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How the Phoenix Took Wing: An Examination of the Humanities Canon as it Relates to the Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth

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**How the Phoenix Took Wing: An Examination of the Humanities
Canon as it Relates to the Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth**

A senior thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of
California in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts
in Humanities and Cultural Studies with a Psychology Minor.

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Table of Contents

1. Copyright Page	2
2. Table of Contents	3
3. Abstract	4
4. Preface	5
5. Introduction	6
6. The Phoenix	9
7. Posttraumatic Growth	11
8. Joseph Campbell's "Monomyth" – The Hero's Journey	21
9. Overlay of the Monomyth and Posttraumatic Growth	24
10. Tracking Posttraumatic Growth in the Humanities	27
11. Conclusion	34
12. Appendix A – Posttraumatic Growth Inventory	37
13. Appendix B – "The Guest House" by Jelaluddin Rumi	38
14. Works Cited	39
15. Acknowledgements	44

Abstract

The investigation of posttraumatic growth as a psychological principle is giving researchers new ways to understand how it is that some people seem to thrive following events that are normally perceived as tragic and wholly negative. These survivors do not just bounce back from their tragedies; the researchers describe these people as “bouncing forward” – that is, the survivors report that their lives now are profoundly better than they were before the trauma. While the psychological research into posttraumatic growth is relatively new, the field of Humanities has conducted this same inquiry for several thousand years. For example, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger,” (3) and Mythology offers the example of the phoenix, the legendary bird that is reborn from the ashes of its prior life. A review of the scientific literature on posttraumatic growth and examples of that selfsame ideal embodied within the Humanities will show the intersection of these two domains. My goal is to identify sources within the Humanities canon that may potentially provide insight and inspiration to survivors and family members experiencing the acute phase of trauma, as well as the clinicians working with them in the recovery process. Ultimately, my research will demonstrate that the Humanities can help survivors, family members, and clinicians not only understand how to make sense of “what happened,” but provide fertile ground in which they might optimistically ask, “What’s next?”

Preface

My initial interest in the topic of posttraumatic growth, although I did not know the term until years later, arose from the personal reflections prompted within me by a simple question posed at a dinner not long after I became a paraplegic. There were four of us at the restaurant table: a physical therapy instructor and three of us who now used wheelchairs because of spinal cord injuries. We had spent the day working and speaking with physical therapy students and were relaxing after the class. While waiting for our meal, the instructor asked, “If there was a pill that would completely cure you of your injury, but the cost would be that everything you have learned and experienced since your injury would be lost to you, would you take it?”

“Would you take it?” Embedded in this question was a much larger question “Would you trade your life now for the one you had before?” In the two years that had passed following my accident, until that moment, I had never consciously considered the idea of having gained any benefits from my injury and recovery, even though I had ceased enumerating the losses inherent in my new condition. One of my companions quickly responded, “Walking isn’t *that* important,” and I found myself readily agreeing.

As we went around the table, the question elicited three “No” answers. It was unanimous. The resulting discussion made it clear that we each very much would have liked to return to a “normal” life without the physical, emotional, and social trappings of our disabilities. But, none of us saw that a return to “normal” was worth giving up the gains made in our “new” lives. As we talked about the powerful personal changes we each experienced, and/or the unique opportunities that arose specifically because of our disabilities, it became clear that we each had acquired something very dear in the various realms of our lives – like having better relationships,

becoming open to new possibilities, and finding greater joy and strength within ourselves – discoveries that could only have been accessed through the gateway of our individual recoveries.

The Uses of Sorrow

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

Mary Oliver, from *Thirst: Poems*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2006.

Introduction

Time and again we are presented with figurative and literal images of the phoenix as it rises from the ashes. This representation may be in a film or novel presenting us with scenes of mystics and onlookers gazing in awe as a being of light, energy, and grace takes flight from the ground of utter destruction. Or it may be in the form of a human interest story with the speaker calling upon the phoenix as a kind of shorthand to stand in for all that the subject has overcome to triumph in the face of their adversity. It is this shorthand that the phoenix is best known for: literally taking the elements of its former life and creating a new life that is inspiring to those who are witness to the transformation. Because of its continual use in association with these rebirth motifs, the phoenix has become one of the most recognizable symbols of transformation in our collective psyche. This mythical animal has become our common metaphor for the stories of odds-beating recoveries from disaster, whether personal or communal narratives.

The story of rising from the ashes to take flight anew can be an apt metaphor for many people who have lived through a serious trauma. In the last thirty years researchers have begun to investigate the instances and circumstances in which this personal renewal occurs and how it manifests in the lives of those who experience it. In the field of Psychology this personal renewal is known as “posttraumatic growth.” Much like the phoenix, these trauma survivors have experienced a death of sorts when their lives, often ones that were seen as safe and predictable, were touched by the flames of trauma, disease, or bereavement. Yet, these survivors have also found rebirths within the destruction, as elements of their lives were transformed in positive ways as a result of recovering from the trauma. This is the definition of posttraumatic growth; the survivor reports that life is better now, at least in some areas, than it was prior to the traumatic event as a result of working through the aftermath of that traumatic event.

The experience of posttraumatic growth does not negate the pain and suffering that is experienced as a result of a significant trauma or loss. Everyone who experiences trauma goes through a period of mourning and disorientation as a natural part of the process of enduring a tragedy, eventually finding their way through it, and living with its lasting effects. In fact, the psychological research reveals that states of depression or post-traumatic stress disorder can persist for a decade or more, even while an individual simultaneously reports experiencing posttraumatic growth. While this finding may seem paradoxical, it demonstrates the complex relationship posttraumatic growth has to the precipitating trauma.

The research on posttraumatic growth reveals that one does not have to appreciate the trauma itself, be it disease, accident, or event, to recognize the personal growth that may have resulted from coping with that trauma and its after-effects. Researchers have shown that it is through the process of acknowledging and accepting, even grudgingly so, the presence and

persistence of the negative aspects of the trauma experience and its aftermath that one begins to recognize the positive effects of coping with the trauma. Posttraumatic growth represents the integration of the trauma and its effects into one's greater life experience.

I suggest that this is the area where the Humanities can offer insight into the processes of posttraumatic growth, and more importantly, provide models that may be adapted to our own circumstances. Researchers in the field of posttraumatic growth are not blind to this correlation either. Many of their studies contain references to the stores of knowledge in the realms of the Humanities. For example, pioneering researchers Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun note, "there has been a very long tradition of viewing human suffering as offering the possibility for the origin of significant good" ("2004 Posttraumatic Growth" 2). The prevalence of the ideal of the phoenix and other "blessings from a curse" scenarios suggest that our social fabric is interleaved with Humanities-based memes that illustrate and validate the conclusions of the posttraumatic growth research.

In fact, many people draw from the Humanities, often unconsciously or reflexively, when confronted with difficult circumstances. When faced with some distasteful situation, one might off-handedly quip, "Whatever doesn't kill me, makes me stronger." While that phrase floats about in the popular lexicon, it is actually a philosophically grounded contention. It is one of the carefully considered conclusions of the 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, taken from his book *Twilight of the Gods* (3). These responses also reflect the speaker's own philosophical stance, be it conscious or unconscious, on personal suffering. Going beyond that simple example, it is not just the realm of philosophy that offers people a perspective on their pain during the trying times of life. For centuries upon centuries, people have sought refuge in literature,

religion, art, and music, as well as philosophy, when they have found themselves met with the seemingly insurmountable obstacles of trauma and its aftermath.

Making explicit connections between the Humanities and posttraumatic growth is the primary concern of this paper. It will begin with an explanation of the myth of the Phoenix, its origins and why it is such an enduring symbol of rebirth. The paper will then review the insights of the psychological science of posttraumatic growth. Following that summary, connections between the two fields of Humanities and Psychology will be made. Joseph Campbell's model of the monomyth, also known as "The Hero's Journey," will be outlined. I then offer a framework for viewing the process of posttraumatic growth through the lens of The Hero's Journey. I next offer some examples from the Humanities canon that illustrate the discipline's relationship to posttraumatic growth. I conclude by suggesting some future applications of this work. All of this exploration into the intersection of the two disciplines is done with the intention of actively seeking insights that may be employed in the cultivation of posttraumatic growth.

The Phoenix

Stories of the phoenix date back thousands of years and have been prominent in cultures ranging from the areas surrounding the Mediterranean Sea across the Eurasian land mass to Russia, China, and Japan. The phoenix itself is immortal across all cultural versions of the story. Most versions, all but the Chinese and Japanese versions, include an element of the bird's periodic death and subsequent rebirth in an unending cycle. The legend of the phoenix seems to hold prominence across this broad swath of space and time because it represents the perpetual series of endings and beginnings that occur around and within the human experience.

One of the original uses of the phoenix was to track the movement of celestial bodies across the heavens. The phoenix cycles tracked the regular “deaths” and “rebirths” of these celestial objects. The ancient Egyptians (circa fifteenth century BCE) are credited with the first association of a bird, their native *benu*, with the rising of the fiery body of the sun (Krupp 102; Pinch). Various, the phoenix was also used to track Venus or Sirius (Krupp 103). Depending upon the heavenly body whose orbit was being symbolically tracked by the phoenix, the phoenix’s lifespan varied from around 500 to 1461 years (Krupp 103; Shumaker). Regardless of the particular celestial association, the phoenix’s representation as a creature of fire which would be perpetually extinguished and alighted once again was clear.

Sometime around the fifth century BCE, the stories of Egypt’s *benu* and stories of the phoenix from other locales around the Mediterranean were collected by the Greeks, most notably by Herodotus (Krupp 103; Pinch; Schumaker). As a result, the stories, which featured not only variable timing, but various means of death and rebirth, began to amalgamate themselves into the more consistent narrative widely known today. By the first century CE, the mythical cycle of death and rebirth of the phoenix had proven to be a powerful symbol that communicated a clear message of renewal that would be used to inspire countless generations of humankind.

The phoenix’s attributes of immortality and regeneration were put to use by Jewish rabbis, Christian theologians, and the Roman Empire to communicate their respective messages of faith and political power. The religious scholars used the phoenix to exemplify their doctrinal beliefs (Niehoff 246). Hebrew commentary, known as *midrash*, discussed the phoenix’s immortality as a reward for its obedience to G-d, while, Christian theologian St. Clement (96 CE) used the phoenix to prove the validity of the resurrection of Jesus (Niehoff 252). And, Tertullian’s (ca. 160-225 CE), another Christian apologist, argument could be summarized as “If

the resurrection of the phoenix is certain, how much more so the resurrection of the righteous, who are superior to birds” (Niehoff 254). Following the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE, the message of the phoenix was given another new life. It was imprinted on the Roman coins as an emblem of the city’s restoration (Krupp 103; Shumaker). This particular application of the image of the phoenix and its rising from the ashes has become one of the most enduring incarnations of the phoenix legend.

With close to four thousand years of propagation and persistence, it is clear that the renewal the phoenix has come to represent offers something compelling to the human psyche. Joseph Nigg, noted phoenix scholar, suggests that phoenix lore is enduring precisely “because of renewal,” and “hope for rebirth” (qtd. in Shumaker). Clad in its guise as “hope for rebirth,” the phoenix is the embodiment of overcoming even the greatest obstacles of death and destruction.

The phoenix can also represent sloughing away the worn, the damaged, that which is no longer viable, and being newly created in order to take flight with a new era of possibilities ahead. As such, it is no wonder that this denizen of the Humanities is so prolifically invoked when one wishes to convey a message of recovery. With the phoenix in mind as a potent image of rebirth or resurrection, let us now turn our attention to the psychological study of posttraumatic growth.

Posttraumatic Growth

In reference to the landmark 1996 study done by Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, researcher Alia I. Sheikh describes posttraumatic growth in this way:

While the negative consequences of trauma are well-documented, a recent emerging literature points to the potential for trauma to be an experience that is, for some

individuals, deeply transformative in ways that are reported as positive and valued. It is not that such individuals have somehow escaped the seriously negative impact of the losses, but rather that, in coping with the losses and rebuilding their lives, some individuals may unexpectedly arrive at a new level of meaning, a changed philosophical stance that represents a renewed and valued purpose, a redefined sense of self, and a changed relationship to the world. This phenomenon has been recognized as a distinct construct – posttraumatic growth. (85)

Researchers Tatjana Barskova and Rainer Oesterreich characterize posttraumatic growth as “express[ing] that something positively new occurs in a person’s life, which represents a personal benefit and development when compared with the pre-crisis level” (1710). Or, stated more simply, posttraumatic growth is the renewal and even greater revitalization of one or more areas of one’s life following a life-changing trauma such as an injury, attack, or severe illness.

Dr. Froma Walsh has used the term “bouncing forward” to describe this outcome of coping with trauma. Posttraumatic growth has been shown to be a product of the process of “constructing a new sense of normality as we recalibrate our lives to face unanticipated challenges ahead” (Walsh 34). Sheikh’s definition, used in this section’s opening, as well as Walsh’s explanation, make clear two things: posttraumatic growth’s natural environment is one of profoundly challenging circumstances, and posttraumatic growth results from the work done in rebuilding and recalibrating in the aftermath of the trauma.

It is essential to also acknowledge that not all traumas result in posttraumatic growth. Calhoun and Tedeschi’s studies frequently reiterate their assertion from their 1999 publication, “it would be a mistake, a gross misunderstanding of our position, to assume that posttraumatic growth always happens” (qtd. in “2004 Foundations” 98). But, encouragingly, these authors also

state, “we have been finding that reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders” (Tedeschi and Calhoun “2004 Posttraumatic Growth” 2; see also Barskova and Oesterreich 1729). So, while it is known that posttraumatic growth is not an outcome which all trauma survivors will experience, this paper will concern itself with what has been learned about the posttraumatic growth phenomenon.

First, researchers are careful to emphasize that it is not the trauma that is the source of the subject’s growth; rather, it is the individual’s response to the trauma that manifests as posttraumatic growth. “The point is... that appreciating a disability, giving it value, need not require that it be preferred in and of itself; just that its ramifying meaning is valued,” says rehabilitation psychologist Beatrice A. Wright, as quoted by Calhoun and Tedeschi (“2004 Foundations” 99). Wright makes it clear that the trauma and its results can remain undesirable, while what has come about through the individual’s process of coping with the trauma and its impact within their lives can still be viewed positively.

Posttraumatic growth subjects have articulated those positive elements in myriad ways, but researchers have found some general themes in the responses shared by survivors. Those themes manifest broadly into five domains as defined by Tedeschi and Calhoun in their diagnostic tool, the Post-traumatic Growth Index (PTGI). These domains are “Appreciation for Life,” “Spiritual Change,” “Relating to Others,” “Personal Growth,” and “New Possibilities.” Detailed subheadings for each domain can be found in Appendix A (“2004 Posttraumatic Growth” 6; Barskova and Oesterreich 1714). In the context of these domains, respondents often describe a greater understanding of, and connection with, themselves as well as with the people and world around them. A friend of mine whose daughter was stillborn once told me, “you know, when things get tough, I just think to myself that if I got through my daughter’s death, I

can get through anything.” Her insight nicely illustrates the PTGI domain of “Personal Strength.” Other respondents have realized “New Possibilities” in the pursuit of new career paths or activist roles, with those pursuits often related to their own traumas and recoveries (Tedeschi and Calhoun “2004 Posttraumatic Growth” 6). The body of posttraumatic growth research goes on to cite numerous examples of corollaries in each domain of the PTGI, from respondents experiencing a deepened spirituality to having a greater appreciation for life as a result of their trauma experiences.

Another diagnostic tool, Tomich and Helgeson’s “Benefit Finding Scale,” uses actual quotes from cancer survivors as the qualitative measures in the researchers’ scale. Each item on the questionnaire is prefaced with the statement “Having had cancer has....” followed by the quoted phrase that the respondent then rates to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement. A sampling of the twenty phrases used in this scale offers such phrases as “...made me more grateful for each day,” “...brought my family close together,” or “...renewed my interest in participating in different activities” (Barskova and Oesterreich 1715). These statements offer clear, simple representations of how posttraumatic growth may be expressed by a trauma survivor.

The seemingly simple day-to-day aspects of the greater life satisfaction and engagement that are experienced as a result of posttraumatic growth offer long-term benefits as well. Some studies have shown positive associations with posttraumatic growth and its effect upon the long-term physical and mental health status of individuals. One literature review found that “Individuals who were high in [posttraumatic growth] tended to show a low level of depression symptoms” (Barskova and Oesterreich 1723). That same literature review found positive relationships between posttraumatic growth and lower anxiety levels, lower levels of distress,

and better health outcomes (1725, 1726, 1728; see also Joseph 340). It is for these reasons that attaining some degree of posttraumatic growth can be seen as desirable.

Unfortunately, posttraumatic growth is not a panacea capable of eradicating all the negative repercussions of trauma. Tedeschi and Calhoun note in their 2004 study, “The experience of posttraumatic growth may be accompanied by a reduction in distress, but our model does not predict such a relation” (“2004 Posttraumatic Growth” 13). And, in fact, many studies have revealed high rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or other negative mental health states among the same subjects who scored highly in posttraumatic growth measurements (Barskova and Oesterreich 1723; Pat-Horenczyk and Brom 382). For example, one longitudinal study of spinal cord injury (SCI) showed that even subjects who consistently scored highly on the posttraumatic growth index also showed similar rates of depression at 10 years post-injury as those that were experienced at 12 weeks post-injury (Pollard and Kennedy 356). Ronnie Janoff-Bulman observes, “It is not simply that some survivors report benefits and others losses, but rather that the same people often report both” (100). Interestingly, although it is not uncommon for “highly distressed states” to be concurrent with posttraumatic growth, some studies suggest this distress may actually promote posttraumatic growth outcomes.

The studies that show positive links between “highly distressed states” and greater degrees of posttraumatic growth present two interesting hypotheses regarding the correlation between distress and growth. One theory for the linkage suggests that the greater the posttraumatic stress or depressive symptoms, the more the individual may employ coping mechanisms that facilitate posttraumatic growth. The other theory suggests that posttraumatic

growth itself is a coping mechanism of sorts, thus preventing the negative psychological states from taking over the individual.

In the literature review conducted by Pat- Horenczyk and Brom, one study suggested that posttraumatic growth “served as a protective factor against a probable PTSD diagnosis” (382). In this model, it is thought that individuals are coping with the stress of their trauma by actively engaging themselves in turning their “beliefs into action.” They are seen as working toward finding meaning and sense in the midst of their trauma (358). The subjects of this study were on the verge of being evicted from their homes in Gaza by Israeli troops and bulldozers during the period of “disengagement” in 2005. The study subjects were found to be actively confronting the cause of their trauma by peacefully, or sometimes violently, resisting the Israeli forces. It is thought that by acting on their own behalf, they were activating elements of posttraumatic growth. The process of utilizing one’s sense of personal strength, community engagement, and acting on what is important to one self can act as a shield against PTSD.

The other study which links a state of distress with posttraumatic growth suggests that a phenomenon often associated with PTSD, intrusive rumination, acts as a catalyst for the greater cognitive (a.k.a. “thinking”) processes that can lead to posttraumatic growth. Kanako Taku et al. posit that the intrusive thoughts which occur in the aftermath of trauma may “prime the process of more deliberate rumination that ultimately facilitates growth” (130). In this model, the intrusive rumination “(e.g., ‘I thought about the event when I didn’t mean to’)” leads to a more reflective type of thinking that is directed toward “reminiscence, problem solving and ‘making sense’ of events” in order to integrate the trauma experience into one’s larger life experience (Taku et. al 132, 129). This second type of thinking, deliberate rumination “(e.g., ‘I have tried to make something good come out of my struggle’),” is linked to “recognizing the positive by-

products of the experience,” and leading to greater likelihood of posttraumatic growth (Taku et. al 132, 130). Both the Israeli eviction and rumination studies seem to highlight that deliberate and active engagement in meaning-making by the individual as part of their conscious or unconscious coping strategy has a significant impact upon posttraumatic growth outcomes.

The research regularly shows that the processes of coping with, adjusting to, and reconciling one’s post-trauma reality with one’s pre-trauma life and ideals are what lead to posttraumatic growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun tell their readers, “It is the individual’s struggle with the new reality in the aftermath of trauma that is crucial in determining the extent to which posttraumatic growth occurs” (“2004 Posttraumatic Growth” 5). This struggle “with the new reality” is commonly identified as “schema change” across the body of posttraumatic growth research. Stephen Joseph describes schema change in this way: “The new trauma-related information must be either assimilated within existing models of the world, or existing models of the world must accommodate the new trauma-related information” (339). Essentially, how the trauma survivor begins to think about, the process known as “cognitive processing,” the trauma and its aftermath is what enables this assimilation into, or adjustment of, existing schemas to incorporate the trauma and its aftermath into the survivor’s larger life narrative.

Coping strategies can either facilitate or disrupt the cognitive processes necessary for successful adjustment. There is a broad spectrum of coping strategies that may be employed following a trauma, from those which have been found to be conducive to posttraumatic growth, to others which have proven debilitating. Some of the coping methods that have been found to negatively affect an individual’s ability to rebound from a traumatic experience are alcohol/drug use, denial, and behavioral disengagement (Pollard and Kennedy 349). It is thought that this group of coping strategies fails to foster the cognitive processing necessary for posttraumatic

growth. These forms of negative coping were found to be predictors of continued negative psychological outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Pollard and Kennedy 354). On the other hand, strategies such as positive reappraisal, acceptance, and social support are often identified with posttraumatic growth (Pollard and Kennedy 354; Prati and Pietrantonio 364; Tedeschi and “2004 Posttraumatic Growth” 8-11). These positive coping strategies appear to move the survivor towards constructing the new schemas necessary to incorporate the changes the trauma has wrought in an individual’s life.

These new schemas have the effect of changing the stories survivors tell themselves about their world and how they see themselves within it following a trauma. Robert Neimeyer says, “our sense of self is established through the stories that we tell about ourselves, the stories that relevant others tell about us, and the stories we enact in their presence” (54). Trauma inserts itself into those stories. Neimeyer continues to say that, “self-narrative is profoundly shaken by seismic life events” (54). It is within the process of answering the question “Why me?” that there is an “attempt to reestablish some semblance of a meaningful universe” (Janoff-Bulman 100). It “instigat[es] the process of revision, repair, or replacement of basic thematic assumptions and goals” (Neimeyer 54). And it is here that positive coping strategies take effect.

As noted above, the element of rumination – that is, how one thinks about the trauma and its repercussions – can play a significant role in posttraumatic growth. Deliberate rumination was found to enable the survivor to do “the cognitive work required to restore a meaningful understanding of the world” (Taku et al. 130). These researchers describe deliberate rumination as “evidence of a continuing process of building back one’s assumptive world” – in essence, reconstituting the story of one’s life after trauma. It is thought that engaging in the deliberate patterns of thought associated with problem-solving, anticipating challenges and pro-actively

addressing them, and actively seeking meaning in the aftermath of trauma encourages the development of the qualities associated with posttraumatic growth – things like greater self-reliance, a sense of acceptance, revision of personal priorities and the like. The Taku et al. study effectively shows the influence one's thoughts may exercise upon the posttraumatic experience.

Positive reappraisal was another coping strategy found to have been employed by subjects who ranked highly in posttraumatic growth. Positive reappraisal is thought to work as a self-fulfilling prophecy. By actively attempting to positively interpret the lasting resonance of one's trauma experience, the individual may be creating a framework in which benefit can be found (Prati and Pietrantonio 377). When reviewing studies on survivors of terror attacks, the researchers Ruth Pat-Horenczyk, and Danny Brom found evidence that those who employed active coping strategies, including positive reappraisal, early in their trauma experience could be predicted to have lower incidences of depression, and greater likelihood of reporting posttraumatic growth (383). Calhoun and Tedeschi state “that the work of constructing narratives that accommodate the traumatic events can lead to profound changes in identity” (“2004 Foundations” 99). Positive reappraisal is one way of recrafting one's personal narrative wherein some benefit can be found not in the trauma, but in the personal changes in its aftermath. Like the prior coping strategy, this strategy also focuses upon the cognitive processing of the trauma experience.

The posttraumatic growth literature also highlights that involving others in the recovery process is an especially important means of coping with trauma. This coping strategy is called “social support.” It “is defined as the perception or experience that one is loved and cared for by others, esteemed and valued, and is part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations” (Barskova and Oesterreich 1720). It seems to be effective for a number of reasons.

Certainly, it offers a sense of community, inclusion, and support. But, it also encourages survivors to speak with others about their emotions and their experiences of the trauma and its aftermath. Tedeschi and Calhoun call this process “disclosure,” and they observe, “supportive others can aid in posttraumatic growth by providing a way to craft narratives about the changes that have occurred, and by offering perspectives that can be integrated into schema change” (“2004 Posttraumatic Growth” 8). Neimeyer’s views support their hypothesis:

...The recounting of traumatic life narratives to others solicits validation of one's experience and provision of social support, both of which can facilitate healing and growth. Indeed, a good deal of social psychological research demonstrates the importance of confiding or "account making" in integrating and transcending difficult life experiences. (54)

By its very nature, social support encourages a thoughtful processing of the trauma on the part of the individual because it engages the survivor in the cognitive work of articulating the story of the trauma, its aftermath, and its meaning in the context of their lives.

The manifestation of posttraumatic growth is based upon what the survivors tell themselves about the trauma experience and how it has affected them. These studies indicate that one’s inner story has a profound impact upon how one might perceive the quality of his or her life following a traumatic event. It is in the context of personal reflections and conversations that one may begin to identify, articulate, and give voice to the unexpected positive repercussions following a traumatic experience.

In the next section, we will begin to explore how, sometimes, one’s own story can be better understood through the story of another.

*They published your diary and that's how I got to know you
 Key to the room of your own and a mind without end.
 Here's a young girl on a kind of a telephone line through time
 The voice at the other end comes like a long lost friend
 So I know I'm all right, my life will come, my life will go
 Still I feel it's all right, I just got a letter to my soul*

“Virginia Woolf” – Indigo Girls

Joseph Campbell’s “Monomyth” – The Hero’s Journey

The phoenix metaphor is a powerful image of the regenerative moment of crossing over from pain to progress, but as an explanation of the *process* of posttraumatic growth it is somewhat lacking. Here is where an examination of Joseph Campbell’s work on the “monomyth” or “hero’s journey” can help us understand the strength of the connection between the Humanities and the psychology of posttraumatic growth. As noted earlier, many of the introductions to the scientific studies of posttraumatic growth examined for this paper reference the stories and ideas revealed in the realms of the Humanities as a precursor to the scientific inquiry into the subject (Joseph 335, Prati and Pietrantonio 364; Sheikh 86; Tedeschi and Calhoun “2004 Posttraumatic Growth” 3). Campbell’s work is a watershed moment in the combination of the application of the psychological sciences and the scholarly study of the Humanities.

In 1949 Joseph Campbell published his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he analyzed the heroic stories and myths from cultures and religions around the world. As a result of this analysis, Campbell outlined a consistent story arc that all of the protagonists move through in the course of these narratives, regardless of cultural origin. Campbell employed the

psychoanalytic models of Jung and Freud in his review of these tales and the symbols contained within them. As he analyzed these narratives, he came to the conclusion that there was “one shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story” underlying the world’s wide variety of mythologies and religions (1). He called that story arc the “monomyth,” and it has become popularly known as “The Hero’s Journey.”

Campbell’s monomyth outlines a progression that each hero moves through as encompassing three phases, and consisting of as many as seventeen stages. This progression tracks the hero from the dissolution of a known world, through unknown realms and challenges, to the hero’s return with knowledge of self and/or something special to offer one’s community. Each of these phases represents a significant transition in the hero’s inner life.

The first phase is “Departure,” wherein the hero embarks on her journey, sometimes willingly, sometimes not, by being jolted from her commonplace existence (Campbell 41). The hero may attempt to refuse the call away from the familiar, but with or without her cooperation, the wheels of fate have already been set into motion. The second phase is “Initiation” (Campbell 81). This phase encompasses the entrance and immersion into the unknown; it is often a subterranean place or one filled with darkness or confusion. The Initiation is the phase in which the hero’s metamorphosis begins. The hero has accepted her quest and faces the trials of the quest along the way; she may receive aid from unexpected sources and will undoubtedly experience her widest range of emotions in this portion of the journey. The final phase is “Return” (Campbell 167). The hero has acquired her “boon” – the tangible or intangible reward, such as a golden treasure or heretofore unrealized self-knowledge – resulting from her quest, and returns with it to her former life, transformed and enriched. The result of this journey is that the

hero attains a mastery and freedom for herself and/or her community that did not exist prior to her journey.

This hero's journey through the monomyth is intended to serve a larger purpose than the mere transformation of the hero character. It is intended to be a roadmap for the lives of the tale's audience. Campbell writes, "The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they stand along the scale" (101). Campbell continues, "The individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general human formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls" (101). According to Campbell, these stories and their lessons have always been intended for the real world, rather than relegated to the realms of fantasy.

"It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that move the human spirit forward," writes Campbell (7). "The old teachers knew what they were saying," Campbell tells us (xii). Neimeyer, in relating the importance of narrative to posttraumatic growth says, "stories can be told to instruct, entertain, impress, implore, test, admonish, invite, or distance the listener, and occasionally several of these intentions can be compressed into a single telling" (54). The events and examples found in the hero's journey convey all of these intentions. They are there to teach their audiences to "cut away from the attitudes, attachments, and the life patterns of the stage being left behind" (6); to "die to the past and be reborn to the future" (10). Campbell's inquiry has shown that this severance is necessary in times of crisis in order to move one's story forward, otherwise "the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved" (49). These precise lessons are most relevant to the connection between the Humanities and science of posttraumatic growth because they are intended to "move the human spirit forward."

Overlay of the Monomyth and Posttraumatic Growth

“Moving the spirit forward,” as Campbell’s analysis of the monomyth tells us, means that stories are more than mere entertainment. He concludes that these stories are the potential maps, or at least evidence for the existence of milestones, that can be called upon when navigating the altered landscapes of our lives following trauma. The personal narratives of trauma survivors – the stories they tell themselves about what they have endured and how it has affected them – have been found by the posttraumatic growth researchers to be of significant import in the process of posttraumatic growth. How much more powerful would it be to find one’s own story in the collective library? Isak Dinesen said, “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them” (qtd. by Momaday 89). Using Campbell’s milestones, it becomes possible to overlay posttraumatic growth with the monomyth’s narrative structure with the goal of proposing a confluence of these ideas.

Most, if not all, of the monomyth’s stages can be seen to have corollaries in the posttraumatic growth process. Prior to the initiation of the hero’s journey, she exists in the “ordinary world,” this being the pre-traumatic state. “The Call to Adventure” could be seen as the trauma, be it event, attack, or diagnosis of illness. This is the beginning of the first phase Campbell identified as “Departure.” The “Refusal of the Call” is that time period of disbelief immediately following the trauma. It is the time of questioning, “Why me?” “How did this happen?” and the stage in the cycle of grief known as “denial.” This is the point at which the trauma survivor, our hero, may get stranded, unable to accept the trauma and the changes it will surely make in her life and the survivor/hero may even turn to some of the negative coping strategies noted in the posttraumatic growth section of this paper. At “The Crossing of the First Threshold,” the survivor/hero is now “at the limits of the hero’s present sphere or life horizon”

writes Campbell, “Beyond them is darkness, the unknown...” (64). It is at this point, most often with the help of others such as family, clinicians, and peers that the survivor moves into the exploration of her posttraumatic reality.

The “Initiation” phase begins with “The Road of Trials.” This stage is filled with all of the obstacles that must be navigated in order for the hero to reach her goal. Rather than slaying dragons or lashing oneself to the mast in order to resist the siren’s call, for the trauma survivor these trials may take the more mundane but no less imposing forms of enduring physical therapy, navigating the intricacies of insurance coverage, securing social services, and weathering the rollercoaster of emotions that follow a traumatic experience. This is the phase in which the initiates become familiar with the strange new world into which they have been thrust. They typically will encounter successes and failures in the course of traversing this portion of the journey. It is in this phase that the hero’s old self is reconciled with the new reality. Christopher Reeve’s choice to title his memoir *Still Me* reflects this reconciliation. It was the realization that while his paralyzing equestrian accident and newly disabled body had profoundly impacted his life, more importantly, there were also aspects of his being that were enduring beyond the confines of his bodily circumstance (9). For some, this realization alone may be equivalent to the stage Campbell calls the “Ultimate Boon,” which he describes as the hero attaining something that is “indestructible,” “inexhaustible,” “immortal” (151). In the context of posttraumatic growth, a realization like Reeve’s may well be the foundational element for any later construction of the trauma’s “ramifying meaning” in the survivor’s life.

Campbell’s final phase is the “Return” wherein the hero must leave the strange new land of her adventure and bring her boon back to the ordinary world, or as he says, “the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy” (167). There may be a “Refusal of the Return”

in which the hero would prefer to stay in the environment of the quest for reasons of comfort or fear. For some, leaving the hospital, with all of its supportive systems, and striking out alone at home may be a source of refusal of the return. Campbell does not suggest that the return home will be easy; he identifies the tribulations of return and adjustment as “The Magic Flight” and “Rescue from Without” to describe both the difficulty of returning with the boon intact and the hero’s need for assistance to return home safely. For trauma survivors, these stages are where they are tested again, perhaps revisited by elements of psychological or bureaucratic obstacles faced earlier in their recovery that may threaten their wellbeing or security and they must turn to clergy, counselors, social workers, family, and/or friends to help them along. “Master of Two Worlds” and “Freedom to Live” represent the final stages of Campbell’s hero’s journey. Here one is confident in their identity as a trauma survivor and has attained a significant mastery over the equipment, routines, and coping skills required to deal with the trauma’s aftermath. This is the point at which the recovery process bears fruit and the posttraumatic growth domains begin to open up in the forms of new possibilities and deeper connections with people, self, and spirit. The hero has returned home, for better *and* worse – for any gains made came at a cost to the hero and those close to her – and while she is no longer the same person who was separated from her “ordinary world,” she can claim the rewards of the journey *and* the enduring parts of her old life.

When viewed in this way, Campbell’s monomyth has the potential to show trauma survivors where they are and where they are going in the recovery process. As therapist Estelle Frankel points out; “Knowing we are on a journey that has distinct stages, and being able to ‘name’ these stages, helps us place our personal experience within a larger context.” (77). With this model in mind, the stories and insights of the Humanities can be consciously employed in

who understands that his legacy will not be in his personal existence, but rather that legacy will be manifested in the qualities of the kingdom he shepherds which is what will last well beyond his own lifetime. Over the course of the story, Gilgamesh embodied qualities that are identified on the PTGI scale such as greater compassion for others, and a revision of personal priorities. When read with an attentive eye, Gilgamesh's lessons are freely available to each of us *before* we must confront similar crises in our own lives.

Another classic, *The Odyssey*, has recently been used by author, and Department of Veterans Affairs counselor, Dr. Jonathan Shay to illustrate the nature of the “psychological injury,” PTSD, and the challenges that battle-scarred soldiers face upon returning home (4). In his book *Odysseus in America*, Dr. Shay uses the epic “as an *allegory for real problems of combat veterans* returning to civilian society [emphasis Dr. Shay's]” (2). He incorporates the stories of Odysseus in his work counseling veterans returned from Vietnam, and increasingly he is working with veterans of the Middle East conflicts as well. He says, “One of the things they appreciate is the sense that they're part of a long historical context — that they are not personally deficient for having become injured in war” (qtd. in Shapiro). Through his use of classic works in the Humanities canon, Dr. Shay reveals that these tales have the power to aid in the recovery from trauma. By establishing a link between the events of the story and the events of the client's life experience, Dr. Shay enables, and I would suggest accelerates, the development of critical personal insights which his patients can use in their own recovery and rehabilitation processes.

It is in this manner that the Humanities hold the potential to help address the big questions faced when one is in a posttraumatic state. Janoff-Bulman identifies two key understandings survivors are often wrestling with in their recovery process: “meaning as comprehensibility” and “meaning as significance” (qtd. in Sheikh 90). Sheikh elaborates on these

concepts in the following way: “The former involves questions relating to how the events fit in with a pre-trauma understanding of the world” while “the latter involves a more abstract level of inquiry relating to whether there may be some value or purpose to coping with the event” (90). Religion, literature and philosophy especially have engaged these questions.

When trauma survivors consider the first question, some may find the connection between trauma and their understanding of the world in the realm of religion. The story of Job, a man faithful to God, yet from whom God took everything of value for seemingly no reason, is often called upon to illustrate faithfulness, patience, and an acceptance of the fortunes of life. Job endured his distressing circumstances and remained faithful to God throughout, and so God eventually restored Job to a position of comfort in life and relationship. Of course, this example raises the question of “why do bad things happen to good people?”

Offering one answer to this question is the experience of Islamic scholar Gray Henry. In her essay “Even at Night the Sun is There,” she relates how in a matter of weeks she had experienced a decline from being fully fit to being in a state of total paralysis due to Guillain-Barré syndrome. As her paralysis progressed, she tackled the question “why does this happen to someone, in the view of Islam?” (Henry 64). Her scholarly study of the Hadith, composed of the recorded teachings, deeds, and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, revealed the prevailing Islamic thought on the matter: “illness is understood to be a great blessing because it is an opportunity, if borne with patience free of complaint, to purify oneself of past sins – to burn away wrong thoughts and deeds” (Henry 64-5). As Henry recalled her experiences with other Muslims she had met who were praising God for their afflictions, she began to apply this teaching to her own circumstance.

This exploration led Henry to an answer of her own to Janoff-Bulman's second question of meaning as significance: "In an instant, my own illness was seen in a new light. I no longer patiently tolerated it – I loved it, I flowed with it. I saw how blessed I was to have been given, not something small, but something as total as paralysis" (Henry 65). As she began to recover, she explains how her illness moved her to a new state of understanding regarding the value of her experience: "God had blessed me with near total dependence on others, a symbol reminding me of my utter dependency on Him. And even when I had not been able to move one inch, I was able to be in touch with His Divine Presence" (Henry 65). In the parlance of posttraumatic growth, she experienced a "Spiritual Change." Across most religions, stories can be found of one having everything stripped away and coming to rely upon the divine just as Henry did.

In another sense, Henry's experience evokes the phrase, "the two-foot drop." It is a phrase I first heard in addiction recovery circles, which refers to the moment one moves from thinking to feeling; from head knowledge to heart wisdom. World Religion scholar Lawrence Sullivan has addressed the phenomenon, illustrated with Henry's example, by saying, "The symptoms of illness become symbols of the state of your being. You are ill but you are not just suffering passively, you begin to see this particular illness as a call to enter into association with powers that are less familiar and to assume new responsibilities." (Parabola 3-4). John Updike's poem "Fever" offers another view of this idea: "I have brought back a good / message from the land of 102 degrees: / God exists. / I had seriously doubted it before;" (qtd. in Shea 147). He concludes, "... it is truth long known, / that some secrets are hidden from health" (qtd. in Shea 147). Here we see that the traumatic state of illness becomes the gateway, Campbell's "First Threshold," through which the survivor passes toward a deeper spiritual connection.

Stories from religion may also offer hope to one in the midst of coming to an understanding of how anything good may come of this current misfortune, creating “meaning as significance.” In her article, “Life as a Sacred Narrative,” therapist Estelle Frankel recalls the Book of Esther and the story’s importance in her life as holding out hope for an eventual revelation of meaning during periods when she found it difficult to make sense of her own circumstances. Esther was a Jewish woman forced into the harem of the King of Persia. After several years in captivity, she was chosen to be the king’s wife and while in that role she learned of a plot to kill all of the Jewish people in the kingdom. Because of her new-found position as queen, she was able to persuade the king to put a halt to the plan and save her people. Frankel notes, “. . . what begins as bad luck is, in the end, reversed into good fortune; events that initially appear to be ‘by chance’ turn out to be providential” (77). Frankel finds “meaning and coherence” in her own life’s progression as a result of putting herself “in Esther’s shoes” (77). Stories like Esther’s show that the terrible events that do not make sense at the time may yet become comprehensible and significant over the course of time.

The passage of time is a necessary element in allowing the space for posttraumatic growth to occur. The meaning and significance of trauma are rarely comprehensible at the outset. Here, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* presents a perspective on patience and trauma. The medicine man Betonie is beginning to help Tayo, a World War II veteran, with his PTSD. As they sit together, Betonie tells Tayo, “Accidents happen and there’s little we can do. But don’t be so quick to call something good or bad. There are balances and harmonies always shifting, always necessary to maintain” (120). Here he calls into question Tayo’s initial judgement of the situation at hand. Then Betonie continues, “It is a matter of transitions, you see; the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely. You would do as much for the seedlings as they become

plants in the field” (120). By evoking the growth cycle of plants, how they need time to bear fruit, Betonie is now urging Tayo to allow the healing process to ripen in its own time, and through that process Tayo’s perspective of the situation may also change. This idea is implicit in Calhoun and Tedeschi’s comment, “For most persons the overwhelming pain and distress... must be satisfactorily managed before growth can begin to be experienced and acknowledged” (“1998 Beyond Recovery” 365). One recurring theme in those works of the Humanities which offer perspectives that also reflect the eventual outcomes of the posttraumatic growth process is that of patience.

Rainer Maria Rilke’s series of *Letters to a Young Poet* offer practical advice that is just as relatable to one living into the aftermath of trauma as it was to the anxious young man to whom Rilke first addressed those letters. In “Letter #4” Rilke advises restraint of the natural inclination towards immediate resolution of our problems:

I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (35)

Here, Rilke’s words suggest that in the midst of turmoil one need not rush off to find a cure.

There is healing power in merely remaining present through one’s times of discomfort. Like the story of Esther noted earlier, Rilke suggests that the greater meaning of today’s struggle will be revealed in its own time. He suggests adopting a sense of greater acceptance, yet another characteristic of posttraumatic growth.

This is where the Humanities strength lies in relation to posttraumatic growth. The canon offers countless stories about loss and adversity, about healing and recovery, and frequently urges us to new heights. Some of these stories offer solace by connecting the reader with another who has passed this way before, for as Leslie Marmon Silko states, “It is very important that one keep track of all these stories – both positive and not so positive.... Because... by knowing the stories that originate in other families, one is able to deal with the terrible sorts of things that might happen within one’s own family” (“2001 Language” 161). Further, like Rilke, the 13th century poet-philosopher Jelaluddin Rumi actively encourages the reader to take a new perspective upon their current situation. In his poem “The Guest House,” Rumi advises the reader to welcome not only joy, but sorrow, depression and shame; to invite them inside eagerly, for they “may be clearing you out / for some new delight” (Rumi; see Appendix B for full text). In addition, Greek philosopher Sophocles (5th century BCE) presented his drama *Philoctetes* to the Athenians in such a way as “he told them a story and invited them to recognize that story as their own, so that by learning to re-imagine themselves, they could find new resources to confront a[n uncertain] future they were facing” (MacIntyre 9). Sophocles’ approach reflects that of Dr. Shay in his use of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The Humanities is filled with narratives in which trauma survivors can see themselves or the trials which they are facing in new ways. Through these stories, the survivor can learn how others have weathered similar storms and found unforeseen rewards on the other side of the tempest. Whether it is a matter of soldiering on, or taking a step back in order to bounce forward, the stories told by the Humanities have profound potential to influence the stories survivors tell themselves in the aftermath of trauma.

I took a leap of faith and I stumbled
I tried to live outside grace and I was humbled
But I'd like to bet if I live to fear regret
Then we never would've met
...
If it took those years to get me here
I'd do it again for you

“My Girlhood among the Outlaws” Maria McKee

Conclusion

Because the Humanities canon is the result of millennia of deep reflection on, and meticulous recording of, the human condition it is not surprising that solace and inspiration can be found in its contents. It would seem logical then that the content would cross over into the psychological domain of posttraumatic growth; after all, as long as there have been humans, there has been trauma and its psychological aftermath. Therefore, the Humanities should, and does, have a lot to tell us about trauma and our responses to it, both positive and negative. Posttraumatic growth psychologists have acknowledged this, and I have shown that the Humanities does indeed have much to say about deriving benefit from setbacks. By using The Hero's Journey as an analogy for the process of recovery and posttraumatic growth, I have suggested one method for aligning the Humanities' content with the work of the psychologists. Further, I have offered some works from the Humanities canon that not only support the idea that eventual good can come out of the immediate bad, but take concrete steps towards teaching the survivor how to arrive at that conclusion for themselves.

It is in the application of the Humanities to the process of posttraumatic growth that I see the greatest potential for future benefits to trauma survivors. Further fieldwork may consist of actively taking clients who are in recovery through a Hero's Journey of their own. This may take the form of a writing workshop, as done by the Brain Injury Network of the Bay Area in 2013 ("The Rediscovery Project"). Perhaps an even more immersive experience of moving through the stages of the Hero's Journey could be combined with an adaptive sports experience akin to the "ropes course" – an outdoor course consisting of individual and team challenges to move through the physical environment usually encompassing elements of terrain that require participants to overcome one or more fears or anxieties in the process – to foster the realization of posttraumatic growth. Another research opportunity might be in the form of a longitudinal study to incorporate reading and discussion of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* in the treatment program for a group of acute rehabilitation patients and to compare their short, medium, and long-term posttraumatic growth outcomes with counterparts who participated in standard rehabilitation therapies. Studies such as these may move our knowledge beyond the theoretical, intuitive, and academic connections between the Humanities and posttraumatic growth into realms that enable us to provide the springboard necessary for trauma survivors to "bounce forward" much sooner in their recovery process.

The idea of bouncing forward is borne out in the literature of both the Humanities and Psychology. The psychological studies have shown that it is possible for trauma survivors to move beyond the immediate aftermath of the trauma and into mindsets that allow for realization of benefits that have arisen as a result of coping with the trauma and its repercussions. As therapist Peter Levine has written, "Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence" (37). However, the verdict rendered by each survivor will be an outgrowth of their

personal narrative. I believe that the narratives of the Humanities are not just mirrors reflecting the existence of posttraumatic growth. The literature of Humanities reveals the knowledge that can be both gateway and path to posttraumatic growth and a new life beyond the confines of trauma enabling the survivor to soar once again.

Phoenix bird! Don't you know him? The bird of paradise, the holy swan of song?
When ... born in the garden of paradise, in its first rose, beneath the tree of knowledge,
our Lord kissed [him] and gave [him his] true name - Poetry!

“The Phoenix Bird,” Hans Christian Andersen

Appendix A

Personal strength

A feeling of self-reliance
Knowing I can handle difficulties
Being able to accept the way things work out
I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I
was

Relating to others

Knowing that I can count on people
A sense of closeness with others
A willingness to express my emotions
Having compassion for others
Putting effort into my relationships
I learned a great deal about how wonderful
people are
I accept needing others

Appreciation of life

My priorities about what is important in life
An appreciation for the value of my own life
Appreciating each day

Spiritual change

A better understanding of spiritual matters
I have a stronger religious faith

New possibilities

I developed new interests
I established a new path for my life
I'm able to do better things with my life
New opportunities are available which
wouldn't have been otherwise
I'm more likely to try to change things which
need changing

(Barskova and Oesterreich 1714)

Appendix B

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

– Jelaluddin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

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