

Our Wounding Can Become The Very Portal For Transformation

BY JUSTIN CRAIG

I like the fact that *awakening* is a gerund – an *-ing* word that looks like a verb but acts as a noun. There is no certainty where I might be placed on this open-ended verb-noun spectrum and, to be honest, I am still resistant to rouse myself from the seductions of sleep.

Awakening is a path of loss: loss of identity, loss of security, loss of hope. It is from this apparently bleak landscape that crisis emerges as a confrontation with the transience of life itself.

Archetypally, when the old is dying and the new still being birthed, we enter a liminal space between worlds. By definition, it is obscure and tends to draw to the surface our unresolved material – the old hurts, traumas, and their bedrock beliefs. Yet, through exquisitely painful discovery, I believe our wounding can become the very portal for the transformation we were seeking.

Most of my crises have related to home, homelessness, social isolation, work, money and – most tellingly – belonging. In the midst of these dying pains, I would cling to wretched old consolations and grasp for certainties where there were none. In the meantime, I'd heard a lot about the virtues of surrender and made them articles of a different kind of faith than mine.

The quote, "If you're going through hell, keep going," has been attributed to Winston Churchill. Whether apocryphal or not, he's the right figure to carry this conceit, full of

weary gravitas in the face of totalitarian forces. But the principle is sure: there is no turning around.

At a time of radical recalibration, personally and collectively, crisis is a transition zone where polarities come to be reconciled in a process reflected endlessly in myth and art, mysticism, chaos theory, dialectics, and even the stars. In Vedic astrology, for example, the junction point between water and fire signs is known as *gandanta*, literally translated as knot-end. To move through this zone is to traverse a field of elemental transformation, and at its centre is a knot or longstanding issue.

This metaphorical knot isn't necessarily so easily identifiable, though.

A crisis of faith can be diffuse and barren, and nothing at the surface does justice to the unfaltering void. Here, to paraphrase Saint Bonaventure, the answer lies not in clarity, but the darkness itself; not in instruction, but grace; not light, but the fire that carries us to direct illumination by "ecstatic unctions and burning afflictions."

The fire and the night are such potent symbols in mystical imagery, capturing the inseparability of transformation and woundedness. Indeed, it's impossible for me to address crisis without reference to trauma.

How we respond to a crisis – and even the anatomy of the crisis itself – bears the imprint of our foundational injuries.

Though crisis ought not to be conflated with catastrophe or tragedy, the signature of violence, held in the implicit and explicit domains of memory, does not make such distinctions.

In *The Boy who was Raised as a Dog*, Bruce D. Perry, MD, Ph.D. backgrounds the phenomenon of abused children who, having been passed from foster home to foster home, finally land in a genuinely caring environment, only to unconsciously sabotage their new-found stability. "Attempting to take control of what they believe is the inevitable return to chaos, they appear to 'provoke' it in order to make things feel more comfortable and predictable," he writes.

This may seem an extreme example, but no one is untouched by trauma. It's the price of admission. Certainly, in the collective memory, our history is marked by repeated cycles of conquest and domination. It set me wondering to what extent my own crises had been involuntary escalations, a maladaptive means of controlling the uncontrollable when some intolerable loss beckoned and gathered about itself all the other losses of my life. As W.B Yeats evoked in 'The Second Coming':

*Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere;
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.*

Crisis is a charged word, shrill and shock-inducing; its inflammatory overtones borrowed from news-speak, which seeks to keep the scandal bandwagon moving, preferably on a downward slope.

John F. Kennedy first popularised the understanding of the word 'crisis' in Chinese as comprised of two characters signifying 'danger' and 'opportunity,' a rhetorical device to galvanize America that is now part of the modern motivational lexicon. Except it's not true.

Chinese language scholars say the second character is more rightly translated as "incipient moment" or "crucial point" after which things change and – read inextricably with the first syllable of 'danger' – not in a good way.

It can be hard to appreciate the silver lining of opportunity when the foundations are moving under our feet. Crisis is not for the faint-hearted, no matter how it's dressed. Yet – like death – it seems to come for us all sooner or later.

These transitions feel like riding a deeply personal evolutionary edge, where the distinctions between work and calling, a spiritual life and an ordinary life break down; when it's time to stop hiding my light for fear of being put back in my place by the imagined 'other.' If we are in the midst of transcending archetypes, our stories will no longer be constellated into points of shared experience. To be radically free means to be radically oneself.

This is consecrated ground but also empty ground, and that alone has been enough to raise the dead in the middle of those sleepless nights. My misunderstanding had been to hold fast to the singularity of surrender: it happened in a moment, or not at all.

Crisis originates from the Greek *krisis*, which according to Merriam-Webster, connotes an “act of separating, decision, judgment, event, outcome, turning point, sudden change.” If there is a commonality here with Chinese, then it relates to a critical juncture.

To reimagine crisis, I had to see the eruptions of existential despair and the catalytic change points as a turning over of the soil. As a child of chaos, I had to reckon with how I might provoke something old and familiar, an internalised dynamic of violence, in a bid to control the uncontrollable.

As *krisis* implies, at the centre of each turning point was a decision or judgment to be made about where to orient myself:

to identify with what was dying, or to yield to what was being born.

In orthodox Christianity, grace is seen as a mysterious force visited upon the unworthy. In an unredeemed world, I can follow that logic. But we are redeemed already. Grace reaches into those places I cannot reach by my will alone.

There *with* the Grace of God I go...into uncharted territory, where my ignorance of the terrain means I am receptive to the only real intelligence available. What surer way to be led than to be robbed of my usual senses and made supple and yielding?

And somewhere in there, surrender was not what I thought. It didn't require me at all. My traumas didn't need to be healed, cleared, cleansed, or purified. My primal wounds were sacred – the very portal through which I could embrace my broken self and in so doing, commune with the soul of the world.

Grace needs only the narrowest of openings and is ever inviting us to lay down our arms.

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For more self-study, [The Urban Howl](#) recommends [The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom](#) .

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