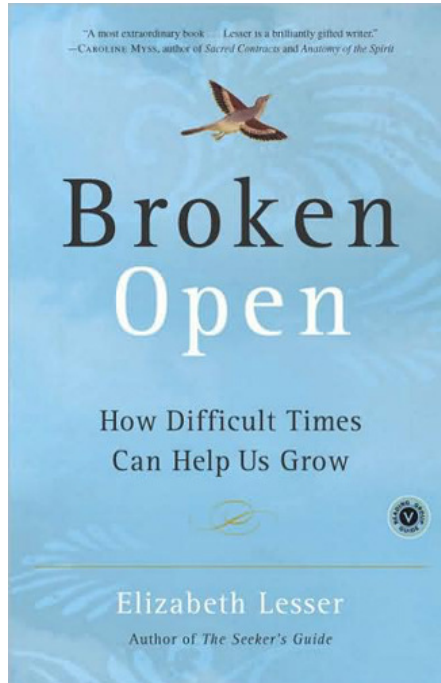


# Broken Open

## *How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*



**Author:** Elizabeth Lesser  
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### ■ **The Big Idea**

During times of transition, amid everyday stress, and even when we face seemingly insurmountable adversity, life offers us a choice: to turn away from change or to embrace it; to shut down or to be broken open and transformed. In the more than twenty-five years since she co-founded the Omega Institute – now the world's largest personal-growth and spiritual retreat center – Elizabeth Lesser has been an intimate witness to the ways in which human beings deal with change, loss, and difficulty. She herself has struggled to submit to what she calls the "Phoenix Process" – allowing herself to be broken open in order to rise like the mythical bird from the ashes of past mistakes and suffering.

## ■ Why You Need This Book

This practical book provides tools to support us in our quest for a clearer sense of purpose and a new passion for life.

In this beautifully written, often funny, and always inspiring book, Lesser has gathered together true stories about ordinary people who by design or disaster decided to step boldly into a fuller life.

Here are profoundly moving narratives of fears overcome and risks taken; of hard times and difficult passages; of betrayal, divorce, sickness, and death; and of the day-to-day challenges of raising children, earning a living, and growing older.

By sharing her own most human traits, Lesser helps us feel less lonely in our own struggles, and more optimistic about the possibility of transformation. *Broken Open* also introduces us to some of the world's greatest spiritual teachers – both ancient and living – and imparts the wisdom of various traditions, from Buddhist meditation to Sufi dance, and from Christian prayer to contemporary psychotherapy.

## ■ The Call of the Soul

Many of us feel uncomfortable revealing to others – and even to ourselves – what lies beneath the surface of our day-to-day consciousness. We get out of bed in the morning and begin again where we left off yesterday, attacking life as if we were waging a campaign of control and survival.

All the while, deep within us, flows an endless river of pure energy. It sings a low and rich song that hints of joy and liberation and peace. Up on top, as we make our way through life, we may sense the presence of the river. We may feel a subtle longing to connect with it.

But we are usually moving too fast, or we are distracted, or we fear disturbing the status quo of our surface thoughts and feelings. It can be unsettling to dip below the familiar and descend into the more mysterious realms of the soul.

We may not be able to hold it in our hands, but the soul is real. We may not know what form it will take when our bodies die, but the soul lives on. If you are in the habit of negating the longings of the soul, or if the idea of having a soul makes you nervous, or if you regard the whole subject with raised eyebrows, you may want to consider this piece of advice: When you do something from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy.

If we don't listen to the voice of the soul, it sings a stranger tune. If we don't go looking for what lies beneath the surface of our lives, the soul comes looking for us.

## **The Hands that Work on Us**

*"In the difficult are the friendly forces,  
the hands that work on us."  
~ RAINER MARIA RILKE*

Every shift in our life comes courtesy of the friendly forces; every catastrophe can hand us exactly what we need to awaken into who we really are. It's difficult, though, when you're in the middle of a painful transition, to mine the experience for inner growth. And when your life falls apart, it's a lot easier to blame someone else, to rail against fate, or to ignore the hopeful messages carried on the winds of change.

Sometimes, when friends try to help by saying, "There's a reason for everything," or "It's a blessing in disguise," you just want to run away, or you want to say, "Yeah, if it's such a blessing, then why does it hurt so much?"

Everything that happens to us in life is a blessing – whether it comes as a gift wrapped in happy times or as a heartbreak, a loss, or a tragedy. It is true: There is meaning hidden in the small changes of everyday life, and wisdom to be found in the shards of your most broken moments.

At the end of a dark night of the soul is the beginning of a new life. But it's hard to accept that when you're in pain, and it's tiresome to hear about from someone who's not.

## **The Rapture of Being Alive**

*"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life.  
I don't think that's what we're really seeking.  
I think that what we're seeking  
Is an experience of being alive...  
So that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."  
~ JOSEPH CAMPBELL*

The great loneliness – like the loneliness of a caterpillar endured when it wraps herself in a silky shroud and begins the long transformation from chrysalis to butterfly. It seems that we too must go through such a time, when life as we have known it is over – when being a caterpillar feels somehow false and yet we don't know who we are supposed to become.

All we know is that something bigger is calling us to change. And though we must make the journey alone, and even if suffering is our only companion, soon enough we will become a butterfly, soon enough we will taste the rapture of being alive.

What is keeping you from feeling the rapture? You won't find the answer in a lighted room. What stands between you and a full-bodied life can be found only in the shadows. What wants to live in you may be waiting – at the end of a long loneliness.

### ■ **The Phoenix Process**

When there is nothing left to lose, we find the true self – the self that is whole, the self that is enough, the self that no longer looks to others for definition, or completion, or anything but companionship on the journey.

This is the way to live a meaningful and hopeful life – a life of real happiness and inner peace. This is the Phoenix Process.

### **A Broken Heart is an Open Heart**

There are three major hurdles to overcome in crisis: dealing with pain; working with your attitude; and using the crisis as a wake-up and a clean-up call.

#### **Pain:**

Pain management is a huge issue in the hospital or for anyone who suffers from chronic, debilitating pain. If you do not get proper pain management, it is extremely difficult to heal or keep your wits about you. There is physical pain and there is psychic pain. Don't confuse the two and think that when the physical pain goes away you will be all right psychically. The longer we avoid dealing with our lives, the more trouble we find at the end. Issues not attended to can come roaring out like devouring monsters.

#### **Attitude:**

Where your attitude is, so be you. Where your attitude is, so be your consciousness. No matter what has happened in life, you have the capacity to choose how you want to be. Allowing yourself to be guided by your core values unlocks a profound spiritual blessing – the blessing of living in the moment with grace, dignity, warmth, kindness, and compassion.

#### **Wake up and Clean up:**

Don't fool yourself and think that Spirit is somewhere else, in other-worldly experiences, in great rushes or ecstatic visions. Life's deepest experience is the joy that fills our hearts when we love and give to others. When in crisis explodes in your life, the best in you is born.

## ■ The Shaman Lover

*"The great epochs of life come  
When we gain the courage  
To re-christen our evil  
As what is best in us."  
~ FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE*

The Shaman Lover is a man or a woman whose destiny is to heal the heartsick with the sweetness of love, and to give the gift of fire to those whose passion is frozen. The Shaman Lover has been sent by fate to blast us open, to awaken the dead parts of our body, to deliver the kiss of life. And as we succumb, we are changed forever.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche would call the dance with the Shaman Lover a "great epoch." He says that the great epochs of life come when we gain the courage to re-christen our evil as what is best in us. Your great epoch may involve a different kind of shamanic force. Some people fall under the spell of drugs or alcohol. One might call a drug or drink a shamanic substance – a dark elixir that teaches you about your own darkness and, one hopes, delivers you back into the light with the hard-earned gift of what is best in you.

If you are a quick learner, your time in the underworld will be brief: a vacation, a business trip, an exotic detour from everyday life. But you may need a deeper engagement. Your life may have to change.

You may have to become unrecognizable to yourself and those around you. You may have to enter into a great epoch long enough to gain the kind of courage to which Nietzsche is referring – the courage to turn and face and own all the exiled parts of the self until you can step firmly onto higher ground.

## Marriage Math

*"What is not brought to consciousness,  
Comes to us as fate."  
~ CARL JUNG*

Here's the thing about marriages. Every one has a story that could end in divorce. That does not mean they all should. Nor does it mean that divorce will automatically raise the wreckage of the soul from the bottom of the sea. The rebirth of the soul is a much more

arduous endeavor than merely getting a divorce, or changing jobs, or having a crisis crash over the flimsy structure of a life.

What matters is that we take the deadness of the soul seriously; that we pay attention to the contents of the heart; that we ask the hard questions, and fearlessly face the hidden parts of the self. What matters, Jung says, is that we shine the light of consciousness in the dark corners of our life. What is not brought to consciousness, he says, comes to us as fate.

## **The Joy of Being Wrong**

*"Tale as old as time,  
Tune as old as song,  
Bittersweet and strange,  
Finding you can change,  
Learning you were wrong.*

*~ HOWARD ASHMAN AND ALAN MENKEN from *Beauty and the Beast**

Whether a marriage or relationship survives the heat of a Phoenix Process is not really the issue here. Something much greater is at stake when we choose to learn and grow in the crucible of love. When trouble visits a relationship – a dance with a Shaman Lover, a long period of deadness, a shift in roles, a change in expectations --we are faced with weighty choices.

For your sake, for your partner's sake, and for the sake of the children, who learn from us how to change and how to grow, may your bittersweet and strange adventure lead you into the landscape of love. Every new relationship you build, with your old partner or with a new one, is a marriage between two whole people – two people who have married the shadow and the light within themselves, and who love the truth as much as they love each other.

### **■ Children**

If you would like to be broken open, raising children is the highest recommendation. Parenthood is defined as when you have fallen in love with a person who is always changing into someone else, and who you know will leave you. Yet most parents will say that they have never given themselves to anyone as fully as they have to their children.

Parenthood is a never-ending journey down a wide river of worry and love. You get in that boat with your kids and you never get out. They get out – they build their own

boats and row into their own destinies – but you stay in the original boat, always their parent, forever caring and forever kvelling (a useful Yiddish word that describes how parents express pride in their children).

At each stage of your child's growth, you are given ample opportunities to use parenthood as a mirror. You get to see exactly where you fall short in the most graphic ways. Whatever it is that wants to be transformed in your psyche will be revealed as you parent. If you accept the challenge, parenting becomes a perpetual process of change and transformation – a dynamic experience of being broken open by love.

## ■ The River of Change

Life is always changing: we are always changing. We live in a river of change, and a river of change lives within us. Every day, we are given a choice: we can relax and float in the direction that the water flows, or we can swim hard against it. If we go with the river, the energy of a thousand mountain streams will be with us, filling our hearts with courage and enthusiasm. If we resist the river, we will feel rankled and tired as we tread water, stuck in the same place.

"I've known rivers," writes Langston Hughes. "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

## The Truth

*MAN: Doc, my brother's crazy. He thinks he's a chicken.*

*PSYCHIATRIST: Well, why don't you turn him in?*

*MAN: I would, but I need the eggs.*

*~ WOODY ALLEN*

Adversity is a natural part of being human. It is the height of arrogance to prescribe a moral code or health regime or spiritual practice as an amulet to keep things from falling apart. Things do fall apart. It is in their nature to do so. When we try to protect ourselves from the inevitability of change, we are not listening to the soul. We are listening to our fear of life and death, our lack of faith, our smaller ego's will to prevail.

To listen to the soul is to stop fighting with life – to stop fighting when things fall apart; when they don't go our way, when we get sick, when we are betrayed or mistreated or misunderstood. To listen to the soul is to slow down, to feel deeply, to see ourselves clearly, to surrender to discomfort and uncertainty, and to wait.

It is in times of brokenness that the soul sings its most wise and eternal song. The tune cannot be hummed or the lyrics be told; each person's soul has its own cadence. You will recognize its music, though, by the way you feel when you are listening: awake, calm, and suddenly relieved of the burden of control. You will take a big breath, you'll sigh and say to yourself, "It's okay. Everything's okay." You'll unfold your arms and lean back, and say to the soul, "Just sing me your song. Teach me the words. Tell me what you know."

## ■ **The Toolbox**

### **TEN-STEP MEDITATION PRACTICE**

#### **Step One: Place and Time**

Find a private and relatively quiet place where you will not be disturbed by people, children, telephones, et cetera. Choose an amount of time you are going to meditate. Set a timer or keep a clock close by. Begin with ten minutes, and work your way up over a few weeks or months to a half hour or forty-five minutes.

#### **Step Two: Seat and Posture**

Assume a comfortable posture, sitting cross-legged on a pillow on the floor or on a simple chair. Keep the spine straight, and let your shoulders soften and drop. Do a brief scan of the body, relaxing parts that are tight. Relax your jaw. Choose a hand position and gently hold it.

#### **Step Three: Beginning**

Close your eyes (or keep your open eyes focused gently on a spot on the floor). Take a deep breath in and let it out with a sigh. Do this three times. As you sigh, release anything you are holding on to. Remind yourself that for these few minutes you are doing nothing but meditating. You can afford to drop everything else for the time being. The pressing details of your life will be waiting for you at the end of the session.

#### **Step Four: Breath**

Bring your attention to your breathing, becoming aware of the natural flow of breath in and out of the body. Observe your chest and belly as they rise and expand on the in-breath, and fall and recede on the out-breath. Witness each in-breath as it enters your body and fills it with energy. Witness each out-breath as it leaves your body and dissipates into space. Then start again, bringing your attention back each time to the next breath. Let your breath be like a soft broom, gently sweeping its way through your body and mind.



### **Step Five: Thoughts**

When a thought takes you away from witnessing your breathing, take note of the thought without judging it, then gently bring your attention back to your chest or your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out. Remember that meditation is the practice of unconditional friendliness. Observe your thoughts with friendliness and then let the breath sweep them gently away.

### **Step Six: Feelings**

When feeling arise, do not raise them. Allow them to be. Observe them. Taste them. Experience them but do not identify with them. Let them run their natural course, then return to observing your breath. If you find yourself stuck in a feeling state, shift a little on your seat and straighten your posture. Get back in the saddle and gently pick up the reins of the breath.

### **Step Seven: Pain**

If you feel pain in the body – your knees, for example, or your back – bring your awareness to the pain. Surround the area in pain with breath. Witness yourself in pain, as opposed to responding to the pain. If the pain is persistent, move gently to release tension, and return to your posture and breath. You may need to lean against a wall or the back of your chair, or you may want to straighten your legs for a while. Avoid excess movement, but do not allow pain to dominate your experience.

### **Step Eight: Restlessness and Sleepiness**

If you are agitated by thoughts or feelings, or if you feel as if you cannot sit still, or if you are bored to distraction, come back to your breath and your posture again and again. Treat yourself gently, as if you were training a puppy. Likewise, if a wave of sleepiness overtakes you, see if you can waken yourself by breathing a little more deeply, keeping your eyes open, and sitting up tall. Sleep and meditation are not the same thing. See if you can be as relaxed as you are during sleep, yet at the same time, awake and aware.

### **Step Nine: Counting Breaths**

A good way to deal with all of these impediments to concentration is to count your breaths. On the in-breath, count "one," and on the out-breath, count "two." Continue up to ten. Then begin again. If you lose count at any point, start over at "one." As thoughts and feelings, pain and discomfort, restlessness and sleepiness arise, allow your counting to gently override their distracting chatter.

**Step Ten: Discipline**

For one week, practice meditation each day, whether you are in the mood or not. Even if it is for only five minutes, commit to a regular practice. See how you feel. If you notice a difference (or even if you don't), commit to a regular practice. See how you feel. If you notice a difference (or even if you don't), commit to another week. Then consider joining a meditation group or taking a retreat and receiving more in-depth instruction and support in your practice.

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