



HOW TO DO THE WORK

RECOGNIZE YOUR PATTERNS,
HEAL FROM YOUR PAST,
+ CREATE YOUR SELF

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How to Do the Work

Recognize Your Patterns,
Heal from Your Past,
and Create Your Self

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Dedication

For Lolly, who saw me before even I could.

To each of you, I see you.

Epigraph

As above, so below, as within, so without, to perform the miracles of one only thing.

—Hermes Trismegistus, *The Great Work*

The evolution of man is the evolution of his consciousness. With objective consciousness it is possible to see and feel the unity of everything. Attempts to connect these phenomena into some sort of system in a scientific or philosophical way lead to nothing because man cannot reconstruct the idea of the whole starting from separate facts.

—George Gurdjieff, *The Fourth Way*

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin, *Remember This House*
(inspiration for the film *I Am Not Your Negro*)

Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless . . . we become illuminated and enlightened to the Truth of who we are and where we are going . . . to the light while we live through love.

—Jesus, about *The Great Work*

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A Note on *Doing the Work*

A long, rich tradition of *the work* of transcending our human experience has been passed down by different messengers throughout the ages. The ancient Hermetic traditions spoke of mysterious alchemy, while modern mystics, such as George Gurdjieff, urged seekers to engage more deeply in the world by attaining higher levels of consciousness. We see similar language used in the required knowledge for antiracism training and the necessary dismantling of systemic oppression, as well as in substance use recovery models, like twelve-step programs. What all of these iterations of *the work* share—and what this book will foster and continue—is the pursuit of insight into the Self and our place in our community. The goal of *my work* is to provide you with the tools to understand and harness the complex interconnectedness of your mind, body, and soul. This will foster deeper, more authentic, more meaningful relationships with yourself, with others, and within the greater society. What follows is my journey, and I hope that it inspires you to find your own version of *the work*.

Preface

Dark Night of the Soul

Poets and mystics always seem to have their transcendental awakenings somewhere divine—on a mountaintop, while staring off into the open sea, by a babbling brook, next to a burning bush. Mine happened in a log cabin in the middle of the woods, where I found myself sobbing uncontrollably into a bowl of oatmeal.

I was in upstate New York with my partner, Lolly, on what was supposed to be a vacation, a retreat from the stress of city life in Philadelphia.

As I ate my breakfast, I pored through the pages of another psychologist's book, my version of a "beach read." The topic? Emotionally unavailable mothers. As I read it—for professional enrichment, or so I believed—the words activated an unexpected, and confusing, emotional response.

"You're burnt out," my partner, Lolly, offered. "You need to take a step back. Try to relax."

I brushed her off. I didn't believe that I was in any way unique in my general feelings and experiences. I heard similar complaints from so many of my clients and friends. *Who doesn't get out of bed in the morning dreading the day ahead? Who doesn't feel distracted at work? Who doesn't feel distanced from the people they love? Who in the world can honestly say that they aren't living each day for their vacation? Isn't this just what happens when you get older?*

I had recently "celebrated" my thirtieth birthday and thought to myself, *Is this it?* Even though I'd already checked off so many of the boxes that I'd dreamed of since I was a child—living in a city of my choosing, running my own private therapy practice, finding a loving partner—I still felt like there

was something essential in my being that was lost or missing or had never been there in the first place. After years of being in relationships yet feeling emotionally alone, I had finally met a person who felt *right* because she was so different from me. Whereas I was hesitant and often disengaged, Lolly was passionate and headstrong. She often challenged me in ways that I felt were exciting. I should have been happy, or, at the very least, content. Instead I felt outside myself, detached, emotionless. I felt *nothing*.

On top of it all, I was experiencing physical issues that had become so acute that I could no longer ignore them. There was the brain fog, which would cloud me so thoroughly that I sometimes not only forgot words or phrases but entered a complete state of blankness. This was particularly upsetting, especially during the few times when it happened in session with clients. Persistent gut issues, which had plagued me for years, now made me feel heavy and constantly weighed down. Then one day I fainted out of the blue—full-on passed out at a friend’s house, which terrified everyone.

Sitting in the rocking chair with my bowl of oatmeal in such a serene setting, I suddenly felt how hollowed out my life had become. I was energetically drained, in the clutches of existential despair, frustrated by my clients’ inability to make progress, angered at my own limitations in the pursuit of their care and my own, and deeply constricted by a free-floating sluggishness and dissatisfaction that made me question the point of everything. Back at home in the hustle and bustle of city life, I could mask these troubling feelings by channeling all of these energies into action: cleaning the kitchen, walking the dog, making endless plans. Moving, moving, moving. If you didn’t look too closely you might admire my type A efficiency. But dig in just a little bit, and you’d realize that I was moving my body to distract myself from some deeply rooted unresolved feelings. In the middle of the woods, without a thing to do but read about the lasting effects of childhood trauma, I could no longer escape myself. The book exposed so many of the feelings about my mother and my family that I had long repressed. It was like looking into a mirror. There I was, naked, no distractions, and very uncomfortable with what I saw.

When I did look more honestly at myself overall, it was hard not to notice that many of the issues I was having closely mirrored those I saw in my mother’s own struggles; in particular my mother’s own relationship with her body and emotions. I watched her struggle in many ways with near constant physical pain in her knees and back, and frequent anxiety and worry. As I

grew up there were, of course, many ways I was different from my mom. I was physically active, making it a priority to take care of my body by exercising and eating healthy. In my twenties, I even became a vegetarian after befriending a cow at an animal sanctuary, making it impossible for me to imagine eating any animal ever again. Sure, the bulk of my diet revolved around hyperprocessed fake meat and vegan junk food (vegan Philly cheesesteaks were a particular favorite), but at least I cared about what I put into my body. With the exception of alcohol, which I still overindulged in, I sometimes took that caring to an extreme, restricting myself and eating joylessly.

I always thought that I was *nothing like my mom*, but as these emotional and now physical issues erupted, spilling into all aspects of my life, I realized it was time to start questioning things. And that realization sent me sobbing into a pile of hot mush. Contained in this sad, somewhat pathetic picture was a message. This outpouring of emotion was so unusual, so outside the realm of my typical personality, that I couldn't ignore this soul signal. Something was screaming out for me to pay attention, and there was nothing for me to hide behind in the middle of the woods. It was time to come face-to-face with my suffering, my pain, my trauma, and ultimately my true Self.

Today I call that incident my dark night of the soul, my rock bottom. Hitting rock bottom is like a death, and for some of us, it can literally bring us close to death. Death, of course, enables rebirth, and I emerged determined to figure out what was wrong. That painful moment brought the light in, revealing so much of myself that I buried. Suddenly, clarity hit: *I need to find change*. I had no idea that this insight would lead to a physical, psychological, and spiritual awakening and eventually become an international movement.

Initially, I focused on what I felt was most pressing: my body. I assessed myself physically: How was I sick, and where was this sickness manifesting? I knew intuitively that the way back would start with nutrition and movement. I enlisted Lolly, who I call my Energizer Bunny of self-improvement, to help keep me on the path to honestly dealing with how I was mistreating my vessel. She kicked me out of bed in the morning, shoved dumbbells into my hands, and forced us to consciously move our bodies several times a day. We dug into nutrition research and found that many of our ideas about what was “healthy” were debatable. We began a morning ritual incorporating breathwork and meditation—again, every day. Though I

participated somewhat begrudgingly at first and there were missed days, tears, sore muscles, aching souls, and threats of quitting, after many months a routine took hold. I began to crave this new routine, and I felt stronger physically and mentally than I had in my entire life.

As my body began to heal, I began to question so many other truths that I had once felt were self-evident. I learned new ways of thinking about mental wellness. I realized that a disconnect among mind, body, and soul can manifest as sickness and dysregulation. I discovered that our genes are not destiny and that in order to change, we have to become consciously aware of our thought patterns and habits, which have been shaped by the people we care for, and have been cared for by, the most. I discovered a new, wider definition of trauma, one that takes into account the profound spiritual effects that stress and adverse experiences in childhood have on the body's nervous system. I realized that I had unresolved traumas from my childhood that continued to affect me every single day.

The more I learned, the more I integrated what I was learning into the new daily choices I was consistently making. Over time, I adapted to those changes and began to transform. Once my physiology began to heal, I went deeper, harnessing some of the insights I'd learned in my diverse range of clinical experience and applying them to the knowledge I was building about the integration of the whole person—our physical, psychological, and spiritual Selves. I met my inner child, learned how to reparent her, examined the trauma bonds that were holding me hostage, learned how to set boundaries, and began to engage with the world with an emotional maturity that I had never before known was possible, as it had been an entirely unknown state to me. I realized that this inner work didn't stop inside me but extended beyond myself into each and every relationship and into the greater community at large. This revelatory understanding of mind-body-soul wellness is encapsulated in the pages that follow, which set forth the basic tenets of Holistic Psychology.

I write to you today from a place of continued healing. My symptoms of anxiety and panic have largely disappeared. I no longer relate to the world from a reactive place, and I am able to access more awareness and compassion. I feel connected to and present with my loved ones—and I am able to set boundaries with those who are not active participants in my journey. I am conscious for the first time in my adult life. I didn't see it when I hit rock bottom. I didn't see it a year later. Today I know that I would not be