

Fierce Surrender: Seven Teachings for Chronic Pain and Lyme Disease

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"Through love, all pain will turn to medicine." Rumi

I didn't learn about chronic pain on purpose. No one does, I suppose. I was bitten by a tick with Lyme in New England in 2003 and insufficiently treated. Almost overnight, I went from an athletic 43 year old participating in bi-athalons, to a body that felt like it was 90 years old. Because there is no known cure for chronic Lyme Disease, I decided I might as well learn as much as I could from my struggles. The following are some lessons I compiled on the journey.

1. **Accepting the difficult roommate.** With chronic pain, there is the initial phase of "shopping for a cure." This phase can take many years until you are financially drained and emotionally exhausted. After trying every possible fix, it's very sobering to realize that you are stuck with some version of the pain,

like it or not, like a difficult roommate who won't vacate. At this point you develop a willingness to include, rather than exclude, the pain. You end the civil war, and simply allow the pain have it's place in the fabric of your life.

2. **It's perfect, I just don't know how yet.** I heard this parable from a friend several years ago: *"There are 3 kinds of people. The first type of person says of a tragedy, "This is terrible." The second type of person says of a tragedy, "This is difficult but I will make the most of it." The third type of person says of a tragedy, "It's perfect."* Since I'm not naturally the third type of person, I learned to do what I call a "cheating step." I say, "It's perfect, I just don't know how yet." And then I stay curious as to how it might be perfect. One afternoon while having the thought, "this client session would be so much better if I wasn't in pain," my perspective spontaneously shifted. I saw my pain was perfectly woven into the client's sharing, my listening, and the tenderness of the moment. Now, instead of feeling pain detracts from the moment, I remember it is an invaluable part of the connection of all things.
3. **Just this 100 feet.** You only need 100 feet of headlights in your car to be able to travel a thousand miles. With pain too, just take things in small increments. Whether it be a day, an hour, a minute, or one-second intervals, see what works best for you to meet the day. Fear needs a future, and if you stay in the present anything is possible.
4. **Mindfulness of the pain managers.** Pain managers are aspects of you that try to figure out the pain or rehearse for the future. See if you can notice the difference between the parts of you trying to manage the pain, and your wholeness/awareness itself. Your wholeness is always here, and is actually bigger than any physical pain, or thoughts about the pain.

5. **I am willing.** A spiritual teacher once asked me, “If you knew this pain was your path to God, would you take it?” When I said, “Yes,” she pointedly replied, “Well it is your path, because you have it now, so be willing to take it!” Chronic pain teaches a fierce surrender where ultimately you must fall to your knees daily. Every day my bottom-line practice is simply to show up and say, “I am willing.”

6. **Choose joy.** Pain can even become a doorway to choose joy. A meditation student told me this story: *“My mother had severe pain from arthritis and Parkinson’s for over a decade. Despite her increasing levels of pain, she remained loving and joyful. One day I asked her how she could be happy with so much pain. She told me, ‘I can be in pain and be joyful, or I can be in pain and be grumpy. The pain is a given. The choice of how I meet it, is up to me.’”*

7. **Some human greatness.** The ultimate lesson of pain is connection. The Dalai Lama’s physician, Tenzin Choedrak, was tortured everyday for seventeen years. Throughout his torture, he held the belief and the prayer that, “Some benefit would be gained, and some human greatness would be accomplished” by his extreme experience.

The Tibetans have this specific practice to share one’s pain in service of all beings: *When you experience pain, think about all the people in the world right now suffering from the exact same pain. Realize that you are not alone, and you are connected to many people in the same condition. Then, dedicate the benefit of anything you learn from this pain with, “Whatever compassion I may learn, and however I may grow from this pain right now, may it benefit all beings, everywhere.”*

R. Anela Painting by Ramona "Jade" Anela, age 11 yrs old