

Cushion and Couch

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From the Editor

Cushion and Couch is IMP's quarterly e-journal, featuring articles, interviews and book reviews written by and for members of our community. If you would like to contribute pieces or offer feedback, please reach out by [e-mail](#).

Alex Gokce, MSW
Editor, *Cushion and Couch*

Failure To Apprehend Evil

by Edward R. Ryan

It has been well known for ages that the greatest trick of the Devil is getting us to believe that he doesn't exist.

It would appear that he doesn't exist in the two stories that we like and share, the story of Buddhist meditation and the story of psychotherapy.

In the story of Buddhism, as I understand it, the mind is innately radiant, and the goal of meditation, perhaps pursued over many lifetimes, is to become mindful of, and thereby become free from, all of the hindrances, inherited through karma, to this natural experience of radiance. It may well be that this is true of some people, that there are among us those whose minds are innately radiant, that is to say who are basically good. But this is clearly not true of everyone.

In the story of psychotherapy, as I understand it, a person in early development is influenced by her interpretation of her experiences, especially experiences with her parents and siblings. So, if a person is hostile, difficult and harmful as an adult, it is hypothesized that she had a difficult childhood, with a difficult parent. Then it is hypothesized that she can become aware of this through therapy and become free of those early influences, and thus no longer hostile, difficult, and harmful. In other words, that she was basically good and that once she is free of these early influences through therapy, she will realize this innate goodness. And once again, this may be true for some of us, but not for everyone.

What neither story includes is evil.

I was talking with a person the other day, and he was referring to all the people who have been refusing to wear masks in the midst of the pandemic, to all those people who are continuing to say that the certified results of the election are not true, to all the locally and federally elected officials who support and encourage these lies and this bad behavior, and to those who participated in the insurrection in which people were injured, traumatized, and killed. Sad and frustrated he asked: why are they doing this? to what end? I have reflected and meditated on that question, and I think that we often fail to apprehend evil. The end of evil is not competitively constructive. It is not puzzling. It is mayhem, harm, and destruction—and...for the pleasure of it.

When we who meditate and we who do psychotherapy consider this commitment to mayhem, harm, and destruction for the pleasure of it — something we see every day, we are thrown back upon our stories to explain and understand it. So, we may hear a Buddhist talk of a great karmic load from which a person needs to be freed through practicing mindfulness and

lovingkindness. Or we may hear a psychotherapist talk about narcissism or psychopathy or the influence of a difficult parent, and about the need for the person to be in a long-term therapy with a psychotherapist, who will be a benevolent surrogate parent, through which the person will be freed from the early toxic influence.

Am I wrong to conclude that what each of our stories tell us is that the person who has created mayhem, has been harmful, has been destructive, and has enjoyed it, is basically a good person? And that meditation teachers and psychotherapists, and the methods they recommend, have some extraordinary powers of benevolence through which such a person can be converted, freed, redeemed?

I think it is true that if a person is basically good, or is capable of being good, he can benefit from mediation and from psychotherapy. But what about a person who is evil?

Yes, a person who is evil. Do you notice how that concept seems weird, unkind, inconsiderate? It makes us feel uncomfortable. In fact, the very idea of evil seems old-fashioned, something we in our scientific, enlightened, liberal, modern stories have moved beyond. But all this really means is that our stories do not accommodate evil, and so we fail to apprehend it. Not long ago, I was using a different story, the story of Job, to make a point in a talk about the scope of human control. When I described the attitude of the voice from the whirlwind, a person in the audience said that the voice of God spoken from the whirlwind was not her God. She dismissed that voice as "the Old Testament God," a God we have grown beyond. Well, we know from talking with many people over many years that having one's own God is a common experience. Each of us is free to choose her own story. So, if one has a personal relationship with a loving, protective God and things go well, one can feel one's story of God, and who one is in relation to God is confirmed—and that one is in control. But what happens when one's teenage daughter, on her way home from school, is raped and shot dead by a person who enjoyed the experience?

One can, if one is limited to one's story, tell oneself that this was not an act of an evil person, but rather an act of an unenlightened or mentally ill person. It feels good to say that. It feels good, I think, because one can then feel comfortable that one is living in a world controlled by goodness, and such behavior is an aberration. But this is not true. That long discarded Old Testament, often not even regarded well by modern, liberal Jews, is a story with evil and evil people in it, and that evil has a great deal of control. Even in the Garden itself, evil influences Adam and Eve successfully, or one might say that the primary couple realized their evil. And much of that ensuing story is the story of a battle between good and evil.

Why is this important? I believe it is important because if we are living within a story that fails to apprehend evil, we will not be prepared to fight against it when it arises, as it does, in ourselves and in others. That goodness can win over evil is a matter of faith, but goodness doesn't even stand a chance if we can't see evil right before our eyes. So, it seems to make sense, doesn't it, to keep our eyes open, and when we see what's clearly evil, to apprehend it, even if that means moving beyond our favorite stories? One doesn't have to embrace the Old Testament, but one ought to have a story that includes the reality of evil. Otherwise, one falls prey to the Devil's greatest trick.

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Excerpt: Introduction to *Becoming Safely Embodied*

by Deirdre Fay

The mirror reflected back a person. It always had. That day, decades ago, was different somehow. I was in the gym, working out—something I always enjoyed. But this day, I looked in the mirror and realized, that's me. It was the oddest experience of realizing there was someone living inside my skin. I was used to working out, developing strength and flexibility, yet somehow, I hadn't connected to the being that was inside me.

As much work as I had done on myself, I came to realize I wasn't inhabiting my whole body-mind-heart. That revelation came in the late 1980s as my own trauma history erupted while I was living in a yoga ashram. I went from being able to meditate, practice yoga, and train for triathlons to, what seemed like overnight, unable to get out of bed or do the teaching I had done before with ease. How had I gone from experiencing my body as a temple for the soul...to living in inner chaos, confusion, and pretty constant distress? To answer that, I went back to the basics, integrating yoga, meditation, and the awareness of being in the body.

This book—which has its origins in my own experience, then developed further through groups I led in inpatient hospital settings, the Trauma Center, and private practice—introduces you to that approach.

The Becoming Safely Embodied (BSE) skills were developed on an integrated platform of spiritual practice and psychology. For forty years I have practiced yoga and meditation, and for thirty-five years I have trained in and practiced psychotherapy—including gestalt, systems-centered practice, Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, and Internal Family Systems. My experience with these approaches, each uniquely addressing health and wholeness, were the primary resources used in my own healing. They have been the mainstays of my work in helping others heal from their trauma.

During my training I applied these practices and skills to those on a dissociative unit at a major teaching hospital. The staff had heard about my years practicing and living a yogic/meditation lifestyle. They were curious if meditation and yoga could be helpful. In the evenings, after my shift was done, I would be with those on the unit, exploring what helped. In the process I learned how much I needed to scaffold (Lyons-Ruth) down the concepts to make them accessible. I'm grateful for my time with the people who were there.

Developing the BSE skills has also involved research with other long-term meditation and yoga practitioners. After living and working for six years in a yoga ashram, I became curious about what had happened to long-term yogis whose trauma histories came up while they participated in intensive spiritual practices. I wondered if their spiritual practices made it easier for them to be in their bodies. Did having a spiritual framework make healing trauma easier, even when the process was incredibly difficult? And if it did, could modern psychotherapeutic principles be successfully integrated with this

other dimension of apparently deep healing practice, to form a clear, step-by-step approach to recover from trauma?

Translating and applying what I learned as a result of this inquiry with others became the basis for the modules contained in this book. Long-term meditators repeatedly told me they needed both psychotherapy as well as the meditation practices they were immersed in to help their healing. That was true for me as well. Despite the years of spiritual practice, I needed solid trauma treatment to weather the internal storms. As I have continually developed my own meditation and yoga practices, I have been able to discover a deep wisdom of the body/heart/mind, which has effectively served as an antidote to feelings of despair and resignation, reorienting toward a life of wellbeing, equanimity, and compassion.

In my own practice with individuals, I realized I needed ways to help people organize the confusing life they were in, to make sense of it, all while growing, developing and flourishing. They would come to therapy one or two times a week, and then be alone for the other twenty-three hours a day, multiple days a week.

There were so many moments of being with someone as they stood on the threshold of our time together—the client knowing they had to leave, not wanting to go and be alone again. Those moments spurred me to find ways to support people during those many hours a day between therapy sessions. People who came to the BSE groups had good therapists. They were doing good work in therapy. Yet they needed more. They needed support being with their lives in between sessions. It was out of addressing that need that the BSE skills were born.

Throughout my years of working with trauma survivors and those with issues ranging from dissociation to attachment-wounding, and shame to stress, I have become increasingly moved by their deep longing to feel better, even amid frequent despair. Becoming Safely Embodied represents a structured yet flexible approach that has proven effective in both my personal and professional work.

In this book I refer to “trauma” as shorthand for a broader band of challenges many of us face. Research has shown that trauma is less likely to resolve when the underlying attachment wounds aren’t addressed, because the body’s felt experience is different from our understanding of what goes on there. Eugene Gendlin invited us into the “felt experience” of what happens inside. Daniel Stern wrote of the “vibrational affects” and body therapists like Susan Aposhyan speak of the “pulsatory energy.” When there’s been trauma, people are often left confused by these internal signals of energy, often fearing what happens as they are hijacked and catapulted into distress.

Over time, working with people in a variety of settings—those with PTSD, complex PTSD, dissociation—I found time and again that these skills helped them with a wide variety of emotional/psychological wounds. Broadly construed, BSE can help with issues ranging from trauma to dissociation to attachment-wounding to shame to stress and beyond. The BSE skills are a simple, practical, concrete way to do so.

After twenty years of leading BSE groups in person and online, I have witnessed thousands of people with trauma histories make longed-for changes and live the lives they always wanted to live. For some, practicing these BSE skills on their own can be a game changer, yet there are times—sometimes prolonged, when individual therapy is essential. Having a trusted therapist skilled at the many layers of psychological healing makes all the difference. Individual therapy provides the space and holding environment to listen deeply—allowing the wounded, exiled parts to emerge—which may not be possible in regular, day to day life.

In life, having structure to be able to dip into those old, wounded places, and then dipping out, coming out for air helps healing to be balanced and manageable.

Overall, welcoming all of our parts, all of our experiences, and creating room inside to have an Unshakeable Core happens through multiple disciplines.

As I repeat to others (and to myself!) there is no right way to do this. The good thing is, there is also no wrong way to do it. We need to become skillful, adapting to different circumstances, having multiple modalities in our toolbox. I'm hoping the BSE skills become some of the many tools you use in having the life you want to live.

Learning these skills does not depend on having or developing a spiritual perspective. Nevertheless, these skills serve as an invitation to encounter what the body knows and for what the heart yearns.

Having now taught the Becoming Safely Embodied online skills course for decades, and having had another cohort of professionals recently become certified in these simple tools, I'm grateful for how the BSE skills ripple into the world.

Over and over throughout the years people find the BSE skills help make their inner world more understandable and accessible. With practice, they find themselves transforming old painful patterns into nourishing life-sustaining ways of living.

Dive in. Try one. See what changes. Something will open up. Let yourself be surprised at what you'll find. Becoming Safely Embodied helps you become more aware of what works in you and what you'd like to change.

Our Bodies are the Temples of Our Souls

The ancient wisdom traditions invite us into the body, which shelters our heart, opening the door to our soul. In yoga and many other spiritual traditions, the body is considered the temple of the soul. Yoga psychology suggests there are many layers of the body, koshas, which provide access points to different ways of knowing. My training in different mystical traditions highlights the importance of the heart, and the layers of the heart, contained within the body.

The promise is there—inviting us. Yet many trauma survivors can't begin to imagine their bodies as safe, let alone sacred, thereby denying themselves the experience of living a

safely embodied life. Their internal world is often chaotic and horrific, and their bodies repositories of great anguish and pain. A trauma survivor might easily describe their body not as a temple but instead as a desecrated, scorched earth.

Our challenges include: healing our inner worlds, integrating our native movement toward compassion and possibility, bringing in curiosity, welcoming the steps that take our body from feeling unsafe or confusing to living inside our own skin, and opening to the wisdom that naturally flows through us.

Becoming Safely Embodied comes as we integrate the outside world with our inside world. There are two main axes, which provide this integration, bringing wholeness. When we're connecting with people, events, circumstances in life outside of ourselves, we're connecting on our Horizontal Axis. Our relationships with life bridge the outside world with our inner world. That external connection joins us through our bodies, providing a way to integrate within ourselves.

We also have a Vertical Axis connecting our psychological self with our sensory body—with our heart experience—opening the door to our inner wisdom and ultimately to connections through the earth into the holy expressions of grounded native wisdom as well as flowing up through the channel of the body accessing the sacred unity of the Divine. In this perspective, our heart is the connection between the vertical and the horizontal.

In my professional practice I found it helpful to not only see clients individually, but to also provide a well mapped out approach with step-by-step suggestions that they could do on their own. There are so many, many hours in a day, in a week, when someone suffering from trauma is alone, grappling with the mess of it all. My goal with this book is to use what's worked for individuals and groups to help you have a similar way to "becoming safely embodied." This guidebook, then, includes small manageable steps—allowing you to gently open the door to your internal world, and to safely begin making distinctions between what's happening now and what happened in the past. This will allow you to listen to the inner wisdom that wants to guide you home to yourself.

Excerpt from [Becoming Safely Embodied: A Guide to Organize Your Mind, Body and Heart to Feel Secure in the World.](#)

Deirdre Fay, LICSW has decades of experience exploring the intersection of trauma, attachment, yoga, and meditation, and teaches "a radically positive approach to healing trauma." Deirdre has written [Becoming Safely Embodied](#) (Morgan James Publishing, in press) and [Attachment-Based Yoga & Meditation for Trauma Recovery](#) (W.W. Norton, 2017). She is a co-author of [Attachment Disturbances for Adults](#) (W.W. Norton, 2016) and a co-author of chapters in [Neurobiological Treatments of Traumatic Dissociation](#). Deirdre is a respected international teacher, workshop leader, coach, and mentor in working safely with the body.

Have You Felt Like a Failure During the Pandemic?

You are not alone.

by Susan M. Pollak

At the beginning of the pandemic, my patients would confide in me about how difficult it was for them: "Trying to parent, school my kids from home, and sustain a relationship is too much, it's totally unsustainable. And it is breaking me."

But that was nearly a year ago. What I'm hearing now is more dramatic and reveals, collectively, how worn-out we are. "I feel that I've failed. I haven't been a good parent, I haven't been a good teacher. I feel that I've let my partner down. I feel that I've let my family down."

So how do we respond? Generally, we blame ourselves, criticize our family, push harder and try to exert more control. We feel exhausted and worried. And often we drink more, eat more, and turn to substances to help. A few months ago, we joked about the "quarantine 15" which was how many pounds we gained. Now physicians are talking about the "quarantine 30."

The research on the impact of COVID-19 is troubling. Over one-third of people are showing signs of clinical depression and anxiety. Much of this is due to trauma from COVID, grief, fear, the impact of physical distancing, financial concerns, loss of community, and for those with children or aging or ill family members, a decrease in access to caregiving.

However, we have decades of research that show that the practices of mindfulness and compassion can lower our stress, decrease depression and anxiety, increase our satisfaction in relationships, slow down aging, develop resilience, and make us kinder, less biased, and more generous.

At this point, we are all exhausted, experiencing COVID fatigue and worse. It is hard for everyone, but especially hard when friends and loved ones are far away, and the village that it's supposed to take to support us seems full of idiots and a pandemic makes it virtually impossible to get outside support. Most of us are living without a safety net to catch us when things inevitably go south. It is so easy to become overwhelmed and depleted.

So many of us during the pandemic are blaming ourselves or feeling like failures. Failing to be the "perfect" worker who doesn't let her children distract her from her work obligation or deadlines or failing to be the "perfect" partner who never gets angry or stressed and can manage the needs of work, children, a partner, and a home with a smile. Pretty impossible, yes?

I'd like to share a mindfulness practice that my patients and students have found useful. You can do it when you are at the end of your rope or feel that you've failed. It helps at work, with family, and is useful for healthcare providers.

The Power of Seven Billion

- When things get difficult, give yourself permission to pause.
- Don't deny all that you are dealing with. Acknowledge it. "This is hard, really hard."
- Life is full of really tough moments. And sometimes the moments become weeks and then months, and now, nearly a year.
- Right now, it is hard for nearly Seven Billion People.
- Stop. Let that in. Just like me, millions, if not billions are suffering as well.
- Imagine that people all over the globe are your companions in facing illness, despair, anxiety, financial pressure, food and housing insecurity, isolation, trauma. And, it isn't personal.
- Add anything else that you are dealing with.
- Now imagine that you are standing side by side with these human companions.
- Add some words of kindness. "Let me be kind to myself."
- Now, let's make this more powerful. Imagine that someone who really loves you, and it might be that best friend, comes over, puts a hand around you (we don't need to social distance in the imagination), and says exactly what you need to hear.
- Spend a moment to listen. It might be, "You are doing a good job. You are a good person. This is just an impossible situation. I love you, just hang in there," or anything that wells up inside you.
- And extend this to others, "Let me send kindness and compassion to the other beings who are suffering as well."
- Put a hand on your heart if that feels right. And if you like, imagine that kindness touching the other suffering beings, like rays of sunshine offering a respite.
- Take this in. Spend a moment allowing ourselves to appreciate those who have supported us. Let it soak in.

We are not taught to be kind to ourselves. We are taught to grit our teeth and to power through the hard times, ignoring our bodies, ignoring our feelings, often ignoring our behaviors and the needs of those we love.

If we just care for others and don't include ourselves, we'll burn out, lose our tempers, act out, and put more stress on all our relationships. Try this, even if it is only for a few minutes. It may help you feel that you have many companions on this journey and help you feel less alone.

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About the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy

The Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy (IMP) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the education and training of mental health professionals in the integration of mindfulness meditation and psychotherapy.

The vision of IMP is practice-based, and all teaching faculty have extensive personal and professional experience in the practice of mindfulness meditation or other mindfulness practices. Most educational programs offer CE credit for psychologists, social workers, licensed mental health counselors, licensed marital and family therapists, and nurses. Secondary activities of IMP include psychological consultation to meditation centers, clinical supervision, psychotherapy referrals, and networking for interested clinicians.

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