

Not the Price of Admission:

Healthy Relationships after Childhood Trauma

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Forward—And Onward

Memorial Day weekend of 2015 I had a plan to work on the last chapter of the draft of a book that I had nearly completed in the two previous months. I was going to write “finis,” send it off to people to read and make comments on, and savor the experience of creation before taking some time to revise, edit, and publish later in the year.

This is that book. I didn’t spend that weekend writing. Instead, I had the universe insure that I was reminded of the fact that I am completely unable to predict the future. I walked into my home that Friday evening after dinner with friends to find that thieves had been in the house in my absence. They stole many things that could be replaced, and one thing that I knew I could not order one of from anywhere. Both of the copies of the draft of the book left with the thieves. I had carefully backed the book up on a flash drive and a laptop. The thieves had taken both of the devices on which the book resided.

One sleepless night later, I sat exhausted and grief-stricken at my keyboard, wondering what this book would be if I had to recreate it. I do not make notes or an outline when I write. Instead, I write books by gestating them in my brain for several years and then dumping most of the volume out into the keyboard over an intensive week or two week long writing session. The ideas for the book had all migrated to the page. I was uncertain that I could ever find them again.

I wrote six pages that day. I tried to begin the grieving process, and yet I also did not, could not accept that I had no options available to me. I decided to hope against hope that I could lure my thieves into ransoming my flash drive back to me. I had an idea of who had invaded my

home, and what they might value. The neighborhood in which I live, known for being free-spirited and open, has been chronically plagued by a group of methamphetamine addicts who break into houses and cars and steal packages off porches. I was fairly certain that they had been the ones in my house. I took a picture of the stolen flash drive off the internet and used it to make posters which I put up all around my neighborhood, targeting the places where I knew that these folks went for cigarettes and sugar and alcohol, offering a no-questions-asked large reward for the return of the flash drive.

My hunch proved correct. Five days later, a knock on my door introduced me to a disheveled man, misery streaming out of every pore of his being, who had a copy of the poster and the flash drive in his hand along with a deeply not credible yarn about how he had “found” it. I paid my ransom, thanked him profusely for returning the book to me, wished him well, and got this beloved child of my brain back (and promptly backed it up into the cloud and three different geographically distributed portable devices!).

Had the manuscript not returned, I was determined to work through to a place of knowing that it was truly gone, to move through my grief and to write this book again even though I might never had found the words that originally poured out of me. For this motivation, which sustained me over those four painful days, I have a very special collection of people to thank. What kept me in touch with hope and the commitment to write were my commitments to my clients, as well as to all of the people I know who have struggled with paying relationship prices because of failures on the parts of those who raised them. The folks who have honored me with their presence in my therapy office for the last four decades are the primary inspiration for this book, as they have been for much of my writing.

While on the morning after the theft most of me wanted to simply give up and go into a place of despair, I was inspired by the courage and willingness of the people with whom I work. They do hard things on days when they are exhausted and grief-stricken and frightened by the echoes of their past, when they are struggling with the difficult realities of their present lives whose seeds were planted by childhood abuse and neglect. How could I be honest as a therapist asking people to take the risks to heal from their much more enormous losses if I was unwilling to get up off the ground of the theft and move forward? I couldn't be –and so I wept, was hugged by my spouse and my friends, collected some high sugar writing fuel, and sat down to try to talk with you all again about your right to have a good-enough, safe-enough, loved-enough life that works. I didn't write very much that day in May.

Wonderfully and strangely, though, the void that was opened up by what felt like the forever loss of this book created a space into which new ideas and new energy flowed. In the brief period between theft and recovery I found myself sitting down between therapy sessions making notes about things I wanted to remember to include, interrupting supervision meetings with my interns to run into my office and memorialize an idea that had emerged as we discussed a client's relational struggles. In the midst of grief and loss there was an opening. My thieves, as it turned out, gave me a gift, although I had to go through some quite painful hours to see it. The gift of knowing that these ideas were in me because of all of you is a precious one.

So thank-you, all of you, for being my reason to write. Thank-you for teaching me with your struggles. Thank-you for inspiring me with your courage. Special thanks to the six of you among my current clients who read a nearly-finished draft of this book and gave me excellent and valuable feedback.

Attention: Some hard stuff ahead

A few words before we dive in. One piece of that feedback has been that reading this book should not be done in one sitting. All of my early readers, who are all wise people who've spent a lot of time on their own healing work, advised me to tell you to take your time, go slowly, take breaks. One person read a few pages, and then put it down, and then picked it up again, for several months, then went back and re-read the book in its entirety a second time. This book stirs things up.

There are also some blunt and sometimes graphic descriptions of the kinds of truly bad things that adults do to children, and that were done to some of you. My early readers told me two things about that content. First, it was helpful to several of them because it told the truth about their experiences. They also said, and asked me to tell you, that reading that material may feel activating or numbing because it's hard to read. Give yourself ample time and permission to respond to that material in whatever way works best for you. Take what helps you. The rest won't matter.

One last thank-you. Almost all of this book was written at a house on the Big Island of Hawai'i that sits on the far east edge of the island along the tide pools of Kapoho. Being able to sit and write with the ocean in all of its changing nature directly in front of me, and to take breaks among the fish and coral of this unique protected reef, has made these hard topics flow more easily from brain to keyboard. Linda and Kirk Flanders, who have been instrumental in making parts of this reef into the Wai'opae Marine Life Sanctuary, have created a lovely space. Thanks, folks, for sharing your home with strangers like me. And thanks to the people of Hawai'i, who in their spirit of aloha generously have shared their aina (homeland) with all of us who began as their colonizers.

And now, let's look together at how to have the kind of emotionally meaningful relationships that you have always deserved.

Draft- Sample Chapter

Chapter 1

Time to Stop Paying Prices

“Waiting for the punch line, thinking that the joke’s on you, like good is too good to be true”

If you are this book’s intended audience, if for you, good is too good to be true in a relationship, then you are someone who grew up in a family where there was, at the very best, no danger, only insufficient quality of love and care for you. At the worst, you grew up in a situation where your physical, sexual, emotional, and/or spiritual safety were put at risk, usually repeatedly, by some or all of the adults raising you. These versions of childhood experience are painfully common despite being invisible in the world around us. There are rarely visible battle scars on the bodies of those who grew up in these war zones. Even when they can be seen it’s rare for people around you to know how you incurred these warrior marks. No purple hearts are given out, no monuments raised to the unknown survivors of childhood trauma.

Research conducted in the last forty years on rates of childhood maltreatment in people who aren’t in therapy estimates that at least one third of adults in the United States have had one or more of these less-than-optimal, and at times outright dangerous experiences in their childhood. That’s a lot of invisible purple hearts walking around the planet. This research does not even touch the experiences of people whose lives or bodies were not threatened, but who lived in an emotional desert where connection and affection were mostly absent. This book is for all of you.

Childhoods like yours are full of powerful emotional lessons. Without words, these lessons teach children that emotionally meaningful relationships are perilous, and can happen only when there is a large, painful, and continuing price tag attached to connection. Being emotionally close to other human beings feels unsafe, even when it’s what you passionately

desire. If you're reading this book there's a good chance that you've gone through life enacting this belief in the unsafety of attachment to other humans in some way.

Along the way you've put up with abuse and exploitation, with low quality of emotional contact and with distance, with all sorts of less than desirable situations. You've been convincing yourself that the best you could expect in a relationship was to be tolerated by someone, not truly and fully loved. You've spent hours anxiously wondering if the next encounter with someone who matters to you would be the last, never certain of the solidity of your connections with others even when the other person was a spouse who had promised to love you forever.

Or, trying to have some sense of control in a world that has felt chronically lacking control, you've repeatedly, not always consciously, done things to bring the "other shoe" down, since you're certain that it will drop eventually. As we'll discuss later in this book, these behaviors turn out to be powerfully biologically mediated. Your brain learned, very young, to associate danger with attachment. You've been confused by the outcomes of your attempts to have relationships that could nourish you. You've thought that you were doing the right thing, whatever that was, and were surprised by people responding in ways that seemed to tell you that you'd been doing it wrong. You've felt defeated.

You have believed, without putting words to it that paying these prices was the only way you could imagine that anyone would relate to you in other than the most superficial of manners. You have rarely felt secure in an emotionally meaningful relationship. You've sought connection, and it has failed to help you. You've tap-danced like crazy when it's felt as if things were at risk in a relationship. You keep trying, looking for the cues that you're doing it right, giving, pleading—often to little avail. There were rules, you were sure of it. You didn't know what the rules were, and it seemed as if no one was willing to throw a rulebook in your direction.

This book is a sibling to *Your turn for care: Surviving the aging and death of the adults who harmed you*, which is a book I wrote three years before this one. It's about dealing with your relationships in the present with the adults who had undermined your welfare and safety when you were little. The intersection of care-giving and the legacy of abuse was a topic that seemed urgent to address. This was because so many of the survivors of childhood trauma of my acquaintance were facing that challenge without much by way of support. As it happens, the first (and still only) professional publication on the topic that *Your turn* addressed in 2012 finally came out in 2015 and confirmed empirically the ideas I proposed there.

When this kind of vacuum of resources occurs in the vicinity of my work it frequently leads to the birth of a book. The seed for this book planted in a very similar way. This is because, to no one's surprise, many of the difficult dynamics I had touched on regarding dealing with aging and dying abusers also had relevance for other life issues being faced by survivors of less-than-adequate care in childhood. People would read *Your turn* and write to me to ask whether I had suggestions for a similar book to help them with the people who hadn't abused them when they were kids, the people who were sources of distress today as the survivor attempted to negotiate present-time relationships. Thanks, folks. I took your advice. Here's my response.

As I'll discuss in some detail later in this book, it turned out that many of the excellent books about relationships written for people who had good-enough childhoods didn't quite do it for survivors. They skipped the step of explaining why emotionally meaningful connections of all kinds presented core challenges that the self-help strategies simply didn't address. The neurobiology of trauma, the ways in which childhood abuse and neglect and disrupted attachment affects the very biology of your response to other human beings when you get close to them, calls for a different set of skills, including much compassion for self, in order to get the

relationships you want and deserve. For survivors of childhood trauma, the usual complexity of emotional intimacy is exponentially larger. It's not impossible to deal with; it's simply bigger than people who don't understand trauma can begin to imagine. We're imagining it here.

The fact that emotionally meaningful relationships – friendships, romantic relationships, and workplace relationships-- feel confusing, scary, and difficult for many survivors was something that I knew about only too well. My life and work had taught me that difficulties with self-care, with boundaries, with self-empowerment and self-compassion did not emerge solely when survivors had to address whether or not to care for an aging abuser or deal with the death of the adults who had made their childhood difficult. The dynamics learned in families of origin, and the neural networks laid down in early attachment relationships, show up in any relationship that matters, anything that's emotionally meaningful, anything where our human desire for connection is in play. When your early experiences fell below adequate in some way, adulthood and emotional connection have been like a wildernesses without maps, or worse, with maps that led you into confusion or danger.

The conundrums inherent in emotionally meaningful relationships that arise from childhood experience create dilemmas for survivors throughout life. While people who've had adequate or better childhood experiences do not skip challenges in relationships, the pitfalls are multiplied and sometimes quite different in shape and form for you, the people whose adult caregivers were below adequate in their behaviors towards you.

Problematic childhood experiences with the adults who raised us have lasting effects, many of them painful, on our conscious, non-conscious, and biological paradigms for how to engage in emotionally meaningful relationships. The relationship patterns that were set into motion by the failed adult caretakers from your childhood persist. Sometimes survivors

understand that this is what you're dealing with and are able to stand back and have some compassion for yourselves. Sometimes, more often, you blame yourself and feel shame. That is, after all, what you've been taught to do by your childhood experiences, in which relationship problems were ascribed by the adults around you to something wrong in you, not to failures in their care for you. Sometimes you are bewildered, wondering if you have a sign painted on your back telling others to misuse, exploit, and abuse you. One persistent experience for survivors is that you find that you pay all kinds of prices to be in relationships.

This book is an exploration of the root causes of the struggles that many survivors have with emotionally meaningful relationships (which I'm going to abbreviate in the rest of this book with the acronym EMR). It's also a discussion of some ideas about how to transform those struggles. Hacking the code of EMRs is challenging for adult humans in the best of circumstances. We are unable to read one another's minds, although in the families in which you grew up you were often expected to perform this feat of clairvoyance with the adults. We are different from one another, and rarely in perfect synch. We make and drop connections like a bad cell phone line. This normative collection of challenges has fueled an industry of relationship self-help books and workshops and retreats for people seeking better relationships, usually with their romantic partners (although those of you working in large organizations will likely have been put through retreats and workshops whose aim is to improve the EMRs of the workplace as well).

Sing, sing a song

Before there were self-help books, poets and troubadours sang for centuries of the vicissitudes of emotional connection. It's why we have torch songs and the enormous repertoire of "loved and lost" lyrics, and music in every genre about how someone did us wrong. It's why

there are the elegiac “once you have found her, never let her go,” lyrics, too. It’s why Sondheim’s character sings “send in the clowns,” that poignant ballad of having missed the emotional window of opportunity.

The drama of love and connection, although it is sung in many different melodies, is a universally human one. In a prior version of myself where I was a singer my performances were saturated with these lyrics of pain and passion that are so central to the human experience of attachment, love, and connection. Writing about this topic has turned on the jukebox that lives in my head because those lyrics often succinctly describe the challenges that survivors face when trying to forge connections with other humans. So bear with me, please, as I quote (and sometimes mangle) the words of Rogers and Hammerstein, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, and the other musical poets of love and broken heartedness. Sometimes I think that if I simply sat all of my clients down with Leonard Cohen’s collected works I would be able to retire from my practice. But not everyone heals through music—so here’s a book that’s not nearly as eloquent, trying to say the same things.

It’s the attachment

While emotionally meaningful relationships of all kinds can kick anyone’s behind, survivors face special challenges because of the less-than-adequate attachment experiences that you were given by the adults who raised you. Importantly, those challenges are not caused by something uniquely and terminally screwed up in you personally. One of the common effects of the kind of attachment wound we’ll be talking about in this book, which can happen in the absence of overt abuse or neglect, is that people blame themselves for the painful nature of the relationship with the caregivers from their childhood. You feel terminally unique, different from others in bad ways.

This book offers a window into how common are your struggles, how normal-for-attachment-wounded-people you are. I hope, like my early readers, you'll see yourself here, so that you can look in the mirror with enhanced understanding and compassion. Shame and self-blame don't thrive well in the light of knowledge. It's harder to pin all of the problems you've had in relationships on something inherently flawed in you when you know that you are not alone, nor uniquely flawed, in the ways that you find emotionally meaningful relationships to be such a mine field.

Looking for love in all the hard places

We come into the world hard-wired to seek attachment and connection with the humans around us. Ironically for those of you whose caregivers were the source of terror, we are driven to seek connection with our caregivers when we are the most frightened, a paradox which lives at the neural and emotional root of survivors' difficulties with EMRs.

From childhood on we spend our lives trying to figure out how to make attachment and connection occur in ways that nourish and sustain us, that calm and center us. This is, after all, what the attachment system of the brain, in humans and other creatures, is meant to do. Our brains naturally seek out connection when we are fearful. Simply because our experiences of attachment have been less than adequate doesn't change that brain circuitry and what it drives us to do.

When we have been well-loved, or even simply loved well-enough, by the people who cared for us before we had language, then our unconscious knowledge about the complex and intricate world of emotionally meaningful relationships is pretty reasonable and sane, and informed by self-love and self-compassion. There is congruence between what our brains are wired to do and our actual experiences with other human beings. Good-enough care in childhood

doesn't make relationships a walk in the park; it does provide helpful roadmaps, as well as the neurobiological substrate of connection = safety.

The well-and-consistently-enough-loved-in-childhood person believes themselves to be essentially loveable. It's the first lesson these babies learned, and it's a lesson that stuck with them. There was congruence between their wired-in need to seek connection and the safe-enough care given by the adults around them. These folks unconsciously expect others to treat them with love and respect and care. They believe that love endures, even when someone is angry or sad or temporarily unavailable. When they're not treated with respect and care they rarely assume that ill-treatment is happening due entirely to something they've done wrong. Although they are able to look at their contribution to interpersonal difficulties, they don't immediately assume the worst or heap blame on their own heads if a relationship goes through a tough time. One bad fight does not mean a break-up is looming. They know that love is solid, not fragile, persistent, not contingent on them being perfect.

If a relationship does come to its end, the well-enough-loved person is able to grieve, and unlikely to blame themselves unfairly. They feel the pain of loss and then they move forward, and find friendships and partners and spouses who are able to love them as they are. They learn from their errors, in part because those errors aren't coded as evidence of deep character flaws, the problematic interpretation made by many survivors that usually leads to anxiety and self-hatred.

Instead, errors in relationships are compassionately understood by the well-loved-enough as their own quirks and variations in human skillfulness when applied to the complex dance of intimacy and connection. Like an athlete in training, the well-enough-loved person can review

the “game film” of a difficult situation and observe themselves with sufficient compassion to make changes.

These folks love others in that way as well. They do not expect perfection, knowing it to be a myth, and are capable of offering humor and compassion to friends and lovers when they are human and stumble and sometimes step on their emotional toes. They can get angry when someone does something not okay, irritated by the umpteenth time that someone forgets to follow through on a commitment, upset when lied to. But they are unlikely to hold onto the anger or upset as a protective distancing device, or to use anger punitively or for the sake of revenge. They generally trust their perceptions and intuitions about people. They can sense betrayal and respond to it appropriately. They know it’s okay to say that someone is doing them wrong because they have never been required to choose between attachment and safety. A person who had good-enough care before they had language knows that they deserve to be treated with fairness and respect if they’ve behaved in a fair and respectful manner themselves. For them, attachment and safety are bound up together in one nourishing package.

With all of this capacity in their emotional repertoire, emotionally meaningful relationships will have challenges, bring heartache, and create both intense joy and immense confusion for people who were loved well enough. As the author Anne Lamott once wrote, “Life is so lifey.” It’s a flawed system, the whole business of relating to one another, and it’s what we’ve got. It’s an opal in its matrix; gorgeous, ever-changing, fragile at times and yet solid. It’s unpredictable (see under theft of this book when it was in embryo). Yet for those loved well-enough, attached well-enough, life and love are approached with optimism and hope even when there have been periods of loss and pain.

Love hurts

Very few of these capacities and beliefs have been available to you if you have had less than adequate experiences with primary caregivers in your childhood. When you have experienced disruptions and wounds to attachment in early life and/or abuse and neglect growing up, if one or some of your caregivers were more interested in how you were their mirror on the wall reflecting back their wonderfulness than in your well-being, if you could never predict how that person would respond to you from moment to moment – if any part of this was true for you, then you have been given a distinctive and difficult relationship to attachment, love and connection. Emotionally meaningful relationships feel like a 1 million piece puzzle, and not a fun one. Damage done to attachment capacities by the missteps or failures of caregivers reverberates throughout a person's life, particularly at the location of their EMRs. For you, love often does hurt.

As I was finishing up this manuscript I attended a conference presentation by a scientist, Regina Sullivan, who studies the brains of infant rats so as to better understand infant humans. She said something profound that made me sit up and pay attention. As she spoke about her baby rats, I had echoes reverberating through my head of the people I know who grew up with dangerous caregivers. She told her audience of trauma experts that adult caregivers control the brains of infants and small children. Adults, through their actions, regulate the brains of infants and children. Adults control temperature and access to food—and adults also control what happens in the brain's attachment system, through how they relate to infants and children.

Adults control the brains of infants and small children. Think about that for a moment. Consider the power of that statement. Your struggles with EMRs are not your fault, your flaw. They are the results of your infant and child brain being controlled by adults who were

dangerous, thoughtless, disengaged, doing things that messed very badly with your circuitry. There are things you can do to repair. You didn't mess it up.

For you, love and connection have been equal parts terrifying and desperately desired, difficult and shaming, a place where old wounds are activated and seem rarely healed even as you hope against hope that love might heal you. Despair and hope battle it out for control of your relationship life. Each new connection, each fresh friendship, is fraught. Moving to a new job, a new town, a new street is a challenge because you were too preoccupied as a child by the effects of what was happening at home to be able to pay good attention to social cues. You know that there are rules to the social game, but you were too busy soothing your anxiety or being depressed or dissociated or terrified when you were young to be able to pay attention to those social rules.

Each new potentially emotionally meaningful relationship with another adult – friend, lover, co-worker – is a new opportunity to either seek fulfillment of fantasies of finally being fully accepted or, more likely, suffer the fear of finally being completely crushed. Even relationships with kids are hard. If you have them, you worry that they will discover that their parent is worthless and reject you, which can make it difficult to navigate setting boundaries when your kid misbehaves or turns into an adolescent. Each new person who matters is an opportunity to reenact painful patterns that seem to show up despite your best efforts. Each new relational loss, each misstep in connection along the way, activates old themes of self-criticism and shame, and can become an opportunity to revisit narratives of inadequacy and self-hatred, or inner beliefs that no one is to be trusted no matter how nice they initially seem to be.

It's hard for you to trust your judgments about other people, which means that sometimes you trust too much and sometimes you trust too little. In many of your EMRs you feel a bit like a

tenant on a month to month agreement with a landlord who won't tell you what the grounds are for eviction. The sense that you're only there as long as the other person will put up with you creates a deep vein of anxiety under the surface of your interactions. No matter how much or how often the other person reassures you of their care and commitment, you're looking for the little cues that tell you that the end is near—because you learned, before words, that the end of connection is always on its way. Connection and danger are wired together for you, rather than connection being the thing that soothes fear. You're continuously checking the emotional weather because for you, once a storm comes in you believe that it's there to stay.

For you, being in a relationship that feels like it might be a good one looks like a scary ride that's fun for some other people but isn't for you. The survivor of difficult childhood attachment experiences keeps wondering what the price of admission is to that ride. To be in a relationship, do you have to give up your safety, your boundaries, your values, your identity? Do you need to walk on eggshells? Or constantly apologize for being human? Do you have to ignore the signals inside you that say that something's wrong and never voice your discomforts? Must you never be angry? Never express disappointment? Be the mirror on the wall saying, "Fairest, fairest"?

You scurry, you scramble, trying to read between the lines. What feat of emotional legerdemain do you have to do to get this one not to leave? Not to be mean to you? Not to show you disgust or contempt? Not to get tired of you? How can you sneak in some of your needs through the back door, where they won't be visible enough for this new person to see them and reject you? What can you do to get this person to sometimes, not always (because you are a realist, after all), be loving and tender to you if they are your partner, respectful and decent if they are your friend? And when they are that, must you tread lightly, ask little, simply be

extremely grateful for what you have so that they don't realize the truth that you're too difficult, too much, not worth it after all? Or even worse, must you cringe enough so that you're prepared for the emotional blow when they realize who you really are (not worthy)?

Sounds terrible, doesn't it? No wonder that many people who survived less than adequate attachment experiences find themselves giving up on the hope that they will ever experience love, care, and genuine connection with people in any realm of their lives. The perceived price of admission has been too high, paid too often, is perceived as too inevitable. The pain of risking finding out that it seems that the abusive, neglectful, difficult, or disturbed adults of your childhood were right—that no one will ever love you, like you, want to hang out with you—becomes unbearable. So you exit the stage. You get a dog. You make your life smaller. You tell yourself that you can be content with this—until the possibility of love and intimacy and friendship and connection shows up again without warning and you find it nearly impossible to resist hope. You get back on the ride once more, vowing to make it different this time, not really knowing how.

This book is about getting off that ride and getting on a path towards EMRs that can work for you and be part of your process of healing your attachment wounds. **You don't have to spend your life paying a price for what happened to you when you were little.**

It's not simple to reverse the course that you were put on. It is, however, doable. You're already someone who is able to work hard at relationship and connection. Heck, you were doing most of the work with the grownups in your life when you were little and it was really their job to do. The solutions you came up with then have gotten you here, and they don't work very well any more. You need help to work hard on developing the capacities that will actually help you get what you want. This kind of transformation can even be doable inside of a relationship

you're already in. It's not easy, and yet people *can* change their covert agreements about the emotional prices that they are willing to pay. You may be surprised in a good way about how willing people are to actually love you, or how surprised and saddened they are that you've been believing that they required a price from you.

Emotional intimacy, love and attachment, are our human birthrights. As primates, we are born needing connection with others of our species. We wither and sometimes die without those connections. We count on connection to keep us safe. When we lose a deep connection our hearts physically ache and sometimes seize up and spasm. When you have been unjustly exposed to serious failures on the part of the adults who raised you, you come into adulthood with wounds to your psyche and kinks in your wiring that are sometimes already known to you, and other times unknown until a close-enough relationship makes them palpable. While I was writing this book I met a woman who told me that she was unable to know about the depth of her wounds until she was fifty, after which, she told me, she cried for most of a year. Those wounds start to hurt again when you allow someone to get close to you in any way.

Thus the push-pull nature of emotional intimacy for survivors. You desire it, because you are human. You are terrified of it, because the source of your wounds has been other humans, the ones who you loved with all of your open, vulnerable, child's heart, and who in return wounded that heart repeatedly. You want connection and love; connection and love confuse you. You think you have to live on crumbs or learn to live hungry.

You don't have to live on crumbs, and you don't have to stuff yourself sick when the real thing shows up so that you can get as much as possible before it's yanked away. There's a way to get to the banquet table without paying more than everyone else sitting there, and to enjoy the meal, knowing that there's more when you're hungry again.

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

Philip Larkin, *High Windows*

The abusive or neglectful or impaired or depleted or dangerous adults who raised you taught you, by how they treated you, that there would be a price to relationships. This is because they exacted a price for your attachment to them. Their motives were many, and rarely consciously known to them. Some of them wounded you by accident, and some by design.

Some of these people were, most likely, the inheritors of generations of people who also had a distorted perspective on humanity. These difficult caregivers living with their own legacies of pain did not necessarily mean for you to suffer, too. They simply were not, themselves, able or willing to figure out how to heal from their own attachment wounds. In some instances they actually thought that they were protecting you from heartache by “helping” you to become impervious or detached, to pretend to emotional invulnerability, to develop a cynical take on other humans, to enter life devoid of hope, “realistic” rather than open to possibility. These caregivers schooled you in their own wounded beliefs that the price of admission to emotional intimacy was always going to be too high, and tried, overtly and covertly, to talk you out of ever wanting it.

Some of those caregivers were too caught up in caring for their own insides, scratching their own emotional itches, to care about how you felt or what happened to you. They were too drunk, too lost in untreated mental illness, too violent or cruel or sexually perverse or self-focused, to give a good goddamn. These caregivers betrayed you and lied to you, and tricked you into thinking that they offered attachment and connection. Your small child self struggled to stay connected to them anyhow, because you were human, and human infants and children are always doing their little level bests to be connected to adults and to love those adults no matter what. If it

even vaguely looks and feels like attachment, infants will attach, even if what you're attaching to is itself dangerous and toxic.

These caregivers frequently gave you very specific directions, usually unspoken but no less clear, as to the price of admission to connection with them –connection that you absolutely required, connection that you could not choose to go without. You had to tolerate violation of your body, not protest when they called you vile names, not flinch when they beat you, not ask questions when they left you alone and cold and hungry while they were out on a binge. You had to soothe them when they were anxious, listen while they ranted manically, not scream when they took you for a careening drunken drive in the car without a seatbelt, not complain when they failed to respond to your normal child needs.

You cheered them up when they were depressed. You flattered them and told them what wonderful people they were. They taught you that the only way to have connection was to give up important aspects of self and safety. They taught you that there was a price that you had to keep paying and paying. Love was for rent. The rent could be raised any time, collected any moment. You learned to be prepared for that to happen.

So it's no wonder that survivors of complex childhood trauma and other forms of problematic childhood experiences struggle with emotional intimacy. What has been consistently impressive to me, as a therapist whose good fortune it has been to work with so many of you for the last forty years, is the persistence, creativity, and hope that many survivors have brought to the arena of EMRs. Thrown in with predators, you have been courageous. Licking wounds, grieving, you have come into my office feeling defeated—and yet have risen up again, and again. You have fought for your birthright of good-enough relationships with others. The power of the

human urge to attach, to “only connect” is profound. It’s a force of nature to which I bow in respect.

The confusion that you often feel when your emotionally meaningful relationship does seem to be with a decent, compassionate, not-like-your-family human being is another legacy from being raised by adults who failed miserably at the job. Is this the “real thing?” And if so, what do you do with it? Is there truly no other shoe, no Lucy holding the football to pull away from you at the last nano-second? Does this person really mean what they say? Where’s the hidden agenda that you must figure out?

When survivors aren’t caught in a reenactment of childhood experiences, you frequently have no idea how to behave or what to expect. Unconsciously, you may begin to search for small clues that tell you that this new person is, indeed, just like all the rest. You pull out your familiar ways of paying for connection even as the other person wonders why you don’t believe that they do, truly, want to connect with you, simply connect, with no hidden painful prices.

Many survivors of less than adequate childhood attachment experiences come to see therapists because you find yourselves either somehow blowing up every relationship you’re in, or being left behind and betrayed, and sometimes abused or endangered, by every EMR that you’ve had, friends and lovers alike. Sometimes there’s a painful pattern of getting people to leave before they leave you, controlling what feels like an inevitable process of loss. A tragic pattern of leaving the good ones behind before they “figure out who I really am” often dogs the emotional footsteps of survivors of less-than-adequate attachment experiences. The feeling of being damned no matter which choices you make can feel defeating, and yet too true to you.

Or you find yourself being used, abused, and exploited everywhere you turn. You’re the one at work who finishes other peoples’ projects, the one left to clean up the dishes after the

potluck, the one nominated for the crappy jobs. You don't understand why that happens. You wonder if there's a target on your back saying, "Kick me." You end up feeling as if you're doomed to repeat the pain of your childhood. Maybe, you think, your caregivers were right. People are cruel, you'd better get used to it. But you don't want to get used to it. You don't want them to be right. So you calculate how much more of a price you're able to extract from yourself, and you try again.

Not the price of admission

You don't have to live like this. I'm here to tell you that your worst fears and despair need not be true. You can have love and connection without paying prices. This doesn't mean that good-enough relationships are all rainbows and unicorns and sappy love songs. Far from it. Attachments between humans, intimate relationships, friendships, all of the permutations of how we connect, are never perfect and sometimes are obnoxiously difficult to live in. People who are well-loved, connected with others who are well-loved, still have conflicts, still experience moments or days or weeks or months of emotional distance and distress, still have their share of difficult encounters, still get irritated by the other person, still end relationships or behave badly. They still lose those they love to illness, death, distance. They are no strangers to grief.

The differences are what the well-enough-loved-as-a-child folks do with these experiences. Each problematic encounter is treated as its own thing. It is not evidence of something else, or the predictor of something else, ultimately leading to a negative judgment about the self. A bad relationship with a former friend or partner or co-worker is simply an unpleasant experience that one hopes not to repeat. These negative encounters with others are not seen as lessons to remind the person of their place in the world. They are simply what they are; one bad time with one person who perhaps turned out not to have been a very good choice. They

are not evidence that one must pay a higher price simply to have someone in your life. They are just bad times.

A fight with your spouse is only what it seems to be, a fight about that pile of clothing not put away once again, not the first sign that you will be abandoned because you have either been the one failing to put their pile away or because you were the one opening your mouth to indicate unhappiness with the pile. A friend or partner having a bad month isn't cause for the despairing knowledge that things are about to go badly from now on, or for putting yourself entirely aside to bring that person back to feeling good. It's simply the normal ups and downs of human experience. A loss is cause for sadness, not self-blame.

The reasonable emotional cost of attachment is, should be, that sometimes we feel distress because we differ and are in conflict with one another. The reasonable cost of attachment is that sometimes we're angry with someone close to us who has behaved in a way that is not okay and that we want them to stop. A reasonable cost, when a relationship is lost or someone dies, is that we feel grief. Grief is, in fact, one of the most powerful indicators of the presence of love. The presence of grief felt cleanly, with no accompanying self-hatred or self-blame, is the evidence of love.

But the cost of attachment is not and should not be the requirement to get rid of yourself, make yourself small, or make the relationship all about pleasing and soothing the other person at the expense of your own welfare. The price of connection is not having to be in danger. You don't have to bargain away safety in order to have connection. The price is not about feeling out of control of behaviors that seem to chase other people away. Those are unfair prices, psychic loan shark prices. Those inflated and unfair prices are what this book is about no longer paying.

In these pages we will explore two things. First, we'll look at how a childhood in which you are subjected to less than adequate attachment experiences creates challenges to emotional intimacy for survivors. We'll consider common relationship patterns that emerge from these wounds to the psyche and look at some of the underlying neurobiology of attachment. Then we'll explore the difficult and yet entirely possible task of changing patterns so that you can increase your capacities to find and keep the quality of love and care that we all deserve.

None of this is simple. The terrible gift of being abused or neglected or exploited by your caregivers in childhood is that it makes the good feel dangerous and suspect, the bad feel familiar. Change entails learning to tolerate difficult sensations and emotions, to embrace the terror of ambiguity, and to disrupt non-conscious loyalties to old family narratives about how life and love will go for you.

Been there, done that, have the t-shirt

All of this is doable. I know, and not just because I've been a therapist for my entire adult life. I've been here myself. I am the child of a depressed mother and a scared and angry father. Each of them carried their own emotional burdens, ones that they placed on me and my siblings because they had no idea of how not to do so. They were not malicious. They were simply themselves hurt and impaired.

My mother was beaten and strangled by her father when she was young and exposed to his abuse of her mother and to her parents' frequent screaming matches. My father was pressed into service as his immigrant parents' English translator when he was a child, requiring him to deal with difficult parental emotions at time in his life when a child should be shielded from adult realities. When he fell in love with my mother, he was cut off emotionally by his parents who did not approve of his choice. He spent his last two years of college living at home being

frozen out, not spoken to. His parents then spent years trying to undermine the marriage, leading to him cutting them off for a period during my own adolescence.

One result of these legacies of their own difficult families is that they were one another's everything. They were fused as tightly as if someone had welded them together. Another was that they were two emotionally wounded people who had no idea how wounded they were. A third result was that our family had as a norm that people could stop loving their children or their parents, could simply cut them out of their lives. My parents had had that experience. How could they possibly have known any better?

Our job as their kids was to support them, mirror them, make them feel good, and tolerate their emotional distress; in short, to carry on with a reversal of the roles of parent and child that they had each had foisted on them as children themselves and which, in consequence, felt completely right and normal to them. As in many families, the legacy of anxiety, disconnection and fear in the realm of attachment was intergenerational. They also carried cultural and historical wounds, inheritors of two millennia of anti-Semitic persecution that had finally sent my grandparents to the U.S. in the early 1900's, fleeing systemic anti-Semitism and danger at home in Poland. They carried the epigenetic changes to their genome that all members of targeted cultures carry, changes that affect the ways in which people code fear and danger.

As their eldest child, I learned early that one of my tasks in life was soothing and pleasing them, entertaining them and placating them. Keeping my mother emotionally regulated became the entire family's task, especially after a debilitating bout of post-partum depression put her in a psychiatric hospital when I was six and a half. Since she never spoke of her childhood history, which I learned only from her mother and younger sister when I was myself an adult, and since her psych hospital stay occurred in 1959, long before the link between childhood trauma and

depression was known, she never had a chance to genuinely heal. She simply got less symptomatic from being given electroconvulsive treatments.

She became avoidant, as is true for many trauma survivors, terrified of a recurrence. After that terrible and frightening time in her own life she did not want to ever have to be “uneasy,” as she finally said to me towards the end of her life, and I did my best when I was a child never to let her know anything that was troubling me, ever.

Any time one of the kids behaved in ways that were distressing to her, our father’s rage would emerge. He was what dog people call a “fear-biter;” when scared, he symbolically bit us. His emotional safety depended hugely on her well-being. Thus our normal childhood failures of perfection, which she could rarely tolerate well as her depression persisted in a mild form for years, were threatening to him. As a psychotherapist, as an adult who has compassion for suffering human beings, I get it. Tears of compassion for him well up in my eyes when I think about how scary this all was for him. He was only thirty-two, with three little kids, one of them a newborn, when she fell into her depression. He was pretty emotionally alone in the world but for her, psychologically unsophisticated, not self-aware. He was trying to soothe himself when his beloved wife fell into an emotional abyss. His children were one of the means by which he did so. Some of the ways he soothed himself with us were good ones. I knew the laws of thermodynamics when I was seven because I was his companion on long walks, where he taught me things that were relevant to his work as an engineer.

But when we took normal childhood risks, she became frightened, and he got mad. When we failed to appreciate her care-giving efforts sufficiently, she took to her bed, more depressed—and he got mad. When she seemed to give more attention to my brother than to him, my brother became his target. When they had had a bad encounter with each other, I found myself on the

receiving end of the verbal abuse. He couldn't be angry at her until the very end of their lives when he was too ill himself to contain it, so he deflected that anger onto us. Love was contingent on keeping the balls of my mother's happiness well-juggled.

We all tried hard in our ways, my brothers and me. We got good grades and high scores on our standardized tests, we won awards, we excelled in many endeavors. We could be bragged about. Ultimately none of it was ever quite enough because each of us were children, with our own unique desires and opinions and imperfections. Each of us grew up, got minds of our own, differentiated from them, which was nearly intolerable. Each of us, in our own way, came to realize that nothing we could do would ever satisfy our parents. There was always going to be a "but" attached to any words of praise. Each of us has paid some prices.

The therapist I am had its beginnings in that little girl who would sit for what seemed to be forever at the table in a darkened kitchen as her mother poured out words of fear and sadness to her. My clients think I'm patient. Maybe- and you, and I, too, have those two and three hours long kitchen table "sessions" to thank for my patience.

So I know, not only from the work that I do, but from living my own life trying to figure out how to stop paying a price for connection, that this transformation process is possible. It's not easy in any way. Anyone who tells you that you can take six simple steps and have great relationships is either deluded or lying to you. Having good quality encounters with other human beings is a skill. It requires continuous practice so that the neural networks associated with love and attachment can be transformed over time from their previously well-worn traumatized grooves into new ones that aren't about trauma. These new networks will be more fragile, and need more care and tending than the old ones.

The old networks will not be gone. They will need to be gently thanked and set aside, repeatedly, in favor of the new ones, because they will continue to attempt to assert themselves. You know that feeling you get when you can hardly stand to be in your body when you're in conflict with someone you're in an EMR with? That urge to just shut down and go away and get it over with so that you don't feel like tearing your face off? That's those neural networks doing their thing.

Having the relationships you deserve also requires learning to tolerate as forms of normal life certain kinds of distress that, in your childhood, usually were the harbingers of something very bad happening. You get to learn to be around other people being unhappy and know that this is not the evidence of coming doom. To stop paying unreasonable prices, you have to be willing to learn to soothe your insides while someone close to you is being unhappy or even angry, and to trust that the relationship will not be damaged if you do not leap into the breach and immediately make things good for everyone else. You'll have to learn to embrace ambiguity, to be able to get through not-knowing and not being in constant contact with the other person. To stop paying prices you have to rediscover and rebuild your capacities to accurately assess other people, the capacities you were born with and had messed with by damages to attachment. You need to learn to respond to your assessments of others in light of that present-day information rather than through the lenses of your childhood. Just because someone reminds you of the father who violated you doesn't mean that this new person will, too. Most important- giving up paying the unfair prices of admission to connection and love means learning to live radically in the present. This is a challenge for survivors because so many of you live relationally in the past. So let's explore how to get into the time machine and come firmly into the present.