

Conscious Creation: Module 3

Step One: Making Peace with the Past

If peace is really what you want, then you will choose peace. If peace mattered to you more than anything else and if you truly knew yourself to be spirit rather than a little me, you would remain nonreactive and absolutely alert when confronted with challenging people or situations. You would immediately accept the situation and thus become one with it rather than separate yourself from it.

— Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth*

We love our stories. Frankly, we love all kinds of stories, and we surround ourselves with them, whether we stream them, read them, or get them through podcasts. We devour stories. Much of daily conversation is storytelling. Stories make us laugh and give us a way to escape, and they also engage us on a deeper level. They hook us with dramatic events, and they keep us engrossed with conflict, with a challenge of some kind that seeks resolution.

Perhaps your personal story, your past, is the book that you can't seem to put down, the binge-worthy series that seems to never end. It's the painting you can't stop working on, the movie you will never finish. The conflict at the center of your personal past is the most compelling conflict of all. You can go to therapy and spend years recounting and evaluating it. Or you're not aware of it at all; it's just there, the powerful invisible director of your life and your decisions. In my experience, we cannot consciously create the life of our dreams until we make peace with the past. And, if you can't let go of that conflict, you can't make peace. And making peace is the first step in consciously creating your life.

Unconscious Creation

We all create, consciously and unconsciously. Unconscious creation is simply creating something from the foundational beliefs that form the basis of your personally constructed reality. Sometimes the thing we create unconsciously is a role for ourselves as victim or as long-suffering hero. That's what suffering is, really—unconscious creation engrained in memory. Of course, our memories may seem very important. Our memory, together with our ongoing awareness of what's happening in the present, seem to help us make sense of the world, to give us continuity of experience. It's part of what we believe makes us unique. It shapes our personality so that we can be more or less the same person today as we were

yesterday. But our memories can also make it difficult to remain open to some forms of new information and experience.

When Travis came to me for counseling, he told me his story very gradually, and I learned that some traumas were buried deep within his memory. His mother had been addicted to drugs and alcohol. “When I was little, she would disappear for months at a time and then reappear out of nowhere,” Travis explained. “We never knew how long she was gonna stick around or when she’d come back again. I always wondered what I was doing wrong. Why couldn’t she stay with us?”

Whenever she left, Travis and his younger sister, Cynthia, were shuttled to live with their grandmother. But when their grandmother died, they entered foster care and were sent to live with different families; he didn’t see Cynthia again for many years. Travis found little love or nurturing in foster care—he was sexually and physically abused by one of his foster fathers. He never gave up on his mother: “Whenever I could,” he said, his head in his hands and his voice soft, “I wandered the streets looking for her. I felt that if I could find her, I could bring our family back together again and everything would be OK.”

When he was emancipated from the foster care system at the age of eighteen, he had limited life skills. He hadn’t yet reconnected with his sister, and he ended up living on the streets. He was anxious and depressed: “There was no relief outside of getting drunk and high. I had nowhere to go and no hope.” By the time he turned twenty-one, his addiction had brought him to his knees, and he entered treatment and attained sobriety.

The trauma of Travis’s early life perpetuated an unconscious belief far more damaging than the idea that foster kids can’t succeed. Everything that had happened to him since he was little had planted the belief that now haunted him: “I’m not lovable.” The seed of this belief was planted in trauma, and he unconsciously nurtured it into an “I am unlovable” tree. This tree creates shadows and filters light in a specific way; it is the way Travis sees and experiences the world.

If Travis’s experience were a movie, we could say that he has been unconsciously writing, filming, and editing his life since he was a young child. The main plot line was inscribed in his early childhood experiences. His interpretation of what happened to him provided the basic plot elements, and the demands of that storyline enthralled him emotionally. Throughout his adolescence that script was rehearsed into a believable reality, and as time went on, he unconsciously cast people to fit its roles. In this way, Travis unconsciously created the story of his life.

The story goes something like this: Boy fails family, and one by one they disappear. Boy searches and does not find. Boy grows up and does more things that drive people away, proving he is unlovable. Boy continues to search for family, for love, and someday he will do enough to make someone believe he is lovable. Then he will be happy.

Travis's foundational experience of abandonment turned into a story that presented a powerful barrier to new experience. He was traumatized by abuse, as well as by the hours he spent searching the underpasses and sidewalks for his mother, and he continued to experience flashbacks of painful memories. The emotions he experienced (or repressed) during those extended years of trauma grew over time into an almost overwhelming feeling of grief and sorrow. Even when he was not remembering his painful past, he still unconsciously associated certain things with excruciating feelings, with the pain that started in his childhood and that had taken on a life of its own. He felt that he had no dominion over his feelings when they were activated, and in his desperation for relief he repeatedly became involved with partners who could not authentically show up for him.

Thus Travis's awareness of whatever was currently happening in his life was haunted by the continuing power of what transpired in the past. Giving into the magnetic pull of the past is living in a state of an imagined reality outside of the present moment. Because of this, he unconsciously produced a reality where love seemed impossible. He was unconsciously creating his own pain and suffering.

That is the tricky thing about unconscious creation—we don't always know we're doing it until we step out of it. We all tell stories about ourselves and other people, and we all have particular perspectives on the world that shape our ideas about what we call reality, but many of us don't recognize this. We keep our stories, beliefs, and viewpoints trapped in the unconscious, in the shadow. And this keeps us in patterns that we don't seem able to interrupt. For example, when I first met Travis, he wouldn't have been able to describe his unconscious belief that he is unlovable because he wasn't aware of it. He didn't know, on a conscious level, that it was there. But there it was, actively assembling things from his unconscious, stopping him from changing his patterns. No amount of affirmations, goal setting, or hanging out with helpful people was going to stop Travis from replicating this belief and the resulting patterns in his life, so long as it remained on the level of the unconscious.

Until he got down and examined those things trapped in the unconscious, he just kept adding new scenes to the same script—he continued to react to his circumstances as if they were happening *to* him. He was attempting to write a new screenplay for his life, but it was an adapted screenplay, a derivative of a previously written story. He didn't yet understand that he had the ability to write an *original* screenplay.

To break his pattern of suffering, he needed to bring what was in the shadow to light, into conscious awareness. Then, as he became able to differentiate between that unconscious patterning and the life he wanted to generate, he became more aware of and open to his choices, more able to consciously respond to circumstances, and freer to express his authentic self.

What Is the Past?

It has been said that the only past that actually exists is the past in our minds. When we're burdened by our stories about the past, we tend to either dwell on them or run from them. Dwelling on the past is giving in to its magnetic pull—ruminating or living in a state of regret: “Maybe if I hadn't said that” or “If only he had called me back” or “Next time I'll do it differently.” When we realize that our past does not define us, we are standing at a new level of freedom. Our true nature is what we experience in the space between our thoughts and narratives.

Sometimes the past feels more real than the present, quite literally. You might be familiar with this experience: As you relive a particular event from your story and as each shot plays out in your mind's eye, your body cannot tell that it isn't actually happening. Your heart rate increases, your breath becomes more shallow—you are there, in that event from your past, which is now having a very real impact on you physically, mentally, and emotionally. Reliving the past in this way can be compelling when it feels more genuine than the present moment, and you might find yourself returning again and again to that 3-D, surround sound movie in your head. We might tell ourselves that ruminating on the past helps us change the future, but generally rumination just increases the story's power. It makes the CGI more realistic, adding a greater sense of “reality” to our interpretation of events and our stories about ourselves and the world.

At some point, we realize that our story just isn't working for us. Maybe we have become so identified with the central story of our past that we don't know who we are in the present. Or we just don't like who we are. We feel ready to move on. When this happens, it can be tempting to go to the other extreme, running away from our past in an attempt to “let it go” or to start fresh. We try to forgive ourselves and those who have hurt us by saying, “That's OK. It's water under the bridge. I'm focusing on the future.” We think that if we can just disregard our feelings of anger or resentment, if we can just quit thinking about the past and contemplate the future instead, our lives will change. We might move to a different city or get a new job in an attempt to start over. We try to produce a new movie by getting new actors or a new setting.

But ultimately it doesn't work that way. We can't simply cover up our unresolved past. We won't be able to create our true story if we are continually re-creating our false story. We first need to make peace with what's beneath the surface, in the unconscious. Otherwise, we'll keep returning to the fundamental patterns of our original screenplay, patterns that depict us as unlovable or unworthy, as victim or perpetrator. If we don't face our past and bring it into the light, it will continue to color our present and our future. If we want freedom, it will be necessary to make peace with our past.

Guilt and Blame

Forgiveness is a loaded word, so let's explore it more deeply. When we think of forgiveness, often we imagine one person saying, "I'm sorry," and then another person saying, "I forgive you." Forgiveness doesn't happen until the perpetrator admits guilt and asks for forgiveness. Forgiveness in this case is an absolution. The forgiving person essentially says, "You can continue now without the burden of guilt. Your slate is clean." That's where the saying "Forgive and forget" comes in: we forgive someone and then try to live as if what they did never happened.

The limits of this view of forgiveness can be seen in our penal system. Someone commits a crime, their guilt is proven, they are punished, and when they are released they are supposed to have "paid their debt to society." But more often than not, society has not forgiven them. We certainly haven't forgotten what they have done. Upon release they often cannot find work or housing because their record—the story of their lives—continues to contain the offense. That kind of forgiveness doesn't truly liberate them or society.

Pulling our perspective back, we can see that human history is full of stories built on this model of guilt and blame. Nations and peoples oppress, pillage, and torment each other, resulting in dislocation, mass murder, and deep intergenerational pain. The "victims" continue to blame the "villains," and generations go back and forth with one side feeling guilty or defensive and the other blaming and feeling victimized. This is what happens when people—and nations—work from the Martyr level of consciousness.

When individuals, communities, or nations drag around their past, it influences the present and the future. We look at the present and the future through the lens of those unresolved issues from the past. Even when we say we've forgiven someone, even when we say, "Oh, I've let that go," often we're still looking at each other as perpetrator or victim, as guilty or blameless. Sometimes it feels like the whole planet is caught in this Martyr level of consciousness. In my experience, it's almost impossible to truly forgive from this level. What is required is a profound shift in consciousness.

True Freedom

When we are in Martyr Consciousness and we try to forgive someone, often what we experience is only a slight shift in awareness. But truly making peace with the past is not so much about forgiveness—as in going back to where things were before the offense happened—as it is about raising our awareness, our consciousness, about the event. When we realize that what happened does not define us, and perhaps more importantly, that what happened does not define the person we're trying to forgive, then we are standing at the opening of a new level of awareness.

This is not to say that difficult things don't happen. Sometimes people do perpetrate terrible pain on one other. We can sometime feel victimized, meaning that things happen that are beyond our control, and they may even seem personal. But through our own conscious evolution, we can move from "I am a victim" to "I may have felt like a victim in that moment, but I am no longer carrying the story of or belief in my victimization." In other words, we don't need to take on the identity of a victim, no matter what has happened in our past. We are participating in our own evolution, and our dedication to spiritual transformation allows us to make peace with our fear.

Guilt and blame are Martyr Consciousness paradigms that make it very challenging to make peace with the past. Truly making peace with the past requires a significant spiritual shift. True freedom is a life without a past. What happens when we let go of guilt and blame? The event does not disappear, but it no longer has power over us. There's a shift from guilt and blame to responsibility, from being closed off to being free from the effects of our past. This is true liberation.

I could tell Travis wanted change and a bigger life from the moment he came into my office for counseling. He was bundled up in layers of clothing, mostly neutral grays, but I could see a bright blue T-shirt peeping from underneath. He leaned forward in the chair as if he was about to take off. His voice was quiet but intense. As he told his story, I saw that he had been growing in conscious awareness already. He was already discovering the ability to observe his own thoughts and reactions.

Travis explained that what brought him to counseling was a need to forgive. He was trying really hard to forgive his foster parents. He was trying to forgive his foster father, who had abused him sexually, and his foster mother, who had allowed it to happen. He was trying to forgive the system that had taken him from his mother when he was six. Through his support group and new friends he had been learning about critical self-talk. He was learning to recognize his triggers and could sometimes stop himself from being sucked into those memories. He explained to me how he did it.

“I used to have flashbacks,” he said. “Every time I’d see a tall man with glasses I’d be triggered. Maybe not immediately, but at some point I’d relive certain things, things that happened to me. It was awful. It still happens sometimes.”

“Can you describe that?”

“Well, I feel myself dropping into the memory. It’s like I’m there, a kid, so ashamed I can hardly move. And then, I just yell ‘Stop!’”

“Really? Out loud?”

“Yeah. It totally works. I need it to be loud—it jars me out of the trance I’m in.”

Travis was already taking the first step. He was attempting to let go of the story and of the conviction that he *was* his story, his past. Whenever he yelled “Stop!” he was disidentifying from the past and centering himself in the present moment: “In the moment I’m yelling ‘Stop’ to an old memory. I’m not getting pulled into that memory.” His idea of yelling “Stop!” was a brilliant strategy; however, from there I invited him to deepen things. From this new place of conscious awareness, we worked together on seeing his foster parents as people, rather than seeing them through the lens of his pain. Over time, this made it possible for him to make peace and eventually to let go of the belief beneath the story that he was victimized because he was unlovable.

Striving for forgiveness in Martyr Consciousness can lead us to an awareness of our own agency, on the way to the next level of consciousness. We begin to recognize that the world isn’t just happening to us; we begin to see that we have the power to pause the video, which is what Travis realized when he started saying, “Stop!” This took the power from the event in his flashbacks and returned the power to Travis; he stopped himself from being pulled into the memory of the victimizing event, which disempowered that memory and thus the original agonizing experience.

In this way we begin to see that, even if we’ve experienced horrendous trauma, we are at some point accountable for creating our reality. From there we can stop seeing the people we blamed through the lens of what they have done and start seeing them as people, whole and perfect at their core, just like us, who are perhaps dragging their own past around with them and acting out of their stories. And thus it becomes possible to make peace and open up to whatever lies beyond our developmental story. This doesn’t mean we bypass the feelings associated with the experience. We will be covering that in greater detail later.

My friend Gavin used to blame his mother for his posture: “She didn’t teach me to sit up straight.” But then one day it dawned on him: “I’m thirty-seven years old. I can sit up straight. I can make a choice to change my posture. The choice is mine.” This was a shift in consciousness. It may seem like an innocuous example, but how many of us are blaming someone or something in our past for what is happening today?

What about the Seemingly Unforgiveable?

As Eckhart Tolle wrote, “Acceptance of the unacceptable is the greatest source of grace in this world.” Living in a state of grace is living beyond cause and effect, beyond right and wrong. In this state of grace we recognize that yes, we have done and experienced things we do not want to repeat. We feel the pain we are experiencing in the present. But we no longer suffer from the harm we once caused or experienced. We have let go of the stories that caused us that suffering. Even in the midst of the seemingly unforgiveable, we can experience peace.

Be assured, I’m not saying that people don’t experience things that seem horrific or that trauma isn’t real. “Nothing needs forgiving” doesn’t mean that people don’t experience profound pain at the hands of others. There may be things in your own experience that most people would say is unforgivable. A violent assault, the loss of a child or a home, torture, prolonged abuse, forced emigration due to war—the list goes on and on. How could someone accept something that seems so unacceptable? How could someone make peace with something so traumatic or ever say that such things don’t require forgiveness?

You may be thinking that sounds like denial. So please let me clarify. When we are living from Mystical Consciousness, nothing needs to be forgiven. But this doesn’t mean we can necessarily skip the process of forgiveness. We are still human beings with thoughts, emotions, and a physical body. We may still attempt to avoid the spiritual practice of forgiveness and sidestep the related emotion. If we’re feeling hurt, if we’re feeling angry, if we’re feeling sad, the spiritual practice calls us to feel that and even to lean into it. It might still hurt when someone does something, like saying something that we perceive to be cruel. And the pain is far greater when something we consider to be horrific happens—when life is turned upside down by some great upheaval or when someone you love is suddenly gone. These are experiences of pain that seem inevitable, at least at our current level of human and spiritual evolution. But pain is different from suffering. Pain is in the body; suffering is in the mind.

As an adult growing in conscious awareness, Travis was learning to make peace, even with those terrible things he experienced as a child. He was recognizing that his stories about

those painful things had caused him great suffering. But one rainy October day, Travis and his sister, Cynthia, had just finished breakfast at his favorite café. They had recently reconnected after many years apart and had been meeting for breakfast every weekend. Travis was thrilled to find family again, and he truly enjoyed Cynthia's company. On this day, they had gone deep, sharing memories of early childhood that validated Travis's recently discovered deeper understanding of his trauma, specifically that he was no longer blaming himself for the trauma he experienced when he was a child. They left the café silently, deep in thought.

They were crossing at a crosswalk when a car came careening around the corner. It struck Cynthia and she died instantly. Travis's whole world collapsed.

If anyone had said to Travis then, or in the days that followed, "There's nothing to forgive here. You need to let go of the story of what happened," that would be unkind, to say the least. Travis is a human being. His body underwent immediate physical and emotional shock, and then he experienced real pain—deep sadness, loss, and anger. The emotions resonated with his childhood experience, and he experienced extended flashbacks and long sessions of hopeless rumination about his life and his future. He blamed the driver, he blamed the rain, he blamed himself: "If only I had been more alert, I could have heard the car. I could have stopped her, and this wouldn't have happened." In this period the pain of his sister's death turned into suffering, not only because of the incident itself but also because of his perception of the incident, because of the way he connected it with his past suffering. All of us have done this. We've done it as a way of making sense of the world. But it doesn't create peace.

Slowly, by beginning a spiritual practice that included stillness and meditation, Travis had more sustained moments of recognizing that he could choose how to relate to his pain. He began to acknowledge that he was creating his current suffering by adding the painful feelings of this recent loss to the old story of his life. He was able to identify that, by giving into the agonizing memories, he was adding new scenes to the old movie, not the new one he was beginning to create on his spiritual path. So he turned away from the old movie toward the new one, the new life he was choosing through his conscious evolution.

The spiritual practice of making peace with the past is going back and forth between these two seeming truths: one, that painful events tell a story about our lives, and two, that we can shift our awareness about those stories and therefore change the effect these stories have on us. We might not be able to change the past, but we can change the core decisions we've made about ourselves and the world as a result of that past. Ultimately, it is not about what happened to us but the meaning we've created about what happened. In this way, we can be free of our past and live in a new a miraculous way where our past no longer has control over our daily lives. And pain can actually be an admission price into a new way of being.

I'm reminded of a powerful excerpt from *The Shift* by Dr. Wayne Dyer that relates perfectly to this: "I've found that every spiritual advance I've made was preceded by some sort of fall—in fact, it's almost a universal law that a fall of some kind precedes a major shift. . . . an accident, a fire that destroys all the stuff we've worked so hard to accumulate, an illness, a failed relationship, a death or injury that causes deep sorrow, an abandonment, a serious addiction, a business failure, a bankruptcy, or the like. These low points actually provide the energy needed to make a shift in the direction away from an ego-driven life to one full of purpose."¹

Five Keys for Step 1

For each of the steps, I'll be offering five keys to assist you in experiencing the step at a deeper level of understanding. I chose the word "keys" very consciously because it has a double meaning. First, it represents a key concept, meaning an important aspect of the step. The second meaning is even more significant—it is a key to unlock the power of the step in your awareness and in your life. The following are the five keys for Step 1.

Key 1: Practicing Mindfulness and Gratitude

Even if we don't have a history of trauma, many of us are troubled by deeply engrained self-criticism. We bemoan our inner critic and worry that we will never be able to eradicate it. If you have heard this inner critic, you may be finding that after years or sometimes even decades of therapy, willpower exercises, or affirmations, you still hear it, threatening to drag you down into a rabbit hole of self-blame or catastrophizing.

I have news for you: You may never be able to completely eliminate your inner critic. But you don't need to. Through mindfulness, you can simply move from resisting it to recognizing that what it says is not true. A simple mindfulness technique for working with this kind of habitual feeling or inner voice is the RAIN acronym, made popular by psychologist Tara Brach: Recognize, Accept, Investigate, and Nonattachment. You recognize the voice (*There it is again, telling me I'm wrong*), accept the voice (*Hello voice, I see you*), investigate the voice (*Hmm, it seems to be coming from my gut. It makes me feel nauseated*), and practice nonattachment (*The more I investigate it, the more it moves outside me, rather than feeling like a part of me*). This practice of becoming the observer allows you to identify where you might feel stuck and move from there.

¹ Wayne W. Dyer, *The Shift* (Carlsbad: Hay House, 2010), 68.

For example, let's say during meditation you think, *This is so hopeless. I should have known I'd be too anxious to meditate.* If you believe you *are* that thought, if you truly believe that you *are* "too anxious," then chances are you will get stuck. The anxiety will look like your true identity, and you will only feel more anxious. But if instead you *have* that thought, then you can witness it from the distance of awareness. It's not you, it's not the ultimate truth—it's just a thought. Rather than being dismayed or depressed by it, you can be curious about it. You can investigate what anxiety feels like in your body and then allow it to move through. You can become unstuck; you can be free.

Once you have identified the inner voice, the blaming story, or the flashback, give it its due. "I know you're trying to keep me safe right now. I know you think you're helping." Then explain what is happening: "I'm learning a deeper reality about myself right now. And I no longer need this voice or strategy or fear." The key is to avoid resisting because resistance only strengthens the voice. Ultimately you want to become an impartial witness to the thing that appears to have power; this creates distance between it and you. When you stop identifying with it, it loses power. You don't need to fight or remove the voice—you simply recognize it for what it is: a single thought, among countless possible thoughts. And when you cease fighting what is, life becomes simple.

I want to add another key: gratitude. When we shift our perspective to gratitude, infinite possibilities open up in our lives. When we are in touch with the wholeness and fullness of who we truly are—when we see things from Mystical Consciousness—there is nothing left to seek, externally or internally. We are already all that we need to be. This moment, right now, contains everything we need. The intention is to move beyond seeking. Seeking is the antithesis of gratitude, because we already have and we already are everything we believe we need. In that way, we come to recognize that gratitude is a choice.

The more we tap into our natural gratitude, the more life seems to give us reasons to be grateful. As a practice, I invite you to infuse your day with gratitude—for both what you once considered "good" and the so-called "bad." What happens when you start saying yes to all of your experiences, trusting that all is well with yourself and the world? Say thank you in order to come into alignment with what is, and live in gratitude. One practice of this principle involves repeating "Thank you, source" or "Thank you, universe" throughout the day regarding every situation in your life.

As Meister Eckhart so beautifully stated all those years ago, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

Key 2: Embracing Self-Love

Quite possibly, what can seem even more difficult than making peace with others is the prospect of making peace with ourselves. We are burdened with what we have done or not done. And more deeply, many of us are burdened with an identity where we believe we are “wrong” or unlovable. So it’s not just “I have done something wrong,” but “I *am* wrong.” That identity can be so deeply entrenched that we’re not even aware that it’s present. This is what makes it seem so hard to make peace with ourselves for things we have done. Part of the challenge in making peace with ourselves is a belief that our goal in life is to resolve our central conflict. We live as if the core conflict of our life story is the main problem keeping us from happiness, so we live as though resolving that core conflict is our life’s purpose.

Sasha, the young, driven lawyer, had an experience that can show us how an “I’m not worthy” movie can become very dark very quickly. Sasha was beginning to witness patterns in her life. For one, she was realizing that she didn’t like how her perceived failures made her feel. She was noticing the lengths to which she went to avoid them and the deep depression that hit her when she inevitably did feel like a failure. What she didn’t yet see was the unconscious strategy beneath this experience—the belief that once she had achieved some great and as yet undefined success, the problems of her life would be solved. What she didn’t yet see is that the role she had created for herself was fundamentally limited and limiting and that she believed her life mission, the central conflict of her story, was to make herself at least appear worthy.

On the surface, Sasha’s childhood looked perfect. She grew up in a beautiful house in an affluent neighborhood, handed down through several generations. The only child of accomplished parents from a long line of academics and professionals, Sasha was “given every opportunity.” She attended a prestigious high school and Ivy League universities for graduate and law school. She speaks four languages, three of them fluently. As a child she excelled in school, gymnastics, and music; by high school she had dropped gymnastics to focus more time on her music, playing first violin in a well-known youth orchestra.

On the other hand, Sasha’s parents socialized a lot, and she mostly spent time with her tutors and *au pairs*. In the evenings she would sit by a big front window waiting for her parents, and if they were the tiniest bit delayed, she would conjure up awful scenarios of what had happened to them. When they finally arrived, they would be bewildered to find her crying and would send her off to her room to “cry it all out” alone.

Her parents were concerned for her, but mostly they seemed concerned about her performance. If she brought home anything less than a 95 percent she would receive a subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, message from her parents, her father especially, who said

things like, “I don’t understand what’s happening—you always get straight As. What’s wrong?” The attention Sasha received from her busy parents was more like conditioned praise than authentic, unconditional love. The primary message she received from her community as well as her parents was “You are acceptable if you are successful,” with success narrowly defined as good grades, good appearance, and good performances. What looked like a well-rounded education including academics, music, and gymnastics was actually quite narrow. In all directions, the boundary was defined by what was “right.” There was no room for going beyond that boundary, no room for failure or experimentation and so no room for true creativity.

This tradition of excellence brought with it the feeling that Sasha’s words and actions were always being judged. Eventually, she internalized this external critic, judging herself harshly and judging others as well. This added to her intensity and made it difficult for people to get close. The story of Sasha’s life is based on these early experiences. It’s a story about never being enough, about feeling fundamentally broken in some way. She didn’t yet see it, but her choices were driven by the fear of being judged, feeling like a failure, and deeper down, a longing for unconditional love. And fear is your unresolved past, imagined in the future.

Underneath many of the recurring themes or patterns in our life stories is an unconscious assumption: If we want to create the life of our dreams, then we need to resolve what we believe is our core conflict, and to do that we need to be self-critical. “If I can just overcome what’s wrong, if I can just fix certain things about myself, then I can change” (be happy, be loved, be successful). The assumption that the key to happiness is to fix things reveals another assumption: that things must be broken. This approach can temporarily work in the external realm—think of all the advances in medicine, for instance, that are based on it. But when it comes to deepening one’s spiritual awareness, this perspective eventually creates not wholeness but more brokenness in our lives.

What if the key to true happiness lies elsewhere? What if things aren’t broken? What if you are essentially perfect and fundamentally whole? How would that shift your entire worldview? If “I am perfect and you are perfect,” then neither of us is worthier than the other. That means you can broaden your awareness by investigating your perspective. No matter how difficult or how idyllic your early life was, Step 1 is about training yourself to think, feel, and embody the truth that you are whole and perfect and one with source, then to ask and follow the question “What else is possible here?” We can then also recognize that we don’t need to earn love. Love is who we are.

Sasha had a deep necessity for success, and that necessity was driven by a deep desire for acceptance. When we started working together, Sasha had been devastated—a promotion she had been working toward was given to another lawyer in the firm. She saw this as a

public humiliation and was overcome by shame and anger. She believed she had failed; she had let her fundamental unworthiness be seen, and at first she could not cover it up.

“I felt like I saw judgment everywhere, even in the faces of strangers on the street—judgment and disgust, a look that said, ‘I know what you are, and I can barely stand to look at you,’” she said, her voice trembling. She had yet to discover the fundamental truth that what you imagine others are thinking about you is a window into your own self-image. She believed everyone was judging her for her perceived failures because at an unconscious level she was her own worst critic.

The humiliation and isolation were excruciating. She questioned everything she’d ever achieved. In self-defense her filter turned from self-blame and self-loathing to anger; she railed internally at the person who got the promotion, at the partners who stole it from her, at the staff lawyers beneath her, at her doorman, the dry cleaner, all the people looking at her on the street. In the past, she had been able to channel her anger into hard work, building herself back up to a level of success that made her at least appear worthy. But this anger was exhausting. She shut way down, further than ever before. She had to take a leave of absence. Sasha’s experience shows how a script titled “I’m not worthy” can be read in voices of either shame or anger, remorse or cruelty. With such a script, our response to seeming failures (and thus to any kind of rejection) can be criticism of self or criticism of others.

If you’ve been able to step back and witness your own thoughts and reactions to life and have discovered a pattern of criticism directed inward or outward, you can give a shout of joy. It’s really one minor step from self-criticism to self-compassion and from criticism of others to acceptance of others. If you continue to give yourself room and the silence to witness, to notice, what activates your criticism, I promise you will find the capacity to live beyond your previous stories and lean into what else is there and what else is possible.

Many, if not all of us, grew up with a somewhat damaged sense of self. Childhood hurts, traumas, or abuse severely distort our self-image and can interfere with our ability to relate to others in meaningful ways. If this is the case for you, it is important to do the emotional work to heal and resolve whatever parts of your past are still affecting you. On your journey of healing, you can develop unconditional love, acceptance, and compassion for those inner parts where you might still feel wounded. You can be aware of whether you are acting out or demanding that your needs be met by others who may not be capable of or willing to meet them. Loving the seemingly wounded parts of yourself is a vital step in having deeply connected and purposeful relationships with yourself and with others.

However, as we move into Mystical Consciousness and fully know ourselves to be love, we recognize there is actually no separate self to love. The very idea of loving oneself suggests

duality, where in fact there is only oneness. Self-love implies that we are separate from the source of love, rather than an expression of it. From the highest level of truth, the greatest act of self-love is to truly know who and what we are. Love is the truth of who we are. When we truly know this, everything changes. Can it be that simple? I say yes!

Key 3: Living Beyond Your Stories

Only ego needs forgiveness. Forgiveness is really a shift in perspective, in the telling of the story of “what happened.” This may sound a bit cryptic. Or it may sound like an adequate way to look at things as long as life is going smoothly but not at all realistic when your spouse cheats on you or your retirement account gets drained. When things go south, it might sound simply ignorant. Somebody has done (been) wrong, you believe, and somebody’s got to pay. So let’s back up a little.

As we discussed before, your perspective on forgiveness depends on your level of conscious awareness. At the Martyr level, every injury requires punishment, so the idea that only ego needs forgiveness simply doesn’t seem to work. At the Magical Thinking level of consciousness, even more so in the Metaphysical, we can shift our perspective on situations, seeing the transformation that comes out of a challenging experience, and we can forgive those who we believe have harmed us. But, even at these levels of consciousness, they might still seem to need forgiving.

When you’re living from the Mystical level, you recognize that the truth of who and what you are is love, light, and peace. You recognize this truth in all of creation. At this level nothing needs forgiveness. At this level you can even see that your so-called enemy is fundamentally love, light, and peace. At the Mystical level, making peace with others is natural; it happens automatically because you can see immediately that whatever wrong someone might have done, you have committed the same or a similar thing yourself—even if only in your imagination. You can also know that their so-called wrong was the result of something you too share, whether that be ignorance, fear, or a deeply ingrained habit. As a result, you empathize with those who look like enemies when viewed from a different level of awareness; you live out of genuinely felt compassion. How can you be at peace with others? There are no others.

Ultimately, making peace with the past is having compassion toward those who originally taught you the false ideas that brought you so much pain. From the Mystical level you can understand that these people were taught the same things by those who came before them. You can see that generation by generation, they had forgotten their true identity, their essential nature. From the Mystical level of awareness, you know, you feel, and you embody

the truth of who you are. And who you truly are is love, wholeness, and oneness with source. Here you can move out of self-criticism, judgment of others, and seeing things as right or wrong. Here forgiveness doesn't need to happen; here you can recognize that there is actually nothing to forgive, ever. You see that all there is to do is simply return to the truth.

Key 4: Feeling Your Feelings

One of the side effects of holding on to our stories from the past is emotional pain. What's more, we often believe it is difficult to let go of our stories because of the pain we experience all over again when we remember those stories. We may also have a strategy of running from or attempting to conceal the pain. This simply doesn't allow us to make peace with the past. This is why feeling our feelings is a path to freedom and a fundamental key to making peace with our past.

Here is a different and more effective approach: If you experience pain, then simply allow that pain to occur. Really allow yourself to feel whatever feelings are present. When you allow yourself to actually feel the emotions, they naturally move through you rather than getting trapped or buried. As you allow feelings to organically move through you, you will no longer be imprisoned by them. When it comes to emotions, the only way out is through. Practicing this allows you to feel great sorrow and loss, even anger, while also feeling compassion. It also allows the natural, impermanent process of the feelings to dissipate after you give yourself permission to be fully present with whatever shows up.

Feeling your feelings and responding in a conscious way is distinctly different from having a feeling and reacting to it. If you react to any situation without tapping into conscious awareness, you are simply continuing what produced the situation in the first place. Say you perceive that someone in your life has been treated unfairly. In response to that experience you might feel angry, and in turn you might want to figure out who to blame, even on whom to pursue revenge. If you react from feelings without questioning them, if you actively identify "the person who did this" as the problem, if you actively judge or hurt the person, it only adds to the aggression that created the original situation. You are merely continuing the cycle of violence.

Feelings are present for a reason. They are the internal navigation system that lets us know something needs attention. The issue for many of us is that we believe a person or a situation makes us feel a certain way. When we become fully accountable for our emotions, we can begin to dialogue with and question the deeper root sources of our feelings. Are they coming from a story or an old idea we are holding? Is there another way to view the situation? The key here is accountability. When we take ownership for our emotional response (or reaction)

to a situation, we recognize it is not the situation that causes us to feel a particular way. It is quite possibly an unhealed wound that has been touched, and with this awareness, we can find freedom in the midst of any emotional experience. In this way, we can even begin to shift the feeling itself.

As a conscious being, your feelings of anger or frustration or vengefulness may still emerge. However, as you allow yourself to feel the emotions and allow them to organically move through you, you will not be imprisoned by them. They won't force you to react in anger. If you have feelings of anger, you can choose to feel the feelings deeply, allow them to pass through you, and then respond in love and acceptance. The more you do this, the simpler it becomes. Over time, you will discover that feelings subside the more you practice. This can be a powerful key to making peace with your past.

Key 5: Living in the Question

If you're feeling stuck in the process, and you're not quite ready to make peace with some aspect of your past, it might help to shift your perspective a little by asking conscious questions. Sit for a moment with something in your life that you want to move beyond. What questions are you asking? Maybe you're asking, "Why did this happen?" or "What needs to be forgiven?" or "What did I do to attract this?" If you're focusing on the pain and suffering, on what someone did wrong, ask yourself some different questions. For example, you can ask yourself, "What's the story I'm telling myself about this situation? Is this perspective bringing me peace?" If the answer is no, then it might be time for some further questions, such as "What would it take to be free from this?" Sit with this again and again until you can hear the story, see the scene, and recognize how it fits into a larger script.

Ask yourself if it's possible to live beyond that story. Is it possible to recognize a deeper reality beyond the long-standing movie you've unconsciously created? What would it feel like to let go of the story about a person or an event and overcome it? Take a deep breath. Question every point of view. Reflect on your true nature. Living in the question is a powerful spiritual practice that we can use to break free from old patterns and live a more conscious life. It's a powerful tool for Conscious Creation because it trains you to question the points of view that influence what you notice and how you perceive what you call reality.

Most of us have been trained from a young age to solve problems and "find the answers"—whether that's the answers on a test at school or the answers to life's questions. We might even believe that finding the answers is our purpose in life. Many of us move into a spiritual practice with this same intention. We begin our practice by looking for the answers, thinking

that if we can just “figure out the meaning of life,” we will be okay. Only the awareness of our true nature can end the mind’s incessant search for meaning.

Many people go through life looking for answers. But an answer-focused approach is steeped in ego; it can’t help but be infused with our personal desires because the thing we are trying to change, whatever that may be, depends on the answer. We *need* the answer to work for us. So, whenever we end up finding an answer, it’s limited by our personal bias, our core false beliefs, and/or our judgments.

An answer-focused approach can create conflict on a personal level as well as a global level. When you believe that you have the answer but someone else sees it another way, that means they must not have the correct answer: “I am right and you are wrong.” That approach creates external conflict. Or if you believe that there’s an answer out there but that you are unable to reach it, or don’t deserve to reach it, then this creates internal conflict. Almost always, conflict comes from the notion that there is a right and a wrong answer, that someone has the answer and that other answers (and thus other people) are incorrect. Approaching life as a search for the answer can keep you stuck in the comfort zone of your core false beliefs and your small view of the world that assumes there’s only one way, one answer.

It can be challenging to let go of this approach. I certainly thought it was the way to look at things when I first came into spiritual practice. I figured there was a right way to believe and act, and if I could just figure it out I would evolve spiritually. Then came a beautiful turning point. I don’t know if it was an event or a gradual process, but at some point, I began to open to the possibility that it’s not about coming up with the answer but about living in the question and opening to the great mystery. At some point, I began seeing my purpose not as spiritual growth toward some perfect state but as growing in awareness of a perfection that already is.

We might think of this in terms of science. We can view science as a discipline that shows us facts about the universe and gives us answers. But the answers that science gives are continually changing as scientists evolve. Ideally, science is endlessly open to ever-deeper understanding, and it doesn’t assume to know or even pursue an absolute answer. It’s really about examining questions. That’s what a scientific hypothesis is—a what-if question. So, living in the question is like living the scientific method, in an open stance that does not assume that the answers will stand for all time or for all people. Focusing on the question provides a distance between me (the person asking the question) and the answer (whatever it is that I find). Living in the question allows us to approach things from a position of curiosity rather than apprehension, of play rather than urgency.

How exactly do we go about living in the question? It's actually quite simple: We ask ourselves open-ended questions that do not start with Why but rather Who, Where, What, When, and How. Our questions might be "Where did this come from?" "Who taught me this?" "How has it been reinforced?" "What does it look like? Feel like?" "Where does this feeling lead me?" "How can I discover what is mine to do?" Being open-ended, these questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. They don't claim to have a simple answer. Life is more nuanced than that. With open-ended questions, we are less likely to create answers based on past experiences and more likely to open up to new possibilities. We can open up rather than contract. And we can begin to question the situations and stories from our past that have kept us feeling stuck.

Why no Why questions? Because Why questions tempt us to immediately search for the answer. With Why questions we're subtly telling ourselves that there's some explanation, and if we can just figure that out, things will shift and life will get better. (It's interesting that most of the questions we ask from a victim mentality or Martyr Consciousness are Why questions. "Why is she like that?" "Why are people so stupid?" "Why is this happening to me?" "Why does he treat me like that?") Why questions often assume that we have been wronged. They assume not only that there is a right answer but that the answer involves our victimization. Or our wrongdoing. They close off other possibilities. And if there's only one answer, then there seems to be only one option. This is the kind of thinking that traps us and limits our freedom.

When we live in the question, we're not focused on finding the answer. We're opening to the possibilities, finding a way to expand our consciousness to awaken to a broader view of ourselves and the world. It's an expansion of our awareness. When we live in the question our focus is not on change or improvement or reaching some ultimate goal. Our focus is on expanding our awareness of what else is possible. Answers contract. Questions expand.

Here are some ideas for starting this practice: You might bring an open-ended Who, What, Where, When, or How question to your meditation practice. Ask this question and pay attention to what you experience physically, mentally, and emotionally. Stay open to the awareness this brings. In another exercise, you can sit in front of a mirror or face a partner. Set the timer for three minutes, and then present the question to your reflection in the mirror, or have your partner ask you the question. Over the set time, stay open to whatever awareness comes to you. After each short answer comes to you, repeat the question.

Another practice is to focus on a question throughout the day. Pick a question the night before or as soon as you wake up. Then live in that question as you move through your day. For example, if today's question is, "What more is there for me to see?" then throughout the day you will sit with that question. While you're in the shower, while you're waiting for an

appointment or sitting in traffic, while you're preparing dinner, you'll ask yourself the question and see what organically emerges.

I also again invite you to notice if your questions are empowering or disempowering. If you observe yourself asking disempowering questions, you might want to replace them with questions that open you up to more possibilities rather than cause you to shut down. For example, if you have noticed relationship patterns that feel stuck, you might find yourself asking questions like "Why does this keep happening to me?" or "What's wrong with me?" By making yourself the victim or the villain, these questions will only reinforce your core false beliefs. More empowering questions might be: "What story does this pattern tell?" "What role do I play in this story?" "What is the truth of who and what I am?" "How can I allow this to move me forward in my life?" Notice how these questions open you up to the infinite possibilities that this situation contains.

When we live in the question, we might still be interested in answers but not in absolute answers. We allow the question to settle deep into our consciousness, and we wait for possible information. We pay attention to all the places the information might originate. The initial awareness might come from the mind and then it might seem to come from the gut and then from the heart space and then from a much deeper place. My hope for you is that, as you live with the question, possibilities will come to you from a greater place, from a place of acceptance, wholeness, and transformation.

Now, you may be ready to move forward and truly make peace with your past. "I am willing to see this differently. I am light. I am love. I am peace." Keep sitting in silence with that piece of the past, that thing you want to overcome. Open yourself to other questions, other perspectives. Remind yourself that every moment is an opportunity for you to choose to close off or to open up to source, to your unharmed and unharmable self. It's an opportunity to tap into the powerful invisible realm and start the process of bringing it into your life and into the world. You can come home to yourself and experience ever-present wisdom.

A Deeper Peace

Manifestation is happening all the time whether we're conscious of it or not. If we take an honest look at our lives right now, we can see where we divide our world into us and them or right and wrong. In other words, we can see where we hold biases and judgments about ourselves and others. It then becomes clear how we create every single division or separation in the world we inhabit. We create it with the power of our thinking, emotions, and the core vibration we are holding.

The mind is a very powerful force. When we're unconscious, the mind creates our reality and reinforces the stories we live by. When we spend time in silence, we can disengage the mind, pause our need to control the outer world, and listen for the powerful inner voice that tells us what our deeper self wants. We can open to our true self that's one with spirit, the creative energy of the world.

I invite you to imagine yourself, even for a moment, experiencing total freedom from your past and the stories you have created as a result of that past. It is possible. You have the power within you to make peace with all that has happened in your life and step fully into an awakened life filled with happiness, connection, joy, and purpose. This is your fundamental birthright and can become your essential reality. Are you ready?