

Introduction: My Comfort Journey



Cinnamon toast, holding hands, the warmth of sand on bare feet, comfortable shoes, reading in bed, praying, drinking tea every morning, listening to a favorite song. These are some of the simple ways I found comfort during a difficult time in my life.

When I entered my thirties, I thought my life was on track. I was building a career in education, happily married and intending to have children, and writing fiction with the hope of finding a publisher. From the outside, my life looked rather routine and orderly.

But the order during those years was only on the surface. By my mid-thirties, my life began to exhibit cracks and chips, the way a clay bowl or cup does over time from use. I felt detached from my job, unfulfilled with my creative projects, and drained from years of struggling to conceive. During this time, my sister, who was

only three years older than I, had been diagnosed with breast cancer. In addition to the struggles with my own life, I was faced with the confusion and grief I felt from the intimate and daily involvement with my sister's struggle and pain.

By the time I turned thirty-six, my sister had died, and the fragile bowl that held my spirit fell off the shelf and broke into tiny pieces. About six months later, I was sitting in my manager's office discussing my schedule for the new year when something in me snapped. "I can't do this anymore; I need to resign," I blurted out. She was startled, but not surprised, since my disengagement from my job had become apparent. I was relieved to be leaving a job I had outgrown, but the departure was symbolic for me. I was walking out the doors of a place I had entered with so many aspirations, and I was leaving empty-handed, no sister to talk to, no child to cradle, no book to hold.

My feelings of loss only increased in the following months, and I began to suffer with insomnia. In the

sleepless nights that followed, I found myself in an unrecognizable landscape. Having trouble sleeping was completely foreign to me. I had always slept easily, anywhere and anytime, in a car, on a sofa, in a hotel. Sleep was something I could trust to give me relief and restore my energy, but now that had changed.

Sometimes, my husband would get up during the night and try to soothe me. He would hold me, and in his arms, I usually started crying. Often we would share a mug of warm milk with honey while snuggled on the couch. In these moments, I recognized the first signs of comfort, as I felt a relief, an ease that made the fatigue less painful.

There was a calling in my body for comfort. I longed for it, cried for it, desired it. I needed to heal from all the pain accumulated in me, from my sister's cancer and dying process, the demands and disappointments of infertility treatments, and my deep feelings of being creatively unfulfilled.



I could not hide from what I was going through. As I shared my struggles with other people, they began to share their stories with me. Other people had lost loved ones to cancer. Other people had unfulfilled dreams. Other people had trouble sleeping. I felt comfort in these moments of exchange, of being listened to and of listening. By sharing everyday sufferings with other people, I was touching a depth in the human experience. In this way, I realized that I was not alone.

Comforting others was also a way of comforting myself. As I gave comfort, I received comfort. It was a turning wheel. Comfort could be felt in very simple ways—through a moment of listening, by a warm smile, from a gentle touch, or in a word of encouragement. To receive and give comfort was to trust both my capacity to give as well as my limits. I was craving to open this channel in myself and in others. Yet, could I accept it if someone didn't respond to my need, or have faith that I could always find comfort for myself? Could I become this vulnerable?

As I became more sensitive to my need for comfort, I began to recognize the many ways in which comfort was present in my daily life. I felt it in the softness of my clothes against my skin, in the scent of a fresh apple, and in the warmth of holding my husband's hand. Cultivating comfort in the ordinary moments of my daily life gave me tremendous relief, softness, nurturing, and support. The effects of comfort were like a pebble tossed into a pond. The rings multiplied, and the more I recognized the many ways that comfort restored me, the more comfort expanded into my daily life.

I was learning to be more receptive to my need for comfort. I didn't have to run away from it, or get over it, or find a way to change it. I just needed to listen, to pay attention, to hear what my body and heart were saying.

Still, the listening wasn't always easy, and was even harder in the night hours when I couldn't sleep, or as I continued not to conceive, or as I struggled with freelance work. How could I be patient and accepting of what I was going through?



In the darkness of the night, agitated, exhausted, vulnerable, angry, and groping, I began scribbling in a large notebook. Within its pages, I began drawing a series of self-portraits in charcoal. I felt such comfort in these moments of expression. There was something in me that wanted to speak, something in me that was asking for my attention.

The night scribbling eventually led me to my first painting class. I had never painted before, but my instincts were pulling me in that direction. Surprisingly, I felt an intimacy when I painted, an intimacy that gave me comfort. From the beginning, painting gave me a deep way of listening to myself, and through this creative process, I began to rebuild a trust inside myself that had broken. Painting was part of a mending process, repairing the torn fibers of my soul's shawl.

There were stages in my comfort journey: feeling my need for comfort, recognizing the sources of comfort in my daily life, asking for comfort, and receiving it. Throughout the day and during the nights that I

couldn't sleep, I would often ask myself, *How can I find comfort right now?*

With this attentiveness, I began to see how *living* comfort was a way to tap into my own internal healing process. I invited more comfort into my experiences, and over time I began to heal, to sleep better, and my husband and I resolved not to have children.



Comfort is a shelter, a warm blanket, a refuge. Fortunately, we do not need to do anything extraordinary to produce comfort, because it is something that already exists within each of us and all around us. Real comfort can be found in the context of daily living. It is a grace. We just need to open our arms and receive it. We just need to open our arms and give it.

I invite you to explore the power of comfort in your life. Your reasons for seeking comfort will be your own. I encourage you to bring them into the reading of these pages, and allow this book to open the doors of comfort in your daily life.





Comfort

Vignettes





Acceptance

I cannot think about life anymore. I just know that I'm asking another person to love me, in all my fragility. I just know that another person is asking me to love him, during a time of struggle. Sometimes, it's the will that gets tired, not the body. Comfort comes from feeling accepted. Comfort comes from accepting others.

For this one day, I will say: *This is enough, this is just right.* I will offer you my hand and encourage you on your journey. You will offer me your hand, and gently help me over the stepping stones of my path.

Together we lift each other up with the comfort of deep and willing acceptance.

Cultivating Comfort



Sometimes comfort isn't an action, but an open heart that you bring to a situation. Acceptance for others is rooted in accepting yourself. If you are tired today, emotionally vulnerable, or angry and frustrated, make room for it. Learn to gently say, I accept all of myself. I hold my feelings with tenderness, love, and comfort.

☀ *I go to comfort, hearing my voice comforting me*



A Bath

There are such things as comfort rituals—reading in bed, eating popcorn at the movies, listening to love songs.

The simple luxury of taking a bath is one of my favorite comfort rituals. I like preparing for a bath, setting the water to the right temperature, adding lavender bubble bath, lighting a few candles in the bathroom, and changing into my robe.

I like to linger before I get in the tub, letting my senses take in the sweet scent filling the bathroom, the amber glow of the candles, and the cool air on my skin. I step into the warm water, and sink my body into this royal experience. Comfort, felt deeply, sensuously, nurtures me in the core of my being.

Cultivating Comfort

Many sources of comfort are already available in your daily life. You need only to take time and recognize them. So the next time you take a bath, let it become a pool of comfort you are soaking in. Take a moment and reflect on what daily rituals comfort you. Notice them and appreciate the comfort they are giving you.



 *go to comfort as a tired traveler seeks shelter*

A Bowl

A bowl, whether shallow or deep, small or large, wooden or ceramic, is always in the form of holding, receiving, and giving. A bowl is an opening. We display bowls in our houses for decoration. We place bowls at altars. We fill bowls.

A bowl full: of fruit, of a café au lait, or of clear water with a single gardenia floating in it.

What comfort there is in a bowl of soup on a chilly day.

What comfort there is in a bowl always offering something, like the wooden bowl on my coffee table, filled with roasted almonds, red grapes, or chocolates.

A bowl empty: of all that is not in it, of all that will come.

And what comfort there is in the beauty of a simple black bowl, made by a potter, sitting on the table, inviting us to fill it or leave it empty.



Cultivating Comfort

Comfort is both given and received, and like a bowl, you can be a vessel for that exchange. Are there bowls in your life that need to be emptied, in order to make more room for comfort to be received? Are there bowls in your life that need to be filled, so that you have more comfort to give?

 *opening myself to comfort*