



Don't Go Back to Sleep, by Elizabeth Lesser

To be human is to be lost in the woods. None of us arrives here with clear directions on how to get from point A to point B without stumbling into the forest of confusion or catastrophe or wrongdoing. Although they are dark and dangerous, it is in the woods that we discover our strengths. We all know people who say their cancer or divorce or bankruptcy was the greatest gift of a lifetime—that until the body, or the heart, or the bank was broken, they didn't know who they were, what they felt, or what they wanted. Before their descent into the darkness, they took more than they gave, or they were numb, or full of fear or blame or self-pity. In their most broken moments they were brought to their knees; they were humbled; they were opened. And later, as they pulled the pieces back together, they discovered a clearer sense of purpose and a new passion for life. But we also know people who did not turn their misfortune into insight, or their grief into joy. Instead, they became more bitter, more reactive, more cynical. They shut down. They went back to sleep.

The Persian poet Rumi says, "The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep. You must ask for what you really want.

Don't go back to sleep. People are going back and forth across the doorsill, where the two worlds touch. The door is round and open. Don't go back to sleep."

I am fascinated by what it takes to stay awake in difficult times. I marvel at what we all do in times of transition -- how we resist, and how we surrender; how we stay stuck, and how we grow. Since my first major broken-open experience -- my divorce -- I have been an observer and a confidante of others as they engage with the forces of their own suffering. I have made note of how fiasco and failure visit each one of us, as if they were written into the job description of being human. I have seen people crumble in times of trouble, lose their spirit, and never fully recover. I have seen others protect themselves fiercely from any kind of change, until they are living a half life, safe yet stunted.

But I have also seen another way to deal with a fearful change or a painful loss. I call this other way the Phoenix Process -- named for the mythical phoenix bird who remains awake through the fires of change, rises from the ashes of death, and is reborn into his most vibrant and enlightened self.

I've tried both ways: I have gone back to sleep in order to resist the forces of change. And I have stayed awake and been broken open. Both ways are difficult, but one way brings with it the gift of a

lifetime. If we can stay awake when our lives are changing, secrets will be revealed to usâ€”secrets about ourselves, about the nature of life, and about the eternal source of happiness and peace that is always available, always renewable, already within us.

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