

## The Embrace of Being Lost

*“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura che la diritta via era smarrita.”*

Dante Alighieri 1308

These famous opening lines of the Divine Comedy – *“in the middle of our life I found myself in a dark wood, and the straight way was lost”* – find their echo throughout mythology and the poetic traditions. The echo of an essential part of our evolutionary journey, at the same time one of the most challenging and the most transformative passages we experience in the course of our lives.

Lost.

I find less and less inner or outer ground. I lose a sense of what really matters to me or who I really am - I do not quite recognize myself any more, the self that I have been, that I have invested so heavily in. Frightening indeed.

Yet, far from recognizing the potentially transformational aspect of these periods, our culture is mostly chronically unable to face or navigate them. We basically find ourselves doing everything possible to stay away from the experience of being lost, finding more and more ways of distracting ourselves, and when those fail, reaching for the substances and/or the medication, or more and more work. And along the way we make jokes about the ‘midlife crisis’, precisely because we have become so estranged from the deeper meaning and the deeper potential of these passages.

The same can be said for some of the emotions that often arise during periods of feeling lost. Emotions such as despair, hopelessness, loneliness and helplessness, emotions we do everything possible not to feel, not least because we judge them so harshly as ‘weak’, ‘useless’, and ‘negative’.

And yet time and time again it is my experience, both in myself and in deep coaching work, that when we can step beyond our judgements and create together an unconditional relating space, in which we gradually learn to *accept and relax towards whatever is arising, however ‘dark’ it is*, the most profound inner movements can start to awaken.

When we stop resisting and instead become one with being lost, with the feeling of despair or the sense of helplessness, while in a deep relational space, suddenly we start to feel a different kind of embrace, a softening of our whole being, as if the fight is over...the fight I’ve been conducting for so many years to keep those feelings, that experience away.

It’s like I can relax and breathe again, and in so doing touch one of the ultimate paradoxes of the human developmental journey – that when finally I stop trying to ‘overcome’ difficult feelings, when I stop trying to ‘resolve’ them, or ‘understand’ them better so that they might go away, I find that I am suddenly closer to the whisper, the heartbeat of Life itself, that a melting has occurred, and I can feel in time the first seeds of new experience, one that I could not possibly have previously imagined.

We need to commit to caring enough to have the courage to create these unconditional spaces together, to re-write the whole vocabulary of ‘weakness’, of ‘negative’ emotion, so that, as Dante discovered, the dark wood gradually reveals a new way, not the straight one of our previous lives, but a way that is immeasurably more full of life, and grace, and immanence.

## Addendum

I recently wrapped up a 15 hour coaching engagement with a senior executive from the one of the most well-known global organisations.

He has really taken on board the principle and practice of unconditionally presencing emotion, in a relational space. We did it again in the last session with a layer of fear in him, and he experienced the settling and relaxation in himself, again...

He told me that in his organisation they are actively taught by 'experts' how to connect only with 'positive' emotions, and how to disconnect from 'negative' emotions'. And how he now sees how totally erroneous, stupid and dysfunctional that approach is. And how widespread it is everywhere. And what tension it creates in individuals and teams, and how much it contracts the spaciousness, connectedness and receptivity needed for creative thinking.