

THE GIFT OF CRISIS

FINDING YOUR BEST SELF IN
THE WORST OF TIMES

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Published by Soul Circle: Dallas, TX

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Photography by Karen Almond Photography

Cover design by Bogdan Matei

Book design by Guido Henkel

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Printed in the U.S.A.

In the years our family fought for the survival of our men, Nick and Vito taught me love always brings transformation to our lives. That love is endless and can never be taken away from us, even when we can no longer see its source.

*To Nick and Vito
All my love*

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INTRODUCTION: THE GIFT OF CRISIS

Overnight, or in the space of the time it takes for a brief phone call or conversation, our lives become divided forever into “before” and “after.” Unexpectedly or confirming our worst fears, there it is—a divorce, a life-altering diagnosis, a bankruptcy, the unexpected loss of a job, a national tragedy, or other form of life interruption or trauma. Our normal routines are unceremoniously shoved aside; our daily tasks and interactions are completely re-prioritized. An event occurs, wrenching away our illusion of control and turning our ability to navigate our lives upside down.

But what if a personal, medical, economic, or professional crisis could also be the catalyst for something positive? What if, buried in the tears, anxiety, sleepless nights, anger, and fear crises can bring, there is also the possibility of personal, psychological treasure? Would we be willing to seek out the treasure? If so, how would we find it? I have seen friends and clients emerge wiser, more successful, and more loving from disasters which felled other strong souls. What makes the difference?

Twenty years before the series of devastating medical events that occurred in the lives of my son and my husband, I had read Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*. In this book he relates how, in the midst of the uncontrollable horrors and brutality of a Nazi concentration camp, he had uncovered the one freedom over which he could still maintain control. It was the freedom “to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” It became a passion for me, in my life and in my work as both a psychologist and leadership consultant for organizations, to help my

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clients understand and integrate this freedom in their lives. Regardless of what others said or did, in the most difficult of circumstances, they still retained the right to choose who they would be and how they would respond.

In more than thirty years working with clients as they faced tragedy or trauma, I watched them navigate their way through the experience—trying to find a way to survive the onslaught of emotions, challenges, and logistics crises bring. When my sixteen-year-old son was diagnosed with cancer, it seemed as if my entire existence had come to an abrupt standstill. Feeling out of control and helpless to change the circumstances, I turned to this belief that had become foundational in my life—I could choose who I would be during this crisis. Regardless of whether or not I had any other choices, I had this one. And from that insight, I began to find my way forward. And yet this belief was tested severely over the next three years as both my son and my husband dealt with the life-threatening illnesses altering the courses of their lives.

My clients' experiences and my own have taught me about the power of this choice. I also have come to understand that, while the energy of a crisis is invariably disruptive, it also can be transformative. I believe crises can be the Divine's way of getting our attention—a kind of crucible, melting off everything but the truest parts of ourselves. In those moments when we are jolted out of our routines or our beliefs, we can become desperate for a connection to something that feels more powerful than our individual existences. We are displaced from our normal lives. We can feel like strangers in a new land, looking carefully (and anxiously) at everything we encounter, trying to find a path to take us beyond the discomfort of this new place. And, with the disruption crises cause in our usual lives, it can also shake us loose from everything we are sure of, creating the potential for transformation.

Within crisis there is also an equal opportunity for destruction. Lives, hopes, and beliefs can be lost or altered beyond recognition. I

have met with clients who, after facing a significant crisis earlier in their lives, continue to experience the world as a dark, fearsome, and angry place. They are unable to let go of the past hurt, and resentment builds, allowing the damage to persist long after the disruptive event has passed. One of my earliest areas of interest, as a psychologist, was the question of why some clients lost their way in the aftermath of a personal crisis, while others found new meaning in their lives or used the crisis as a pivot point leading them towards a more fulfilling life.

In researching the lives of people who have gone through war, hurricanes, cancer, and other life-changing events, scientists have found what they refer to as “post-traumatic growth.” Tedeschi and Calhoun, early researchers of post-traumatic growth, define it as “positive psychological change that is experienced as a result of struggles with highly challenging life circumstances.” Victor Frankl was one of the first to write of the counterintuitive shift he coined “tragic optimism”—looking for a way to describe the clients he saw in his therapeutic practice who had made the choice to find some benefit in the tragedies they had experienced in the Holocaust.

As someone who straddles the worlds of psychology, science, business, and metaphysics on a daily basis, I envision this “positive psychological change” as the result of a process much like gold mining. The business of prospecting is anything but glamorous – treasure seekers spend much of their lives in muddy, inhospitable terrains, exposed to the elements. Some find nothing, but others emerge with items of value and great beauty. As I watch my clients venture into the bedlam and debris of their crises in order to find nuggets of personal gold, I am awed by the psychological, spiritual, and sometimes miraculous outcomes that occur. And while not all outcomes of crises are good, I have come to believe even the worst of situations can be a catalyst for growth.

As treasure hunters have found throughout the centuries, the back-breaking process of looking for gold, real or personal, is not for eve-

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ryone. The search to find meaning and growth in crisis is neither easy nor linear. Forewarned, I hope you will come on this journey of exploration. It was, for me, completely worth the process. The “Susan” who emerged (and is still emerging) from those years is far more compassionate, confident, loving, successful, and peaceful than the Susan I was when the crisis began. When I look back on those changes, forged within me by the crucible of crisis I went through, I am filled with gratitude.

Having gone through my personal crises without a manual, I hope this book will help you avoid or at least minimize the potentially destructive aspects of a crisis. My belief is, if you follow the suggestions contained within these pages, you will have a resource to help you survive the crisis, and navigate it with as much grace, resilience, and optimism as possible. With guidance, intention, and effort, I believe you can use what you’ve learned and how you’ve changed to create the potential for a positive transformation in your life. I invite you to skim the table of contents and decide what will be most useful to you, depending on where you are now. The book is arranged first by stages of a crisis and then by strategies to help you get through that period of time.

A couple of things to note about the stages. First, these stages were formulated from research and writings on transitions and change as well as the experiences of my clients and my own.¹² There are a variety of different ways to view the process. Second, stages are only roughly linear, despite how they are presented. For example, the first stage, “Survive the Initial Shock” discusses the emotional, mental, and/or physical shock most people experience when a traumatic event occurs. That being said, people will go through this process differently. For some it is an unpleasant way station they leave as quickly as possible. For others, the trauma continues to recur in their lives, rekindled by new information or events bringing back the memories of the original event.

So, I invite you to dip into the book, and skim or read the stories and the practical strategies for getting through the different stages of a crisis. Try a few ideas and decide for yourself if you find the practices or skills will be helpful to you. Or, as I like to suggest to my clients, “Read lots. Decide what makes sense to you. Toss the rest.” As you read them, I hope to remind you of what you already know but have forgotten, and suggest new ways of surviving and thriving when something happens—catastrophic or simply difficult—in your life. Wherever this crisis takes you, please be assured I am sending love and prayers your way.

THE FIRST STAGE: SURVIVE THE INITIAL SHOCK

When you are going through hell, keep going.

—Winston Churchill

WHEN YOU'VE BEEN DUMPED UNCEREMONIOUSLY INTO A CRISIS, IT'S much like being thrown unexpectedly into an ocean. You sink for at least a few minutes into those dark, briny waters, disoriented and confused. Then, some instinct comes rushing in that causes you to fight your way back to the surface. For some, the impetus is the drive to survive and live or an unwillingness to give up—despite the seemingly irreparable change that has occurred. For others, a desire to protect those they love pushes them forward. Regardless of the driver, it's a nauseating and terrifying process, those first few moments or days. You panic and thrash around before you remember again how to keep your head above the waves, and to breathe.

The moment that changed my life irrevocably came as my husband and I listened to the urologist's call from surgery. The pathology report on our son Nick's biopsy was in and it confirmed the worst-case scenario—Nick had cancer. Our world came to an abrupt, stomach-lurching stop. We looked at each other for a few seconds—each stunned into a state of fear and grief too intense and private to be shared through words. In those few seconds while the world stood still in our lives, we were transformed from a reasonably normal couple (one kid, a cat, a dog, two stressful jobs, and a mostly-okay marriage) to two people barely breathing, trying to make sense of a world that had, without warning, lost its familiar landmarks.

My clients and friends talk about divorces, job losses, the tragedy of September 11th or indeed the financial crisis of 2008 as being some of the moments when their lives were disrupted by an event for which they had little or no warning. Regardless of how or why the event occurred, if it was personal, financial or an act of nature, most people have a similar experience—they feel disoriented, terrified, and numb—sometimes all at the same time. Since our family's crisis, I have gone back to the research on crisis to understand what was happening to us in those first few critical days after a traumatic event. In doing so, I have gained an extraordinary amount of respect for everything to be navigated and it has changed not only the way I work with clients in crisis but also how I now handled crises in my own life. To say a crisis is disruptive significantly understates the impact it makes physically, emotionally, and psychologically. In fact, I have found it is critical for my clients to understand what is going on within their bodies, what is normal and what is not, as well as for them to be able to regain a sense of control and comfort in the days that follow.

CHAPTER 1: HANDLE WITH CARE

In times of life crisis, whether wild fires or smoldering stress, the first thing I do is go back to basics...am I eating right, am I getting enough sleep, am I getting some physical and mental exercise every day?

—Edward Albert

If you are at the beginning of a crisis, it can be helpful to grasp what is going on within your body. The overview provided here is not comprehensive, so I have provided additional sources in the Resource section for those who want more detail. I hope as you read through the paragraphs below, you will find some solace in knowing what you are going through is normal, at least in the initial stage of a crisis. Through the years I have found that too many of my clients have a tendency to blame themselves for what is actually a normal physiological reaction to extreme stress. They hold themselves to an impossible standard—expecting their intelligence and competence will keep them from feeling the effects of what they are going through, while allowing them to power through a life-changing event.

So, what is going on, inside this skin that may feel like it no longer belongs to you? Our bodies, relying on the primitive evolutionary design of the limbic system (this includes the amygdala and is referred to frequently as the “lizard brain”), respond quickly and completely to stress or distress we perceive to be severe. Our neurochemistry kicks into action, flooding the brain and the body with massive amounts of neurochemical hormones (adrenaline, norepi-

nephrine, cortisol, and epinephrine) to ready us to fight or flee—two of the three options we are programmed to follow in the face of anything the mind registers as dangerous—physically or emotionally. Physiologically, our blood pressure goes up, our pupils dilate, our senses become hypervigilant to any changes around us and our bodies shut down everything not currently needed such as digestion and cell repair. From a behavioral standpoint, someone experiencing a flight reaction to the crisis might find himself compulsively eating, sleeping too much, or walking away from a relationship of numerous years. Fight routinely manifests as lashing out—physically or verbally, responding to everyday occurrences with irritation, or creating distance from loved ones with hurtful words or sarcasm. The shock of the event can also cause us to freeze—unable to process information, make decisions, or articulate our thoughts—numb to what is going on around us. Worse yet, we are usually unaware of how the crisis is affecting us, finding others to blame for our anger or castigating ourselves for our inability to respond effectively to the challenges in front of us.

Not only do our bodies take the first “hit,” the impact of those natural chemicals running through us does not dissipate quickly. It can be days or weeks before the after-effects of those initial few moments begin to fade. If the crisis continues—getting additional terrifying news, being put into situations that feel unsafe, having to continue to confront the upsetting events—the body will continue to pump those chemicals through our bodies, readying us to take action when needed. And, because we are already in a state of hypervigilance, even normal happenings can trigger those reactions, slowing our recovery from the initial situation.

It is normal to have a broad range of thoughts, emotions, psychological, and physical reactions to the crisis you are going through, especially at the outset. In many instances, people find the crisis, and the events leading up to it, playing over and over in their minds. This can be experienced as memories that keep intruding in your

day-to-day activities, insomnia caused by the constant looping of terrifying thoughts, nightmares, or an over-the-top reaction to something reminding you of the crisis. Repeatedly, in those first few weeks, innocent comments from my friends or clients would be a catalyst for the horrible “what ifs” to come marauding through my mind.

Emotionally, quite a few of my clients find themselves tearful to the point of inaction or numbing out and/or avoiding anything that might remind them of the crisis. They get extremely busy, burying their anxiety in work or family, and become hyperactive in focusing on their to-do list. They put self-care at the invisible end of the to-do list and are, more times than not, completely out of contact with the emotions they are experiencing. I have watched as more than one client took on Superwoman or Superman characteristics, managing everything their families needed without asking for the help which could have lightened their loads—inevitably to their detriment.

Psychologically, a crisis can disrupt our lives in multiple ways. It can put into question our beliefs about God, ourselves, and those we love. Crises challenge our sense of self and our place in the world. Clients report feeling they are in perilous territory—betrayed by their bodies, their understanding of their world, or, sometimes, of God. Clients in crisis regularly blame themselves, become cynical, despair, or feel completely separated from any sense of community they had experienced before. Because of these factors, my clients routinely report more arguments with loved ones or feeling uncharacteristically aggressive about normal events such as being cut off in traffic.

Physically, the effect of the body chemicals slowly being released from our uncommonly stressed-out system can be experienced in various ways: as anger or irritability, startling easily, feeling nauseous, sweating, trembling, hyperventilation, and headaches, to name a few. Falling asleep or staying asleep can be difficult, as can eating. Taking care of the basics – eating, breathing, moving, staying

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hydrated, finding ways to relax –starts the journey back to effective action by allowing you to regain some control in a situation that can (at least initially) feel incredibly uncontrollable. For these and the reasons mentioned previously, it is important your healthcare team be aware of what you are going through so they can stand ready to assist you. I needed my amazing internist to fill a variety of needs: a listening ear, someone to provide resources, and someone to help me stay healthy so I could be there for my family.

STRATEGIES

STRATEGY #1. GET GROUNDED.

When we are in shock—facing something that seems impossible or coming to terms with a condition or event previously unthinkable in our lives, we can have a tendency to vacate our bodies and numb out, making it hard to discern what our bodies need to return to a state of balance. Our minds are so busy trying to absorb our new situation that we can lose track of time, forget to eat, or find ourselves running into things. As someone who normally finds comfort in food, I was completely uninterested in eating in the days following Nick's diagnosis. It didn't seem important, or indeed feasible, to eat while I was digesting this incomprehensible information. Breathing can feel like an unnatural act for some, with more than one client reporting becoming dizzy, unaware they were holding their breath, trying to prevent the crisis from unfolding. In addition to eating well (protein, vegetables, and good complex carbohydrates rather than sugary fixes), getting adequate sleep, and maintaining some kind of exercise program, try some of the following suggestions to get back into your body so you can do what needs to be done. Some ideas to try:

- Take your shoes off. Rub your feet back and forth on the carpet. The sensation will make you aware of your body. Then stand, and with your feet spread about shoulder-width apart, push as if you are on a rug and trying to split it in two with your feet. Hold the pose for at least one minute. The sensation of your legs pushing will also bring you back into the lower part of your body, centering you.

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- Stamp your feet. Standing comfortably, alternating feet, lift each foot and place it firmly back down, feeling the impact of the ground in your legs. Do it for at least 30 seconds.
- Jog in place. The repeated impact of your feet on the ground brings blood into your legs and increases your energy flow. Try it for 30 seconds to a minute at a time. This is especially good if you don't have time to exercise as it can be done in a hospital hallway while waiting (of course, you might get some odd looks!).
- Aromatherapy. The sense of smell is evocative and powerful, as anyone can attest who has been transported back to childhood by the aroma of honeysuckle, certain foods cooking, or other scents. Because our reaction to smells is so personal, any fragrance or smell you find soothing or comforting (for example: lavender, rose, jasmine, lemon or peppermint) will have a positive influence on your mental or emotional state. Beyond personal preference, skilled aromatherapists have discovered a class of essential oils called sesquiterpenes impact the nervous system, soothing it when you have been stressed. Oils falling into this category include cedarwood, spikenard, vetiver, sandalwood, and patchouli. The quality of the essential oil is extremely important, so do your research and buy from someone who carefully sources their oils. These oils need a carrier oil, such as sweet almond or hazelnut oil, to facilitate their absorption into the system and should be put on the wrists and behind the knees for the best effect.³
- Get a massage. Massage helps you be present in your body and it provides the nurturing you may be missing. Concentrate on any feelings arising while you're on the massage table. Let them come up and flow out of you as your muscles relax. Pay attention to the parts of you holding onto the tension so you can release those muscles more consciously. For

example, I consistently find my clients carry tension in the upper back region. Remembering to simply drop the shoulders from time to time will help alleviate the soreness. In addition, you may want to ask if your massage therapist can include some aromatherapy (see above for suggestions) for stress relief and grounding.

- Yoga postures. Hatha yoga, in particular, has several postures that support grounding. Consider dropping in on a local yoga class to determine if it helps you handle the stress of the crisis.

STRATEGY #2. RECOGNIZE THE FEAR.

The impact of fear is multi-faceted—emotional, physical, and mental. With fear in the foreground, we can feel cut off from the positive emotions available to us—the love of family, the embrace of the Divine, the caring of friends—making the fear feel isolating and inescapable. Physically, fear can feel like a rock in the pit of your stomach, a tightening across your chest, a feeling of nerves running through your body, or an ache in your shoulders. Regardless of how you are experiencing the fear, it typically seems overwhelming.

Because the purpose of our limbic system is to strengthen us when we encounter something we deem to be dangerous, it immediately takes over. Our heart pounds, we feel faint, and we sweat. Urgently our old lizard brain sends us messages to fight, freeze, or run like hell away from the danger. With the screaming going on from our limbic system, our frontal lobe – the place of reason, analytical thinking, and judgment – is pushed to the background. As Jon Kabat-Zinn points out in his classic, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, fear can lead to a feeling you've lost control over your life and to panic. These reactions are completely counter to what is actually needed from you at that time—the ability to respond to the immediate crisis with thoughtful analysis and decision-making. Recognize the sensations you are experiencing are natural and related to the fear. Rather than trying to fix it or make it go away, merely observe

it. Research suggests that labeling an emotion calms the response in our amygdala.⁴ This was a huge insight for Steven, a young man in his thirties. Steven can easily spiral into a fairly dark place when work and family stress seem overwhelming. He discovered when he simply watched the negative emotions rise up within him, and labeled them as fear, guilt, or shame without trying to figure out why he was feeling that way, he was able to stay out of the grim thoughts more successfully.

STRATEGY #3. BREATHE.

One of the most immediate and simple ways to get your brain to calm down, and begin to operate more strategically, is to focus on your breathing—something you *can* control. While most of my clients understand their breathing is important, I'm continually surprised by the number of them who (like me) unconsciously hold their breath when anxious. They forget the importance of deep breathing in helping the body return to a calmer, less alert status. When frightening or sudden events occur, the body automatically begins to breathe quickly and shallowly as part of its survival instinct. Continuing to breathe shallowly will prolong the heightened sense of stimulation, preventing you from calming down and taking more intentional action.

Take a few moments to notice how you are breathing. Are you holding your breath? Breathing rapidly? Or are you supporting your body with slow, deep, regular breaths? Because breathing is such an important and basic way to re-center yourself for effective action, it is helpful to look at some ways to use your breath to do so.

- Diaphragmatic breathing. This exercise is particularly useful when you feel as if anxiety or stress is about to overwhelm you.
 - *Step one:* Sit up straight. The tendency is to hunch over when dealing with something impacting you like a body blow. When you're in a fetal position, it's

impossible to breathe deeply. Be aware of your posture while you breathe.

- *Step two:* Put one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.
- *Step three:* Slowly breathe in through your nose, making sure the hand on your stomach moves as the breath you take expands it. Watch to make sure the hand on your chest stays still.
- *Step four:* Blow out your breath slowly through your mouth.
- Repeat at least 5-10 times.

If you begin to feel lightheaded (as did one of my clients, before I learned to add the part about breathing *slowly*), you are probably breathing too shallowly or quickly and may be hyperventilating. Slow down so the inward breath takes at least five seconds and the outward breath takes as long or longer. The deep breathing should alleviate the heart pounding and lightheadedness. If not, immediately consult a physician (if you haven't already).

- Breathe in beauty—A technique I love and teach my clients is to “breathe in beauty.” This is a process that integrates breathing with a form of imagery and can be done anywhere you see something beautiful—a picture, a vase of flowers, the face of a child, a tree. I like to do it when walking out of doors, bringing activity to the practice, something research⁵ has shown to be useful.

If you choose to do this exercise while you walk, you will want to be watching for sights you find to be peaceful, relaxing, or beautiful. In the summertime in Dallas, crepe myrtle trees are in bloom and they are everywhere in my older neighborhood. Their vibrant pink, red, and white blossoms provide a constant source of beauty for me. As you walk, keep your pace steady enough to support slow, deep

breathing. Then, find something beautiful in front of you. Breathing in, imagine you are pulling the vision into your lungs. Observe the colors, scents, textures, and shapes of it flowing into your body, flooding you with the experience it invokes in you. When you breathe out, feel the stress, anxiety, worry, and fear leave your body and disappear into the light. When you pass it by, quickly focus your eyes on the next spot you find beautiful. Repeat five to ten times or throughout your entire walk. If you choose to do this while seated, bring what you are choosing to focus on close enough in order to perceive it clearly. Using the same slow, steady, in-and-out breaths, breathe in the beauty and breathe out the stress. Repeat the exercise as regularly as possible.

STRATEGY #4. FIND A SAFE PLACE TO CRY.

The initial stages of a crisis can bring seemingly unlimited tears and those of us who are criers by nature have experienced the release a good cry can bring. Uninterrupted time to let the tears flow naturally can clear the mind and bring a sense of calm. If you find yourself crying frequently in the days immediately after a crisis, give some thought to creating a time and place for those tears. Some people use the car, the shower, walks with their dog, church, or their bedroom. Regardless of where you choose, after you are done crying, create some kind of ritual to indicate to yourself you have finished. It can be as simple and natural as washing your face or it can be a healing moment of meditation where you send love to the person or the situation. Other ways to “finish” could be:

- Say a prayer.
- Use a mantra that resonates for you.
- State an affirmation such as “I let this go and let this loose” or “I release this situation to God for healing.”
- Take a shower.

STRATEGY #5. STAY WARM.

Hospitals and clinics can be harsh places to wait, especially when you're in the initial stages of a medically related shock. Take care of your practical needs in a way that is as soothing and nurturing as possible. Stock a big tote or backpack with bottled water, something warm (clothing or liquid), change for the vending machines, and something to read. Add things you need or will make you feel comfortable—antacids, scented lotion, essential oils, socks for cold feet. Take it with you every time you go, even if you have every reason to assume it will be a brief appointment. If you are not required to be in a hospital or clinic, you can nurture yourself in similar ways, at home or in your office. One client, going through an extremely stressful time in her career, stocked up on her favorite teas and snacks as a way to take care of herself at work. Others have brought in comforting music, flowers, or earphones, which allow them to tune out the noises that can be extremely jangling when your nervous system is on high alert.

I don't know whether it was fear, exhaustion, or a lowered immune system due to shock, but I was perpetually freezing whenever we sat in the waiting room of the oncology clinic. After several occasions when I had to ask for blankets to keep my teeth from chattering, I decided to find a throw to bring with me. I chose a purple, soft, chenille throw as a way to nurture my spirit (purple is associated with spiritual connection), appeal to my tactile senses that wanted something comforting, and keep me warm.

As simple as it seems, taking care of the basics is the first step towards regaining your balance during the first part of a crisis. Equally important is to remember that, in your current state, your brain may not be functioning at its capacity. Spending a few moments to breathe, ground, and nurture yourself will pay off by getting you back on track more quickly.