



THE POWER OF ACCEPTANCE Growing From Suffering

By Catherine Dowling

“It’s excruciating in the short term, but two years from now you’ll be back here telling me it was the best thing that ever happened to you.” Those were the words of my friend Jenna’s doctor after Jenna’s marriage ended. It was the most painful time of Jenna’s life but just one year later she was able to admit to herself that her doctor was correct in everything but the timeline.

In our western society we grow up pushing pain away. We distance ourselves from pain through both legal and illegal drugs, shopping, compulsive socializing, eating or not eating...the list is endless. More subtly we can use caretaking of others, anger, blame and even obsessively positive thinking to allay suffering. Sometimes this is the only wise option. In Jenna’s case she didn’t want to live so medication was the sensible, short-term solution for her. But every spiritual and wisdom tradition tells us that the dark times can be the most fertile periods for growth, the incubators of new life.

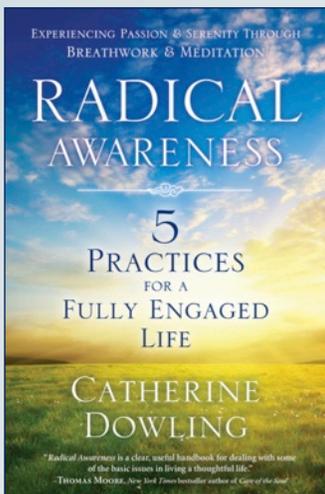
The big events—divorce, bereavement, losing a job or a home, physical injury—can plunge us into long periods of suffering that last months to years. In the aftermath of these events we often need support. In addition to a limited period on medication, Jenna used therapy and daily contact with her network of friends to get her through. But almost daily, life throws up little growth opportunities disguised as something we’d rather do without. The put-down at work, the argument with a child who won’t obey the rules of the house, the shop assistant who is rude to us, these all invite us to go beneath the feelings of irritation, hurt, shock or frustration to discover something new about ourselves. The more we can accept the pain, the quicker and deeper the learning experience.

Jenna’s pain could have defeated her—made her permanently angry and bitter—but she opted to face it in manageable doses. In that process she faced her own co-dependency, insecurity and loneliness and the fact that she brought those issues into her marriage. She’s now a much happier woman than at any point in her life. She can also appreciate the good times of her marriage.

In the same way, the accumulated frustrations and hurts of daily life can help us to either grow or stagnate. I have found two tell-tale signs that I am pushing the small pains away: I focus on what the other person has done and how wrong they are, or the situation keeps happening to me, often in different contexts. These are signals that I should let myself feel my feelings and then go beneath them to the role I play in each conflict or situation. I’ve found that the acceptance of both pain and responsibility is a far quicker path to a more peaceful, effective life than resistance.

www.catherinedowling.com
catherinedowling@yahoo.ie

“There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own Soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.” ~ C.G. Jung



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