

Write to the Heart of Motherhood
connecting to our true voice in the middle of our messy lives

Week 5. THEME AND GUIDANCE



CREATING AND DISMANTLING

Wow! Week 5 already... I seriously cannot believe it. Welcome, amazing one, to our second to last week together. I hope this finds you truly well.

Our theme this week is: **CREATING AND DISMANTLING**.

Everything contains its opposite, if we look deeply enough. Or, another way of seeing this point is: everything leads to its opposite, if we follow it deep or far enough. We can trace our pleasure to our pain, and that pain again to pleasure. Our fatigue as humans and mothers leads to deeper resources of vitality than we've ever known, whether by forcing us deeper into our source, or sending us out looking for ways to shift into wellness from trusted guides. Our love for our children makes us angry at them sometimes, out of protection and ferocity of care. In week one of this course, we stopped ourselves in order to start. In week two we listened deeply in order to give voice. In week three we explored how deep communion with various parts of ourselves or with unseen forces can be found within solitude, and self-knowledge can be found and practiced in community. And, last week we discovered that work can become a form of play. What's an example that's up for you right now of a powerful pair of opposites — or paradox — in your experience?

I've noticed that whenever I make a strong assertion, or focus my attention on one thing in particular, its opposite tends to arise, and want some attention at some point or another. If not right away, then eventually. And if I ignore that other side of the spectrum, that other side of the polarity, it seems to find its way into expression in less-than-conscious, less-than-optimal ways. We all know how this works in our own lives, right? Woah, I've had to learn this the hard way a few times in my life... have you?

I have been schooled and humbled by my own rejected parts seeking integration, and the lessons have gotten my attention. If I refuse or ignore shadow parts of myself or my experience, they can teach me the hard way that they, too, exist, have purpose, and need to be included wisely and skillfully. "What we resist, persists," the old adage says. My Zen teacher makes a critical distinction in working with shadow aspects of ourselves that has really supported me over the years, which is that acknowledging and working to include the parts of ourselves we don't like, does not mean we have to enact them, or let them lead our behavior. We can work to bring them into conscious awareness, include the energy and wisdom that they do carry, AND also choose not to follow them into action that violates our sense of integrity and commitments for how we engage with others and the world at large.

So it's a fine line: in my view, working with the stuff we don't like, the stuff on the other side of the spectrum from what we identify with, is just like working with thoughts in meditation. Which is just like working with intense emotions. Which is just like working with our kids in difficult moments. It's that sweet spot, that threshold, where we engage with the energy without indulging in it and getting lost in it. We touch the thought and then let it pass. We move into the rage, find intimacy as the rage, and then let it subside when it subsides, not getting stuck in replaying it. We meet our child in their pain or redirect them in their anger if needed, and then stay present as the intensity changes or dissolves. We go for the ride without demanding that the ride go faster or slower or solidify where we like it or skip the parts we don't like. This is the practice of being human. And, of course, oh my goodness, it takes practice!

We're all practicing this, all the time. Going for the full ride, no more, no less. Simple, but not always easy.

So, including (or at least acknowledging) the stuff on the other side of the spectrum from what we like, what we identify with, or what we've got our attention on, is part of the practice of being a whole human being. I was surprised by how this played out in the polarity between birth and death with my first son, Lundin. The actual birthing process itself was a psycho-spiritual death for me, and I talk about this in more depth in two different podcast interviews (Magamama and The Embodiment Podcast) if that resonates for you and you'd like to hear more. But, here, I want to focus on later down the road, almost a year after the birth, what I discovered about my identity. I've been a performer all my life, and been making dance-theater duets with my creative partner, Lauren Beale, for the past nine years since we met in grad school. We make wild, quirky, heartbreaking pieces that push us to our edges and hold us in deep intimacy. She's a mama also, and we figure if we're going to take the time, effort, and energy to make performances, they have to really move us and transform us, make us laugh and cry, to be worth our investments.

The first piece we made after I had Lundin began with this idea: we were playing the "yes, and..." game I offered as an assignment for you last week, and Lauren said, "What if the piece started with you and me onstage drowning in like a pile of 500 baby dolls, and we have to awkwardly climb our way out?!" And we both started laughing until we were crying because of the truth that image elicited for each of us. Though truly happy and grateful as mothers, we were both also, on a certain level, drowning in motherhood. I know it's kind of dark humor, but the piece ending up being this exploration of us navigating baby dolls flying at us from all directions, or being stuck all over velcro patches on our costumes, or being shoved into our arms in bundles too big to properly hold on to, or laid on the ground underneath where we were dancing.

It was very tender, including moments of falling deeply in love with motherhood and our children, and also moments of complete overwhelm. The piece was titled "She Rites," and

though it was never made explicit, Lauren and I decided early on that the piece in essence was a ritual, specifically a funeral, for the parts of us that died when our babies (and our mothering selves) were born. The final image of the piece is Lauren's voice saying though the speaker "She's gone" (meaning, the pre-mother, maiden versions of us) and then the two of us opening these patches on our chests so that a bunch of red glitter and sequins shoot out of our heart area, caught shimmering in the stage lights, right before the lights go black.

The piece was funny, sad, reverent, irreverent, quirky, and earnest. It was our unique way to ritualize and process the very complex, surreal, and layered territory of postpartum identity transformation for us mothers. It made our audiences really think, ask, and feel about what happens to a new mother's identity — and this consideration from a greater public about motherhood felt healthy and right. Furthermore, creating and performing this piece made a very real difference in my psyche, as it externalized and made symbols out of this paradox I hadn't realized would be so damn powerful in my becoming a mother: that creation includes destruction. That in birthing a new human I would need to let some parts of myself be dismantled and truly die away. That I would, in fact, need to bury and put to rest who I had formerly been in order to blossom into who I was being called to become. "She Rites" was one way I helped myself be intimate with that process, and to also be witnessed and held in that process.

This polarity and paradox is also true for our creative work. Creation includes destruction. Destruction makes way for creation. They cannot be completely separated, ever, if we look closely and honestly. I realize the word and concept "destruction" may feel empowering and exciting to some of you, but it may feel unnecessarily violent or dramatic to others. There are other words we can use that capture what I'm talking about. I chose "dismantling" for the theme title, because it feels to me somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of intensity — if something like "dissolving" or "letting go" is near the softer end, and "destroying" or "dying" is near the more intense end. From dissolving to dismantling to destroying, whatever the degree of intensity that we employ or that we experience happening to us, the ending of things — of portions of our identity, ways of being in relationship, and phenomena (objects or beings) in the

world around us — is woven inextricably to the act of creation, whether in birthing our babies, or writing our thoughts, visions, and feelings onto the page.

Let's pause here to connect to ourselves and two poems. I'll give a warning that it's possible each of these poems could be experienced as containing intense material, for better or worse, so it may be wise to make sure you're in a state of being and moment in time to care for yourself well, should your emotions get stirred.

Now, take a few moments to move in a way that feels good to you — stretching, shaking, jiggling, wiggling, making circles with your head, hands, feet or arms to awaken the major joints in the body. Maybe a fake yawn to stretch your jaw joints, maybe stick out your tongue, maybe make some sound. A lunge or two, a forward fold to stretch the back body open. Follow the longing of your body for movement and deepen your breath in the process. Now, settle into stillness, in whatever position feels most wonderful to you — sitting, lying down, however you can really release the weight of your body while also keeping your attention bright and awake. Once in stillness, take a couple deep letting go breaths, and close your eyes. Now listen, receive, and feel...

THE HOLY LONGING

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, translation by Robert Bly

Tell a wise person, or else keep silent,
because the mass man will mock it right away.

I praise what is truly alive,
what longs to be burned to death.

In the calm water of the love-nights,
where you were begotten, where you have begotten,
a strange feeling comes over you,
when you see the silent candle burning.

Now you are no longer caught in the obsession with darkness,
and a desire for higher love-making sweeps you upward.

Distance does not make you falter.

Now, arriving in magic, flying,
and finally, insane for the light,
you are the butterfly and you are gone.

And so long as you haven't experienced this: to die and so to grow,
you are only a troubled guest on the dark earth.

Thank you for going there, and receiving and exploring. Feel free to pause and linger in what's been stirred in you by Goethe's magnificent poem. When you're ready to keep reading, please continue with a poem of mine, which I've never shared beyond my book, but which feels relevant as another side of this "to die and so to grow" invitation. Here it is:

BRAZEN

Sometimes my care is paralyzing
or saccharine, impotent
in its need to look a certain way.

This is when I have to say
fuck it
a few times, because *fuck it*

is the plug to
fuck me
into something past an image

of sweetness into something able to rise
volcanic, move my fury
into splattering, igneous wisdom

and pour over all our bullshit, nullify
to reveal innate radiance.
Fuck it — my love can kill.

Now go ahead and take a couple breaths, notice what sensations, thoughts, and images are flowing through you, and slowly move out of stillness when you're ready. If you want to pause and write any of these down, please feel free.

I remember when I was about to publish my book, I felt nervous about that poem. I talked to a dear friend about my fear that someone might take it as more than metaphor — take it in an extreme way that I was actually going to kill, or that it was an invitation to follow fierce love to actually killing another being. That's not what it's about, and I hope and assume that readers hear it for what it is, as I hear Goethe's invitation in "The Holy Longing"... not to actually, physically die, but to be willing to transform, to be dismantled and put back together in new order. In the case of my poem, the invitation is to be willing to embody the fierce kind of love that kills illusion, delusion, or whatever no longer serves a higher good.

This is what I want us to look at and practice this week. It's like tending our garden — trimming the plants, pulling the weeds. Because as mothers, we are already intimate with creation, and for the past four weeks we've been turning up the heat, in our own unique ways, on being and doing our creative work through writing. When we make that move, when we turn up that heat, we have to also take time to look, from the practical to the subtle, and from our own self to the world around us, for what is dissolving, what needs to be dismantled, or what might even need to die — because of, or for, something new to find life and manifestation. These dissolving

processes might happen anyway, without our attention and of their own accord, but if we bring care, awareness, and artfulness to the destruction process, just as we do the creative process, my sense is that we'll feel more peace and power all around.

Let's take a little tour of what this tending to our creating and dismantling processes might look like. I recently listened to an interview between Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Big Magic* and *Eat, Pray, Love* and Glennon Doyle, author of *Love Warrior* and founder of the activist organization "Together Rising." Gilbert asked Doyle about her practice of getting up at 4:00 am every morning, before her children woke, to write. She basically asked how in the world Doyle kept doing that, day in and day out (a good question, right?!). Doyle laughed and said something to the effect of, "You know, I thought that would be some kind of spiritual discovery, that I'd have this big spiritual answer for you. But really, my answer is that I had to give up watching TV at night. That's it. That's my big answer. I had to give up TV. Which was a big deal! For me as a mom, that hour of TV at night was the promised land, where, for once in the day, no one needed me to get them snacks or anything. But I realized, if I was going to get my butt in my chair the next morning to write, which I was committed to doing, I had to get in bed by 9:00. I had to give up my hour of TV every night. And I did. And it was worth it."

I love this answer. I love it more than some big, "spiritual" answer. She had to dismantle her habit of watching TV at night, in order to create resources in herself, and space in her schedule, to show up for her writing. I'm not suggesting we should all do this — I'm *definitely* in a phase of motherhood where I am actively choosing my practice of TV most nights — haha! But this is one solid, clear (albeit not easy) example of bringing attention, care, and decisive action to what needs to be dismantled to make space for creation. Getting clear and committed about "killing" that practice at night supported Doyle in skipping the possibility of an unconscious, in-between phase of weeks or months of trying to continue with an old habit (TV), establish a new one (morning writing), and either being sleep-deprived because of trying to do both, or not showing up for the mornings and feeling guilty, disempowered, or disconnected from what matters most.

This unconscious, in-between activity is what I want us all to muster the courage to begin to clarify and transform this week, in the ways that are most meaningful and inspiring to each of us. And believe me, I can be Queen of holding on, of wavering, of trying to make space for it all to exist, and then suffering from depletion and distraction, so I fully understand it's not always easy to destroy old habits that no longer serve. But even baby steps, even just asking these questions of ourselves, can get the ball rolling in invigorating and clarifying ways.

So, let's take a look at where and how our garden could be tended, moving from the inside, out (from 1st, to 2nd, to 3rd person perspectives). Please ask yourself and consider honestly:

- Since becoming a mother, whether that's 4 months ago or 40 years ago, what parts of myself or my identity do I feel have dissolved away, been dismantled, or been destroyed? What parts of me died when I had my kid(s) and was reborn a mother? What in my identity still needs to be released, and what is still finding form? How have I participated in caring for, ritualizing, grieving, and celebrating this transformation? Is there anything else I am inspired to do to honor these processes of dismantling and creating in my own identity since becoming a mother?
- 2) As I have deepened and amplified my creative life over the past four weeks, what parts of myself or my identity do I feel have dissolved away or been dismantled? What parts of me are holding on to existence or holding on to being front and center, that my creative process would benefit from dismantling, or submitting to a different aspect of my identity? What new parts of myself are emerging or flourishing, which support my work-play as a writer, and how can I nurture these pieces of myself to thrive?
- 3) Since becoming a mother, what interpersonal ways of being have weakened or disappeared? How am I different in my relationships? What ways of being would I benefit from changing or "killing"? How could I do this? Who could I enlist for support and accountability? What are some new ways of being interpersonally that I've

developed since becoming a mother? Which ones do I want to celebrate, honor, and grow even more?

- 4) Since deepening my commitment to writing, what ways of being with others have dissolved, and what interpersonal habits would I benefit from dismantling or destroying? What relational habits are emerging, and which ones do I want to nurture and develop to support myself, my community, and my work?
- 5) Since becoming a mother, what ways of engaging with the world — work, politics/activism, house holding, religious or spiritual practice, etc. — have shifted, fallen away, or emerged? What ways of being in the world do I want to help to die away, and what behaviors or activities do I want to strengthen?
- 6) What habitual activities and behaviors take up time, energy, and attention that I'd rather spend on creative endeavors? Am I ready and willing to dissolve, dismantle, or destroy these activities and commit the resources that open up to my creative life? How could I stay on track with this change? Who could help keep me accountable?
- 7) Finally, in my writing work itself, when and how am I willing to destroy (remove, trim down, or drastically rearrange) parts that feel unclear or off the mark, in order to give power to what's left on the page?

Whew, that was a lot! Don't worry, we'll integrate those questions into the "what and how" portion of your materials this week, to give you more opportunity to explore all this — how the activation of our creativity can cause or necessitate its opposite: destruction. How, as we stir the pot of our own deep hearts and give voice from there, we can also bring skill to the art of dismantling, to make space for more truth, beauty, and goodness to move through our writing and our lives.