



Loving Bravely

**20 Lessons of
Self-Discovery to Help You
Get the Love You Want**

Alexandra H. Solomon, PhD

Foreword by Mona Fishbane, PhD

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Lesson 3

Awaken to Your Life Today

Realize deeply that the present moment is all you have. Make the Now the primary focus of your life.

—Eckhart Tolle

Your *story* has a past, a present, and a future, but your *life* is lived in this moment. As humans, our ability to reflect on the past and dream of the future is a bit of a double-edged sword. Yes, mental time travel has its benefits. We can reminisce as a way to feel close to those in our lives, and we can look ahead in order to make plans and create goals. But there is a dark side to focusing on the past or a future. It is difficult to feel happy and connected to others if we are habitually leaving the present moment by rewinding or fast-forwarding inside our heads. When our thoughts take us to the past, we tend to experience feelings like shame and blame. When our thoughts take us to the future, we tend to experience feelings like anxiety and self-doubt. Trying our best to live in the present moment is our best chance for happiness and peace of mind. And living in the present moment helps us in love.

Living well, with an open heart that is loving of self and loving of others, requires bringing ourselves, again and again, as fully as possible, into the present moment—and that means knowing how to work with our stories. While we need to acknowledge and honor the impact that the past has on us today, we also need to be careful not to get stuck there. Spiritual teacher and author Carolyn Myss

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says, “By remaining stuck in the power of our wounds, we block our own transformation. We overlook the greater gifts inherent in our wounds—the strength to overcome them and the lessons we are meant to receive through them. Wounds teach us to become passionate and wise” (1997, 15). When you import into the present moment old, outdated, and inaccurate stories about who you are and how the world works, there are two unfortunate consequences:

- Your intimate relationship is compromised, because your view of the present moment is being skewed by the past.
- You are prevented from honoring the resilience and wisdom that emerges from pain—resilience and wisdom that in fact can serve you and your intimate relationship right here right now.

In this lesson we will talk about how to live in the here and now of your life by working gently and lovingly with old stories that have a way of sneaking up on us.

Ghosts from the Past

Leticia and Owen showed up to our weekly therapy session wanting to rehash yet another explosive fight—a fight in which each of them felt very much like the victim. Here’s what had happened: Owen had agreed to pick Leticia’s car up from the mechanic, but he was swamped at work and forgot to get it. The next morning, when Leticia headed out to the garage, she was surprised that it wasn’t waiting there for her, and she ended up being late for an appointment. She called Owen and unleashed her fury. She called him names, attacked his character (lazy, dishonest, phony, worthless), and she threatened to end the relationship. The more she attacked him, the more he defended himself, and each of them felt hurt, angry, and deeply misunderstood.

Although Leticia’s upset was certainly understandable, it felt out of proportion to the situation. I suspected that something else was

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going on for her—something from her past—and I very gently said to her, “Leticia, I get how frustrating this incident with Owen was and is for you. And I can’t get past this nagging sense that something very old is going on for you. Something that has nothing to do with the successful and ambitious woman sitting in this room today and everything to do with the little girl you once were. In that moment in the garage, when Owen’s forgetfulness disappointed you so severely, I suspect something much deeper was getting stirred up in you.”

Tears filled her eyes (and Owen’s eyes, too), and she began to talk about her past in a way she never had done before. As the only child of a single mother, she and her mother were extremely close. Her mother was (and is) hardworking and driven. She was also prone to fits of rage; she would explode at Leticia’s slightest misstep, calling her names and hitting her. Leticia never told anyone and maintained a very split view of her mother (loving mom/angry mom). She had so many reasons *not* to talk about the past. She feared it would change Owen’s view of her mother. She feared Owen might use it against her down the road. She feared it might keep her from being able to have a relationship with her mother today. But part of her, a resilient and wise part, knew the past was haunting her.

When Leticia would fly into a rage, Owen felt like a switch was flipped, and he was dealing with a different person. And in many ways, he really was. When raging, Leticia “becomes” that terrified little girl and Owen “becomes” the unpredictable mother. In those moments, Leticia is living in the past, desperately fighting a ghost, and both of them are lost. Leticia is lost within an old and painful story, and Owen is lost in confusion and fear. But her willingness to be vulnerable with him by sharing the past opened the door to a brand-new, brave, and deep intimacy between them. He was able to feel and express tremendous empathy for the girl she was. To him, it was like putting a missing piece into a puzzle.

Embracing Both/And

Leticia needed to let her guard down in order to talk with us about the pain of her childhood. She trusted Owen enough (although just barely) to share the truth of her past with him. Also, a part of her was tired of living like this. Even though she would defend and justify her behavior by blaming Owen for “making” her mad, she was sick of being triggered so easily, and her rageful behavior confused and frightened her. Changing this old pattern is hard work because it means she must face her past and tackle her core issues.

In order to be able to do what she did in session—in order to take responsibility for her relational behavior—she had to be able to take a dialectic approach. Dialectics is the core of a powerful therapeutic approach created by Dr. Marsha Linehan called dialectical behavior therapy (2015). Dialectics is a complex concept that has its roots in philosophy and science, and it involves several assumptions about the nature of reality: 1) everything is connected to everything else; 2) change is constant and inevitable; and 3) opposites can be integrated to form a closer approximating to the truth (which is always evolving). The last point has particular significance in learning to love bravely, deeply, and intimately. Let’s look at some examples:

I feel *both* excited *and* afraid.

This moment is full of *both* joy *and* sadness.

I’m *both* feminine *and* athletic.

I can *both* rational *and* emotional.

My partner is *both* whole *and* a work in progress.

Both my point of view *and* my partner’s point of view make sense.

Thinking and acting dialectically can be quite difficult to do, downright impossible at times. The ability to move to this “both/and” thinking is a vital skill for individual well-being and for relational happiness. Dialectics help us expand our ways of considering a situation. They can “unstick” conflicts by avoiding blaming and

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approaching with flexibility. For Leticia, holding the dialectical view—Owen disappointed me *and* Owen cares deeply about me—has helped her begin to more effectively handle moments when pain from the past comes rushing in. In this both/and space, she can honor her emotions while also honoring the relationship. A dialectical approach in the face of a conflict does not mean giving up your values or selling out—it means acknowledging the truth on both sides.

If you find yourself prone to all-or-nothing, good-or-bad, right-or-wrong thinking, dialectics offer a new way. And when it comes to love, being able to hold dialectics is key. Nothing on Earth quite compares to the vulnerability invoked within an intimate relationship. And when we feel vulnerable, we are at risk of seeking what is simple and concrete in an attempt to steady ourselves. Black or white, good or bad, right or wrong are simple and concrete for sure. But they are usually far too narrow to hold the complexity and paradox of an intimate relationship.

Leticia, in a desperate effort to keep the past in the past, held an extremely rigid view of who she was—successful, ambitious, determined, and sure of herself. Her erratic and rage-filled behavior with Owen didn't fit within her narrow self-definition, so she did two things:

- She pushed those awful moments out of her awareness, acting minutes later like it never happened (and insisting Owen do the same).
- She blamed those awful moments on Owen (“I yelled because of *his* behavior”).

When Leticia didn't see her car in the garage, deep feelings of fear and worthlessness were *triggered*, or stirred up, within her: “Owen forgot me!” Without a dialectical approach, the old story was in charge, and her fear quickly became rage. As she becomes better able to embrace complexity, she can author a new story: “I feel both angry *and* sad. Owen loves me *and* he forgot to take care of something for me.”

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As she courageously named her story of herself and her past, she began to connect with and honor the terrified girl that she was. She softened and widened her view of herself, adding complexity and nuance. Her story became thicker and richer, allowing her to feel *both* successful, ambitious, determined, and sure of herself *and* frightened, needy, unsure, and worthless. Both/and. One does not destroy the other. Ever. One does not lessen the other. Ever.

Bravery and humility are required in order to say, “My internal world is complex and mysterious. The experiences in my life reveal new layers of me to me. I can look without judgment at what bubbles up within me, trusting that I can experience the fullness of what it is to be me.” Naming the old story and connecting to it sets the stage for Leticia to be able to choose different behaviors in her relationship. She can advocate for herself and her needs in her relationship with Owen without tearing him to shreds in the process.

Parenting Yourself from the Inside

Old, rigid, either/or stories don’t stand a chance in the face of complex, nuanced, juicy stories of the self and of the relationship. Being able to find an internal both/and space opens up the possibility for *self-soothing*. Because how we relate to ourselves determines everything about how we relate to other people, self-soothing is actually a vital relationships skill. I like to think of self-soothing as becoming a parent to yourself because when we soothe ourselves, we offer comfort to ourselves the way a parent offers comfort to an upset child (Siegel and Hartzel 2013; Fishbane 2013).

Here’s a personal example of self-soothing in the form of parenting yourself. I was about to give an important talk. It wasn’t my biggest audience ever, but it was an intimidating one—full of former professors, colleagues, and strangers. And the topic, spirituality, was a new one for me. It felt like a big risk, and I was really nervous. On the drive to the venue, I tried my usual preparation routine of cranking up my favorite Jay Z song—the one that gets me in the zone. It did *nothing* to calm my nerves. I started to get a little panicky. My

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heart was racing, I was getting sweaty, and my hands were clammy. My thoughts were all over the place: *What if I can't calm down? What if they don't like me? What if I run out of material?*

After a few minutes of running myself ragged, part of me rose above the fray and was able to see what was happening from a little bit of distance. This part of me was saying, "These are all *stories*. These are just old stories. You don't need them." Naming the fact that I was having some stressful thoughts allowed me to begin to shift from panic to compassion. Next, I imagined myself as a kid. I literally pictured my round face and thick curly hair. I imagined talking to my younger self the way a scared kid needs to be talked to. I validated the girl's feelings ("You're scared right now, aren't you?"). I imagined giving her a hug and patting her curls. Then I reminded her that actually *she* wasn't the one who was going to stand in front of all those people. Giving the talk was a job for a woman not a girl. She could play or rest or just generally be a kid. I, the woman, would give this talk. And I, the woman, have everything I need to get the job done.

Guess what? It worked like a charm. I calmed right down, and I was able to do what needed to be done. Although this example doesn't directly involve my intimate relationship, I assure you that being able to parent myself from within creates a steady platform from which I can connect to my partner. The same can happen for you.

Awakening to your life today means honoring the fact that you may be haunted from time to time by old stories that no longer serve you. Naming those old stories when they impinge on the present moment requires humility and awareness. Connecting with the impact of those old stories opens the door to compassion with self. And, most important, turning inward and attending to the impact of the past on the present moment facilitates choice. We can remain the victims of our old stories—reactive, stuck, and narrow—or we can soften, open, and parent ourselves from within. The latter path adds complexity and nuance to a dried-out old story. From a both/and place of compassion, intimate connection with others can flow.

Steps Toward Loving Bravely

Clarity about the role of the past in your life today allows you to parent yourself from the inside—relating to yourself with compassion, wisdom, and love so that you can disentangle old stories from current realities.

Being Here Now

One of the best ways to get better at living in the present moment is to practice *mindfulness*. Being mindful simply means bringing your attention to the present moment without judgment. As with most things in life, the more we practice, the better we get! You may find it helpful to take several brief two- or three-minute *mindfulness breaks* throughout the day, for example when you sit down to a meal, when you park your car at work in the morning, and/or when you are in the shower. Or you might enjoy doing one longer daily mindfulness meditation. There are lots of great books, audio recordings, and apps devoted to teaching mindfulness. Here are some tips:

Sit comfortably.

As you sit, still and quiet, scan your body, bringing your attention to each part of your body, from head to toes. Take note of the various sensations you are experiencing.

Focus on your breath, noticing how it feels in your nose, mouth, chest, and belly.

As thoughts bounce around inside your head, return your focus to your breath. This will happen many times. I find it helpful to imagine that my present-moment awareness is a blue sky and each thought inside my head is a cloud. When a thought comes in, I note it and allow it to pass on by like the cloud, as I return my attention to the sky—my present-moment awareness of my breath. You will need to do this over and over again.

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Mindfulness meditation takes practice, but the benefits to your physical and emotional well-being are worth it!

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Find a place in your home to post a photo of yourself as a child. Having that photo in view can serve as a reminder to relate to yourself with compassion. When you notice yourself engaging in unhelpful and unkind stories about who you are (“You can’t do anything right! No wonder you are single. You screwed up. You are fat, lazy, weak!”), look at that photo and imagine talking to your younger self in that way. You wouldn’t, would you? Ask yourself, “What does that kid need to hear instead?”