

The Universal Secret

Everybody thinks they're not good enough.

In graduate school, a favorite teacher of mine asked our class one day, “What’s the Universal Secret?” A few guesses were offered, then she quickly and generously eased our anxiety:

“Everybody thinks they’re not good enough.”

With now over 30 years in the field of mental health, I’ve been fortunate to hold the trust of thousands of individuals who have shared their innermost struggles and “secrets” with me. Ironically, their secrets are not so much about horrific acts or criminal behaviors (although at times these, burdens of guilt or shame arise), but rather are most often about their inner world of being human. These “secrets” are made up of feelings, thoughts, regrets, losses, worries, insecurities, longings, and wounds. These “secrets” are the commonalities that can potentially connect and unite us with our fellow humans. Instead, because we believe they are unique and cannot and should not be spoken, they often separate us from our greatest longings: to be seen, to belong, and to love and be loved.

One day, about three years into my private practice, I was nearing the end of a session with a warm, loving, financially successful mother of three. She shared with me that her husband of ten years had presented her with a gift the night before during their anniversary dinner. She took a card from her purse that said “just because I love you” on the envelope. Just as she started to hand the card to me so I could see the surprise trip he had arranged for the two of them, she began to cry softly, then collapsed on the couch into deep, wailing


sobs. “How COULD he love me?! He doesn’t, I know! My own MOTHER didn’t even love me!!”

After this dear woman left my office — clearly surprised and also relieved to release the pain she was still carrying in the depths of her body ten years into her near-perfect life and marriage — I sat in my chair, reflecting on the “put together” presentation she had mastered as she walked into my office an hour earlier, and the softer, more relaxed, mascara-streaked, but smiling face I saw as I said goodbye.

I wrote at the top of a legal pad “why do we suffer?” For the next 17 years, I kept it in a file in the front of the drawer. I often added to the list, reviewing and summarizing the themes and similarities of the struggles and stories of every human I had been honored to hold space for that day. Sometimes weeks (or more) would pass without me adding to it, and there were times I forgot about the list for a year.

In the intervening years, I also became involved in research on a study involving more than 400 people at a local hospital. One of the questions sought to identify the source of the participant’s “greatest hurt and pain” of their lives, and the responses were summarized by category. I added this to the legal pad list, wondering if my unscientific, sporadic recording of “universal struggles” might help others someday. Certain themes about the various universal struggles emerged over the years, including themes around how we try and cope with suffering—usually unsuccessfully.

At right: MORGAN HARPER NICHOLS is an artist and poet whose work is inspired by real-life interactions and stories. Based in Phoenix, Arizona, Morgan shares her art on a daily basis across social media, through a diverse range of collaborations, and also, in her online shop Garden24.



YOU ARE LOVED.
YOU ARE GUIDED.
YOU ARE SEEN.
YOU ARE WORTHY
OF NEW BEGINNINGS.
-MHN

“We continuously ‘compare our insides to other people’s outsides.’”

I offer the following list in the hope that you find comfort in knowing that your own personal struggles may in fact be “universal” and that you are not alone in your suffering. When we feel alone, different, or unique in our suffering, perhaps seeing ourselves in lists such as this one helps us understand that, in truth, we are all much more alike than different. And that no matter why, how, or for how long we have been hurting, there is help, and we CAN heal.

(Great care has been taken so that individual experiences and/or specifics cannot be identified.)

WHY DO WE SUFFER?

- We continuously “compare our insides to other people’s outsides,” believing that others are happier, more balanced, and are somehow finding life to be much “easier” than we are.
- **We struggle to believe that others who love us truly do, and we tell ourselves they don’t “really know” us. Receiving love is sometimes more difficult than giving it.**
- We carry ongoing pain from the losses, hurts, and rejections of our pasts, telling ourselves we should “be over that by now” and fearing that others will judge us if we’re not.
- We worry about whether we are “good enough,” and this insecurity manifests in a variety of ways such as striving for attention and affirmation, people-pleasing, feigned confidence, and isolating ourselves from others because we’re too tired to stay in the running.
- We carry critical, negative voices in our heads that tell us we’re stupid, lazy, worthless, unlovable, ugly, fat, and/or a variety of other hurtful phrases. We often “believe everything we think” and fail when we try to fight negative voices off or overcome them. We don’t realize there are effective methods for easing this inner criticism through meditation or modalities such as Internal Family Systems therapy.
- We have all been hurt by others and have adapted strategies to protect us from having to experience that feeling “ever again.” Yet these defenses often create barriers between ourselves and what we long for most: human connection.
- We believe being “successful” means always being happy. We categorize feelings as good or bad and suppress the ones we consider bad. Our suppressed anger becomes depression, cynicism, and is projected on those we love, damaging our relationships. Our suppressed sadness deadens our connection to others and the world. Our suppressed fear becomes a continuous, ongoing apprehension or erupts in panic attacks. Our body must hold the feelings we have denied or shut down, and eventually they manifest as aches, pains, or more serious illness and disease.
- We believe if we can attain enough external “status” through acquiring objects such as the right car, the right brand of shoes or clothing, the right spouse or partner, or enough money, we will feel safe, secure, and fulfilled. When we discover this doesn’t happen, we continue the same behaviors more fervently, learning quickly the truth of the phrase “you can’t get enough of what you don’t need.”
- We believe that by denying or refusing to accept our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, we will feel stronger and more confident. We don’t understand that denying this (or any other inherent trait of being human) actually creates an inner sense of disconnect from one’s self, and we feel weak, fragmented, or like a fraud.
- We struggle to understand that how our parents treated us does not define our worth. If we were criticized, abused, scapegoated, or otherwise hurt by them, we are afraid to acknowledge the

anger that this created in us. And by not acknowledging and honoring our self-protective anger toward those that have hurt us, we internalize it and identify with them, rather than ourselves and/or the child within us. We believe others who tell us we “must forgive,” not realizing that we must be angry first to return the shame to its rightful owner before forgiveness is possible.

- We allow others to define our relationship with a Higher Power, God, Creator, Universal Mystery, or whatever our concept of spirituality might be, and we are invariably disappointed by such persons, which in turn separates us from our relationship with that Source and the aliveness we find by having a unique and sacred internal experience with that Entity.
- We think we can fast-track or avoid painful feelings or that we “shouldn’t” feel or express them. We were not afraid of our wide range of feelings until they became threatening to our bond with our parents, and now we utilize every possible means to avoid them. We use substances such as food, drugs,

and alcohol that may block our feelings temporarily, yet stop us from fully healing or “metabolizing” them to their natural end. We believe our pain is “too much” for others to hear and that we simply can’t be helped. Over time, the reservoir of unprocessed emotion overwhelms us and overflows, much like a breaking dam. For many of us, this “breakdown” was what brought us to a point where we asked for help and began a journey of recovery, hope, and joy.

CINDY WESTCOTT serves as the Senior Clinical Advisor of Milestones at Onsite, which is a residential program specializing in helping people who are struggling from trauma and its effects. She also has over 30 years of experience as a licensed clinical social worker.

For more information on Milestones, visit [page 62](#).

