

## Dorothy and the Very Bad Awful Disowned Feelings

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Dorothy feels afraid and powerless, and she doesn't like it. Mean old Elmira Gulch is threatening to take away her dog Toto, Dorothy's closest friend and companion. Aunt Em and Uncle Henry are too busy counting chicks to be bothered. Zeke insists she be courageous, even though he's afraid. Hunk tells her to use her brains and gives her wise council while fumbling every move he makes. Hickory is too self absorbed to care about anything but himself. Despite Dorothy's pleading, Aunt Em cuts her off and scurries away, telling her to stop imagining things and find a place where she won't get into any trouble. Elmira's takes the dog away to be destroyed, but her selfish plot is foiled by Toto's quick escape. Dorothy feels she has no choice but to run away from home.

Dorothy is desperate. She feels alone and frightened in a dangerous, uncaring world, and she doesn't want to feel these very bad awful feelings. She decides to utilize one of the most successful strategies for avoiding them: running away. This is not only a classic children's story, but also a classic psychological stance we take toward our very bad awful feelings. We will do anything – even create a completely delusional world – in order to avoid feeling uncomfortable. This is the insidious realm of disowned experience.

At age thirteen, while showing off for my father, I dared a sequence of three flips on our backyard trampoline. On the third flip, I opened my tuck too early and my forehead hit the mat. My body continued its trajectory over me. I heard a crunch and felt pressure and a twist of my neck as the back of my head touched the middle of my back. My body lay still as I went into shock, having come very close to snapping my spine in two. Fortunately, my back was only traumatized, not broken. I felt okay a few days later, although my enthusiasm for the trampoline had vanished.

Nine years later, while attending the University of Colorado in Boulder, I was chosen to participate in a demonstration of Roling, a connective tissue body therapy also known as Structural Integration. After stripping down to my underwear, I was led onto the stage to stand next to the wrinkled, white-haired, 80-year old grandmother and originator of the technique, Dr. Ida Rolf. In front of her audience of 300 people, Dr. Rolf pointed to my back and identified various imbalances in my posture. She then asked, "How did you injure your back here?" Not if, but how. Speaking into the microphone, I told the story of my tangle with the trampoline. She then laid me down on a low massage table and began pushing her strong hands, knuckles, and elbows into my body, stretching my tissues and changing my structure with each powerful move. I breathed deeply as each intense manipulation opened something deep inside me. My body began to vibrate with a subtle electric buzz, and my nose started to tingle. The tingling sensation slowly spread to my entire face, head, and chest. Ida slipped her fingers beneath my back and pushed up into a spot below and between my shoulder blades.

A bolt of lightening shot through me, as if she had plugged my toes into a 220V outlet. A fire rushed up my spine and out my head. I remembered the entire trampoline accident as if it was happening in that moment. Instead of going into shock and feeling nothing, as had happened nine years before, I heard the crackling sound of bones twisted in the wrong direction, and felt the folding of my neck and upper back. I could feel my vertebrae crunching into each other, and began to sob. The trauma that had been stored in my body for nine years flooded through me. I curled into a fetal position, crying as an injured child. Huge waves of energy flowed through me, so powerful that I couldn't move.

Ida covered me with a sheet and put a loving hand on my shoulder. Between my sobs, she told the audience, "Those of you who are therapists will recognize this as emotional trauma release, normally coming after months and months of therapy." Opening my eyes for a moment, I saw hundreds of people staring at me, mouths agape. "The hell with them," I thought. "I'm going to feel this fully. So what if I'm crying in public." It was not one of my most glorious moments in front of an audience, but it was a glorious moment of release. After that night, I felt more alive than I had felt in nine years. Feelings in my body and my heart were more vivid than I could ever remember. Had the trampoline trauma remained stored in my tissues, it might have later turned into back problems, emotional distance in my relationships, or disease somewhere in my body.

When very bad awful things happen, whether by threat, stress, injury or disease, the nerves send signals to the brain and the surrounding tissues to indicate something is wrong. We experience most of these signals as pain. In the case of emotional stress or trauma, we usually experience it as overwhelming, and something we cannot handle. Dorothy felt it as panic and the associated need to escape. These feelings are the result of a chain of hundreds of thousands of chemical and electrical events, including those that stimulate repair of damage. Pain is an important signal to receive and welcome, but we don't always receive the message. We don't like to be uncomfortable, and we don't like pain, whether physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. We resist it. We seek to dull it, or extinguish it completely. We intellectualize it away by labeling or analyzing. We try to fix it, desperately seeking change or solutions. We may try to ignore it by distracting ourselves, or push ahead with what needs to be done. We may suffer silently, enduring it, or we may talk endlessly to others about it. We sometimes use alcohol or drugs to numb ourselves out. We rely on our favorite addictions of choice –

for some it is food, for others sex, TV, or work. We will do anything to resist the pain, even to our detriment. But whatever we resist will somehow persist. We will experience it eventually, sooner or later, one way or the other.

Dorothy went so far as to get hit on the head (getting injured or creating a bigger problem is another convenient way to avoid unpleasant feelings) and entered a shamanic journey involving tiny people she could tower over, an emerald city with infinite delights, and vivid manifestations of her many sub-personalities: an simple con-man portraying himself as a powerful wizard, a lion with no courage but much false bravado, an empty kettle with no heart and a steely personality, and a stuffed doll with little brain but lots of bright ideas. In her magical land over the rainbow, Dorothy became the subject of everyone's attention instead of being ignored and unseen.

What would have happened if instead she had stayed home and dealt with her feelings? Had Dorothy lived through the 1990s, receiving the benefit of psychotherapy and the human potential movement, she might have sat down with her family to express how frustrated, afraid and unloved she felt. Auntie Em, Uncle Henry, and each of the farm hands would hold her close, telling her she was truly loved. Someone would remind her that adults get busy, and sometimes forget to show their love. Children misinterpret this, believing they are unloved or unlovable, and feel neglected or abandoned. (Unfortunately, this is also true of many adults.) Each member of her family would promise to do better, and someone would remind her to ask for what she wanted. "Feel your feelings as they come up," they would tell her, "and tell us all your feelings honestly." The story would be much shorter and far less interesting, of course, because Dorothy never would have left home or stumbled into Oz.

Six years after my near-naked on-stage demonstration of emotional trauma release, a young man who was traveling with me pulled out a gun, aimed at my head, and shot me – four times. I had learned by this time that any resistance to an experience only delays, and often exacerbates, suffering. The first bullet felt like a baseball bat to the top of my head, shocking me into a state of hyper-awareness. When I realized my companion intended to kill me, I decided to face my death with presence and courage. I relaxed, determined to die well, fully awake to whatever might happen.

The absence of resistance saved my life. My relaxation was so deep that the fourth bullet pushed my head to the side, allowing the bullet to glance off at an angle. Resistance in the form of fear or anger would have locked up my neck; that counter-force may well have allowed the bullet to shatter my skull. I not only survived, but as Dorothy did, received my own initiation into another world. The full story, "A Shot In The Light," can be found in the international bestseller, *I Thought My Father Was God... and Other True Tales from NPR's National Story Project* (Henry Holt, 2001), and in the film, "The Kindness of Strangers," directed by Claudia Myers. Both may be viewed on [www.EverydayAwakening.com](http://www.EverydayAwakening.com).

Whenever we experience a trauma, shock, or injury, the natural response is to contract inward to protect ourselves. When the difficulty is over and the body has recovered, we should ideally return to an open, relaxed posture. Cats and dogs demonstrate this natural principle: when they get hurt or injured, they first shake themselves or jump around, discharging the energy generated by the trauma. They then stop eating, curl up, and rest or sleep for extended periods of time. After their body has healed, they return to their natural feline or canine behavior. Humans, however, have the option of disowning their experience.

The most severe shocks and traumas – especially repeated or sustained traumas such as sexual or emotional abuse, or the experience of life-or-death conflicts such as war – cause the temporary contraction to become permanent. The body is unable to relax back into trust and openness. A defensive posture becomes a fixed way of life. The holding pattern becomes protective body armor against a dangerous world.

Some holding patterns are necessary, like a cast that allows a broken bone to heal. But after the healing occurs, holding patterns that get stuck in the system act to restrict the flow of energy (including healing energy) in our body. Disease often results. Much of the work of healing involves returning to past experiences that have been avoided in order to re-experience them, or perhaps to experience them fully for the first time. Body-centered therapies such as Rolfing, Bioenergetics, and Holotropic Breathwork can release the protective armor, allowing the natural flow of breath and movement to return. Psychotherapy aims at the same principle, targeting the release of emotions and memories, and the establishment of new patterns of behavior.

An even more effective method of release is to eliminate the beliefs and resisted experiences that created the persistent condition in the first place. In the programs I teach, *Everyday Awakening™* and *The Avatar® Course*, we use a wide variety of methods to root out unhealthy core beliefs and dissolve them, replacing them with more positive beliefs that will create our preferred reality. Dorothy's core beliefs included "Nobody cares about me," which created very bad awful feelings. She was released from her colorful delusion by creating a new belief, "There's no place like home."

We have two choices when faced with unpleasant experiences: we can experience them very intensely for a short amount of time, or we can experience them subtly in the background for a long period of time. But experience them we must. If we put up enough resistance, another experience just like it will come our way. (Dorothy had numerous encounters with the Wicked Witch, a projection of her own shadow – her disowned feelings of being out of control, being angry about it, and the willingness to do anything in order to get back in control.) Distancing or disowning reality only delays our confrontation with the inevitable. Running away from a threat or a bad feeling prevents a full encounter with what we fear, but as Dorothy demonstrated in Oz, experiences tend to repeat themselves in our lives until we face them fully. When we do

finally confront the dark force we've been avoiding, we tap into inner resources we didn't know we had. Our character is tested, and we find our courage, intelligence, and heart. Our greatest fears are often dispatched with nothing more potent than facing the naked truth. As very bad, awful and scary as they seem, witches and goblins that have prevented us from achieving our goals are dissolved by a splash of water: the willingness to experience them directly.

We have been given a simple, glorious and important assignment by the Creator: EXPERIENCE EVERYTHING that comes. You were given the gift of human birth in order to have your own set of unique experiences. Your job is to act as a nerve ending and give full attention and appreciation to your experiences. I like to believe that our experiences travel up the chain of being into the Infinite Mind of the Creator. When we dull, deaden, or numb our input signals, we cut off the flow of this information. If the information can't get through, it will wait in the background as an annoying little signal until it has the opportunity to be experienced fully. It's like the memory buffer on your printer which blinks a little light to let you know that it has stored the pages you sent. It waits patiently until you give it the attention it needs, replenishing its supply of paper so it can finish the assigned job.

Why would a benevolent God have given us the ability to experience a wide variety of feelings and then have us avoid them? To the Great Mystery, all experiences are interesting! This includes the very bad awful experiences of pain, trauma, injury, loss, tragedy, sickness, and death. The Infinite Mind does not have a human heart or human preferences. It wants to experience everything, and is always creating new possibilities (along with its many old favorites such as suffering, pain, joy, sadness, delight, etc.)

But humans have human hearts, and we have strong preferences. We resist approximately half of all our experiences – the difficult and uncomfortable ones. We believe that pain is bad. We believe that we shouldn't be uncomfortable. We resist these very bad awful feelings, pushing them away, dulling our senses, anesthetizing ourselves with our own version of the field of poppies enchanted by the Wicked Witch. The poppies of today are everywhere – as close as the nearest rack of convenience store snacks or the infinite distractions of the web and cable TV. They put us to sleep, separating us from our own (often uncomfortable) direct experience. Every disowned or refused experience, however, persists until experienced. Everything we resist does persist.

If you have a persisting condition that you prefer not to have, including pain, disease, unworkable relationships, a bad financial situation, etc., there is something you are resisting. This is not to say there aren't things physically wrong with your body, brain or circumstances. Physical manifestations are the expression of our resistance. How do you know when you've stopped resisting? The rule is simple: When you experience something fully, it will change or disappear completely. If you're still experiencing something you don't like, there is more work to do.

If you wish to make a change, ask yourself these questions:

- What experience or feeling am I successfully avoiding by having this condition persist?
- What is the payoff I get from having this exact condition?
- What beliefs do I have that could create a condition like this?
- What beliefs would create the scenario I would rather have?
- Am I willing to change my beliefs?

Curiously, God would not have given us the ability to resist our experiences if she didn't want us to use it from time to time. Persistence keeps things in existence. Rocks resist erosion, so mountains last for millions of years. Life-forms resist being destroyed, so we avoid dangerous situations and survive.

We cannot change a condition we dislike unless we first take off the resistance to that condition. When the Wizard gave Dorothy and her crew the assignment to retrieve the broom of the Wicked Witch of the West, they resisted the idea and believed it impossible. But they then accepted the fact that it was the only route home. Here is a handy trick: If you have a persisting condition (a pain, problem, disease, difficulty, etc.), begin by intensifying your resistance. Fight off what you don't like. Keep it away with all your strength. Consciously ignore it and deny that it belongs to you. Push it as far away from you as you can possibly push it. Do all of this consciously, by choice, rather than automatically and subconsciously, which is what you have been doing.

When you are good and tired of what that resistance has created in your life, become willing to experience your resistance fully. Feel your resistance to the condition. Allow it to be there. Appreciate it as one more gift from God. Experience it, and glory in it. The cycle of resistance will be completed, and it can move on.

When you feel your resistance lift, become willing to experience whatever you have been resisting. If you didn't want to feel the pain, let the pain in, and feel it fully. Let the discomfort come through the door like a welcomed guest. Offer it a cup of tea and appreciate it for what it is. If you have a disease, even a terminal one, appreciate it as part of God's plan, as part of your plan for your life. If there is persistent pain, open your arms to it and thank the Creator for this experience, sending it on to the Infinite Mind of God, since that is your role as a nerve ending – to experience and send the signal on to Source. Breathe into it. Breathe through it. Pain has a role, just as pleasure does. It is a signal that something is out of balance, dangerous, or beyond the edge of our safe limits. The body needs this signal in order to know how to heal. Receive this gift willingly, and let it play the role it is designed to play – prompting growth and healing.

The Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi gave us similar advice nearly 800 years ago:  
This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and attend them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably. They may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice – meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Welcome difficulty. Learn the alchemy True Human Beings know:  
the moment you accept what troubles you've been given, the door opens.

Welcome difficulty as a familiar comrade. Joke with torment brought by the Friend.  
Sorrows are the rags of old clothes and jackets that serve to cover, and then are taken off.

That undressing, and the beautiful naked body underneath, is the sweetness that comes  
after grief.

All pain is growing pain when received and welcomed fully. This is true for emotional pain – those very bad awful feelings – as well as physical pain, intellectual angst, and spiritual crisis. Appreciate the gift, welcome it, and it will move through you more easily. Deny it, or resist it, and it will stick with you forever – or until you accept it as your gift and learn its lesson. Miracles can, and do happen. We can go home again – to our bodies, to our aliveness, and to the full range of our experience – recognizing finally that there really is no place like home.