

An Introduction to the Secret Language of Fear

Excerpted from *It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle* by Mark Wolynn

I never set out to create a method for overcoming fear and anxiety. It all began the day I lost my vision. I was in the throes of my first ocular migraine. No real physical pain to speak of—just a cyclone of dark terror, within which my vision was obscured. I was thirty-four years old and stumbling around my office in the murk, fingering the desk phone for the 911 buttons. An ambulance would soon be on its way.

An ocular migraine is generally not serious. Your vision becomes muddled, but usually returns to normal in about an hour. You just don't always know that while it's happening. But for me, the ocular migraine was just the beginning. Within weeks, the vision in my left eye began to disappear. Faces and road signs soon became a gray blur.

The doctors informed me that I had central serous retinopathy, a condition without a cure, its cause unknown. Fluid builds up under the retina and then leaks, causing scarring and blurring in the visual field. Some folks, the 5 percent with the chronic form mine had turned into, become legally blind. The way things were going, I was told to expect that both eyes would be affected. It was just a matter of time.

The doctors were unable to tell me what caused my vision loss and what would heal it. Everything I tried on my own—vitamins, juice fasts, hands-on healing—all seemed to make things worse. I was flummoxed. My greatest fear was unfolding in front of me and I was helpless to do anything about it. Blind, unable to take care of myself, and all alone, I'd fall apart. My life would be ruined. I'd lose my will to live.

I replayed the scenario over and over in my head. The more I thought about it, the deeper the hopeless feelings embedded in my body. I was sinking into sludge. Each time I tried to dig myself out, my thoughts circled back to images of being all *alone*, *helpless*, and *ruined*. What I didn't know then was that the very words *alone*, *helpless*, and *ruined* were part of my personal language of fear. Unbridled and unrestrained, they reeled in my head and rattled my body.

I wondered why I gave my thoughts such power. Other people had adversity far worse than mine and they didn't dwell in the depths like this. What was it about me that stayed so deeply entrenched in fear? It would be years before I could answer that question.

Back then, all I could do was leave. I left my relationship, my family, my business, my city—everything I knew. I wanted answers that couldn't be found in the world I was part of—a world where many people seemed to be confused and unhappy. I had only questions, and little desire to carry on with life as I knew it. I handed my

business (a successful events company) over to someone I had literally just met, and off I went, east—as far east as I could go—until I reached Southeast Asia. I wanted to be healed. I just had no idea what that would look like.

I read books and studied with the teachers who wrote them. Whenever I heard that there might be someone who could help me—some old woman in a hut, some laughing man in a robe—I showed up. I joined training programs and chanted with gurus. One guru said, to those of us gathered to hear him speak, that he wanted to surround himself with only "finders." Seekers, he said, remained just that—in a constant state of seeking.

I wanted to be a finder. I meditated for hours each day. I fasted for days at a time. I brewed herbs and battled the fierce toxins that I imagined had invaded my tissues. All the while, my eyesight continued to worsen and my depression deepened.

What I failed to realize at the time is that when we try to resist feeling something painful, we often protract the very pain we're trying to avoid. Doing so is a prescription for continued suffering. There's also something about the action of searching that blocks us from what we seek. The constant looking outside of ourselves can keep us from knowing when we hit the target. Something valuable can be going on inside us, but if we're not tuning in, we can miss it.

"What aren't you willing to see?" the healers prodded, provoking me to look deeper. How could I know? I was in the dark.

One guru in Indonesia shined the light a bit brighter for me when he asked, "Who do you think you are not to have eye problems?" He went on: "Perhaps Johan's ears don't hear as well as Gerhard's, and maybe Eliza's lungs aren't as strong as Gerta's. And Dietrich doesn't walk nearly as well as Sebastian." (Everyone was either Dutch or German at this particular training program and seemed to be struggling with one chronic condition or another.) Something got through. He was right. Who was I not to have eye problems? It was arrogant for me to argue with reality. Like it or not, my retina was scarred and my vision was blurred, but I—the "me" underneath it all—was beginning to feel calm. No matter what my eye was doing, it no longer had to be the defining factor for how I was doing.

To deepen the learning, this guru had us spend seventy-two hours—three days and nights—blindfolded and ear plugged, meditating on a small cushion. Each day, we were given a small bowl of rice to eat and only water to drink. No sleep, no getting up, no lying down, no communicating. Going to the bathroom meant raising your hand and being escorted to a hole in the ground in the dark.

The goal of this madness was just that—to intimately come to know the madness of the mind by observing it. I learned how my mind continually taunted me with worst-case-scenario thinking and the lie that if I just worried hard enough, I could insulate myself from what I feared most.

After this experience and others like it, my inner vision began to clear a bit. My eye, however, stayed the same; the leaking and scarring continued. On many levels, having a vision problem is a great metaphor. I eventually learned that it was less about what I could or couldn't see and more about the way I saw things. But that wasn't when I turned the corner.

It was during the third year of what I now call my "vision quest" that I finally got what I was looking for. By this time, I was doing a lot of meditation. The depression had mostly lifted. I could spend countless hours in silence just being with my breath or body sensations. That was the easy part.

One day, I was waiting in line to have a *satsang*—a meeting with a spiritual master. I had been waiting for hours in the white robe that everyone in line at the temple wore. It was now my turn. I was expecting the master to acknowledge my dedication. Instead, he looked right through me and saw what I couldn't. "Go home," he said. "Go home and call your mother and your father."

What? I was livid. My body shook with anger. Clearly, he misread me. I no longer needed my parents. I had outgrown them. I had given up on them long ago, traded them in for better parents, divine parents, spiritual parents—all the teachers, gurus, and wise men and women who were guiding me to the next level of awakening. What's more, with several years of misguided therapy under my belt, of beating pillows and tearing cardboard effigies of my parents to smithereens, I believed I had already "healed" my relationship with them. I decided to ignore his advice.

And yet something struck a chord inside me. I couldn't quite let go of what he had said. I was finally beginning to understand that no experience is ever wasted. Everything that happens to us has merit, whether we recognize the surface significance of it or not. Everything in our lives ultimately leads us somewhere.

Still, I was determined to keep the illusion about who I was intact. Being an accomplished meditator was all I had to cling to. So I sought a meeting with another spiritual master—one, I was sure, who would set the record straight. This man imbued hundreds of people a day with his heavenly love. Surely he would see me for the deeply spiritual person I imagined myself to be. Again, I waited a full day until it was my turn. I was now at the front of the line. And then it happened. Again. The same words.

"Call your parents. Go home and make peace with them."

This time I heard what was being said.

The great teachers know. The truly great ones don't care whether you believe in their teachings or not. They present a truth, then leave you with yourself to discover your own truth. Adam Gopnik writes about the difference between gurus and teachers in his book *Through the Children's Gate*: "A guru gives us himself and then his system; a teacher gives us his subject and then ourselves."

The great teachers understand that where we come from affects where we go, and that what sits unresolved in our past influences our present. They know that our parents are important, regardless of whether they are good at parenting or not. There's no way around it: The family story is *our* story. Like it or not, it resides within us.

Regardless of the story we have about them, our parents cannot be expunged or ejected from us. They are in us and we are part of them—even if we've never met them. Rejecting them only distances us further from ourselves and creates more suffering. Those two teachers could see it. I couldn't. My blindness was both literal and figurative. Now I was beginning to wake up, mostly to the fact that I had left a huge mess back home.

For years, I had judged my parents harshly. I imagined myself to be more capable, far more sensitive and human, than they. I blamed them for all the things I believed were wrong with my life. Now I had to return to them to restore what was missing in me—my vulnerability. I was now coming to realize that my ability to receive love from others was linked to my ability to receive my mother's love.

Still, taking in her love was not going to be easy. I had such a deep break in the bond with my mother that being held by her felt like being squeezed in a bear trap. My body would tighten in on itself as if to create a shell she couldn't penetrate. This wound affected every aspect of my life—especially my ability to stay open in a relationship.

My mother and I could go months without speaking. When we did speak, I'd find a way, through either my words or my armored body language, to discount the warm feelings she showed me. I appeared cold and distant. Conversely, I accused her of not being able to see me or hear me. It was an emotional dead end.

Determined to heal our broken relationship, I booked a flight home to Pittsburgh. I had not seen my mother in several months. As I walked up the driveway, I could feel my chest tighten. I wasn't sure our relationship could be repaired; I had so many raw feelings inside. I prepared myself for the worst, playing out the scenario in my mind: She would hold me and I, wanting only to soften in her arms, would do just the opposite. I would turn to steel.

And that's pretty much what happened. Embraced in a hug I could barely endure, I could hardly breathe. Yet I asked her to keep holding me. I wanted to learn, from the inside out, my body's resistance, where I tightened, what sensations arose, how I would shut down. It wasn't new information. I had seen this pattern mirrored in my relationships. Only this time, I wasn't walking away. My plan was to heal this wound at the source.

The longer she held me, the more I thought I would burst. It was physically painful. Pain would meld into numbness, and numbness into pain. Then, after many minutes, something gave. My chest and belly began to quake. I began to soften, and, in the weeks that followed, I continued to soften.

It was in one of our many conversations during this time that she shared—almost in an offhanded way—an event that occurred when I was small. My mom had to be hospitalized for three weeks for gall bladder surgery. With this insight, I began piecing together what was going on inside me. Somewhere, before the age of two—that's when my mother and I were separated—an unconscious tightening had taken root inside my body. When she returned home, I had stopped trusting her care. I was no longer vulnerable to her. Instead, I pushed her away, and would continue to do so for the next thirty years.

Another early event also may have contributed to the fear I carried that my life would suddenly be ruined. My mother told me that she experienced a difficult labor while giving birth to me—one in which the doctor used forceps. As a result, I was born with extensive bruising and a partially collapsed skull, not uncommon with a forceps delivery. My mother revealed with regret that my appearance made it difficult for her even to hold me at first. Her story resonated, and helped to explain the feeling of being ruined that I knew deep inside. Specifically, traumatic memories from my birth that had submerged in my body would resurface whenever I "gave birth" to a new project or presented new work in public. Just having this understanding brought me peace. It also, in an unexpected way, brought the two of us closer.

While repairing my bond with my mother, I also began to rebuild my relationship with my father. Living alone in a small, ramshackle apartment—the same one he'd lived in since my parents divorced when I was thirteen—my father, a former marine sergeant and construction worker, never bothered to renovate his own place. Old tools, bolts, screws, nails, and rolls of electrical and duct tape were strewn throughout the rooms and hallways—just as they had always been. As we stood together in a sea of rusty iron and steel, I told him how much I missed him. The words seemed to evaporate into empty space. He didn't know what to do with them.

I had always craved a close relationship with my father, yet neither he nor I knew how to make it happen. This time, however, we kept talking. I told him that I loved him and that he was a good father. I shared the memories I had of things he did for me when I was small. I could feel him listening to what I was saying, even though his actions—shrugging his shoulders, changing the subject—indicated he was not. It took many weeks of talking and sharing memories. During one of our lunches together, he looked directly into my eyes and said, "I didn't think you ever loved me." I could barely breathe. It was clear that great pain welled in both of us. In that moment, something broke open. It was our hearts. Sometimes, the heart must break in order to open. Eventually, we began to express our love for each other. I was now seeing the effects of trusting the words of the teachers and returning home to heal with my parents.

For the first time I could remember, I was able to let myself receive my parents' love and care—not in the way I had once expected it, but in the way they could give it. Something opened in me. It didn't matter how they could or couldn't love me. What mattered was how I could receive what they had to give. They were the

same parents they'd always been. The difference was in me. I was falling back in love with them, the way I must have felt as a baby before the break in the bond with my mother occurred.

My early separation from my mother, along with similar traumas I inherited from my family history—specifically, the fact that three of my grandparents had lost their mothers at an early age, and the fourth had lost a father as an infant—helped to forge my secret language of fear. The words *alone*, *helpless*, and *ruined*, and the feelings that had accompanied them, were finally losing their power to lead me astray. I was being granted a new life, and my renewed relationship with my parents was a large part of it.

Over the next few months, I reestablished a tender connection with my mother. Her love, which once felt invasive and grating, now felt calming and restorative. I was also lucky to have sixteen close years with my father before he died. In the dementia that dominated the last four years of his life, my father taught me perhaps the most profound lesson about vulnerability and love I have ever learned. Together, we met in that place beyond thought, beyond the mind, where only the deepest love dwells.

During my travels, I had many great teachers. When I look back, however, it was my eye—my stressed-out, beleaguered, terror-producing eye—that led me halfway around the world, back to my parents, through the morass of family trauma, and finally back to my heart. My eye was, hands down, the greatest teacher of them all.

Somewhere along the way, I had even stopped thinking about my eye and worrying about whether it would improve or worsen. I no longer expected to be able to see clearly again. Somehow, that stopped being important. Not long afterward, my vision returned. I hadn't expected it to. I hadn't even needed it to. I had learned to be okay no matter what my eye was doing.

Today my vision is 20/ 20, even though my ophthalmologist swears that with the amount of scarring I still have on my retina, I shouldn't be able to see. He just shakes his head and postulates that somehow the light signals must be ricocheting and bypassing the fovea, the central area of the retina. As with many stories of healing and transformation, what started out looking like adversity was actually grace in disguise. Ironically, after scouring the distant corners of the planet for answers, I found that the greatest resources for healing were already inside me just waiting to be excavated.

Ultimately, healing is an inside job. Thankfully, my teachers led me back to my parents, and home to myself. Along the way I uncovered the stories in my family history that ultimately brought me peace. Out of gratitude and a newfound sense of freedom, it became my mission to help others discover this freedom for themselves.

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