

# The Darkness Has Its Own Light

By Mariam Greenspan

In my work as a psychotherapist, I once saw a client who was on the verge of divorce from his second wife. His wife was fed up with his almost total lack of emotion and responsiveness. This man's first wife had died of breast cancer while still a young woman. He had no children from his first marriage, and his second wife was infertile. Yet he had never grieved the loss of his first wife or of his dream of having children.

"All I have is this relationship, and I don't want to lose it. Please help me," he begged. "Tell me what I can do."

I told him that I thought I could help him if he was willing to befriend his grief. "What do you mean?" he asked, looking frantic at the suggestion.

"I mean letting yourself grieve your losses."

His response was swift and unambiguous: "I can't imagine anything I'd want to do less. Isn't there another way?"

I told him that if there was, I didn't know of it. His wife wanted a man who could feel, and he had stopped feeling after his first wife died. I asked him: "Why would you rather deaden yourself to your emotions than feel your way through them?"

"Because," he said with finality, "I'm sure that I couldn't survive it."

I've come to believe that the source of much of our suffering is, ironically, the inability to bear the dark emotions of grief, fear, and despair. These are the emotions we most avoid and that we most need to attend to in our time. Suppressed grief often turns into depression, anxiety, or addiction. Benumbed fear can easily lead to irrational prejudice, toxic rage, and acts of violence. Overwhelming or unconscious despair often leads to severe psychic numbing or expresses itself through destructive acts to oneself and others. Sadly, these patterns play themselves out on the world stage as much as in the individual psyche.

In my view, there are no negative emotions, just unskillful ways of coping with emotions we don't like to feel. In my book *Healing through the Dark Emotions*, I explain that "negative" emotions have a wisdom all their own-wisdom that is essential to the work of healing and transformation on both individual and collective levels. But one of the principle barriers to discovering this healing wisdom is a widespread fear of emotion itself.

When it comes to primary human emotions like love and anger, fear and joy, grief and gratitude, despair and hope- what is, is. We all want to sit at the happiness banquet and feast on the bread of contentment, the wine of joy. We'd rather skip the emotional food that doesn't go down so well. In life's many meals, not everything is equally palatable; but it all needs to be digested. To be at peace, we have to be at home with all of our emotions, to get comfortable with vulnerability.

Grief, fear, and despair are primary human emotions. Without them, we would be less than human, and less likely to survive. Grief arises because we are not alone, and what connects us to others and to the world also breaks our hearts. Grieving our losses allows us to heal and renew our spirits. Fear alerts us to protect our survival, extending beyond our instinct for self-preservation to our concern for others. Despair asks us to find meaning in the midst of apparent chaos or meaninglessness. Making meaning out of suffering is the basis of the human capacity to survive evil and transcend it.

The purposefulness of these dark emotions is evident when we can experience them mindfully, tolerate their intense energies, and let them be. Unfortunately, we don't learn how to do this in a culture that fears and devalues them. In my work I explore another way: learning the healing wisdom of the dark emotions. The dark emotions can be our best, albeit most demanding, spiritual teachers, when we can get beyond the compulsion to control or dispel them. By learning how to attend to, befriend, and surrender to the energies of grief, despair, and fear, we create the conditions for something new to arise in ourselves and in the world. We discover an unexpected gateway to healing and transformation.