

# Taking *The Exquisite Risk*: An Undefended Heart

~ a talk by Tara Brach presented on March 22, 2017

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One of the metaphors for spiritual transformation that we hear a lot is that we are like a caterpillar in a cocoon, and that awakening comes as we feel the sense of the cocoon and realize that it is time to go beyond; and then we transform into a butterfly and fly into freedom. It is a very useful metaphor. Individually and as a species, we live in this familiar cocoon of our egoic thoughts and behaviors and so on, and they serve us—the cocoon serves us in earlier stages of development—and then the time comes to go beyond. And if we don't, the cocoon creates a pressure and we start getting more and more squeezed because we are living in too small a space for our growing spirit. So that pressure is a reminder to take the chance and break open. And it is damaging if we don't. It is arrested development.

It is even more useful to remember that, for humans, this is not a one-shot and we are continually waking up out of our cocoons— cocoons of illusion, cocoons of limiting beliefs, cocoons of behaviors keep us small. It is an ongoing process of coming into contact with a wider reality. It is like shedding a skin, and each time that we shed our skin, we feel more exposed because the new skin is more porous, than the old skin, so there is more contact, more flow through, and more of a sense of vulnerability.

So, I would like to take a phrase that I heard recently from the poet Mark Nepo, who I love. He describes this shedding of the skin as, “taking the *exquisite risk*.” Every time we open up out of our familiar cocoon to contact a wider reality, to really touch aliveness more fully, we are taking the *exquisite risk*. I love it because *exquisite* connotes a kind of beauty and excellence and sensitivity and responsiveness. *Exquisite*. And then *risk*—it is exposure to danger and loss. We are willing to let go of an old experience that gave us some measure of comfort, security or certainty and exchange it for what is unfamiliar and way more alive. *The exquisite risk*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nepo, M. (2005). *The Exquisite Risk: Daring To Live An Authentic Life*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

So one flavor of the *exquisite risk* comes from Andre Gregory. Many of you saw *My Dinner with Andre*. In it, a man asks Andre about writing and he responds with a story about his wife. She was going into surgery and after she had anesthesia, he realized he hadn't said what he needed to. He said that from then on, he dedicated himself to speaking his heart as if for the last time, not taking the risk of not being real. And then he told the man: "Write like that, Write like it is the last time, like this is it. And live your life like that, from that wholeheartedness."

*The exquisite risk.*

Basically, this path of *exquisite risk* arises in the moments that we are willing to be fully present. It is full unconditional presence—meeting the moment, wide open. One Buddhist nun from the fifteen-hundreds said, "I meet this life with my whole body." You can kind of feel that, this undefended presence.

Frederik Nietzsche writes: "The snake which cannot cast its skin has to die."<sup>2</sup> So, again, we are talking about what happens when we are not willing. This coincides with a belief that indigenous people had that humans originally had the power to rejuvenate and live fully by shedding their skin. That's what gave them the power. There is a story from the Polynesian culture about the mother of a tribe that went regularly to the river to shed her skin. But one such time, she shed her skin and the old skin got caught in a bit of drift wood. So she goes back to the village and her teenage daughter sees her and is frightened you know, because she doesn't look like her old self. And the mother tries to reassure her, but the daughter was repulsed by seeing this raw-skinned new person that didn't look like her mother. She was so distressed and angry that the mother decided that, to soothe her fear, she would go back to the river. And so, she found the old skin and put it back on, and from that day on humans lost their ability to be immortal. Arrested development.

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, F. (1954). *The Portable Nietzsche* (W. Kaufmann, Ed.). New York: Viking Press.

Of course, shedding our skin doesn't mean to be without skin. It means that we are opening to a level where there is more transparency and more porousness and more of a natural exchange—a belonging to our world.

What I would like to do in our reflection here is to look at the challenges and the blessings of taking the *exquisite risk* and what it really means—not in some big super-human way that we are going to plan for down the road—but right in any moment, right this moment, as much as any moment in your life, you can *take the exquisite risk* of really arriving, putting down ideas and certainties and orientations . . . that quality of openness.

So the challenge, for all of us, is that we are very habituated and attached to and identified with our particular familiar skin—our cocoon. Every one of us. It is part of our evolution. We develop our cocoon and we are attached to it, and we have to deal with that. The ego-self is organized around controlling life. Most of the time, we are trying to get what we want and avoid what we don't want and trying to hold on to security and comfort and push away fear or pain.

You can see with meditation instruction: *Oh just relax, just come into the present moment*. That little word *just*. Do you know what I mean? We are rigged to be vigilant, to not come into the present moment, to constantly be darting off. In fact, our brain is designed with a default network in it and, when we don't have a task . . . when we are told, "Oh, just be" . . . that default-network gets activated and has us scurrying around to re-affirm our selfness by looking into the future and the past just to reorient ourselves. It is part of our evolutionary potential to keep awakening out of our cocoon, but there are pulls to stay inside. In the Buddhist tradition, the pulls are described as our reactions to the eight worldly winds. We are constantly trying to control and to have praise but not blame, success but not failure, pleasure but not pain, fame but not disrepute. Those are the eight winds. That is the way we are maintaining our cocoon—we are busy trying to organize around having what we want and not, in some way, losing what we really want to keep with us.

So, in this vein:

A student and a Zen master lived across the river from each other and they often discussed Buddhism. One day the student, whose name was Su Dongpo, felt inspired and wrote the following poem:

I bow my head to the heaven within heaven,  
hairline rays illuminating the universe,  
the eight winds cannot move me,  
sitting still upon the purple lotus.

So here he is, and he is basically saying that he has attained a very high level of spirituality. He is no longer buffeted around by the eight winds. He is impressed with himself. Then he sends a servant to hand-carry this poem to the Zen Master across the river, Foyin. And when he reads the poem, Foyin immediately sees that it is a declaration of spiritual refinement. Smiling, the Zen Master wrote the word “fart” on the manuscript and had it returned to Su Dongpo.

So, Su Dongpo is there thinking he is pretty cool and expecting compliments and a seal of approval, and he sees the word “fart” and he gets really, really upset. “How dare he insult me like this, what a lousy old monk, he’s got a lot of explaining to do!” He gets his things together and, indignant, he rushes out of his house and he orders a boat to ferry him to the other side of the shore so he can set this guy straight. He wants an apology. However, Foyin’s door is closed, and on the door is a piece of paper for Su Dongpo. It says: “The eight winds cannot move me. One fart blows me across the river.”

I don’t know if I need to tell the moral of the story or not, but it was a turning point in Su Dongpo’s spiritual development and he became more of a man of humility.

It is hard to overestimate the power of the eight winds and how many moments we are holding on to our skin, so to speak—trying to thicken it up . . . trying to hang on to that cocoon so that we can protect ourselves and get what we want. And so, the big question is: *What enables us to keep evolving to eventually let go?* What we find is, that it hurts more to hang on than to let go. It is suffering to stay in that small container. After a brush with cancer, Mary Oliver wrote:

“Do you need a prod? Do you need a little darkness to get you going?”<sup>3</sup>

So, the inquiry is: *Where in our life right now are we sensing that prod? Where is the cocoon squeezing? Where are we suffering? What is our growing edge?*

For many of us, the hook is looking good and getting approval, right? And that is where we get small. It is interesting. Don't take my word for it. Just notice when you are in an interaction, check and sense: *How much of the way I am expressing myself is, in some way, designed to get a certain response from another person?*

In one story, a man walked into the produce section of his local supermarket and he asked to buy a half a head of lettuce. And this young man that's working there says, “We don't do that. We only sell whole heads of lettuce.” But the guy is insistent, so the young man goes to the back area and asks his manager about it, “Some jerk back there wants to buy half a head of lettuce...” But just as he is finishing his sentence he sees the gentleman standing there behind him and says, “...and this fine gentleman wants to buy the other half.”

So, later on in the day, the manager, pulls him back into the back with him and says, “I like a young man who can think on his feet. Where do you come from son?”

And the guy says, “I come from Canada.”

“How come you left Canada?” the manager asks.

The young man replies, “All they have in Canada are whores and hockey players.”

And the manager goes, “You know, my wife is from Canada.” “Oh,” the young man says, “What team does she play for?”

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<sup>3</sup> Oliver, M. (2014). The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac. In *Blue Horses: Poems* (p. 61). New York: Penguin.

We get rewards for good presentation. We get rewards for being clever. We get rewards for having the right answer or for looking a certain way or acting a certain way. But we can also see how much the seeking of approval stops us from being spontaneous and it stops us from being, you know, really authentic. And in a deep way, as long as we think we need to act a certain way to be okay, we can't trust in our innate lovability. It keeps us trapped in insecurity.

Some months ago, I was teaching a *Fearless Heart* weekend up at Garrison, New York, and I had the people get into groups and name things that they were afraid of. One group said it was interesting to them that they all said the same thing and what they were afraid of was other people's judgment. Again, in terms of these worldly winds, we wear our skin tight because we are afraid that if we don't, others will see something about us we don't want them to see, or they won't see something about us that we do want them to see. So, that is one of the places we get stuck—one of the places that we hold on to our skin. Another is the habit of blame. We can see where the prod is in that behavior. We blame and blame and blame, and then there is distance.

One friend described the breakdown with a teen because it was so hard for her to accept the way her son was behaving. She got into a chronic blaming and even when he wasn't behaving that way, she in some way was resentful. And that wedge was the prod. Sometimes the prod that we get comes because we are addicted to trying to achieve—we just have to keep striving and doing more and proving ourselves. Maybe the prod is that, all of a sudden, a partner wants a divorce because we just haven't been present for the last ten years. Or it might be that our hook is soothing ourselves with food or drugs. Or obsessive thinking, planning, worrying. These are just a few examples of the ways that we hold on tight to a familiar cocoon to make ourselves feel better, but then it backfires because we end up feeling bad about ourselves . . . ashamed.

So we need the prod of the cocoon—the squeeze—because we get so habituated. Whatever we practice regularly—whatever we are regularly thinking and the regular ways we behave—that is what we strengthen. If you are practicing worry, you strengthen the pathways that have to do with biological and psychological fear. If you are practicing blaming, that gets strengthened. We

need that prod so that we begin to practice in a different way—so we start turning towards presence.

### *Reflection:*

So let's take a moment to reflect a little bit about how you wear your skin. How you might hold on to your skin or cocoon...

As we pause, just sense the pausing—letting yourself rest for a moment, open. And just feel yourself breathing and sitting here. Bring to mind someone who is important to you, someone you care about and care about how they are relating to you. Now sense: What is it you most want this person to see about you? And also: What is it you most want them *not* to see about you? Then you might bring to mind a recent time that you were together. How much were you practicing your habitual persona, showing some parts, covering some parts? In other words: What kind of skin were you wearing? Was it a familiar old skin where you were somewhat habitual? Was there a sense of that *exquisite risk*, where taking a chance to be real? What might it be like, with this person, to take the *exquisite risk*? To shed an older skin? To be more real, more porous, more transparent? Let this be not just an inquiry for right this moment, but you might bring your interest and care to the next time you are together and sense: What would that really mean?

For some people, what will come up when we think about people that matter to us and whose opinions matter to us is that sense of: *I can't really dare to be real because something is wrong with me and if they saw it, they would judge. That's just how it is.* I bring this up because one of the most binding and pervasive cocoons that many of us live in is what I sometimes call the *trance of unworthiness*—where the cocoon or skin is really built on practicing beliefs like: *Something is wrong with me; I am not okay; If people see it they won't like me.* It's important to name that, because this sense of *I am falling short* is exactly the place that we are getting squeezed where we can begin to take the *exquisite risk* more. Rather than practicing the thought, are we willing to pause and come into the actual vulnerability of that moment? Can we unpack it some? You wouldn't be here if there wasn't some wisdom in you that feels how old skin binds and a longing to live in a more awake, open reality. If that sense of *something is*

*wrong with me* is what you are practicing and making stronger, then that is a perfect place to take the *exquisite risk*.

So, let's shift and look more closely at what all of this actually means. We are using this language, *taking a risk*—what does it mean? The grounds of the *exquisite risk* are exactly the instructions we use for meditation: *Come back to what is right here*. Really come back, though. There is a willingness to feel what is here—with tenderness, with presence, with honesty—and stay.

### *Reflection:*

Again, let's just practice together and, with a meditative presence, explore what it means to dare to be more present in the moment.

You might bring to mind something that is going on in your life that is challenging. It may be one of the things I named. It may be somewhere that the trance of unworthiness is playing out . . . a sense of insecurity or feeling a failure. It might be a place that you are feeling caught in seeking another's approval. It may be a kind of addictive behavior or maybe a place you are caught in blame—but somewhere where the cocoon is squeezing you, where you feel that prod. And when you bring to mind that challenging situation, you might first see if you can observe without judging: *What are the habitual thoughts or beliefs that go with this? What have you been practicing thus far that reinforces the cocoon? What do you tell yourself about yourself or about others? What is it you are believing that is keeping you small? And you might ask: What is it that I am unwilling to feel? What is under the belief, under the thoughts, that in some way I might be avoiding or running from? What am I unwilling to feel? And can I dare to fully contact this? Can I take the exquisite risk of deepening intimacy, right this moment, with the place in me that is asking for attention? Can I dare to hold this with compassion?*

We usually need a while to get in touch with our bodies and our heart so, if you just have a short time available now, you might sense your intention—your intention to explore letting go of the old skin, of just practicing those same thoughts and beliefs, and coming into this tender connectedness with what is really here, breathing with it, feeling it, offering a kindness. This is the



foundation of being able to take the *exquisite risk* with others. If we are willing to bravely be with the vulnerability inside us, then we can begin to engage with others without a mask. We can begin to be more real.

So often we are with each other and to others, it might seem we are being real—we are being who we are. We might be in a lively place, a fun-place, a sweet place, but only we can know for sure whether we are actually engaging from a groundless presence, where we are not playing out our routines, but we are really there. And to be taking the *exquisite risk* requires dropping a lot of our certainty and really listening inwardly and outwardly—being truly interested in what it’s like for another person. So, there is an internal awareness of what it is like and what is going on inside of your own being, but it also extends to a real curiosity that is attending to the other. And there is a willingness to be changed by the shared experience. This means really putting down our habits, it is a radical kind of presence. So, I want to name a few guidelines and then practice again and explore into it.

If you want to, more consciously, dare to be present in this way, the most basic attitude is to be very forgiving of how hard it is and how quickly you lapse back into the old familiar cocoon behaviors—like truly forgiving—because the conditioning is there, and it is not our fault. All we can do is intend to be real, so we need to know we are going to open sometimes and we are going to close sometimes. We need to encourage ourselves.

Sol and Mort are walking from religious service. Sol wonders if it would be all right to smoke while praying. Mort replies, “Well, why don’t you ask Rabbi Schwarz?” So Sol goes up to Rabbi Schwarz and says, “Rabbi, may I smoke while I pray?”

And Rabbi Schwarz says, “No, my son, you may not, that is utter disrespect to our religion.”

So Sol goes back and tells his friend what the Rabbi said. And Mort said, “I am not surprised. You asked the wrong question. Let me try!” So Mort goes up to Rabbi Schwarz and says, “Rabbi, may I pray while I smoke?” to which Rabbi Schwarz eagerly replies, “By all means, my son, by all means!”

So, give yourself a lot of leeway...

We have so much pain and so many wounds from our early connections with each other or lack thereof, that we are afraid of each other. It is in our bodies. So, just like we do with meditation, it is important to be able to recognize that, sometimes, taking the *exquisite risk* is not the most compassionate and wise thing to do in a moment because we might re-traumatize ourselves in some way. It is not like, in every single moment, “thou shalt take a risk.” There is a wisdom to it and we start where it seems like there is *enough* safety. It is never a hundred percent—it is not supposed to be—but we start coming out of the cocoon where it feels *safe enough*.

And, like meditation, you set the intention and the anchor in your body. And, especially when strong emotions are there like anger, fear or grief, what I’ve found, in taking a risk, is that my best friend is pausing — because my “cocoon” habit is to keep tumbling into what is next and saying or doing the next thing, it keeps me secure. So the non-doing—creating space—takes away my ground, but it makes me more real.

A few months ago, I was going for a walk with my sister and she said something that sounded pretty critical to me. And the way I knew it sounded critical was that I felt a kind of familiar, heated twist of irritation—we are sisters, you know. We know our patterns. So I was breathing with that and, I could hear my mind launching into its defense, but I didn’t say anything. I just continued breathing with it and being quiet and feeling into it. Then, as I got a little more present, some part of me could sense, “Okay, she is upset about something.” So, I stayed quiet for a bit longer and then she said, “You know, I know that sounded judgmental.” And then she went on, “Here is what is really bothering me about this...” She attuned and made it easier but, even if she hadn’t, because of that pause, I would have responded from more of a real place—a little less defended, a little more porous...just a little. We are sisters. It takes a while, you know, there is so much of a habitual thing. So helpful.

Another very recent example:

I did a Skype call with a friend who had lost both of her parents within a very short time in the last year—very close. It was a really huge absence, and so I knew I was entering this call with a deep intention to show up. At one point, she was speaking and the story was really compelling, and I could tell she was about to finish a piece of it and kind of invite me in, and she did. And I could feel myself rehearsing the right things to say. As you know, with people being with dying there is no right thing to say—there is nothing, really. But, nonetheless, I was kind of leaning in, getting ready to say what I thought would be the right thing and, when she stopped, something in me just said, “No, just wait.” So I waited. There was a bit of awkwardness because she was kind of ready for me to say something, but I just knew that I couldn’t be as real. So I just waited some more and then tears started flowing and we both just cried together. And a Skype cry works as well as any other cry...

So I have shared two examples of taking the *exquisite risk*, and I want to confess that I have also had countless times of taking the *exquisite risk* in retrospect—you know, looking back, saying, “Oh, that’s where I could’ve...” So, it is a real practice. And it is a practice with an amazing gift, which is that our habitual filters dissolve and we get to see more truly what is here in ourselves and in each other—which equals intimacy. We get to see the goodness that is here.

### *Reflection:*

Let me ask you to check in again and, in the spirit this exploration, just to really be right here—right in this moment, sense the here-ness, the experience being and allowing the person you were considering before – that you care about, that is important to you – to come to mind. Go ahead and imagine the next time you have some time together. Imagine the look on that person’s face—their eyes . . . and what they might be wearing, where you might be. And imagine having that intention to take the *exquisite risk*—to engage without an agenda, without rehearsing, without thinking you know what is going on—just open and curious and tender. Letting that person be really here in your awareness, right now.

You might sense that you are seeing them as if for the first time. Not allowing your past knowledge or experience of them be there. Just right now, for the first time. Fresh. And look for things in them you might have missed because of

familiarity. Sense the particular ways that goodness or spirit shines through. You cannot love what you cannot see afresh. It is very much about what is right in the moment. You cannot love what you are not discovering anew.

You might bring to mind another person. In the same way, letting all the old filters and ideas of them go, so you are just sensing the presence of this being for the first time. Sense what you might have missed. Just sense the goodness moving through. When we start shedding the skin of our old habits, our old filters and our ways of impressing or having agendas, we begin to see afresh. We get to see beyond the mask. We get to see the goodness that is there and start trusting it more and more. And, as we do that with each other, it can ripple out to be a way of seeing and being in widening circles in our society. Seeing this goodness.

I have always loved this from Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*:

“No-one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion. People learn to hate. And if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love. For love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest of times in prison when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I could see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.”<sup>4</sup>

The more our habit is to come into this radical presence and see afresh, the more we can not only see the goodness in ourselves and each other, but invite it out.

One last little story that came to mind as I was reflecting on this. One of my friends is really very drawn to exploring in this way as part of his path and his practice, kind of living and putting aside uncertainty. He decided to do it by working as a doula—an attending companion—for those who are dying and he is working primarily with low-income people who don't have family in

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<sup>4</sup> Mandela, N. (1994). *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

Baltimore. So, very early on in his Doula career, he spent time with a man who was unable to speak. On the first day, the guy was trying to communicate with him and he was pointing to the door of the bedroom. And so my friend was trying to be present but was trying to figure out what this man needed...and thinking, "What should I do?" So he was going into his old pattern. The man got increasingly focused, struggling to get up and my friend put his arm around him thinking, "Oh he wants to stand up. Maybe he needs to go to the bathroom." He helped him to stand and walked to the door of the bedroom with him and the man pointed out into the kitchen at the fridge, and then pointed to my friend and then he motioned, "Eat!" And my friend realized that this man was trying to be a caring host. He wanted to make sure that my friend was comfortable and getting the food he needed.

It is so easy to see someone who is older as "old" or someone who has cancer as a "cancer patient" or someone who is overweight as an "overweight person". It is so easy to be in our cocoon and miss out on the humanness and the heart and the spirit that is here. It is such a gift. As the indigenous people taught, we tune into a timeless presence—we become immortals in that sense—when we can keep shedding the skin of our familiar thoughts and habits.

So in that spirit, one last pause together to come into presence, to have that intention in our lives to keep on waking up into that larger reality, that larger heart-space and to sense as you connect with others, that intention to be fresh, to be there—open, present, curious. And right in these moments, to deepen your attention and to sense what it means to really be intimate with the life that is right here.

We will close with a poem by Mary Oliver:

When death comes  
like a hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox;

when death comes  
like an iceberg between shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:  
What is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood  
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,  
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth,

When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.<sup>5</sup>

Namaste and thank you for your presence.

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver, M. (1992). When Death Comes. In *New and Selected Poems: Volume One* (p. 10). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.