

Except from Introduction

*The Wisdom of a Broken Heart* (Simon & Schuster, January 2010)

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This book is about how to deal with the trauma of a broken heart, the kind you experience when a romantic relationship ends. There is no other experience quite like this one. For many people, the devastating, obsessive nature of a broken heart is a complete surprise. You have a sense of having been physically shattered, right in the middle of your chest. Discomfort takes over your body, making it feel heavy and dull or oddly light, like something that has been burned to a crisp and now floats in the air like ash. Most noticeably, heartbreak puts your own mind outside of your control. You fixate on certain thoughts or events, torment yourself with unanswerable questions such as “what if?” and “how come?” and are susceptible to shocking waves of grief that flood you without any warning whatsoever, even while asleep. You can no longer count on yourself to make it through a business meeting or the checkout line at the supermarket without having to stifle tears.

Everyone and everything you encounter becomes a part of your heartbreak by reminding you of your loss, sadness, and shame. A colleague’s morning greeting feels like a snooty taunt; missing the bus is testimony to your having been born under a bad sign; and every single couple in every single song, movie, and television show points out either the impossible beauty of love (if they’re happy) or the inevitability of it blowing up in your face (if they’re not). The whole planet mirrors your sorrow and there is nowhere to hide. You once thought of daily events as sometimes having to do with you

and sometimes not, but now that the wall between your inner life and the outer world has come down, everything becomes extremely personal and intimate. It feels like the world has turned upside down. It has.

As it turns out, you will see that this is all excellent news.

I'm speaking from first-hand knowledge. Although I've had my share of relationships and varying degrees of sadness when they ended, I've only had my heart truly broken once and it abides in memory as one of the pivotal events of my life. Although I have now happily moved on, I still breathe in the consequences of this incredibly difficult event every day—but with gratitude, not despair.

When this particular relationship ended, I realized that the aches and pains I'd experienced in the past had been like a summer rain compared to a tsunami. They were not the same thing at all. When other relationships ended, sure, I had cried, hated him, hated myself and lost 10 pounds—the usual. But when this one ended I didn't just cry, mope, and lose my appetite—my entire world also fell apart. I didn't know who I was anymore or what my life meant, and I wasn't sure I'd ever recover.

When it happened, I lived in Austin, Texas, and worked as a bartender in a fabulous nightclub that featured world-class live blues music seven nights a week. All the legends of the genre played there, backed by a stellar house band. I was in my mid-twenties, had not gone to college, and had zero prospects beyond the bar, but I was incredibly happy for the first time ever. Previously, my life was full of icky things like dreadful depression, major academic failures, and painful relationships. When I left home at age 16, I moved about in a cloud of confusion, went from job to job waiting tables, driving a cab, and working as a delivery person. Throughout, I indulged a life-

long interest in spirituality by reading countless books but despaired of ever finding a way to integrate my interests and discoveries into daily life. There seemed to be such an enormous divide between who I was on the inside and how my life looked on the outside. But now, coincidentally (and I'm not kidding about the coincidental part—I had been traveling cross country on a lark and my car broke down in Austin), I found myself living in a town I loved, listening to music I loved, and working with people I came to love. (Shout out to Antone's: Austin's Home of the Blues.)

Best of all, I fell madly in love with a guitar player in the house band, and he fell in love with me. I had had boyfriends before, but this was different. I had never known anyone like him. He was gentle and smart and funny and also cool and deep. He made me laugh and taught me so much about music. He was a musician's musician, all soul, no hype, hung out in bars but was super-literary with a special love for Isaac Bashevis Singer. He was a Texan with a taste for Jewish girls and in Texas, I was like ten Jews put together, all of whom had a thing for Texan guitar players. *Perfect*. I adored him. He adored me.

The first time we kissed, I had an experience that was unforgettable, not just for how powerful it was in that moment, but for how perfectly it christened the nature of our relationship. Held in the circle of his arms, I drew back to look into his eyes and lay my hand on his chest directly over his heart. At that exact moment an inexpressible rush of wellbeing streamed from his chest into my palm and imparted an otherworldly sense of safety. I had never known such a feeling. We were bound together as lovers in that very moment. With him, finally, I lay down my burden and gave myself over to love, completely. Throughout the course of our five-year relationship, every time I placed my

palm on his chest, this feeling returned. Even sitting here right now, a gazillion years later, all I have to do is think of him and the feeling returns. This was the kind of love that you can never excise, because you were born with this person already in your heart.

Over the course of our relationship, several big things happened that made us grateful for the circle of safety created through our embrace, which was that I was almost killed in a truly dreadful car accident and he took care of me throughout my lengthy hospital stay, sleeping in my hospital room every night, and caring for me during the months of recovery. A few years later, he was busted for being part of a marijuana-selling operation (of which I had had no knowledge) and ended up going to prison for 14 months. Out of desperation, he had been trying to make enough money to provide for us, something not likely to happen on a guitar player's income. Death, drugs, lover's sacrifices, and prison: a very bluesy story indeed, with many opportunities to take shelter in each other's arms.

Even before the prison months however, we had slipped into an on-again, off-again kind of relationship. Although we were bound together by the undeniable soul-connection and the ability to truly be there for each other in an emergency, everyday life was another story. We could not make a regular life together, and would break up and get back together, break up and get back together. During one of these break-ups, he started going out with someone else and my heart shattered. Into. One. Million. Pieces.

I was inconsolable. I lost my mind. I was wracked with the worst case of jealousy, which I had had no idea I was even capable of; I had not been a jealous person before this event, and have never been so again. My sleep was absolutely destroyed—every night I had horrible nightmares about him being beyond my reach. My appetite

disappeared and I shrank to a skeletal size zero. My friends set up a system to check on me, including a feeding schedule like for a baby. (Once, three people came over and wouldn't leave until I drank a fruit smoothie, coaxing me to take sips through a straw.) I filled dozens of journals trying to make sense of this pain.

Ultimately, after months and months of struggle, I simply could not get over it and moved over a thousand miles away from the place I loved so dearly, just to get away from this situation. It helped, but only a little. I am not exaggerating when I say that I did not draw breath for two years without also feeling the pain of this breakup.

Spurred by this utter confusion, my interest in spirituality reached an unprecedented peak. I think I was reading two or three books per week, searching for answers. Why did this hurt so much? How could I make it go away? What was it about me that made this happen? How can you stop loving someone just because they have ceased to love you? All the pain particular to my childhood—thinking I was unlovable, overly emotional, and probably stupid resurfaced with a vengeance. As it seems to, the pain of today's broken heart brings back the pain of *all* broken hearts, beginning from the beginning. My mind rang round the clock with self-recrimination and shame and I was terrified I would never be able to put my life back together. I was so afraid. I was so sad.

Then in my readings, I happened to pick up a book that said this:

*...this experience of sad and tender heart is what gives birth to fearlessness.*

*Conventionally, being fearless means that you are not afraid or that, if someone hits you, you will hit him back... (But) real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart. You are willing to*

*open up, without resistance or shyness, and face the world... If a person does not feel alone and sad, he cannot be a (spiritual) warrior at all...*

Oh.

Here was a path that led you, not away from strong emotion, but directly toward it, one that applauded the ability to feel deeply, not for its dramatic qualities, but for its vividness and intelligence. And if the leading qualities of being powerful and courageous—of spiritual warriorship—were sadness and loneliness, I could imagine quickly advancing through the ranks. For the first time, I read something that made sense. *This sadness meant something. It could lead to something good.* It was extremely encouraging to think that what I thought most problematic about my situation—the overwhelming sorrow and life-wrecking sensitivity—might actually be solutions. Heartbreak could be a source of power.

What I learned from this book, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* by a Buddhist teacher called Chögyam Trungpa, and from other books and teachers I found, was that a brilliant life is not about being untouched by sorrow, but has more to do with relaxing and allowing the world to touch you. It's way braver to open yourself to the world than to wall yourself off from it. I had never before heard such a definition of courage. And I had never heard of a spiritual path that celebrated and invited strong emotion and actually explained how to work with it, not by arguing against it, but by liberating it. Instead of trying to toughen up, I could appreciate my softness. Instead of trying to stem the tears, I could dive into them and let the current carry me. In fact, the more I was able to own and proclaim my tenderness, the more of a bad-ass I would be. After some thought, I realized it made perfect sense. After all, if you try to prevent

strong emotion, you're always on the defensive. If you never put up your guard in the first place, you have nothing to defend and therefore nothing to worry about.

For more than a decade I've explored in my own life this notion of the tender-hearted warrior, of being open to all emotions and becoming strong in the broken places. I've had many opportunities to test and apply the teachings on warriorship. I'm always astonished at how wise, accurate, and practical they are, even for dealing with the most grievously broken heart, and I want to share them with you.