



Chapter One of The Joyous Recovery: A New Approach to Emotional Healing and Freedom

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Healing shouldn't have to be so hard.

I hear various versions of the following comments, made with strained voices:

"I have some really heavy issues I need to work on some day."

"There are things about myself that I've been avoiding facing up to."

"Eventually I'm going to have to dive in and deal with all this bad stuff I went through, but I just don't want to look at that stuff."

"I'm working really hard on myself. Some things are getting better, but it's so hard to keep moving forward."

What do I take away from all this? That people see emotional healing as painful, scary, and slow. That there are rewards eventually, but first there is huge work and sacrifice before the improvements start to come. That big changes aren't that common, but that if you really put your nose to the grindstone you'll be able to make some small changes, and that will feel good. That part of growing and maturing is accepting that life is hard, and adapting lowered expectations.

And what's my response to all this? That I don't think so. In fact, I don't think so at all. The reason most people find healing so hard to do is that they've had so little help, so little guidance, and so little information. Emotional recovery can be, and should be, mostly a joyous journey. People who really know how to heal find that:

- * *Healing moves fast.*
- * *Some of the gains are immediate, with many more to follow.*



- * *The pleasure greatly outweighs the pain.*
- * *Even the parts that do involve hard work are so rewarding — and quickly rewarding, not months or years into the future — that they don't feel tiring, so that the underlying feeling remains, "I can totally do this."*
- * *Healing is not a solitary undertaking and leads rapidly to greater and greater connection.*

I'd like to respond to four messages that likely go through your mind since they seem to go through almost everyone's mind at one time or another. I'm no exception, by the way; these messages fortunately don't run around in my head much anymore, but they used to.

(1) "It's different for me because the things that have happened to me in my life are just too deep and awful."

And hand-in-hand with this message is the one that goes:

"Other people may be able to heal, but I'm just way too messed up. My problems are so serious that it's too late to get them to change."

No, no, no. If you're still alive, there's still time. You can gain back a vibrant, connected, satisfying life. Pain, anxiety, and isolation do not need to dominate.

Everyone that I have ever spoken with has been through experiences that are so emotionally wrenching that it's miraculous that their heart didn't just stop beating from the pain. I don't know if the world has always been this way, but it's certainly true in our times. People from the kindest families and the safest towns still have stunning stories to tell of heartbreak, loss, and fear.

Are there people who have had it even worse than the rest? Yes, some people's childhoods could only be described as torture. Some people live as slaves, often literally, as teenagers or adults. Some people have been targets of a level of cruelty, of a depth of atrocity, that I can't even fully wrap my head around. But you know what? Somehow, seeming to defy possibility, many, many of them find their way back to love and peace, back to a life that is full of meaning. The differences in how we've been hurt do matter,



and it doesn't help anyone to pretend those differences aren't there or that we've all experienced the same levels of darkness. It's not true. But those differences don't have to set us apart from each other. And they absolutely do not mean that some of us can recover from the harm that's been done to us but that others cannot.

In fact, part of what happens when you experience really deep healing is that you come to feel more and more determined that no one, *no one*, is to be left behind. It's not that you can be everyone's personal rescuer — you can't be, and it won't help you or them if you try to be — but you can certainly rescue a few, and the rest of us can each rescue a few — even while we ourselves are being rescued — and together we can get each other, get everyone, onto dry land.

(2) "I've read so many books, I've tried so many healing approaches, I've thought and thought and thought, I've wept and wept. There's just no way out for me."

Okay, let's talk about the books first.

I recognize that there are occasional great ones. But most books about psychology, including most of the whole "self-help" genre, are long on analyzing what we're doing wrong, what's incorrect about our thinking and our attitudes, and what our sources of pain are, and very short on what to do about it all. Their advice tends to come down to things like, "Change your outlook," and "Think positively," and "Just do it." It's emotional healing by bumpersticker. And it never works for very long, though short-term gains are common.

If they aren't telling you to fix your erroneous thinking, they're telling you to fix your emotions. And again, the actual steps to take are vague. "You need to process your emotions," they say. But how are emotions processed? Hardly anyone seems to know. Or they say, "You are causing your own pain because of the way you think." Oh, so now we're back to where the answer is you have to change what goes on inside your mind, keeping a constant eye on yourself to make sure you aren't having the wrong thoughts. Good luck with that.

But it's not just the books. Even psychotherapists that I speak with usually have much more to say about emotional injury than about emotional healing, and they get vague



when I ask them, “So where exactly does healing come from?” They say a few words about “working it through,” or “going it over again from an adult perspective,” or “gaining insight,” but not much that’s concrete comes out.

There are some alternative therapies, including especially a genre known as “body-centered” ones, that are showing some promising healing power. But even those are rarely having the depth of positive effect that we’re all craving.

In short, there is a general lack of information available about how to heal, and especially about how to love the process of healing rather than experiencing it as a chore. It’s time for those specifics, and that is what *The Joyous Recovery*, along with the book that follows it, *The Emotional Immune Response*, are all about.

(3) *“This is just the way life is. Life is hard. We came into the world alone and we leave it alone. You need to accept it.”*

You can accept that if you want to. I don’t choose to, because I think it’s total crap. My life, for example, has been mostly terrific for over a decade. Maybe for some reason it’s going to be much harder from now on — that certainly could happen — but the great years I’ve already had will always be mine; it’s too late to take those away from me, they already happened.

As for “we come into the world alone,” no statement could be more preposterous. We come into the world *literally inside of the body of another human being — our mother — beginning as an actual part of her, and then we gradually separate into an individual that can survive outside of our mother’s body.* And even after we’re born, years go by before we are capable of surviving with almost constant assistance from other human beings. How could we possibly come into the world *less* alone than we do?

As for dying alone, we manage to avoid having that happen for the vast majority of the human race. Most people are accompanied by one or more of their loved ones when they pass on.

Look at wild animals. Do they seem to spend most of their lives suffering? No. Certainly parts of their lives are painful, but mostly they seem to be doing pretty well. Why would



the human being be the only animal on the planet destined to spend most of its life in pain?

Yes, modern life has become quite painful, because humans have been driven out of the ways of life we are naturally designed for, including have been driven largely away from our connections to each other. But that doesn't mean life is inherently that way. We can heal, and our world can heal.

And in fact healing has become an urgent project, not just for you or for me but for everyone, as you may well have noticed.

(4) *"Life could never be happy all the time. There will always be pain and suffering."*

Duh. But so what? We don't *need* to be happy all the time, we don't need lives that are pain-free. What we need is lives where the happy times outweigh the sad ones, where we live with meaning and purpose, and where we feel connected to the human race, to all that lives, and to all that exists. When our lives contain these elements we feel *fulfilled*, and that's what we're really wanting. And this we absolutely can have.

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So what's different about *The Joyous Recovery*? What is this path to healing that says I don't have to slog through my deep issues, that I don't have to focus on "facing up" to dark awful truths, that sdoens't require me to stew in my faults and "work on myself" to fix what's wrong?

Point One: We're In This Together

The Joyous Recovery is *not* a self-help book. In fact, I believe the entire concept of "self-help" is mistaken. Not only does your recovery not have to be a solitary project, the reality is that it can't be; healing on your own will only move you small distances, if it even moves you at all. This is why consumers of self-help literature keep feeling like they've found the answer, then the benefits of whatever new approach they are trying start to fade over time, so they hungrily grab up the next self-help approach that comes

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down the line. Emotional healing is *collective*. Either we heal in large numbers or we don't heal much at all.

Human beings are not mountain lions. Throughout almost the entirety of human history, we have been born into tribes and clans where our membership was secure from the moment we emerged into the world. We are a species of animal that watches over each other, that shares food, that sleeps piled together, that cares for the sick, that gathers for wedding and funerals. It is only in the last 3% or so of our history that we have *not* lived in this manner, and this means that the need and desire to live in community is genetically programmed into us at the deepest levels.

The reason we are longing for connection is that we were built to live connected.

As I will be explaining farther on, so much of why we are feeling so wounded and unhappy is because of ways that connection in our lives broke down, or because it failed to exist in the first place. Either the people who were supposed to be making sure we were well were hurting us instead, or there just wasn't anyone that was focusing much on our wellness, or both. *Since aloneness is one of the most profound sources of our injuries — perhaps the single most profound source — it's not surprising that we don't heal well alone.*

And it's not your fault that you keep trying to make changes in your life and many or most of those improvements slip away from you. Try to stop dumping on yourself about the resolutions you haven't been able to stick with, the diets you haven't stayed on, the exercise programs you've dropped off of. You aren't a weak person, so it isn't your weakness that's at fault when these efforts don't work.

As I was writing *The Joyous Recovery*, I was simultaneously launching the Peak Living Network (PLN). PLN is a free global network for anyone who chooses to be part of it. Our mission is to support each other's healing and recovery in thoughtful, aware, successful ways. This book will be far more likely to lead you toward your dreams if you become part of the Peak Living Network, or of some other community that consciously supports mutual healing.



The Peak Living Network is here to support your healing. Through the network and our website you can find, *entirely free*:

- * peer-led support groups
- * peer-led discussion groups
- * articles and brochures
- * an online healing forum
- * people to meet with for one-on-one support sessions (explained in Chapter ___)

For very reasonable costs you can also find:

- * PLN books
- * classes on *The Joyous Recovery* healing approach taught by certified instructors
- * weekend healing retreats
- * larger regional or national Peak Living Network gatherings

For more information, see the Peak Living Network appendix at the back of this book, and visit PeakLivingNetwork.org.

The core activity of the Peak Living Network is “splitting time,” which we also call “co-counseling.” I am going to be explaining how to work with a partner to do sessions where you split the time in half, where one person is the speaker during the first half while the other person listens and gives support, and then you *switch roles* for the second half of the time. Learning how to co-counsel skillfully and effectively is a lifetime learning process, and the better you get at it, the more you will be amazed by its power to transform your life.



Throughout this book, I will periodically return to ideas about how you can increase connection in your life, so that your healing can happen in a sea of love and encouragement. You will find the difference in your progress to be immeasurable.

Point Two: You Aren't Broken, So You Don't Need to Be Fixed

There's a big difference between thinking:

"I need to change the things that are wrong with me, because those parts are bad,"

and thinking:

"I need to heal so that I can enjoy my life more and give more love to others."

What do people's emotional struggles consist of? Mostly, things like:

being downhearted much of the time

having low energy or low motivation

feeling ashamed or embarrassed about who you are

feeling unattractive or unappealing

believing you aren't very smart

feeling afraid, feeling that your fears are limiting your life

feeling unpleasantly full of anger, feeling a lot of frustrated rage

feeling powerless to defend ourselves or our loved ones from wrongs that are being done



feeling powerless to stop behaving in ways that are harmful to ourselves, such as eating unhealthfully or smoking or withdrawing from social contact or sabotaging our own progress in life

This list doesn't cover everything, but most of what we go through fits in here somewhere.

And these elements, whether we carry just a few of the or whether we are burdened by them all, are signs of ways in which we have been *hurt*. These are the effects of traumatic emotional injury. The great majority of the time these emotional struggles are the products of wounds that have happened *over and over again* to us as we have gone through life, with particular damage done when they kept occurring during our childhoods.

Moreover, these effects didn't come from small things. They grow out of experiences that were devastating to us when they happened. As we move into adulthood, we tend to gradually block out how soul-assaulting many of the wrongs we experienced really were.

It isn't your fault that you developed distressing effects from outrages and heartbreaks. *We all need to stop blaming ourselves, and each other, for the injuries we are carrying.*

You may ask the question, "But what if I'm behaving in ways that are really hurting other people, such as much children?" By way of response, I'm going to put our emotional problems in three categories:

- 1) Ways that we chronically feel bad or empty
- 2) Ways that we chronically behave in ways that are bad for us
- 3) Ways that we chronically behave in ways that are harmful to others.

For now, I'm just talking about numbers 1 and 2 above. Number 3 has to be thought about somewhat differently, and we'll come back to that in chapter ____. But even for number 3, I'm going to say that seeing yourself as broken or bad is not likely to help



your progress. And for numbers 1 and 2, self-blame will get sharply in the way of your progress every time.

Human healing happens most powerfully when we feel connected to our strengths. If from the outset we're made to feel that we need a repair job, how will we be able to focus on what we do well and where our blessings are?

As you will see, I don't believe that positive thinking is the solution. We need lots of space to allow ourselves to feel how bad we really feel, and not to be constantly pressured to "look on the bright side." You will see as we go along that I consider it important not to walk around pretending that everything is okay. But the thing is, on a deeper level you *are* okay. I'm going to be encouraging you to do a balancing act, where you:

keep one foot delicately placed in the realities of today's challenges

keep the other foot rooted, as much as you can, in the profound truth of who you really are

And who you really are is the same person you were when you were born; loving, open, full of energy, and with a vast capacity for intelligence.

Point Three: To Give Is to Receive

If you go see a therapist, the discussion is all about you. The therapist doesn't open up with much or at all about his or her own feelings or challenges, and you aren't there to provide help. In some ways this is nice. You probably don't get listened to anywhere else in your life with this kind of focused attention, especially not for an hour at a time. Some new things get to happen in your thinking, and in your feelings, from being able to attend fully to yourself, and do so with support. And you don't have to worry about whether you're giving enough back, because you aren't expected to give anything but your payment.



But at the same time, something's a little wrong here. A message is accidentally being sent that says, "Some people in the world are helpers, and other people are in need of help, and you are one of the ones who needs help." This in turn implies that the therapist has special healing knowledge and powers that you don't.

So while the structure of a therapist-client relationship supports healing in certain ways, it interferes with it in others. What tends to work better is to set up a healing path where, from the start, we are assuming that you have as much to give as to receive. And we mean now, not just at some point in the future. Your own healing is accelerated by the contributions you make to the healing of others. That's why it doesn't make sense to wait "until I have it together enough that I can have something to give to other people."

Being a force for other people's recovery helps our own process because:

- * it helps us to see who we really are: smart, capable people with a lot to give, not helpless people who need to be endlessly rescued
- * when we help strengthen the people around us, their increased wellness then comes back to help us; we're helping them become better helpers for us
- * it helps us to heal injuries we carry from times when we didn't get to give enough caring, not just times when we didn't receive enough caring

This last point, by the way, is one that I don't hear mentioned anywhere, and it is a crucial one. People don't just get hurt by not getting the love that they need; they get just as wounded from not having the opportunity to *give* the love that they feel in their hearts, and to have that love valued and treasured. This is true for children, not just for adults. Children need to feel that their love is noticed and taken in by other people, that it is taken seriously, and that it *makes a difference*. This is a huge challenge because most adults in our times are reluctant to let children have an impact on their lives, to take in what children have to give.

Now, let's suppose that you already are a giving style of person, and that you're actually feeling a little burnt out on all the time you spend listening to other people, attending to their needs, and trying to help them with their problems. If so, you may feel that the



last thing you need for your healing is to be giving even more. And in a sense you're right.

But in *The Joyous Recovery* I'm going to be teaching you a new way of giving – with some specific structures in place – that you'll find doesn't drain you. In fact, it leaves you feeling more filled up than you did without it. The difference is that we'll be setting it up so that:

- * You get reminded often of how much your gifts are appreciated.
- * The people you are supporting are actually *moving* in their lives. So you don't have to feel that sense of burden that comes from holding people up through struggles in their lives that never seem to actually improve.
- * Equal exchange is built into how we do things, so that you can feel confident that you are going to be receiving support in equal measure to how you are giving it.

Bear with me; after a few chapters, you'll start to see how this is all going to work. And it does.

Point Four: "Just Do It" Doesn't Do It

Bumper stickers often point to some kernel of truth, but the wisdom gets ruined by trying to fit it into such a small number of words. If we could "just do it," we would. If New Years Resolutions truly worked we'd all be physically fit, caught up with our taxes, out of debt, and making great progress on that novel we'd always said we would write some day.

At the same time, the sticker has a point. Why? Because it also doesn't work to keep waiting until we "feel ready" to make the changes that we so desperately crave in our lives. It's just too easy to slip into waiting a lifetime for the right time to take those big risks, to run with those great ideas, to let our hearts show. It is important to seize the moment, and sometimes it really is time to stop whining.



The solution to this apparent contradiction is to stop seeing these two aspects of life — getting ready to take steps vs. actually taking those steps — as a forced choice. These are not mutually exclusive priorities in our lives. The reality is that both can — and in fact should — go on simultaneously. *The Joyous Recovery* teaches how to create a constant back and forth between:

taking decisive action in your life, moving forward, living fully

and

taking time to feel your fear and sadness, to heal, and to grow

When we stop thinking of these as separate processes, one that's better than the other (take your pick), or one that's for now and the other for later, we discover that a wonderful interplay is possible.

In fact, the cycle that I will be teaching involves four elements, not two:

- 1) Increasing your awareness of your personal strengths and your awareness of the love and support you can find from other people
- 2) Taking time to feel and process our weaknesses and wounds; that whole internal landscape where we *don't* feel confident or strong, where we *don't* feel whole, where in fact we may feel profoundly shattered
- 3) Allowing time and space for deep crying (not just weeping a few tears) and other forms of deep emotional release
- 4) Taking decisive, courageous action to improve our lives, the lives of others, and the condition of our world

You won't necessarily start at number 1 — you can start at any of these four places depending on where you're at on a given day — but you will find that you do tend to cycle roughly through these four phases, and that the phases follow more or less this order. You may cycle through them in a day sometimes, while at other periods in your



life it seems like you need a few weeks at each one. The pace doesn't matter as long as the cycle keeps moving.

Most healing approaches are held back because they are missing one or more of these pieces, or because they emphasize one of them way out of proportion to the others. Number 3 above is entirely missing from most healing paths, and the whole train gets badly held back if that car isn't hooked up, as we will discuss soon.

The most important point for now, though, is to stop blaming yourself when you can't "just do it." There are ways to proceed where you can be much kinder to yourself, and that are far more likely to get you where you want to go.

Point Five: Huge Goals and Tiny Ones are Equally Important

If I were to ask someone, "Why do you want to heal emotionally?" I'd be likely to hear answers along the lines of:

"So my life wouldn't feel so painful and frustrating."

"So I could have more energy and motivation."

"So I wouldn't have these terrible nightmares."

"So I could stop binge eating."

"So I could get out of this emptiness and longing."

All good. These are terrific goals, pointing you toward reclaiming the life you deserve and have a right to. And to accomplish any of these would feel huge.

Yet at the same time these goals primarily touch on just one aspect of life: your relationship with yourself. Consider some other realms of life that are just as important to your well-being:



How can I grow closer to other people?

How can I stand up for myself better?

How can I get clearer about what I want to accomplish on this earth?

How can I make more of a difference to people?

How can I help the people around me to pull together?

How can I have an impact on the crises that are facing my world?

Some of you may now feel an urge to quickly put this book down. The last three or four questions on the list may especially bring up a sensation of, "I can't possibly take on those kinds of concerns right now, I'm barely making it through each day. The last thing I need is the weight of the world on my shoulders!"

Another way I hear this sense of barely-making-it summed up is in the common saying, "I have to get myself together before I can think about helping others – in fact, before I can think about anything else at all."

It does indeed make sense to be very careful about what you take on. And there are certain periods in life when we really have to just focus on our own healing and not think about much of anything else because we just can't.

But there are also risks to narrowing our view in this way, even temporarily. Notice some of the messages that we are sending ourselves from this outlook:

"I'm in such bad shape that I have nothing to offer others."

"My healing is all up to me."

"Dealing with relationships is just too stressful at this point."

"The world doesn't need me right now."



These ways of thinking can create substantial obstacles to healing. As I explained earlier, we run the risk of rooting ourselves in what's wrong with us. The result is that the whole, "I have to get myself together first" approach, as popular as it is – and as much as it's encouraged by many therapists and self-help books — often doesn't work well.

The Joyous Recovery approach is going to encourage you to start gently – not roughly – leading yourself to start thinking on four levels simultaneously:

- * my wishes and goals for myself
- * my wishes and goals for the people I care about (which often includes the goal to simply *have* more people that we care about in our lives, to find them and building connections to them in other words)
- * my wishes and goals for my surroundings (my neighborhood, my community, my work place, my spiritual community, my wider social world)
- * my wishes and goals for the world I live in

There are ways to think into these areas that will not add to your burden, and I'll guide you through how to do that. And what you'll find is that, rather than slowing your inner healing processes down, learning to move in and out of these four realms will get your recovery speeding along like never before.

One way to sum up this piece of what I'm explaining is that I would like to steer you away from thinking of healing as a process that you go through now so that you can live better later. Instead, think of healing as a *way* of living that will probably be with you your entire life, and at the least will be with you for many years. So you don't want to wait for later to live. The point of *The Joyous Recovery* is to start leaning into life right now. Yes, we do heal to live, but we also live to heal. And this interplay is actually what works best.

Point Six: Deep Release is What Greases the Wheels

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The sixth — and last — point in this section is the most overlooked of all, missing from virtually every well-known healing approach; and yet it is probably the most important concept of all. All human beings — and that includes you and me — come into the world built to heal. Healing *emotionally*, not just physically, is literally part of our bodies' physical design, and is in fact woven into how our immune system works.

Our bodies are primed to heal emotional distress through deep, prolonged, visceral releases. There is no question that these releases are inherent, because babies and children exhibit them without ever having been taught anything about them. These processes are present because they are *necessary* to us. The specific forms they take are the following:

- * Deep crying and sobbing, which is primarily a healer of grief and longing
- * Deep trembling, usually accompanied by frightened outbursts and agitated physical movements and often accompanied by sweating, which is primarily a healer of deep fear or terror
- * Deep laughter, which again is often accompanied by sweating, which is primarily a healer of fear and embarrassment at less-than-terrifying levels
- * Raging, which generally with intense angry noises and vigorous physical movements, which is primarily a healer of anger (this is a tricky one, as I will be explaining, because needing to release rage should never be used as an excuse for behaving in ways that frighten or intimidate other people)
- * Yawning, often accompanied by a desire to stretch, which is a mysterious part of this process and no one really knows for sure exactly what it does (but it is clearly one of the inherent emotional releases, for reasons that I will return to)

No other healing experience open to human beings has quite the transforming power that the inherent releases carry when they get a chance to work as deeply as they were designed to do. They are as central to lasting recovery as the immune system is to physical healing. In fact, they are interwoven in many intriguing ways with our physical immune system, as I explain in detail in my book *The Emotional Immune Response*.



Fortunately, though, there isn't any need to choose between these releases and other approaches to healing. One of my central messages is, "Stick with whatever you have found that brings healing to you. You don't need to abandon your practices or beliefs. Just *add* deep release to whatever path you are on. It makes *everything* work better."

The inherent releases have been massively misunderstood. One misconception is that these releases are ways of expressing emotion, which they actually have almost nothing to do with. We express emotion with words, songs, paintings, tones of voice, physical movements, and many other channels. But the inherent releases exist to *heal* pain, not to express it. And that leads to a crucial understanding: releasing pain cannot substitute for expressing it, and expressing pain cannot substitute for releasing it. These are two different processes that play very important but distinct roles.

A second crucial misconception is that the inherent releases just dissipate distress. In this view, vigorous exercise can play the same role as a deep sobbing cry does, since they can both leave us feeling clearer and both seem to have driven our emotional pain away. But actually two very different things have happened. The exercise has made the distress dissipate – which could lead to a better day, so it may well have been just the right choice for that moment – but the deep cry has actually *healed* a significant piece of the distress, so that it's gone. And over time, it becomes clear that the exercise cannot do what the crying can. Dissipation and discharge play two very distinct roles in our lives.

The releases don't tend to do much unless they go deep. That's why you may sometimes cry all night and not wake up feeling any better. Weeping won't do it. We have to relearn how to cry like babies, no holds barred, busting it all out of ourselves like an avalanche.

The Joyous Recovery will teach you some important ways to bring deep release to your life, It will also help you feel confident in responding when someone else starts to shed their pain, so that you feel like you know how to help and what to say.

If you can succeed in opening up these natural channels, all your other efforts will seem so much easier that you'll hardly feel like you're living the same life you were before. We could say that the deepest underpinnings of the Peak Living Network approach are love



and release. Our inherent nature, including the natural wisdom of our bodies, leads the way.

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You now know the six tenets of emotional healing upon which *The Joyous Recovery* is based. We will be exploring them in various ways throughout the pages ahead. These tenets create the foundation for building a healing process that is rewarding, connected, and successful. And above all, they lead to a recovery that is full of joy and excitement, rather than one that is dominated by a sense of slogging through a swamp in hopes of reaching green lands somewhere in the far distance. We can't do all of our healing today – in fact we will probably be healing for as long as we live — but the joy of regaining the pieces of ourselves that we lost, the joy of regaining our excitement and engagement with life, can begin today. And if it can, then why not do it that way?