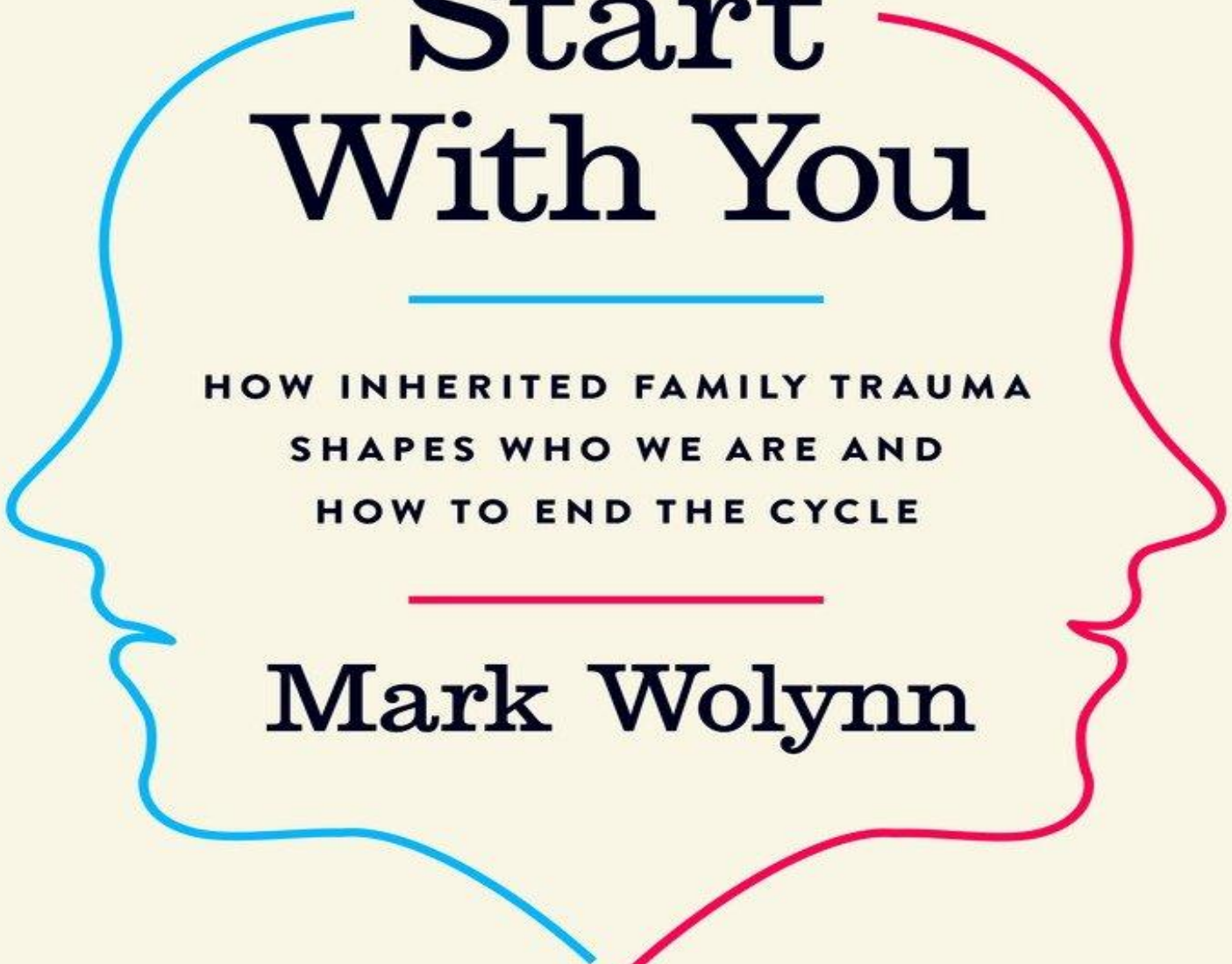


# It Didn't Start With You



HOW INHERITED FAMILY TRAUMA  
SHAPES WHO WE ARE AND  
HOW TO END THE CYCLE

Mark Wolynn



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How Inherited Family Trauma  
Shapes Who We Are and  
How to End the Cycle

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Viking

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The case studies portrayed in this book are based on the experiences of real patients, whose names and identities have been changed to protect their privacy. Any resemblance to actual persons is entirely coincidental.

Version\_1

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To my parents,  
Marvin Wolynn and Sandra Lazier Wolynn Miller.  
I'm so grateful for all you've given me.

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*Who looks outside dreams; who looks inside awakes.*

—Carl Jung, *Letters*, Vol. 1

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# Introduction: The Secret Language of Fear

*In a dark time, the eye begins to see . . .*

—Theodore Roethke, “In a Dark Time”

**T**his book is the fruit of a mission, one that has led me around the world, back home to my roots, and into a professional career that I never could have envisioned when this journey began. For more than twenty years, I have worked with individuals who have struggled with depression, anxiety, chronic illness, phobias, obsessive thoughts, PTSD, and other debilitating conditions. Many have come to me discouraged and disheartened after years of talk therapy, medication, and other interventions failed to uncover the source of their symptoms and allay their suffering.

What I’ve learned from my own experience, training, and clinical practice is that the answer may not lie within our own story as much as in the stories of our parents, grandparents, and even our great-grandparents. The latest scientific research, now making headlines, also tells us that the effects of trauma can pass from one generation to the next. This “bequest” is what’s known as inherited family trauma, and emerging evidence suggests that it is a very real phenomenon. Pain does not always dissolve on its own or diminish with time. Even if the person who suffered the original trauma has died, even if his or her story lies submerged in years of silence, fragments of life experience, memory, and body sensation can live on, as if reaching out from the past to find resolution in the minds and bodies of those living in the present.

What you'll read in the pages that follow is a synthesis of empirical observations from my practice as director of the Family Constellation Institute in San Francisco and the latest findings in neuroscience, epigenetics, and the science of language. It also reflects my professional training with Bert Hellinger, the renowned German psychotherapist, whose approach to family therapy demonstrates the psychological and physical effects of inherited family trauma on multiple generations.

Much of this book focuses on identifying inherited family patterns—the fears, feelings, and behavior we've unknowingly adopted that keep the cycle of suffering alive from generation to generation—and also how to end this cycle, which is the core of my work. You may learn, as I did, that many of these patterns don't belong to us; they've merely been borrowed from others in our family history. Why is this? I strongly believe that it is because a story that needs to be told can finally be brought to light. Let me share my own.

I never set out to create a method for overcoming fear and anxiety. It all began the day I lost my vision. I was in the throes of my first ocular migraine. No real physical pain to speak of—just a cyclone of dark terror, within which my vision was obscured. I was thirty-four years old and stumbling around my office in the murk, fingering the desk phone for the 911 buttons. An ambulance would soon be on its way.

An ocular migraine is generally not serious. Your vision becomes muddled, but usually returns to normal in about an hour. You just don't always know that while it's happening. But for me, the ocular migraine was just the beginning. Within weeks, the vision in my left eye began to disappear. Faces and road signs soon became a gray blur.

The doctors informed me that I had central serous retinopathy, a condition without a cure, its cause unknown. Fluid builds up under the retina and then leaks, causing scarring and blurring in the visual field. Some folks, the 5 percent with the chronic form mine had turned into, become legally blind. The way things were going, I was told to expect that both eyes would be affected. It was just a matter of time.

The doctors were unable to tell me what caused my vision loss and what would heal it. Everything I tried on my own—vitamins, juice fasts, hands-on healing—all seemed to make things worse. I was flummoxed. My greatest fear was unfolding in front of me and I was helpless to do anything

about it. Blind, unable to take care of myself, and all alone, I'd fall apart. My life would be ruined. I'd lose my will to live.

I replayed the scenario over and over in my head. The more I thought about it, the deeper the hopeless feelings embedded in my body. I was sinking into sludge. Each time I tried to dig myself out, my thoughts circled back to images of being all alone, helpless, and ruined. What I didn't know then was that the very words *alone*, *helpless*, and *ruined* were part of my personal language of fear. Unbridled and unrestrained, they reeled in my head and rattled my body.

I wondered why I gave my thoughts such power. Other people had adversity far worse than mine and they didn't dwell in the depths like this. What was it about me that stayed so deeply entrenched in fear? It would be years before I could answer that question.

Back then, all I could do was leave. I left my relationship, my family, my business, my city—everything I knew. I wanted answers that couldn't be found in the world I was part of—a world where many people seemed to be confused and unhappy. I had only questions, and little desire to carry on with life as I knew it. I handed my business (a successful events company) over to someone I had literally just met, and off I went, east—as far east as I could go—until I reached Southeast Asia. I wanted to be healed. I just had no idea what that would look like.

I read books and studied with the teachers who wrote them. Whenever I heard that there might be someone who could help me—some old woman in a hut, some laughing man in a robe—I showed up. I joined training programs and chanted with gurus. One guru said, to those of us gathered to hear him speak, that he wanted to surround himself with only “finders.” Seekers, he said, remained just that—in a constant state of seeking.

I wanted to be a finder. I meditated for hours each day. I fasted for days at a time. I brewed herbs and battled the fierce toxins that I imagined had invaded my tissues. All the while, my eyesight continued to worsen and my depression deepened.

What I failed to realize at the time is that when we try to resist feeling something painful, we often protract the very pain we're trying to avoid. Doing so is a prescription for continued suffering. There's also something about the action of searching that blocks us from what we seek. The constant looking outside of ourselves can keep us from knowing when we

hit the target. Something valuable can be going on inside us, but if we're not tuning in, we can miss it.

"What aren't you willing to see?" the healers prodded, provoking me to look deeper. How could I know? I was in the dark.

One guru in Indonesia shined the light a bit brighter for me when he asked, "Who do you think you are not to have eye problems?" He went on: "Perhaps Johan's ears don't hear as well as Gerhard's, and maybe Eliza's lungs aren't as strong as Gerta's. And Dietrich doesn't walk nearly as well as Sebastian." (Everyone was either Dutch or German at this particular training program and seemed to be struggling with one chronic condition or another.) Something got through. He was right. Who was I not to have eye problems? It was arrogant for me to argue with reality. Like it or not, my retina was scarred and my vision was blurred, but I—the "me" underneath it all—was beginning to feel calm. No matter what my eye was doing, it no longer had to be the defining factor for how I was doing.

To deepen the learning, this guru had us spend seventy-two hours—three days and nights—blindfolded and earplugged, meditating on a small cushion. Each day, we were given a small bowl of rice to eat and only water to drink. No sleep, no getting up, no lying down, no communicating. Going to the bathroom meant raising your hand and being escorted to a hole in the ground in the dark.

The goal of this madness was just that—to intimately come to know the madness of the mind by observing it. I learned how my mind continually taunted me with worst-case-scenario thinking and the lie that if I just worried hard enough, I could insulate myself from what I feared most.

After this experience and others like it, my inner vision began to clear a bit. My eye, however, stayed the same; the leaking and scarring continued. On many levels, having a vision problem is a great metaphor. I eventually learned that it was less about what I could or couldn't see and more about the way I saw things. But that wasn't when I turned the corner.

It was during the third year of what I now call my "vision quest" that I finally got what I was looking for. By this time, I was doing a lot of meditation. The depression had mostly lifted. I could spend countless hours in silence just being with my breath or body sensations. That was the easy part.

One day, I was waiting in line to have a *satsang*—a meeting with a spiritual master. I had been waiting for hours in the white robe that

everyone in line at the temple wore. It was now my turn. I was expecting the master to acknowledge my dedication. Instead, he looked right through me and saw what I couldn't. "Go home," he said. "Go home and call your mother and your father."

*What?* I was livid. My body shook with anger. Clearly, he misread me. I no longer needed my parents. I had outgrown them. I had given up on them long ago, traded them in for better parents, divine parents, spiritual parents—all the teachers, gurus, and wise men and women who were guiding me to the next level of awakening. What's more, with several years of misguided therapy under my belt, of beating pillows and tearing cardboard effigies of my parents to smithereens, I believed I had already "healed" my relationship with them. I decided to ignore his advice.

And yet something struck a chord inside me. I couldn't quite let go of what he had said. I was finally beginning to understand that no experience is ever wasted. Everything that happens to us has merit, whether we recognize the surface significance of it or not. Everything in our lives ultimately leads us somewhere.

Still, I was determined to keep the illusion about who I was intact. Being an accomplished meditator was all I had to cling to. So I sought a meeting with another spiritual master—one, I was sure, who would set the record straight. This man imbued hundreds of people a day with his heavenly love. Surely he would see me for the deeply spiritual person I imagined myself to be. Again, I waited a full day until it was my turn. I was now at the front of the line. And then it happened. Again. The same words. "Call your parents. Go home and make peace with them."

This time I heard what was being said.

The great teachers know. The truly great ones don't care whether you believe in their teachings or not. They present a truth, then leave you with yourself to discover your own truth. Adam Gopnik writes about the difference between gurus and teachers in his book *Through the Children's Gate*: "A guru gives us himself and then his system; a teacher gives us his subject and then ourselves."

The great teachers understand that where we come from affects where we go, and that what sits unresolved in our past influences our present. They know that our parents are important, regardless of whether they are good at parenting or not. There's no way around it: The family story is *our* story. Like it or not, it resides within us.

Regardless of the story we have about them, our parents cannot be expunged or ejected from us. They are in us and we are part of them—even if we've never met them. Rejecting them only distances us further from ourselves and creates more suffering. Those two teachers could see it. I couldn't. My blindness was both literal and figurative. Now I was beginning to wake up, mostly to the fact that I had left a huge mess back home.

For years, I had judged my parents harshly. I imagined myself to be more capable, far more sensitive and human, than they. I blamed them for all the things I believed were wrong with my life. Now I had to return to them to restore what was missing in me—my vulnerability. I was now coming to realize that my ability to receive love from others was linked to my ability to receive my mother's love.

Still, taking in her love was not going to be easy. I had such a deep break in the bond with my mother that being held by her felt like being squeezed in a bear trap. My body would tighten in on itself as if to create a shell she couldn't penetrate. This wound affected every aspect of my life—especially my ability to stay open in a relationship.

My mother and I could go months without speaking. When we did speak, I'd find a way, through either my words or my armored body language, to discount the warm feelings she showed me. I appeared cold and distant. Conversely, I accused her of not being able to see me or hear me. It was an emotional dead end.

Determined to heal our broken relationship, I booked a flight home to Pittsburgh. I had not seen my mother in several months. As I walked up the driveway, I could feel my chest tighten. I wasn't sure our relationship could be repaired; I had so many raw feelings inside. I prepared myself for the worst, playing out the scenario in my mind: She would hold me and I, wanting only to soften in her arms, would do just the opposite. I would turn to steel.

And that's pretty much what happened. Embraced in a hug I could barely endure, I could hardly breathe. Yet I asked her to keep holding me. I wanted to learn, from the inside out, my body's resistance, where I tightened, what sensations arose, how I would shut down. It wasn't new information. I had seen this pattern mirrored in my relationships. Only this time, I wasn't walking away. My plan was to heal this wound at the source.

The longer she held me, the more I thought I would burst. It was physically painful. Pain would meld into numbness, and numbness into pain. Then, after many minutes, something gave. My chest and belly began to quake. I began to soften, and, in the weeks that followed, I continued to soften.

It was in one of our many conversations during this time that she shared—almost in an offhanded way—an event that occurred when I was small. My mom had to be hospitalized for three weeks for gall bladder surgery. With this insight, I began piecing together what was going on inside me. Somewhere, before the age of two—that’s when my mother and I were separated—an unconscious tightening had taken root inside my body. When she returned home, I had stopped trusting her care. I was no longer vulnerable to her. Instead, I pushed her away, and would continue to do so for the next thirty years.

Another early event also may have contributed to the fear I carried that my life would suddenly be ruined. My mother told me that she experienced a difficult labor while giving birth to me—one in which the doctor used forceps. As a result, I was born with extensive bruising and a partially collapsed skull, not uncommon with a forceps delivery. My mother revealed with regret that my appearance made it difficult for her even to hold me at first. Her story resonated, and helped to explain the feeling of being ruined that I knew deep inside. Specifically, traumatic memories from my birth that had submerged in my body would resurface whenever I “gave birth” to a new project or presented new work in public. Just having this understanding brought me peace. It also, in an unexpected way, brought the two of us closer.

While repairing my bond with my mother, I also began to rebuild my relationship with my father. Living alone in a small, ramshackle apartment—the same one he’d lived in since my parents divorced when I was thirteen—my father, a former marine sergeant and construction worker, never bothered to renovate his own place. Old tools, bolts, screws, nails, and rolls of electrical and duct tape were strewn throughout the rooms and hallways—just as they had always been. As we stood together in a sea of rusty iron and steel, I told him how much I missed him. The words seemed to evaporate into empty space. He didn’t know what to do with them.

I had always craved a close relationship with my father, yet neither he nor I knew how to make it happen. This time, however, we kept talking. I

told him that I loved him and that he was a good father. I shared the memories I had of things he did for me when I was small. I could feel him listening to what I was saying, even though his actions—shrugging his shoulders, changing the subject—indicated he was not. It took many weeks of talking and sharing memories. During one of our lunches together, he looked directly into my eyes and said, “I didn’t think you ever loved me.” I could barely breathe. It was clear that great pain welled in both of us. In that moment, something broke open. It was our hearts. Sometimes, the heart must break in order to open. Eventually, we began to express our love for each other. I was now seeing the effects of trusting the words of the teachers and returning home to heal with my parents.

For the first time I could remember, I was able to let myself receive my parents’ love and care—not in the way I had once expected it, but in the way they could give it. Something opened in me. It didn’t matter how they could or couldn’t love me. What mattered was how I could receive what they had to give. They were the same parents they’d always been. The difference was in me. I was falling back in love with them, the way I must have felt as a baby before the break in the bond with my mother occurred.

My early separation from my mother, along with similar traumas I inherited from my family history—specifically, the fact that three of my grandparents had lost their mothers at an early age, and the fourth had lost a father as an infant—helped to forge my secret language of fear. The words *alone*, *helpless*, and *ruined*, and the feelings that had accompanied them, were finally losing their power to lead me astray. I was being granted a new life, and my renewed relationship with my parents was a large part of it.

Over the next few months, I reestablished a tender connection with my mother. Her love, which once felt invasive and grating, now felt calming and restorative. I was also lucky to have sixteen close years with my father before he died. In the dementia that dominated the last four years of his life, my father taught me perhaps the most profound lesson about vulnerability and love I have ever learned. Together, we met in that place beyond thought, beyond the mind, where only the deepest love dwells.

During my travels, I had many great teachers. When I look back, however, it was my eye—my stressed-out, beleaguered, terror-producing eye—that led me halfway around the world, back to my parents, through the morass of family trauma, and finally back to my heart. My eye was, hands down, the greatest teacher of them all.

Somewhere along the way, I had even stopped thinking about my eye and worrying about whether it would improve or worsen. I no longer expected to be able to see clearly again. Somehow, that stopped being important. Not long afterward, my vision returned. I hadn't expected it to. I hadn't even needed it to. I had learned to be okay no matter what my eye was doing.

Today my vision is 20/20, even though my ophthalmologist swears that with the amount of scarring I still have on my retina, I shouldn't be able to see. He just shakes his head and postulates that somehow the light signals must be ricocheting and bypassing the fovea, the central area of the retina. As with many stories of healing and transformation, what started out looking like adversity was actually grace in disguise. Ironically, after scouring the distant corners of the planet for answers, I found that the greatest resources for healing were already inside me just waiting to be excavated.

Ultimately, healing is an inside job. Thankfully, my teachers led me back to my parents, and home to myself. Along the way I uncovered the stories in my family history that ultimately brought me peace. Out of gratitude and a newfound sense of freedom, it became my mission to help others discover this freedom for themselves.



It was through language that I entered the world of psychology. Both as a student and then as a clinician, I had little interest in tests and theories and models of behavior. Instead, I heard language. I developed listening techniques, and taught myself to hear what people were saying behind their complaints, beneath their old stories. I learned to help them identify the specific words that led to the origin of their pain. And though some theorists postulate that language goes missing during trauma, I've seen firsthand again and again that this language is never lost. It roams the unconscious realms, waiting to be rediscovered.

It's no accident that for me language is a potent tool of healing. For as far back as I can remember, language has been my teacher, my way of organizing and understanding the world. I've written poetry since I was an adolescent, and will drop everything (well, almost everything) when a surge of urgent language insists on being born. I know that on the other side of

that surrender are insights that would otherwise be unavailable to me. In my own process, locating the words *alone*, *helpless*, and *ruined* was essential.

In many ways, healing from trauma is akin to creating a poem. Both require the right timing, the right words, and the right image. When these elements align, something meaningful is set into motion that can be felt in the body. To heal, our pacing must be in tune. If we arrive too quickly at an image, it might not take root. If the words that comfort us arrive too early, we might not be ready to take them in. If the words aren't precise, we might not hear them or resonate with them at all.

Over the course of my practice as a teacher and workshop leader, I've combined the insights and methods gained from my training in inherited family trauma with my knowledge of the crucial role of language. I call this the *core language approach*. Using specific questions, I help people discover the root cause behind the physical and emotional symptoms that keep them mired. Uncovering the right language not only exposes the trauma, it also unveils the tools and images needed for healing. In using this method, I've witnessed deep-rooted patterns of depression, anxiety, and emptiness shift in a flash of insight.

The vehicle for this journey is language, the buried language of our worries and fears. It's likely that this language has lived inside us our whole lives. It may have originated with our parents, or even generations ago with our great-grandparents. Our core language insists on being heard. When we follow where it leads and hear its story, it has the power to defuse our deepest fears.

Along the way, we're likely to meet family members both known and unknown. Some have been dead for years. Some aren't even related, but their suffering or cruelty may have altered the course of our family's destiny. We might even uncover a secret or two hidden in stories that have long been laid to rest. But regardless of where this exploration takes us, my experience suggests that we'll arrive at a new place in our lives, with a greater sense of freedom in our bodies and an ability to be more at peace with ourselves.

Throughout this book, I have drawn on the stories of the people I've worked with in my workshops, trainings, and individual sessions. The case details are real, but to protect their privacy, I have changed their names and other identifying characteristics. I am deeply grateful to them for letting me

share the secret language of their fears, for their trust in me, and for allowing me to hear what's essential beneath their words.

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## Part I

# The Web of Family Trauma

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# Chapter 1

## Traumas Lost and Found

*The past is never dead. It's not even past.*

—William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

A well-documented feature of trauma, one familiar to many, is our inability to articulate what happens to us. Not only do we lose our words, but something happens with our memory as well. During a traumatic incident, our thought processes become scattered and disorganized in such a way that we no longer recognize the memories as belonging to the original event. Instead, fragments of memory, dispersed as images, body sensations, and words, are stored in our unconscious and can become activated later by anything even remotely reminiscent of the original experience. Once they are triggered, it is as if an invisible rewind button has been pressed, causing us to reenact aspects of the original trauma in our day-to-day lives. Unconsciously, we could find ourselves reacting to certain people, events, or situations in old, familiar ways that echo the past.

Sigmund Freud identified this pattern more than one hundred years ago. Traumatic reenactment, or “repetition compulsion,” as Freud called it, is an attempt of the unconscious to replay what’s unresolved, so we can “get it right.” This unconscious drive to relive past events could be one of the mechanisms at work when families repeat unresolved traumas in future generations.

Freud’s contemporary Carl Jung also believed that what remains unconscious does not dissolve but, rather, resurfaces in our lives as fate or fortune. Whatever is not conscious, he said, will be experienced as fate. In other words, we’re likely to keep repeating our unconscious patterns until we bring them into the light of awareness. Both Jung and Freud noted that

whatever is too difficult to process does not fade away on its own but, rather, is stored in our unconscious.

Freud and Jung each observed how fragments of previously blocked, suppressed, or repressed life experience would show up in the words, gestures, and behaviors of their patients. For decades to follow, therapists would see such clues as slips of the tongue, accident patterns, or dream images as messengers shining a light into the unspeakable and unthinkable regions of their clients' lives.

Recent advances in imaging technology have allowed researchers to unravel the brain and bodily functions that “misfire” or break down during overwhelming episodes. Bessel van der Kolk is a Dutch psychiatrist known for his research on posttraumatic stress. He explains that during a trauma, the speech center shuts down, as does the medial prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for experiencing the present moment. He describes the *speechless terror* of trauma as the experience of being at a *loss for words*, a common occurrence when brain pathways of remembering are hindered during periods of threat or danger. “When people relive their traumatic experiences,” he says, “the frontal lobes become impaired and, as [a] result, they have trouble thinking and speaking. They no longer are capable of communicating to either themselves or to others precisely what’s going on.”<sup>1</sup>

Still, all is not silent: words, images, and impulses that fragment following a traumatic event reemerge to form a secret language of our suffering we carry with us. Nothing is lost. The pieces have just been rerouted.

Emerging trends in psychotherapy are now beginning to point beyond the traumas of the individual to include traumatic events in the family and social history as a part of the whole picture. Tragedies varying in type and intensity—such as abandonment, suicide, and war, or the early death of a child, parent, or sibling—can send shock waves of distress cascading from one generation to the next. Recent developments in the fields of cellular biology, neurobiology, epigenetics, and developmental psychology underscore the importance of exploring at least three generations of family history in order to understand the mechanism behind patterns of trauma and suffering that repeat.

The following story offers a vivid example. When I first met Jesse, he hadn’t had a full night’s sleep in more than a year. His insomnia was

evident in the dark shadows around his eyes, but the blankness of his stare suggested a deeper story. Though only twenty, Jesse looked at least ten years older. He sank onto my sofa as if his legs could no longer bear his weight.

Jesse explained that he had been a star athlete and a straight-A student, but that his persistent insomnia had initiated a downward spiral of depression and despair. As a result, he dropped out of college and had to forfeit the baseball scholarship he'd worked so hard to win. He desperately sought help to get his life back on track. Over the past year, he'd been to three doctors, two psychologists, a sleep clinic, and a naturopathic physician. Not one of them, he related in a monotone, was able to offer any real insight or help. Jesse, gazing mostly at the floor as he shared his story, told me he was at the end of his rope.

When I asked whether he had any ideas about what might have triggered his insomnia, he shook his head. Sleep had always come easily for Jesse. Then, one night just after his nineteenth birthday, he woke suddenly at 3:30 a.m. He was freezing, shivering, unable to get warm no matter what he tried. Three hours and several blankets later, Jesse was still wide awake. Not only was he cold and tired, he was seized by a strange fear he had never experienced before, a fear that something awful could happen if he let himself fall back to sleep. *If I go to sleep, I'll never wake up.* Every time he felt himself drifting off, the fear would jolt him back into wakefulness. The pattern repeated itself the next night, and the night after that. Soon insomnia became a nightly ordeal. Jesse knew his fear was irrational, yet he felt helpless to put an end to it.

I listened closely as Jesse spoke. What stood out for me was one unusual detail—he'd been extremely cold, "freezing," he said, just prior to the first episode. I began to explore this with Jesse, and asked him if anyone on either side of the family suffered a trauma that involved being *cold*, or being *asleep*, or being *nineteen*.

Jesse revealed that his mother had only recently told him about the tragic death of his father's older brother—an uncle he never knew he had. Uncle Colin was only nineteen when he froze to death checking power lines in a storm just north of Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories of Canada. Tracks in the snow revealed that he had been struggling to hang on. Eventually, he was found facedown in a blizzard, having lost consciousness

from hypothermia. His death was such a tragic loss that the family never spoke his name again.

Now, three decades later, Jesse was unconsciously reliving aspects of Colin's death—specifically, the terror of letting go into unconsciousness. For Colin, letting go meant death. For Jesse, falling asleep must have felt the same.

Making the connection was a turning point for Jesse. Once he grasped that his insomnia had its origin in an event that had occurred thirty years earlier, he finally had an explanation for his fear of falling asleep. The process of healing could now begin. With tools Jesse learned in our work together, which will be detailed later in this book, he was able to disentangle himself from the trauma endured by an uncle he'd never met, but whose terror he had unconsciously taken on as his own. Not only did Jesse feel freed from the heavy fog of insomnia, he gained a deeper sense of connection to his family, present and past.

In an attempt to explain stories such as Jesse's, scientists are now able to identify biological markers—evidence that traumas can and do pass down from one generation to the next. Rachel Yehuda, professor of psychiatry and neuroscience at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, is one of the world's leading experts in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a true pioneer in this field. In numerous studies, Yehuda has examined the neurobiology of PTSD in Holocaust survivors and their children. Her research on cortisol in particular (the stress hormone that helps our body return to normal after we experience a trauma) and its effects on brain function has revolutionized the understanding and treatment of PTSD worldwide. (People with PTSD relive feelings and sensations associated with a trauma despite the fact that the trauma occurred in the past. Symptoms include depression, anxiety, numbness, insomnia, nightmares, frightening thoughts, and being easily startled or “on edge.”)

Yehuda and her team found that children of Holocaust survivors who had PTSD were born with low cortisol levels similar to their parents', predisposing them to relive the PTSD symptoms of the previous generation. Her discovery of low cortisol levels in people who experience an acute traumatic event has been controversial, going against the long-held notion that stress is associated with high cortisol levels. Specifically, in cases of chronic PTSD, cortisol production can become suppressed, contributing to the low levels measured in both survivors and their children.

Yehuda discovered similar low cortisol levels in war veterans, as well as in pregnant mothers who developed PTSD after the World Trade Center attacks, and in their children. Not only did she find that the survivors in her study produced less cortisol, a characteristic they can pass on to their children; she notes that several stress-related psychiatric disorders, including PTSD, chronic pain syndrome, and chronic fatigue syndrome, are associated with low blood levels of cortisol.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, 50 to 70 percent of PTSD patients also meet the diagnostic criteria for major depression or another mood or anxiety disorder.<sup>3</sup>

Yehuda's research demonstrates that you and I are three times more likely to experience symptoms of PTSD if one of our parents had PTSD, and as a result, we're likely to suffer from depression or anxiety.<sup>4</sup> She believes that this type of generational PTSD is inherited rather than occurring from our being exposed to our parents' stories of their ordeals.<sup>5</sup> Yehuda was one of the first researchers to show how descendants of trauma survivors carry the physical and emotional symptoms of traumas they have not directly experienced.

That was the case with Gretchen. After years of taking antidepressants, attending talk and group therapy sessions, and trying various cognitive approaches to mitigating the effects of stress, her symptoms of depression and anxiety remained unchanged.

Gretchen told me she no longer wanted to live. For as long as she could remember, she had struggled with emotions so intense she could barely contain the surges in her body. Gretchen had been admitted several times to a psychiatric hospital, where she was diagnosed as bipolar with a severe anxiety disorder. Medication brought her slight relief, but never touched the powerful suicidal urges that lived inside her. As a teenager, she would self-injure by burning herself with the lit end of a cigarette. Now, at thirty-nine, Gretchen had had enough. Her depression and anxiety, she said, had prevented her from ever marrying and having children. In a surprisingly matter-of-fact tone of voice, she told me that she was planning to commit suicide before her next birthday.

Listening to Gretchen, I had the strong sense that there must be significant trauma in her family history. In such cases, I find it's essential to pay close attention to the words being spoken for clues to the traumatic event underlying a client's symptoms.

When I asked her how she planned to kill herself, Gretchen said that she was going to “vaporize” herself. As incomprehensible as it might sound to most of us, her plan was literally to leap into a vat of molten steel at the mill where her brother worked. “My body will incinerate in seconds,” she said, staring directly into my eyes, “even before it reaches the bottom.”

I was struck by her lack of emotion as she spoke. Whatever feeling lay beneath appeared to have been vaulted deep inside. At the same time, the words *vaporize* and *incinerate* rattled inside me. Having worked with many children and grandchildren whose families were affected by the Holocaust, I’ve learned to let their words lead me. I wanted Gretchen to tell me more.

I asked if anyone in her family was Jewish or had been involved in the Holocaust. Gretchen started to say no, but then stopped herself and recalled a story about her grandmother. She had been born into a Jewish family in Poland, but converted to Catholicism when she came to the United States in 1946 and married Gretchen’s grandfather. Two years earlier, her grandmother’s entire family had perished in the ovens at Auschwitz. They had literally been gassed—engulfed in poisonous vapors—and incinerated. No one in Gretchen’s immediate family ever spoke to her grandmother about the war, or about the fate of her siblings or her parents. Instead, as is often the case with such extreme trauma, they avoided the subject entirely.

Gretchen knew the basic facts of her family history, but had never connected it to her own anxiety and depression. It was clear to me that the words she used and the feelings she described didn’t originate with her, but had in fact originated with her grandmother and the family members who lost their lives.

As I explained the connection, Gretchen listened intently. Her eyes widened and color rose in her cheeks. I could tell that what I said was resonating. For the first time, Gretchen had an explanation for her suffering that made sense to her.

To help her deepen her new understanding, I invited her to imagine standing in her grandmother’s shoes, represented by a pair of foam rubber footprints that I placed on the carpet in the center of my office. I asked her to imagine feeling what her grandmother might have felt after having lost all her loved ones. Taking it even a step further, I asked her if she could literally stand on the footprints *as her grandmother*, and feel her grandmother’s feelings in her *own* body. Gretchen reported sensations of overwhelming loss and grief, aloneness and isolation. She also experienced

the profound sense of guilt that many survivors feel, the sense of remaining alive after loved ones have been killed.

In order to process trauma, it's often helpful for clients to have a direct experience of the feelings and sensations that have been submerged in the body. When Gretchen was able to access these sensations, she realized that her wish to annihilate herself was deeply entwined with her lost family members. She also realized that she had taken on some element of her grandmother's desire to die. As Gretchen absorbed this understanding, seeing the family story in a new light, her body began to soften, as if something inside her that had long been coiled up could now relax.

As with Jesse, Gretchen's recognition that her trauma lay buried in her family's unspoken history was merely the first step in her healing process. An intellectual understanding by itself is rarely enough for a lasting shift to occur. Often, the awareness needs to be accompanied by a deeply felt visceral experience. We'll explore further the ways in which healing becomes fully integrated so that the wounds of previous generations can finally be released.

## An Unexpected Family Inheritance

A boy may have his grandpa's long legs and a girl may have her mother's nose, but Jesse had inherited his uncle's fear of never waking, and Gretchen carried the family's Holocaust history in her depression. Sleeping inside each of them were fragments of traumas too great to be resolved in one generation.

When those in our family have experienced unbearable traumas or have suffered with immense guilt or grief, the feelings can be overwhelming and can escalate beyond what they can manage or resolve. It's human nature: when pain is too great, people tend to avoid it. Yet when we block the feelings, we unknowingly stunt the necessary healing process that can lead us to a natural release.

Sometimes pain submerges until it can find a pathway for expression or resolution. That expression is often found in the generations that follow and can resurface as symptoms that are difficult to explain. For Jesse, the

unrelenting cold and shivering did not appear until he reached the age that his Uncle Colin was when he froze to death. For Gretchen, her grandmother's anxious despair and suicidal urges had been with her for as long as she could remember. These feelings became so much a part of her life that no one ever thought to consider that the feelings didn't originate with her.

Currently, our society does not provide many options to help people like Jesse and Gretchen who carry remnants of inherited family trauma. Typically, they might consult a doctor, psychologist, or psychiatrist and receive medications, therapy, or some combination of both. But although these avenues might bring some relief, generally they don't provide a complete solution.

Not all of us have traumas as dramatic as Gretchen's or Jesse's in our family history. However, events such as the death of an infant, a child given away, the loss of one's home, or even the withdrawal of a mother's attention can all have the effect of collapsing the walls of support and restricting the flow of love in our family. With the origin of these traumas in view, long-standing family patterns can finally be laid to rest. It's important to note that not all effects of trauma are negative. In the next chapter, we'll learn about epigenetic changes—the chemical modifications that occur in our cells as a result of a traumatic event.

According to Rachel Yehuda, the purpose of an epigenetic change is to expand the range of ways we respond in stressful situations, which she says is a positive thing. “Who would you rather be in a war zone with?” she asks. “Somebody that's had previous adversity [and] knows how to defend themselves? Or somebody that has never had to fight for anything?”<sup>6</sup> Once we understand what biological changes from stress and trauma are meant to do, she says, “we can develop a better way of explaining to ourselves what our true capabilities and potentials are.”<sup>7</sup>

Viewed in this way, the traumas we inherit or experience firsthand can not only create a legacy of distress, but also forge a legacy of strength and resilience that can be felt for generations to come.

## Chapter 2

# Three Generations of Shared Family History: The Family Body

*I feel very strongly that I am under the influence of things or questions which were left incomplete and unanswered by my parents and grandparents and more distant ancestors. It often seems as if there were an impersonal karma within a family, which is passed on from parents to children. It has always seemed to me that I had to . . . complete, or perhaps continue, things which previous ages had left unfinished.*

—Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

**T**he history you share with your family begins before you are even conceived. In your earliest biological form, as an unfertilized egg, you already share a cellular environment with your mother and grandmother. When your grandmother was five months pregnant with your mother, the precursor cell of the egg you developed from was already present in your mother's ovaries.

This means that before your mother was even born, your mother, your grandmother, and the earliest traces of you were all in the same body—three generations sharing the same biological environment.<sup>1</sup> This isn't a new idea: embryology textbooks have told us as much for more than a century. Your inception can be similarly traced in your paternal line. The precursor cells of the sperm you developed from were present in your father when he was a fetus in his mother's womb.<sup>2</sup>

With what we're now learning, from the Yehuda studies and others, about the ways stress can be inherited, we can begin to map out how the

biological residue of traumas your grandmother experienced can be passed down, with far-reaching consequences.

There is, however, a significant biological difference in the evolution of the egg and sperm. Your father's sperm continued to multiply when he reached puberty, whereas your mother was born with her lifetime supply of eggs. Once her egg cells were formed in your grandmother's womb, that cell line stopped dividing.<sup>3</sup> So twelve to forty or so years later, one of those eggs, fertilized by your father's sperm, eventually developed into who you are today. In either case, both precursor egg and sperm cells, science now tells us, can be imprinted by events with the potential to affect subsequent generations. Because your father's sperm continues to develop throughout adolescence and adulthood, his sperm continues to be susceptible to traumatic imprints almost up until the point when you are conceived.<sup>4</sup> The implications of this are startlingly vast, as we see when we look at the emerging research.

## Cellular Biology

Scientists originally believed that our parents' genes forged the blueprint from which we were created, and that with just the right amount of guidance and nutrition we would develop seamlessly according to plan. We now know that our genetic blueprint is merely the starting point, as influences from the environment, from as early as conception, begin to shape us emotionally, psychologically, and biologically, and this shaping continues throughout our lives.

The pioneering cell biologist Bruce Lipton demonstrates that our DNA can be affected by both negative and positive thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. Dr. Lipton spent decades, as a medical school professor and research scientist, investigating the mechanisms by which cells receive and process information. As a Stanford scholar and researcher from 1987 to 1992, he demonstrated that signals from the environment could operate through the cell membrane, controlling the behavior and physiology of the cell, which in turn could activate or silence a gene. His ideas and discoveries, which were once considered controversial, have since been

corroborated by many researchers. As a result of his work with both animal and human cells, we now have a window of understanding into how cellular memory is transferred in the womb from a mother to her unborn child.

According to Lipton, “The mother’s emotions, such as fear, anger, love, hope among others, can biochemically alter the genetic expression of her offspring.”<sup>5</sup> During pregnancy, nutrients in the mother’s blood nourish the fetus through the wall of the placenta. With the nutrients, she also releases a host of hormones and information signals generated by the emotions she experiences. These chemical signals activate specific receptor proteins in the cells, triggering a cascade of physiologic, metabolic, and behavioral changes in the mother’s body as well as in the fetus.

Chronic or repetitive emotions like anger and fear can imprint her child, essentially preparing or “preprogramming” how the child will adapt to its environment.<sup>6</sup> Lipton explains: “When stress hormones cross the [human] placenta . . . they cause fetal blood vessels to be more constricted in the viscera, sending more blood to the periphery, preparing the fetus for a fight/flight behavioral response.”<sup>7</sup> In that sense, a child who experienced a stressful in utero environment can become reactive in a similarly stressful situation.

There are now numerous studies documenting how a pregnant mother’s stress, even as early as the first trimester, can affect her child. One such study, published in 2010 in *Biological Psychiatry*, examined the relationship between prenatal stress and its effects on the neurodevelopment of infants. The researchers measured the stress-regulating hormone cortisol in the amniotic fluid of 125 pregnant mothers to determine stress levels. The findings demonstrated that babies exposed to increased cortisol in utero, as early as seventeen weeks after conception, exhibited impaired cognitive development when they were evaluated at seventeen months old.<sup>8</sup>

In his book *Nurturing the Unborn Child: A Nine-Month Program for Soothing, Stimulating, and Communicating with Your Baby*, psychiatrist Thomas Verny tells us: “If a pregnant mother experiences acute or chronic stress, her body will manufacture stress hormones (including adrenaline and noradrenaline) that travel through her bloodstream to the womb, inducing the same stressful state in the unborn child.”<sup>9</sup> Verny goes on to say, “Our studies show that mothers under extreme and constant stress are more likely to have babies who are premature, lower than average in weight,

hyperactive, irritable, and colicky. In extreme instances, these babies may be born with thumbs sucked raw or even with ulcers.”<sup>10</sup>

Lipton stresses the importance of what he terms conscious parenting—parenting with the awareness that, from preconception all the way through postnatal development, a child’s development and health can be profoundly influenced by the parent’s thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors.<sup>11</sup> “Parents that did not wish to have a child, parents that are continuously concerned about their own and consequently their offspring’s chances for survival, women who sustain physical and emotional abuse during their pregnancy all represent situations where adverse environmental cues surrounding the birth of their child can be passed on to the offspring.”<sup>12</sup>

With the knowledge that emotions can be biologically communicated and the fact that three generations share the same biological environment of the womb, imagine this scenario: A month before your mother is born, your grandmother receives the devastating news that her husband has been killed in an accident. With a new baby to prepare for, and little space to grieve the loss, your grandmother would likely submerge her emotions into the body she now shares with her daughter and grandchild. You and your mother would know something about that grief from a place deep inside you, a place all three of you share.

It’s within this shared environment that stress can cause changes to our DNA. In the next section, we’ll look at how our genes are affected by traumas in our family history.

## Epigenetics

Bruce Lipton’s work on cellular memory both predates and supports the emerging field of epigenetics—the study of heritable changes in gene function that occur without a change in the sequence of the DNA.<sup>13</sup>

Originally, it was believed that our genetic inheritance was transmitted only through the chromosomal DNA we received from our parents. Now, with greater understanding of the human genome, scientists have discovered that chromosomal DNA—the DNA responsible for transmitting physical traits, such as the color of our hair, eyes, and skin—surprisingly makes up less

than 2 percent of our total DNA.<sup>14</sup> The other 98 percent consists of what is called noncoding DNA (ncDNA), and is responsible for many of the emotional, behavioral, and personality traits we inherit.<sup>15</sup>

Scientists used to call it “junk DNA,” thinking it was mostly useless, but they’ve recently begun to recognize its significance. Interestingly, the percentage of noncoding DNA increases with the complexity of the organism, with humans having the highest percentage.<sup>16</sup>

Noncoding DNA is known to be affected by environmental stressors, such as toxins and inadequate nutrition, as well as stressful emotions.<sup>17,18</sup> The affected DNA transmits information that helps us prepare for life out of the womb by ensuring that we have the particular traits we’ll need to adapt to our environment.<sup>19</sup> According to Rachel Yehuda, epigenetic changes biologically prepare us to cope with the traumas that our parents experienced.<sup>20</sup> In preparation for similar stressors, we’re born with a specific set of tools to help us survive.

On the one hand, this is good news. We’re born with an intrinsic skill set—an “environmental resilience,” as Yehuda calls it—that allows us to adapt to stressful situations.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, these inherited adaptations can also be detrimental. For example, the child of a parent who, early in life, lived in a war zone may inherit the impulse to recoil in response to sudden loud noises. Although this instinct would be protective in the event of a bomb threat, such a heightened startle response can keep a person in a highly reactive state even when no danger is present. In such a case, an incongruity would exist between the child’s epigenetic preparedness and the actual environment. Such a mismatch could predispose someone to stress disorders and disease later in life.<sup>22,23</sup>

These adaptive changes are caused by chemical signals in the cells, known as epigenetic tags, which attach to the DNA and tell the cell to either activate or silence a specific gene. “There’s something in the external environment that affects the internal environment, and before you know it a gene is functioning in a different way,” says Yehuda.<sup>24</sup> The sequence of the DNA itself doesn’t change, but because of these epigenetic tags, its expression does. Research has shown that epigenetic tags can account for differences in how we regulate stress later in life.<sup>25</sup>

Scientists used to believe that the effects of stress were erased in the precursor sperm and egg cells (soon after fertilization occurs) before any epigenetic information could affect the next generation—like data being erased from a computer’s hard drive. Scientists have now demonstrated, however, that certain epigenetic tags escape this reprogramming process and are in fact transmitted to the precursor egg and sperm cells that will one day become us.<sup>[26](#)</sup>

The most common epigenetic tag is DNA methylation, a process that blocks proteins from attaching to a gene, suppressing its expression.<sup>[27](#)</sup> DNA methylation can positively or adversely affect our health by locking “helpful” or “unhelpful” genes in the “off” position. When a stressor or trauma occurs, researchers have observed irregularities in DNA methylation that can be transmitted, along with a predisposition for physical or emotional health challenges, to subsequent generations.<sup>[28,29](#)</sup>

Another epigenetic mechanism that plays a significant role in gene regulation is the small noncoding RNA molecule called microRNA. As with DNA methylation, stress-induced irregularities in microRNA levels can affect how genes are expressed in multiple generations.<sup>[30](#)</sup>

Among the numerous genes affected by stress are the CRF1 (corticotropin-releasing hormone receptor) and CRF2 genes. Increased levels of these genes have been observed in people who have depression and anxiety.<sup>[31](#)</sup> The CRF1 and CRF2 genes can be inherited from stressed mothers who share similar increased amounts.<sup>[32](#)</sup> Scientists have documented numerous other genes that can also be affected by trauma experienced early in one’s lifetime.<sup>[33,34](#)</sup>

“Our research demonstrates [that] genes . . . retain some memory of their past experiences,” says Dr. Jamie Hackett from the University of Cambridge.<sup>[35](#)</sup>

The historic study conducted by Yehuda in 2005 brought considerable awareness to the idea that stress patterns do, in fact, transfer from pregnant women to their children. Pregnant women (in their second or third trimester) who were either at or near the World Trade Center during the 9/11 attacks in New York City, and who went on to develop PTSD, delivered children who had low levels of cortisol.<sup>[36](#)</sup> Their children also exhibited increased distress in response to new stimuli. When cortisol levels are compromised, so is our ability to regulate emotions and manage stress.

These babies were also smaller for their gestational age.<sup>37</sup> Yehuda and her team suggest that the results of the 9/11 study are most likely due to epigenetic mechanisms; they found sixteen genes that expressed differently in those who developed PTSD after 9/11 compared with those who did not.<sup>38</sup>

In an August 2015 study published in *Biological Psychiatry*, Yehuda and her team at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital demonstrated that gene changes could be transmitted from parents to their children. Analyzing a particular region of a gene that's associated with stress regulation, Yehuda and her team found that Jews who had experienced trauma during the Holocaust, and their children, shared a similar genetic pattern. Specifically, they found epigenetic tags on the very same part of the gene in both parent and child. They compared the results with Jewish families who were living outside of Europe during the war and determined that the gene changes in the children could be attributed only to the trauma that the parents experienced.<sup>39</sup>

There are now a significant number of studies demonstrating how the traumatic experiences of parents can influence the gene expression and stress patterns of their children. In an article entitled "Epigenetic Mechanisms of Depression," published in *JAMA Psychiatry* in February 2014, Dr. Eric Nestler writes, "Indeed, stressful life events have been shown to alter stress susceptibility in subsequent generations."<sup>40</sup> Pregnant mothers who developed PTSD after 9/11 gave birth to children who not only had compromised cortisol levels, but also were more easily disrupted by loud noises and unfamiliar people. One study in England found that children's emotional and behavioral problems doubled when their mothers were anxious during pregnancy.<sup>41</sup>

"Trauma has the power to reach out from the past and claim new victims," writes addiction psychiatrist Dr. David Sack in *Psychology Today*. "Children of a parent struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder can sometimes develop their own PTSD, called secondary PTSD." He reports that about 30 percent of kids with a parent who served in Iraq or Afghanistan and developed PTSD struggle with similar symptoms. "The parent's trauma," he says, "becomes the child's own and [the child's] behavioral and emotional issues can mirror those of the parent."<sup>42</sup> Children with a parent who was traumatized during the Cambodian genocide, for

example, tend to suffer from depression and anxiety. Similarly, children of Australian Vietnam War veterans have higher rates of suicide than the general population.<sup>[43](#)</sup>

Native American youths on reservations have the highest suicide rate in the Western Hemisphere. In some parts of the country, the rate is ten to nineteen times higher than that of other American youth.<sup>[44](#)</sup> Albert Bender, a Cherokee historian and attorney specializing in Native American law, suggests that the “intergenerational trauma felt by all Native people, but particularly by Indian youth, is the result of the historical policy of genocide exemplified by the endless massacres, the forced removals and military campaigns that continued to the end of the 19th century, culminating in the Wounded Knee Massacre.” He believes that generational grief is fueling these suicides. “All of these memories,” he says, “resonate in the minds of our young people in one form or another.” He reports that young people are hanging themselves at such a high rate that “a week without a suicide is now considered a blessing on many reservations.”<sup>[45](#)</sup>

LeManuel “Lee” Bitsoi, a Navajo PhD research associate in genetics at Harvard University, corroborates Bender’s claim that young people are reliving the past in their symptoms. He believes that epigenetics research is finally beginning to provide substantial evidence that intergenerational trauma is a real phenomenon.<sup>[46](#)</sup>

Native American youths, like the children of war veterans, like the children of Holocaust survivors, like the children of Cambodian genocide survivors, and like the children of the World Trade Center attack survivors, are among the modern world’s newest victims of transgenerational trauma. Alarmingly, the list keeps expanding. Violence, war, and oppression continue to sow the seeds of generational reliving, as survivors unknowingly transmit what they have experienced to successive generations.

Case in point: many young people born after 1994 in Rwanda, too young to have witnessed the senseless killings of approximately 800,000 people, experience the same symptoms of posttraumatic stress as those who witnessed and survived the brutality. The young Rwandans report feelings of intense anxiety and obsessive visions similar to the horrors that occurred before they were even born.

“It is a phenomenon that was expected . . . all that is not said, is transmitted,” says psychiatrist Naasson Munyandamutsa. Even children whose families were unscathed by the violence are similarly affected by what psychiatrist Rutakayile Bizoza refers to as a “contagion in the collective subconscious.”<sup>47</sup>

Yehuda claims that children of PTSD-stricken mothers are three times more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD than children in her control groups. She also finds that children of survivors are three to four times more likely to struggle with depression and anxiety, or engage more in substance abuse, when either parent suffered from PTSD.<sup>48</sup> Yehuda and her team have also been able to distinguish differences in a child’s symptoms based on whether the mother or the father passed on the PTSD.<sup>49</sup> Paternal PTSD, she discovered, increases the likelihood that the child will feel “dissociated from [his or] her memories,” whereas maternal PTSD increases the likelihood that a child will have difficulty “calming down.”<sup>50</sup>

Specifically, Yehuda reports that children of fathers who had PTSD are “probably more prone to depression or chronic stress responses.” The opposite seems to be true for children whose mothers had PTSD.<sup>51</sup> Yehuda points out that mothers who survived the Holocaust feared being separated from their children, and that Holocaust offspring often complained that their mothers were overattached to them.<sup>52</sup>

Yehuda believes that the stress-induced epigenetic modifications we inherit from our fathers occur before conception and are transmitted in our fathers’ sperm. She also believes that these changes can occur in our mothers either before conception or during gestation.<sup>53</sup> Yehuda also notes that a mother’s age when a trauma occurs is significant for what she transmits to her children. Children of Holocaust survivors, for example, inherited variances in the enzyme that converts active cortisol to inactive cortisol based on whether their mothers were younger or were adults during the Holocaust.<sup>54</sup>

PTSD experienced by a grandparent can also affect succeeding generations. As we saw with Gretchen, war-related trauma can continue to spiral, affecting the grandchildren of those who suffered the original trauma.

Traumas, not only from war but from any event significant enough to disrupt the emotional equilibrium in our family—a crime, a suicide, an

early death, a sudden or unexpected loss—can lead to our reliving trauma symptoms from the past. Sack writes, “Trauma travels throughout society, as well as generationally.”<sup>55</sup>

## Epigenetic Inheritance

It’s only recently that scientists have begun to understand the biological processes that occur when trauma is inherited. To learn more, researchers have turned to animal studies. Because humans and mice share a strikingly similar genetic blueprint—99 percent of the genes in humans have counterparts in mice—these studies provide us with a lens through which to view the effects of inherited stress in our own lives. This research is valuable for another reason: As a generation in mice is approximately twelve weeks, multigenerational studies can produce results in a relatively short time. A similar study conducted with humans could take as long as sixty years.

Chemical changes in the blood, brain, ova, and sperm of mice are now being linked to behavioral patterns, such as anxiety and depression, in later generations. Studies performed on offspring, for example, have shown that the stress of maternal separation caused gene expression changes that can be traced for three generations.

In one such study, researchers prevented females from nurturing their pups for up to three hours a day during their first two weeks of life. Later in life, their offspring exhibited behaviors similar to what we call depression in humans. The symptoms seemed to worsen as the mice aged. Surprisingly, some of the males did not express the behaviors themselves, but appeared to epigenetically transmit the behavioral changes to their female offspring. The researchers also discovered altered methylation and gene expression changes in the stressed mice. Among the genes involved was the CRF2 gene, which regulates anxiety in both mice and humans. The researchers also found that the germ cells—the precursor egg and sperm cells—as well as the brains of the offspring were affected by the stress of being separated from their mothers.<sup>56</sup> In another experiment with rats, offspring that received low levels of maternal care were more anxious and more reactive

to stress in adulthood than were the rats that received high levels of maternal care. This stress pattern was observed in multiple generations.<sup>[57](#)</sup>

It's common knowledge that infants who've been separated from their mothers can experience challenges as a result. In studies involving male mice, pups that were separated from their mothers exhibited lifelong increases in stress susceptibility and generated offspring that exhibited similar stress patterns over several generations.<sup>[58,59](#)</sup> In one of those studies, conducted at the Brain Research Institute of the University of Zurich in 2014, researchers subjected male mice to repeated and prolonged periods of intense stress by separating them from their mothers. Afterward, the traumatized mice exhibited a number of depressionlike symptoms. The researchers then had the mice reproduce, and discovered that the pups in both the second and third generation showed the same symptoms of trauma despite never having experienced it themselves.<sup>[60](#)</sup>

The researchers also discovered abnormally high numbers of microRNA—genetic material that regulates gene expression—present in the sperm, blood, and hippocampi of the traumatized mice. (The hippocampus is a brain region involved in stress responses.) Abnormal levels of microRNA were also discovered in the blood and hippocampi of mice from the second generation. Although mice in the third generation expressed the same symptoms of trauma as did their fathers and grandfathers, elevated numbers of microRNA were not detected, leading researchers to speculate that the behavioral effects of a traumatic event can express for three generations, but perhaps not beyond that.<sup>[61](#)</sup>

“With the imbalance in microRNAs in sperm, we have discovered a key factor through which trauma can be passed on,” explains Isabelle Mansuy, a coauthor of the study.<sup>[62](#)</sup> She and her team are currently studying the role of microRNAs in trauma inheritance in humans.

What makes the mouse research so intriguing is that science can now substantiate how the challenges experienced in one generation can become the legacy transmitted to the next. Looking at the possible implications of all this, we have to ask ourselves: what's really being handed down to our kids?

In a study involving the offspring of stressed male mice conducted at Emory University School of Medicine in 2013, researchers discovered that traumatic memories could be passed down to subsequent generations

through epigenetic changes that occur in DNA. Mice in one generation were trained to fear a cherry blossom–like scent called acetophenone. Each time they were exposed to the smell, they simultaneously received an electric shock. After a while, the shocked mice had a greater amount of smell receptors associated with that particular scent, enabling them to detect it at lower concentrations. They also had enlarged brain areas devoted to those receptors. Researchers were also able to identify changes in the mice’s sperm.

The most intriguing aspect of the study is what occurred in the next two generations. Both the pups and grandpups, when exposed to the blossom odor, became jumpy and avoided it, despite never having experienced it before. They also exhibited the same brain changes. The mice appeared to inherit not only the sensitivity to the scent, but also the fear response associated with it.<sup>63</sup>

Brian Dias, one of the researchers of the study, suggests that “there’s something in the sperm that is informing or allowing that information to be inherited.”<sup>64</sup> He and his team noted abnormally low DNA methylation in both the sperm of the father mice and the sperm of the offspring.<sup>65</sup> Although the exact mechanism for how a parent’s traumatic experience gets stored in the DNA is still under investigation, Dias says, “it behooves ancestors to inform their offspring that a particular environment was a negative environment for them.”<sup>66</sup>

This particular study provides compelling evidence for what the researchers term “transgenerational epigenetic inheritance,” the notion that behaviors can pass from one generation to another. When I work with families in my practice, I often see recurring patterns of illness, depression, anxiety, relationship struggles, and financial hardship, and always feel compelled to look deeper. What unexplored event in a previous generation drives the behavior of the man who loses all his money at the racetrack, or the woman who chooses to be intimate only with married men? How have their genetic inheritances been influenced?

Dias and his group are hoping to carry out further work to determine whether similar effects can be seen in the genes of humans. Until the data is examined in human studies spanning multiple generations, the current research with animals certainly asks us to pause and consider how we’re born sharing the stress of our parents and grandparents.

In a 2013 study involving female rats, published in *Biological Psychiatry*, University of Haifa researchers Hiba Zaidan, Micah Leshem, and Inna Gaisler-Salomon discovered that even relatively mild stress before conception and pregnancy was significant enough to affect offspring. Several of the rats were exposed to minor stress, such as changes in temperature, as early as forty-five days after they were born, which is equivalent to adolescence in humans. Remarkably, the effects were measurable in the next generation.<sup>67</sup>

Focusing on the CRF1 gene, which encodes a molecule involved in the body's response to stress, the researchers detected increased amounts of the molecular product of this gene in the brains of the stressed female rats. They also discovered significantly increased concentrations of this same molecular product in the eggs of the stressed females and also in the brains of their offspring, demonstrating that information about the stress experience was being transferred in the eggs. The researchers insist that the altered behavior in the newborn rats is unrelated to the type of parenting the pups received from their mothers.<sup>68</sup> This particular study suggests that even if humans receive supportive parenting as infants, we are still the recipients of the stress our parents experienced before we were conceived. In the next chapter, we'll explore how siblings born of the same parents may inherit different traumas and lead contrasting lives despite sharing a similar upbringing.

In a 2014 study with rats at the University of Lethbridge in Canada, researchers examined the effects of stress on pregnant mothers and its influence on preterm births. The findings revealed that stressed mothers delivered preterm babies and bore daughters who also had shortened pregnancies. The granddaughters experienced even shorter pregnancies than their mothers. What surprised the researchers most occurred in the third generation. Granddaughters of stressed grandmothers had shorter pregnancies, even when their mothers had not been stressed.<sup>69</sup> Gerlinde Metz, senior author of the article, says: "A surprising finding was that mild to moderate stress during pregnancy had a compounding effect across generations. Thus, the effects of stress grew larger with each generation."<sup>70</sup> Metz believes that the epigenetic changes are due to noncoding microRNA molecules.<sup>71</sup> These findings could have implications for humans who are at risk for pregnancy or childbirth complications due to stress.

Given that a generation in humans is approximately twenty years, the results from human studies spanning multiple generations are still pending. However, with the research demonstrating that stress can be transmitted through at least three generations of mice, the researchers surmise that children born to human parents who experienced a traumatic or stressful event would also likely pass the pattern down not only to their children, but to their grandchildren as well. Uncannily, the Bible, in Numbers 14:18, appears to corroborate the claims of modern science—or vice versa—that the sins, iniquities, or consequences (depending on which translation you read) of the parents can affect the children up to the third and fourth generations. Specifically, the New Living Translation states: “The LORD is slow to anger and filled with unfailing love, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion. But he does not excuse the guilty. He lays the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations.”

As new discoveries in epigenetics are revealed, new information about how to mitigate the transgenerational effects of trauma could become standard practice. Researchers are now finding that our thoughts, inner images, and daily practices, such as visualization and meditation, can change the way our genes express, an idea we will examine in more detail in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3

# The Family Mind

*The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.*

—Ezekiel 18:2 (New International Version)

To put it simply, we receive aspects of our grandmother's mothering through our own mother. The traumas our grandmother endured, her pains and sorrows, her difficulties in her childhood or with our grandfather, the losses of those she loved who died early—these filter, to some degree, into the mothering she gave to our mother. If we look back another generation, the same would likely be true about the mothering our grandmother received.

The particulars of the events that shaped their lives may be obscured from our vision, but nevertheless, the impact of those particulars can be deeply felt. It's not only what we inherit from our parents but also how they were parented that influences how we relate to a partner, how we relate to ourselves, and how we nurture our children. For better or worse, parents tend to pass on the parenting that they themselves received.

These patterns appear to be hardwired into the brain, and begin to be formed before we're even born. How our mother bonds with us in the womb is instrumental in the development of our neural circuitry. Thomas Verny says, "From the moment of conception, the experience in the womb shapes the brain and lays the groundwork for personality, emotional temperament, and the power of higher thought."<sup>1</sup> Like a blueprint, these patterns are transmitted more than learned.

The first nine months outside the womb function as a continuation of the neural development that occurs within the womb. Which neural circuits

remain, which are discarded, and how the remaining circuits will be organized depend on how an infant experiences and interacts with the mother or caregiver. It's through these early interactions that a child continues to establish a blueprint for managing emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

When a mother carries inherited trauma, or has experienced a break in the bond with her mother, it can affect the tender bond that's forming with her infant, and that bond is more likely to be interrupted. The impact of an early break in the mother-child bond—an extended hospital stay, an ill-timed vacation, a long-term separation—can be devastating for the infant. The deep, embodied familiarity of the mother's smell, feel, touch, sound, and taste—everything the child has come to know and depend on—is suddenly gone.

“Mother and offspring live in a biological state that has much in common with addiction,” says behavior science writer Winifred Gallagher. “When they are parted, the infant does not just miss its mother. It experiences a physical and psychological withdrawal . . . not unlike the plight of a heroin addict who goes cold turkey.”<sup>2</sup> This analogy helps to explain why all newborn mammals, including humans, protest with such vigor when they're separated from their mothers. From an infant's perspective, a separation from the mother can be felt as “life threatening,” says Dr. Raylene Phillips, a neonatologist at Loma Linda University Children's Hospital. “If separation continues for a prolonged period,” she says, “the . . . response is despair. . . . The baby gives up.”<sup>3</sup> Dr. Phillips shares this understanding with Dr. Nils Bergman and other experts in the neuroscience of mother-infant bonding.

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In my early life, I knew that feeling of giving up. It came from my family. What my mother didn't get from her mother affected what she was able to give to me and to my siblings. Although I could always feel her love shine through, much of her mothering was infused with the traumas in our family history—specifically the fact that her mother, Ida, lost both of her parents when she was two.

The family lore goes like this: When my great-grandmother Sora died of pneumonia in 1904, her parents blamed her husband, Andrew, whom they described as a ne'er-do-well and a gambler. According to the story, Sora

contracted pneumonia from leaning out the window in the middle of winter, begging for her husband to come home. My grandmother Ida was told that her father had “gambled away the rent money,” a phrase that has echoed in our family for generations. After Sora’s death, my great-grandfather Andrew was banished from the family and never heard from again. Even as a child, I sensed my grandmother’s bitterness when she told the story—which she did repeatedly—and I felt sad that she never got to know her father.

Orphaned at two, my grandmother was raised by her elderly grandparents, who earned a living peddling rags from a pushcart in the Hill District in Pittsburgh. My grandmother adored her grandparents, and often lit up when she shared memories about how much they loved her. But that was only part of the story—the part she could consciously remember. A deeper story lay beneath her reach.

Before Ida was a toddler, perhaps even in the womb, she would have absorbed the sensations of her mother’s distress caused by the constant arguing, the tears and disappointments. All this would have had a profound effect on the crucial neural development taking place in Ida’s brain. Then, losing her mother at age two would leave her emotionally shattered.

It’s not only that my mother was raised by an orphan who couldn’t give her the nurturing she never got from her own mother; my mother also inherited the visceral trauma of Ida’s separation from her mother at an early age. Although Ida was present physically in my mother’s life, she was unable to express the depth of emotion that would support my mother’s development. That missing emotional connection also became part of my mother’s inheritance.

My mother’s father’s story was equally fraught. His mother, Rachel, died in childbirth when my grandfather Harry was only five. Harry’s father, Samuel, believing he was responsible for her death by making her pregnant, carried a heavy burden of guilt. Samuel quickly remarried a woman who, as the story goes, cared more for her biological child than for Harry, whom she treated with an indifference bordering on cruelty. My grandfather rarely talked about his childhood. What I know about it came from my mother, who recounted stories about how Harry nearly starved to death when he was young. He’d pick scraps out of garbage cans and eat dandelion leaves just to survive. As a boy, I imagined my grandfather also as a boy, sitting on

a curb alone, biting into a chunk of stale bread or ripping spoiled meat from a chicken bone.

Having both lost their mothers as young children, my grandparents unknowingly passed the legacy of trauma forward. In our family, the mother-child bond had been severed for at least three generations. Had these disruptions not occurred before my mother was born, my siblings and I might have received a different type of mothering. But as it was, my mother's need for the love her parents couldn't provide often left her feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

In order to end the cycle of inherited trauma in my family, and ultimately for my own healing, I realized that I needed to heal my relationship with my mother. I knew I couldn't change what had happened in the past, but I certainly could change the relationship we had now.

My mother had inherited her mother's stress patterns, and so did I. She would often clutch her chest and complain about feelings of agitation in her body. I realize now that she was unconsciously reliving the fear and loneliness that rippled through our family, the terror of being separated from the one she needed most—her mother. I remember as a small child, maybe five or six, feeling so terrified when my mother left the house that I'd enter her bedroom, open her drawer of scarves and nightgowns, and bury my face into them so that I could breathe in her scent. I remember the feeling vividly—that I would never see her again, that her smell would be all I would have left. As an adult, I shared those memories with my mother, only to learn that she had done the same thing—she had buried her face in her mother's clothes when her mother would leave the house.

As my story illustrates, early interruptions to the mother-child bond can originate long before we're ever conceived. The effects can remain in our unconscious and live in our body as somatic memories that can be triggered by events reminiscent of rejection or abandonment.

When this happens, we can feel entirely out of sync with ourselves. Our thoughts can become overpowering, and we can feel overwhelmed—even frightened—by the sensations that flood our body. Because the trauma existed so early, it often remains hidden beyond our awareness. We know there's a problem, but we can't quite put our finger on the "what happened" part of it. Instead, we surmise that we're the problem, that something inside us is "off." In our fear and anxiety, we often try to control our environment to feel safe. That's because we had so little control when we were small,

and there was likely not a safe place for the intense emotions we experienced. Without our consciously changing the pattern, bonding injuries can echo for generations.

## The Family Consciousness

The notion that we inherit and “re-live” aspects of family trauma has been the subject of many books by the renowned German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger. Having studied families for more than fifty years, first as a Catholic priest and later as a family therapist and philosopher, Hellinger teaches that we share a family consciousness with our biological family members who come before us. He has observed that traumatic events, such as the premature death of a parent, sibling, or child or an abandonment, crime, or suicide, can exert a powerful influence over us, leaving an imprint on our entire family system for generations. These imprints then become the family blueprint as family members unconsciously repeat the sufferings of the past.

The repetition of a trauma is not always an exact replica of the original event. In a family in which someone has committed a crime, for example, someone born in a later generation could atone for that crime without realizing that he or she is doing so. A man named John once came to see me shortly after being released from prison. He had served three years for embezzlement—a crime he claimed he did not commit. At trial, John had pleaded not guilty, but because of the weight of the evidence against him—a false accusation made by his former business associate—he was advised by his attorney to accept a plea bargain. The moment he entered my office, John appeared agitated. His jaw was clenched, and he flung his coat against the back of the chair. He revealed that he’d been framed, and was now obsessed with thoughts of revenge. As we discussed his family situation, it came to light that a generation back, in the 1960s, his father had been accused of murdering his business partner, but had been acquitted at trial on a technicality. Everyone in the family knew that the father was guilty, but they never spoke about it. Given my experience with inherited family trauma, it wasn’t surprising to learn that John was the same age his father

was when he went to trial. Justice was finally served, but the wrong person paid the price.

Hellinger believes that the mechanism behind these repetitions is unconscious loyalty, and views unconscious loyalty as the cause of much suffering in families. Unable to identify the source of their symptoms as belonging to an earlier generation, people often assume that the source of their problem is their own life experience, and are left helpless to find a solution. Hellinger teaches that everyone has the same right to belong in a family system, and that no one can be excluded for any reason whatsoever. This includes the alcoholic grandfather who left our grandmother impoverished, the stillborn brother whose death broke our mother's heart, and even the neighbor child our father accidentally killed as he backed out of the driveway. The criminal uncle, our mother's older half-sister, the baby we aborted—they all belong in our family. The list goes on.

Even people we wouldn't normally include in our family system must be included. If someone harmed or murdered or took advantage of a member of our family, that person must be included. Likewise, somebody in our family harmed or murdered or took advantage of someone, that victim would also need to be included in our family system.

Earlier partners of our parents and grandparents also belong. By their dying or leaving or having been left, an opening is created that allows for our mother, father, grandmother, or grandfather to enter the system, and ultimately allows for us to be born.

Hellinger has observed that when someone is rejected or left out of the family system, that person can be represented by a later member of the system. The later person might share or repeat the earlier person's fate by behaving similarly or by repeating some aspect of the excluded person's suffering. If, for example, your grandfather is rejected in the family because of his drinking, gambling, and philandering, it is possible that one or more of these behaviors will be adopted by one of his descendants. In this way, family suffering continues into subsequent generations.

In John's family, the man his father murdered was now part of John's family system. When John was framed by his business partner, served time in jail, and carried murderous thoughts of revenge, he was unconsciously reliving aspects of his father's experience that had occurred forty years earlier. When John made the link between his father's experience and his own, he could finally release the obsessive thoughts and move on. Two

fates had been intricately linked as though both men shared a single fate. As long as this connection remained obscured, John's emotional freedom remained limited.

Hellinger stresses that we must each carry our own fate regardless of its severity. No one can attempt to take on the fate of a parent, grandparent, sibling, uncle, or aunt without some type of suffering ensuing. Hellinger uses the word "entanglement" to describe this kind of suffering. When entangled, you unconsciously carry the feelings, symptoms, behaviors, or hardships of an earlier member of your family system as if these were your own.

Even children born of the same parents, in the same family home, who share a similar upbringing, are likely to inherit different traumas and experience different fates. For example, the firstborn son is likely to carry what remains unresolved with the father, and the firstborn daughter is likely to carry what remains unresolved with the mother, though this is not always the case. The reverse can also be true. Later children in the family are likely to carry different aspects of their parents' traumas, or elements of the grandparents' traumas.

For example, the first daughter might marry a man who is emotionally unavailable and controlling—similar to how she perceives her father—and, by doing so, share this dynamic with her mother. By marrying a shut-down, controlling man, she repeats her mother's experiences and joins her in her discontent. The second daughter might carry the unexpressed anger of her mother. In this way, she is affected by the same trauma, but carries a different aspect of it. She might reject her father, whereas the first daughter does not.

Later children in a family can often carry the unresolved traumas of the grandparents. In the same family, either the third or fourth daughter might never marry, fearing that she will be controlled by a man she does not love.

I once worked with a Lebanese family that shared a similar dynamic. When we looked back another generation, we learned that both of the Lebanese grandmothers were given away by their parents to become child brides—the one grandmother at age nine and the other at age twelve. Connected with their grandmothers' experience of being forced to marry while still children, two of the Lebanese sisters repeated aspects of this fate in their relationships. Like her grandmothers, one married a much older man. The other never married at all, complaining that men were disgusting

and controlling—similar to how her unhappy paternal grandmother must have felt being trapped in a loveless marriage.

With a break in the mother-child bond among siblings, each child might express his or her disconnection with the mother differently. One child might become a people pleaser, fearing that if he's not good, or he makes waves, he'll lose connection with people. Another child, believing that connection is never hers to have in the first place, might become argumentative and create conflict to push away the people close to her. Another child might isolate and have little contact with people at all.

I've noticed that if several siblings have breaks in the mother-child bond, they'll often express anger or jealousy, or feel disconnected from one another. For example, an older child might resent the child born later, perceiving that the younger child received the love that he or she did not get. Because the hippocampus—that part of the brain involved in creating memories—isn't fully operational until after the age of two, the older child may not consciously remember being held, fed, or cuddled by the mother, but remembers the younger child receiving their mother's love. In response, the older child, feeling slighted, can unconsciously blame the younger child for getting what he or she did not.

And then, of course, there are some children who don't seem to carry any family trauma at all. For these children, it's quite possible that a successful bond was established with the mother and/or father, and this connection helped to immunize the child from carrying entanglements from the past. Perhaps a window of time opened in which the mother was able to give more to one particular child and not the others. Perhaps the parents' relationship improved. Perhaps the mother experienced a special connection with one child, but couldn't connect deeply with the others. Younger children often, though not always, seem to do a bit better than first children, or only children, who seem to carry a bigger portion of unfinished business from the family history.

When it comes to siblings and inherited family trauma, there are no hard and fast rules governing how each child is affected. Many variables, in addition to birth order and gender, can influence the choices siblings make and the lives they lead. Even though it may appear from the outside that one sibling is unscathed by trauma, while another is encumbered, my clinical experience gives me a different perspective: Most of us carry at least some residue from our family history. However, many intangibles also enter into

the equation and can influence how deeply entrenched family traumas remain. These intangibles include self-awareness, the ability to self-soothe, and having a powerful internal healing experience.

## Healing Images and Our Brain

The idea that we relive family traumas may well be at the core of what psychiatrist Norman Doidge alludes to in his breakthrough book *The Brain That Changes Itself* when he writes: “Psychotherapy is often about turning our ghosts into ancestors.” By identifying the source of our generational traumas, Dr. Doidge suggests that our ghosts can “go from haunting us to becoming simply part of our history.”<sup>4</sup>

One key way we do this is by allowing ourselves to be moved by an experience or image strong enough to overshadow the old trauma emotions and sensations that live inside us. Our minds have a vast capacity for healing through images. Whether we’re imagining a scene of forgiveness, comfort, or letting go, or simply visualizing a loved one, images can profoundly settle into our bodies and sink into our minds. In my work, I’ve found that helping people to unearth the image that most resonates with them is the cornerstone of healing.

The notion of the healing power of images was valid long before brain scans could prove it. In 1913, Carl Jung coined the term *active imagination*, a technique that uses images (often from a dream) to enter into a dialogue with the unconscious mind, bringing to light what has been shrouded in darkness. Recently, the idea of visualization for healing has gained widespread traction, with guided imagery programs readily available to lower stress, reduce anxiety, boost athletic performance, and help with specific fears and phobias.

Science supports this idea. Doidge revolutionized our understanding of how human brains operate by identifying a paradigm shift away from viewing the brain as fixed and unchanging to seeing it as flexible and capable of change. His work demonstrates how new experiences can create new neural pathways. These new neural pathways become strengthened

through repetition and deepened through focused attention. Essentially, the more we practice something, the more we train our brain to change.

This fundamental principle is reflected in a phrase coined in 1949 by the Canadian neuropsychologist Donald Hebb: “Neurons that fire together, wire together.” In essence, when brain cells activate together, the connection between them strengthens. Simply put, each time we repeat a particular experience, it becomes more ingrained in us. With enough repetition, it can become automatic.

According to Doidge, neuroscientist Michael Merzenich, a leader in the field of neuroplasticity, says that “practicing a new skill, under the right conditions, can change hundreds of millions and possibly billions of the connections between the nerve cells in our brain maps.”<sup>5</sup> Once a new brain map is established, new thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can emerge organically, expanding our repertoire when old fears arise.

When we make the link to what sits behind our fears and symptoms, we are already opening up new possibilities for resolution. Sometimes the new understanding alone is enough to shift the old painful images we hold and initiate a visceral release that can be felt in the core of our body. In other cases, making the link merely increases understanding, but more is needed to fully integrate what we’ve learned. We will need sentences, rituals, practices, or exercises to help us forge a new inner image. The new image can fill us with a reservoir of calm, becoming an internal reference point of peace that we can return to again and again. With new thoughts, new feelings, new sensations, and a new brain map ingrained, we begin to establish an inner experience of well-being that starts to compete with our old trauma reactions and their power to lead us astray.

The more we travel the neural and visceral pathways of our new brain map, the more we identify with the good feelings that accompany that map. Over time, the good feelings start to become familiar and we begin to trust our ability to return to solid ground even when our foundation has been temporarily shaken.

Doidge tells us that we can change our brains simply by imagining. Just by closing our eyes and visualizing an activity, our primary visual cortex lights up, just as it would if we were actually performing the action. Brain scans demonstrate that many of the same neurons and regions of the brain become activated whether we’re imagining an event or actually living it.<sup>6</sup> Doidge describes visualization as a process that uses both imagination and

memory. He says that “visualizing, remembering, or imagining pleasant experiences activates many of the same sensory, motor, emotional, and cognitive circuits that fired during the ‘real’ pleasant experience.”<sup>7</sup>

“Imagination is the beginning of creation,” wrote the playwright George Bernard Shaw in 1921. Long before neuroplasticity was even considered a possibility, Shaw expounded the principle: What we imagine, we make possible.

## Healing Images and Our Genes

“Plastic change, caused by our experience,” says Doidge, “travels deep into the brain, and even into our genes, molding them as well.”<sup>8</sup> In his best-selling book *The Genie in Your Genes*, which reviews the research linking emotions and gene expression, Dr. Dawson Church describes how visualization, meditation, and focusing on positive thoughts, emotions, and prayers—what he calls internal epigenetic interventions—can activate genes and positively affect our health. “Filling our minds with positive images of wellbeing,” he says, “can produce an epigenetic environment that reinforces the healing process.”<sup>9</sup>

A considerable amount of research has been dedicated to showing how meditation positively affects gene expression. One study conducted at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, published in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology* in 2013, revealed that meditators, after only eight hours of meditation, experienced clear genetic and molecular changes, including decreased levels of pro-inflammatory genes, which would enable them to physically recover from stressful situations more quickly.<sup>10</sup> Church says that when we meditate, we are “bulking up the portions of our brains that produce happiness.”<sup>11</sup>

Throughout our lives, we continuously generate new brain cells. Much of this new growth takes place in the hippocampus. “When we learn, we alter which genes in our neurons are expressed,” says Doidge. “When a gene is turned on, it makes a new protein that alters the structure and function of the cell.” This process, Doidge explains, is influenced by what

we do and what we think. “We can shape our genes, which in turn shapes our brain’s microscopic anatomy.”<sup>[12](#)</sup>

“You can’t change your DNA,” says Rachel Yehuda, “but if you can change the way your DNA functions, that’s sort of the same thing.”<sup>[13](#)</sup>

A life completely devoid of trauma, as we’re learning, is highly unlikely. Traumas do not sleep, even with death, but, rather, continue to look for the fertile ground of resolution in the children of the following generations. Fortunately, human beings are resilient and are capable of healing most types of trauma. This can happen at any time during our lives. We just need the right insights and tools. Later, I’ll share the practices that have been instrumental in my work with clients, so that you can have a firsthand experience of healing the traumas that could be part of your family inheritance.

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## Chapter 4

# The Core Language Approach

*The unconscious insists, repeats, and practically breaks down the door, to be heard.*

—Annie Rogers, *The Unsayable*

When fragments of past trauma play out inside us, these fragments leave clues behind. Clues in the form of emotionally charged words and sentences expressing our deepest fears often link us back to unresolved traumas. As we have seen, these traumas might not even belong to us. I call the verbal expressions of these traumas *core language*. Core language can also be expressed in nonverbal ways. These can include physical sensations, behaviors, emotions, impulses, and even the symptoms of an illness. Jesse's core language included being jolted awake at 3:30 a.m., shivering without knowing why and being terrified of falling back to sleep. Gretchen's core language included depression, despair, anxiety, and the urge to "vaporize" herself. Both Gretchen and Jesse carried pieces of the puzzle that linked them to something unresolved from their family history.

We all know the story of Hansel and Gretel, who are tricked into the dark forest. Worried that they'll never find their way out, Hansel leaves a trail of breadcrumbs in the woods to ensure their safe return home. It's an apt analogy: whether deep in the forest of our fears, or just a little unsettled from stepping off the path, we too leave a trail of crumbs that can help us find our way. But instead of breadcrumbs, we leave a trail of words—words that have the power to lead us back on course. These words may appear random but they are not. They're actually clues from our unconscious. When we know how to gather and connect them, they form a trail we can follow to help us understand more about ourselves.

Like the fairy-tale children, we may wander too far into the forest of our fears even to remember where home is. Instead of following the trail of words, we may find ourselves resorting to medications, comforting ourselves with food, cigarettes, sex, or alcohol, or distracting ourselves with mindless activities. As we know from personal experience, these paths always dead-end. They never take us where we need to go.

We don't realize that the breadcrumbs of our core language are all around us. They live in the words we speak aloud and in the ones spoken in silence. They live in the words that go off continually in our heads like the alarm of a clock. But instead of following them to see where they lead, we may become paralyzed by the trance that these words create inside us.

## Unconscious Memory

Understanding how traumatic memories are stored can shed some light on what happens to our words when we're overwhelmed. Long-term memory is often divided into two main categories: declarative and nondeclarative. Declarative memory, also called explicit or narrative memory, is the ability to consciously recall facts or events. This type of memory depends on language to organize, categorize, and store information and experiences that will later become retrievable memories. It's like a book we can pull off the shelf when we need to refer to a story from the past. When we can put events into words, we can recall them as a part of our history.

Nondeclarative memory, also called implicit, sensorimotor, or procedural memory, operates without conscious recall. It allows us to automatically retrieve what we've already learned without having to relearn the steps. When we ride a bicycle, for example, we don't think about the sequence of events required to make it move forward. The memory of riding a bicycle is so ingrained in us that we just hop on and pedal without breaking the process down into steps. These kinds of memories are not always easy to describe in words.

Traumatic experiences are often stored as nondeclarative memory. When an event becomes so overwhelming that we lose our words, we cannot accurately record or "declare" the memory in story form, which requires

language to do so. It's as though a flash flood is streaming through all our doors and windows at once. In the danger, we don't stop long enough to put our experience into words. We just leave the house.

Without words, we no longer have full access to our memory of the event. Fragments of the experience go unnamed and submerge out of sight. Lost and undeclared, they become part of our unconscious.

The vast reservoir of our unconscious appears to hold not only our traumatic memories, but also the unresolved traumatic experiences of our ancestors. In this shared unconscious, we seem to reexperience fragments of an ancestor's memory and declare them as our own.

Although the mice studies described earlier provide some evidence of how traumas pass down from one generation to the next, the exact mechanism for how this transfer takes place in human beings has yet to be fully understood. Still, even though we're not exactly certain how an ancestor's unfinished business takes root inside us, it appears to bring relief when such a link is made conscious.

## Undeclared Language: When Words Go Missing

There are two important times when we're unable to use words to describe our experience. The first is before the age of two or three, when the language centers of our brain have not yet reached full maturity. The second occurs during a traumatic episode, when our memory functions become suppressed and we can't accurately process information.

When memory function is inhibited, emotionally significant information bypasses the frontal lobes and cannot be named or ordered through words or language, as Bessel van der Kolk describes. Without language, our experiences often go "undeclared," and are more likely to be stored as fragments of memory, bodily sensations, images, and emotions. Language allows us to corral our experiences into story form. Once we have the story, we're more able to revisit an experience—even a trauma—without reliving all the turmoil attached to it.

Even though language may be one of the first things to go when we're overwhelmed, this language is never lost. It sifts back in our unconscious

and surfaces unexpectedly, refusing to be ignored. As psychologist Annie Rogers says, “The unconscious insists, repeats, and practically breaks down the door, to be heard. The only way to hear it, to invite it into the room, is to stop imposing something over it—mostly in the form of your own ideas—and listen instead for the unsayable, which is everywhere, in speech, in enactments, in dreams, and in the body.”<sup>1</sup>

## Core Language and Memory Recovery

The unspoken experiences that live in our unconscious are all around us. They appear in our quirky language. They express in our chronic symptoms and unexplainable behaviors. They resurface in the repetitive struggles we face in our day-to-day lives. These unspoken experiences form the basis of our core language. When our unconscious breaks down our door to be heard, core language is what we hear.

The emotionally charged words of our core language are keys to the nondeclarative memories that live both in our bodies and in the “body” of our family system. They are like gems in our unconscious waiting to be excavated. If we fail to recognize them as messengers, we miss important clues that can help us unravel the mystery behind our struggles. Once we dig them out, we take an essential step toward healing trauma.

Core language helps us “declare” the memories that have gone “undeclared,” enabling us to piece together the events and experiences that could not be integrated or even remembered. When enough of these pieces are gathered in our consciousness, we begin to form a story that deepens our understanding of what might have happened to us or to our family members. We begin to make sense of memories, emotions, and sensations that may have been haunting us our entire lives. Once we locate their origin in the past, in our trauma or in a family trauma, we can stop living them as though they belong in the present. And though not every fear, anxiety, or repetitive thought can be explained by a traumatic event in the family, certain experiences can be more fully understood when we decipher our core language.

# How to Recognize Your Core Language

The intense or urgent words we use to describe our deepest fears—that’s our core language. We can also hear it in the complaints we have about our relationships, our health, our work, and other life situations. Core language is even revealed in the way we’ve disconnected from our bodies, and from the core of ourselves. Essentially, it’s the fallout from trauma that has occurred in our early childhood or family history.

The language is unusual in that it can feel out of context from what we know or what we have experienced. Core language can have the quality of coming from outside us while being experienced inside us. Gretchen, who now understood what was behind the words *vaporize* and *incinerate*, reported, “Those feelings lived in me, but they weren’t from me.” Once this idiosyncratic language is exposed, its intensity and its influence on us begins to lose its charge.

## The Core Language Map

In the chapters that follow, I offer tools that help connect the dots between previously unexplained emotions and events from the past. Each tool contains a series of questions designed to draw out a feeling or inner experience that has probably never been named or made fully conscious. Once enough information has been retrieved, a map begins to appear—a map of the unconscious. It’s called a core language map, and it can actually be charted on paper. The words we write will determine the direction in which we’ll travel. Everyone has a core language map and every map is unique.

Our core language map probably existed long before we were born. It may have belonged to our father or to our grandmother, and we have merely been carrying it for them. Perhaps they, too, had been merely the bearer of this map for a family member who lived before them. Some maps are formed during the wordless time of infancy. In whatever way we’ve received it, we now have the opportunity to trace it back to its origin.

Unresolved traumas from our family history spill into successive generations, blending into our emotions, reactions, and choices in ways we never think to question. We assume these experiences originate with us. With their true source out of sight, we're often unable to differentiate what is ours from what is not.

Following our core language map can bring us face-to-face with family members who live like ghosts, unseen and ignored. Some have been long buried. Some have been rejected or forgotten. Others have gone through ordeals so traumatic, it's too painful to think about what they must have endured. Once we find them, they are set free and we are set free.

Our history is waiting to be discovered. The words, the language, the map—everything we need to make the journey is inside us at this very moment.

In chapter 3, I presented the latest scientific research showing how such tools as visualization can create new neural pathways in the brain and even have a positive effect on our genes. Now, let's apply what we've learned.

In the chapters that follow, you'll find exercises intended to take you beyond the constraints of habitual thinking. They are designed to stir the pot so that the deeper streams of the unconscious can bubble up to the surface.

Each exercise builds upon the one that preceded it. Some ask you to close your eyes and visualize family members; others will ask you to tune in to the sensations in your body. Several of the exercises will ask you to write down answers to questions designed to help you uncover the significant clues in your core language. It's helpful to keep pen and paper close by; a notebook works well so that you can easily review your responses as you move forward.

It's been my experience that, by doing the exercises, you'll deepen your own experience and discover more about yourself. There's no need to worry about right or wrong answers. Let curiosity be your guide as I walk you through a process that, in my practice, has been a healing one for many.

## Chapter 5

# The Four Unconscious Themes

*The most powerful ties are the ones to the people who gave us birth . . . it hardly seems to matter how many years have passed, how many betrayals there may have been, how much misery in the family: We remain connected, even against our wills.*

—Anthony Brandt, “Bloodlines”

Whether we inherit our parents’ emotions in the womb, or they are transmitted in our early relationship with our mother, or we share them through unconscious loyalty or family traumas, one thing is clear: life sends us forward with something unresolved from the past.

We delude ourselves when we believe we can make our lives go exactly as we plan. Too often, our intentions are at odds with our actions. We might desire good health, but eat far too much junk food or find excuses not to exercise. We might yearn for a romantic relationship, but distance ourselves as soon as a potential partner gets close. We might want a career that’s meaningful, but fail to take the steps necessary to achieve it. The worst part is that the very thing that holds us back is often invisible to us, keeping us frustrated and confused.

We look for answers in the usual places. We focus on the deficits in our upbringing. We mull over the upsetting events in our childhood that left us feeling powerless. We blame our parents for unfortunate things that happened to us. We visit the same thoughts over and over again. Yet remembering in this way rarely makes things better. Without the origin of our issue in sight, our complaints merely perpetuate our continued unhappiness.

In this chapter, we'll learn about the four unconscious themes that interrupt life's forward progress, four ways our relationships, success, and health can be disrupted. Before we go there, let's look at how we got here.

## The Flow of Life

The pathway was simple. We came here through our parents. As children of our parents, we are connected to something vast that extends backward in time, literally to the beginning of humanity itself. Through our parents, we are plugged into the very current of life, though we are not the source of that current. The spark has merely been forwarded to us—transmitted biologically, along with our family history. It's also possible to experience how it lives inside us.

This spark is our life force. Maybe you can feel it pulsing inside you right now as you read this. If you've ever been with someone when he or she died, you can feel this force diminish. You can even feel the very instant of separation when that force leaves the body. Likewise, if you've ever witnessed a birth, you can feel the life force filling the room.

That life force doesn't stop with birth. It continues to flow from your parents to you, even if you feel disconnected from them. I've observed, both in my clinical practice and in my own life, that when our connection to our parents flows freely, we experience ourselves as more open to receiving what life brings our way. When our connection to our parents is impaired in some way, the life force available to us can feel limited. We may feel blocked and constricted, or feel outside the flow of life, as if we're swimming upstream against the current. Ultimately, we suffer and don't know why. But we have the resources within us to heal. Let's start by assessing the connection we feel to our parents in this very moment, regardless of whether they're still alive or not.

### **Sensing the Flow**

Take a minute and feel the connection or disconnection you have with your parents. Regardless of the story you have about them, feel the relationship and how it affects your body physically.

Visualize your biological parents standing in front of you. If you have never met them or cannot visualize them, just let yourself sense their presence. Hold the image and ask yourself the following:

- Do I welcome them or do I shut them out?
- Do I sense them as welcoming me?
- Do I experience one differently from the other?
- Is my body relaxed or tight as I visualize them?
- If a life-giving force were flowing from them to me, how much of it would be getting through: 5 percent? 25 percent? 50 percent? 75 percent? Or a full 100 percent?

The life force that flows from our parents flows to us freely. There's nothing we need to do. Our only job is to receive it.

Visualize the life force as the main wire that feeds electricity into your home. All the other wires that branch off into the various rooms depend on the main wire for power. No matter how successfully we wire our house, if our connection to the main wire is compromised, the flow will be impacted.

Now let's look at how this "main wire" can be affected by the four unconscious themes.

## Four Unconscious Themes That Interrupt the Flow of Life

These themes are common to each of us, yet their effects are unconscious in us:

1. We have merged with a parent.
2. We have rejected a parent.
3. We have experienced a break in the early bond with our mother.
4. We have identified with a member of our family system other than our parents.

Any one of these themes can hinder our ability to flourish and to achieve the goals we set. They can limit our vitality, our health, and our success.

They show up in our behavior and in our relationships. They appear in our words.

The four themes are relational, in that they describe aspects of how we relate to our parents and to others in our family system. If we understand the themes, and know how to look for them, we can identify which ones are operating in us and blocking us from having the fullness of our life experiences.

A disconnection from our mother or father underlies three of the four unconscious themes, and is the first place to consider when we are struggling.

There are other interruptions to the life force that can prevent us from living fully, but these interruptions aren't always unconscious, and don't necessarily involve a parent or another member of our family system. One such interruption comes about when we have experienced a personal trauma. Even if we are aware of the trauma's effects on us, we might still be powerless to resolve it.

Another type of interruption occurs when we feel guilty for an action we have taken or a crime we have committed. Perhaps we made a decision that hurt someone, or left a relationship in a cruel way, or took something that didn't belong to us, or purposely or accidentally took a life. Guilt can freeze up our life force in myriad ways. And, when not owned or resolved, it can extend to our children and even to their children. You'll read more about this in the chapters that follow. First, let's look at the four interruptions that directly relate to our parents or another member of the family system.

## **1. Did You Merge with the Feelings, Behaviors, or Experience of a Parent?**

Think back. Did one of your parents struggle emotionally, physically, or psychologically? Did it hurt you to see them suffer? Did you want to take their pain away? Did you try? Did you ever side with the feelings of one parent against the other? Were you afraid to show your love to one parent for fear of hurting the other? In your life today, do you struggle in a way similar to how your parents struggled? Do you recognize your parents' pain in you?

Many of us unconsciously take on our parents' pain. As small children, we develop our sense of self gradually. Back then, we had not learned how

to be separate from our parents and be connected to them at the same time. In this innocent place, perhaps we imagined that we could alleviate their unhappiness by fixing or sharing it. If we too carried it, they wouldn't have to carry it alone. But this is fantasized thinking, and it only leads to more unhappiness. Shared patterns of unhappiness are all around us. Sad mother, sad daughter . . . disrespected father, disrespected son . . . the relationship difficulties of the parents mirrored by the children. The combinations are endless.

When we merge with a parent, we unconsciously share an aspect, often a negative aspect, of that parent's life experience. We repeat or relive certain situations or circumstances without making the very link that can set us free.

### *Gavin's Story*

The following story illustrates how this often-veiled dynamic can fuel a struggle we feel powerless to resolve.

When Gavin was thirty-four, he made a series of rash financial decisions that cost him and his family all the money they had saved. He had recently been let go from his job as a project manager for failing to meet deadlines. With a wife and two small children at home, Gavin was desperate. Struggling to pay his bills and with his marriage now strained, Gavin spiraled into a deep depression.

When he was a small boy, his father, who also happened to be in his mid-thirties at the time, lost the family's entire savings at the racetrack, believing he had insider information about a particular horse. At that point, Gavin's mother took the kids and moved back to her parents' home. After that, Gavin rarely saw his father, whom his mother referred to as a selfish man, a compulsive gambler, and a loser.

Now, at thirty-four, though he hadn't made the connection consciously, Gavin was repeating his father's "loser" experience. He too had lost his family's savings and was now facing the possibility of losing his wife and children. It wasn't until our session together that Gavin realized he had been reliving the past.

Being so far removed from his father, Gavin couldn't understand how their lives mirrored such a similar pattern. By not sharing a conscious connection with his father, Gavin had forged an unconscious one—he had

unwittingly repeated his father's failures. Understanding this, Gavin set out to repair their broken relationship.

It had been nearly a decade since they'd spoken. Conscious of his own resistance, and aware that he mostly knew his father through his mother's stories, Gavin proceeded cautiously, but with an open mind. In a handwritten letter, he told his dad that he was a grandfather of two little girls and that Gavin was sorry he hadn't been in touch. Gavin waited six weeks, but no response came. He was fearful that either his father had died—or worse, in his mind, his father had written him off.

Trusting an instinct beneath his fear, Gavin picked up the phone and dialed his father's number. He was glad he did; surprisingly, his father had not received the letter. In the call, both men awkwardly fumbled through words and emotions while trying to forge a connection. After a few strained phone calls, genuine feelings began to surface. Gavin was able to tell his father that he deeply missed him. His father listened, choking back tears. He told Gavin how incredibly painful it had been to lose his family, and how a day hadn't gone by without his feeling the sting of grief and sadness. His father suggested that they meet in person. Gavin agreed. Within weeks, the depression that had engulfed Gavin began to lift. With his father back in his life, Gavin began to stabilize things at home, restoring the trust he'd lost with his wife and strengthening his ties with his children. It was as if a key he never knew was missing had been found. Gavin could now unlock the safe that held the most essential valuables of his life—his connection to his family.

The last thing parents would want to see is their child suffering on their behalf. It is arrogant and inflated to think that we, as children, are better equipped to handle our parents' suffering than they are. It is also out of tune with the order of life. Our parents existed before we did. They provided for us so that we could survive. We did not, as infants, provide for them.

When a child takes on a parent's burden—whether consciously or unconsciously—he or she misses out on the experience of being given to, and can have difficulty receiving from relationships later in life. A child who takes care of a parent often forges a lifelong pattern of overextension and creates a blueprint for habitually feeling overwhelmed. By attempting to share or carry our parent's burden, we continue the family suffering and block the flow of life force that is available to us and to the generations that follow us.

Even when we care for ill or elderly parents, providing what they cannot do for themselves, it is important to preserve and respect the integrity of the parent-child relationship, rather than diminish our parents' dignity.

## **2. Have You Judged, Blamed, Rejected, or Cut Yourself Off from a Parent?**

If we truly want to embrace life and experience joy, if we truly want deep and satisfying relationships, and health that's vibrant and resilient, if we truly want to live up to our full potential, without the sense of being broken inside, we must first repair our broken relationships with our parents. Beyond having given us life and being an inexorable part of who we are, our parents are the gateway to the hidden strengths and creative forces, as well as the challenges, that are also part of our ancestral legacy. Whether they're dead or alive, whether we're distant from them or our relationship is amicable, our parents—and the traumas they've experienced or inherited—hold the key to our healing.

Even if you have the sense that you'd rather chew a handful of thumbtacks than warm to your parents, this step cannot be bypassed, no matter how long it takes. (It took me thirty-six weekly lunches with my marine sergeant father before he finally told me that he never believed I loved him.) Broken relationships often stem from painful events in our family history and can repeat for generations until we summon the courage to let go of our judging minds, open our constricted hearts, and regard our parents and other family members with the light of compassion. Only by doing so can we resolve the pain that prevents us from wholly embracing our lives.

Even if, at first, we can make the movement only on an internal level, it's important to find a place inside ourselves where we can soften when we think of our parents and not bristle.

This approach may run counter to what you've been taught. Much conventional talk therapy focuses on blaming the parents as the root cause of our suffering. Like rats endlessly navigating the same maze, many people spend decades rehashing old stories of how their parents failed them and made their lives miserable. Though our old stories can entrap us, once we uncover the deeper stories behind them, they have the power to set us free. The source of that freedom is inside us, simply waiting to be mined.

Ask yourself: Do you reject, blame, or judge a parent for something you feel he or she has done to you? Do you disrespect one or both of your parents? Have you cut yourself off from either of them?

Let's say that you blame or reject your mother. Let's say that you blame her for not giving you enough of what you feel you should have received. If this is true for you, have you also asked yourself what happened to her? What event had the power to interrupt the flow of love in your relationship? Did something occur that separated the two of you, or separated her from her parents?

Perhaps your mother carried a wound from her mother and was unable to give you what she didn't get. Her parenting skills would be limited by what she did not receive from her parents.

If you reject your mother, it is likely that a traumatic event stands between you and her. Maybe your mother lost a child before you were born, or gave a child up for adoption, or lost her first love in a car accident—the man she had planned to marry. Perhaps her father died when she was young, or her beloved brother was killed getting off the school bus. The shock waves from such an event would affect you, but the actual event would have nothing to do with you directly. Instead, the trauma would tie up your mother's focus and attention, no matter how great her love for you.

As a child, you might experience her as unavailable, self-absorbed, or withholding. You might then reject her, taking her depleted flow of love personally, as if somehow she had made a choice to keep it from you. The greater truth would be that the love you longed for was not available for your mother to give. Any child born into similar circumstances would likely experience a similar type of mothering.

If you cut yourself off from your mother, you might blame her for not responding to all the love you gave to her when you were a small child. Maybe she was depressed and cried a lot, and maybe you attempted to make her happy with your love. Maybe you took care of her and tried to take her pain away. Maybe one day you realized that all your good efforts had failed, that your love could not make your mother feel better. And so you distanced yourself from her and blamed her for not giving you what you needed, when it was really that you felt unseen for all the love you gave, or disheartened that her love could not be returned in the same way. Cutting off may have been the only option you knew. Cutting off can make

you feel free at first, but it's the false freedom of a childhood defense. Ultimately, it will limit your life experience.

Maybe you blame or judge one parent because he or she was at war with the other, and you felt forced to take sides. Often, a child will be openly loyal to one parent, but secretly loyal to the other. The child may form a covert bond with the rejected or denigrated parent by adopting or emulating what's judged as negative in that parent.

Let's look at that again. The emotions, traits, and behaviors we reject in our parents will likely live on in us. It's our unconscious way of loving them, a way to bring them back into our lives. We saw how that pattern unconsciously played out in Gavin's life.

When we reject our parents, we can't see the ways in which we're similar. The behaviors become disowned in us and are often projected onto the people around us. Conversely, we can attract friends, romantic partners, or business associates who display the very behaviors we reject, allowing us myriad opportunities to recognize and heal the dynamic.

On a physical level, a rejection of our parents can be felt as a pain, tightness, or numbness in our body. Our bodies will feel some degree of unrest until our rejected parent is experienced inside us in a loving way.

We don't even need to know the exact family history to understand what triggered the rejection. Clearly, something happened that kept the two of you from being close. Perhaps your mother's own mother died when she was young or your mother lost a sibling or was left by the great love of her life. She may not reveal her history and you may never know it. Even so, healing your relationship with her will help you feel more whole inside yourself. Something clearly happened. That's all you need to know. And this something blocked your heart or blocked her heart, or both. Your job is to reconnect with the love you naturally felt for her when you were small. In this way, you can let go of what you might be carrying that actually belongs to her.

Healing our relationship with our parents often begins with an inner image. Sometimes, before we can take a step in the outer world, we must first make a step in our inner world. What follows is one way to get the process going. Although the exercise focuses on our relationship with our mother, the same exercise can be done visualizing our father.

## Visualizing Your Mother and Her History

Imagine that your mother stands in front of you, a few steps away. Check inside. What sensations are you aware of? Now imagine that she takes three large steps and stands very close to you, within inches of your body. What physically happens inside you? Does your body open or does it contract or want to pull away? If your answer is that your body contracts or wants to pull away, it's important to realize that the work of opening is now your responsibility and not your mother's.

Now let's widen the lens, and think of your mother again standing several steps away. This time, visualize her surrounded by all the traumatic events she experienced. Even if you don't know exactly what happened to her, you have a sense of her family history and how she might have struggled in her life. Take a moment to really feel what it must have been like for her.

- Close your eyes.
- Recall all the stories from your mother's family history and let all the tragedies you know come to mind.
- Visualize your mother as a young woman or a small child or even a small baby tightening against the waves of loss, trying to protect herself from the onslaught of pain.
- What does your body feel as you sense what she might have felt? What are the sensations and where do they arise in your body?
- Can you feel or imagine what it must have been like for her?
- Does this touch you? Can you feel your compassion for her?
- Tell her in your heart, "Mom, I understand." Even if you don't fully understand, say the words again. "Mom, I understand." Consider adding the words "Mom, I'll try to take in your love *just as it is, without judging it or expecting it to be different.*"
- How does it feel to say that?
- What happens in your body when you tell her this?
- Is there any place in your body that lets go, opens, or feels softer?

Not only does having a close relationship with our parents add to the comfort and support we feel in life, it has also been shown to correlate with good health. The results of a thirty-five-year longitudinal study conducted at Harvard University found compelling evidence that the quality of our relationship with our parents can affect our health in later life.

Specifically, participants were asked to describe their relationship with each parent using the following scale: "very close," "warm and friendly," "tolerant," or "strained and cold." Ninety-one percent of participants who stated that their relationship with their mother was tolerant or strained were diagnosed with a significant health issue (such as cancer, coronary artery disease, hypertension, etc.) in midlife, compared with 45 percent of participants—less than half—who reported that their relationship with their

mothers was warm or close. Similar numbers were reported for participants who described their relationship with their fathers. Eighty-two percent of the participants who reported tolerant or strained relationships with their fathers had significant health issues in midlife, compared with 50 percent of those who had warm or close relationships with their fathers. If participants had a strained relationship with both parents, the results were startling: 100 percent had significant health issues, versus 47 percent of those who described their relationships with their parents as being warm and close.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

Another study, conducted at Johns Hopkins University, followed 1,100 male medical students for fifty years and found that cancer rates correlated closely with the degree of distance a participant felt toward a parent.<sup>[2](#)</sup>

Not only can a difficult relationship with our parents affect our physical health, our early relationship with our mother in particular can serve as a template from which our later relationships are forged. The following story shows how unresolved feelings toward our mother can be projected onto our partners.

### *Tricia's Story*

Tricia's relationships were all short-lived. None lasted for more than a year or two. Now she was about to leave her current partner. "He's cold and insensitive," she complained. "He's never there when I need him." Unaware that she was doing so, Tricia described her mother in a similar way. "She's distant and emotionally unavailable. I could never go to her for support. She never loved me in the way I needed to be loved."

Tricia's rejection of her mother was the culprit behind her relationship failures. What sat unresolved with her mother unconsciously resurfaced with her partners, eroding the bond they shared and the intimacy they desired.

Tricia was unable to pinpoint any specific event that explained why she had rejected her mother. However, in our work together, she revealed that her mother had often described her own mother—Tricia's grandmother—as being selfish and emotionally unavailable. The story went like this: The grandmother, when just a toddler, was sent to live with her aunt after her mother's death. She often felt like an outsider in the new family and remained resentful for most of her life. Tricia finally understood the source

of her mother's lack of warmth. She also saw for the first time that she too had merely been repeating a family pattern of daughters who didn't get what they needed from their mothers. This pattern reverberated through the family history for at least three generations.

With a deeper understanding of the events behind her mother's distance, Tricia reported feeling compassion for her for the first time. Tricia reconciled their relationship and immediately could feel the effects of that reconciliation with her partner. She found that she was less defensive and could remain open and present—even during rough patches when, in the past, she would have felt threatened, pulled away, and retreated into herself. Projections that had been veiled were now in full view.

If your relationship with your parents is strained, don't worry. I offer tools that can help you repair the connection. It will be important not to expect your parents to be any different from who they are—the change will occur in you. The relationship dynamics may remain the same, but your perspective will be different. It's not about recklessly throwing yourself in front of a moving train; it's more about choosing the best route to make the journey.

### **3. Did You Experience an Interruption in the Early Bond with Your Mother?**

If you reject your mother, it could be that you experienced an interruption during the early bonding process with her. Not everyone who experiences a break in the early bond will reject his or her mother. What is more likely with an interruption during this period is that you experience some degree of anxiety when you attempt to bond with a partner in an intimate relationship. That anxiety could translate into a difficulty maintaining a relationship or even not wanting a relationship at all. It could also translate into making the decision not to have children. On the surface, you might complain that raising a child involves too much time and energy. On the deeper level, you might feel ill equipped to supply a child with what you yourself have missed.

An interruption in the mother-child bond in earlier generations can affect your connection with your mother as well. Did your mother or grandmother experience a break in the bond with her mother? The residues from these early traumas can be experienced in later generations. Not only that, it

would be difficult for your mother to give you what she was unable to receive from her own mother.

If you're estranged from your parents, or they are deceased, you may never know the answer to these questions, especially if you were very young when the break occurred. Early interruptions in general can be difficult to discern, because the brain is not equipped to retrieve our experiences in those first few years of life. The hippocampus, the part of the brain associated with forming, organizing, and storing memories, has not fully developed its connections to the prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that helps us interpret our experiences) until sometime after the age of two. As a result, the trauma of an early separation would be stored as fragments of physical sensations, images, and emotions, rather than as clear memories that can be pieced into a story. Without the story, the emotions and sensations can be difficult to understand.

### **Some Questions to Ask When Looking for an Interrupted Bond**

- Did something traumatic happen while your mother was pregnant with you? Was she highly anxious, depressed, or stressed?
- Were your parents having difficulties in their relationship during the pregnancy?
- Did you experience a difficult birth? Were you born premature?
- Did your mother experience postpartum depression?
- Were you separated from your mother shortly after birth?
- Were you adopted?
- Did you experience a trauma or a separation from your mother during the first three years of life?
- Were you or your mother ever hospitalized and forced to be apart (maybe you spent time in an incubator, or had your tonsils removed or some other medical procedure, or your mother needed to have surgery or experienced a complication from a pregnancy, etc.)?
- Did your mother experience a trauma or emotional turmoil during your first three years of life?
- Did your mother lose a child or pregnancy before you were born?
- Was your mother's attention pulled to a trauma involving one of your siblings (a late-term miscarriage, a stillbirth, a death, a medical emergency, etc.)?

Sometimes the break in the bond isn't physical. Sometimes we experience more of an energetic break from our mother. She may be physically present, but emotionally distant or inconsistent. The presence

and constancy that a mother establishes during the first years of life is instrumental for the child's psychological and emotional well-being. Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut describes how "the gleam in the mother's eye" when she gazes at her infant is the vehicle by which the child feels validated and affirmed and can begin to develop in a healthy way.

If we experienced an early break in the bond with our mother, we may have to piece together certain clues arising from our mother's history, as well as from our own history. We will need to look back and ask: Did something traumatic happen to our mother that affected her ability to be attentive? Was she present or preoccupied? Was there a disconnection in how she touched us, in the way she looked at us, in the tone of her voice when she spoke to us? Do I experience difficulty bonding in a relationship? Do I shut down, pull away, or push away from closeness?

Suzanne, a thirty-year-old mother of two, cringed at the thought of having a physically close relationship with her mother. For as long as she could remember, she never liked being hugged by her. Suzanne also revealed that she and her husband weren't physically affectionate. "Hugging takes your energy away," Suzanne would say. When Suzanne was nine months old, she spent two weeks alone in the hospital with pneumonia, while her mother remained at home to care for the other siblings. At that point, Suzanne unconsciously began to withdraw. By rejecting her mother's affection, Suzanne was merely protecting herself from being hurt and left again. Just being able to identify the root of her repulsion toward her mother was crucial. After that, Suzanne was able to restore the bond that had broken between them.

After experiencing an interrupted bond, a child can be hesitant when it's time to reestablish the connection with the mother. The way this connection is restored can create a blueprint for bonding and separating in future relationships. If the mother and child do not fully reestablish their connection, the child may remain hesitant later in life when attempting to bond with a partner. A failure to reestablish the bond can create "an unexplainable lack of closeness [that] casts a shadow over daily relationships," says psychologist David Chamberlain. "Intimacy and genuine friendship seem beyond reach."<sup>3</sup>

As infants, we perceive our mother as our world. A separation from her is felt as a separation from life. Experiences of emptiness and disconnection, feelings of hopelessness and despair, a belief that something

is terribly wrong with us or with life itself—all these can be generated by an early separation. Too young to process the trauma, we experience feelings, beliefs, and body sensations that live inside us without the story that connects them to the past. It is these experiences that infuse the many hurts, losses, disappointments, and disconnections we encounter as our lives unfold.

### *The Negative Memories of Childhood*

Many of us cannot see beyond the painful images of our childhood, and are unable to remember the positive things that happened to us. As small children, we experience both comforting and unsettling times. However, the comforting memories—memories of being held by our mother as she fed us, cleaned us, or rocked us to sleep—are often blocked from surfacing. Instead, we seem to recall only the painful memories of not getting what we wanted, not getting enough love.

There are reasons for this. When we, as small children, experienced our safety or security being threatened, our bodies reacted by erecting defenses. These unconscious defenses then become our default, orienting our attention toward what's difficult or unsettling, instead of registering what's comforting. It's as though our positive memories live on the other side of a wall just out of our reach. Only able to reside on one side of the wall, we truly believe nothing good ever happened to us.

It's as though we have rewritten history, keeping only those memories that support our primitive defensive structure, defenses that have been with us so long, they become us. Beneath the unconscious barricade we have erected lies a deep desire to be loved by our parents. Yet many of us can no longer access these feelings. For were we to recall the loving and tender moments we shared with our parents, we would feel vulnerable and risk being hurt again. Thus the very memories that could bring us healing are those we unconsciously block.

Evolutionary biologists back up this premise. They describe how our amygdala uses about two thirds of its neurons scanning for threats. As a result, painful and frightening events are more easily stored in our long-term memory than pleasant events. Scientists call this default mechanism a “negativity bias,” and it makes perfect sense. Our very survival depends on being able to screen out potential attacks. “The mind is like Velcro for

negative experiences,” says neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, “and Teflon for positive ones.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. Are You Unconsciously Identified with a Member of Your Family System Other than Your Parents?**

Sometimes, our relationship with our parents is strong and loving, yet we still find ourselves unable to explain the difficult feelings we carry. We often assume that the problem originates inside us, and if we only dig deep enough, we’ll discover its source. Until we uncover the actual triggering event in our family history, we can relive fears and feelings that don’t belong to us—unconscious fragments of a trauma—and we will think they’re ours.

##### *Todd’s Story*

Todd was nine when he began stabbing the couch with a pen. That year, he assaulted a neighbor boy with a stick, resulting in a gash that required forty stitches. Todd spent the next several years receiving both medication and psychological treatment, yet the aggressive behaviors continued. It wasn’t until Todd’s father, Earl, told me about his own father—a man he said he loathed—that the missing piece of the puzzle emerged into view.

Todd’s grandfather was a violent man. Not only did he beat his children, he also stabbed a man to death in a barroom brawl. Charges were never brought, and the grandfather remained free to live his life as he pleased. But not his descendants; Todd, his grandson, had become the unsuspecting recipient of violent feelings that weren’t his. He shared an unconscious connection with his grandfather, a connection that would have remained hidden had Todd’s father not probed into the family’s past.

In our session together, Earl revealed that his father’s father had also killed a man. And in the generation before that, his great-grandfather had been slain, along with several members of his family, by a land baron and his gang from the neighboring town. The pattern was now beginning to make sense. Earl began to see that his father was merely a cog in a spinning wheel of family violence.

With the lens widened, Earl felt, perhaps for the first time in his life, compassion for his father. He told me that he wished his father were still alive, so that he could talk to him about the family story. Earl went home and shared what he knew with Todd, who listened intently. Both of them knew intuitively that something in the telling and receiving would finally come to rest. That insight proved to be true. Five months later, Earl called me and told me that Todd was no longer on medication and no longer behaving violently.

If you are identified with someone in your family system, you are probably not aware of it. Identifications are unconscious, so it's unlikely that you will make the link by yourself. Jesse and Gretchen, whom you met in the opening pages of this book, also carried identifications with members of their family systems. So did Megan.

### *Megan's Story*

Megan married Dean at nineteen and thought their relationship would last forever. Then one day, when Megan was twenty-five, she looked at him across the kitchen table and felt herself go numb. Her feelings for Dean were gone. Within weeks, Megan filed for divorce. Realizing that her suddenly vanishing love for Dean seemed aberrant, she sought help.

I suspected that a family story lay out of reach for her and began to probe. It was fortuitous that we did. The link Megan hadn't made was easy to see. Megan's grandmother was only twenty-five years old when her husband, the love of her life, drowned while fishing at sea. She raised Megan's mother on her own and never remarried. Her husband's sudden death was the great tragedy in their family.

The story was so familiar that Megan hadn't even considered its effects on her. Once Megan realized that she was reliving her grandmother's story, the sudden aloneness, the deep loss and numbness, Megan began to blink and scrunch her face. I gave her all the time she needed to let the insight sink in. After many seconds came a series of quick breaths. A few minutes later, her breath began to lengthen. She was putting the pieces together. "I feel strangely hopeful," she said. "I need to tell Dean." Days later she called and reported that something was changing inside her; her feelings for Dean were returning.

It's important to restate: not all behaviors expressed by us actually originate from us. They can easily belong to family members who came before us. We can merely be carrying the feelings for them or sharing them. We call these "identification feelings."

### **Are You Identified with a Member of Your Family System?**

- Could you be feeling like, behaving like, suffering like, atoning for, or carrying the grief for someone who came before you?
- Do you have symptoms, feelings, or behaviors that are difficult to explain in the context of your life experience?
- Did guilt or pain prevent a family member from loving someone or grieving his or her loss?
- Did someone do something that caused his or her rejection in the family?
- Was there a trauma in the family (an early death of a parent, child, or sibling, or an abandonment, murder, crime, or suicide, etc.), an event that was too terrible, painful, or shameful to talk about?
- Could you be connected with that event, living a life similar to the person no one talks about?
- Could you be reliving this family member's trauma as though it were your own?

## **How the Four Themes Get Set in Motion**

Let's consider a hypothetical scenario: First, a tragedy occurs. The older brother of a two-year-old dies suddenly, leaving behind grieving parents and a child too young to make sense of what happened. It's a painful thing to imagine, but for the surviving child, this event could activate one or more of the four themes. For example:

**The child could reject a parent.** In his or her grief, either parent could lose the will to live. Maybe the father or mother starts drinking to numb the pain, or begins spending extra time away from home. Perhaps being together only intensifies the grief they can't tolerate. Maybe they blame themselves for something they believe contributed to their son's death. Or secretly, they blame each other. Accusations like "You didn't get the right

doctor” or “You should have been watching him more carefully” might brew under the surface but probably wouldn’t be spoken. In any case, the surviving child would feel his parents’ spiraling emotions. The rages, the self-incriminations, the shutdowns—it could feel like the world has suddenly collapsed or disappeared. In response, the child might split off or armor his body from the overwhelming feelings in an attempt to protect himself. At two years old, he wouldn’t understand the scale of the tragedy. The loss of his parents’ attention would feel confusing—perhaps even life-threatening. Later on, he might blame them for the hurt or distance he felt, not taking into account what happened and what it must have been like for them.

**The child could experience an interrupted bond with the mother.** The shock of the older brother’s death would likely shatter the mother’s heart. Forlorn and despairing, she might disappear for weeks or months into her grief, fragmenting the tender, energetic bond she shares with her two-year-old. An event like this would disrupt the bond the child has experienced up to that point and interrupt the crucial neural development taking place in his two-year-old body and brain. At that age, he wouldn’t understand the enormity of the tragedy that caused his mother’s attention to shift. All he would feel is that she was shining her light toward him one moment, and shutting down the next. Chemicals designed to put him on alert would fire in his body, keeping him on guard. He might then become mistrustful of her, fearing her inconsistency, wary that she could “disappear” on him again at any time.

**The child could merge with the mother’s or father’s pain.** With the older child dead, the living child might experience the weight of his mother’s or father’s pain as if it were his own. The cascading effects of grief could rigidify the entire family. In a blind attempt to ease his parents’ pain, he might try to carry his mother’s depression or his father’s grief as though he had some magical power to take it away. It would be almost as if he were saying, “Mom, Dad, if I carry the pain with you, or if I carry it for you, it will make you feel better.” His attempt, of course, wouldn’t succeed. It would only extend the grief into the next generation.

Children who share their parents’ pain generally do so unconsciously. They operate from a blind fantasy that they can save their parents.

Instinctively loyal, children often repeat their parents' sorrows and relive their misfortunes. These bonds of loyalty, as Hellinger calls them, can then be carried over several generations, rendering the family legacy a legacy of unhappiness.

**The child could become identified with the dead brother.** When a small child dies, a blanket of grief shrouds the family. The intolerable waves of pain block expressions of aliveness and happiness. The living child might even begin tiptoeing around the grieving parents so as not to upset them further. In an attempt to avoid the pain and senselessness of the death, family members may try not to think about the dead child and even resist speaking his name. In this way, the dead child is excluded, creating a fertile ground for an identification to take root.

Hellinger teaches that a later child in the system (even one from the next generation) can express what a family has suppressed. That means that the living child could find himself feeling depressed or lifeless, split off from his essence as if he doesn't exist, similar to how the family perceives the dead brother. The living child might feel like he is ignored or not seen in the family, or that he is not important or doesn't matter. He might even begin to take on traits of the dead brother, expressing facets of his gender, personality, illness, or trauma. Unconsciously identified with him, he might find his enthusiasm diminished, the amount of life force he takes in limited. It could feel as though, joined with his dead sibling in silent sympathy, the living child is saying, "Since you couldn't live, then I won't live fully."

I once worked with a woman who was born less than a year after her older brother died stillborn. The dead child wasn't given a name or a place in the family. The family claimed only two children—my client and her younger sister. My client claimed only one sibling—her sister. Yet she suffered with feelings of not belonging. "I feel like an outsider in this family," she said. "It's like I don't have a place." Although there was no way to prove it was true, it appeared that she carried her older brother's experience of being excluded in the family. After we worked together, she reported that the feeling of not belonging had dissolved.

Identifications like these can significantly alter the course of our lives. Unsuspecting and unaware, we relive aspects of our family traumas with startling consequences. These experiences are not uncommon. Many of us unwittingly live in sympathy with family members who have suffered

difficult traumas. When suffering confounds us, we need to ask ourselves: whose feelings am I actually living?

## The Four Tools of the Core Language Map

One of the greatest roadblocks to resolving trauma is that the source often remains out of sight. Without a context for understanding our feelings, we often don't know the next steps to take. Core language can bring the origin of a trauma into view so that we can disentangle from the ways in which we may have been reliving the past.

In the pages that follow, you'll begin constructing your core language map. You'll follow a step-by-step process that uses your language, the words you speak, to help you target the source of feelings that may have been difficult for you to explain.

There are four steps to constructing your core language map. In each step, you will be given a new tool. Each tool is designed to extract new information. The tools are:

1. The Core Complaint
2. The Core Descriptors
3. The Core Sentence
4. The Core Trauma

In the next chapter, you will learn to listen for clues in the words of your core complaint. You'll learn to analyze and decipher what belongs to you and what stems from your family history. In doing so, you'll begin to break the trance of traumas from the past and learn to place the feelings and symptoms attached to them in their proper historical context.

## Part II

# The Core Language Map

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## Chapter 6

# The Core Complaint

*When an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside as fate.*

—Carl Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*

The words we use to describe our worries and struggles can say more than we realize. Yet few of us ever think to look there. In this chapter, you will begin to construct your core language map. You will learn to follow your words as they form a trail of clues that can lead you to the origin of your fears. Along this verbal path, the core complaint will be your first stopping point. It can be a treasure chest of unexamined wealth. Your core complaint can even contain the seeds of the resolution you seek. You just need to look inside.

To hear the core complaint in our everyday language, we look for the deepest thread of emotion in the fabric of the words we speak. We listen for words that have the strongest emotional resonance to them. Sometimes there is a debilitating fear that holds us captive. Sometimes there's an urgent quality of something that is being asked for or requested. Sometimes there's just great pain. Whenever Bob, a fifty-two-year-old structural engineer, feels anxious and alone, he complains, "Why does everyone always leave me? Why am I not good enough?"

Sometimes we hear words or phrases that appear to have a life of their own. In Joanne's complaint, she said that her mother always referred to her as the "abject disappointment" in the family. Her major complaint was that she and her mother weren't close and that the distance and harsh words between them had been the source of great pain and emptiness for her.

When she peeled back the layers of generational pain, she understood that it was her grandmother—not her—who felt like the “abject disappointment” in the family.

The story went like this: Grandmother was a fifteen-year-old girl in love with a married man in their small Irish village. She became pregnant and the man refused to take responsibility. Kicked out of her home, the grandmother lived with shame for the rest of her life, cleaning houses and raising her only daughter as a single parent. Grandmother never married and never got over the feeling that, by having an illegitimate child, she had brought shame to her family.

Even though the words “abject disappointment” were never spoken by the grandmother, they resonated for all three women. The grandmother lived these words when she was banished by her family. Her daughter lived these words when she felt that she had ruined her mother’s life by being born out of wedlock. Two generations later, the granddaughter shared the emotions, feeling like she was a disappointment to her mother.

The words “abject disappointment” in the granddaughter’s core complaint, when explored, brought her tranquillity and understanding. She began to realize that her mother’s invective was never meant for her personally, even though the words had been directed toward her. Now, when she heard them, the words evoked feelings of love and compassion for her mother and for her grandmother, and for what must have been a difficult life for them in Ireland.

In analyzing the core complaint, we’re not only looking at our spoken language, we’re observing our somatic or physical body language as well. We also pay particularly close attention to the symptoms and behaviors we have that stand out as idiosyncratic or unusual. In the example that follows, Carson, a twenty-six-year-old firefighter, expressed his fear physically as well as verbally.

Carson was twenty-four when his car sideswiped a guardrail and nearly toppled over a cliff. In an instant, he recovered control of the vehicle and continued safely to his destination, but his sense of having any control in his life vanished. From that day, Carson had been suffering from daily panic attacks. Coupled with feelings of shakiness and light-headedness was a clear feeling that, were he to die, his life would have amounted to nothing. Specifically, these were the words of his core complaint: “If I die, I’ll leave no legacy. No one will remember me. I’ll be completely gone as if I never

existed. I won't be remembered in a good light." What was odd about Carson's regrets was that they belonged to a twenty-six-year-old man. Carson's life had barely begun, and here he was, already bemoaning a lifetime of regret. Something was clearly off-kilter.

When we examine the words of a core complaint, we trust the words implicitly. We don't always trust the context, however. The words themselves are generally true for someone—not necessarily us. Discovering who that someone is requires a peek behind the curtain into our family history.

For Carson, that missing someone was his father. After a tumultuous divorce from his mother, Carson's father was asked to give up his parental rights to Carson, who was four at the time. After a long and unsuccessful battle for custody rights, his father finally conceded. Carson would never see his father again. Not only did his mother speak disparagingly about his father, but Carson was also adopted by his mother's new husband and was given the new man's name.

Let's look again at the core language of Carson's core complaint: "I'll leave no legacy. No one will remember me. I'll be completely gone as if I never existed. I won't be remembered in a good light."

Carson's story now takes on a new light. Merged with his father's reality of having lost his living "legacy"—his son—Carson had found a covert way to join with his missing father. He shared the feelings of his father's painful experience, fearing that he too would suddenly be gone and forgotten.

After discovering the root of his core complaint, Carson made a decision to locate and resume contact with his father. His father had moved out of state and had three children with a second wife, yet he was ecstatic to hear from Carson. The emptiness of losing his first son twenty years earlier had remained with him, "boring a hole," as he described it to Carson, in his heart. Something tangible, though deeply submerged, had also remained inside Carson. It was his love for his father.

As the adage goes, *history is written by the victors*, penned by those who remain to tell it. No matter how skewed or one-sided the story, many of us rarely think to question what that story would look like if told by the other side. In Carson's case, his mother was the victor, and his father the loser, based on the fact that he wasn't there to raise his son. Both parents had fought for child custody, but for reasons unknown, his father lost.

Carson realized that years of the negative stories his mother told him about his father had shrouded his early memories of him. Over the following months, Carson and his father created new memories, taking several camping and fishing trips in the mountains they had frequented when Carson was small. During that time, Carson's panic attacks completely disappeared. Father and son began forging a new, substantive legacy together.

Now here's your first written exercise. Grab your pen and paper or notebook and let's get started.

### **Written Exercise #1: Investigating Your Core Complaint**

1. Focus on a problem that's most pressing in your life right now. It might be an issue with your health, your job, your relationship—any issue that disrupts your sense of safety, peace, security, or well-being.
2. What is the deepest issue you want to heal? Maybe it's a problem that feels overwhelming to you. Maybe it's a symptom or a feeling you've had all your life.
3. What do you want to see shift?
4. Don't edit yourself.
5. Write down what feels important to you.
6. Write it down as it comes to you. For example, you may carry a fear of something terrible happening to you in the future. It doesn't matter what comes out; just keep writing.
7. If nothing comes, answer this one question: If the feeling or symptom or condition you have never goes away, what would you be afraid could happen to you?
8. Don't continue reading until you've written down your most pressing concern.

Now look at what you've written. As you read it, don't read it so carefully that you become enthralled with it. Don't get caught up in the words or feelings. Scan it lightly without feeling the emotions. You're looking for words or phrases that stand out as unusual or peculiar. For example, what words or phrases do you always say, or perhaps have never said before this writing exercise? What language seems to jump out at you? What language calls out to be noticed?

Now read it again. But this time, read it out loud to yourself. Try to hear with a new ear that hears without feeling emotions. I call this type of hearing "hearing with our meta ear" or "hearing with our third ear." What

words or sentences have an urgent quality to them? What words have a strong emotional resonance or a dramatic feeling? What words have a feeling of strangeness or peculiarity? What words may not fit entirely in the context of your life experience?

See if you can listen to what you've written as though you were listening to someone else. Perhaps the words do in fact belong to someone else, and you have merely been giving them a voice. Perhaps the words belong to someone in your family who was traumatized and couldn't speak them out loud. Maybe through your complaints, you are telling this person's story, the way Carson shared his father's angst.

Listen as deeply as you can for something in the writing to grab you. In this type of listening, you are *listening beneath the story line* for what is essential to appear. If you get lost in the emotional elements of the story, you may miss the core complaint.

Here's how Bert Hellinger describes this type of listening:

I'll describe what is happening when I'm working with someone. He will have told me something about himself and I will have only half listened. I don't want to hear exactly what he's saying or know exactly what he's saying. Therefore I don't listen so carefully that I have to concentrate, but rather just enough so that I can at the same time keep my eyes on the greater picture. Then suddenly he says a word and this alerts me. . . . Suddenly beneath all that he said to me there is a word that speaks to me. This word has energy. And without knowing exactly what I am going to do, I know that this is the place where I can do something. If I allow this word to take its effect on me, I get a sense of the people who are necessary for the [resolution].<sup>[1](#)</sup>

## Sandy: "I'm Going to Die"

Now, follow along as we dissect the core complaint of a woman I'll call Sandy. Sandy was also, like Gretchen, a child with a history rooted in the

Holocaust. As the child of a Holocaust survivor, Sandy wanted help to understand her overwhelming fear of death, and so we explored some of her core language.

She described her fear as “not death itself, but knowing that I’m going to die and I can’t do anything to stop it. It’s totally out of my control.”

Sandy also wanted help with her debilitating fear of closed-in spaces, which kept her from flying in planes and riding in elevators. Whenever the door of an elevator would close, or the plane would fill with people, whenever there’d be “a mass of people between me and the exit,” a deep panic would set in. Her core complaint said it all: “I can’t breathe. I can’t get out. I’m going to die.”

Sandy was nineteen when the claustrophobia and feelings of not being able to breathe began. Her father was also nineteen when both of his parents and his younger sister were asphyxiated in the gas chamber at Auschwitz. Sandy’s symptoms worsened after her father passed away ten years ago. Although a link seemed obvious to me—as I have worked with many descendants of Holocaust victims and survivors—Sandy had never made the connection. She was carrying the panicked terror of her grandparents and aunt. Perhaps she even carried her father’s guilt of having been the only family member to survive.

Look again at Sandy’s core language: “*Knowing that I’m going to die and I can’t do anything to stop it. It’s totally out of my control.*”

Clearly, her grandparents and aunt would feel this way living in the death camp or as they were being led to the gas chamber.

Once inside the gas chamber, any one of them might have experienced “*a mass of people between me and the exit.*” Then, of course, an unfathomable panic would have set in. Sandy’s core language revealed the tragic outcome: “*I can’t breathe. I can’t get out. I’m going to die.*” The connection was now obvious to Sandy. The panic of her ancestors had been expressing itself inside her. Although she had known about the tragic events in her family, she had never made the connection that she could be the bearer of suffering that didn’t belong to her. Now it was clear.

In our session together, I asked Sandy to visualize her aunt and grandparents standing in front of her. I asked her to have a conversation with them. With my prompting, Sandy told them: “I have been terrified just like you. And I can see that this terror doesn’t even belong to me. I realize that it doesn’t help you when I carry it, and it certainly isn’t helping me. I

know this is not what you want for me. And I know it burdens you to see me anxious like this. Instead, I will leave these anxious feelings with you, Grandma, and with you, Grandpa, and with you, Aunt Sarah.” Tears collected in the corners of her eyes as she imagined the three of them smiling and blessing her to be happy. Sandy imagined her body filling up with the love they were sending her. Finally able to pinpoint the origin of her claustrophobia and fear of death, Sandy could feel the weight of her fears dissipate.

## Lorena: “I’ll Go Crazy”

Many of us carry a fear of something horrific happening to us in the future. This fear is often revealed in our core complaint.

Lorena was nineteen years old and was suffering from anxiety and panic attacks in social situations. She described feelings of being “trapped” and not being able to “get out” whenever she was with friends. She had first noticed the anxiety three years ago, around the same time she had been struggling with a stubborn bladder infection. She recalled going from doctor to doctor; none of the drugs they prescribed seemed to help with the symptoms.

Lorena described the most terrible part about having the bladder infection. Her worst fear was that nothing and no one could help her and that the infection would never go away. The bladder infection eventually did go away, but her anxiety continued to surge.

Here’s how our conversation unfolded:

MARK: And if the bladder infection never went away?

LORENA: I’d have pain. I’d be depressed. I’d always be going to doctors. I’d be restricted. I wouldn’t be happy. I wouldn’t be successful. I’d be anxious all the time. I’d be a loser.

When you hear Lorena’s core language, do any words jump out at you? How about the words “restricted” or “loser”? Notice how those words want to carry us in a new direction beyond the bladder infection. For a moment,

let's suspend any ideas we might have about Lorena and her bladder infection and let the energy of Lorena's words lead us.

Lorena was getting closer to her core language, but she wasn't all the way there yet. In order to help her go deeper, I asked her to describe the worst thing that could happen to someone else. When we hit an impasse while trying to articulate our worst fear, it's often useful to take a few steps back and imagine the worst thing that can happen to someone other than ourselves. Notice what emerged for Lorena.

MARK: What's the worst thing that could happen to someone—  
someone else, not you?

LORENA: They wouldn't be successful. They wouldn't be happy. They wouldn't be able to do the things they want to do. They'd go crazy. They'd become like a hermit. They'd end up in a mental institution and eventually commit suicide.

How about the juice in these words? "Go crazy," "end up in a mental institution," "commit suicide."

Now let's put it all together and see what we come up with. We've got a "loser" who is "restricted," who goes "crazy" and "ends up in a mental institution," where he or she "eventually commits suicide." Maybe you're asking yourself where all this information is coming from. Let's find out.

While peeling back the layers behind her core complaint, Lorena uncovered her deepest fear, and plowed squarely into her core sentence. You'll learn more about the core sentence in chapter 8.

**Lorena's Core Sentences:** "I'll be a loser. I'll go crazy and end up in a mental institution and eventually commit suicide."

In the process of following her core language map, Lorena also uncovered a crucial trauma in her family history.

Let's open Lorena's family album and let the words of her worst fear lead us. The words of the worst fear can be turned into a family history question that takes us to the next stop on our core language map. I call this type of question the *bridging question*.

**Lorena's Bridging Question:** "Was there anyone in your family who was perceived as a loser who ended up in a mental institution and committed suicide?"

Bull's-eye! Lorena's grandfather, her mother's father, was disrespected and viewed as the loser in the family. He was in and out of mental institutions. He eventually committed suicide while institutionalized. In the next generation, Lorena's aunt, her mother's older sister, had also been rejected in the family as "the crazy loser." She too had been in and out of mental institutions. The family, embarrassed by this aunt's behavior, rarely spoke about her. Without admitting it, they had been expecting her to commit suicide like her father.

When family members lead unhappy lives or suffer an extremely difficult fate, it's often easier to reject them than to feel the pain of loving them. Anger is often an easier emotion to feel than sadness. It appears that this was the case in regard to how the family angrily treated this sister. It was easier to reject her than to love her.

As we learned in chapter 3, the fates of family members who are rejected are often repeated. This was the case with the rejected "loser" grandfather, and in the next generation, the rejected "loser" aunt. Now Lorena was in line to make it a "loser" trifecta and extend the pain into a third generation.

A suicide in a family can be extremely difficult to grieve. Family members are often angry with the person who has taken his life for leaving in such a tragic way. What's more, the consequences of the suicide—shame, embarrassment, horrid images, unresolved affairs, financial debt, religious uncertainty—are left for the family to deal with.

Lorena's fate was looming, but it was not yet set in stone. Once she understood that the fears she carried did not originate with her, she was able to leave them with their rightful owners. I asked her to visualize her grandfather and aunt standing in front of her. Lorena spontaneously expressed genuine feelings of love for them both. She imagined that they were supporting her to be well, and that she could just breathe the anxiety out of her body and send it back to them. She breathed for several minutes, reporting that her body felt lighter and more at peace. She asked them both for their blessings so that she could live a happy life, even though they did not have happy lives. She could see that it served no purpose to carry their anxiety and that doing so only brought more pain to the family. She promised them both that she would not carry it anymore, and imagined a future anxious situation in which she could breathe any residual anxiety back to them. After one session, Lorena was free from the panic that had been consuming her.

When I'm asked about how the emerging research on neuroplasticity relates to my own clinical experience, I often think of Lorena. Her ability to shift from a predominantly anxious state to one that was more peaceful and balanced was a vivid illustration of the elegant way in which personal family history and present-day awareness can come together. Once key connections are made, and we practice focusing on our healing images and experiences, we lay the groundwork for new neural pathways. Healing can then be surprisingly efficient.

## Core Language as a Compass

Sometimes, the core language of our core complaint is so compelling, it forces us to excavate the family burial grounds for answers. Yet often the family history we seek isn't readily available. Masked in shame, pushed away in pain, or protected in the form of a family secret, this information is unlikely to be talked about at the dinner table. Sometimes we know the traumatic history behind our issue. We just don't always make the link to our present experiences.

The core language of our core complaint can guide us like a compass through generations of unexplained family angst. There, a traumatic event may be waiting to be remembered and explored, so that it can finally be laid to rest.

The following is a list of questions that can help you unearth some of the core language of your core complaint. Answer each question in as much detail as possible. Keep an open mind. Don't edit your responses. The answers to these questions can illuminate a connection between a current issue and a trauma in your family history.

### **Written Exercise #2: Ten Questions That Generate Core Language**

1. What was taking place in your life when your symptom or problem first appeared?
2. What was going on right before it started?
3. What age were you when the symptom or problem first appeared?
4. Did something traumatic happen to someone in your family at a similar age?

5. What exactly happens in the problem?
6. What does it feel like in its worst moments?
7. What happens right before you feel this way or have the symptom?
8. What makes it better or worse?
9. What does the problem or symptom keep you from being able to do?  
What does it force you to do?
10. If the feeling or symptom were never to go away, what would be the worst thing that could happen to you?

Now read what you've written. Here are some themes I've observed that repeat in families. Do you recognize any of the following themes in your family?

- **Language that repeats:**

Is there language that doesn't seem to fit in the context of your life experience? If so, could this language belong to someone in your family?

- **Ages that repeat:**

Is there a connection between the age you were when your symptom or problem first appeared and the age of a family member when they struggled or suffered? If, for example, you had a parent who died young, you could develop an issue or symptom that limits your life in some way when you reach the same age as your deceased parent. Unconsciously, it might be difficult for you to be happy or live fully beyond the age when her or she died. Your problem or symptom can even occur when your child reaches the same age that you were when your parent died.

- **Emotions, behaviors, and symptoms that repeat:**

Think back. What triggered your problem or symptom into motion? What was happening in the background? Did someone leave you? Did you feel slighted, rejected, or abandoned? Did something happen that made you feel like you wanted to give up or quit? Does your issue or symptom mimic or recreate a certain experience or situation from your early childhood? Is it similar in any way to an event in your family history? Does it resemble anything that happened to your mother, father, grandmother, or grandfather?

The answers to these questions can reveal significant clues to unearthing a family connection.

# Complaints and Symptoms as Clues for Resolution

What particular quality or essential message is the complaint or symptom attempting to express? When looked at out of the box, your complaint or symptom can be a creative expression leading you to complete something, heal something, integrate something, or separate from something—perhaps a feeling you’ve taken on that never belonged to you in the first place.

Perhaps your symptom or issue is forcing you to take a step you haven’t taken, a step you can no longer ignore. Maybe you are being asked to complete a stage in your development that got interrupted when you were small. Maybe your symptom or issue recreates a state of helplessness that functions to bring you close to your parents. Or conversely, maybe your symptom or issue forces growth and independence from them.

Maybe you are being shown that you need to finish a task or follow a path you abandoned. Maybe you have ignored a young or fragmented part of yourself that expresses in symptoms. Maybe you neglected a personal boundary that can no longer remain overlooked.

Our symptoms and complaints can also lead us to mend a broken relationship or help us to heal a personal trauma by forcing us to confront feelings we have long ago suppressed. Not only can they give us insight into a family trauma that has never fully resolved, they can also give us insight into a personal guilt we carry, perhaps even lighting the path toward reconciliation.

Our complaints, symptoms, and problems can function as signposts pointing us in the direction of something that’s still unresolved. They can help bring something to light that we cannot see or connect us with something or someone we, or our family, have rejected. When we stop and explore them, what’s unresolved can rise to the surface, adding a new dimension to our healing process. We can emerge feeling more whole and complete.

## Chapter 7

# Core Descriptors

*. . . words, like Nature, half reveal  
And half conceal the Soul within.*

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam A.H.H.”

**T**he feelings we hold about our parents are a doorway into ourselves. They are also a doorway into the four unconscious themes introduced in chapter 5, helping us to pinpoint which ones are operating in our lives. In this chapter, you will be asked to describe your biological mother and father. In doing so, let yourself be free with your responses. As you move through the following exercises, you are likely to discover more about yourself than about your parents. If you’ve never met your biological parents, proceed to the next chapter.

## Describe Your Mother

Take a moment to describe your mother when you were growing up. What was she like? What adjectives or phrases instantly come to mind? Was she warm? Loving? Cold? Distant? Happy? Sad? Did she hug you a lot or rarely hug you? Grab your notebook and write down your first thoughts, the first words that come to mind.

### Written Exercise #3: Describing Your Mother

My mother was . . .  
Also, write down what you blame her for.  
I blame my mother for . . .

Write everything down. Don't do this in your head. It's essential that you write down the words as they come to you.

## Describe Your Father

Now do the same thing for your father. How would you describe him? Was he kind? Easygoing? Harsh? Critical? Was he involved or not involved? Write everything down. Resist the impulse to edit.

### **Written Exercise #4: Describing Your Father**

My father was . . .  
Also write down what you blame him for.  
I blame my father for . . .

### **Written Exercise #5: Describing Your Partner, Close Friend, or Boss**

My partner, close friend, or boss is . . .  
I blame him/her for . . .

While you're in the flow, you might even want to describe your romantic partner if you have one, or a close friend, or even your boss.

Now let's take a look at what has just been revealed in your writing. I call these spontaneous, "off the cuff" adjectives and phrases *core descriptors*. These descriptors are a doorway into our unconscious feelings. They can reveal feelings about our parents that we might not even be aware we hold.

Writing down an impromptu list of adjectives and phrases gives us the opportunity to bypass the adult-rationalized, refined version of our childhood story. In this writing, our true attitudes can emerge devoid of the usual filters and censors. This list can put us in touch with unconscious loyalties and alliances we share with our parents. What's more, it can reveal how we have rejected one or both of our parents, or how we have adopted the very behaviors we judge as negative in them. These descriptors don't lie, because they come from an inner image we carry, an image we formed long ago, perhaps to protect ourselves from feeling hurt.

When we were small, our bodies functioned as recorders chronicling the information we took in and storing it as feeling states. The adjectives take us back into these feeling states and the images that accompany them. The adjectives are significant, because they highlight old images that prevent us from moving forward.

Many of us hold images that are painful, images of our parents not giving us enough, images of not getting what we needed. Unchecked, these inner images can direct the course of our lives, forming a blueprint for how our lives will continue. These images are also incomplete. An essential truth is missing. What traumatic events lurk behind these images that were powerful enough to derail the flow of love in our family?

Now look at the words you've written. Are there resentments you still hold toward your parents? Are there accusations? If so, you may already have experienced that the very complaints you hold against your parents are the same complaints that you experience with your partner or with a close friend. Often, our discontent toward our parents gets projected onto our partner or shows up in our close friendships. What is unresolved with our parents does not automatically disappear. It serves as a template that forges our later relationships.

If we had a difficult relationship with our parents, our core descriptors will expose the resentments we're still harboring. When we're resentful, it erodes our inner peace. Those of us who feel that we didn't receive enough from our parents, especially from our mothers, often feel that we don't receive enough from life.

When we've had a close relationship with our parents, our core descriptors reveal the warmth and compassion we feel toward them. When we feel positive toward our parents, we tend to feel positive about life, and trust that good things will continue to come our way.

Sometimes our core descriptors reveal mixed feelings. In most cases, people hold disparate feelings toward their parents, yet one theme or essential thread of core language often stands out as unresolved. And this is what we're looking for. For some of us, the actions of our parents are still felt as personal attacks or rejections.

Look at the way these two sisters, each with different childhood experiences, describe their mother:

FIRST SISTER: "Lonely, sad, frustrated, strict, violent; she had a bad temper."

SECOND SISTER: "Cruel, vindictive, and emotionally abusive."

In the words of the first sister, the description of the mother is merely stated as a truth. In the second sister's description, her pain has not been resolved, and is still carried in the form of blame and judgments toward her mother. To this sister, the actions of the mother are felt as intentionally directed toward her. She feels singled out, whereas the first sister is stating facts. A mother can be violent and have a bad temper, and we can still be at peace with her. The second sister, who sees her mother as intentionally cruel, is clearly not at peace with her mother.

One can only imagine how differently the two sisters experienced life. Although they shared the same mother, each sister carried a personal version of that mother inside her. The second sister experienced her life as cruel and abusive. She felt emotionally drained and unsupported and was alone much of the time.

Sometimes we're able to feel love for one parent and not the other. Kim, who preferred her father to her mother, complained that her mother was "infantile, like a little girl. I could never count on her for anything." In contrast, her core descriptors about her father were glowing: "Dad was wonderful. We did everything together. I could always go to him for comfort and care. He should've left my mother a long time ago. He never got the love he needed from her."

Beneath the surface of Kim's resentment toward her mother surged a sea of hurt. Add to that the feeling of betrayal in wishing that her mother would be left by her father. Kim's emptiness and disconnectedness permeated her core language.

When we pit one parent against the other, we go against the source of our own existence, and unconsciously create a rift inside ourselves. We forget that half of us comes from our mother and half from our father. Kim's resentment served only to fuel her self-loathing and inner unrest. It was a prison from which her only escape was self-awareness.

Many of us have become fixated on something we believe our parents have done to us that has spoiled our lives. We have allowed these memories, whether accurate or distorted, to override the good things that our parents gave to us. Parents, in the course of being parents, inadvertently cause their children pain. It's inevitable. The problem is not what our parents have done to us; the problem is how we're still holding on to it. Generally, when our parents caused us harm, it was unintentional. All of us feel that there are things we didn't get from our parents. But being at peace with our parents means that we are at peace with what we did receive as well as what we did not receive. When we hold what was given in this light, we can gain strength from our parents, who, even if they couldn't always show it, wanted only the best for us.

## Common Core Descriptors from an Early Break in the Bond

Yet there are many of us who have experienced an early separation or a break in the bond with our mother and struggle to find peace, that feeling of solid ground beneath our feet. The following are some common core descriptors from people who experienced an early disconnection from their mothers.

- "Mom was cold and distant. She never held me. I didn't trust her at all."
- "My mother was too busy for me. She never had any time for me."
- "My mom and I are really close. She's like my little sister I take care of."
- "I don't ever want to be a burden to my mom."

- “My mother was distant, emotionally unavailable, and critical.”
- “She would always push me away. She doesn’t really care about me.”
- “We really don’t have a relationship.”
- “I felt much closer to my grandmother. She was the one who mothered me.”
- “My mother is completely self-centered. It’s all about her. She never showed me any love.”
- “She can be very calculating and manipulative. I didn’t feel safe with her.”
- “I was scared of her. I never knew what was going to happen next.”
- “I’m not close with her. She’s not maternal—not like a mother.”
- “I’ve never wanted children. I’ve never had that maternal feeling inside me.”

Can you hear the pain in these core descriptors? In chapter 11, we will explore in detail the core language of separation and how to rebuild our relationship with our mothers.

It’s important to note that not everyone who has experienced a break in the early bond will be resentful toward his or her mother. Often the mother is deeply loved and trusted. Sometimes, after such a break, a child unknowingly shuts down to receiving the mother’s nurturance, and instead attempts to take care of the mother as a way of bonding with her.

Sometimes the break occurred so early in life that there is no cognitive memory of the experience. Body memories of the separation can be triggered, however, when bonding or distancing is experienced in relationships. Without ever understanding why, we can feel overwhelmed by feelings of terror, dissociation, numbness, disconnection, defeat, and annihilation.

# The Emotional Charge in Core Descriptors

The emotional charge contained in your core descriptors can function like a barometer to gauge the healing that still needs to take place. Generally, the stronger the negative charge, the clearer the direction for healing. You are looking for words that contain a significant emotional charge.

Feel the emotional charge in these words spoken by a twenty-seven-year-old man describing his alcoholic father:

“My father’s a drunk. He’s totally useless. He’s an idiot, a complete loser. He was never there for my mother or for us kids. He was abusive and violent toward her. I have absolutely no respect for him.”

Underneath words like “drunk” and “useless,” underneath “idiot” and “loser,” you can feel the son’s hurt. The boy’s anger and numbness are only the top layers. Anger and numbness are much easier to feel than sadness and pain. At his core, the son likely feels devastated whenever he sees his father drinking.

You can also sense his mother’s feelings toward his father in the following words: “He was never there for my mother or for us kids.” The words “useless” and “never there for us” were probably his mother’s words. That she had shut down to her husband made it almost impossible for her son to be open to him. The son appears to be loyal to his mother on the surface, but, in reality, he actually shared his father’s plight. He drank like his father and raged at his girlfriend until she kicked him out, just as his mother had kicked his father out. In this way, the son unwittingly wove a subterranean thread that tied him to his father. He made sure that he wouldn’t have more in life than his father had. Until the relationship between them healed, he repeated his father’s suffering. With his father back in his life, he was freer to make healthier choices.

When a parent is rejected or disrespected, one of the children will often represent that parent by sharing the rejected behaviors. In this way, the child makes himself or herself equal to the parent by suffering in a similar way. It is as though the child is saying, “I’ll go through it, too, so that you don’t have to go through it alone.” Loyal in this way, the child continues the suffering into the next generation. It often doesn’t stop there.

It is essential that we make peace with our parents. Doing so not only brings us inner peace, it also allows for harmony to spread into the

generations that follow. By softening toward our parents and dropping the story that stands in the way, we are more likely to halt the senseless repetition of generational suffering. While at first this might seem challenging (or even impossible), I have witnessed again and again the unexpected rewards of healing our connection with our parents, including experiencing positive outcomes in our health, relationships, and productivity.

### **Shifting Your Inner Image of Your Parents**

1. Read your core descriptors again. This time, read them out loud.
2. Listen with new ears. Do you hear anything new?
3. Do the emotionally charged words indicate that you still have unresolved feelings toward your parents?
4. Feel your body as you read the descriptors. Does your body tighten or relax? How about your breath? Is it flowing or stuck?
5. Notice if there is anything inside you that wants to shift.

Your core descriptors are a valuable step in rebuilding your relationship with your parents. It makes no difference whether your parents are living or have passed away; once you decrypt your core descriptors, the negative feelings, attitudes, and judgments you hold toward your parents can finally shift. Remember, the greater the emotional charge in your words, the deeper your pain. There is often sadness hibernating beneath your angry words. The sadness won't kill you. The anger actually might.

The image you have of your parents can affect the quality of the life you live. The good news is that this inner image, once revealed, can change. You can't change your parents, but you can change the way you hold them inside you.

## Chapter 8

# The Core Sentence

*The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for.*

—Joseph Campbell, *Reflections on the Art of Living*

If you struggle with a fear or phobia, panic attacks or obsessive thoughts, you know only too well what it feels like to be held captive in the prison of your inner life. The hard time you do inside yourself—the constant worry, the overwhelming emotions, the unnerving body sensations—can feel like a life sentence, yet no trial or conviction has ever taken place. Fear and anxiety shrink your world and drain your vitality, restricting the day in front of you and limiting the life ahead of you. It can be exhausting to live that way.

Finding a way out is simpler than you think. You just need to “do time” with a different kind of “life sentence”—the sentence that your worst fear creates. This sentence has probably been with you since you were a small child. Whether spoken aloud or said silently, this sentence deepens your despair. Yet at the same time, it can lead you out beyond your prison gates into a new world of understanding and resolution. This sentence is called your *core sentence*. If the core language map is a tool for locating buried treasure, the core sentence is the diamond you find when you get there.

# Finding Your Core Sentence

Before we go further, answer this question and write down your answer: What is your worst fear, the worst thing that could ever happen to you? It's probably a fear or feeling you've had your whole life. You might even feel as though you were born with it. Here's the question again, asked in a slightly different way: If your life were to fall apart, if things were to go terribly wrong, what's your worst fear? What's the worst thing that could happen to you? Write down your answer.

## Written Exercise #6: Identifying Your Core Sentence

My worst fear, the worst thing that could happen to me, is . . .

What you've just written is your core sentence. Don't read further until you've written it down.

Maybe your core sentence begins with the word "I":

"I would lose everything."

Maybe it begins with the word "They":

"They would destroy me."

Maybe your core sentence begins with the word "My":

"My children/family/wife/husband would leave me."

A core sentence can begin with a number of other words as well.

Now let's go deeper and answer the same question again. This time, don't edit. Keep writing until you've gone as far as you can go. The answer to this question initiates a process of self-discovery that will continue to deepen in the pages that follow.

## Written Exercise #7: Tweaking Your Core Sentence

The worst thing that could happen to me is . . .

"I . . ."

"They . . ."

"I could . . ."

"My children/family/spouse could . . ."

Now look at what you've written. If you think you've reached the bottom, ask yourself one more question: And if that happened, then what? What would be the worst part of that?

For example, if you wrote the sentence "I could die," take it a bit further. And if that happened, what would be the worst part of that?

"My family would be without me."

Go one more level down. And what would be the worst part of that?

"They'll forget me."

Can you feel how the sentence "They'll forget me" has a bit more juice than the previous two sentences?

Take another moment to narrow down and deepen the emotional resonance of your core sentence.

### **Written Exercise #8: Deepening Your Core Sentence**

My absolute worst fear is . . .

Now let's look again at the words you've written. Your core sentence probably contains three, four, maybe five or six words. As we mentioned earlier, it is frequently an "I" or a "They" sentence, but it can start with other words as well. Often it's a sentence that's stated in the present or future tense as though either it's happening right now or it's just about to happen. The words feel alive inside you. They resonate in your body when spoken aloud. When the core sentence is on target, it hits more like a "ping" on crystal than a "thud" on wood. Core sentences sound like this:

"I'm all alone."

"They reject me."

"They leave me."

"I let them down."

"I'll lose everything."

"I'll fall apart."

"It's all my fault."

"They abandon me."

"They betray me."

"They humiliate me."

“I’ll go crazy.”  
“I’ll hurt my child.”  
“I’ll lose my family.”  
“I’ll lose control.”  
“I’ll do something terrible.”  
“I’ll hurt someone.”  
“I won’t deserve to live.”  
“I’ll be hated.”  
“I’ll kill myself.”  
“They’ll lock me up.”  
“They’ll put me away.”  
“It’ll never end.”

### **Fine-Tuning Your Core Sentence**

There’s one more step. If you wrote down a sentence like “I’m all alone,” inch the dial in both directions to make sure your core sentence pings at its highest possible frequency.

For example, is your sentence “I’m all alone” or is it more like “They leave me”? Is it “They leave me” or is it more like “They reject me” or “They abandon me”?

The same way your optician checks and double-checks your vision for your prescription, you’re checking to make sure the words align exactly with the feeling inside you. Keep testing it. Is your core sentence more like “They abandon me” or more like “I’m abandoned”? Your body will know which words are best by the vibration that’s created inside you. The words of your core sentence create a physical reaction—often an anxious or sinking feeling—when the right words are spoken.

## **Other Paths to Finding Your Core Sentence**

If you tried to write your core sentence and nothing came to you, then answer this question: What’s the worst thing that could happen to someone? Someone else. Not you. Perhaps you remember a news story of something terrible that happened to somebody you didn’t know. Or maybe something awful happened to somebody you did know. What happened to them? Write it down. What you remember is important. It might even say something about you.

Many times, another's tragedy reflects a facet of our own worst fears. Of the myriad painful images around us, those that strike a familiar chord, or to be more exact, a *familial* chord tend to resonate with us. Call it a back door into the family psyche. Of all the terrible things that happen to people, the one that strikes us as the most terrible will most likely link to a traumatic event in our family system. It can also remind us of a trauma we personally experienced. When another's tragedy resonates with us, there is generally something about that tragedy that belongs to us on some level.

There's even another way to get to your core sentence. Think of a scene from a book, movie, or play that deeply affected you. What part of that scene affects you the most? If, for example, a story of children who are all alone without their mother resonates with you, what part of that story stirs the greatest emotion in you? Is it the fact that a mother has left her children? Or is it the fact that the children are left alone and have no one to take care of them?

This family story can resonate with two people, but one person might be affected more by the idea of the mother leaving her kids, and the other person might be affected more by the image of children who have no one to take care of them. Were we to look in the family system of the first person, the one who cannot bear the thought of a mother leaving her children, we might find a member of her own family, maybe her mother or grandmother, maybe even she herself, who left children or gave up a child. An unacknowledged guilt might resound in the family system of the first person, whereas the deep grief of a child who has been abandoned might infuse the family system of the second person. Images from books, movies, and plays that hold an emotional charge for us can be like storms rattling the delicate fruit hidden in the recesses of our family tree.

## When a News Story Becomes Our Family Story

For as long as she could remember, Pam had the fear that strangers would break into her home and violently harm her. Until recently, this fear hovered in the background like the drone of a distant machine. Then she read a newspaper story about a young Somali boy who was beaten to death by a

gang of boys in her city. The fear that had been vibrating on low was now cranked up to high, unleashing a torrent of panic inside her body. Pam felt like she was coming apart at the seams and described a sensation like she was floating outside of her body.

“He was just a child,” she said. “He was innocent. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They took away his life, his dignity. They made him suffer.”

Unbeknownst to Pam, she was also talking about her mother’s older brother, Walter, who died when he was eleven. Pam had heard the story only once, when she was a small child. The family rarely spoke of it. Although it was never proven, the family suspected foul play. Lured out of his house by the neighborhood kids who frequently teased him, Walter was found dead at the bottom of an abandoned mine shaft. He either fell or was pushed and was left to die. It was days before his body was recovered. The boys must have panicked and run off. Walter had been “in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

## Core Language Born Out of War

When our family members have suffered, perished, or perpetrated violence in a war, we can inherit a virtual minefield of trauma. Not consciously making the link that we are reliving traumatic experiences from decades ago, we can become heir to fears (of being kidnapped, of being forced from our home, of being murdered, etc.) as though the feelings belong to us.

Prak, a rambunctious eight-year-old Cambodian boy, never knew his grandfather, who was murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Accused of being a spy for the CIA, his grandfather had been bludgeoned with a scythe, a machete-like tool used in farming. Prak suffered from repeated head injuries, and his parents, Rith and Sita—first-generation survivors of the Killing Fields—sought help for him. Polite and soft-spoken, Rith and Sita appeared weighed down as though buckled from the burden that linked them together. In broken English, they explained that they had left Cambodia as teenagers, nearly a decade after the carnage ended, and moved to Los Angeles, where they gave birth to their son—their only child. Now

eight, Prak had suffered numerous concussions. His father, Rith, explained that Prak would run headfirst, deliberately it seemed, into walls or metal poles. Prak also “played” daily with a coat hanger, whacking it against the floor or sofa, yelling, “Kill! Kill!” The boy’s behaviors hauntingly echoed the murder of his paternal grandfather. Prak’s core language not only appeared verbally in the words “Kill, kill!”; it expressed physically in two disturbing ways. By whacking the coat hanger, Prak eerily reenacted the deathblows struck by the killer. By injuring his own head, Prak reenacted the head injury experienced by his grandfather.

In many families that have experienced tragic or painful events, the past tends to stay buried. Parents, thinking it’s best not to expose their children to unnecessary pain, often keep their lips—the doorway to the past—tightly sealed. The less a child knows, they think, the more protected, the more insulated, their child remains. Prak knew nothing about the Killing Fields, nothing about the murder, and—worst of all—nothing about his paternal grandfather. In fact, he was told that his grandmother’s second husband was his real grandfather.

Unfortunately, remaining silent about the past does little to immunize the next generation. What’s hidden from sight and mind seldom disappears. Conversely, it often reappears in the behaviors and symptoms of our children.

Explaining these concepts to Rith and Sita wasn’t easy. It was as though a cultural veil, a shroud of denial, forbade any discussion of the genocide. “We only look forward—not at the past,” said Sita. “We are lucky to have survived and to be in America,” said Rith. It wasn’t until I explained how the past had apparently come alive in Prak’s suffering that Rith and Sita were ready to take the next steps.

“Go home and tell Prak about your father,” I said to Rith. “Tell him how much you loved him and how much you still miss him. Place a photo of your father—his real grandfather—over his bed and tell him that your dad protects him and blesses his head at night while he sleeps. Give him the image that, with your dad blessing him, his head doesn’t have to be hurt anymore.”

The last step was the most difficult to impart. It appeared to me that Prak had identified not only with his grandfather, but also with the killer who struck the murderous blow. I explained to Sita and Rith how those who hurt our family members belong in our family system, and that we can become

identified with them when they are expunged from our awareness. I explained how the children of both perpetrators and victims suffer similarly, and that we must hold feelings of goodwill toward all involved. Going a step further, it supports our children and their children when we can pray equally for those who harmed our family members and for those our family members have harmed. Sita and Rith understood. As practicing Buddhists, they said they would take Prak to the pagoda—the Cambodian temple—and light incense for Rith’s father as well as for his killer so that the descendants in both families could be free. Three weeks after Prak’s visit to the pagoda, and with his grandfather’s photo protecting him at night, Prak handed the coat hanger to Sita. “Mommy, I don’t need to play with this anymore.”

## Family Pain, Family Silence

Gretchen, whom you met earlier in this book, carried the anxious feelings of her grandmother, the lone survivor of a family who perished at Auschwitz. Unable to fully receive the gift of having survived the Holocaust, Gretchen’s grandmother walked through life like a ghost, while her children and grandchildren walked on eggshells around her so as not to distress her further.

Talking about her dead family was not a conversation you could have with her. Her eyes would glaze over and the color in her cheeks would fade. It was best to leave her memories vaulted. Perhaps Grandmother felt an unconscious desire to die like the rest of her family. Two generations later, Gretchen would inherit these feelings and carry an image of wanting to be incinerated like her grandmother’s family.

**Gretchen’s Core Language:** “I’m going to vaporize myself. My body will incinerate in seconds.”

Once she recognized that she had been entangled with her grandmother’s trauma, Gretchen finally had a context within which to understand the feelings she carried. I invited her to close her eyes and visualize being cradled by her grandmother and all the Jewish family members she’d never known. In the experience of that comforting image, Gretchen reported feeling peaceful—a feeling she said had been unfamiliar to her. She realized

that her wish to incinerate herself was connected to the relatives who literally had been incinerated. In that moment, the impulse to kill herself dissipated; she no longer felt the need to die.

While Gretchen was identified with her grandmother, she also may have been identified with the murderers who killed her grandmother's family. By killing herself, Gretchen would have been unconsciously reenacting the aggression of the killers. Such identifications with perpetrators are not unusual and need to be considered when violent behaviors are observed in family members in later generations.

## Prisons of Fear

Steve struggled with panic attacks whenever he visited a new place. It didn't matter whether he was entering a new building, trying out a new restaurant, or traveling to a new town; Steve would dissociate whenever he found himself in unfamiliar surroundings. He described sensations of "passing out," a feeling of dizziness that made him "go black inside," and feeling like the "sky was closing in on him." Along with these sensations would be the racing heart and intense sweating he experienced time and time again. He could think of nothing in his childhood that could have created fears this extreme. In an attempt to keep him feeling safe, his wife and kids remained imprisoned with him in the constancy of familiar territory. There were no vacations, no new restaurants, and no surprises.

**Steve's Core Language:** "I'll disappear. I'll be wiped out."

A look into Steve's family history revealed the source of his lack of safety. Seventy-four members of his family perished in the Holocaust. They were literally taken from the familiar surroundings of their homes in the village in which they had lived their entire lives and moved to "a new place"—a concentration camp—where they were systematically murdered. Once realizing the connection he shared with his family members, Steve found the context for the panic attacks that had been limiting his life. After one session, the fear lifted. Embracing a new inner image of his relatives at peace and blessing him to be free, Steve opened the barbed-wire gates of his old life and walked into a new life filled with exploration and adventure.

Not unlike Steve, Linda had panic attacks that kept her from feeling safe. She kept herself locked in a prison of fears. “The world isn’t a safe place,” she said. “You have to hide who you are. If people find out too much about you, they can hurt you.” For as long as she could remember, she’d had nightmares of being kidnapped by strangers. As a child, she remembered never wanting to sleep at her friends’ houses. Even in her forties, Linda rarely went anywhere. Linda, like Steve, lived in a prison gated by fears that she couldn’t attach to any event in her childhood.

When I asked about her family history, she remembered a story she had heard as a little girl about her grandmother’s sister, who was killed in the Holocaust. Researching what happened, Linda discovered that her great-aunt lived hidden in a neighbor’s home until someone outside the home found out that she was a Jew. The sister was then “kidnapped by strangers”—Nazi soldiers—and shot dead in a ditch.

**Linda’s Core Language:** “The world isn’t a safe place. You have to hide who you are. People can hurt you.”

By comparing her own core language with her great-aunt’s tragedy, Linda now had a context for her anxious feelings. She imagined having a conversation with her aunt in which her aunt offered to protect her and help her feel safe. In this new image, Linda felt that she could leave the anxious feelings back with her aunt, where they originated.

While many of us do not have family members who died or participated in the Holocaust—or the Armenian genocide, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the Ukrainian famine imposed by Stalin, the mass killings in China, Rwanda, Nigeria, El Salvador, the former Yugoslavia (the list goes on)—the residues of war, violence, murder, rape, oppression, exile, forced relocation, and other such traumas that our ancestors did endure can infuse the many fears and anxieties we believe originate with us. Our core sentence can be the link that allows us to ferret out what’s past from what’s now.

# Excavating the Origin of Your Core Sentence

A core sentence often invokes feelings and sensations of fear. Just by speaking its words, we can observe a strong physical reaction in our bodies. Many people report waves of sensation reverberating inside them as the sentence is spoken. That's because a core sentence arises from an unresolved tragedy. If not ours, then the question is: whose?

We may be the one speaking the core sentence and carrying its fears, but the original fear can stem from a tragic event that took place long before we were even born. The question we ask is: to whom does the initial fear belong?

Say your core sentence to yourself. Feel its vibration inside. Listen inwardly. Imagine for a moment that the words belong to someone else. You may even want to write your core sentence down again to see the words in front of you. Hear the sentence of someone who experienced a great trauma, or carried deep grief or guilt, or died violently or regretfully, or lived a life of emptiness or quiet desperation. This sentence could be the sentence of your mother or your father. It could belong to your grandmother or grandfather, or even to your older sibling or to an uncle or aunt. And now it lives on in you.

Core sentences are like traveling sentences, much like traveling salesmen who knock on door after door until someone lets them in. But the doors they solicit are the psyches of those who follow in a family system. And the invitation to enter is without conscious permission.

We appear to share an unconscious obligation to resolve the tragedies of our families' past. In an unconscious attempt to heal the family pain, you might share your grandmother's unresolved grief surrounding the death of her mother or husband or child. Her feeling of "I've lost everything" may live inside you as a fear that you too will lose everything.

These sentences affect the way you know yourself. They affect the choices you make. They affect how your mind and body respond to the world around you. Imagine the effect of a sentence like "He'll leave me" playing out in the back of your awareness when the man of your dreams proposes. Or consider the impact of a sentence like "I'll hurt my child" on the complex biological and emotional state of a young mother-to-be.

Listen again to the words of your core sentence. Speak them aloud. Are you sure they're your words? Who in your family might have had cause to feel the same way?

Think of your parents and your grandparents. Did they experience an event so painful that they rarely spoke about it? Did they lose a newborn baby or miscarry late in a pregnancy? Were they abandoned by a great love or did they lose a parent or a sibling when they were young? Did they feel guilty for causing harm to someone? Did they blame themselves for something?

If nothing comes to mind, you might even look back another generation to your great-grandparents, or to an uncle or aunt.

Zach had to go back two generations to find peace. He was lucky to be alive. After several suicide attempts, he finally decided to open the door to his family's past.

Zach's core sentence had been with him for as far back as he could remember. Ever since he was a small boy, he felt that he needed to die. He had been born into this life to die, he said.

**Zach's Core Sentence:** "I need to die."

And so when Zach was old enough to do so, he signed up to fight and die in Iraq. Nothing could be simpler. As an infantryman, he would be gunned down on the front line of battle and die, thus fulfilling his life's purpose. He trained diligently. He would be a hero. He would take huge risks. He would die with honor for his country.

But Zach's plan went awry. His unit was not deployed. They remained stateside. Zach was incredulous. He immediately went AWOL from the base and put a second plan to die into action. He drove down the highway at turbo speed, certain that a state trooper would pull him over. He had it carefully planned out. He would leap out of his car and go for the trooper's gun. In an instant, it would all be over. The trooper would be forced to shoot him and Zach could die. He raced down the highway, just as he had planned. Again fate intervened. Nothing happened. There was no state trooper. No shooting. No dying.

Undeterred, Zach drove straight to Washington, D.C. His third plan surely couldn't fail. He would leap over the White House fence and, with a toy gun in hand, sprint toward the president's office. Certainly, he would be shot by Secret Service agents as he ran. But again, fate had other plans for

Zach. When he got to Pennsylvania Avenue, the fence was so well protected by security agents, he couldn't get within several feet of it.

Zach had one more suicide plan in mind. This one never materialized. He would attend a political rally where the governor was speaking. Zach would brandish a toy gun and aim it at the governor. Surely, security agents would have to shoot him dead. Then a sobering thought occurred to him. In the thick of the crowd, he might only be wrestled to the ground and spend the rest of his life in prison. Desperate, he sought help.

In Zach's case, can you hear a common thread in each of his plans to die?

Each suicide attempt, if successful, would have resulted in his being shot to death by someone defending his or her country. Yet Zach, in his twenty-four years of life, had done nothing that would warrant such a punishment. He had never harmed anyone. He carried no personal guilt. He didn't blame himself for anyone's suffering.

For whom, then, did Zach need to die? To put it more precisely, who in his family system needed to be shot for something he had done?

For this, we had to travel back into Zach's family history. His core sentence lit the way. Given Zach's core complaint, there were three possible bridging questions.

### **Zach's Bridging Questions**

- Who in your family committed a crime and was never punished for it?
- Who felt like he needed to be shot for something he did?
- Who was shot in your family that the family couldn't grieve?

Either of the first two questions would have hit a bull's-eye. In Zach's case, the first question sparked a memory of a conversation he had overheard as a child. Zach's grandfather, his mother's father, was a high official in Mussolini's cabinet who had been responsible for decisions that led to the deaths of many people. As the war in Italy was ending, he managed to forge fake documents, change his identity, and escape to the United States. Those in his cabinet who remained were rounded up and shot to death by a firing squad. Zach's grandfather had circumvented his fate. He

was lucky—or so he had thought. Unbeknownst to him, his fate would pass down to the firstborn boy in the family—to his grandson.

As we learned in chapter 3, Bert Hellinger teaches that each of us is solely responsible for our fate, and that each of us alone must carry the consequences of that fate. If we avoid or reject or circumvent that fate, another member of our system could attempt to pay the price—often with his or her own life.

Zach had been attempting to pay for the crimes of his grandfather. It was a costly inheritance, and Zach had no conscious awareness that he was taking it on. He thought that the urge to be shot to death had originated in him. He thought that he had been born defective, and that's just how things were. He never considered that he could be affected so deeply by his family history. He had never made the link.

“You mean it's not me who needs to die?” Zach was stunned. “You mean I don't have to die?”

By dodging his death by the firing squad, Zach's grandfather never balanced the deaths he had caused. Two generations later, Zach would attempt to even the score by atoning with his own life. It wasn't fair, but it was happening. And Zach almost succeeded.

Instead, Zach was able to leave the feelings of needing to die with his grandfather. Just having a place to put them was huge for him. For the first time, he could separate feelings that weren't his from those that were. What had once been internalized could now sit on the periphery.

When the old feelings arose, Zach now had a conscious plan. He would see his grandfather in his mind's eye and bow his head respectfully. He would hear his grandfather telling him that the need to die belonged with him, and that he would deal with it, and that Zach could just breathe in and out and be at peace. Zach imagined his grandfather in the afterlife making amends to the people he had harmed. In Zach's inner image, the whole landscape began to take on a peaceful quality of reconciliation.

Like Zach, you probably never thought to link your current issue to a traumatic event in your family history. Now, with the core sentence, you have a way to do so. Say your core sentence one more time and ask yourself these two questions: Are you sure this fear originates with you? Is there someone in your family system who had cause to feel the same way?

Even if you don't have any information about your family's past, the path toward healing is still straightforward. You've already done the hard

part: you've isolated your deepest fear. Although you might carry the feelings of that fear, the fear itself likely originates in a traumatic event that occurred before you were born, an event that sits behind the suffering of one of your parents. Even if you don't know what it is, you can tell it's there. You feel it.

### **Acknowledging the Family Member[s] Behind Your Core Sentence**

1. If you have a clear idea of the original owner of the fear expressed in your core sentence, visualize that person now.
2. If you are not clear who this person is, close your eyes. Imagine somebody in your family who might have felt similar emotions. This person might be your uncle or your grandmother or even the older half-sibling you never met. You don't have to know who it is. This person might not even be a blood member of your family, but may have harmed someone or been harmed by someone in your family.
3. Visualize the person or people connected to the traumatic event behind your core sentence. You don't even need to know what that event is.
4. Now bow your head and breathe deeply through your opened mouth.
5. Tell this person or these people that you respect them and all that happened to them. Tell them that they will not be forgotten and that they will be remembered with love.
6. Visualize them being at peace.
7. Feel them blessing you to have a full life. Feel their well wishes having a physical effect in your body as you breathe in. As you breathe out, feel the emotions of your core sentence leaving your body. Feel the fear dissipating as though the intensity dial were turned all the way down to zero.
8. Do this for several minutes, until your body quiets.

## **Your Core Sentence: The Path to Transforming Fear**

Of all the core language tools you learn in this book, the sentence that describes your worst fear, your core sentence, is the most direct path to uncovering unresolved family trauma. The core sentence not only guides you to the source of your fear, but also connects you to the feelings of unresolved family trauma that might still live in your body. With the source

in sight, the fear can begin to lift. Here are the ten key attributes of the core sentence:

### **The Core Sentence: Ten Key Attributes**

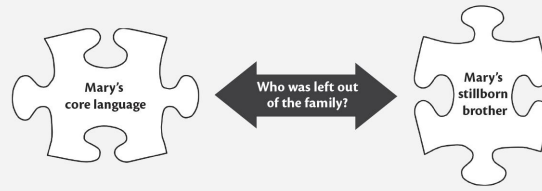
1. It often links to a traumatic event in your family history or in childhood.
2. It frequently begins with an “I” or “They” sentence.
3. It has very few words, yet it’s dramatic.
4. It contains the emotionally charged language of your greatest fear.
5. It causes a physical reaction when spoken.
6. It can retrieve the “lost language” of a trauma and locate where this language originated in your family history.
7. It can recover trauma memories that could not be integrated.
8. It can provide you with a context for understanding the emotions, sensations, and symptoms you’ve been experiencing.
9. It targets the cause, not the symptoms.
10. It has the power, when spoken, to release you from the past.

In the next chapter, you will learn to construct your family tree to find the core trauma connected to your core sentence. Before we go there, let’s lay out your core language map one more time.

You’ve now gathered all the core language you need to take you to the fourth and final step—how to uncover the core trauma in your family.

### **Written Exercise #9: Constructing Your Core Language Map**

1. Write down your core complaint. Here’s an example of a core complaint from Mary, whose older brother died stillborn and was never named or talked about:
  - “I don’t fit in. I feel like I don’t belong. I feel like I’m invisible. Nobody sees me. I feel like I’m observing life, but not in it.”
2. Write down your core descriptors about your mother and your father. Here are Mary’s core descriptors:
  - “Mom was kind, fragile, caring, depressed, preoccupied, and vacant. I blame her for not being there for me. I felt like I had to take care of her.”
  - “Dad was funny, lonely, distant, away a lot, and hardworking. I blame him for not being around.”
3. Write down your core sentence—your worst fear. Here is Mary’s worst fear:
  - “I’ll always feel alone and left out.”



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## Chapter 9

# The Core Trauma

*Atrocities . . . refuse to be buried. . . . Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told.*

—Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*

**L**et's put all the pieces of our core language map together. So far, we've learned to extract the core language gems from our core complaint. We've also learned how to analyze our core descriptors, how the adjectives we use to describe our parents often say more about us than they do about them. We've also learned that the sentence that expresses our greatest fear, our core sentence, can lead us back to a trauma in our family system. The last thing we need to learn is how to construct a bridge to get to our core trauma, the unresolved trauma in childhood or in the family history.

In sequence, the four tools of the core language map are the core complaint, the core descriptors, the core sentence, and the core trauma. There are two ways to unearth the core trauma. One is through a genogram, a diagram of a family tree. The other is through a bridging question.

## The Bridging Question

As we learned from Zach in the last chapter, one way to get to the underlying trauma is to ask a bridging question. A bridging question can summon forward the family member from whom we have inherited our

core sentence. Because our core sentence can originate in a past generation, locating the rightful owner can bring about peace and understanding, not only for us, but for our children as well.

In Zach's case, the bridging question "Who in your family committed a crime and was never punished for it?" led us to his grandfather, who, as a powerful official in Mussolini's government, harmed many people. As you can imagine, people in Zach's family rarely, if ever, spoke about what the grandfather did during the war.

Simply put, a bridging question is a question that connects the present to the past. Excavating the feelings of your greatest fear can lead you to the person in your family system who had cause to feel the same way you do.

For example, if your greatest fear is that you might "harm a child," turn that fear into a question. Think about all the relevant combinations that could express in a fear carried by a descendant in the family.

## **The Fear: "I Could Harm a Child"**

### **Possible Bridging Questions**

- Who in your family system might have blamed himself or herself for hurting a child or not keeping a child safe?
- Who might have held himself or herself responsible for a child's death?
- Who might have felt guilty for actions or decisions that harmed a child?
- What child in your family system was harmed, neglected, given away, or mistreated?

One or more of these questions is likely to lead you to the source of your fear. However, the source might not always be readily available. Many parents and grandparents keep the family past tightly sealed, and thus, valuable information can be lost forever.

When people suffer deeply, they often attempt to distance themselves from their emotional pain by avoiding it. In this way, they think that they are protecting themselves and protecting their children. Ignoring the pain actually deepens it. What is hidden from sight often increases in intensity.

Remaining silent about family pain is rarely an effective strategy for healing it. The suffering will surface again at a later time, often expressing in the fears or symptoms of a later generation.

Even if you can't find out what happened in your family, you can still complete your core language map. Your core sentence will provide you with the clues you need to point you in the direction of a family trauma. Your bridging question will connect enough of the dots, even if the specific details are vague or missing.

### *Lisa's Story*

Lisa described herself as an overprotective mother. She was terrified that something terrible would happen to one of her children, and so never let them out of her sight. Even though nothing significant had ever happened to any of Lisa's three children, she was haunted by her core sentence, "My child will die." Lisa knew very little about her family history, but when she followed the fear of her core sentence, she asked the following bridging questions:

Who in the family had a child who died?

Who in the family could not keep his or her child safe?

The only information Lisa had was that her grandparents came to America from the Carpathian Mountains region of Ukraine. Fleeing famine and starvation, her grandparents never spoke about the hardships they endured. The children knew never to ask.

Lisa's mother was the youngest of the children and the only one who was born in America. Although Lisa's mother wasn't sure of the details, she suspected that some of the children didn't survive the journey. Just bringing this information to light increased Lisa's understanding of the fear she carried. She recognized that the sentence "My child will die" most likely belonged to her grandparents. Making this link immediately reduced the intensity of her fear. Lisa was able to worry less and enjoy her children more.

When you ask your bridging questions, you could confront a traumatic event in your family that has never been fully resolved. You could find

yourself standing face-to-face with family members who suffered terribly. You could be carrying their fallout.

### **Written Exercise #10: Identifying Bridging Questions from Your Core Sentence**

My Core Sentence:

My Bridging Questions:

A bridging question is one way to discover the unresolved trauma in your family. Mapping out your family tree and constructing a genogram on paper is another.

## **The Genogram**

A genogram is a two-dimensional visual representation of a family tree. Here are the steps to create yours:

1. Looking back three or four generations in your family, construct a diagram that includes your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, siblings, uncles, and aunts. You don't need to go back any further than your great-grandparents. Using squares to represent males and circles to represent females, create your family tree. (See diagram [here](#).) You can use lines to represent the branches of the family tree, showing who belongs in which generation. List the children of your parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. You do not need to list the children of your aunts, uncles, or siblings. However you map this out will be fine.
2. Next to each family member (represented by a square or a circle), write down the significant traumas and difficult fates that person experienced. If your parents are still alive, you might ask them what they know. Don't worry if there are answers you can't get.

Whatever you know should be enough. Traumatic events include: Who died early? Who left? Who was abandoned or isolated or excluded from the family? Who was adopted or who gave a child up for adoption? Who died in childbirth? Who had a stillbirth or an abortion? Who committed suicide? Who committed a crime? Who experienced a significant trauma? Who was forgotten or suffered in war? Who died in or participated in the Holocaust or some other genocide? Who was murdered? Who murdered someone? Who felt responsible for someone's death or misfortune?

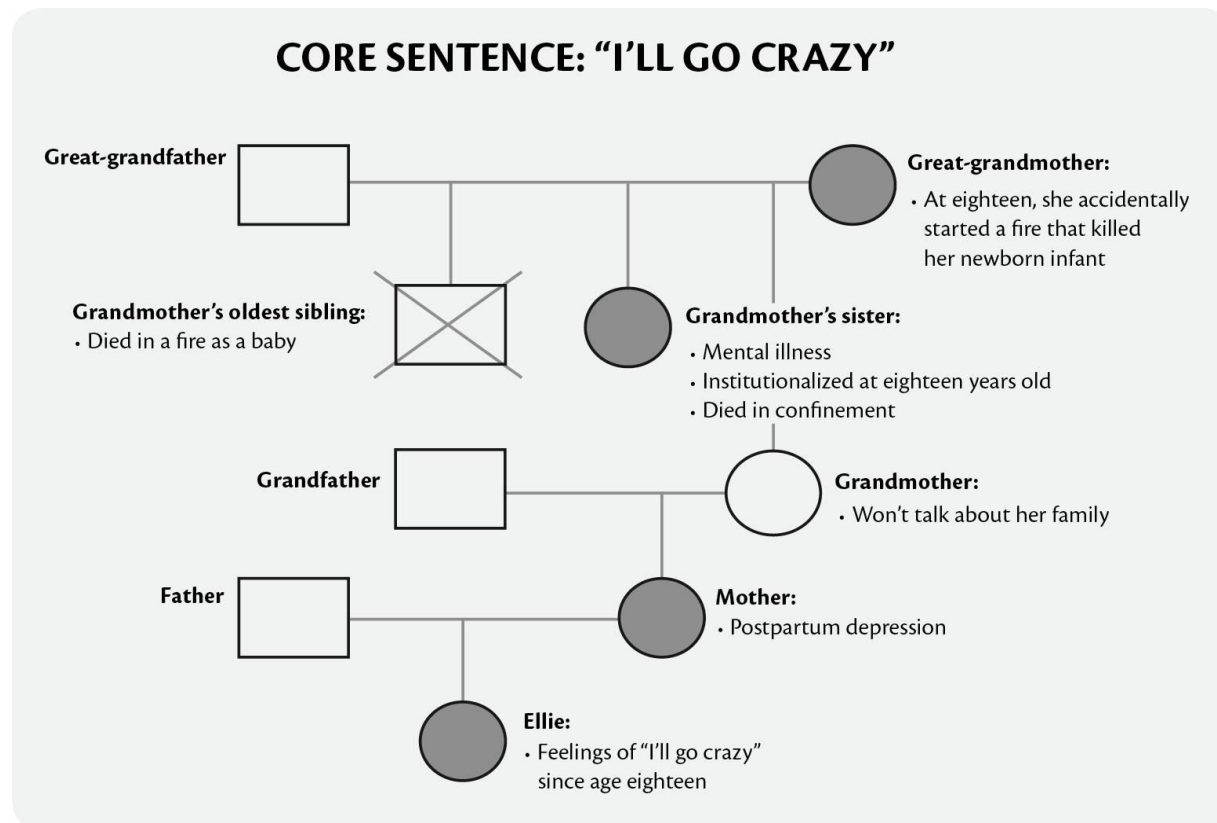
These questions are important. If someone in your family harmed or murdered someone, list the harmed or murdered person in your family tree. The victims harmed by people in your family must be included, as they are now members of your family system with whom you could be identified. Likewise, list anyone who harmed or murdered a member of your family, as you could also be unconsciously identified with this person.

Keep going. Who profited from another's loss? Who was wrongly accused of something? Who was jailed or institutionalized? Who had a physical, emotional, or mental disability? Which parent or grandparent had a significant relationship prior to getting married, and what happened? List any former partners of your parents and grandparents. List anyone else you can think of who was deeply hurt by someone or deeply hurt another.

3. At the top of the genogram, write down your core sentence. Now look at everyone who belongs in your family system. Who might have had a reason to feel the same way you do? This person could be your mother or your father, especially if one of them had a difficult fate or was disrespected by the other. It could also be the sister of your grandmother who was institutionalized, or the older brother that your mother miscarried before she had you. Often, it is someone who isn't talked about much in your family.

Take a look at the following example. This genogram tells the story of a woman named Ellie who struggled with a fear of going crazy. Until she

constructed the maternal line of her genogram, Ellie believed that she was the source of that fear.



In the genogram, it's easy to see that the feeling of going crazy did not originate in the current generation with Ellie. Ellie's great-aunt was institutionalized at eighteen and died alone and forgotten. No one in the family ever spoke her name or told her story. Ellie never even knew that her grandmother had any siblings, and discovered the information only through repeated inquiries.

Interestingly, the great-aunt was committed to a state hospital at eighteen—the same age the great-grandmother was when she started a fire that killed her newborn child. With three generations in view, a new understanding for Ellie was possible. Whose feelings of insanity had the great-aunt been reliving? And more important, what story was Ellie trying to bring back to the forefront by sharing the same fear? With the genogram laid out, the fogged history of Ellie's family was now becoming clear.

For Ellie, the fear of going crazy arose once she turned eighteen and graduated from high school. The same fear that had been depleting her life force was now leading her toward self-discovery. The more she studied the genogram, the more connections she began to make.

Ellie remembered her mother telling her that she had experienced postpartum depression for the first year of Ellie's life. In her suffering, Ellie's mother was also a recipient of the great-grandmother's trauma. Ellie's mother admitted that, as soon as Ellie was born, she began obsessing that something would go terribly wrong. Specifically, she was terrified that she would inadvertently do something and, as a consequence, Ellie would die. Unbearable feelings of dread arose during the pregnancy and intensified after Ellie was born. Ellie's mother never connected the depression to what had happened in her family. What wasn't talked about consciously in the family was expressed unconsciously through the fears, feelings, and behaviors of its members.

### **Written Exercise #11: Creating Your Genogram**

Using squares for males and circles for females, position the members of your family, along with the significant traumas and difficult fates they experienced. Use a full, blank sheet of paper for this exercise. Write your core sentence at the top of the page.

Now sit back and look at your genogram. Without focusing too carefully, let your eyes take in the whole gestalt. Absorb the energy on both sides of your family. Feel the quality of weight, the lightness or heaviness of the emotions, into which you were born. Compare your paternal line with your maternal line. Which side feels weightier? Which side has a more burdensome feeling? Look at the traumatic events. Who suffered from the most difficult fate? Who lived the most difficult life? How did the other family members feel about this person? Who or what was rarely talked about in your family? Don't worry if the information you have is incomplete. Let your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations be your guide.

Now speak your core sentence out loud. Who in the family would have echoed a similar feeling? Who would have struggled with similar emotions? Chances are your core sentence existed long before you were even born.

Let's meet Carole, whose core sentence originated with her grandmother. From the time Carole was eleven years old, she had been overweight. As an adult, her weight consistently hovered around three hundred pounds. At thirty-eight, she was at the top of her weight range. Carole had had very few relationships and had never been married.

Carole described feeling “smothered and suffocated” by her weight and being “betrayed by her body.” Right away, we hear her core language calling out to be deciphered as though something in her family was seeking resolution. Knowing what we already know about core language, we might ask the bridging questions: Who in the family felt betrayed by her body? Who was smothered? Who was suffocated?

Carole went on to explain. “I developed early, way before the other girls. I got my period at eleven and began hating my body even back then. I felt my body had betrayed me by developing so early. That’s when I began to put on weight.”

Again, that interesting notion of feeling *betrayed* by one’s body. And now a new clue: Carole felt *betrayed* by her body once it turned into a *woman’s body*, a body that could now create life in its *womb*.

Adding this information to the mix, more bridging questions come to mind: What *woman* in Carole’s family felt *betrayed* by her *womb*? What terrible thing could happen to Carole if she were to become a woman or get pregnant?

All of the questions so far have been right on target—we just don’t know it yet.

Add to the mix Carole’s worst fear: “I’ll be all alone without anybody.”

At three hundred pounds and isolated from other people, Carole was well on her way to making her worst fear a reality.

Now let’s put all the pieces together and investigate Carole’s core language map. Remember, Carole’s anguish started once her womb became fertile. Here are the words she used, the words that form her core language map.

## Carole’s Core Language Map

**Carole’s Core Complaint:** “I feel smothered and suffocated by all this weight. I feel betrayed by my body.”

**Carole’s Core Sentence:** “I’ll be all alone without anybody.”

**Carole’s Bridging Questions:** Here are the bridging questions that helped Carole make the link between a traumatic event in her family and her

excessive weight gain:

- Who in the family felt betrayed by her body?
- Who was smothered?
- Who was suffocated?
- What woman in the family felt betrayed by her womb?
- What terrible thing happened to a woman who got pregnant?
- Who felt all alone without anybody?

**Carole's Core Trauma:** Now let's visit the core trauma, the traumatic event, the unresolved tragedy in Carole's family. Her grandmother had three children: a boy, Carole's mother, and another boy. Both boys suffocated in the grandmother's birth canal during the delivery, and as a result of severe oxygen deprivation, both boys became mentally handicapped. They lived in the basement of the grandmother's rural Kentucky home for nearly fifty years. The grandmother lived brokenhearted and empty for the rest of her life.

Although it was probably never spoken aloud, the sentence "My body betrayed me" clearly belonged to Carole's grandmother. Her grandmother's body had "suffocated" the babies. She lived "all alone," shrouded in pain and guilt. The two boys, who had been "smothered by the weight" pressing against them, also lived all alone, in the basement, cut off from the outside world. Carole's mother also felt alone throughout her childhood, describing her mother as "there physically but not there emotionally." Carole's core language and her body had inadvertently been telling the whole story.

Let's revisit it one more time. When Carole became old enough to conceive a child, she put on weight and isolated herself from those around her. Staying isolated ensured that she would never become pregnant and suffer as her grandmother had. She lived a solitary life, feeling all alone in her world, as her grandmother did in her desolation, as her uncles in the basement did, and as her mother, whose life was riddled with sadness did.

Carole used the words "smothered and suffocated" to describe the feeling of being oppressed by her weight. Yet these words had a deeper meaning in the context of her family. These were the unspoken words of her family's trauma. They were probably words no one dared say in front of the grandmother. These words, however, would be important for this family's ability to heal from such a horrifically tragic event. Had the grandmother

been able to come to terms with the magnitude of her tragedy, had she been able to grieve her losses without blaming herself and feeling betrayed by her body, then this family might have had a chance to follow a different path. Carole might not have had to carry the family suffering as bulk on her body.

Tragic events like this can shatter the resiliency in a family and collapse the walls of support. They can erode the flow of love from parent to child and set our children adrift on a sea of sadness.

As with most of us, Carole never made the connection that she was carrying the suffering in her family history. She thought the suffering originated somewhere inside her. She thought something must have been wrong with who she was. Once she understood that the feeling of being betrayed by her body belonged to her grandmother, and not to her, Carole was on a path to freedom.

As soon as she recognized that she had been absorbing the family suffering for her grandmother, her uncles, and her mother, her whole body began to shake. An emotional weight was lifting off, allowing her to inhabit those places inside her that had long been shut down. It wouldn't be long until Carole would gain a physical awareness of her body that would enable her to make different lifestyle choices.

Carole's core language was the vehicle that set this family's healing into motion. It was the family's opportunity to heal what had not been able to heal. Seen another way, Carole's suffering was merely the messenger bringing healing to the difficult tragedy in her family. It was as though the family pain had been calling out for healing and resolution and Carole's words and body provided the map.

Like Carole's, your core language map can lead you on a healing journey. With the link to your family history in sight, the only step remaining is to bring all that you have discovered back to yourself. What has been unspoken or invisible in your family history has likely been hidden in the shadows of your own self-awareness. Once you make the link, what was previously unseen can become an opportunity for healing. Sometimes the new images that arise require our care and attention to integrate them fully. In the chapter that follows, you will be guided through exercises and be given practices and sentences that will strengthen these images and move you toward greater wholeness and freedom.

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## Part III

# Pathways to Reconnection

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## Chapter 10

# From Insight to Integration

*A human being is a part of the whole . . . [though] he experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.*

—Albert Einstein to Robert S. Marcus, February 12, 1950

The optical delusion Einstein refers to is the idea that we are separate from those around us as well as from those who came before us. Yet, as we've seen again and again, we're connected to people in our family history whose unresolved traumas have become our legacy. When the connection remains unconscious, we can live imprisoned in feelings and sensations that belong to the past. However, with our family history in view, the pathways that will set us free become illuminated.

Sometimes the simple act of linking our experience to an unresolved trauma in our family is enough. As we saw with Carole in the last chapter, once she connected the feelings in her core language to the trauma in her family, her body immediately began to tremble as if she were shaking off what had belonged to the past. For Carole, the awareness alone was profound enough to initiate a visceral reaction she could feel at her core.

For some of us, the awareness of what happened in our families needs to be accompanied by an exercise or experience that brings about a release or creates greater ease in our bodies.

# The Map Home

By this point in the book, you have likely gathered the essential pieces of your core language map. You have likely discovered words or sentences you thought were yours but which may have, in fact, belonged to others. You have likely also made links in your family history, unearthing traumatic events or unspoken loyalties that have seeded this language. Now it's time to bring all the pieces together and take the next step. Here's a list of what you'll need:

- Your Core Complaint—the core language describing your deepest worry, struggle, or complaint
- Your Core Descriptors—the core language describing your parents
- Your Core Sentence—the core language describing your worst fear
- Your Core Trauma—the event or events in your family that sit behind your core language

## **Written Exercise #12: Making Peace with Your Family History**

1. Write down the core language that has the greatest emotional charge or that evokes the most emotion in you when you speak it aloud.
2. Also write down the traumatic event or events that are connected to this core language.
3. List all the people whose lives were touched by this event. Who was most affected? Your mother? Your father? A grandparent? An uncle? An aunt? Who isn't acknowledged or talked about? Is there a sibling who was given away or didn't survive? Did a grandparent or great-grandparent leave the family or die young or suffer in some terrible way? Was a parent or grandparent engaged or married previously? Is that person acknowledged in your family? Is there anyone outside your family who was judged, rejected, or blamed for harming a family member?
4. Describe what happened. What images come to mind as you write this? Take a minute and visualize what they might have felt or gone through. What's happening in your body as you think about this?
5. Are there any family members you feel particularly drawn to? Do you feel yourself being pulled in emotionally? Does it resonate in your body? Where in your body do you feel this? Is it a place you're

familiar with? Do you experience sensitivity or symptoms in that same area?

6. Place your hand there and allow your breath to fill that area.
7. Visualize the family member or members involved in this event. Tell them: “You are important. I will do something meaningful to honor you. I will make something good come out of this tragedy. I will live my life as fully as I can, knowing that this is what you want for me.”
8. Construct your own personal language that acknowledges the unique connection you share with this person or these people.

## Creating Personal Healing Sentences

Unconscious reliving can go on for generations. Once we recognize that we have been carrying thoughts, emotions, feelings, behaviors, or symptoms that do not originate with us, we can break the cycle. We start by taking a conscious action that acknowledges the tragic event and the people involved. Often this begins with a conversation we have internally, or with a family member—either in person or through visualization. The right words can release us from unconscious family ties and loyalties, and end the cycle of inherited trauma.

For Jesse, the young man with insomnia who at nineteen began to reenact aspects of his uncle’s death in a blizzard, the conversation took place in my office. I asked Jesse to visualize his uncle standing in front of him and to speak directly to him, silently inside, if he wished. I helped Jesse construct the words and suggested that he tell his uncle: “I shiver each night, and have had difficulty letting myself fall asleep since my nineteenth birthday.” Jesse’s breathing deepened. I could hear a rasp in his exhale. His eyelids began to flutter, shaking loose a tear from the corner of his eye. “From now on, Uncle Colin, you’ll live on in my heart—not in my sleeplessness.” As Jesse mouthed the words, more tears began to fall. At that point I said, “Hear your uncle telling you to breathe out and release the fear back to him. This insomnia doesn’t belong to you. It never did.”

Just by having this conversation with his uncle—the uncle he never knew he had—Jesse began to calm. As he breathed out, his jaw loosened and his shoulders dropped. Color began to return to his cheeks. His eyes

seemed to spark back to life. Something from deep inside him was letting go.

Although Jesse was only imagining this conversation with his uncle, brain research shows that Jesse was actually activating the same neurons and regions in the brain that would be activated if he were actually having this healing experience with his uncle in person. Following our session, Jesse reported that he was able to sleep through the night without interruption.

## Examples of Healing Sentences

One man I worked with recognized that he had been unconsciously sharing his rejected grandfather's loneliness and isolation. He said these words:

"I have been isolated and alone just like you. I can see that this doesn't even belong to me. I know this is not what you want for me. And I know it burdens you to see me suffer like this. From now on, I will live my life connected to the people around me. In this way, I'll honor you."

Another client understood that she had been unconsciously sharing the relationship failures and unhappiness of her mother and grandmother. She said these sentences:

"Mom, please bless me to be happy with my husband, even when you couldn't be happy with Dad. To honor you and Dad, I will relish my love with my husband so that both of you can see that things go well for me."

A young woman I once worked with acknowledged that she had been living in an anxious and contracted state for as long as she could remember. She said these words to her mother, who died while giving birth to her:

"Every time I feel anxious, I will feel you smiling at me, supporting me, blessing me to be well. Whenever I feel my breath moving inside me, I will feel you there with me and know that you are happy for me."

### **Additional Healing Sentences**

"Instead of reliving what happened to you, I promise to live *my* life fully."

“What happened to you won’t be in vain.”  
“I’ll use what happened as a source of strength.”  
“I will honor the life you gave me by doing something good with it.”  
“I will do something meaningful and dedicate it to you.”  
“I will not leave you out of my heart.”  
“I’ll light a candle for you.”  
“I will honor you by living fully.”  
“I’ll live my life in a loving way.”  
“I will make something good come out of this tragedy.”  
“Now I understand. It helps to understand.”

## From Healing Sentences to Healing Images

Whether we’re conscious of it or not, our life is profoundly influenced by the inner images, beliefs, expectations, assumptions, and opinions we hold. Intrinsic imprints such as “life never works out for me” or “I’ll fail no matter what I try” or “I have a weak immune system” can lay a blueprint for how our life unfolds, limiting the way we take in new experiences and affecting the way we heal. Imagine the effect on your body of the inner image “my childhood was difficult.” Or the image “my mother was cruel.” Or “my father was emotionally abusive.” Although there may be a significant amount of truth in these images, they might also not reveal the whole story. Was every day of your childhood difficult? Was your father ever gentle? Was your mother ever caring? Do you have access to all your early memories of being held, fed, and tucked into your crib at night when you were an infant? Remember, as we learned in chapter 5, many of us hold on to only those memories designed to protect us from being hurt again, memories that support our defenses, memories that the evolutionary biologists claim are part of our inborn “negativity bias.” Could any memories be missing? More important, have you asked the questions: What was behind my mom’s hurtfulness? What traumatic event lay behind my father’s frustration?

In creating your healing sentences, you may have already noticed a new internal experience beginning to take root. It may have come to you in the form of an image or a feeling, perhaps as a sense of belonging or connection. Maybe you could feel the support of family members watching over you. Maybe you experienced a greater sense of peace, as if something unresolved was finally completing.

All these experiences can have a potent effect on healing. Essentially, they establish an internal reference point of feeling whole, a reference point we can refer back to each time old feelings threaten our stability. These new experiences function much like new memories accompanied with new understandings, new images, new feelings, and new sensations in the body. They can be life changers, powerful enough to overshadow the old, limiting images that have been running our lives.

These new experiences and images continue to deepen through ritual, exercises, and practice. Here are some creative ways to support your healing process as it continues to unfold.

### **Examples of Rituals, Exercises, Practices, and Healing Images**

- **Placing a Photo on the Desk:** A man who understood that he had been reexperiencing his grandfather's guilt placed a photo of his grandfather on his desk. He breathed out and visualized leaving the guilt feelings with his grandfather. Each time he repeated this ritual, he felt lighter and freer.
- **Lighting a Candle:** A woman whose father died when she was an infant had no memory of him. Estranged from her husband at twenty-nine—the same age her father was when he died—she unconsciously shared her father's disconnection from the family. She lit a candle every night for two months and imagined the flame from the candle burning an opening for the two of them to reunite. She would speak to her father and feel his presence comforting her. By the end of the ritual, her feelings of disconnection had eased, and a new feeling

of being cared for by a loving father had expanded inside her.

- **Writing a Letter:** A man who had abruptly left his college fiancée found himself still struggling in his relationships twenty years later. He had learned that his fiancée had died the year after he left. Although he knew she would never receive his letter, he wrote to her, apologizing for his carelessness and indifference. In the letter, he said: “I’m so sorry. I know how much you loved me, and how much I hurt you. It must have been so terrible for you. I’m so very sorry. I know I’ll never be able to deliver this letter, but I hope you can receive my words.” After writing this letter, the man felt a sense of peace and completion he couldn’t explain.
- **Placing a Photo Above the Bed:** A woman who had spent her life rejecting her mother realized that an early separation in an incubator had kept her feeling suspicious and shut down from receiving her mother’s love. She also began to see how pushing her mother away became a blueprint for pushing relationships away. She taped a photo of her mother on the wall above her pillow and asked her mother to hold her each night while she slept, and her defenses softened. As she lay in bed, she could feel her mother caressing her. She described her mother’s love as being like a current of energy that gave her strength. Within weeks, she could feel more ease in her body upon awakening. Within months, she could feel her mother’s support with her as a physical feeling throughout the day. By the end of the year, she noticed more people entering her life in a substantial way. (Note: This particular woman’s mother was still alive; however, this practice is effective regardless of whether one’s parent is alive or deceased.)

- **Developing a Supportive Image:** A sudden onset of anxiety in a seven-year-old boy expressed in his pulling out much of the hair on the crown of his head, a condition known as trichotillomania. His anxiety appeared to originate in the family history. When his mother was seven, she witnessed her mother die suddenly of a brain aneurysm. The grief was so great that his mother never talked about his grandmother. When his mother shared what had happened, he immediately began to relax. She had him imagine his deceased grandmother as a guardian angel protecting them both. She showed him a picture of a halo and had him imagine that Grandmother's love was like a halo caressing his head. Whenever he touched the top of his head, he would be met with a peaceful feeling. That day he stopped pulling his hair out.
- **Creating a Boundary:** Another woman grew up burdened by feeling responsible for her alcoholic mother's happiness and well-being. As this pattern of caretaking continued into adulthood, she had difficulty letting herself receive care and support from others. It was hard for her to be in relationships without feeling both responsible for people's feelings and suffocated by their needs. She sat on the floor and traced a circle around her body using a piece of yarn, noticing that, as she marked out a space for herself, she was already breathing more easily. She told her mother: "Mom, this is my space. You are over there and I am over here. When I was little, I would have done anything to make you happy, but it was way too much for me. Now I feel like I have to make everyone happy and it makes closeness feel suffocating. Mom, from now on, your feelings are over there with you and my feelings are over here with me. In this boundary, I'll honor my own feelings so I that don't have to lose myself when I start to feel connected with someone."

The rituals and practices I just described may seem small in comparison with the great pain one has carried for years, yet science tells us that the more we repeat and revisit these new images and experiences, the more they integrate inside us. Science tells us that practices such as these can alter our brains by creating new neural pathways. Not only that, when we visualize a healing image, we activate the same regions of the brain—specifically in the left prefrontal cortex—that are associated with feelings of well-being and positive emotion.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

## Healing Sentences and the Body

An essential part of healing involves our ability to incorporate the experience of our physical sensations into the process. When we can just “be with” the feelings that arise in our bodies without reacting unconsciously, we are more likely to stay grounded when inner unrest begins to surge. Insight is often gained when we are willing to tolerate what’s uncomfortable in the quest to understand ourselves.

When you focus inside, what do you feel? What sensations do you connect with your fearful thoughts or uncomfortable emotions? Where do you feel it the most? Does your throat constrict? Does your breathing stop? Does your chest tighten? Do you go numb? Where is the epicenter of that feeling in your body? In your heart? In your belly or solar plexus? Being able to navigate this inner territory, even when the feelings seem overpowering, is essential.

If you’re not sure what your body’s feeling, say your core sentence aloud. As you learned in chapter 8, speaking your core sentence aloud can arouse physical sensations. Say it and observe your body. Are you aware of any shakiness? Is there a sinking feeling? Numbness? Whatever you feel or don’t feel is fine. Just place your hand where you imagine or sense the feelings to be. Next, bring your breath to that area. Exhale into your body so that the entire area feels supported. You might want to visualize your exhale as a beam of light illuminating that part of your body. Next, say to yourself these words: “I’ve got you.”

Imagine that you are speaking to a young child who feels unseen and unheard. Chances are there *is* a child there—a child part of you that has been ignored for a very long time. Imagine that this small child has been waiting for you to recognize him or her, and today is that day.

### *Healing Sentences We Can Say to Ourselves*

Place your hand on your body and breathe deeply while you say one or more of the following inner sentences to yourself:

“I’ve got you.”

“I’m here.”

“I’ll hold you.”

“I’ll breathe with you.”

“I’ll comfort you.”

“Whenever you’re feeling scared or overwhelmed, I won’t leave you.”

“I’ll stay with you.”

“I’ll breathe with you until you’re calm.”

When we place our hands on our body and direct our words and breath inside, we support the parts of ourselves that feel most vulnerable. In doing so, we have a chance to ease or release what we experience as intolerable. Long-standing feelings of discomfort can give way to feelings of expansion and well-being. As the new feelings take root, we can experience ourselves being more supported in our body.

## Healing Our Relationship with Our Parents

In chapter 5, we learned how our vitality—the life force that comes to us from our parents—can become blocked when our connection to them is compromised. When we have rejected, judged, blamed, or distanced ourselves from either parent, the reverberations are felt in us as well. We

might not be consciously aware of it, but pushing a parent away is akin to pushing away a part of ourselves.

When we cut ourselves off from our parents, the qualities we view as negative in them can express in us unconsciously. If, for example, we experienced our parents as cold or critical or aggressive, we can experience ourselves as cold, self-critical, and even inwardly aggressive—the very qualities we reject in them. In that sense, we do to ourselves what we feel was done to us.

The answer is to find some way to bring our parents into our hearts, and to bring the qualities we reject in them (and in us) into awareness. There, we have the chance to transform something difficult into something that can bring us strength. By developing a relationship with the painful parts of ourselves—parts we have often inherited from our family—we have an opportunity to shift them. Qualities like cruelty can become the source of our kindness; our judgments can forge the foundation of our compassion.

Feeling at peace with ourselves often begins with being at peace with our parents. That being said, can you receive something good from what they gave you? Can you stay open in your body when you think about them? If they're still alive, can you remain undefended when you're with them?

Healing can happen even if they have passed on, sit in jail, or tread in a sea of pain. Is there one memory, one good intention, one tender image, one understanding, one way your parents express love, that you can let in? Letting yourself connect with a warm inner image can begin to change your outer relationship with your parents. You can't change what was, but you can change what is, as long as you don't expect your parents to change or be any different from who they are. It is you who must hold the relationship differently. That's your work. Not your parents' work. The question is: are you willing?

The renowned Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that when you're angry with your parents, "you get angry with yourself. Suppose the plant of corn got angry at the grain of corn." He tells us: "If we're angry with our father or mother, we have to breathe in and out and find reconciliation. This is the only path to happiness."<sup>2</sup>

Reconciliation is mostly an internal movement. Our relationship with our parents is not dependent on what they do, how they are, or how they respond. It's about what we do. The change occurs in us.

Once Randy learned that his father lost his best friend while they fought together during the war, Randy could understand why his father kept to himself. Randy had often felt that his father's distance had been personally directed toward him. Knowing the story changed all that. His father, Glenn, and his childhood best friend, Don, were reunited by chance when their units joined together to fight the Germans in Belgium. Under heavy fire, Don saved Glenn's life. In the process, he took a bullet in his neck and died in Glenn's arms. Glenn returned home, married, and had a family, though he could never fully embrace what he had, knowing that Don would never have these things.

Randy apologized to his dad for judging him and for pulling away. He no longer expected Glenn to connect with him in the way he craved. Instead, Randy could love him just as he was.

As we learned in the preceding chapters, it helps to know what happened in our family that made our parents hurt so much. What sat behind the distance, criticism, or aggression in the first place? Knowing these events can open the door to understanding their pain, as well as our own. When we know the traumatic events that contributed to our parents' pain, our understanding and compassion can begin to overshadow the old hurts. Sometimes just saying a sentence like "Mom, Dad, I'm sorry that I was distant and pulled away" can open something in us that surprises us.

Read the list of healing sentences that follows. Perhaps one or two of them will speak to you in a way that starts to dissolve the block between you and your parents. Let the words reach you. Is there a sentence that tugs at your heart? Perhaps you can imagine saying one or two of these sentences to the parent you have rejected.

### *Healing Sentences When We Have Rejected a Parent*

1. "I'm so sorry for how distant I've been."
2. "Whenever you've reached out to me, I've pushed you away."
3. "I miss you, but it's not easy to tell you that."
4. "Dad/Mom, you're a really good father/mother."
5. "I've learned a lot from you." (Recall and share a positive memory.)
6. "I'm sorry for how difficult I've been."

7. "I've been really judgmental. It's prevented me from being close to you."
8. "Please give me a second chance."
9. "I'd really like to be closer."
10. "I'm sorry that I pulled away. I promise, for the remaining time we have together, I'll be closer."
11. "I really like that we're close."
12. "I promise to stop making you prove your love to me."
13. "I'll stop expecting that your love should look a certain way."
14. "I'll take in your love as you give it—not as I expect it."
15. "I'll take your love in even when I can't feel it in your words."
16. "You've given me a lot. Thank you."
17. "Mom/Dad, I had a really bad day and just needed to call you."
18. "Mom/Dad, can we stay on the phone a bit longer? It comforts me just to hear your voice."
19. "Mom/Dad, can I just sit here? It feels good just being next to you."

Before you attempt to heal a severely broken relationship with your parents, you might first want to have a few sessions with a body-centered therapist or cultivate a mindfulness meditation practice to learn resources that will allow you to connect with your body's sensations. When you can observe your reactions to stress, you can monitor and give yourself what you need in the very moments you most need it. It's important to cultivate an inner feeling that both guides and supports you. For example, learning certain breathing techniques can give you a physical sense of your body's limits so that you can proceed at a speed that's just right for you, as well as maintain the distance you feel is appropriate. The right distance allows you to feel relaxed, so that you don't have to defend or shrink yourself to feel connected. A solid but flexible boundary enables you to have adequate space to feel your feelings while, at the same time, letting you enjoy the healing connection you're forging with your parents. Ultimately, when you can breathe deeply enough to know what you're feeling in your body, you don't have to leave it.

### *Healing Sentences to Say to a Deceased Parent*

Even when our outer relationship with our parents is distant or nonexistent, our inner relationship with them continues to evolve. Even when our parents are deceased, we can still speak to them. Here are a few sentences that can help rebuild a bond that broke or never fully developed:

1. "Please hold me in my sleep when my body is more open and I'm easier to reach."
2. "Please teach me how to trust and let love in."
3. "Please teach me how to receive."
4. "Please help me feel more peaceful in my body."

### *Healing Sentences to Say to an Unknown or Estranged Parent*

When a parent has left early or has given us away to be raised by others, the pain can feel insurmountable. In a sense, the initial leaving often forges an unconscious blueprint for the many rejections and abandonments that occur later in our life. The cycle of pain needs to come to an end. As long as we continue to live feeling that we've been wronged or victimized, we're likely to continue the pattern. Read the following sentences and imagine that you are saying them to your estranged parent or to the parent you never met.

1. "If it made things easier for you to leave or give me away, I understand."
2. "I'll stop blaming you, which I know only holds us both hostage."
3. "I'll get what I need from others and make something good come out of what happened."
4. "What happened between us will serve as the source of my strength."
5. "Because it happened, I've gained a particular strength I can rely on."
6. "Thank you for the gift of life. I promise not to waste or squander it."

## *Healing Sentences When We've Merged with a Parent*

While some of us have rejected a parent, others have merged with a parent in a way that clouds our identity and drains our individuality. In the merged relationship, we might have missed opportunities for self-definition or lost the edges of who we are and what we feel. If this is true for you, you might read the sentences that follow as though you are hearing them from your mother or father. Imagine his or her voice saying these words to you as your body opens to receive them. Notice which words or sentences reach you in the deepest way.

### **Imagine Your Parent Saying One or More of These Sentences to You**

1. "I love you for who you are. There's nothing you have to do to earn my love."
2. "You are my child, and you're separate from me. My feelings do not have to be your feelings."
3. "I've been too close to you, and I see the toll it has taken on you."
4. "It must have been overwhelming with all my needs and emotions."
5. "My needs made it difficult for you to have space for yourself."
6. "I will step back now so that my love doesn't overpower you."
7. "I will give you all the space you need."
8. "I have been too close to you for you to know yourself. Now I will stay over here and take joy in watching you live your life over there."
9. "You have been taking care of me and I have allowed it—but no more."
10. "This is way too much for any child."
11. "Any child who tried to fix this would feel burdened. This is not yours."
12. "Take a step back now until you can feel your own life flowing through you. Only then will I be at peace."

13. "I had not been able to face my own pain until now. What's mine has been over there with you. It is time for it to return to me, where it belongs. Then we're both free."
14. "You have had far too much of me and not enough of your mother/father. It would please me to see the two of you closer. That's where you need to be."

Now visualize your parent standing in front of you and notice if you have an inner feeling to move forward or backward. Do you need to move closer or farther away? Do you have a body feeling that lets you know what distance is right for you? The right distance can open, soften, or relax something inside of us. When this happens, we have more room inside to feel our feelings. When you have found your right distance, say one or more of the following sentences, noticing your feelings as the words are spoken.

### **Say One or More of These Sentences to a Parent**

1. "Mom/Dad, I'm over here, and you're over there."
2. "Your feelings are over there with you, and my feelings are over here with me."
3. "Please stay over there, but don't go too far away."
4. "I breathe much easier when I have my own space."
5. "It shrinks me when I try to take care of your feelings."
6. "It was too much to think I could make you happy."
7. "I see now that setting myself aside has only made us both invisible."
8. "From now on, I'll live my life fully, knowing that you are there behind me, supporting me."
9. "Whenever I feel my breath moving inside my body, I'll know that you are happy for me."
10. "Thank you for seeing me and hearing me."

If you've followed the steps in this chapter, you might already be noticing a new kind of peace inside yourself. The healing sentences you've spoken and the images, rituals, practices, and exercises you've experienced may have helped to strengthen a relationship with a loved one or helped ease an unconscious entanglement with a family member. If you've followed these

steps and feel the need for something more, the next chapter will provide you with another piece of the puzzle—an exploration into the first few years of life. An early separation from our mother can keep us separate from life in a way that can block a resolution from fully reaching us. In the next chapter, we will explore the effects of an early separation and look at the many ways it can leave an imprint on our relationships, success, health, and well-being.

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## Chapter 11

# The Core Language of Separation

*There is no influence so powerful as that of the mother.*

—Sarah Josepha Hale, *The Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette*, 1829

Not all core language stems from previous generations. There is a particular quality of core language that reflects the overwhelming experience of children who've been separated from their mothers. This type of separation is one of life's most pervasive and frequently overlooked traumas. When we have experienced a significant break in the bond with our mother, our words can reflect an intense longing, anxiety, and frustration that remains unseen and unhealed.

In previous chapters, we described how life is passed to us from our parents, essentially laying a blueprint for how we make sense of our lives. This blueprint begins in the womb and takes shape even before we are born. During this time, our mother is our whole world, and once we're born, her touch, her gaze, and her smell is our contact with life itself.

While we are too small to make sense of life on our own, our mother reflects our experiences back to us in doses we can ingest and assimilate. In an ideal world, when we cry, her face shows concern. When we laugh, she beams with delight, mirroring our every expression. When our mother is in tune with us, she infuses us with a sense of safety, worth, and belonging through the tenderness of her touch, the warmth of her skin, the constancy of her attention, and even the sweetness of her smile. She fills us up with all her “good stuff” and, in response, we develop a reservoir of “good feeling” inside.

In our earliest years, we need to acquire enough “good stuff” in our reservoir to trust that the good feeling will remain inside us even when we

temporarily lose our way. When we have enough in our reservoir, we are able to trust that life will turn out okay, even if there are interruptions that knock us off track. When we get little or none of the “good stuff” from our mother, it can be hard to trust life at all.

On many levels, the images we hold of “mother” and “life” are interrelated. Ideally, a mother nurtures us and makes sure that we are safe. She comforts us and gives us what we need to survive when we are too small to give it to ourselves. When we are cared for in this way, we begin to trust the feeling that we are safe, and that life will provide us with what we need. After repeated experiences of getting enough of what we need from our mother, we learn that we can also give ourselves what we need. In essence, we feel that we are “enough” to give ourselves “enough.” Life, in collusion, then seems to bring us what we need. When the connection with our mother flows freely, good health, money, success, and love can often seem to flow our way.

When the early bond with our mother is interrupted, however, a dark cloud of fear, scarcity, and distrust can become our default. Whether this break in the bond is permanent, as with an adoption, or whether it’s a temporary break that did not get fully restored, the gap between mother and child can become a breeding ground for many of life’s struggles. When this bond remains interrupted, we seem to lose our lifeline. It’s as though we break into pieces and need our mother to put us back together.

When the break is only temporary, it is important that our mother stay stable, present, and welcoming during our return from separation. The experience of losing her can be so devastating that we can be hesitant or resistant to reconnect with her. If she is unable to tolerate our hesitation, or if she interprets our reticence as a rejection, she might react by defending or distancing, thus leaving the bond between us bruised and broken. She might never understand why she feels disconnected from us, and dwell in feelings of self-doubt, disappointment, and insecurity in her ability to mother us—or worse, irritability and anger toward us. A rift that doesn’t heal can shake the foundation of our future relationships.

An essential feature of these early experiences is that they are not retrievable in our memory banks. During gestation, infancy, and early childhood, our brain is not equipped to put our experiences into story form so that they can be made into memories. Without the memories, our unmet longings can play out unconsciously as urges, cravings, and yearnings that

we seek to satisfy through our next job, our next holiday, our next glass of wine, and even our next partner. In a similar vein, the fear and anxiety of an early separation can distort our reality, making our difficult and uncomfortable situations feel catastrophic and life-threatening.

Falling in love can unleash intense emotions, as it naturally transports us back in time to the early experience with our mother. We tend to have similar feelings toward our partner as we felt toward our mother. We meet someone special and tell ourselves: “Finally, I’ve found someone who will take good care of me, someone who will understand *all* my desires and give me *everything* I need.” Yet these feelings are only the illusion of a child who longs to reexperience the closeness he or she felt or wanted to feel with the mother.

Many of us unknowingly expect our partner to fulfill the needs that could not be fulfilled by our mother. This misdirected expectation is a prescription for failure and disappointment. If our partner begins to act like a parent and attempts to satisfy our unmet needs, romance can fly out the window. If our partner does not satisfy our unmet needs, we can feel betrayed or neglected.

An early separation from our mother can undermine our stability in a romantic relationship. Unconsciously, we might fear that our closeness will vanish or be stripped away. In response, we either cling to our partner, as we may have clung to our mother, or we push our partner away in anticipation that intimacy will be lost. We often express both behaviors in the same relationship, and our partner can feel as though he or she is trapped on an emotional roller-coaster ride that never ends.

## Types of Separation

Although the vast majority of women approach motherhood with the best of intentions, situations beyond a mother’s control can lead to unavoidable early separations from her child. Some of these separations are physical in nature. In addition to adoption, events that involve an extended period of separation, such as birth complications, hospitalizations and illnesses, work, or long trips away from home, can all threaten the developing bond.

Emotional disconnections can function similarly. When the mother is physically available, but her focus and attention are sporadic, the child does not feel safe and secure. As children, we need our mother's emotional and energetic presence as much as we need her physical presence. When our mother experiences a traumatic event—such as the loss of health, a pregnancy, a child, a parent, a partner, or a home—her attention can be pulled away from us. We, in turn, experience the trauma of losing her.

Disconnections between mother and child can also occur in the womb. High levels of fear, anxiety, depression, a stressful relationship with a partner, the death of a loved one, a negative attitude around being pregnant, a previous loss in utero can all interrupt a mother's attunement with her developing baby inside.

If we ourselves have experienced lapses in our mother's early care or attention, or difficulties during pregnancy or birth, all is not lost. Fortunately, the potential to repair the bond is not restricted to childhood. Healing can happen at any time in our lives. Identifying our core language can be the first step.

## The Core Language of Separation

These early separations, like other kinds of traumas we have explored in this book, create an environment in which core language can flourish. When listening for an interrupted bond, we often hear words of longing for connection as well as words of rage, judgment, criticism, or cynicism.

### **Examples of Core Sentences from an Early Separation**

“I'll be left.”

“I'll be abandoned.”

“I'll be rejected.”

“I'll be all alone.”

“I'll have nobody.”

“I'll be helpless.”

“I'll lose control.”

“I don’t matter.”  
“They don’t want me.”  
“I’m not enough.”  
“I’m too much.”  
“They’ll leave me.”  
“They’ll hurt me.”  
“They’ll betray me.”  
“I’ll be annihilated.”  
“I’ll be destroyed.”  
“I won’t exist.”  
“It’s hopeless.”

Core sentences like these can also come from a prior generation in the family history, and not necessarily from an interruption in the bond with the mother. We can be born into the feeling and never know where it originates.

A common theme that characterizes an early separation is a strong rejection of our mother, combined with a feeling of blame that she couldn’t attend to our needs. This is not always the case, however. We can feel a great love for our mother but, because the bond never fully developed, feel that she was weak and fragile and that we needed to take care of her. In our need to feel bonded with her, the direction of tending can go in reverse. Unknowingly, we can attempt to provide our mother with the very nurturance we desperately need ourselves.

In people with an interrupted bond, it is common to hear core complaints and core descriptors like the ones we discussed in chapter 7. To refresh your memory:

- “Mom was cold and distant. She never held me. I didn’t trust her at all.”
- “My mother was too busy for me. She never had any time for me.”
- “My mom and I are really close. She’s like my little sister that I take care of.”
- “I don’t ever want to be a burden to my mom.”
- “My mother was distant, emotionally unavailable, and critical.”

- “She would always push me away. She doesn’t really care about me.”
- “We really don’t have a relationship.”
- “I felt much closer to my grandmother. She was the one who mothered me.”
- “My mother is completely self-centered. It’s all about her. She never showed me any love.”
- “She can be very calculating and manipulative. I didn’t feel safe with her.”
- “I was scared of her. I never knew what was going to happen next.”
- “I’m not close with her. She’s not maternal—not like a mother.”
- “I’ve never wanted children. I’ve never had that maternal feeling inside me.”

### **Wanda’s Aloneness**

Wanda was sixty-two and depressed. A veteran of three broken marriages, an alcohol addiction, and many nights of aloneness, Wanda had rarely experienced peace in her life. Her core descriptors about her mother said it all.

**Wanda’s Core Descriptors:** “My mother was cold, aloof, and distant.”

Let’s take a look at the event that spawned this type of core language. Before Wanda was born, her mother, Evelyn, suffered a horrific tragedy. While nursing her newborn baby girl, Evelyn accidentally fell asleep, rolled over, and suffocated the infant. She awoke to find Gail, the older sister Wanda would never know, dead in her arms. In her inconsolable grief, she and her husband made love and conceived Wanda. The new pregnancy was the answer to their prayers. It allowed them to focus forward and forget the past. But a past like that can never be forgotten. The terrible death of Gail and the ensuing guilt would seep into every stream of Evelyn’s motherhood. It affected how she would bond with her next child, limiting how consistent and available her love would be.

Wanda believed that her mother’s distance had been directed toward her personally. Any little girl in her situation would feel that way. Wanda remembered being held as a young child. She could feel her mother’s

distance and reacted by protecting herself. She felt that her mother must not love her, and so armored herself against her.

Perhaps Evelyn felt that she was a bad mother who didn't deserve to have another child. Perhaps she felt that she didn't deserve to be given a second chance after what had happened to Gail. Maybe she felt that Wanda, the next child, would die too, a pain she wouldn't be able to tolerate, so she unconsciously distanced herself from her. Perhaps Wanda perceived this distance even in her mother's womb. Maybe Evelyn felt that if she got too close to Wanda, and took her to her breast, she could harm her as well. Whatever thoughts and emotions Evelyn held, the trauma of Gail's death had the effect of separating Evelyn from Wanda.

It took sixty years for Wanda to make the link that her mother's aloofness was connected to the death of Gail, and wasn't personal. She had spent her lifetime blaming and hating her mother for not giving her enough love. When she finally understood the magnitude of her mother's pain, Wanda stood up in the middle of her session and grabbed her purse. "I have to get home," she said. "There's not much time. My mother's eighty-five and I need to tell her that I love her."

## The Anxiety of Early Separations

Jennifer was two years old the night the men came to the door. She heard her mother gasp and then watched as her mother collapsed to the floor, sobbing. The men announced that her father had been killed in a drilling rig explosion. Her mother had just become a widow at the age of twenty-six. That was the first night Jennifer's mother did not tuck her into bed with a kiss on her forehead as she drifted into sleep.

After that night, things were never the same. Jennifer and her four-year-old brother were taken to their aunt's for a few weeks, as their mother was paralyzed by the shock. During this time she would come and visit the children. Jennifer would rush to the door to see her mother, but it was as if a stranger had taken her mother's place. The woman who bent to hug her had a red and swollen face that Jennifer hardly recognized. It scared her. When her mother's arms tightened around her body, Jennifer froze. She wanted to

tell her mom how scared she was, but at two years old, she was already learning that her mother was different. Mom seemed fragile and had little to give. It would be years before Jennifer would uncover these memories.

Jennifer was twenty-six the first time she experienced a panic attack. She was riding the subway home after giving a successful presentation to the management team at work. Suddenly, her vision began to blur. It was as if she were looking out from behind water. Her ears seemed to plug and she began to feel dizzy and afraid. The sensations were so foreign to her that she thought she was having a stroke. She found herself frozen with a paralysis that left her helpless and unable to call out for help.

The next attack came before her presentation the following week. The one after that occurred while she was shopping. By the end of that month, the panic attacks were a daily occurrence.

If Jennifer had been able to hear her own core language, she would have uncovered sentences like these: “I won’t get through this.” “I’ve lost everything.” “I’m all alone.” “I’ll fail.” “They’ll reject me.” “They won’t want me anymore.”

When she got in touch with these fears, she was halfway home.

Jennifer began to remember an earlier time in her life when she felt this hopeless and paralyzed. Although she was close with her mom, Jennifer described her as fragile, alone, needy, sweet, and loving. As the words came out, Jennifer was already beginning to get in touch with how helpless she felt as a little girl trying to ease her mother’s great grief. The impossible task of a little girl attempting to console her mother left Jennifer feeling alone, unsafe, and afraid of failing.

Connecting her panic attacks to her childhood allowed Jennifer to target the source of her anxiety. Whenever the panicky feelings would arise, Jennifer was able to defuse them by reminding herself that these were merely the feelings of a frightened little girl. Once she could identify those feelings inside her, she was able to slow the escalation of anxiety. Jennifer learned how to lengthen and deepen her breath while keeping her focus and attention on the anxious sensations in her chest. She also learned to speak the words that would have soothed her as a little girl. She would breathe and tell herself: “I’m here for you and I’ll take care of you. You never have to be alone in these feelings again. You can trust me to keep you safe.” The more Jennifer practiced, the more she trusted her ability to take care of herself.

## Trichotillomania—“Separated at the Root”

For sixteen years, Kelly pulled hair from her scalp, eyebrows, and eyelashes. She wore fake lashes, painted on eyebrows, and wore her hair tightly pulled back to conceal the bald patches underneath. Hair pulling (trichotillomania) was a nightly ritual. Each evening around 9:00 p.m., she would sit alone in her room, overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety that would overtake her body. Her hands, “needing to be doing something,” wouldn’t find peace until she yanked out massive amounts of hair. “It’s like a release,” she said. “It relaxes me.”

When Kelly was thirteen, her best girlfriend Michelle rejected her. Kelly never understood what she had done that caused Michelle to suddenly distance herself from her, but the feelings of loss were unbearable. She began pulling her hair soon after that. “There must be something wrong with me,” she thought. “I mustn’t be enough to make her want to stay with me.” These sentences, as you’ll soon see, flashed like direction signs along the highways of her core language landscape. Living just below the surface of consciousness waiting to be discovered, these sentences would direct Kelly to an even earlier, and more significant, event—a break in the bond with her mother.

When Kelly was a year and a half, she underwent intestinal surgery and had to be separated from her mother for ten days. Each evening, as hospital visiting hours would end (approximately 9:00 p.m.), Kelly’s mother would leave her to go home to take care of Kelly’s newborn sister and older brother.

One can only imagine the feelings of anxiety that Kelly must have experienced when her mother would leave her alone in the hospital room. Those feelings unconsciously found their way to the surface in Kelly’s trichotillomania. Each night, at approximately 9:00 p.m., they would stir in Kelly’s body until she found a substitute way to manage them—by literally pulling her hair out.

Kelly’s worst fear, as expressed in her core sentence, led her back to the root of the trauma. “The worst thing that could ever happen to me is that I would be all alone. I would be left. I would go out of my mind.”

**Kelly’s Core Sentence:** “I’ll be all alone. I’ll be left. I’ll go out of my mind.”

When Kelly was thirteen, she reexperienced these feelings. Michelle and Kelly had been inseparable. Then suddenly, Michelle left Kelly and befriended girls from the “in crowd.” At that point, all the girls turned against Kelly. Kelly felt “left, rejected, and ignored.”

That experience, when looked at with a larger scope, can be viewed as a “missed opportunity” for Kelly to have been pointed in the direction of greater healing—of the deeper, more significant trauma of being left in the hospital by her mother. Not many of us, however, when faced with our difficulties, can use the difficulties as direction signs. Instead, we focus on alleviating the suffering and rarely travel to the source. When we recognize the wisdom of our core language, the symptoms of our suffering can become our greatest ally.

### **The Metaphor of Kelly’s Hair Pulling**

Kelly’s core language showed her how deeply afraid she was of being “left alone.” In fact, her hair pulling (the nonverbal expression of her core language) began right after Michelle left. While Kelly’s hair pulling led her to uncover her original trauma, it is also a metaphor for two things that belong together that had been separated from each other. Kelly separated her hair from the follicle that held it. The image is similar to that of a baby being separated from the mother who holds her.

Idiosyncratic behaviors often mimic what cannot be consciously observed or examined. When we stop and explore our symptoms, a deeper truth can be revealed to us. Symptoms often function as signposts pointing us in the direction of what we need to heal or resolve. When Kelly embraced her hair pulling in this way, she traveled to the source of her suffering and freed herself from a lifetime of anxiety.

### **Kelly’s Resolution**

Kelly located the uncomfortable sensations of being “left all alone” in her belly. She placed her hands over the anxious area and allowed her breath to fill her belly. As she felt the rising and falling of breath beneath her hands, she envisioned holding and rocking the infant part of herself that still felt frightened and alone. As the movement began to calm her, she told herself:

“I’ll never leave you when you’re feeling alone and afraid. Instead, I’ll place my hand here and breathe with you until you feel calm again.” After one session, Kelly stopped pulling out her hair.

## Separation: The Origin of Inner Conflict

Sometimes, the freedom we seek eludes us. Unable to feel at ease inside our bodies, we search for relief in the next glass of wine, the next purchase, the next text or phone call, the next sexual partner. Relief rarely comes when the source of our longing is our mother’s care. For those of us who’ve been cut off from the light of our mother’s love, our world can be an endless search for comfort.

Myrna was two when her mother accompanied her father on a business trip to Saudi Arabia and left Myrna in the care of a babysitter for three weeks. During the first week, Myrna clung to the sweater her mother wore on cold nights as she rocked her to sleep. Comforted by the familiar feel and smell, Myrna would curl herself around it and rock herself to sleep. By the second week, Myrna refused to take the sweater when the babysitter offered it. Instead she turned away, crying, and sucked her thumb to fall asleep.

After three weeks away, her mother excitedly hurried through the door to hold her daughter. She was expecting Myrna to run into her arms as she always had before. This time it was different. Myrna barely looked up from her dolls. Startled and confused, Myrna’s mother could not help but notice the sensations of her own body tightening with feelings of rejection. Over the coming days, Myrna’s mother would rationalize the experience, telling herself that Myrna was becoming “a very independent child.”

Unaware of the importance of restoring their delicate bond, Myrna’s mother lost sight of her little girl’s vulnerability and held herself a little distant. The distance continued between them, deepening Myrna’s feelings of aloneness. This distance would spill into Myrna’s life experiences, tainting her ability to feel safe and secure in future relationships. Feelings of abandonment and frustration were expressed in her core language: “Don’t

leave me.” “They’ll never come back.” “I’ll be all alone.” “I’m not wanted.” “They don’t get who I am.” “I’m not seen or understood.”

For Myrna, falling in love was a minefield of unpredictability. The vulnerability of needing another person was so terrifying that each time she took another step into her desire, she was met by a deeper level of her fear. Unable to link this conflict to her childhood, she found fault with every man who attempted to love her, often leaving them before they could leave her. By the time she was thirty, Myrna had talked herself out of three potential marriages.

Myrna’s inner conflict played out in her career as well. Each time she accepted a new position, she filled with doubt, fearing inevitable disaster. Something would go terribly wrong. They wouldn’t like her. She wouldn’t be enough. They would distance themselves from her. She wouldn’t trust them. They would betray her. These were the same unspoken feelings Myrna felt with a partner—the same feelings she had never resolved with her mother.

How many of us struggle with conflicts similar to Myrna’s and haven’t been able to identify the source? The importance of our early bond with our mother cannot be overstated. She is our first relationship as we enter the world. She is our first love. Our connection or lack of connection with her forms an essential blueprint for our lives. Understanding what happened when we were small can expose one of the hidden mysteries as to why we suffer so much in our relationships.

## Interruptions to the Flow of Life

Our earliest image of who we are and how life will unfold for us begins in the womb. During pregnancy, our mother’s emotions permeate our world, influencing whether our basic nature is calm or troubled, receptive or defiant, resilient or inflexible.

“Whether [the child’s] mind evolves into something essentially hard, angular and dangerous or soft, flowing and open depends largely on whether [the mother’s] thoughts and emotions are positive and reinforcing or negative and etched with ambivalence,” explains Thomas Verny. “This

absolutely does not mean that occasional doubts and uncertainty will damage your child. Such feelings are natural and harmless. What I'm talking about is a clear-cut, continual pattern of behavior."<sup>1</sup>

When our early experience with our mother is disrupted by a significant break in the bond, shards of pain and emptiness can shred our well-being and disconnect us from the fundamental flow of life. Where the mother-child (or caregiver-child) relationship remains severed, empty, or fraught with indifference, a stream of negative images can lock the child in a pattern of frustration and self-doubt. In extreme cases, when the negative images are continuous and unrelenting, frustration, rage, numbness, and insensitivity to others can emerge.

This profile is commonly associated with sociopathic and psychopathic behavior. In their book *High Risk: Children Without a Conscience*, Dr. Ken Magid and Carole McKelvey state, "We all have some degree of rage, but the rage of psychopaths is that born of unfulfilled needs as infants."<sup>2</sup> Magid and McKelvey go on to describe how the infant experiences "incomprehensible pain" as a result of an abandonment or early break in the bond.

Psychopaths and sociopaths sit at the far end of a wide spectrum, where severe interruptions to the bond have been observed. These extreme cases reflect just how crucial the mother or early caregiver's role is in shaping the child's developing compassion, empathy, and respect for self, others, and all life.

The majority of us who have experienced a break in the bond with our mother, however, got enough of what we needed—even with the deficits. It would be unrealistic to expect a mother to be perfectly attuned to her child 100 percent of the time. Disruptions in attunement are bound to happen. When they do, the repair process can be a positive growth experience, giving both mother and child an opportunity to learn how to handle brief moments of distress and then reach out for each other to reconnect again. What is most important is that the repair is made. Repeatedly repairing a relationship actually builds a sense of trust and helps to create a secure attachment between mother and child.<sup>3</sup>

Even when our connection to our mother is relatively intact, we may still find ourselves grappling with feelings we don't understand. We might struggle with fears of being left, rejected, or abandoned, or feelings of being exposed, humiliated, or shamed. However, when these feelings can be seen

in the context of our early experience with our mother—likely from a time we don't remember—we can become more aware of what was missing and more able to support what we need in order to heal.

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## Chapter 12

# The Core Language of Relationships

*The distance from your pain, your grief, your unattended wounds, is the distance from your partner.*

—Stephen and Ondrea Levine, *Embracing the Beloved*

For many of us, our greatest yearning is to be in love and have a happy relationship. Yet because of the way love is often expressed unconsciously in families, our way of loving can be to share the unhappiness or repeat the patterns of our parents and grandparents.

In this chapter, we'll look at the unconscious loyalties and hidden dynamics that limit our ability to have satisfying relationships. We'll ask ourselves one question: are we truly available for a partner?

No matter how successful we are, how wonderful our communication skills, how many couples retreats we have attended, or how deeply we understand our own patterns of avoiding intimacy, as long as we're entangled with our family history, we can distance ourselves from the one we love most. Unconsciously, we'll repeat family patterns of neediness, mistrust, anger, withdrawal, shutting down, leaving, or being left, and blame our partner for our unhappiness when the true source lies behind us.

Many of the problems experienced in a relationship do not originate in the relationship itself. They stem from dynamics that existed in our families long before we were even born.

If a woman died giving birth to a child, for example, a wave of repercussions can engulf the descendants in unexplained fear and unhappiness. The daughters and granddaughters can fear getting married, as marriage can lead to children and children can lead to death. On the surface, they might say they don't want to be married or have children. They might

complain that they've never met the right guy or that they are too busy to settle down. Beneath their complaints, their core language would tell a different story. Their core sentences, resonant with family history, might sound something like this: "If I get married, something terrible could happen. I could die. My children would be without me. They'd be all alone."

The sons and grandsons in the same family could also be affected. They might fear committing to a wife, as their sexuality could lead to her death. Their core sentences might go like this: "I could hurt someone and it would be all my fault. I would never forgive myself."

Fears like these lurk in the background of our lives and unconsciously drive many of the behaviors we express and the choices we make and don't make.

Seth, a man I once worked with, labeled himself a "people pleaser" and was terrified that he would do the wrong thing and disappoint the people closest to him. He feared that if they were unhappy with him, they would reject him and leave him. He feared that he would die all alone, disconnected from everyone. With this fear operating behind the scenes, he often agreed to do things he didn't want to do and said things he didn't always mean. He would often say yes when he meant no, and then in reaction to feeling angry with those he was trying to please, he would say no when he meant yes. He lived an inauthentic life much of the time, blaming his wife for his own unhappiness. He left her in an attempt to escape the pattern, only to recreate it with his next partner. It wasn't until Seth realized how his fears manifested in his relationships that he could find peace with a partner.

## Dan and Nancy

Dan and Nancy, a successful couple in their fifties, seemed to have it all. Dan, a CEO of a large financial institution, and Nancy, a hospital administrator, were the proud parents of three college-educated children, who were all doing well. Now that the nest was empty, they had to face the fact that their hopes for a happy retirement had dimmed. Their marriage

was in trouble. “We haven’t had sex in over six years,” said Nancy. “We live like strangers.” Dan had lost his sexual desire for Nancy years ago but couldn’t pinpoint exactly when. Dan wanted to stay married to Nancy, but she, at this point, was uncertain. Both had exhausted the pathways of secular and faith-based marriage counseling. Let’s explore Dan and Nancy’s relationship struggles from the perspective of the core language approach.

## **The Issue (The Core Complaint)**

Listen to the core language of Nancy’s complaint: “I feel like he’s not interested in me. He’s distant much of the time. I don’t get enough of his attention and rarely feel connected to him. He always seems more interested in the children than in me.”

Now listen to Dan’s core language: “She’s always dissatisfied with me. She blames me for everything. She wants more than I can give.”

Taken at face value, their words exemplify the common types of complaints we see in marriages. But examined further, their words formed a map that led to an unexamined source of discontent. Dan and Nancy’s map led straight to what had been unresolved in their family systems.

To find the core language map of a relationship issue, we revisit the four tools and ask four questions. Then we listen deeply to what is revealed.

## **The Questions**

- 1. The Core Complaint: What is your greatest complaint about your partner?** This question is the jumping-off point. The information gained with this question often correlates to the unfinished business we experience with one or both of our parents. This unfinished business is then projected onto our partner. Whether we’re male or female, one rule of thumb appears to hold true: *What we feel we didn’t get from our mother, what remains unresolved in our relationship with her, often sets the stage for what we experience with our partner.* If we experienced our mother as distant, or we rejected her love, we’re likely also to distance from our partner’s love.

**2. The Core Descriptors: What are some adjectives and phrases you would use to describe your mother and your father?** With this question, we look for unconscious loyalties and ways we've distanced ourselves from our parents. By constructing a list of adjectives and phrases to describe our parents, we access the core of our deepest feelings. There we find old resentments and accusations that many of us still hold against our parents. It's this same unconscious reservoir of childhood experience that we draw upon when we project our internal unrest onto our partner.

For many of us, our core descriptors stem from childhood images of feeling cheated or unsatisfied. We might feel that our parents didn't give us enough, or didn't love us in the right way. When we carry these images, blaming our parents for the discontent we feel, our relationships rarely go well. We'll view our partner through an old, distorted lens, already expecting him or her to cheat us out of the very love we need.

**3. The Core Sentence: What is your worst fear? What's the worst thing that could ever happen to you?** As we learned in chapter 8, the answer to this question becomes our core sentence, the core fear that reverberates from an unresolved trauma in our childhood or family history.

By now you probably know your core sentence. How could your core sentence limit your relationship? How does it affect your ability to commit to a partner? Are you able to remain vulnerable when the two of you are together? Or do you shut down, fearful of being hurt?

**4. The Core Trauma: What tragic events occurred in your family history?** This question, as we've seen in earlier chapters, opens our systemic lens and allows us to identify the transgenerational patterns affecting our relationships. Often the problems a couple experiences have their origins in the family history. Marital suffering and relationship conflicts can often be tracked in a family genogram for several generations.

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With each question, we listen for the dramatic, emotionally charged words that arise. Family trauma often expresses itself in our verbal language, providing significant key words and clues that lead to its origin.

Now that we've got the structure, let's hear some of Dan's and Nancy's core language. Within the first few moments of the session, they had already unleashed a barrage of accusations against each other. Now it was time to hear descriptions of their parents.

### **Adjectives and Phrases (The Core Descriptors)**

Unbeknownst to her, Nancy described her mother similarly to the way she described Dan. "My mother was emotionally distant. I never felt connected to her. I could never go to her when I needed something. Whenever I tried, she didn't know how to take care of me." Nancy's unfinished business with her mother appeared to fall squarely into Dan's lap.

Nancy's unresolved relationship with her mother was not the only factor affecting her bond with Dan. In Nancy's family, all the women were displeased with their husbands. "My mother was always dissatisfied with my father," Nancy said. This pattern also extended back into the previous generation. Nancy's grandmother referred to the grandfather as "that no-good alcoholic SOB."

Imagine the impact of such a denunciation upon Nancy's mother. Growing up aligned with Grandma, Nancy's mother would have had a slim chance of being happy with Nancy's father. How could she have more than her mother? Even if she were satisfied with Nancy's father, how could she share that happiness with her mother when Grandma suffered so much with Grandpa? Instead, she unconsciously continued the pattern and was critical of Nancy's father.

Dan, for his part, described his mother as very depressed and nervous. As a small boy, he felt he needed to take care of her. "She needed so much from me . . . too much from me." Dan glanced down at his hands, which were neatly folded in his lap. "My father was always working. I felt I had to give her the attention that he couldn't." Dan described how his mother had been hospitalized from time to time with severe bouts of depression. From the family history, it was clear why his mother struggled. Dan's

grandmother died of tuberculosis when his mother was only ten. The loss devastated her. Great loss would again arise when Dan's youngest sibling died as a baby. At that point, Dan's mother was hospitalized for six weeks and received shock treatments. Dan was ten at the time.

To make matters worse, Dan felt distant from his father. He described his father as "weak and ineffectual." "My father wasn't able to be a man with my mother." Dan further described his father, a Ukrainian immigrant laborer, as being from a lower social class than Dan's mother. "He could never measure up to the men in her family, who were professional and educated." Dan's judgments had severed his connection with his father.

When a man rejects his father, he unwittingly distances himself from the source of his masculinity. A man who admires and respects his father is generally at ease in his male strength, and is more likely to emulate his father's traits. In a relationship, that can translate into ease with commitment, responsibility, and stability. The same is also true for women. A woman who loves and respects her mother is generally at ease in her femininity and is more likely to express what she admires about her mother in her relationship.

Dan had distanced himself from his father for another reason as well. He had assumed the role of his mother's confidant, and had unwittingly encroached into territory that belonged to his father. Dan didn't consciously choose this situation, but like many boys who feel their mother's need, Dan felt it was his job to take care of her. He could feel how his mother would light up when he tended to her, and similarly, how she would shut down when his father was around. In feeling preferred by his mother, Dan learned to feel superior to his father.

Dan even adopted his mother's disapproving feelings toward his father. By rejecting his father, Dan had not only disconnected from his masculine strength, he had unconsciously set the stage to repeat a similar dynamic in his marriage to Nancy. Dan, like his father, became a "weak and ineffectual" husband.

Nancy similarly couldn't draw upon the feminine strength of her mother. At some point in her childhood, Nancy had made the decision to stop going to her mother for support. Nancy left her childhood home feeling like she hadn't gotten enough, and blamed her mother for not supplying her with the attention she craved. That arrow of discontent would later be aimed at Dan.

In Nancy's eyes, he too would fail at providing her with the support she needed.

While Dan and Nancy were joined in raising their children, it was easy to get lost in focusing on the needs of the family. But now, with the children gone, the underlying dynamics were in plain view. Dan and Nancy were barely holding it together.

Dan described himself as "sexually dead" toward Nancy. "I've lost total interest in sex," he said. When he explored his early relationship with his mother, Dan was quick to understand why. Supplying his mother with the care and solace she needed was not a child's responsibility. It was too much to ask of a small boy. He could never give her what she needed. He could never fully take her pain away. Instead, her love felt inundating. Her needs overwhelmed him.

When Dan complained that Nancy wanted too much from him, it wasn't Nancy he was referencing. Unconsciously, he was alluding to the unmet needs of his mother. Dan had confused his closeness with Nancy with the enmeshed closeness he experienced as a child. Even Nancy's natural wants and needs were met with resistance. Protecting himself from what felt like an onslaught of demand, Dan shut down to Nancy, automatically saying no to her requests, even when he truly wanted to say yes.

Dan's and Nancy's issues dovetailed in a synchronistic fashion. It was as though the two of them had been brought together to heal themselves through their marriage. People often unconsciously choose a mate who will trigger their wounds. In this way, they have an opportunity to see, own, and heal the painful and reactive parts of themselves. Like the perfect mirror, the chosen partner reflects what sits unclaimed and unfinished at the core of the other. Who better than Dan could provide the emotionally distant love Nancy required to help her complete her unfinished business with her mother? And who better than Nancy could supply Dan with the insatiable neediness he experienced as a child to help him heal his wound with his mother?

### **The Worst Fear (The Core Sentence)**

Dan described his worst fear in life as losing Nancy. "My worst nightmare would be to lose the person I love most. I worry that Nancy would die or leave me, and I would have to live without her." One generation earlier, the

echo of this core sentence could be painfully felt when Dan's mother lost her mother at the age of ten. Dan's mother repeated the experience of "losing the one she loved most" when her newborn baby died. Those losses would be mirrored in Dan's greatest fear. Although Dan carried the fear, it was actually his mother who had to live without the people she loved most. Dan was quick to recognize that his core sentence originated with his mother.

The pattern continued into the next generation. At ten, the same age Dan's mother was when her mother died, Dan lost his mother—"the person he loved most"—for six weeks, while she was hospitalized for what the doctors called a "nervous breakdown." Even earlier, he could remember lapses in her attention as she would slip into depression. During those times, he would feel left and all alone.

Nancy's core sentence could also be traced back to an earlier time. "I would be trapped in a terrible marriage and feel alone." This sentence clearly belonged to her grandmother, who was married to Nancy's alcoholic grandfather, who was blamed for just about everything that went wrong in the family. If we could peek one generation further back, we might see that Nancy's grandmother had a difficult relationship with *her* mother, or that the great-grandmother mirrored a similar pattern of feeling trapped in a bad marriage with *her* husband. Unfortunately, all information beyond the grandmother had been lost to history. In each generation, we would likely see a little girl either disconnected from her mother or raised by parents who were disconnected from each other. Understanding this, Nancy could either continue to repeat the pattern with Dan or seize the opportunity to heal it. Nancy was ready for healing.

### **The Family History (The Core Trauma)**

On a systemic level, Dan repeated his father's experience by sharing his father's feelings of emasculation in his marriage. Nancy repeated the experience of her mother and grandmother by feeling "dissatisfied" with her husband. Let's look at their family systems.

# DAN'S FAMILY SYSTEM



**Grandmother**

(Dies when mother is ten years old)



**Father**

*"He was a weak man."*



**Mother**

*"She needed too much from me."*



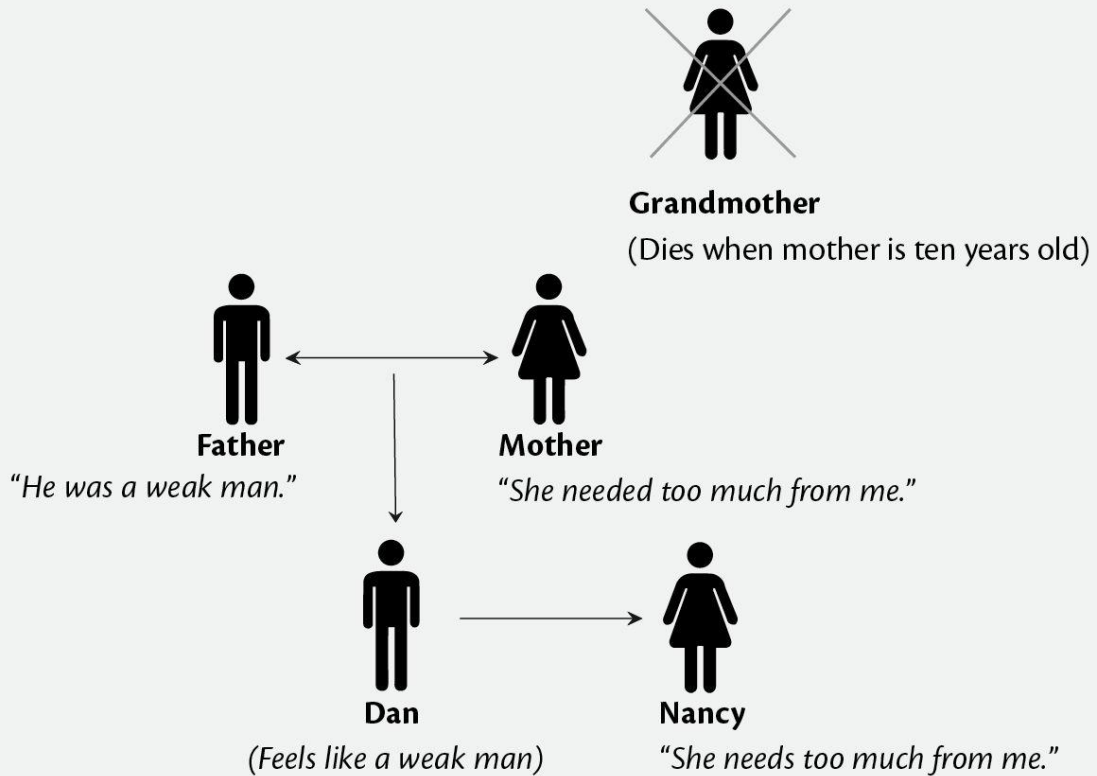
**Dan**

*(Feels like a weak man)*



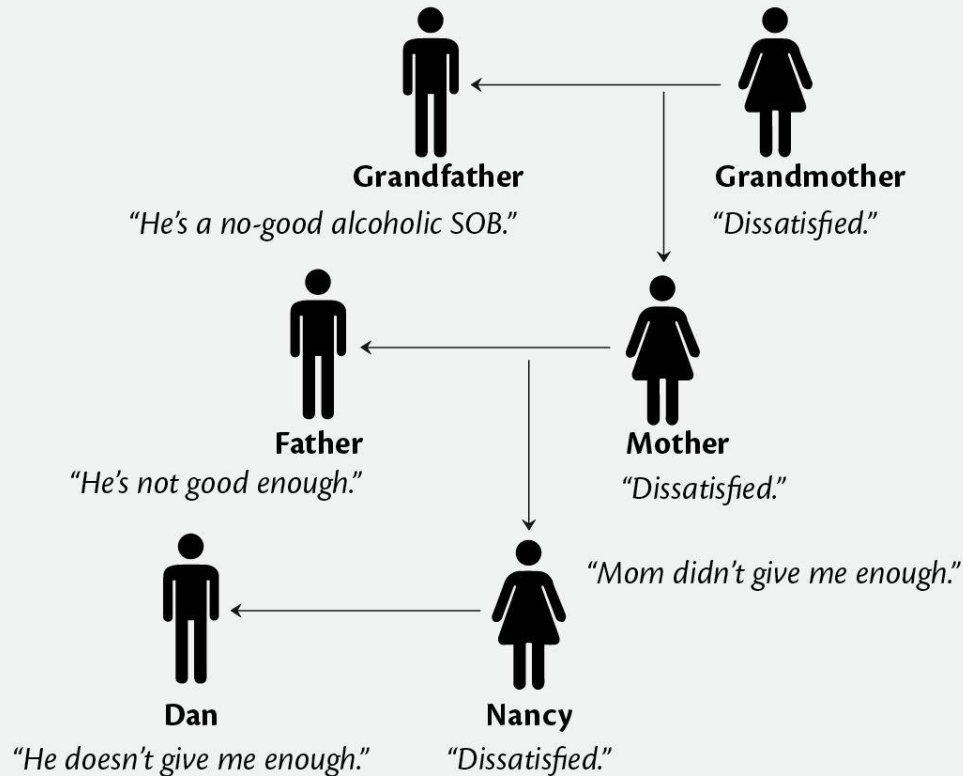
**Nancy**

*"She needs too much from me."*



# NANCY'S FAMILY SYSTEM

## Three Generations of Dissatisfaction



## The Big Picture

As Dan's and Nancy's family histories illustrate, relationship conflicts are often set in motion long before our partner ever arrives on the scene.

Nancy was able to see that Dan was not the source of her "not getting enough." That feeling originated long ago with her mother. Dan likewise could see that Nancy was not the source of his feeling that a woman "needs too much" from him. This feeling too originated long ago with his mother.

Nancy also realized that any man who married into her family wouldn't feel appreciated by the women. As it stood, Dan had become the beneficiary of three generations of marital discontent.

Once they recognized that they each carried unfinished business into their relationship, the spell was broken and the cloud of blame began to dissolve. Projections and accusations that had once been aimed at each

other were now being understood in the broader context of their family histories. As the larger picture emerged, the illusion that the other was responsible for his or her discontent began to melt away.

Almost immediately, they could see each other in a new light. Dan and Nancy were able to rediscover the tender feelings that had brought them together in the first place. Not only did they start showing more kindness and generosity toward each other, they began making love.

### **Expanding the New Image**

Nancy's compassion for her mother also began to deepen. As a little girl, Nancy's mother had been the emotional caretaker for her unhappily married mother. Not allowing herself to have more than Grandmother had, Nancy's mother repeated the cycle of an unhappy marriage.

In Nancy's earliest memories, her mother seemed distant and listless. As a little girl, Nancy felt rejected by her. However, when taking in the gestalt of her family history, Nancy could see her mother with new eyes. She could feel that her mother, even with the distance, still gave her everything she had to give. Understanding this, Nancy was able to soften. She was able to transcend the old inner image that she had been cheated out of "mothering." A new image of feeling comforted by her mother surfaced in its place. It seemed to fill her from the inside. In her new image, her mother had only loving intentions toward her.

Even though her mother had been dead for sixteen years, Nancy was able to ask her for the kind of support she would never have imagined asking for when her mother was alive. For the first time that she could remember, Nancy was able to feel her mother's love.

She closed her eyes and visualized her mother holding her from behind. "Mom, I always blamed you for not giving me enough. And I have been blaming Dan for the same thing—not giving me enough. Now I understand that you gave me all you had. It was enough, Mom. It truly was enough." Nancy was crying. "Mom, please give me your blessing to be happy with Dan. I want to feel satisfied in my marriage, even if you and Grandma couldn't be. From now on, when I feel dissatisfied and alone, I will reach for you and feel you behind me, supporting me and wanting the best for me."

For the next several weeks, Nancy placed a photograph of her mother beside her bed and imagined her mother holding her at night as she fell asleep. She imagined being cradled in her mother's arms and receiving all the love that she needed. Nancy could now receive what she could not take in as a little girl. Now, embraced in her mother's love, she could turn to Dan in a whole new way.

Dan likewise visualized a conversation with his deceased mother: "Mom, when I was small, I thought I had to take care of you. I became resentful about that. Without either of us realizing it, I was trying to make up for you losing your mom when you were a little girl. It was too much to ask of me. No wonder I feel like I'm never enough. No little boy could make up for a loss like that."

In his inner image, Dan could feel his mother responding by stepping back to give him more space. Dan exhaled and then inhaled deeply, as though his lungs had expanded to twice their size. Not used to this much breath inside his body, Dan felt dizzy at first, and then energized. He continued: "Mom, I often feel that Nancy asks too much of me. Please help me to see Nancy as she is, without feeling afraid that I will disappear or not be enough when she needs me."

In his desire to continue healing, Dan contacted his dad, who was still alive. Dan told him that he was sorry for having been distant with him. He took his father to lunch and told him that he wanted to be close with him. During lunch, he thanked his father for being a great father. His father was touched beyond words. He told Dan that he had been waiting a long time for this conversation to happen. Dan could feel the love that had always been there. Now he was ready to take it in.

Nancy could feel a new strength in Dan. He seemed somehow taller to her. Her response was automatic. She began to respect him.

She asked Dan for his help: "When you feel that I'm being blaming or critical or dissatisfied, please point it out to me. I promise I'll try to catch it in myself. I want to be a better wife to you." Dan took another deep breath. It filled his body in a new way, expanding into places he had shut down as a small boy.

He, in turn, asked Nancy to help him stay present: "When I am emotionally distant, please point it out to me. I promise to observe it in myself and not pull away from you." She breathed a similar breath. His hand found hers at the same time hers reached for his.

The case of Dan and Nancy illustrates how, by asking specific questions and listening for core language to surface, we can access the source of our deepest relationship conflicts. Just as Dan and Nancy each experienced their wounds mirrored and magnified by the other, we too can look to our partners to reflect what we bring unfinished from our family histories. The map is already inside us. Its pathways may be shrouded in darkness, yet we can often rely on our partners to provide us with the light to see.

## Looking Beyond the Couple

When we explore the core language of our relationship complaints, we often find a family story line that is familiar. Rather than taking our complaints at face value, we need to ask ourselves: Did our parents or grandparents share a similar experience? Do we feel similarly toward our parents as we do toward our partner?

### **Does My Relationship Mirror a Pattern in My Family History?**

If you have challenges with your partner, don't automatically conclude that your partner is the source. Instead, listen to the words of your complaints without blaming your partner or becoming captivated by the emotions. Ask yourself:

- Do these words sound familiar?
- Do I have the same complaint about my mother or father?
- Did my mother or father have the same complaint about the other?
- Did my grandmother or grandfather struggle in a similar way?
- Is there a parallel between two or three generations?
- Does my experience with my partner mirror how I felt as a small child with my parents?

### *Tyler's Story*

Tyler, an athletic twenty-eight-year-old pharmacist, dearly loved his wife, Jocelyn. They had been married for three years, yet had made love to completion only twice since their wedding. Prior to their marriage, sex had been frequent. However, from the day they exchanged vows, Tyler felt

anxious and unsettled. He was certain that she would leave him for another man. “Within six months, you’ll cheat on me,” he proclaimed. Jocelyn persistently assured him of her loyalty, but Tyler couldn’t hear it. His insistence that she’d be unfaithful was corroding their relationship. “I’m sure of it,” he told me in our first session together. “She’ll cheat on me and I’ll be devastated.”

Since the wedding, Tyler had struggled with erectile dysfunction. Medical testing had confirmed that he was healthy and had no physical issues. Tyler knew that his answer lay beyond his grasp. He just didn’t know where to look. His core sentence, however, functioned like a map, directing him where he needed to go.

**Tyler’s Core Sentence:** “She’ll cheat on me and I’ll be devastated.”

Unbeknownst to Tyler, he was not the author of this core sentence. This painful mantra had resounded forty years earlier in the history of his family, though Tyler was unaware of the specific event.

Tyler’s father had been married to his first wife for less than a year when he walked in on her having sex with another man. The shock was more than he could handle. He left town, left his job, left his friends, and never spoke about what had happened. Tyler never knew any of this. He learned about it only when his symptoms appeared and, upon my urging, he asked his father if he had had a previous relationship before marrying Tyler’s mother. In our next session, Tyler reported that, when asked the question, his father had momentarily stopped breathing and his lips tightened against his teeth. It sounded to me as if he literally was trying to keep his past from spilling out. Eventually, though, he told Tyler about his first wife.

It was clear to Tyler that, despite time, distance, and a remarriage, his father’s broken heart had never healed all the way. What remained unresolved in his father’s heart was now affecting Tyler’s marriage. Although his father had never spoken about the pain he experienced, the feelings were very much alive in Tyler’s body. Tyler had unknowingly inherited his father’s trauma.

For Tyler, the light of understanding awoke his entire body, as if from a deep sleep. He could now understand why his body froze when he attempted to make love to Jocelyn. He finally understood the intelligence behind his body’s shutdown. Impotence had allowed him to remain distant from the very love he desired. On the surface, it seemed counterintuitive,

but at a deeper level, Tyler understood that he was terrified that Jocelyn would hurt him.

By not being able to have sexual intercourse with her, he was unconsciously protecting himself from being vulnerable to any infidelity she might commit. Tyler could not bear the idea of being “not good enough” for Jocelyn the way his father was “not good enough” for his first wife. Erectile dysfunction kept him safe from risking that the same rejection could happen to him. The idea of being rejected by Jocelyn was a place Tyler refused to visit. In his insecurity, he nearly brought about his own rejection.

For Tyler, making the connection was all he needed. He could see that Jocelyn really loved him and had stood by him through their sexual challenges. Although he had inherited his father’s feelings, Tyler understood that he no longer had to relive them. His father’s nightmare did not have to happen to him.

## Blind Love

The ancient poet Virgil declared, “Love conquers all.” If only our love is great enough, our relationship, no matter how difficult, will surely succeed. Even the Beatles tell us, “Love is all you need.” Yet, with the myriad unconscious loyalties that operate invisibly under the surface of our lives, it might be more apt to say that love—the unconscious love expressed in families—can “conquer” our ability to sustain a loving relationship with our partner.

As long as we remain caught in the web of family patterns, our relationships are likely to struggle. When we learn, however, to untangle the invisible threads of family history, we can unravel their influence upon us. Deciphering our core language makes that possible. By making visible what has been invisible, we become freer to give and receive love. The poet Rilke understood the difficulty of sustaining a relationship. He wrote: “For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.”<sup>[1](#)</sup>

The following are twenty-one family dynamics that erode intimacy with our partner. Some of these dynamics might even keep us from entering into a relationship at all.

### **Twenty-one Invisible Dynamics That Can Affect Relationships**

1. **You had a difficult relationship with your mother.** What's unfinished with your mother is likely to repeat with your partner.
2. **You reject, judge, or blame a parent.** The emotions, traits, and behaviors you reject in a parent are likely to live on unconsciously in you. You might project the complaints you have about that parent onto your partner. You might also attract a partner who embodies qualities similar to those of the rejected parent. When you reject a parent, you might balance this rejection by struggling in your relationships. You might leave your partners or experience being left by them. Your relationships might feel empty, or you might opt to stay alone. A close bond with the same-sexed parent appears to strengthen our capacity to commit to a partner.
3. **You are merged with the feelings of a parent.** If one parent feels negatively toward the other, it is possible that you will continue these feelings toward your partner. Feelings of discontent toward a partner can be carried intergenerationally.
4. **You experienced an interruption in the early bond with your mother.** With this dynamic, it is likely that you experience some degree of anxiety when you attempt to bond with a partner in an intimate relationship. Often the anxiety increases as the relationship deepens. Unaware that the anxiety stems from a break in the early bond, you might begin to find fault with your partner or create other conflicts that allow you to distance yourself from the closeness. You might also experience yourself as feeling needy, clingy, jealous, or insecure. Or conversely, you appear independent and don't ask for much in your relationships. Perhaps you avoid relationships altogether.

5. **You took care of a parent's feelings.** Ideally, parents give and children receive. But for many children with a sad, depressed, anxious, or insecure parent, the focus can be more about giving comfort than about receiving it. In such a dynamic, the child's experience of getting his needs met can become secondary, and the experience of having access to his gut feelings can be overshadowed by the habitual impulse to give out care rather than take it in. Later in life, this child might give too much to his partner, straining the relationship. Or the opposite can be true. Feeling overwhelmed or burdened by the needs of his partner, he can become resentful or feel emotionally blocked as the relationship evolves.
6. **Your parents were unhappy together.** If your parents struggled or didn't do well together, it's possible that you won't allow yourself to have more than they had. An unconscious loyalty to your parents may prevent you from being any happier than they were, even if you know that happiness is what they truly want for you. In a family where exuberance is limited, children can feel guilty or uncomfortable when they are happy.
7. **Your parents didn't stay together.** If your parents didn't stay together, you might unconsciously leave your relationship as well. This can happen when you reach the same age they were when they separated, when you've spent the same amount of time in your relationship, or when your child reaches the same age that you were when your parents separated. Or you'll stay in your relationship, but live emotionally separated.
8. **Your parent or grandparent jilted a former partner.** If your father or grandfather left a former wife or partner who was led to believe that the relationship would lead to marriage, you, as the daughter or granddaughter, might atone for this by remaining alone like the woman. You could feel "not good enough," like the woman who was not good enough for your father or grandfather.

9. **Your mother's great love broke her heart.** You, as the child, might unconsciously join your mother in her brokenheartedness. You might lose your first love, or carry the lovelorn feelings of your mother, or feel imperfect or not good enough (as she did). You might feel that you are never with the partner you want. As the son, you might energetically try to replace the first love and become like a partner to your mother.
10. **Your father's great love broke his heart.** You, as the child, might unconsciously join your father in his brokenheartedness. You might also lose your first love, or carry the lovelorn feelings of your father, or feel imperfect or not good enough (as he did). You might feel that you are never with the partner you want. As the daughter, you might energetically try to replace the first love and become like a partner to your father.
11. **Your parent or grandparent remained alone.** If one of your parents or grandparents stayed alone after being left, or after the death of his or her spouse, you might stay alone as well. If you are in a relationship, you might create conflict or distance so that you too feel alone. In silent allegiance, you unconsciously find a way to share the loneliness.
12. **Your parent or grandparent suffered in marriage.** If, for example, your grandmother was trapped in a loveless marriage, or your grandfather died, drank, gambled, or left, leaving your grandmother alone to raise the children, you, as the granddaughter, could unconsciously associate these experiences with being married. You might either repeat her experience or resist committing to a partner for fear that the same thing could happen to you.
13. **Your parent was disparaged or disrespected by the other parent.** You, as the child, might recreate that parent's experience by being disrespected by your partner.

14. **Your parent died young.** If a parent died in your childhood, you might physically or emotionally distance yourself from your partner when you reach the same age as the dead parent, when you've spent the same amount of time in your relationship, or when your child reaches the same age that you were when your parent died.
15. **One of your parents mistreated the other.** If your father treated your mother poorly, you, as the son, might mistreat your partner similarly so that your father isn't "the bad one" alone. As the daughter, you might have a partner who mistreats you or with whom you feel distant. It could be difficult for you to have more happiness than your mother.
16. **You hurt a former partner.** If you hurt a former partner terribly, you might unconsciously attempt to balance this hurt by sabotaging your new relationship. The new partner, unconsciously aware that he or she could receive similar treatment, might even keep a little distance from you.
17. **You've had too many partners.** If you have had too many partners, you may have eroded your ability to bond in a relationship. Separations can become easier. Relationships can lose their depth.
18. **You had an abortion or gave a child up for adoption.** In your guilt, remorse, or regret, you might not allow yourself much happiness in a relationship.
19. **You were your mother's confidant.** As a boy, you attempted to satisfy your mother's unmet needs and supply her with what she felt she couldn't get from your father. Later on, you might experience difficulty committing to a woman. You might shut down emotionally or physically, fearing that your partner, like your mother, will want or need too much from you. A boy who was his mother's confidant often creates quick relationships with

women. He can even become a womanizer, leaving a trail of broken hearts in his wake. The remedy is a closer bond with his father.

20. **You were your father's favorite.** A girl who is closer to her father than to her mother often feels dissatisfied with the partners she selects. The root of the problem is not the partner; it's the distance she feels toward her mother. A woman's relationship with her mother can be an indicator of how fulfilling the relationship will be with her partner.
21. **Someone in the family didn't marry.** You could be identified with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or older sibling who never married. Perhaps this person was looked down upon, ridiculed, or perceived as having less than the other family members. Unconsciously aligned, you might also not marry.

## Chapter 13

# The Core Language of Success

*One must have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

**M**any self-help books promise us financial success and fulfillment if only we follow the author's prescribed plan. Strategies such as developing effective habits, expanding our social network, visualizing our future success, and repeating money mantras are touted as ways to prosper. But what about those of us who never seem to achieve our goals no matter what we do or which plan we follow?

When our attempts at success seem to collide with roadblocks and dead ends, exploring family history can be an important direction to pursue. Unresolved traumatic events in our families can hinder how success flows to us and how well we are able to receive it. Dynamics ranging from sharing an unconscious identification with someone in the family who failed or was cheated or cheated someone, to receiving an undeserved inheritance, to experiencing the trauma of an early separation from a mother can all affect our ability to feel secure and financially vital. At the end of this chapter, you will find a list of questions that can help you discern if there's a core trauma in your family history standing in your way. You'll also learn how to extract the core language around your own fears of failure and success, and how to get yourself back on track.

First, let's look at how others have used the core language approach to free themselves to become more successful.

# Atoning for Wrongdoings in the Family History

Ben was a week away from closing the door on his law practice. After a series of attempts to get his practice into the black had failed, he was giving up for good. “I can’t seem to get beyond the level of just surviving,” he told me. “I barely have enough.”

**Ben’s Core Language:** “I’m just surviving. I barely have enough.”

Ben described a pattern that he had experienced his entire adult life, of having many irons in the fire, of having several big-time clients on the line, and then suddenly, the bottom falls out from beneath him. “It’s like I can never hold on to anything I earn. I’m barely surviving.” When you listen carefully to Ben’s core language, perhaps you can hear the cry of someone else, someone impoverished, someone who was “barely surviving,” someone who “barely had enough.” The question, of course, is: who?

In Ben’s family, the core language trail led straight to the root of the problem. Ben recalled his childhood visits to Florida. Ben’s grandfather owned and operated a successful citrus plantation in central Florida from the 1930s through the early 1970s. The family had built its fortune on the sweat and toil of migrant workers who were paid next to nothing. Barely surviving on meager wages and unable to cover their debts, they lived in squalor. While Ben’s grandfather’s family prospered and lived in a luxurious mansion, the farmworkers lived crowded together in dilapidated shacks. Ben remembered playing as a little boy with their children. He remembered the guilty feeling of his having more and their having less. Years later, Ben’s father inherited Grandfather’s estate, but eventually lost it due to a series of bad investments and business deals gone wrong. Ben ended up inheriting nothing. Adversity only continued for Ben, who, since passing the bar, had fallen behind on bills he couldn’t pay and loans he owed the bank.

It wasn’t until Ben linked his current situation to the history in his family that things began to make sense. He could see how his family had prospered while the migrant workers were barely surviving. The disadvantage they incurred was directly related to the advantage Ben’s family gained. Unconsciously aligned with the workers, Ben had been reenacting their misery. It was as though, by living impoverished, Ben could somehow balance his grandfather’s debt, a debt that didn’t even belong to him.

It was time to break the pattern. During our session together, Ben closed his eyes and envisioned the children he used to play with and their families standing in front of him. In his inner image, they appeared dejected and impoverished. He visualized his grandfather, who had passed away when Ben was twelve, standing with them, apologizing to them for not paying them what they deserved. Ben imagined telling his grandfather that he could no longer atone for the unfair treatment of the workers by struggling in his law practice, and that he would leave the responsibility for the workers' suffering with him.

He visualized his grandfather taking responsibility and making amends. He imagined his grandfather saying, "This has nothing to do with you, Ben. It's my debt to pay—not yours." Ben pictured the children he used to play with smiling at him. He could feel that they harbored no ill feelings toward him.

Ben later tried to contact one of the migrant families but could find no trace of their whereabouts. Instead, he made a donation to a charity that focused on the health care needs of migrant families as a gesture of goodwill from his family to theirs. Ben kept the doors to his law practice open. He took the case, pro bono, of a worker who had been mistreated by a large company. Within weeks, several new, well-paying accounts came his way. Within six months, his practice was thriving.

When we look back into the family for the source of a financial issue, we have to ask: are we unconsciously attempting to balance the actions of someone who came before us? Many of us unwittingly perpetuate the suffering and misfortunes of the past. Ben appeared to be doing it, and so did Loretta.

More than anything, Loretta wanted to own her own business. For thirty years, her "sweat and hard labor," as she put it, had been lining the pockets of the owners of the companies she worked for. Yet every time an opportunity came her way to start her own venture or to develop one of her own business ideas, she'd balk. "Something keeps me from moving forward. It's as though there's something lurking beneath the surface that holds me back from taking the next step," she said. "It's as though I don't deserve to have what I get."

**Loretta's Core Language:** "I don't deserve to have what I get."

If we allow Loretta's core language to lead us into the past, three bridging questions come to mind:

- Who “didn’t deserve what they got”?
- Who was “held back”?
- Who couldn’t “move forward”?

Again, the answer wasn’t far away. In her will, Loretta’s grandmother had left the profitable family farm to Loretta’s father and left nothing to Loretta’s father’s four brothers and sisters. Her father went on to flourish, and his siblings went on to struggle. They all shared a distant relationship after that.

Loretta’s father had gained an unfair advantage over his siblings. As an adult, Loretta, the only child of her father and mother, struggled financially, just as her aunts and uncles had, turning the family switch from “advantage” to “disadvantage.” As though to balance the ill-gotten gains her father received from the grandmother, Loretta unconsciously held herself back from success. Once she realized that she had involuntarily been attempting to balance a wrong with another wrong, she was able to take the risks necessary to become an entrepreneur.

For Loretta, her core language led her back to the family farm, to the undeserved gain in her family history. For Ben, the path was similar. Yet not everyone who wishes to venture forward can locate a family event so clearly marked. For John-Paul, the family event that hindered him was less conspicuous.

## Separated from Mother, Disconnected from Others

John-Paul also wanted to advance his career, although his actions, as we’ll soon see, demonstrated the contrary. By following his core language map, however, he discovered a path lined with clues and insights.

For more than twenty years, John-Paul had lingered in the same dead-end job, watching others beneath his skill level advance to positions above him. He was quiet, and preferred to stay hidden in the nooks and crannies of office conversations and social interactions. He lived unnoticed, coasting just below the radar of upper management. Because he was never called upon for special assignments, he was never at risk of failure. The thought of

asking for a leadership role, a role accompanied by the stress of being watched and judged by others, was overwhelming. It was just too dangerous.

“I could get rejected,” he said, “or make the wrong move and lose everything.”

**John-Paul’s Core Language:** “I could get rejected. I could make the wrong move and lose everything.”

In John-Paul’s case, we didn’t need to travel back to a previous generation; we only had to explore a single event in his early childhood—a break in the bond with his mother. Many of us have experienced an interruption in the bonding process with our mothers, and like John-Paul, we never make the connection with how it affects us as adults. John-Paul had stopped trusting his mother’s love and support early in his childhood. As a result, he went through much of his life cautious in his relationships with others. Without feeling the support of his mother behind him, John-Paul experienced insecurity and hesitation whenever he stepped toward the things he most desired. “If I say or do the wrong thing,” he feared, “I’ll be rejected or sent away.”

John-Paul did not know how to link his fear of rejection to his having been separated from his mother. At three, he was sent to stay with his grandmother for the summer while his parents went on vacation. John-Paul’s grandparents lived on a farm and, although they provided him with what he needed physically, he was often left in a playpen outside while the adults tended to their chores. Halfway through the summer, Grandpa became ill, which further divided Grandma’s attention and energy. With Grandma so overwhelmed, John-Paul quickly learned that he could avoid her irritation if he stayed quiet and out of the way.

When his parents returned, John-Paul had no way of communicating to them how frightening his experience had been. He wanted to run toward his parents but something held him back. His parents only saw that he didn’t like to be held or cuddled anymore and concluded that he had become more independent in their absence. Inside, however, a contradictory experience was unfolding. His autonomy merely veiled a reluctance to trust that his mother would be there for him. John-Paul didn’t realize that, in an attempt to protect himself from any further disappointment, he had shut down his own vitality. He had dimmed his own light.

What lurked behind the façade of independence was simply an association between getting close and getting hurt. This imprint became a blueprint for much of his adult life. Fearing rejection and loss, he went to extreme measures to avoid the very connections he secretly craved. For John-Paul, taking risks was not an option. The wrong risk could mean that he would once again “lose everything.”

When our early bond with our mother is interrupted, a cloud of fear and distrust can infuse our life experiences.

Another client, Elizabeth, lived under such a cloud. She, like John-Paul, had been separated from her mother. When she was seven months old, she spent two weeks in the hospital away from her mother’s care. A weeklong hospital stay at three years old and another at seven years old followed, repeating the separation.

Elizabeth described her current job as a data entry specialist in an office with thirty other employees as “a living hell.” She could go an entire day without speaking a word to anyone. The distance between her and her office mates had become so extreme that she began disengaging from conversations altogether, relying instead on yes and no answers to questions aimed her way. “If I say the wrong thing,” she told me, “I’ll be rejected, so I hold myself back.”

She described obsessive thoughts and fears that she would replay in her mind at night. “After a conversation, I go over it again and again in my mind. ‘Did I say the wrong thing? Did I offend somebody? Should I have said something differently?’ Or I’ll text my friend repeatedly: ‘Why aren’t you answering me? Are you mad at me?’” Seeing her office mates talking together exacerbated her fears. She worried that they were talking about her.

Ultimately, she worried that she was expendable, and would be rejected or fired, or that she would be ignored or left out of the group. Any of these would bring about the feelings of aloneness and helplessness she felt in the hospital as a little girl. Elizabeth, like John-Paul, did not have the awareness to connect these feelings to the early separation from her mother during her hospital stays.

**Elizabeth’s Core Language:** “They’ll reject me. I’ll be left out. I won’t fit in. I’ll be all alone.”

Like John-Paul, Elizabeth carried a fear of being left or abandoned. Similarly, her resolution came in making the link between her cautious approach to life and her early break from the source of life—her mother.

Simply by making this connection, she could begin to reverse the conclusions she had made as a child that had unconsciously limited her life.

Both John-Paul and Elizabeth began to heal the inner image they carried of their mothers as not being supportive and nurturing. In recognizing the parallel between their limited lives and the limiting images they held, each was more open to looking for what was life-giving in their mothers. For John-Paul, it began with remembering how excited his mother would become when he would draw her pictures. For Elizabeth, it was found in realizing that her mother had not shut down to her. It was Elizabeth who, during the hospital stays, had shut down toward her mother. Elizabeth could now see that she had thwarted her mother's numerous attempts to love her. Her mother, steadfast and supportive, had given her more than she realized.

Once Elizabeth understood the impact of the separation, she felt hopeful. For the first time, she could see an avenue that finally led somewhere. Her core language merely reflected the words of a little child who was left all alone and felt abandoned by her mother. For the first time, she could see a light at the end of her tunnel. By following the core language trail, she was on her way to the other side.

## Family Dynamics That Can Affect Success

Not only can our financial vitality be hindered by breaks in the bond with our mother (as with Elizabeth and John-Paul) or by unjust business dealings and unfair inheritances (as with Ben and Loretta), a host of other dynamics can affect our relationship with success. In the pages that follow, we will explore several family influences that can limit us. Each acts as a silent force that can affect consecutive generations. Any one of these dynamics can derail the forward progress we attempt to make.

### **Rejecting a Parent Can Impede Our Success**

Regardless of the story we tell about our parents, how good or bad they were, how hurt we feel by what they did or didn't do, when we reject them, we can limit our opportunities.

Our relationship with our parents is, in many ways, a metaphor for life. Those who feel that they have received a lot from their parents often feel that they receive a lot from life. Feeling that we got only a small amount from our parents can translate into the feeling that we get only a small amount from life. Shortchanged by our parents, we can feel shortchanged by life.

When we reject our mother, we can unconsciously distance ourselves from the comforts of life. Security, safety, nurturance, care—all the elements associated with mothering—can feel missing in our lives. No matter how much we have, it can feel like we never have enough.

The effects of rejecting a father can be equally limiting. A man, for instance, who rejects his father can experience himself as uncomfortable or self-conscious in the company of other men. He can even find himself hesitant or reluctant to embrace the responsibilities associated with being a father—regardless of whether or not his father was the family provider or the family failure.

Unfinished business with either parent can cloud our work life as well as our social life. By unconsciously replaying unresolved family dynamics, we're likely to create conflicts instead of authentic connections. With old projections aimed at our bosses or coworkers, it can be difficult to flourish.

## **We Can Repeat Our Rejected Parent's Life Experience**

When we reject a parent, a strange symmetry linking us can occur; we can unwittingly walk in his or her shoes. What we judge as unacceptable or intolerable in our parent can reappear in our life. It can feel like an unwelcome inheritance.

We assume the opposite is true: the more we distance ourselves from our parents, the less likely we are to live similar lives and repeat their challenges. However, the converse appears to be truer. When we distance ourselves from them, we tend to become more like them and often lead lives similar to theirs.

If, for example, our father is rejected for being an alcoholic or a failure, we can drink or fail just like him. By unconsciously following in his footsteps, we establish a covert bond with him by sharing what is perceived as negative in him.

## *Kevin's Secret Bond with His Father*

At thirty-six, Kevin was proud of the fact that he held an upper management position in a top-ten Internet company. However, he was worried that his drinking problems would destroy his life. "I'm afraid I'm going to have a breakdown, fail, and lose everything I've created."

**Kevin's Core Language:** "I'll have a breakdown, fail, and lose everything I've created."

In his family, Kevin's father had done exactly that. A successful Boston attorney, Kevin's father had become an alcoholic, lost his job, and then lost his health. The family eventually lost their home. At that point, when Kevin was ten, his mother moved him away from his father. Kevin often heard her say: "Your father is no good. He destroyed our lives." Kevin rarely saw his father after that. His father died early of liver failure. Kevin was twenty-five at the time. That's when his own drinking began to take off.

Kevin remembered hearing about an incident that occurred when his dad was twelve. He and his nine-year-old brother were climbing on an abandoned barn when the younger brother fell through the roof and died. Kevin's father was blamed for his death. Kevin now understood how his father, feeling responsible for his brother's death, might not have been able to sustain living a full life when his brother did not have a full life to live.

In a flash of insight during our session together, Kevin connected his own self-destruction similarly. He realized that by dying early, he would only further the devastation in his family. Understanding the burden his father carried, Kevin could feel a profound love for him. It filled him with compassion. He now felt sorry for pushing him away a long time ago.

Just by making the connection, Kevin was able to make major life changes. He stopped drinking and, for the first time, felt supported by an image of his father at his back. He now felt excited about the life that lay ahead of him.

## **An Unconscious Loyalty to Failure**

We don't need to reject our parents to repeat their misfortunes. Sometimes we share an unconscious bond that keeps us mired in a similar experience. Despite our best efforts to succeed, we can find ourselves unable to achieve more in our lives than they achieved in theirs.

If, for example, our father failed in business and wasn't able to provide financially for the family, we might unconsciously join him by failing in the same way. Ensnared in a hidden loyalty, we might sabotage our success, making sure that we don't surpass him.

Bart, another client of mine, was the weakest link on the sales team. He made only enough money to scrape by. When I asked him about his father, he explained that his father had only an eighth-grade education and had lived a very simple life. When asked what might happen were he to have lots of money, Bart said he feared he would lose "the simplicity of life," a virtue that his father extolled. "Having money would devalue my life and make my life complicated. The essentials would be lost."

**Bart's Core Language:** "Having money would devalue my life."

Bart appeared to be emulating his father's values. Once he realized that he carried an unconscious loyalty to not becoming more successful than his father, Bart began to reassess his financial goals. It became clear to Bart that limiting his success was the opposite of what his father really wanted for him. Bart picked up the pace. Within eight months, his sales production doubled.

We can be unconsciously bound with other family members beyond our parents and find ourselves inadvertently connected with an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or other family member.

That was the case with Paul. He came to see me after being passed over for promotions time and time again. Although it was never mentioned directly to him, his unkempt appearance and the fact that his clothes were shabby and dirty may have been contributory. He didn't look the part of a leader.

Paul remembered how embarrassed he was as a small boy by his grandfather, the town loser. He and his friends would make fun of the grandfather, who could be found scavenging through garbage cans for food or sleeping afternoons in the town movie theater. Now, as an adult, Paul was repeating aspects of his grandfather's life by dressing like him and reliving his fears.

**Paul's Core Language:** "I'm not good enough. They don't want me."

We looked back at the family history. Paul's grandfather had been sent to live in an orphanage at the age of four when his parents fell on hard times and couldn't provide for him. Paul now understood that it was his

grandfather who was the rightful owner of the feelings of not being wanted and not being good enough. Paul had merely been continuing them.

Recognizing his unconscious connection to his grandfather, Paul was able to break free. He was now able to connect with his grandfather in the compassion he felt for him, instead of having to dress like him. Understanding the identification, Paul immediately began to make healthy choices around his physical appearance.

## **The Legacy of Unfinished Business**

Often, when a beloved member of the family dies early and is perceived not to have completed his or her life, someone later in the family, in silent collusion, can fail to complete something of great importance. The later family member can stop short of accomplishing a major task in life, such as finishing a degree or closing a deal that would bring success. Procrastination can also stem from being connected to a family member's early death.

Richard sought to understand why he repeated certain patterns in his life. A brilliant aeronautical engineer, he had been responsible for some of the major advancements in aviation, but had not stepped forward to take the credit. Someone else had even patented work that belonged to him. Although he felt cheated, he blamed only himself. "I don't take risks that will bring me success," he said. "I never get recognized for my accomplishments."

**Richard's Core Language:** "I never get recognized."

A parallel experience lived in Richard's family system. His older brother died stillborn. Nobody in the family ever talked about his brother or his death. In loyalty to his brother, who wasn't seen or recognized, Richard also lived without recognition. Understanding this influence, Richard applied for a patent for his new invention in what he called his "last chance." He took a huge step toward life and life took an equally huge step toward him. Richard received the patent, and his invention became an integral part of the aviation industry.

While we can live unrecognized or unseen, like a family member who dies early, we can also live restricted or limited out of loyalty to a family member with a mental, physical, or emotional challenge. Loyal to a sibling, aunt, uncle, parent, or grandparent whose life we perceive as restricted in

some way, we can unconsciously restrict our lives similarly and limit our own achievements.

### **Past Poverty Can Dim Present Prosperity**

Sometimes we share an unconscious allegiance with ancestors who lived in poverty and had difficulty providing for themselves and their children. Perhaps war, famine, or persecution forced them to leave their homeland and their belongings in order to make a fresh start in another part of the world. If our ancestors experienced great hardship, we can continue their suffering without realizing we are doing so, and our attempts at living an abundant life can be thwarted. It can be difficult to have more than they had.

Often, a simple ritual that honors our family members who struggled, and the country or culture they left behind, grounds us so that we can take advantage of the “new” life we have received from their efforts. Simply by acknowledging what lives on in us from the “old,” what we bring forward from our country or culture, seems to give us an inherent permission to begin life anew.

Beyond that, when we are grateful to the new country for sheltering us and offering us new opportunities for success, we are further grounded. Even beyond that, when we find a way to give something back—paying taxes, honoring the laws, doing charity work—serving the country in some way that balances the advantages our family gained, we seem to more easily reap the benefits that the new home provides for us.

### **Personal Guilt Can Suppress Success**

Sometimes we have personally taken advantage of people or hurt them in a way that has created significant suffering. Maybe we acquired an undeserved sum of money through manipulation or subterfuge, such as by marrying for wealth or embezzling from the company we work for. When such an event takes place, we often cannot hold on to this financial gain. Regardless of whether we feel guilty or not, or whether we consider the consequences of our actions or not, we and/or our children can live meager lives to balance the harm we’ve done.

All in all, the consequences of our actions, the effects of unresolved family traumas, our relationship with our parents, and entanglements with members of our family system who suffered can all be obstacles that stand in the way of our success. Once we make the link to the past and integrate what remains out of balance in the present, we have taken a crucial step. When everyone and everything is held with respectful consideration, the unfinished business from the past can remain in the past, allowing us to move forward with more freedom and financial ease.

### *Twenty Success Questions*

Here are twenty questions to consider when exploring how your family history can influence your success:

1. Did you have a challenging relationship with your mother? (Revisit your core descriptors in chapter 7.)
2. Did you have a challenging relationship with your father? (Revisit your core descriptors in chapter 7.)
3. Were your parents successful at what they did for a living?
4. Did a parent fail in providing for the family?
5. Did your parents separate when you were young?
6. What was your mother's attitude toward your father?
7. What was your father's attitude toward your mother?
8. When you were young, did you experience a physical or emotional separation from your mother?
9. Did your mother, father, or a grandparent die young?

10. Did you, your parents, or your grandparents have any siblings who died young?
11. Did you or anyone in your family gain significantly at someone else's expense?
12. Was anyone cheated out of an inheritance?
13. Did anyone inherit or acquire wealth unjustly?
14. Did anyone in your family go bankrupt, lose the family wealth, or cause the family to experience financial difficulty?
15. Did anyone outside your family cause your family to experience financial difficulty?
16. Was anyone rejected for being a failure, a loser, a gambler, et cetera?
17. Do you have impoverished ancestors?
18. Did you or your parents emigrate?
19. Were your family members forced to flee or driven out of their homeland?
20. Did you or anyone else in your family hurt, cheat, or take advantage of someone?

## Chapter 14

# Core Language Medicine

*If you look deeply into the palm of your hand, you will see your parents and all generations of your ancestors. All of them are alive in this moment. Each is present in your body. You are the continuation of each of these people.*

—Thich Nhat Hanh, *A Lifetime of Peace*

**I**n this book, I've presented a new way of listening that shines a light into the dimly lit hallways of the past. By discovering how to decode our core language map, we can decipher what belongs to us and what may have stemmed from a traumatic event in our family history. With their origin revealed, old patterns can be released so that new pathways and new life possibilities can open.

My hope is that you already feel lighter or have a greater sense of ease when you revisit the fears you wrote down earlier. Perhaps you are experiencing a greater sense of belonging or compassion with family members you met along the way. Maybe they now stand with you in a new way—a supportive way that leaves you feeling held by something greater than yourself. Maybe you can feel their comfort and support around you.

Take a moment and feel this support. Send your breath into the places where you feel it in your body. These new feelings live inside you now and require your care and attention in order to flourish. With each conscious breath, feelings of calm and well-being can spread in all directions, becoming part of who you are. Each time you inhale, allow the good feelings to expand in your body. Each time you exhale, allow any residue of fear to dissipate on your outbreath.

## Next Steps: Continue the Transformation

With your core sentence and its source in conscious awareness, you can continue disentangling from the web of inherited fear. What once functioned as an unconscious mantra keeping you rooted in suffering can now be a resource that sets you free. If you find the old feelings returning, simply implement the following steps.

Say your core sentence aloud or incant it silently to yourself. As you say it, allow the sensations of the old fear to arise, just for a moment, so that you can become familiar with the feelings. These sensations can be a signal that the switch of your core sentence has been turned on without your knowledge. As soon as you become aware of it, you have the power to break its trance. There are three simple steps:

1. You recognize the familiar thoughts, images, and sensations inside you.
2. You acknowledge that the old fear has become activated.
3. You take an action to unhinge from the spiraling feelings.

You might tell yourself: “These are not my feelings. I have merely inherited them from my family.” Sometimes, acknowledging this is enough. You might envision the traumatic event that once held you captive or the family member with whom you had been identified. As you do so, remind yourself that these feelings have now been laid to rest and that the family members involved now comfort and support you. Each time you revisit these steps, you strengthen the pathway of healing.

You might also consider placing your hand on your body where you notice the old feelings and breathe deeply, allowing your exhale to lengthen inside you. When you direct your focus and your breath into your body and feel the sensations that reside there, without letting yourself become triggered by them, you can shift your inner experience.

You might also revisit the practices, exercises, and rituals in chapter 10 and recite some of the healing sentences you found helpful. Return to the experiences in the book that were powerful for you, reminding yourself that each time you do so, you are laying down new neural pathways in your

brain and new experiences in your body. Revisiting the rituals and resolution sentences will further ground and deepen the healing, so that the new thoughts, images, and feelings will remain, stabilizing you through the ups and downs of everyday life.

## Arriving at the Finish Line of Your Core Language Trail

If you followed the steps outlined in this book, you are likely to be standing on the other side of your worst fear. This can feel like standing on the peak of a mountain overlooking a valley. In the distance, the entire territory can be surveyed as though through a wide-angle lens. Down in the valley lie the old fears, the frantic feelings, the family heartbreaks and misfortunes. From this new vantage point, all the fragments of family history can be seen and welcomed.

By piecing together essential information about your family, you have likely made significant links. You now understand more about yourself and the unexplained feelings you've lived with. Chances are they didn't start with you. Perhaps you have also discovered that your worst fear is no longer so frightening, for in following its words, you have been led to a new place. You now know that your secret language of fear was never about fear at all. The bigger secret is that a great love was just waiting to be excavated the whole time. It is the love passed forward from those who came before you, a love that insists that you live your life fully without repeating the fears and misfortunes of the past. It is a deep love. It is a quiet love, a timeless love that connects you to everything and everyone. It is potent medicine.

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# Glossary

**Bridging Question**

A question that can connect a persistent symptom, issue, or fear to a core trauma or to a family member who struggled similarly.

**Core Complaint**

Our main issue, whether internalized or projected outward, which is often derived from fragments of traumatic experience and expressed in core language.

**Core Descriptors**

Adjectives and short descriptive phrases that reveal the unconscious feelings we hold toward our parents.

**Core Language**

The idiosyncratic words and sentences of our deepest fears that provide clues leading to the source of an unresolved trauma. Core language can also be expressed in physical sensations, behaviors, emotions, impulses, and symptoms of an illness or condition.

**Core Sentence**

A short sentence that expresses the emotionally charged language of our deepest fear. It carries the residue of an unresolved trauma from our early childhood or family history.

**Core Trauma**

The unresolved trauma in our early or family history that can unconsciously affect our behaviors, choices, health, and well-being.

**Genogram**

A two-dimensional visual representation of a family tree.

**Healing Sentence**

A sentence of reconciliation or resolution that brings about new images and feelings of well-being.

# Appendix A: List of Family History Questions

- Who died early?
- Who left?
- Who was abandoned, isolated, or excluded from the family?
- Who was adopted or who gave a child up for adoption?
- Who died in childbirth?
- Who had a stillbirth, miscarriage, or abortion?
- Who committed suicide?
- Who committed a crime or experienced a significant trauma?
- Who suffered in war?
- Who died in or participated in a genocide or the Holocaust?
- Who was murdered?
- Who murdered someone or felt responsible for someone's death or misfortune?
- Who profited from another's loss?
- Who was wrongly accused? Who was jailed or institutionalized?
- Who had a physical, emotional, or mental disability?
- Which parent or grandparent had a significant relationship prior to getting married, and what happened?
- Was someone deeply hurt by another?

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## Appendix B: List of Early Trauma Questions

- Did something traumatic happen while your mother was pregnant with you? Was she highly anxious, depressed, or stressed?
- Were your parents having difficulties in their relationship during the pregnancy?
- Did you experience a difficult birth? Were you born premature?
- Did your mother experience postpartum depression?
- Were you separated from your mother shortly after birth?
- Were you adopted?
- Did you experience a trauma or a separation from your mother during the first three years of life?
- Were you or your mother ever hospitalized and forced to be apart (maybe you spent time in an incubator, or had your tonsils removed or some other medical procedure, or your mother needed to have surgery or experienced a complication from a pregnancy, etc.)?
- Did your mother experience a trauma or emotional turmoil during your first three years of life?
- Did your mother lose a child or pregnancy before you were born?
- Was your mother's attention pulled to a trauma involving one of your siblings (a late-term miscarriage, a stillbirth, a death, a medical emergency, etc.)?

# Notes

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