

The Alchemy of Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times

by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: Welcome to Insights at the Edge, produced by Sounds True. My name is Tami Simon, I'm the founder of Sounds True, and I'd love to take a moment to introduce you to the new Sounds True Foundation. The Sounds True Foundation is dedicated to creating a wiser and kinder world by making transformational education widely available. We want everyone to have access to transformational tools, such as mindfulness, emotional awareness, and self-compassion, regardless of financial, social, or physical challenges. The Sounds True Foundation is a nonprofit dedicated to providing these transformational tools to communities in need, including at-risk youth, prisoners, veterans, and those in developing countries. If you'd like to learn more or feel inspired to become a supporter, soundstruefoundation.org.

You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today, my guest is Matt Licata. Matt Licata is a practicing psychotherapist whose work incorporates developmental, psychoanalytic, and depth psychologies, as well as a contemplative, meditative, and mindfulness-based approach to transformation and healing. He hosts in-person retreats and co-facilitates a monthly online membership community called Befriending Yourself. He's the author of the book *The Path Is Everywhere*, and a new book with Sounds True called *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*.

I've got to tell you the truth, I know Matt Licata very well. I've known him for close to 30 years. For 20 of those years, he worked right beside me at Sounds True. We work really closely together and quite honestly, as time went on, I thought he could read my mind. We just had a way of working together. And then, he left, started working as a psychotherapist, one-on-one with clients, hosting retreats, and becoming quite a well-respected author in his own right. Having him now as a guest on Insights at the Edge, it's a great joy and really a kind of fruition, I think, in our life together. Matt's new book, *A Healing Space*, is perfectly titled, because I have to say, I always found him and find him to be a healing space, and that's where we're going to start our conversation.

Matt, how is it that you are naturally such a healing space? Even before you became a psychotherapist, it was something you just had, a kind of natural knack at holding space for others?

ML: Yes, well, thank you, Tami, for that kind introduction. I think it's a good question. I think it's been an ongoing process for me and I think there's something about—I think I would probably emphasize listening. There's something about a quality of listening that I really, when I think about it, it's something that's been with me for a long time. I think we can cultivate sort of deeper listening, but it's something that for me, I think has really unfolded over the years. So I think a curiosity and an ability to sort of bracket my own sort of favorite theories and ideas and I just imagine as you're asking this question, sitting with you or sitting with another person, and I think for that person to really be able to feel felt

and to feel understood, and to feel like I'm with them.

I mean, I think those are really the essential qualities of a healing space where someone has that embodied sort of felt experience that there's someone here with me that's able to actually listen to me, that cares about me, that's curious about not only their own ideas and theories and how I might fit into all of that, but just what's unfolding for me, I think is really the essence of it.

TS: Now, one of the early chapters in *A Healing Space* is a chapter called "Already Held," and you write, "We can hold our experience while allowing ourselves to be held by something greater than ourselves," and I wanted to understand more about that. How can we be held by something greater as we hold what's difficult in our own experience? What is that something greater that's holding us? How do we feel it?

ML: Yes, well, I think this is where—this is sort of that transition line between psychological or conventional therapeutic work and really what we might call a more spiritual or transpersonal dimension; that there's all sorts of things that we can do to train ourselves to be able to sit with very difficult experience. But I think what I started to realize, and this was in my own life and also in my—I think, really, in my clinical work, it started to become more clear to me that when I was there listening, the person that I was with was there listening, but there often seemed to be this sort of third thing that was there.

I don't know how else to say it, but it was a third—almost as if a presence that we were being listened to at the same time. So, this sort of goes beyond—it's a bit difficult to communicate in a certain way, but I think as we do this work, as we have this intention to open up to these deeper parts of ourselves, that we can touch this dimension where it's even—it's beyond healing, beyond holding, and where we have this just felt recognition that we're actually being contained within something vast. And whether we're able to sort of move through a difficult experience or not, somehow we're being contained, I think, in a certain way.

I think this started really to become clear to me, yes, and when I was sitting with people, I would often recognize and we would sometimes recognize together that something else was happening in the room. There was, of course, the intersection of our own subjectivities, our own unconscious, but there was a larger presence. And we have different ways of voicing that or talking about that, whether we use language like God or Spirit or the soul or the self. That's not what's most important to me, but it's a felt sense that often I would have with another person, that there was me, there was them, but there was something else that wasn't just sort of the sum of our parts.

It's a bit mysterious, to be honest with you, Tami, but it's something that just is really clear now, I can even almost start to feel it just sitting here with you, this other sort of energy or presence that's here that's holding the conversation.

TS: I wanted to bring it right into real time, because there's you in your home and there's me and I'm in my house, and we have an engineer also, who's connecting with us. Then, there's the listener, as well.

ML: That's right.

TS: That person listening right now. How would the person listening start to tune in to that greater holding space of presence right here in this moment?

ML: Yes, so I think that it's—we are talking about an embodied felt experience, so I think that all of us could just slow down a little bit and begin to just allow ourselves to fully settle into this space and we might just invite an image—and it could be a visual image, it could be a sound, it could be a word, it could be some sensation deep in the body. Often by way of image, that when we meet together in a field like this, because it is a field where we bring our unconscious, we bring our conscious selves, and if we just allow for an image or a sensation or a feeling to come into the room, there can be a sense that it's not—whatever that is, it's not necessarily tied to my own personal biographical experience.

That there is a way—and Jung for example, talks about this language of archetypes or the sort of archetypal psyche or the collective unconscious, but it's almost like this realm of experience that's transgenerational. So, to just open ourselves and allow for a feeling or an image, and there can be some quality or some sense of otherness to it, but also incredibly familiar at the same time. And so yes.

TS: It's interesting, the subtitle of your book is *Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, and of course, I think most people would say we're certainly in difficult times as a collective. What's the importance of tuning in to this greater presence, image of whatever that presence might be, that is holding us, that is supporting us? How does that help us befriend ourselves in difficult times?

ML: Well, I think that—I mean, there's so many different levels that I could respond to that on. I mean, just going to the neurobiological level for a moment, I mean, I think we, human beings are wired to co-regulate. We're not supposed to do this. We're not supposed to heal and transform and awaken on our own, and this opens up the question, well, the importance of the otherness. This whole idea of the other. And so, the other can be another person, of course. There's that we, that intersubjectivity that we that I feel with you right now, there's this alive we-ness between us, but the other can take all sorts of different forms.

There's the transpersonal other, and I like that you brought in the subtitle of the book, because this idea of befriending—because where we might use religious language such as God or soul or spirit, I actually—my native way of experiencing that otherness is as a friend, and I think we have this image of friendship in certain spiritual traditions, I think of Sufism, as probably the one where we hear about it most. We hear Rumi and Hafez and all of the great Sufi teachers speaking about the relationship with the Friend. Now is the Friend part of my personal, biographical world? Is the friend transpersonal? It's all of that. So I think just this idea that there are resources deep within our nervous systems, but there are also resources in the otherness.

So for someone like Jung for example, which is—who is represented in the book, the working with the otherness of psyche or the otherness of my ordinary ego consciousness is incredibly important for healing. So I think about the shamanic idea as well of sort of calling out to this otherness, whether we envision that as a friend or an animal or a part of nature.

But I think right now, on this planet, in this world, we could use some sort of high-voltage friendship from a source that might be able to see into what's happening here in a way that we often can't; we're in these—there's a lot of sort of bodily arousal, autonomic arousal. There's almost like this collective sort of drip of adrenaline or cortisol in the collective psyche right now. So, I think this idea of we're not supposed to always do this

by ourselves, we're not wired to do this work by ourselves—there's a lot, of course, we can do on our own, but I think it's this acknowledging of how we are wired to co-regulate, not just with a human other, but also with this deep, deep friendship that can transcend that.

TS: Now, Matt, I'm going to see if I can take my understanding of what you're saying a little bit deeper. In the acknowledgments of your book, you acknowledge "with heartfelt gratitude to the great internal other." I think it's one thing when you're talking about an internal friend—that brings up a certain feeling for me, of something inside me, that's an inner friend, like I feel kind of cozy and warm. "It's my inner friend. I'm talking to my outer friend, Matt, but I also have an inner friend. Yay!"

ML: Yes.

TS: But when I hear you talk about this great internal other, that brings up more a feeling of mystery, and to be honest, I'm not quite sure I know what you're talking about.

ML: Well, I think that's a good sign. Yes, I think it is a mystery and it's one of those things—I mean, I think much of what's in this book is me trying to find words for some sort of internal experience that I'm having and so this language such as "internal other," what is internal, what is external? I think this is where it begins to start to break down a little bit, because there's experiences that I've had and that's sort of on my own, and there is something unique about sitting with another person that I found that can sort of facilitate or it makes room for this otherness, but it's something that's other than my ordinary way of perception.

So, whether that's a cozy, warm friend by the fire with me inside some part of myself, or whether it's actually some autonomous energy that's sort of existing outside of my personal psyche, I don't know the answer to that question, that's sort of a metaphysical-type question. I think the way I approach this book and my work in general is more from a more of a phenomenological perspective, which there's some lived experience of otherness, right? So, at times, the language that you're speaking about is that cozy, warm, internal friend. That is the right language. For me, too, that makes sense.

But there are times when something else appears and this is not something that's part of my personal, biographical, cultural world. This is something that's different. Something that feels, that it's a transpersonal, I think, is the best word to use. So I think it's an important question, and that you are skirting at the edges of this mystery. I think that what I tried to do in the book was to really just play with the language in a way that allowed us different sort of pathways into connecting with that friend, so we could talk about the friend with the small "f," and there's the Friend if we use the large "F." So, the difference is—and look, this is a difference in feel, it's tactile, right? It's sensation, you can feel it, and how we want to articulate that is really going to depend on the lenses and what we find most native to ourselves.

But I think it's a really important question, I think it's a good question and I'm an amateur like the rest of us and attuning to these deeper energies of friendship that are available. Are they inside of me? Are they outside of me? Or is it in some third realm? So, this is where I think alchemy comes into play because alchemy, the alchemists were talking about are realm of experience that wasn't quite physical and it wasn't quite spiritual. It's almost like that intersection of spirit and matter. So I think about the alchemists when you ask the question, because what they were inviting us into, really, was this sort of liminal

in-between type experience, which is in-between spirit and matter, in a way. Some of this is my language, my reading of alchemy. So, I think it's a very rich question.

TS: Now, this notion that we can become an alchemist with our own life, this is a theme that runs throughout A Healing Space. Help me understand how I might become an alchemist with difficult experience, befriending difficult experience.

ML: Yes. Well, I think we already are alchemists of our own life, and I think it's really more of an invitation to start to actually have a more conscious, embodied sort of relationship with that alchemical process that's going on all the time. I mean, just the ways that we are attempting to make sense of our experience is an alchemical sort of endeavor. I think one of the gifts that alchemy offers us is this idea that of course, many of us have heard, that there's a certain gold, right? There's a certain jewel, gold, or silver, or a lapis, you have the stone, the ruby, whatever images you want to use. There is some kind of gold that's found, not in a wound that's actually already healed, right? The gold isn't found in a healed wound. The gold is found—and you could say, just to be poetic about it, in a wound that's weeping, right?

So, this idea from alchemy, that there is this golden aspect of our being, that we're only going to be able to find, by sort of going into those unpleasant ... We call them "symptoms" in the psychological world, but this unwanted experience. So this idea of going with the symptom, meaning that there is some kernel, there's some essence, there's some wisdom that's found inside of difficult experience that we're not going to be able to find in moments of clarity and moments of peace.

Look, this is very—it's difficult. The invitation here is one that's not easy and I think we find this idea in a number of traditions, I think of the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition, which talks about how there's a wisdom essence or a quality of wisdom that we find in the negative emotions. And then, if we just jettison what we call the negative emotions too quickly, we lose contact with that clarity, with that energy that's sort of at the core of the emotion.

So, I think what the alchemists are inviting us to, especially in difficult times, is a unique pathway to see our difficulties actually as path. It's not how quickly can I get over—and that's very human. We want to get rid of these difficult emotions, these challenging feelings. But I think the invitation is, we've tried that. Sometimes it works, it often works temporarily, but there's a different invitation of sort of slowing down and being willing to finally see, what is that essence? What is that goal that's available in uncertainty in these states of deflation, disappointment, failure? What's there that I'm not going to be able to access in times of clarity?

TS: OK. Well, let's see if we can make this hit the ground. Somebody comes to, you and you've worked with all kinds of people as a therapist and counselor, and they have a weeping open wound, and they're not particularly interested in a philosophical discussion about alchemy. What they want is they want their wound to be cleaned out, bandaged, and healed. But they've come to Matt Licata, and you're holding this alchemical perspective, how might you approach that in the way that you think would be helpful for their growth process?

ML: Right. Well, I think what I would first try to do is set aside any sort of solid idea that I might have of what might be best for them or what might be part of their sort of unfolding destiny or fate. And I would want to learn more about what their actual experience was. So someone comes in and says, "I'm depressed." Someone comes in and says, "I'm

having panic attacks.” Someone comes in and says, “I’m having OCD.” First of all, I would—I think in the book, I talk about the alchemists, this idea of the massa confusa, the confused mass. So someone comes in, we have to differentiate that. We have to sort of, what is that person’s actual lived experience?

So, I would invite them to set aside those generalized abstract clinical words, and just say, “Would you be willing to ...” and you know, there has to be, of course, enough safety and trust in the room, but just assuming that those things are there, because if there’s not enough safety there, then we’re going to have to go back, really, to resourcing-type work. I would not take someone into the sort of core or essence of their wounding if they had a rich history of traumatic stress or post-traumatic stress. So, I think it’s really important to say that at first. I’m not going to bring someone into that directly. But assuming that there’s enough requisite sort of safety and trust between us, I would guide them into an experience.

This is all experiential learning. I mean, just so you know, Tami, I don’t use a lot of alchemical words or philosophical words in my sessions with clients, that’s really going on inside of me. Unless they have a—and some people come to me with that language, and of course, I’ll meet them in that, but I don’t generally talk about alchemy with my clients. So I would invite them, would you be willing to close your eyes, and could you bring into your immediate reality the last time you felt this depression, or you felt this raging anger that you didn’t want to know— you didn’t know what to do with.

So, through an experiential, and this could be through the imagination. It could be through a real experience they’ve had. The emotional or limbic brain doesn’t really discern very much through an—between an imagined experience and an actual physical experience. So, we could reach it through active imagination, which is a practice I talk about in the book. Anyway, we want to get the person into a lived experience, not of depression, not of anxiety, not of panic, but for them to begin to use their own words to begin to move toward that experience. What’s happening in your body right now? When you concentrate on that sensation in your body or that mood? Are you aware of any images that begin to arise?

Inevitably, the psyche or the soul will produce an image, will give us something to work with, will—and yes, I honor and I empathize with their desire to not want to have that symptom, of course, it’s very human, but I invite them to consider, would you be willing just temporarily to set aside that really just ordinary, natural human desire for relief? Would you be willing to set that aside for a few moments and replace that with curiosity? Could we go on an adventure into your own body and nervous system and see what’s actually there?

And if someone—some people aren’t, they don’t want to do that work. They don’t have the capacity or they just don’t want to. They want to get some techniques to sort of reduce the anxiety and that’s fine. I tend not to work with those sorts of people. I think it’s valid work, but this is deep experiential work. So, maybe we could flush that out some more but that’s at least my introductory comments.

TS: Well, one of the opening chapters in *The Healing Space* is “Re-Imagining What It Means to Heal,” that you ask readers to go with you on this journey to reimagine, what does it mean to heal? So what to you, Matt, is healing?

ML: Yes, well, this is a deep one, Tami and I think that there are many layers of healing. There’s many kinds of healing. And I think if we—I think the way that I tend to like speak

of it to most people is, we've all been asked, really, to—we've all been given experience in this life that we haven't had either the internal resources or the sort of external support to integrate, to metabolize, to make use of. So, I think when that happens, and this is often one way that we talk about what trauma is, but what happens is when we have an experience or a series of experiences that we're unable to integrate, what happens is, that experience gets set aside in a certain part of the brain over in the right limbic system and also in the circuitry of the body where it's held. There's actually a neurochemical that will send the memories and the experience into these parts of the brain and the body, where it's held for healing.

So to me, healing would be being able to bring these new resources, which are lenses of perception—this is why I use all this different language and images and metaphors in the book, sometimes neuroscience, sometimes alchemy, sometimes the contemplative traditions—to, how can we begin to meet that material and provide those resources that weren't available when we originally had those experiences? So to me, that's what a big part of sort of emotional healing. Most people that come in and see me are struggling with unwanted experience, but as they say, the only way out is through, and I know that's a bit of a cliché these days.

But we have to be willing to meet that experience but in a new way and a new—and this is where imagination, this is where I find working within the imaginal field, which is that alchemical area, sort of in between spirit and matter, where we're able to imagine ourselves in a new way, in a new experience, meeting our experience. You walk into the room, you see your mother across the room, you feel that anger, that rage begin to come up. You actually were in that lived experience together, and I'm with them, and I'm helping them to stay within their windows of tolerance, which is just in a manageable zone of arousal, where they're not pushing up into sort of hyper-vigilance or they're falling down into some collapsed state.

We stay there together with one another, making eye contact if their eyes are open, and we offer a new opportunity, a new experience to create, to use the language of neurobiology, new neural circuitry that's oriented in the slower, more empathic, more compassionate, more spacious capacities of sort of the neocortex. And we do that together

And so, that's one way that I would talk about healing and that's more of a neurobiological or emotional, that we have these symptoms that are very adaptive. These symptoms are—and I first learned this from Jung, was that the symptom is really a solution to an underlying vulnerability or a problem; that if we go back, all of our symptoms, as crazy as they might seem, are serving some sort of adaptive, intelligent, almost creative purpose. They're these early forms of sort of self-compassion, you could say.

So that's sort of one route in. There's different, many different versions of what healing is. Healing could also be just working to reduce my symptoms so I can get through my day, so I don't want to dismiss any different types of healing. But that's the way I would at least begin a conversation about healing.

TS: I'm curious, Matt, in your own experience, when you think of a symptom that you worked with for a period of time, and then went through some type of process, whether you call it an alchemical process or whatever, a process that landed you in a very

different place, and the symptom guided you there, what an example might be?

ML: Yes. So for whatever reason, I think what comes up for me is, what I've come to see in myself was this—for many, many years, this deep sort of resistance to really allowing another person, especially a new intimate partner, to sort of matter to me and how I would always sort of play on the outside and wouldn't really let this person in. I wouldn't share myself, even though on the outside consciously, I was claiming that what I really wanted was a very deep, emotionally satisfying, nurturing relationship, how I would inevitably sort of act in ways that would, in some ways, sabotage the possibility that that could ever happen.

I was working with a therapist at the time and what I began to realize that there was so much sort of undigested and unmetabolized grief in myself that the schema or the mental model that was sort of running the show in the background was, "If I really allow someone to matter deeply to me, that's the sure, that's the direct path to being abandoned, to sort of going through loss. And there's no way, I cannot be with that." And so, through therapy, through meditation, through being in nature, through active imagination, I think what I came to experience was that it was actually possible for me to stop that behavior of sabotaging relationship, but it was only going to be if I was able to meet that grief and that loss and realize that entering into a relationship is risky. There's always going to be the potential that I get abandoned, and I face that grief and that loss.

So, I think for me, it's been a journey of really honoring some loss and some grief of a series of losses earlier in my life that were never really digested, and they were showing up in all sorts of ways in my life. So that's just one example I can think of, Tami.

TS: One of the things that always gets my attention is when the scientific community begins to research the benefits of a particular spiritual practice. This is the case now with The Wim Hof Method, an approach to health and spiritual well-being that combines cold immersion, deep breathing, and shifts in mindset. An approach that is now being studied at dozens of universities. You can learn more about Wim Hof and his revolutionary method at findyourcold.com.

TS: So, I asked you about your definition of healing and you said it's complicated, and you gave us some pointers. In the book, one of the things that you seem really pretty critical of, is this idea of some approaches to healing that say things like, "Replace your fear with love." Something like that. If you're feeling fear, the healing approach is, go to love.

ML: Right.

TS: If you're feeling anger, the healing approach is just immediately drop it and let it go and be accepting. So, what about those approaches to quote unquote "healing," give you the heebie-jeebies?

ML: You know, it's not so much a philosophical problem that I have, because as a pragmatic sort of person, hey, I mean, whatever works. I think, for me, it's just seeing the ways, especially when I was younger in my life, how I was able to very skillfully use those sorts of teachings as a way to just avoid parts of myself and then, I inevitably began to see that in working with clients. Being in a place like Boulder, most of my clients were very interested in spirituality and things like meditation and yoga, and whatever New Age philosophies they might come in contact with.

So, really, what I saw, was I saw that a lot of those types of teachings were really just

reenacting this early sort of circuitry of self-abandonment. It was a way to sort of not feel that deep grief that's there underneath so much of our emotional suffering. So, I think there are short-term approaches that can be helpful. I think shifting around things in the mind, cognitive restructuring, just think different, just let it all be as it is, all those are fine, but I think—and they can help us build up some new neural circuitry, of course, to be able to sort of shift out of a deep state of fear and move into a state of love.

What I started to see was it wasn't really—those people would end up coming back to see me, like there's something that's not very long lasting because they're not getting at the root of it. They're just sort of applying these sort of techniques on top of a very deep emotional process that was wanting to emerge. So again, it's not a philosophical problem with those teachings, I just saw that they ended up helping us to really short circuit. We can use any of our psychological or spiritual practices to sort of come closer to ourselves, or as a way to sort of move further away.

And I think these approaches that emphasize immediate relief, I know they're so tempting, they're so seductive, they're so compelling, and I think there's a place for that. But at the same time, the people that were coming to see me really wanted to do a deeper kind of work or it's more like, well, this anger, for example, or this rage, or this sadness keeps coming up. And instead of sort of just setting it aside and replacing it, this sort of grand replacement project of one thought or one feeling for another, what if we were to really slow down and begin a dialogue with that sadness, to go into that sadness, to open to that sadness, to give that sadness a platform to speak and to tell you what it needs, why it's come what it wants, what it's doing here, that it opens a richer door into the psyche, into the soul than just sort of counteracting it in the moment.

TS: You write about how most of us live with these orphans inside of us, and you talk about them as figures, which I thought was interesting, that we can welcome “the sad one.”

ML: Yes.

TS: We can welcome the anxious one. I'm curious about ... I mean, first of all, that the word orphan is very powerful.

ML: Yes.

TS: Hearing that, that we live with orphans inside of us. I'm curious to understand more when we start to notice, “Oh yes, there are these orphaned energies,” this notion of turning them into the sad one, the anxious one, treating them like beings.

ML: Right. Yes, so this was something, to be honest, that I was very resistant to in the beginning. For me as a good Buddhist, this was an emotion that I had some aversion to. It wasn't a being, it wasn't a figure and God knows it wasn't an orphan. Like, I'm just sort of adding all of this on to my—but I think when I started to realize, and again, what's practical, what works was that in my own self and also in the people that I was working with, it's very difficult to open one's heart to an abstract emotion.

Even like, what would it mean to sort of practice kindness or to become curious, for example, about a difficult emotion? There's something about that, that just doesn't click, it doesn't land in a tactile way. But if you close your eyes, and we go on an experiential

sort of immersion together, and you allow yourself to sink in to that sadness, and you invite an image to appear and say, a bird appears and you follow that bird, and it takes you over to a creek, and there's a little child sitting there. There's a little child on the side of the road, who's looking up at you. This actually is from a session that I did with a woman not too long ago. And she was able—and this just reminded me of this, is she was able to actually meet that child and open her heart to that child, because we're wired to be in relationship, not with some abstract clinical term like sadness, but we look, we close our eyes and this can come in dream or fantasy or imagination.

There's something about opening our hearts, and so much of this work over the years, I think, that many of us know this, like more insight, more clarity, more awareness, while it's always welcome, of course—it's necessary but it's not always sufficient to sort of mend or tend to these wounds of the body, of the heart, of the nervous system. It really is love, I mean, that I think has the power to sort of transform these wounds of the heart. So, it really is a heart practice. So, I think for me, it was just more practical of how to get someone, including myself, into a more heart-oriented place.

So, whether we see this as a figure, I think the word "orphan," it is a powerful word. It came to me in a session actually, when I realized that the energy that this person had toward these old parts of himself, it was as if he had made a decision to send them away, to put them into an orphanage. He had some dream images, he actually had a dream of an orphanage, and that's really actually when I started to use that language because it also, like you, it hit me sort of at a really visceral level.

So, I think this idea, is it actually ... are there this whole idea of the multiplicity of psyche. Is psyche one, or are we all multiples? Are there these figures? They sure feel like that in the moment.

TS: I'm happy to go with the figures. OK, the listener right now, and I think our listeners can track this, they know that inside of them there is a sad one or a rage-filled one. They may see themselves at a certain age or in a certain action.

ML: Right.

TS: Crying or explosively homicidal. I don't know, I picked a rage one and a sad one, we could go on and on. OK, Matt, what's next?

ML: Yes, well, I think the first—I would first want to get clear with someone, are you willing to set aside sort of this notion of relief for just a little bit, and let's assume that the answer is yes, and to replace that with curiosity. and then, I think there's a whole number of ways I think sort of mindfulness-based practices allow us to get familiar with the different layers of our experience. So, this sad one is going—how does this sad one sort of show up in your body, in your sensations, in your movements? So, I often start, like many people do, in the body, I think it's— working bottom-up is often very supportive of this type of work.

So, let's go on a journey together over a session or two and let's meet this sad little person that's been sort of—and this basic idea, this basic invitation of this sad one, I know it can feel like she's here or he's here to take you down as an obstacle, as an obscuration on your path, but in my experience, these parts of ourselves want to come home. I mean, this is where it's more of a poetic. This sort of sacred return of they want to come back into this larger sort of ecology, you could say that we are. So we would get to know how that side would manifest through the layers of experience.

This is what—if we think about what is integration and if we use our friend Dan Siegel's definition of the sort of linking together of differentiated parts in a system, we have to see how that sad one shows up across the layers of experience. When she comes, where in your body does she come? Do you find her in your belly? Is she there in your throat hiding out? Is that constriction in her throat? So we find the body, we find the moods and the emotions and what does she have to say?

And I think this is what's really important is I would want to try to facilitate a dialogue, and a lot of gestalt and other traditions do this. I would want to sort of help a dialogue be facilitated between the ordinary—the person sitting there with me and this young girl. Why if you come, what do you need? And it's amazing that when you actually take the time and slow down and begin to have these dialogues, that these parts of ourselves have a lot to say. They show up in our dreams, they show up in all sorts of ways. So, I would want to sort of facilitate a journey through the body and the mind and the emotions and dream world to learn more about that sad part of us and what it's here and what it needs and what it wants.

TS: OK, Matt. Now, I know that you wrote your PhD thesis on spiritual bypassing.

ML: Right.

TS: I'm curious to know, you can define it for our listeners who perhaps aren't deeply familiar with the term, but how can someone start to know when they're spiritual bypassing in their own experience? What are the signs, like, "Oh, that's a sign. I'm doing it now."

ML: [Laughs] Yes. Well, I think in terms of a simple definition, I think we human beings are wired to not feel pain and we'll do just about anything to sort of get around our pain, our trauma, our grief, our loneliness, whatever. We all have two or three sort of feeling states that we'll do just about anything to avoid. And using our spiritual ideas, practices, beliefs, in order to serve that defensive or that avoidant function, I see spiritual bypassing really as just any other list of possible defense mechanisms, to use Freudian sort of language—as ways to get us out of our immediate experience, especially very painful, traumatic, old, developmental tasks that we haven't completed.

So I think, first of all, just becoming curious about what are my spiritual beliefs, like getting clear about, what is it that I really believe in when it comes to spirituality, what are the practices that I'm drawn to? And as we engage those practices, to really get—to be honest, to have a dialogue with ourselves, why am I doing this practice? Being very discerning, is this practice helping me get closer to myself, or is this practice helping me to avoid certain parts of myself? I think to also see, are our ideas, beliefs, and practices helping us to be better partners in relationship? Are they helping our creativity? Are they helping us be better parents? Are they helping us take care of our bodies in a better way, or are they pushing us in other directions?

So, what I've noticed is once we just allow in the possibility that we may be—that there's some way that we may be engaging with our spiritual lives in a way that's really helping us to get out of some emotional, somatic, felt experience or some relational connection that we don't want to feel, that we've deemed is too unsafe or too dangerous, that it starts to—we start to get inside around it, it starts to come. So I don't have any particular method for getting in touch with it but I do think bringing awareness and discernment to it will start to show us, we'll start to get clues on how I might be using my spiritual beliefs and practices to sort of get away from something messy.

TS: When you say we can start to see is this approach bringing us closer to ourselves or further away, when I think of people I know, and I'll just go back to what I said before, every time they feel fear, they're going to replace it with love.

ML: Yes.

TS: They may say, "Oh, you know, and that helps me get closer to myself." I think they really believe that.

ML: Yes. Yes, well, at some point, I think if that's—I mean, just to be really practical about it, I think if that's really working for someone, I would just be curious. I would be curious about what that person's partner has to say. I mean, that's always where the rubber meets the road, right? Like if their partner was to overhear them say that, what would their partner have to say? What would their kids have to say? What would their friends have to say? I think if by pushing away our fear, we're not really healing it. We're not really doing anything with it. We're replacing it in the moment. So, there's some short-term counteractive type change.

We're building up new ... anytime we have a new experience, so we're aware that fear is present, we decide not to look into that fear but to replace it with something else, we are building new neural circuitry, but we're not doing anything for that original circuitry that's there. So what happens is, then we have these two sort of learnings in parallel with one another and they just sort of play it out with each other over time. I think there's a lot of effects of sort of stuffing our emotions, I think—especially with something like anger or fear, just sort of stuffing that.

So I think the person has to—this is where we have to be mature. We have to see for ourselves. I would not try to talk someone out of that, but if someone showed up in my office, they would be there for a reason and I would definitely want to sort of dig into that, and can we go back to the last time you were feeling fear and you felt the need in that moment to replace it with love? Could you close your eyes, could we go there together and would you rewind the frames, the couple of frames in that moment, when you began to apply that practice, that counteractive practice of replacing the fear, what's happening? What was happening in your body? Were there any beliefs about yourself? Are there any images there?

I would want to get curious about—we would reverse-engineer it and see, what was it that you were trying to get out of in that moment?

TS: Now, Matt, I want to dig in a bit more to the alchemical metaphors that you sprinkle throughout A Healing Space because you talk about people staying with the "alchemical middle." Can you help me understand that in the midst of the conversation we're having? You could take this example of the person who feels afraid.

ML: Yes, so I think alchemy is really concerned with paradox. It's concerned with this sort of liminal, in-between type experiences, right? So, I think when it comes to say, an emotion, we're aware of an emotion, and so we have these two sort of automatic pathways that we can take. We either end up not feeling enough—sort of more repressing, stuffing, denying, or we become flooded, we become overwhelmed, we drown in that experience. So I think the sort of alchemical middle is an invitation to sort of begin to be with our experience, aware of these two possibilities. If I don't deny my experience, if I don't repress it, if I don't push it away; and if I don't drown in it—meaning if I step back

enough from it, where I can have some capacity to reflect upon it, but I sort of allow it, I actually go into that vessel. Like, it's me and that emotion in the vessel together, and that's where I can begin to listen.

So the middle is just really a poetic I think, invitation in between those extremes. We see those extremes, hyper-arousal, hypo-arousal. We see them all through sort of psychological and neurobiological theory of these two different pathways: fight/flight on the one hand, collapse on the other hand. So I think it's an invitation into just—it's a very uncertain, disorienting area of experience of not knowing, of if I don't apply any particular methods to sort of counteract or get rid of, understand this experience, and I actually just sit in that vessel with the experience and I open to any images or any words or any feelings that might come, that's the richness. The richness is in that middle, unknown, uncertain territory.

TS: Then, you mentioned that there is this potential for gold and silver to emerge out of the unwanted experience that I'm now sitting in the alchemical middle with. How do I get to the gold and silver, and could we get there fast? No, I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding.

ML: By the end of the call. No, I think why not? I mean, it's a short life, Tami, why hold off? No, I think of—I just reflect back on when you were asking me about a personal experience, and I remember when I first got in touch with that grief that was in me, that it was a surprise to me. Like I had heard about this, "Oh, grief," I had been with clients who had experienced grief. There was this grief that was within me and I think what happened was, is after—as I was able to actually develop a new relationship with it, where I would recognize, we have to train ourselves to see first that these experiences come to us often in the body. We get an early warning sign, maybe our fingers start to tingle or we get flushed in the face or some constriction in the throat.

For me, it was this very unique tension in the very center of my belly, and I finally began to recognize that when that sensation came, that was the grief, that was the grief knocking on the door. That was the little grieving little Matt, that was like, "Hello—is it safe for me to poke my head out? Is it safe for me to actually be here, or are you going to do what you've always done before, which is either deny me, push me away, start some fancy meditation practice where you're dissolving everything into open awareness," which I became pretty good at, because he's not interested in that. He's not interested in my clear, open awareness, and he's not interested in my denial.

So, I think what happened was, is that the gold that's there, when I was able to sort of—and this is a process that took over time, this wasn't just one good weekend—that I was able—the gold that was there, was there was a part of me that was an essential form of life energy. It was filled with energy, meaning once the grief was able to be experienced, integrated, metabolized, held, what it revealed was—I mean, it's hard to say it without sounding kind of Pollyannaish, but it was a certain beauty. It opened my heart to this world and to other people and knowing that millions of brothers and sisters around the world are also feeling this grief. There's all this transgenerational, ancestral grief. It helped me connect to the world and to life in a new way, and that was, for me, the gold that was found in that grief, just to give you one example.

TS: That's powerful. That's helpful. Now, we talked about these orphaned parts of ourselves, and honestly, it's a [inaudible]—just I say the word, it's so powerful. And you talked about, in your view of healing, it has to do with turning towards and relating with

unwanted experience. I'm still imagining that person who's listening, who says, "God, you know, there's a lot of unwanted experience in my life right now." I think of things that are happening in the world at large. That's unwanted.

ML: Yes.

TS: I think that things that are happening with family and friends, that's unwanted.

ML: Yes.

TS: Things in my own past. That's also unwanted.

ML: Yes.

TS: And Matt, this word "befriending" is so powerful, but I still think our listener may feel a little tentative. "I feel repelled by all this unwanted experience."

ML: Yes.

TS: "Help me out, Mr. Licata."

ML: Yes. Yes. I mean, first of all, fair enough. I mean, I think there's a couple different ways to respond to that. One is we work with that repelling quality. I think there's intelligence in that, in being repelled. So, we could go into the repelling, but let's set that aside from—I would be curious if someone used the word like that in a session with me. "I feel repelled by the unwanted." I would want to know, would you be willing to close your eyes? Would you be willing to allow yourself to sink fully into this experience of "I'm repelled?" And let's see. Let's see what arises in this field between us. Let's see if an image comes, let's see what comes.

But I think you could just maybe imagine that, all of a sudden, you hear a little knock on your door, Tami, and you open the door and there's a little girl there and she's just enraged. She's filled with rage. She's screaming. Her hair is flying all over the place. She's clearly just in a completely, just devastated state. Would you ... she just is like, "I just want to come in. I just want to come sit on the couch." Would you say to her, "Well, I mean, maybe once you sort of heal your rage, maybe once you calm down, maybe once you replace that rage with love, maybe then I'll let you in." I think we wouldn't do that. I think the idea of friendship is that this is an old part of ourselves that isn't—we have to somehow let in the possibility that this part isn't here to harm us, that this part carries some energy, some sort of sacred life energy that's important for our journeys.

So, I don't think there's an easy answer to that question. I think, usually what it takes, Tami, is for someone to have tried to sort of press away, to push away, to not move toward the unwanted for so long, that finally there's a surrender, there's a giving up, there's a curiosity—this hasn't worked. Honestly, by the time someone comes to my office or to one of my courses, that's sort of the place they're in. So this is really a matter of destiny and someone's own sort of fate, of when they begin to have this intuition that something here is important. No, I don't like it, but I don't have to like it. I don't have to want to move—I can move toward it even if I don't want to.

And this is where it's more like an experiment. If I phrase it, like, can we just try and experiment? And it's often surprising what happens, and the last person that you would think that could go on that experiment with you can often do it. It's an important

question.

TS: You know, Matt, I loved when you shared more about the alchemical middle, because it gave me more insight into these alchemical metaphors that you use. I also want to talk about another one you introduce in *A Healing Space*, which is the notion of dissolution as part of the healing process, that alchemical idea and how people might apply it to whatever they're going through.

ML: Yes. Well, I think it's a pretty apt metaphor and image right now, in our current world as it really does seem like structures, including the structure of the human physiology, is sort of being dissolved. This idea in alchemy, if you have the material and the vessel, the prima material, the main material that you want to work with, which psychologically speaking is the presenting symptom, like, well, why am I in therapy? Why am I on the spiritual path? It's that prime material in the vessel. And in order to begin to work with that material, there's a process of washing it through. This is the imagery of water in alchemy that we see a lot in dreams, where we have to dissolve all of that fixed, solid material.

We don't have to dissolve it, actually, it's being dissolved. Life will grind us down. There's a certain way that life washes through. It washes through this dream of the way I thought life was going to turn out. I thought I was going to be with this one person or that person forever. I thought I was going to do this kind of work, or I thought my body was going to be in this one certain way. But I think that, especially the times we're in now, I think, have shown us that life will dissolve that fixity.

So there's a certain process in alchemy, there's colors are very important and alchemy. So there's this idea, this phase along the way. We start in that darkened, black material, and then we sort of make the journey into some clarity. This whitening, sort of the albedo state, which is when some clarity begins to come. Like, I can sit with this fear. I can maybe a little bit sort of be a friend to this fear. But there's a process that happens in between that clarity, and in between that and sort of the discovery of the philosopher's stone, or that fully embodied or where we bring our blood into the world or we fully show up.

There's a process of yellowing, which is a decaying process, which is in my mind, one of the most beautiful, poetic, painful parts of alchemy. This is this yellowing, the image of the yellow, rotting sort of leaves when we get washed through, when we're dissolved. When this fixed sense of who I think I am, what I'm doing here, what my purpose is here, when that gets washed away by life, we don't usually ask for that. It's an involuntary process. But I think that what happens in a moment of dissolution is it's a very human sort of thing to want to put it all back together, right? We don't want to stay in that dissolved place, right? We want to get to the rebirth. The death has happened, but where's the rebirth?

So, I think about the time we're in now, in this world which is a dissolution moment. We're in between two things. We're in between a certain death—I mean, I hate to be so literal, but we're in a certain—where something has been dissolved. I think many of us have a sense that we're not going to be able to go back to the way things were; not just COVID, but all of this sort of social upheaval that's happening right now. We're not going back, but we don't know what's being birthed. It's like we're still in this womb.

And so this process of dissolution, I think, is an invitation to see this very human impetus to get out of these complex, contradictory, unresolvable, unborn places, and scramble as

quickly as we can back to sort of rebirth, putting it all back together. And to actually be willing to be fully in this state of falling apart, this dissolved state, and there's a wisdom and a purity within the dissolution that if we short-circuit that or we prematurely try to become reborn—I mean, we know what happens if that happens in an actual womb but it's like that in the psychic or the soul womb as well. This premature movement from dissolution back into an organized state.

So, I find this whole yellowing process of alchemy and this sort of dissolution of what I thought I was and what I'm doing here to—it's really my favorite, I think, to use that word part of alchemy, and it's the most—it can be the most painful in a certain way.

TS: Matt, I'm imagining the listener who feels stirred up right now, they feel stirred up by our conversation. They may not even 100 percent know exactly what's going on and I think to be honest with you, that can also happen in reading your book, *A Healing Space*

ML: Yes.

TS: *Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*. I mean, you're intentionally provocative and you stir up, I think, for other people, the orphans inside us, our unwanted experience, what we feel is dissolving. It's all stirred up.

ML: Yes.

TS: Right now, can you leave our listeners with some way of befriending whatever may be up for them right now in listening to our conversation, such that they experience this conversation as a healing space?

ML: Yes. Yes. Good question. Well, the first thing I would say, if someone has made it this far in the conversation, I think there must be some resonance—and no, it's not a light, easy book, and it's also not a book that I really wrote with the intention that someone would read it sort of from cover to cover in one sitting, but really just small to sort of titrate this invitation. Because what I will say is that to me, these teachings on sort of dissolution, darkening, disappointment, deflation, yes, while they carry in a conventional sense, a very sort of heavy, "Oh my God" sort of energy, to me, these are really—they're portals to—I don't know how else to say it, Tami, but portals to love.

I think that we have—it's really a hopeful teaching. The possibility that we can, by moving, by making room for the darkness in our lives, making room for the movement of life, of God, of spirit, that it isn't always going to conform to the status quo, that this is where real transformation can occur.

So I think it's to go very slow, to really emphasize being kind to oneself. Like my experience, like it's not evidence that I failed, that I've done it wrong, that I'm broken, that something is wrong with me if I'm asked to tend to grief, to loss, to disappointment, to deflation. It's not evidence of that. This is the ultimate teaching in non-pathologizing and unshaming. This is evidence that I'm an open, sensitive, alive, connected human being with a nervous system that's online, with open, receptive mirror neurons and with this longing to connect with myself and with others at a really deep level, not a superficial level.

So I think we can—the good news is that we can start—and we hear this in alchemy, this is a critical teaching in alchemy; it happens to be a critical teaching, essential teaching in Buddhism as well, which is that we can start where we are. In fact, it's the only place that

we can start. So right now, no matter what's going on in your life, the good news is that the invitation is here. The portal is open. The doorway is open.

So I think we need to go really, really slow with this kind of work and we need to really orient ourselves in kindness and compassion, and to see that—to ask ourselves to sort of cut into this sort of so many moments of self-abandonment and self-aggression and getting away from ourselves, to reverse that as we're going to have to be really kind to ourselves.

So I would say that it is a teaching of hope and of confidence and learning to trust ourselves. I can't tell you how many people Tami, have come into my office just like literally on the floor, in a pile, and just to watch that journey of what happens. And it's slow. This is not sort of quick fix, 10 quick steps—this is slow.

So, I just want to make sure—and I think we may have focused on certain parts of the book, but I hope that you also and people can also connect with the field of love. I mean, this is a book—I just will say it again, as cheesy as it might sound, this is a book about love, and that's the energy and that's the spirit that I was in when I wrote it. To me, love and these other darker parts of the spectrum are intimately connected. And if we want to be fully here and be kind to ourselves and actually help this world, we need courageous women and men and others who can fully show up for themselves and their experience.

We need that right now. Empathic, in touch, connected, online, and I really just hope that the book offers a glimpse or an invitation into the radical sort of possibilities, the outrageousness of what it means to have a human heart.

TS: I've been speaking with Matt Licata, author and depth psychotherapist. He's the author of the new book *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*. I mean this, Matt, it's always good to talk to you. Thank you.

ML: Thank you, Tami.

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