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ECKHART TOLLE

SLAY YOUR

DRAGONS

WITH

10 WAYS TO
THRIVE EVEN
WHEN IT FEELS
IMPOSSIBLE

COMPASSION

MALCOLM STERN

WITH BEN CRAIB

“Malcolm Stern’s invaluable book *Slay Your Dragons with Compassion* shows how unconditional acceptance and the power of awareness can help us transcend the suffering caused by unconscious mental-emotional conditioning, and thus bring about redemption and healing.”

Eckhart Tolle, spiritual teacher and author

“Moving and inspiring, filled with humane wisdom that is both tender and compassionately tough. Malcolm shows us how to live with authenticity and a great heart.”

Jack Kornfield, author of *A Path With Heart*

“Malcolm Stern has a beautiful, harrowing story to tell here — a story of loss, suffering, resilience, and grace. His response to the dreadful pain that life dealt to him has been one of curiosity and expansion, rather than despair and a closing down of the self. What he models in *Slay Your Dragons With Compassion* is a practical, yet infinitely humane, method of saving your own life from the darkness. This book is an inspiration.”

Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat Pray Love*

“Through personal stories and through the stories of many others, Malcolm Stern has shown, in *Slay Your Dragons with Compassion*, that with courage and with love we are all capable of going through the dark night of the soul and seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. This is a book of courage as it is a book of compassion equipped with such a marvellous tool. With this book one is able to go through the journey of life with resilience and love. If you want to know how to handle inner and outer difficulties and transcend them then it is a book for you.”

Satish Kumar, editor emeritus, *Resurgence & Ecologist Magazine*

“This is a book about a parent losing his child. A tragedy no one should ever experience. In spite of his suffering he decided to devote his life to help others who are struggling with

challenges they encounter throughout their lives. Through his psychotherapeutic practice, Malcolm has helped countless people to overcome their difficulties and make a success of their life. I applaud him for his courage.”

Eva Schloss, MBE, President of the Anne Frank Trust UK

“Malcolm’s journey of self-discovery through the tragic loss of his daughter is one that I can only imagine: the deep pain, sadness and helplessness he felt from her premature departure is unimaginable.

‘With deep heartache and tragedy comes the possibility of deep growth physically & spiritually’

This is why I have so much love for Malcolm, for even in his darkest moments he is willing to face his dragons head on. Rather than being consumed by them, Malcolm approached his uncomfortable journey with a deeper sense of compassion and inquiry, knowing that ultimately it was only himself that he was facing every time he ran into a so-called dragon. Adopting this intuitive wisdom of being gentle in these difficult times was actually his greatest power.”

Craig David, musician

“We are so lucky to have people in this world who help guide us on this great journey of life - Malcolm is one them. This book and his life work show us that we can be released from being prisoners of ourselves and hope is always present. His deeply personal experiences within his own family and within the groups he supports shows us the way so that no half lived lives are not pre-destined and we learn to understand the very nature of ‘being’ In the 21st-century. This book is full of clues and the reality of our lives in this era where there is a complex web of a social and psychological crisis - Malcom shows us a way even when it takes trauma or death to wake us up to a more enlightened life with a strong sense of purpose - slaying our dragons is a strong and relevant metaphorical antidote and medicine. It can take a lifetime to fix ourselves and with this

book it helps us to understand that we have the choice to do this at any time and embrace the necessary change needed. Thank you, Malcolm, - an important pilgrim for us all in guiding and educating us all to how challenges in life can be transformed.”

Roger Tempest, CEO Broughton Hall

“*Slay Your Dragons With Compassion* is a profound personal healing journey. It is about strengthening the will to face difficult life challenges, including painful ones, and working towards evermore compassionate awareness. Some of the methods Malcolm describes are close to the Buddhist philosophy, focused on the practice of conscious living, not rejecting but looking closely at our problems, becoming aware of them, and allowing the space for them to transform, and liberate us. Life is about embracing ever-present change and meaningfully sharing our life with others and the book is a celebration of this.”

Lama Chime Rinpoche, Dharma teacher

“Malcolm is an authentic pathfinder, facilitator, old school elder and inspiration teacher. Within the pages of this book are priceless insight, wisdom and guidance.”

Mel Carlile, Chair Mind Body Spirit Events

“This book is the author’s “Heroic Journey” through his personal tragedy with deep, penetrating self-examination, compassionately human and transparent. The eventual liberating transcendence came through with his humble and loving ways, he whole-heartedly embraces his dragons. Malcolm has gifted us with this most moving, insightful and very wise human story.”

Chungliang Al Huang, author

“What a lovely, moving, and honest book, spoken from the heart to the heart, and helping us to negotiate our way through the trickiest challenges of living and loving. Don’t miss it.”

Dr Dina Glouberman, Skyros Holidays co-founder,
author, psychotherapist

“*Slay Your Dragons with Compassion* is one heartfelt, compelling roller-coaster in which Malcolm demonstrates his remarkable gift to share the devastation of personal love and loss, with a courage and a compassion that transforms, nourishes, inspires and interweaves his original narrative and philosophy, with wise guiding principles and practices. *Slay Your Dragons with Compassion* offers us a substantial empowering way to, ‘build the capacity to thrive in an unstable world’.”

Chloe Goodchild, singing philosopher,
voice therapist and author

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WATKINS
Sharing Wisdom Since 1893

To my children Melissa, Michael and Alix

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enquiries@watkinspublishing.com

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“Heroes take journeys, confront dragons, and discover
the treasure of their true selves.”

Carol Pearson, author of *The Hero Within*

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INTRODUCTION

It is our challenge to find strength and meaning in the tragedies, fears and confusions that confront us. In discovering ways of dealing with those inevitable events, we have the possibility of alchemizing our experience, turning the base metal of our pain into the gold of wisdom, understanding, enrichment and purpose.

In 2014, one of the worst things that could happen to anyone happened to me – my daughter Melissa took her own life. This tragedy forced me to examine my very existence and expand my concept of who I was. It demanded that I either mature or disintegrate.

Melissa was a vibrant, kind and enthusiastic young woman who'd lived in a magnificent variety of ways. She'd been married for a year to Ian, a sensitive and gentle soul, and was seemingly very happy. She loved the delight in being with others and lived much of her life in the sunshine of other people's joy – much of that joy being enhanced by her presence. One of my fondest memories of her is her roaring with laughter with her friends, with no sense of holding back, uplifting them with her happiness and engagement. In addition, she wanted to help people. Anyone could come to her and get her often wise perspective about what was going on in their lives. Despite her being my daughter, I often turned to her when I needed guidance. She was passionate about supporting those who were in turmoil.

Ten years previously she'd had a serious mental breakdown. I took a phone call when she'd said, "Hello, Dad, I'm in a lunatic asylum." "Very funny," I replied, and she passed the phone to one of the nurses. She was in an intensive care psychiatric unit, having completely broken down, thrown everything away and run naked through the streets. She later told me it felt like the ultimate freedom.

It took her a year to recover from the breakdown, and it appeared as though it would never recur. She regained her confidence and self-assurance and had a lot of love in her life. She worked for Kids Company, with some of the most damaged children and adolescents, and, as she did with everything in her life, threw herself one hundred per cent into her work.

With hindsight, it's easy to see that there was a point at which she was swerving between highs and lows, agonizing about life, while at the same time travelling all over the country, partying, socializing and working. The stillness that is part of the healthy psyche was absent. She was all movement. Melissa lost hold of her internal compass and extreme pieces of behaviour emerged.

She felt the need to take charge of every situation and achieve a successful outcome. As I've said, she worked with vulnerable children, and would often take on the most difficult cases, such as children who had been seriously abused or who had extreme behavioural problems. Sometimes the cases had such a strong impact on her that she agonized over whether to continue. Usually, though, she increased the intensity of her work rather than hand over to people who were more experienced. Her sense of personal responsibility, along with the way that councils' social work departments and Kids Company were run, meant she felt she had little choice but to carry on.

Over a period of some six months, her internal radar became out of sync as she entered one of the darkest depressions it's possible to imagine.

She was unable to speak to people. Her bright clothing, lipsticks and winning smile were replaced by a sombre, withdrawn demeanour. I didn't see her in this state, but a friend

of hers said it was as if all the colour had been drained out of her. She made a video tape in which she talked about her mental state and which reflected her utter confusion. She thought she had gone incurably mad, but didn't want to let herself back into the system because she had felt so abused the first time round. In the psychiatric hospital ten years previously, she had been drugged up intensely; her body was bruised from being held down and she didn't want to relive that trauma.

In all my years as a psychotherapist, nothing prepared me for this. I did the best I could as a father who deeply loved his daughter, and I tried to support her in any way I was able, including going to therapy with Melissa and her mother in an attempt to sort out our difficulties. As it was, we clashed during her struggles. Some of the things she said came across as obnoxious. She came to a retreat centre in Skyros, where I was running a therapy group, and ranted at me, challenging my credibility as the director of the session in front of the other participants. At the time, all I could do was manage her. The way I see it now is that she was in deep pain and needed to be loved, met and contained.

Melissa reached out to me, but I was unable to fully find my own wisdom. I was already wounded around the concept of psychosis, or, as I viewed it then, real madness. My sister Beverly had had a nervous breakdown at the age of eighteen. She had been a promising actress, gaining the part of Brigitte in *The Sound of Music* on the West End stage. One night she began hallucinating. I can still hear her screaming, "The taxi drivers are coming to burn down the house." Her condition worsened. She was diagnosed as schizophrenic and was given fifty-five electric shock treatments over the next few years. Her kidneys were damaged by her medication and she never regained her centre.

I was terrified of Beverly's condition and of anyone who exhibited similar signs – a fear that I have explored in depth in my own personal therapy. It's hard for us to see the profundity of another's pain when they are so close to us.

When Melissa showed similar signs, I couldn't get past my own frustration at her seeming intransigence, and I was unable to disidentify with my own need to care for and be cared for by her, and therefore respond dispassionately in the way that I might have done with a close friend, acquaintance or client, where it would have been easier to put myself aside. I saw her as not just mentally ill, but completely mad. I was scared. I just didn't know how to fully embrace her in that place of illness and need. After around six weeks of languishing in the depths of depression and hopelessness, she left a suicide note that simply said, "sorry, x", and, according to witnesses, toppled two hundred feet from a bridge.

There is a Sufi teaching tale that describes a king asking for a blessing from his wise advisor. Sometime later the advisor presents the king with a ring, on which is inscribed, "Grandfather dies. Father dies. Son dies." The king is furious and says to the wise man, "What sort of blessing is this?" The wise man replies, "It is a blessing when things happen in their natural order." I could not imagine anything more painful than losing a child.

The crossroads

We know when we arrive at a crossroads; we are called to act differently, dispense with old ideas and seek new horizons. This call to alter direction often begins as a quiet unease which builds until the crescendo becomes unbearable and we have to make a change. Often it will arrive in the form of external events – a critical illness, the loss of a job, the loss of a relationship, or the loss of a child.

I couldn't carry on being who I was in the wake of my daughter's suicide. It was the worst thing that had ever happened in my life. However, some years on, I am able to say that Melissa's death carried a hidden blessing: it made me examine myself with painful honesty. I dared to go further into the darker aspects of life, the shadowlands, which house the capacity for healing. This has enabled me to be of more value to my friends, family and clients in increasingly profound ways. I realised that this tragedy

had deepened both my commitment to relieve suffering where I have the capacity to do so, and my understanding that this was my life's work. It's hard to put into words, but the suffering and shock has given birth to an extra layer within me. In my heart, there is a burgeoning, richer experience. I live with more fierceness and meaning. I am aware of life's temporary nature and the need to shine my light as brightly as I can.

Thriving in the face of deep instability is not easy; it always demands a level of discomfort. There is no magic wand that will make our troubles disappear and painful experiences vanish. The path may at times be devastating and we may feel stuck and fear that inspiration may never come again.

Equally, thriving isn't about making life comfortable, fun and happy; it's about finding purpose and making our own unique contribution. Meaningful, authentic living is about what we do with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Ultimately, thriving is not only possible – evolution *demand*s that we expand to become what we can become. We can flourish, and keep our buoyancy, when things fall apart. Until we grow conscious of the patterns in our life, we're like a pinball bouncing around from experience to experience. If we dedicate ourselves to practices that feed our self-awareness, we can start making wise choices that no longer make us a victim of circumstance.

This book will teach a series of accessible practices that allow us to face our demons and build our emotional musculature, so that when the inevitable storms blow across our path, we have a toolkit that we are able to seamlessly bring into play. The strength I teach here doesn't consist of brute force, but is made up of a well-earned mixture of power and vulnerability. At its zenith it is characterized by stillness, compassion, commitment and wisdom.

All the teachings are illustrated by many stories from my group therapy practice, my personal life and my lifetime of psychospiritual study with some of the world's leading teachers. They illustrate the truth that while everyone has their own unique path, many of the experiences and lessons underpinning

the journey are universal. Names and circumstances have been changed to protect privacy. Sometimes multiple stories have been merged in order to elicit the teaching clearly.

I've called this book *Slay Your Dragons With Compassion* because it's one of my key explorations in groups. I use it to articulate the times when you have to speak uncomfortable truths to people, and when you have to face the delusion and obstinacy within yourself. In order to thrive, we must confront our obstacles, our resistances, our self-loathing, our terror, our self-doubt. In the broadest sense, every challenge that blocks our way is a dragon we are called to slay. If we can meet the challenge head on, we will discover a treasure in our psyches, a transformation that has been waiting to evolve us.

These are the practices I think could have helped Melissa: a strong attunement to her internal navigation system; greater self-awareness; and practices in skills that ground and enhance us, such as the creation of a support system (what the Buddhists call a sangha) that would have seen beyond the common judgements of her condition. These could have saved her.

Her life and tragic death are the inspiration for this book.

CHAPTER I

“DOING THE WORK”: WHAT HAPPENS IN THE THERAPY ROOM

People join therapy groups for a number of reasons. Sometimes events in their lives have become unmanageable. There might be enduring suffering that they cannot banish. Often they will observe, as I did when I first came to therapy, that there is an uncomfortable pattern in all their relationships and the common denominator is themselves. Their friendships may be shallow and not a true source of nourishment. For others, there is a hunger for meaning, or connection. They want their life journeys to take a different trajectory – they want to know what a healthy tribe or career might feel like. Whether unconscious or conscious, we are all hungry for more depth of connection and more purpose. People often choose therapy as a last resort to heal their discomfort. My group therapy practice is built on the concept of taking yourself on, or, as we call it in my group, “work”.

“Doing the work” involves the ongoing commitment to a fierce authenticity. It means having the courage to face yourself with integrity and a willingness to allow the parts of yourself you are reticent to look at (and would be mortified if others saw) to be visible to you and the group.

A “piece of work” involves one person taking centre stage, in the fire of the attention of the rest of the group, looking deeply at a pressing issue in their lives. Each piece of work has its own organic lifespan, but usually lasts about an hour. The person talks about their difficulties, and my job is to bypass the intellectual naming in the participant’s story, stop it becoming a well-played radio broadcast, and find a way to get underneath their words to see the emotional truth underneath. I do this in a variety of ways. Psychodrama (role play) is my main tool. I use intuition to sense what’s not being said. I notice bodies, breath, a shaking in the hand or a crossing of arms, a facial expression, and I point them out, sometimes showing how these strengthen the person or act as a shield to the truth. Reflecting their physicality encourages them to go deeper when they might want to run away. I bring them back to their radar by asking them to relate and engage with the group. I often say, “Look around, and see who in the group you trust, like or distrust.” I consider the group to be a hall of mirrors. By bringing the attention of the group to the person in the middle, and the person in the middle bringing their attention to what’s going in the group around them, a field of authenticity is created, where any flattery or falseness would be instantly recognizable. In this sense, “doing the work” is quite different to one-to-one therapy.

For the person doing the work it is like entering into another zone – like bypassing everyday reality as they access their depths. It is usually a nerve-wracking experience, so I create safety – through silence, focus of attention, or facing someone who they know really likes them or who they trust – in order to open doors that may be locked and hidden.

Our depths can show themselves in different ways. Sometimes there is a cathartic outpouring of feelings. Or, much more subtly, a revelation or realization of a personal truth that has been denied and fought with. Sometimes the experience is big and dramatic; sometimes it’s small.

For good reasons we have learned to construct a suit of armour to protect us from being overwhelmed by the magnitude of

painful experience. Perhaps as children we needed to escape from violence, or intrusion, or feeling overwhelmed. This armour serves an important purpose – it protects us – and it’s useful for a warrior to have the capacity for deflection when a situation feels impossible to manage. The problem is that we have lost the ability to take it off, so the barrier we have erected to protect ourselves deadens our deepest relationships and numbs our sensitivity. A piece of work is usually about carefully dismantling the armour and facing what’s underneath (which is usually far less vile or scary than we expected). Once removed, we can learn the mechanisms for removing it and, importantly, how to consciously put it back on again, in appropriate circumstances.

After the work is done, often there is a feeling of lightness, elation, freedom, happiness and a sense that the foundations have been shaken and reconstituted.

“Work” is done over and over again. My main group takes place one weekend a month for a year – you can’t get away with hiding behind a sophisticated smokescreen in that time. We work and work, building trust, practising the skills in this book, and attaining profound and meaningful growth.

CHAPTER 2

FOLLOW YOUR RADAR

Our radar is an essential sixth sense that needs to be developed, recognized and fed; an internal compass that we all have, but most of us don't know how to use effectively.

When our radar is functional there's a smoothness to our thinking and our actions. There's a sense of rightness in our choices. We know, but we can't logically say why, what we are saying and doing fits with who we are. It's like finding the sweet spot of decision – when everything becomes aligned. Thinking is clearer and eye contact is unguarded. Our breathing is long and flowing. Our bullshit detector is stronger. We actually start to trust ourselves. We confront our uncomfortable feelings. When we follow our radar we make the decisions that serve us and others best.

Recently I came out of a yoga class where we performed simple movements and stretches; an hour and a quarter of precision engagement with my body. My head was directed here, my eyes over there. My calf muscle and my arms stretched in one focused movement. In this hour and a quarter, I came away feeling like everything was in place. In my next meeting my thoughts flowed and there was a richness in my ability to communicate what needed to happen. The yoga class put me in a place where I could easily follow my radar.

Often our radar guides us in mysterious ways. Like the person who goes to step off the curb, and halts just as a car comes round

the corner. Or when we think of someone and they message or phone us. You won't find your radar in your thinking mind – the way in is through the body, your feelings and your intuition. It's not logical, and in a society that values logic it is easy to question. Following your radar often means swimming against the tide of society's perceived truths.

We're taught to distrust our radars

As young children we functioned effectively on instinct. Very quickly this gets slapped down in schools, friendships and even by skilled parents. Your teacher may force you to go against something that your gut tells you is true.

I used to play rugby at school. I wasn't a particularly skilled player, but in one game my instinct led me to perform a brilliant set of moves over a few seconds. I sensed that I had found something quite exquisite. I beamed inwardly, knowing that I had unravelled something for myself. I came down to earth when the teacher, not unkindly, dismissed the move and its result as a meaningless fluke. My radar was inviting me to trust my abilities at a non-logical level, but in that moment of feeling shame, I lost touch with something vital. I was never able to replicate that move again.

Equally, I was a keen tennis player and was delighted when one of my groups gave me a tennis racket and a course of lessons as a gift. My serve is utterly unorthodox but probably the best part of my game. The tennis coach thought my serve "could be improved". She taught me to throw the ball up in the air differently, to stand differently, and for a short while my serve became weak. My instinct knew better than any external teacher what to do. Luckily, as I was already immersed in this work, I had the confidence to explain to the teacher that I didn't want to tamper with my service.

We are taught to distrust and disbelieve this ethereal sense. We run to logic and cold facts to guide us. Sometimes the power balance is so skewed that we end up trusting figures of authority rather than our own internal authority.

Robert and Liz and their son go to the beach one weekend. It's perfect. The weather's good, they meet nice people. Their six-year-old son has enormous fun and says, "This is the best day ever," and the feeling between them is enriched. They return from their weekend, full of joy and bonhomie. Robert says, "Let's do this every weekend!" The following Saturday they ignore the fact that the weather is different, that their son's mood is more fractious, and they go to the beach and try to enforce the same lovely time they had before. A creeping sense of lack becomes evident in the whole dynamic. Robert snaps at Liz, and she storms off to a café by herself. Robert tries to interest his son in throwing stones into the sea, but all he says is "I want to go home." They don't go to the beach for a long time after that.

When we get pleasure from an action that we take, our logic says, "Let's take that action again and replicate that pleasure", but what we fail to recognize is that the real pleasure comes from connecting with the instinctive urge to head in an aligned direction – from reading and following our radar.

If Robert and Liz had listened to the radar they would have realized that the dynamics were not the same in weekend two, and perhaps they would have gone for a walk in the forest or spent some time alone – at the very least done something different.

Tune into your radar

To tune into your radar you need to first learn to recognize it. Our radar is a muscle. When that muscle gets flexed regularly it becomes strong. Then, we become more adept at hearing its quiet whisper and following its promptings.

Conversely, when we ignore our radar we have to shut out its voice. Our minds become busy and distracted – we may compulsively perform mind-numbing activities such as computer games, gambling and gorging ourselves with sugary delights to the extent that they eat into our time in an unhealthy way, make us stay up late, or stop us from carrying out our

essential tasks. We look for adrenaline hits to take us away from what our radar is prompting. We abdicate responsibility for what our internal guide is beckoning us to do.

The message and the practice that we utilize in the therapeutic journey is a continuous return to what the radar is saying. When people talk about their troubles in my groups, I feel underneath their story and help them discover where their radar is directing them. It becomes visible when the breath changes. The body will demonstrate unconsciously the instinct that is longing to have its say. The voice might intonate differently, or different limbs lock up. Often this happens when someone is telling a story about their lives. Even though the story might be dramatic or shocking, I get a sense that the teller has pressed a button on an internal tape player and is trotting out an old story which is no longer relevant. Most importantly, I am aware of the other members of a therapy group displaying a lack of interest despite the apparent drama in the story. These are all like poker tells. Something else is being called for here.

Logic and ego will say, "This is how it's been done before, this is how it works, just get on with it," Our ego will also say that our feelings are our "weakness" and will scoff at those highly sensitive souls who function almost entirely on instinct rather than logic.

When we don't learn to trust our radar, our "logical mind" and our "instinctive mind" can feel at war inside of ourselves. When our radar isn't heard, it will find a way to make itself heard. Life will send us a crack across the head to ensure that we wake up to what is happening around us.

The shadow side of our radar

The radar has a shadow side. There is always the danger of our egos getting in the way. I have visited a progressive spiritual community of people who took all their decisions through meditation and instinct. They'd come together in a group and spend a lot of time in silence and tuned into what they felt was the group mind.

When a group comes together there is often a wisdom that guides the whole. I call this the group “field. It incorporates the good of the individuals; it has a larger goal which is about making the venture work – like a group radar. It could be a country, it could be a government, it could be a panel; there is something that comes into play that finds the common good.

For a while this spiritual community accessed this place and had some amazing results; their healing work and finances prospered. There was a growing sense of contentment in the community and a feeling of brotherhood and sisterhood and connecting to the good of the whole. People started to feel they were creating Nirvana.

They had learned some wonderful techniques for becoming still and allowing themselves to be guided. However, the ego is subtle, and after a while it became obvious that in order to influence decisions, all that was needed was to say that you were being led. There was a hunger for self-importance for some of the members and a need to be seen as a guiding light. Perhaps even the people involved couldn't tell the difference between their higher guidance and their own desire for power. The community then embarked on some crackpot choices. They bought land at inflated prices; they began projects that were not well thought through and ended up being disastrous. Fractiousness crept into their meetings, factions formed, and a feeling of “us” and “them” permeated.

It can be hard to tell where the radar stops and our own attachment to our ideas starts. I have to watch myself all the time. I'm a firm believer in complementary medicine. I have a healthy diet and I meditate. When I was diagnosed with high blood pressure I was determined to find a way through it that ignored conventional medicine, which I consider in many ways barbaric and a blunt instrument. I found a practitioner who created a set of practices for me that would negate the need for medical intervention. For nine months I followed an exhaustive regime, with massage, a diet that eliminated dairy,

sugar and wheat as well as many other foods. I had to have lymph drainage massage, colonic irrigation and liver cleanses regularly. I managed this for nine months, and although it worked, it was impractical. I fell off the wagon and my blood pressure started to escalate again. It was only some years later when I started developing chest pains and was told I was in serious danger of a heart attack or stroke that I gave in and embarked on a course of regular blood pressure medication.

I had told myself that my radar would find a way through that had no necessity for Western medicine. My firm option about healthcare was overriding the best side of my logical faculty. My wisest mind would have included Western medicine in my choices. Had I gone on the medication a lot earlier I wouldn't have had to arrive at such a scary place. It can be hard work to root out those places of prejudice inside us.

You have to discern between what is your radar and your fixed thinking. This is a constant practice. The more we develop ourselves, the more we can rely on our radar to give us the right information. But, we have to constantly examine whether we are coming from our radar or a fixed righteousness. I was arrogant in my thinking.

Although we all have a radar, we need to retrain ourselves to use it, to keep up the practices that align us with its clear voice and our wiser selves.

Santiago

I met Santiago at a conference where we were both presenting our work. He is a skilled and experienced yoga teacher, and he came across as a tender, humble guy. I took his class on an early morning, and though ostensibly little happened in terms of dramatic movement or breathing, he transmitted an energy that lifted everyone, and afterwards I felt clear, grounded and present. He and I had a rapport and I was touched when he signed up for my Telling Our Stories workshop.

At the beginning I asked the class, "Who has a story to share and what might it be?"

Santiago spoke with a restrained voice:

“I am here because my yoga teacher abused his female students. He touched them during class, while adjusting their postures, pressing his hands against their breasts and genitals, in full view of everyone.

“He was a charismatic maverick, one of the most profound teachers that it has ever been my privilege to work with. He was so revered that some people twisted what was happening into something positive. Some said he was being tantric [sexual spiritual practices supposed to raise energy] or was somehow doing it out of kindness.

“I knew it was wrong but I was caught in a place of internal conflict. I was one of his long-term students and one of his closest. I didn’t want to destroy my relationship with him. I avoided coming to a definitive judgement. I turned my conscience off.”

I invited Santiago to come into the centre of the circle. It was clear to me that he needed to access something deeper than an intellectual understanding of the issue. He looked around, with his vulnerability in full view, his face open, his eyes soft, showing sadness and pain – a courageous thing to do, given that he was a well-respected teacher.

“So, Santiago,” I said. “What stopped you speaking out earlier than you did?”

He was standing up and he suddenly folded double, his chest hanging over his knees. After a moment he straightened himself up.

“Fear,” he said in a resonant voice. His face flushed and some tears rolled down his cheeks.

“When I was nineteen, I had a female yoga teacher. She was this seductive, magnetic, mystical woman. She was married, in her early forties, and she totally seduced me. I was young, basically still an adolescent, and so attracted to her. I couldn’t resist. I ignored my conscience. I knew it was out of integrity. It was a subconscious risk-taking. We had a two-year affair.

“When it came to my subsequent teacher I felt I had no right to challenge his behaviour. I was already compromised.”

He looked around the group, expecting to see judgement and disapproval, but instead saw tenderness. The group had responded to his authenticity.

His radar had told him that what his yoga teacher did was wrong. He overrode it, partly out of guilt for that teenage affair, and partly because ignoring his radar when he was nineteen had weakened his connection to it.

All this happened decades before he was in my group. He had done a lot of work on this issue, including engaging with former students who received the abuse. But there were still tendrils of shame, sorrow and confusion stuck to his psyche. In my experience we don't clean ourselves up in one fell swoop: it's a lifetime's journey.

The feedback he received was especially tender. A psychotherapist honoured him by saying, "I see a man who dares to face himself and has worked hard. I am so impressed with your capacity for integrity, while recognizing that you fucked up."

Others in the group had similar responses. There is no question that his willingness to show himself, warts and all, in front of a group of strangers, destroying the *flawless yoga teacher* image that some projected on him, enabled him to make a breakthrough.

Living in integrity with our radar gives our words more power and transmission, and during the rest of the conference I saw a man who was now so in touch with his, that when he spoke the atmosphere in the main hall was electric.

Sometimes following our radar means having to confront uneasy truths that may force us into public opprobrium or undermine our cherished relationships.

But when we lose our fear of living our truth and trusting its immaculate wisdom, we become profound.

Freddie

Freddie, an archetypal English gentleman, had a successful career working as an actor in London's West End and touring

theatres all over the world. He was in his seventies and his career had ended because he developed Lyme disease, which caused him to live with chronic pain and fear.

He had participated for much of his adult life in many specialized workshops, with organizations devoted to unravelling shame around the body and sexuality, where the main practice was learning to relate via open-heartedness; where people would look in each other's eyes and use touch and kindness as a method of communication.

After thirty years of this, he felt that he embodied loving kindness. But now he was ill he had become cut off and angry and hated feeling so gnarled up inside. He decided to take action and build on the work he had done around his physical and tactile self, and add to his psychological understanding by joining my group.

His way of engaging with others was via affirmation. He would say things like, "You're so beautiful, you're so kind." He quickly let people know that he loved them, and when he expressed his "love" he would often have tears in his eyes. He felt that his age and physical deterioration made him unthreatening. Obviously women would not be sexually attracted to him and therefore his sexuality was not going to be an issue, and to his mind all of this was platonic.

Groups, like romantic relationships, often start with people being "nice" to each other as they present their best selves in order to be liked. If that state is maintained over an extended period, the group stays on the surface. Initially, like others in the group, Freddie presented his sweet persona. This particular group played the game of sweetness powerfully for quite a while. I knew that Freddie would eventually have to demonstrate authenticity over sentiment and be willing to meet the other group members in a more vulnerable but honest way. In my experience, there's always the "bad guy" or the "bad gal" in the group who will rail against the artificial saccharine nature of too much sweetness, which is not based on genuine relating, and this is what happened.

On our residential retreat, Freddie had become distressed while exploring some of the painful places in his childhood. He went to the bedroom of Natalia, a woman thirty years his junior, and started crying. “I really need a hug,” he said, and then, “I’d really like it if I cuddled in bed with you.” She was waking up from an afternoon nap and felt unable to assert or even know her own needs. Freddie moved toward her, not overtly sexually, but in a clingy, childlike way.

She was so shocked at this neediness that her highly sensitive persona kicked in and she soothed and reassured him. She felt unable to ask him to leave the room. Instead, it was only afterwards that she felt violated, and despite being an intelligent, assertive woman of her time, she had not been able to bring her assertion to Freddie when it was needed.

Freddie’s behaviour irritated others in the group too. Women felt a creeping sexuality that they couldn’t quite name. It was far from obvious, deeply buried, and it was a part of Freddie’s need (as so many men have) to find safety in sexuality, even if it is unconscious and not acted on.

On another retreat, Jasmine, a forthright woman who is utterly committed to a path of no bullshit, confronted him. That morning, as she went to clean her teeth in the communal bathrooms, Freddie appeared, looked deep in her eyes and said, “It’s so lovely waking up under the same roof as a beautiful woman like you.” On the surface this looks like a compliment, but Jasmine felt attacked in a subtle way. Her radar told her that he was coming on to her. He had overstepped her boundary while she was still groggy from sleep and had enforced an intimacy that was not authentic.

The buried nature of his sexuality made it especially hard to confront Freddie. But Jasmine was courageous and called him out on the one-dimensional nature of his kindness. The next day in the group she said, “I don’t trust you, I don’t trust you at all. Whenever you speak I feel creeped out. Your niceness doesn’t do it for me. I won’t trust you until I see who the fuck you really are.” This in turn triggered most of the women to reflect

on their relationship with Freddie, including Natalia. Eight out of ten women in the group had similar stories where ostensibly nothing was amiss, but there was a creepy nature to his relating.

Freddie was forced to examine his own behaviour as he sat in the middle and each woman in turn joined and told him exactly how they felt. Natalia held his hand and genuinely felt compassion for him. There was no way she would let this be a witch hunt. “What you did was out of order. You need to understand what you’re like, but I genuinely like you and feel for you.”

Freddie, exposed and challenged, reverted to tears, as though the women had wounded him grievously. As a person who had practised the art of kindness for most of his adult life, he could not understand what he had done wrong. But the group, relieved at finally nailing him, were not going to let up.

They were far from uncompassionate – they let him know that they cared about him, but they would not tolerate his unconscious behaviour that overstepped unwritten (but clear to most people) boundaries. They were not going to be manipulated by his tears and sweet talk.

A true radar involves being able to read the reflection of others. Freddie’s radar was buried so deep that his behaviour triggered strong reactions in many of the group members. His challenge was to share the less sweet side of himself and to find a place of authenticity where he could take ownership of his behaviour. In challenging him, the group served him.

Following our radar means following it into the shadow lands, the bits of us we don’t want seen, that we don’t want to act out, that we will play out in relationships. The group served as Freddie’s radar in making that journey. In Freddie’s mind, he wasn’t a sexual guy, but a lovely, safe, huggy guy.

Freddie reminds me of his namesake Fredo in *The Godfather* – Fredo is genuinely kind, but unskilful in the ways of the world and creates messes around him through his inability to draw boundaries and his inability to read what’s going on with others. With no malice aforethought, he manages to betray his family

and is murdered by his brother Michael, who waits until after their mother is dead to eliminate this poor soul.

The scene is so shocking because Fredo is so loveable. There isn't a nasty bone in his body. But he is untrustworthy. His radar is so damaged that he doesn't know when to put his defences up, making him easy prey for other people.

Freddie thought he was being authentic but he was blind to the effect he was having on others. He overrode his sexuality and was unable to recognize when his neediness was in play. He was unable to see the lines he was crossing.

A functioning radar tunes you into your own and other's needs; that genuine meeting feels like an interplay of sameness and otherness. He struggled to give meaningful reflection to others in the group because he couldn't read them. After a year of practice he was noticeably more able to recognize other people's emotions and to respond authentically. Yes, he slipped back into unconscious behaviour as we all do, but when challenged about it there was a degree of self-awareness. He was courageous in staying the course. Many people would have run away from facing the difficult feedback he received, but he faced it full on and gained respect from most of the group members, both male and female.

Exercise: Find and develop your radar

Spend some time daily in a meditative practice.

We often try and fail to create a meditation practice because we set the bar too high. We try to jump from 0–100 in one shot. If you are not used to meditation and attempt to do half an hour a day, in a very short space of time you will fail and give the practice up as unattainable.

My suggestion is to start in a simple way. Depending on your capacity with stillness, do 3–5 minutes a day for a week. A simple method would be to close your eyes, find a quiet space and focus on your breathing. When thoughts intrude, you notice them, observe your distraction and return to your breathing. Focus on the quality of your

breath; whether it is deep or short; allow it to happen without trying to change it. You are merely a conscious observer of your breath. If you manage to keep this practice going for a week you can then up the time to 5–7 minutes for the next week, but if you find that even this has been too difficult you can lower the time to 1–3 minutes.

The important thing is to set a regular time aside to centre yourself. This is a muscle that you gradually develop and it will be a powerful aid for you on the journey toward a potent and trustworthy radar. It's a small action, but the regularity of it will pay off.

Meditation is not just about sitting. As time goes on you can explore other avenues that work for you. It may be that you take a daily walk and allow yourself to be touched by the beauty of nature. There are many other things that get us in touch with our radar. Eating well. Exercising well. Sleeping well and loving generously. All of these things slow us down and bring us stillness, revealing and enabling this wise part of ourselves.