



TriYoga® Central Pennsylvania

Cracked Open

by Theresa Shay

I was 32 when life as I knew it ended. It happened when the relationship with the man I had, for most of the previous decade, hoped and wanted to marry collapsed.

Those days, those weeks and months numbering more than a year, I was sure of nothing and hopeless about everything. Despite the many loving friends, steady work, and helpful therapists around me, I was just barely managing to get myself dressed and to my appointed position at the desk in a middle school classroom each day.

During that period of grief, I questioned how I had gotten to this awful place and how life could be so cruel. I thought of myself as a loving, caring, capable person. I knew I had worked hard and done everything I knew to do to be responsible and responsive in my relationship. I believed I was a good communicator, honest, trustworthy, and committed. Most of all, I had thought I was worth treasuring and cherishing, and yet, in my story of abandonment, I felt disrespected and unvalued. I could not make sense of how the relationship could have ended after such big effort, how the other could be so blind to the love I was offering, and how I could have chosen a partner who was, I had decided, so hurtful.

I sat on my porch that school year every minute I wasn't due somewhere else and cried. I lost so much weight that I barely recognize myself in pictures from that time. I kept my practices going, doing yoga and repeating mantra on my prayer beads, but I felt like a ghost having to walk the earth without a home. I could barely leave my house on the mountain because it felt like my sadness was too big to navigate the streets and conversations of the world.

In those days, three things would shift my pain. One was playing the piano. One was walking in the woods. One was going to the yoga mat. None of these made me feel what I could have called "happy" but they could keep me from going further into despair. They held my attention long enough to give me a break from going over the same story in my head, a story which kept ending the same sad way – alone.

Alone or not, there I was by my Self: abiding, accompanying, absolving, holding, loving, and treasuring this being who was riding big waves of emotion, which is exactly where I needed to be to get tossed into the arms of my True Self.

I left my job as a schoolteacher at the end of the year. I vowed to sit on my porch for a year and do only things I liked. I taught yoga. I worked at a farm. I took myself to see a spiritual director. I gave myself permission to sit and wait for something to become clear. I promised I would wait and watch the trees grow and fade, to do only what moved me, until the year was up or my savings account was empty.

Today, I sit here still. But now, the story of pain has become a story of gratitude. The shift for me came all of sudden one day, when I realized I was free. Completely free of everything and *for* anything. I realized I was loved by something much bigger than anything human, that I was connected eternally to a presence within that would never abandon me. I realized, with tears drying on my cheeks, that the call for my life was to do everything I had to do to never move out of this relationship with Self, connected to the eternal. In yogic terms, I recognized the *Atman*, or soul, which was safely situated quite separate from the pain I thought "I" was going through.

It was a head-spinning experience, in the best of ways, like a cartoon character who gets up from a fall and starts walking only to realize a few steps later that its head is on backwards. *Sswwwttteeeeeeep*. The head swivels forward and our friend sets off again all put together and heading down the road.

When we hit the darkness, touch our most dreaded despair, we believe it is the worst thing one could have to experience in a human life. We think we should be spared this pain, and that we can't possibly deserve what we have been dealt. We look for who's to blame, and friends try to support us by corroborating our story. For me, breaking up in my 30s was the scariest prospect. I was young enough to imagine there still might be time, and old enough to be afraid that I was out of time. Panic set in, a panic cloaked in "I can't look too desperate" outerwear, covering "I never want to be that vulnerable again" underwear. Imagine the confusion.

And yet, thank God for the confusion. Welcome, pain; welcome, ending; welcome, death; welcome, dying. Welcome, being left; welcome, needing to leave; welcome, being laid off, being abused, being hurt. Welcome, overdose, illness, separation, desperation, guilt, hurt, anger and sadness...welcome to every circumstance we cannot imagine how we will survive. In these times, buckets of tears wash us out. And then, Spirit makes its way in.

When everything falls away, there's a baring of the soul that is exactly what is needed for discovering truth. Many of us are delivered to adulthood thinking there is a right way to proceed, a certain way to be good at it, a recipe for success, and some promise that if we try hard and work diligently, everything will turn out just right.

But "just right" may not be, in fact probably is not at all, what the soul needs to wake up. What the soul needs is truth. Pure, raw, intense truth, no matter how much pain it rides in on. When the little crack of Reality appears, like the truth that this life doesn't look like I thought it was going to or wanted it to, it's the beginning of unsticking, unclogging, uncovering, and unraveling the wound up story we have gotten entangled in.

Who am I? Where am I going? Who will go with me? What am I supposed to be doing with my life? We might end up dying realizing we started with the last question first, and have gotten now, finally, to the first question last. It's a death that, if we have the chance to experience while we're still alive, can be pursued in complete fearlessness for the hope and freedom that it brings.

When stories fall away, of what I hoped to be or hoped to become or believed I was, what is left standing is who I am in this moment, the eternal Atman. There is no assurance of what is to come next or why I got what came before. But there is peace in the realization that I AM in this moment. The sooner I'm there, and the more fully it's embraced, the faster life sorts itself out and I find myself alive and awake in gratitude.

It takes a willingness to let go of everything one may have thought mattered: relationship, family, money, career, security, "just right". It takes a willingness to trust that something huge and powerful and present is guiding. I would cry on my porch, "This cannot be," until I was crying out in awe, "Oh, this is!"

Stepping into the hard place is the opening. The terrifying experience, the tragedy, the illness, the despair, is one of the greatest gifts a life can give. The armor can fall away because there is nothing left to protect. The story can fall away because we've given up on how it's supposed to end. The posture can be released because we're no longer checking to see who's noticing. Instead, we are simply being present, complete, content, loved and loving with each breath.

For all the pain of my life, I would not give up this knowing. It has pointed me in the direction that has revealed everything that is worth having in life. What was once so unbearable is what I now see saved me. The hard places crack us open, and as one song says, "That's how the light gets in."

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