**Notes on Using spiritual practices while exploring experiences of moral stress**

**©Carrie Doehring 2015**

**(Do not cite without permission)**

*Twenty years ago I decided to end my first marriage after a series of crises convinced me that it was better for my sons—14 and 5 years old at the time—to be in a single parent household with me than in an intact family increasingly dominated by crises. Without a doubt, starting a new chapter as a single parent was the most challenging life experience I had ever faced as an adult. I knew that initiating a marital separation would be met with my husband’s fierce opposition. As I began cutting through the tangled, fused ties that had bound us as husband and wife for twenty years, I carried a burden of guilt and fear about causing further harm to my sons. I knew that breaking up our family household would generate irrevocable losses in their relationship with their father. I also could not predict what sorts of terrible and possibly traumatic experiences might be part of divorce proceedings.*

*I relied upon family, friends, and communities of faith to help me understand that my marriage could no longer be sustained, in spite my best efforts to get different kinds of help over many years. Their compassionate perspective helped me take into account the limitations which, in the end, had made it impossible to realize the dream of a lifelong partnership so hopefully imagined when my husband and I met in our early twenties.*

My brief narrative illustrates the theme of moral stress in overwhelming life events. My moral struggles arose from feeling solely responsible as a wife, mother, and minister for holding my marriage and family together. Hadn’t I made life-long marital vows (“for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health”)? And what about my vows as minister, which for many years meant that I grappled privately with marital distress while maintaining a public image of being in a functional marriage and family?

On the one hand, my faith was a resource. My relationship with God and supportive communities of faith did eventually help me experience compassion and think theologically in complex ways about divorce. On the other hand, aspects of my childhood faith made me feel ashamed about the failure of my marriage and fearful of initiating a divorce and surviving financially as a single mother. This fear and shame made me sometimes experience God and the church as judge, in turn making me cope by stoically enduring suffering and measuring my worth through work. In revisiting this experience I can now see how much my moral stress prevented me from reaching the long overdue decision to end this marriage. This snapshot of agonizing decision-making and a turbulent transition in my life will provide a narrative touchstone for introducing our theme of moral stress and injury. Before thinking further about your own experiences of moral/traumaticstress, I invite you to prepare your hearts for the emotional experience of remembering morally distressing experiences.

**Preparing ourselves to remember: Finding spiritual practices**

In reading about my experience of initiating a divorce, you might have begun to remember stressful situations and perhaps difficult decisions you have made. These decisions may still haunt you because you felt responsible for causing harm or simply because life did not provide a good choice, and the choice you made involved inevitable losses. You might also recognize that the ways you coped were not life-giving. Perhaps like me you avoided decisions about relationships or work. Or you might have sought relief through life-limiting behaviors or substances. While I did not often feel a need for the numbing effects of alcohol, I did find relief by shopping, and bargain hunting in particular, which provided a temporary high. Looking back, I can see how the moral stress of a failing marriage was intensified by some childhood beliefs and ways of coping—shopping—that became problematic and yet another source of moral stress. In this book we describe a process of spiritual integration, through which you might remember painful events involving moral stress while staying connected with compassionate relationships that help you be present to past suffering in transformative ways. I hope to model this process of integration by drawing upon my experience of initiating a divorce.

Returning to morally distressing memories will be arduous—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally. We need to prepare ourselves by anticipating how we will spiritually cope with the physical stress and emotional dynamics of delving into such memories. We need to be spiritually strong enough to swim in waters made turbulent by distressing memories. Finding and using spiritual practices will help us become spiritually strong enough to remember. We can prepare ourselves by using spiritual practices that strengthen the muscles of our spiritual core. We need to be able to feel the ways our faith holds us afloat like a buoyant water vest when we step into turbulent memories. Our spiritual practices will become a wet suit that provides a warm layer of love when we venture into deep chilling waters. Spiritual practices will help us tangibly experience the presence of our support system—human and transcendent—that accompanies us and also stands guard on the shore. What spiritual practices can help us become spiritually strong?

We need an array of spiritual practices, similar to the different kinds of physical activities that develop both core muscles and physical endurance. First, we can experiment with spiritual practices that help us step out of memories quickly if we need to. We have no doubt acquired many ways of distancing ourselves from emotionally overwhelming memories. Our brains are conditioned to use this ‘flight’ response when we are overwhelmed. For example, under extreme duress, we might have psychologically left our bodies and observed ourselves from a distance. Often we use activities and/or substances that provide instant relief—like my bargain hunting habit. Such emotional distancing and sources of quick relief may be life-giving in the immediate crisis but life-limiting in the long run. When I avoided my intractable marital problems through emotional disengagement and relief-seeking activities and substances, I found that my capacity for adventure and intimacy became more and more limited. Like me, you may have found that seeking relief through food, alcohol, drugs, or other kinds of over-consumption like shopping, social media, or Netflix ‘binging’ initially numbs pain but will quickly become a problematic habit that exacerbates moral stress. Over time, these ways of scrambling out of the waters and remaining always on the shore will not help us learn how to swim in the waters of distressing memories. How might spiritual practices help us seek safety in ways that are life-enhancing?

We might experiment with making this flight from distress into a spiritual practice. We can do this by first acknowledging our need to scramble to safety and then telling ourselves in kindness, not judgment, that we don’t feel safe right now; that remembering is too much for us in this moment. How might you use a spiritual practice like prayer to step out of your memories? If you are someone who finds prayer a spiritual resource, you might look for a sacred text that helps you experience

* the good shepherd who protects us from harm;
* the angels who bear us away from danger;
* Jesus who calms the storm and makes sure we are safely in the boat; or
* Mary who holds us like a mother calming a fearful child.

The key here is becoming more aware of when distress makes us flee intense emotions, and turning our flight into a prayer that helps us experience God with us, or a sense that we are surrounded with goodness. Rather than automatically distancing ourselves, or avoiding distressing memories by seeking immediate relief through activities or substances, we will practice how to intentionally use spiritual practices that help us remain spiritually calm while practicing our escape route. Soon, we may only need to remind ourselves of how we can leave spiritually through the exit door of our spiritual practice if remembering becomes too intense. All we need is to know where and how to use that spiritual safety exit. The difference between such intentional spiritual practices and habitual life-limiting coping is that now we compassionately recognize our distress and our need to escape. And we are no longer alone. There is a transcendent and imminent presence of love around us and within us.

What might such a spiritual practice look like? The process of acknowledging our distress and lovingly seeking safety through spiritual practices is a kind of welcoming prayer. Welcoming prayer comes from the Christian tradition of centering prayer described by contemporary spiritual guides like Thomas Keating, Cynthia Bourgeault and Jane Vennard who draw upon ancient and recent Christian spiritual writings and practices ([Bourgeault, 2004](#_ENREF_1); [Keating, 2002](#_ENREF_2); [Vennard, 2013](#_ENREF_3)).

**Welcoming Prayer**

Welcoming prayer is a three-step process that begins by acknowledging whatever signs of stress we are experiencing in our bodies, and in the emotions that surface with memories. The second step is to welcome whatever feelings are part of our physical stress reactions by saying a simple prayer like, “Welcome, fear.” We gently breathe this prayer while being present to the physical sensations of fear. We repeat this prayer of welcome until we feel ready to move to the third step of letting go, by saying “I let go of this fear.” This three-part process of fully experiencing physical distress, welcoming feelings, and letting go is described by Jane Vennard as a spiritual practice of hospitality ([2013, p. 118](#_ENREF_3)).

If we have coped by avoiding distressing memories and their feelings, the process of actually naming the feeling could be like greeting a stranger. For example, the fear which gripped our bodies, which we have tried to avoid and ignore is now at the door of our hearts. Strangers will become friends when we open the door of our hearts, greeting a feeling with a name—fear, sadness, numbness, boredom, agitation, anger, despair—and welcome these formerly estranged feelings into our hearts with the welcoming prayer. In the welcoming process these feelings will no longer be strangers and aliens. They will become part of the household of our hearts and the household of God.[[1]](#footnote-1) When the time feels right in our prayer, we can let go in “a fond farewell” to a formerly strange feeling that has become familiar and even a friend that we could more easily welcome the next time ([Vennard, 2013, p. 119](#_ENREF_3)).

It may seem counter-intuitive to use spiritual practices to fully experience physical and emotional distress. Isn’t there a risk that we will be swept away or swamped by the rough waters stirred up by memories? We need to remember that spiritual practices can be used to step out of these waters at any point, or scramble into the spiritual life boat that accompanies us. Knowing that we have this lifeboat will help us venture into the waters of distressing memories by using welcoming prayer. These spiritual practices will strengthen our spiritual core and endurance, and bring into view the spiritual support system close at hand. We will become spiritually strong enough to experience the turbulence of remembering and to stay afloat. Let me describe how I have used welcoming prayers while writing about my distressing memory of initiating a divorce. This spiritual practice helped me connect what was going on in my *head*—thinking and writing about a memory—with my *heart*—what is going on in my body and emotions.

**Using welcoming prayers to connect head to heart in an integrative process of remembering**

In thinking about memories involving moral/traumatic stress, I honed in on this particular memory about initiating a divorce. I decided to write about this experience. I began making notes and edited this brief story as a way of discerning what was so morally distressing. I also wanted a bare-bone description that would not disclose unnecessary details about family members. While I was using my mind to craft a narrative, my body was responding. Muscles in my chest tightened, as though my heart was aching. My breathing became shallow. My shoulders hunched as though I was once again carrying a heavy burden of responsibility. It was hard to focus my attention. I fidgeted with my hands, ready to fall back into a childhood habit of biting my nails. I often got up from my desk to distract myself. My body was reacting to the stress of remembering. In a sense, I was experiencing the body memories that were part of this stressful time in my life.

These bodily memories were intertwined with all of the emotions that were part of this chapter of my life. I felt anxious and started worrying about people in my life now—people for whom I feel responsible. I felt ashamed—another contagious feeling that made me imagine readers judging me as a bad mother and minister. Old anger toward my first husband welled up, as the tug of memories drew me into ruminating on grievances from long ago.

In thinking and writing about this memory, my body and emotions were sucking me back into this twenty-year-old psychodrama. The body memories and emotional dynamics infused and colored what was happening in my life now, as though I hadn’t really changed over the past twenty years. The psychodrama of the past framed current stress in my life, making it seem as though my sons were once again at risk and I was caught in a morass of overwhelming relational dynamics that I was trying to manage privately while plowing ahead with work.

My usual ways of coping with this kind of stress also kicked in. I wanted to avoid or numb what was going on physically and emotionally, and stoically push on with thinking through memories as I edited my written description of initiating a divorce. Emotional disengagement was a familiar and habitual way of coping with anxiety and shame. Privately managing my feelings by ignoring them had been a survival mechanism that helped me endure pain. I knew that this survival mechanism was written on my DNA, through my family of origin and also as a mother trying to survive for her children’s sake. But my response to fear and shame deferred long-term spiritual integration. The short-term coping through denial and avoidance was keeping me from exploring, learning from, and growing with my experiences. What if I were to try using spiritual practices that would help me pay attention to my body and emotions, accepting them with compassion—even cherishing them as a source of wisdom?

I began to experiment with spiritual practices that helped me accept my body memories and feelings. The simplest practice was to use a Welcoming Prayer. I turned my narrative writing into a welcoming process by paying attention to what I was experiencing in my body. As my body reacted to remembering, I focused on my reactions and tried to be fully present without thinking or doing anything, simply being with the sensations—the tight chest, shallow breathing, hunched shoulders. The next step in the process of the Welcoming Prayer was to use the word, welcome with the name of whatever feelings were associated with what is going on in my body. So, for me, this prayer began with saying, “Welcome, fear.” Saying this prayer gently allowed me to sink deeper into the physical sensations of fear and the ways fear narrowed my horizons to a stark life and death perspective on my present life, as though that was the only view on life available to me. The prayer helped me be compassionately present to fear. Now I was able to look through the window of fear, onto the stark landscape that had life and death meanings, without believing this was reality or the totality of my life. I could now look through the window of fear and even see this stark landscape as beautiful. I stayed with my welcoming prayer and I was able to feel my body shift from fear into calm. I was ready for the third step of letting go, by praying, “I let go of my fear.” It felt as though I was turning from the window of fear and seeing other perspectives available to me—life views energized by compassion, or boundless awe for the mystery of life, or the joy of human goodness.

**What spiritual practices might work for you?**

In reading my description of how I used Welcoming Prayer, you might have started thinking about your own practices. Prayer is an important practice for people of faith and it can take many different forms. Some people use biblical texts or prayer books. Some people use mantras or phrases as they pray. Some people use beads, like the Roman Catholic or Episcopalian rosary. Many people of different faiths have been drawn to contemplative practices from Buddhism traditions. These prayer and meditation practices are especially helpful when we use them regularly because they help us slip more quickly into a centered place, and they also tend to keep us on an even keel, much as a regular physical workout lowers our resting heart rate and gives us more stamina. If you have a regular spiritual practice it won’t be hard to draw upon this spiritual habit when you experience distressing feelings associated with whatever memories you decide to return to. If you had a past practice that worked well, you might want to retrieve it. Or you might want to try a new practice.

You may also want to reflect more broadly on what kinds of activities are implicitly spiritual for you. I have been describing explicitly spiritual practices involving prayer and meditation. But many people also experience a sense of spiritual fullness and transcendence from experiences that are not outwardly religious. Are there moments in your day or week that help you experience peacefulness, beauty, calm, and love for others and oneself? What makes such moments good? Might these moments become an intentional practice of self-care and a spiritual practice of connecting with goodness and beauty in yourself and others? For example, moments of goodness may include pausing to watch a sunrise or sunset, singing in a choir, walking and caring for a dog, gardening, forms of exercise, or listening to music. After identifying and exploring some of the ways of you experience goodness in your daily or weekly routine, you might consider how to incorporate such moments intentionally into the times you are thinking about morally distressing memories.

I have experienced singing and choral music as a way of connecting with goodness ever since I sang in an elementary school choir. Looking back, I can see that the electrifying physical response I had to participating in the beauty of choral music was a childhood religious experience that I left behind when we moved from a school with a strong choral program. I rediscovered the intense joy of choral singing as an undergraduate at McGill University’s Bachelor of Music program. Since that time, listening to and singing choral music have been spiritual ways of connecting head to heart.

Singing in a choir is a wonderful experience of what it means to have a body of your own but find your true voice in a much greater body, where your voice resonates most truly in harmony with the voices of others, where you find your song most fully in words of praise and thanksgiving, where you’re lost in concentration, where every detail matters, where you rejoice at the gifts of others which only enhance the gifts that are your own, where fundamentally you’re all turned to face the source of your gifts and the focus of your praise. (Sam Wells, BBC Radio 3 Choral Evensong, December 10, 2014)

Music has the power to shift my brain out of an often habitual state of worry into a state of compassion—almost like taking an anti-anxiety medication. Now I find myself carrying a few choral pieces of music that are always in the back of my mind, which I can intentionally turn to when I become aware that I am in that familiar childhood worry mode. By re-experiencing my brain and body “on” music I can shift out of worry into a centered place of experiencing goodness and beauty.

The good routines of our daily lives have the power to calm us when we intentionally recall these routines in ways that shift our minds and bodies back into that goodness. I gave the example of how recalling music is calming for me. Other examples might be recalling a moment on a daily walk or run when your body felt strong, or you noticed the beauty of your surroundings. Another example is the comfort you might take from physical closeness with a partner, a family member, or even a pet. Recalling the sensation of physical closeness might have a calming effect that you could use intentionally when you feel under distress.

In closing let me offer several metaphors that we will carry throughout this process of spiritual integration—the images of a home and a tree. Imagine our inner lives as a house with many different rooms and views on life. Recalling distressing memories will take us into rooms in our inner world often associated with childhood feelings. For me, the heavy sense of responsibility and worry about life-and-death consequences was a familiar place from childhood with a bleak view on life and a God who judged me. I find it helpful to pay attention to these physical sensations and emotional dynamics, which automatically transport me to this room in my inner home. The welcoming prayer helps me be in this room with a sense of compassion toward myself. Saying this prayer while naming the feelings of being in this space is like standing as a mother alongside the child I was. The welcoming prayer gives me an adult perspective, as though the features of the room and view distorted by exaggerated childhood fears now shifts from dizzying possibilities (the imagined monsters under the bed) into ordinary fears (like the fears about falling asleep on one’s own in the dark).

The second image is of a tree. Imagine yourself as a tree

…planted by the water

that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes;

its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought

and never fails to bear fruit. (Jer. 17:7-8 NIV)

This tree has endured storms and dry weather—perhaps even hurricanes, tornadoes, lightning, and drought. Its weathered appearance bears the scars of such hardships; a cross section of tis trunk would reveal lean years when nourishment was scarce and growth was limited. It has not only survived, but come to thrive when its roots draw nourishment from the stream; when its natural process of photosynthesis uses moisture and light to produce the sugars of nourishment; and when the trees around it provide protection from wind and lightning.

This process of integration may well reveal aspects of your “home” or your “tree” that you have known about at some level but perhaps not fully realized. When I pay close attention to what’s going on in my body when I recall this memory of getting a divorce, I become more aware of how easily I return to that family childhood space of worry and heavy responsibility. Like me, you may become more aware of those places in your inner home or scarred aspects of your tree from childhood that seem very real when your body experiences distress. Spiritual practices can open up and shift us into places in our inner home or our tree that have a soaring sense of proportion and beauty.

Much as we might wish that this process of spiritual integration could become a brand new inner home for us or allow us to transplant our tree, it is not possible to rebuild our inner home from scratch or transplant our tree in a new ‘location’. The foundation and basic structure of our inner home, and the roots of our tree are built up in childhood through growing up in particular families and places and cultures. In a sense, we are stuck with this old house/tree, with all of its faults and quirks. What spiritual integration does is help us compassionately understand this old house of ours, see how we can better inhabit certain spaces and even make these spaces homey. Working with a distressing memory, then, may well reveal the vulnerabilities and even limits of our homes or our tree particularly as they have been shaped by childhood experiences. But spiritual practices and a sense of support from others may well give us knowledge and tools to make repairs. Imagine having the crew from a “This Old House” episode working with us to make the place we live into a better home. Or imagine a team of loving horticulturalists, caring for our tree by feeding its roots, tenderly pruning dead branches so that new life grows. I invite you to draw upon these images of your inner life as a home or as a tree, in imagining this process of spiritual integration.

*Keeping a journal*

I invite you to begin to make notes; perhaps beginning a journal. You might want to use several columns or pages for jotting down notes about

* memories that involve moral distress or overwhelming events
* what’s happening in your body as you remember and what feelings come up
* what spiritual practices help you accept these feelings and reconnect you with compassion and a sense of goodness

For now don’t get into too many notes about the memories that are coming up. The first step will be in exploring spiritual practices that are either explicitly religious or that implicitly connect you with goodness. Make a list of

* what spiritual practices have helped you in the past,
* what practices are part of your routine, and
* what practices you might want to experiment with.

Experiment with using these practices more intentionally before you begin to work on any overwhelming memories in your journal assingments. It helps to make a plan about how to intentionally use spiritual practices in your daily or weekly life. Here is an example of this kind of plan:

*I am going to try and use a spiritual practice when I first sit down at my computer. Instead of opening my email, I am going to open a music file and choose a particular piece of music that has been “speaking to me lately.” I am going to listen while being in a centered place that begins with deep breathing and a focus on my body. I will listen to the music several times until I have fully experienced the way it centers me. Then, as I turn from this spiritual practice to my tasks (like reading email) I will try to pay attention to how my body reacts to stress, in order to see if I can briefly return to the centered state of listening to music as a way of being compassionately present to stress.*

After making this plan, I will keep notes each day for a week or so about what it is like to try and use these practices more intentionally. In my notes I will explore my ambivalence—the pros and cons of trying to use particular spiritual practices in this process of remembering and integrating a morally distressing and/or traumatic memory.

**References**

Bourgeault, C. (2004). *Centering prayer and inner awakening*. Lanham, MD: Cowley.

Keating, T. (2002). *Foundations for centering prayer and the Christian contemplative life: Open mind, open heart*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Vennard, J. E. (2013). *Fully awake and truly alive: Spiritual practices to nurture your soul*. Woodstock, VT SkyLight Paths.

**Additional Resources**

***CARITAS***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **COMPASSION** practices/experiences (spiritual practices that help us experience compassion toward self and others) | C | In tune:  Heart |
| Awareness and **ACCEPTANCE** of what is going on in our bodies (tensions, pain, core strength, stress reactions, etc.) and our emotions | A | Heart |
| Spiritual **REFLEXIVITY**: Identifying and sharing with others how our physical and emotional reactions often arise from childhood/habitual values, beliefs and coping practices (our embedded spiritual orienting systems) | R | Head |
| **INTENTIONAL** SPIRITUALITY**:** Identifying our intentional spirituality rooted in love, faith, and hope—the core values, ultimate beliefs, and life-giving ways of coping—we would like to put into practice | I | Head |
| **TRYING OUT new routines:** Making spiritual practices part of our daily routine,experimenting with momentary spiritual practices when we react to stress | T | Head to hands |
| **ACCOUNTABILITY:** Sharing with others the ways we are putting our intentional spirituality into practice (e.g. the ways compassion/love is at the heart of spirituality and how it is expressed to others through our actions) | A | Hands |
| **Spiritual renewal ripples out:** the changes we are making ripple out throughout all aspects of our lives and our relationships | S | Hands |

Assessing sources of stress that triggers physical and emotional reactions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Sources of stress | Reactions | Actions |
| Unjust family, organizational and cultural systems (intersecting sexism, racism, rigid religious systems, etc.) | Triggers physical stress reactions and emotions like shame (it feels as though there is something wrong with us), guilt, fear, anger | 1. Seek relational and community support, especially through ongoing meaning-making, rituals, liturgies that hold us  2. Use *CARITAS* process to accept and understand the ways we react and to live out intentional spirituality  3. Seek spiritual care and counseling when relational and community support isn’t enough  4. When there is injustice, protest and seek justice with others |
| Limits and finitude of life arising from inevitable tensions and losses of having multiple commitments | Triggers transitory stress reactions and emotions like sadness, anger, fear related to inevitable losses and conflicts |
| Embedded spiritual orienting systems— values, beliefs and coping practices—formed in childhood or overwhelming experiences of loss/trauma | Triggers habitual/chronic stress and emotional reactions and habitual coping practices (like use of addictive substances, compulsive coping, spiritual struggles, isolation) |

1. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Ephesian 2: **19** NRS). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)