

A Compassionate Path to
True Flourishing

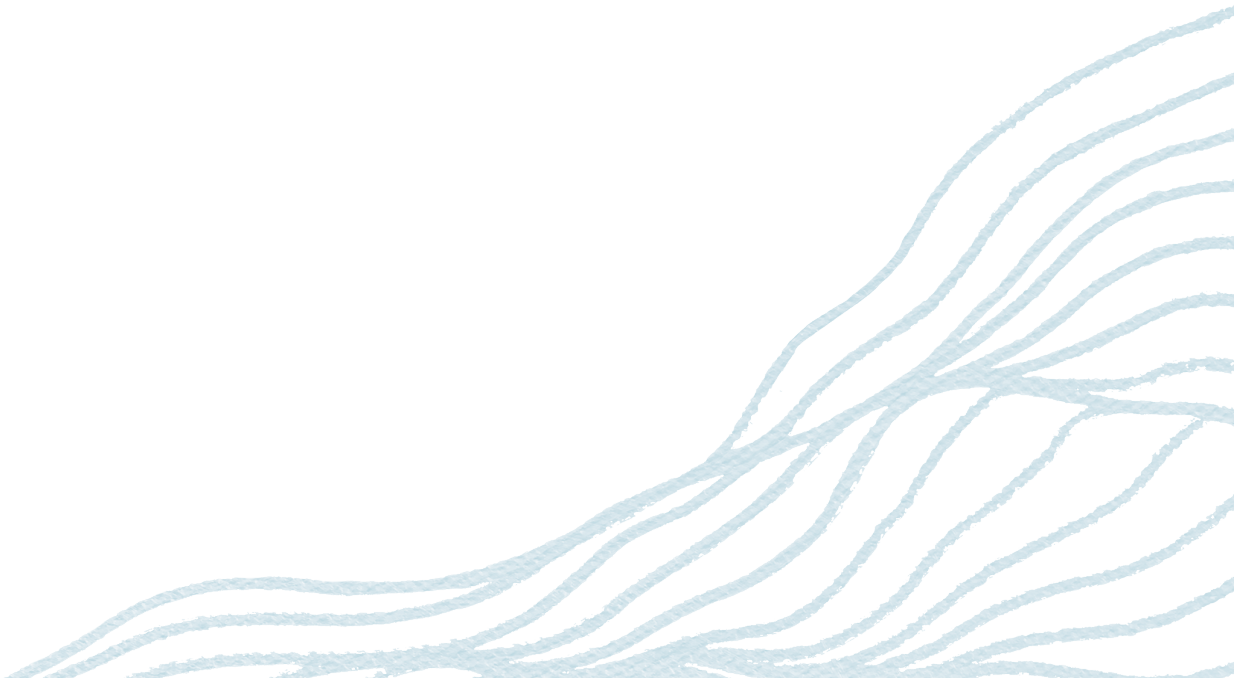
**STRONG
LIKE
WATER**

GUIDED JOURNEY

AUNDI KOLBER MA
LPC

AUTHOR OF *TRY SOFTER*

STRONG LIKE WATER GUIDED JOURNEY





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Strong like Water Guided Journey: A Compassionate Path to True Flourishing

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CONTENTS

Introduction *vii*

- SESSION 1 Embodied Pain Requires Embodied Healing *1*
- SESSION 2 Tending the Ache for Compassionate With-ness *23*
- SESSION 3 The Wisdom of Goodness *41*
- SESSION 4 Embracing the Ebb and Flow *59*
- SESSION 5 In Service of Wholeness *75*

Benediction *91*

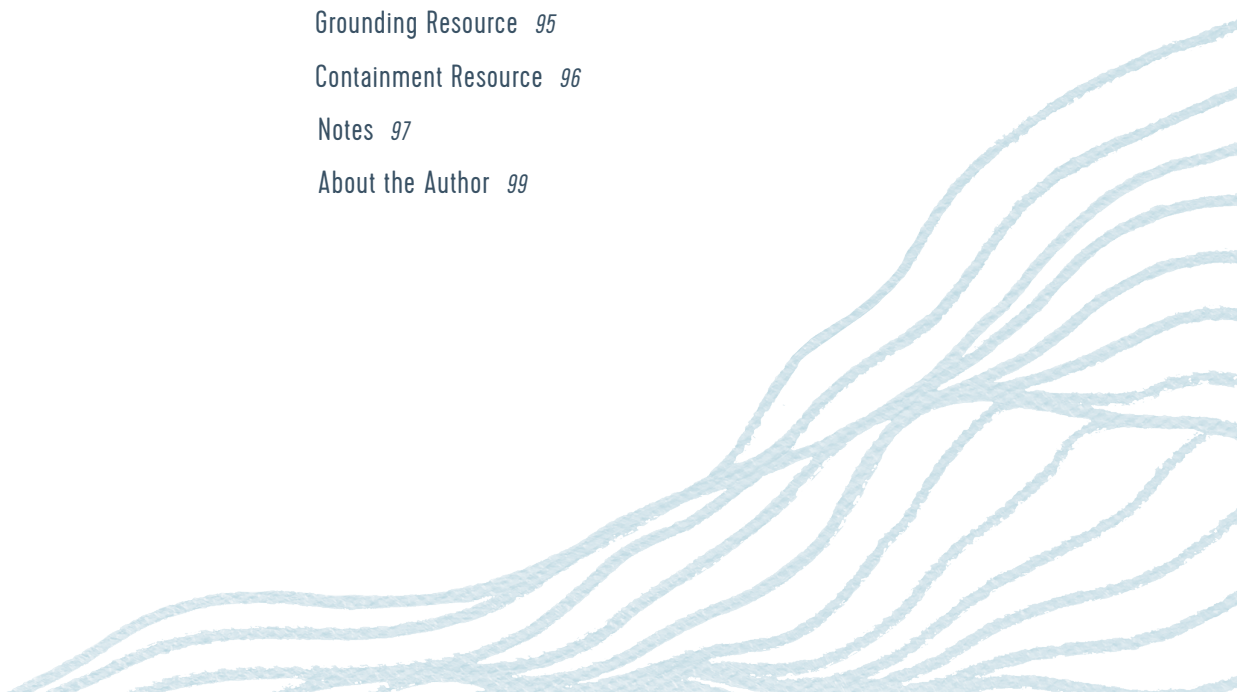
Guidance for Group Leaders *93*

Grounding Resource *95*

Containment Resource *96*

Notes *97*

About the Author *99*





**NOW WITH GOD'S HELP
I SHALL BECOME MYSELF.**

SØREN KIERKEGAARD



INTRODUCTION

THE COLORADO SKY IS CLEAR; the moon shines with a pale white light even as the sun rises and begins to make her debut across the Front Range. Silently, I hand my mom her coffee, turn my keys in the ignition, and begin to drive out of our neighborhood toward the airport. My mom has been visiting for a few weeks, and now it's time for her to return home to the Pacific Northwest. We drive in easy silence for a few minutes, sipping coffee and enjoying the view.

We've come a long way, my mom and I. Much of my own story is intertwined with hers. I grew up knowing my mom loved me, but because of abuse in her marriage as well as her own history of trauma and alcoholism, she often couldn't be the mom I needed. She couldn't always protect me from my dad. Our entire family had to walk on eggshells around his psychological abuse, explosive anger, and violent punishments. As a result of my dad's rage and my mom's distance, my earliest identity was mainly formed around a sense of constant threat. I had to be stronger than a little one should ever have to be; I felt a burden to "keep it all together" so as not to cause more pain. Putting on my

game face, I ventured into the world alone (or so I felt). If no one was going to show up for me, I'd find ways to survive anyway. I'd perform, tie myself in pretzels to keep others happy, and—somehow—find a way to keep going.

Yet in these last decades a precious alchemy has happened. It's not been without deep (and often painful) work—for both my mom and me. But our relationship has softened. We have witnessed and experienced what the psalmist called “the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Psalm 27:13). Through experiences of support, safety, therapy, education, and the nearness of God, my life is on a different trajectory than I have any business being on.

And so here we drive, my mom and I.

After we reminisce about her visit, our conversation begins to turn toward more weighty matters. It almost seems that as we get closer to the airport, we move closer to the truth of who we are. We talk about things like healing, questions, and even doubts. We talk about how things could have been different. We talk about anger. We talk about grief. We talk about the ways we don't understand the mystery of God but know He is with us.

“Aundi, honey,” she says—her voice cracking—“you're more tenacious now than you ever were as a young basketball player.” She laughs to herself. “And that's saying something. Because I remember the way you used to play.”

It's true. The strength that carried me through life was never more evident than when I was on the court. I turn the car into the drop-off lane—our time together is almost done. My mom's voice grows quiet. “But you're more gentle too,” she whispers. “I love seeing who you've become.”

My hands grip the steering wheel and tears start to stream down my face. It's deeply validating to hear my mom say these words to me; I sense that she is perceiving me in a way she wasn't able to in my childhood. She is seeing all of me—more than just my survival strength—and calling it good.

My mom has said what I have learned to be true: There is a different way for me to be strong.

AN INVITATION: A FLEXIBLE AND EXPANSIVE GUIDE

It has taken me years to learn that I can be both soft and strong; that in fact, my strength sustains my softness, and my softness is a resource to my strength. That like the ocean I grew up next to, we each have so much more depth than is visible on the surface; God designed each of us like an entire universe.

And how about you, dear one? Do you know what it's like to feel afraid of your own story or your own life? Are you exhausted trying to live from the kind of strength that's been required of you to keep going—but wonder what other choice you have?

I get it.

Sometimes I wish I didn't. There have been times in my own journey and my work with clients when grief has felt like a deep cavern. And yet, I'd like to tell you one of the things that my dear friend Tasha Jun once wrote as we honor our strong-like-water work. She said this: "Lament is a womb for hope."¹

Reader, it is my deep prayer that our work in the pages ahead will feel more like a "womb" than a tomb. That as we dive deeper into this expansive way to be in the world, you will begin to internalize the idea that strength doesn't have to look just one way—and it doesn't have to cost you yourself. It's so much bigger and more inclusive than you can imagine. And as you begin to embody this idea, I pray you can utilize some of the resources provided to honor your grief, your questions, and your fears—even as you open up to possibilities of healing.

I wish I could tell you this work is going to be easy and fast. Don't we all, on some level, want to figure out how we can heal *right now*? It is extremely tempting and very human of us to want immediate change.

And yet, that's just not how this work *works*. This is a journey of a lifetime, and we know that we may never see full healing on this side of heaven.

But I will say this: Just because the work is difficult, it doesn't mean there won't be moments of ease in your journey. In fact, every single time you begin to

engage your story—body, mind, and spirit—from a lens of safety and compassion, you're *already* healing. Just the fact that you are here with a heart beating in your chest, curious about how to become more of who God made you to be, is a beautiful symbol of the goodness in you and a sign of the growth to come.

I've done my best to structure the *Strong like Water Guided Journey* in the most accessible, gentle, and effective way possible to accommodate both growth and compassion. Though it's good and necessary for us to stretch ourselves at times, for many trauma survivors, hearing that they need to get even *more* uncomfortable in order to grow, heal, or change can be quite overwhelming. This is incredibly valid, of course. You may have spent your whole life in survival mode, completely outside your comfort zone. Because this is true, I do all I can to work from what is known as a trauma-informed lens. With almost every practice, I will prompt you to check in with yourself to make sure your nervous system isn't flooded or disconnected to prevent any harm as we go along. Similarly, I will always try to empower you with choices, reminding you that you can do any and all of the practices ahead at your own pace and in the ways that best serve you; or you can choose not to do them at all. If you'd like to skip sections to come back to later or complete some content partially, you may absolutely do so. In many ways, the internal attunement you practice in doing that is just as much of your strong-like-water work as anything else.

Within the guided journey, I have separated the work into five distinct sections that will enhance various topics from *Strong like Water*.² In order to help enrich what you've already learned from the book, what we discuss in these sections will connect, build on, or expand on the principles in a deeper, more reflective way.

Here's a closer look at what you might expect as we continue:

Holding Space for Our Stories

One of the most beautiful concepts I've come to learn both professionally and personally is that stories change and move us. Not only that, but each

of us carries our own story of lived experience in our body. At the beginning of each section, you'll find a short personal reflection to help you continue processing concepts learned in the corresponding *Strong like Water* chapters. You can also find a free, short video introduction for these ideas on my website: aundikolber.com/slwwideos. (Use the password *stronglikewater*.)

Body-Centered Exercise

The work we do in *Strong like Water* is not for the faint of heart. It can be hard and painful, deep soul work that requires compassion and gentleness. You learned in *Strong like Water* how to check in with yourself and your body, and while I invite you to do this throughout the guided journey, each session will also allow space to explicitly focus on your body. These practices are an extension of what you'll have learned in the corresponding chapters of *Strong like Water* and are meant to help you anchor the content we're working through in your whole self. With that said, safety is key: You'll notice that I often provide cues to make sure you're accessing body work in a way and at a tempo that feels doable to you. Please know that regardless of the extent to which you engage in these practices, just by honoring the pace of your body and your innate need for safety, you are already beginning the work of healing.

Invitation to Reflect and Discuss

While much of the strong-like-water work will be individual, God wired our bodies for interpersonal connection and co-regulation. If you want to do this work in an authentic and supportive group environment, you can adapt and facilitate accordingly. The questions are meant to spark introspection and reflection—as well as conversation and sharing to the extent that you feel comfortable. Because this is such vulnerable and personal work, I've included a short resource, “Guidance for Group Leaders,” that highlights core components of trauma-informed communication, which you'll find in the back of

this book. Especially in groups, creating and maintaining safety are of utmost importance. Be intentional about cultivating a space of trust—and give each other permission to participate and interact with the material *as you personally choose to*. You are the best judge of how much of your story and your experience feels helpful to disclose. My hope is that realizing you are not alone on this journey of living strong like water will be a balm of encouragement to your soul.

Invitation to Journal

Much of the deep work of compassionate resourcing happens squarely within your mind, body, and psyche, and this journaling section is one way to continue to attune to your own story. Many of the prompts I've written are similar to questions and activities I would delve into with you if we were sitting in my therapy office. My hope is that as you engage with these questions, they will provide a springboard that allows you to gently hold and honor the complexities of your personhood.

Invitation to Create

Have you ever noticed that some experiences are hard to describe with words? Or have you ever felt like words aren't enough? We all experience this from time to time, but it can be especially true when parts of our stories have been distressing or traumatic. This is why I want to invite you to use art to gently tap into your right brain, which researchers note is connected to imagery, symbolism, emotion, and sensation.³ Even when parts of your story aren't distressing, finding ways to access the right brain can be helpful as you move toward integration and wholeness—for it is from a place of deeper integration that you can continue to resource and pay compassionate attention to the wounds that are still aching.

In this “Invitation to Create” section, feel free to adapt the prompts so they

INTRODUCTION

best empower you as you honor your story. And as a sidenote, don't let your perceived lack of artistic skill keep you from trying these. Many of us wouldn't consider ourselves artists, and that's okay! As with all our work, the process of creating is as important as what we've created, no matter how it turns out.

Reader, in a culture that often misunderstands the courage required to truly heal, I believe you are wildly brave for engaging in this strong-like-water work. I'm not sure how you're arriving at these pages: whether anxious and frayed or bruised and weary—or perhaps somewhere in between. But I am so glad you're here. I believe you matter; the intricacies of your life and personhood matter. They matter not only to me as a fellow image bearer, but to our world and to the God who formed you. May I offer an even more audacious hope: I pray you come to know that it's possible—truly possible—to heal and live into a more expansive strength, even if you start with only a glimpse of that strength. I pray that in the work ahead, you will experience a sense of alignment with the person you were created to be and the presence of the Spirit of God, who loves you profoundly.





ONE WAVE AT A TIME

MORGAN HARPER NIC•HOLS



**COMPASSION MEANS
FULL IMMERSION IN THE CONDITION
OF BEING HUMAN.**

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN, *SHOW ME THE WAY*

SESSION 1

EMBODIED PAIN REQUIRES EMBODIED HEALING

A Deeper Dive into Chapters 1 and 2 of *Strong like Water*

“WOW, CHARLOTTE, UM, WHAT A STORY,” Izzy said distractedly. “You’ve been so strong pushing through this.” As she talked, Izzy riffled through her wallet and tried to get the server’s attention, signaling that lunch was over.

Charlotte was stunned by Izzy’s nonchalance; she had just shared about the intense betrayal she’d experienced at the hands of a coworker to whom she’d once felt close. This experience had upended Charlotte’s entire life, forcing her to resign from her job and lose most of her support network. Even more, it had rattled her faith. She felt alone, confused, and disoriented by the loss of this friendship. For Charlotte, telling this story was a major deal, a vulnerable sharing of her wounded heart. Just the emotional exhaustion from talking about her experience required courage that Charlotte hadn’t been sure she possessed. Though Izzy was saying the right words of validation, somehow they rang hollow.

Charlotte’s hands felt clammy as she took the last bite of her meal. Suddenly she felt a rush of shame, the heat filling her face. Had Izzy even wanted to

hear her story? Why had sharing this tender part with her made Charlotte feel *worse*, not better, like she'd thought it would? Why did she feel even more alone? An intense sensation of heaviness settled in her; she just wanted to leave the restaurant immediately and hide.

Instead, she did what she always did. She pasted on a smile, suppressing the millions of emotions actually coming up. Then—and Charlotte felt especially angry at herself for this—*she* apologized to Izzy for being such a “high-maintenance friend” who was so “needy.”

Izzy smiled back and said, “Well, yes—sometimes you are.”

In the moment, Charlotte couldn't seem to avoid falling right back into her old habits of overaccommodating and overfunctioning at the expense of her own well-being. Charlotte felt deeply conflicted by her actions, and yet she didn't know what else to do.

Later that night, Charlotte tried to reflect on the missed connection at lunch. She knew Izzy meant well, and she did try to be supportive. Charlotte appreciated that. But even so, she felt *missed*. Like Izzy hadn't truly seen her. Like Izzy hadn't been there for her, not really. Like at the end of the day, Charlotte had to get through this trial on her own.

This wasn't a new feeling for Charlotte, and it had started way before her friendship with Izzy. Charlotte was the oldest of three kids in a family that valued responsibility and hard work. She was used to needing to figure things out on her own. As Charlotte was growing up, her parents had come down brutally on her if she spoke up or asked for more support because they wanted her to be prepared for “the hard world out there.” She loved her parents, but they often micromanaged her schoolwork and extracurriculars to make sure she was succeeding. Through all the stress, Charlotte was expected to maintain a positive attitude no matter how much she was hurting or what she faced. Even when tragedy struck and she lost her dearest friend in a car accident when she was only in middle school, Charlotte knew there wasn't any real space for her to grieve. Even

though her parents told her they supported her and it was okay to cry, their actions told a different story.

It seemed to be like that with everyone Charlotte loved: They appeared to be there for her, but after the lights went out and she was alone, she often felt isolated and unsupported, like she was the only one in the universe.

Charlotte was so tired of always being strong—at least the kind of strong she thought people like Izzy and her parents wanted from her. Recently, Charlotte had been trying to be more aware of this exhaustion, to heal from how these relationships made her feel. However, her efforts—wellness retreats, diets, prayer hacks, cleanses, and forms of therapy focused on changing her thoughts—worked only temporarily, and when she didn't notice lasting change, ultimately she felt more shame.

There had to be more to life than this. A fuller, more connected way of living. But how would she ever find it?

Many of us, like Charlotte, have learned that strength seems to always involve pushing down what we truly need and pushing ourselves beyond our limits so that we ultimately live a life that's fractured from our true sense of self. This is operating in survival mode—or as I call it, situational strength. But please remember, this kind of strong is not bad. It serves a very distinct and necessary purpose: navigating overwhelming, disturbing, and/or life-threatening experiences. And thank goodness we have the ability to tap into this type of strength, because the fact that God designed our bodies to survive is a gift. But its purpose was *never* to sustain us permanently.

As with Charlotte, too often what begins as an adaptive strength in one situation becomes our default strength in all situations. It becomes our reflexive position as we move through life. It's as if our bodies carry the imprint of past pain into the next moment because we never fully metabolized that hurt

in the first place. So we survive, yes, but we never thrive because we aren't experiencing the fullness God created us for.

What alternatives do we have? We begin by working to understand that it was never pain that made us strong in the first place. That we don't need to celebrate pain to cultivate strength. After all, our ability not only to survive but also to heal has always been a gift from our Creator—it's been within us from the start.

The reality is that, like water, our bodies and emotions are designed to flow between nervous system states and ultimately toward wholeness. Yet unfortunately, our experiences of unresolved pain and trauma impede that movement, and instead of processing through them, the pain gets stuck. Many of us have lived our lives like Charlotte, constantly slapping on a smile in the face of deep despair.

But through attuned therapy and the slow building of a few friendships committed to genuine reciprocity, Charlotte began to learn she had always been worthy of love and care. It was slow work, especially at first, but this care birthed courage in her to build her resources, set boundaries, and begin to move through the world as more herself than she had ever been.

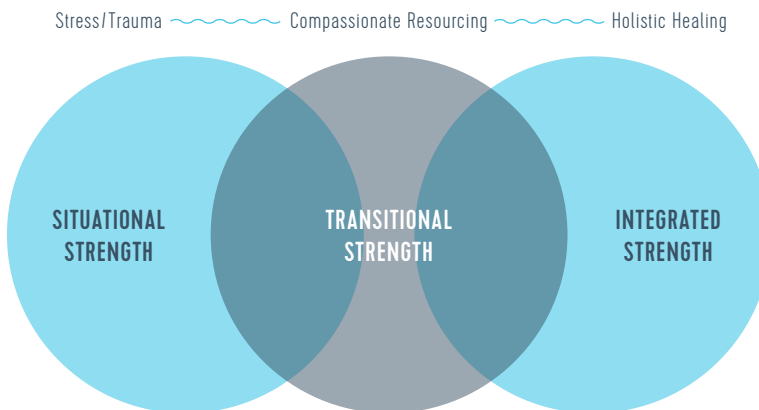
This is possible for you, too, my friend. My conceptualization of the flow of strength (see page 5) helps us imagine the practicalities of how our bodies wisely adapt and integrate as we begin to gain the compassionate resources we need and embody strength like water. Each of the three types of strength serves a purpose and gives us vital information about our needs, process, and experience:

Situational strength: Our bodies operate from a stress/trauma response to navigate or neutralize difficulty. We are reacting from a neurobiological level rather than conscious choice, and in the absence of enough safety after the difficulties occur, our experiences may remain fragmented in our bodies and minds.

Transitional strength: As we experience cues of safety, we have the capacity to attend to the wounded and traumatized parts of ourselves, offering them resources and support. We learn to hold dichotomies, understanding we may have pain but that it is not our identity. Similarly, we learn to hold both goodness and sorrow; joy and suffering. As a result, we begin to have a choice in how we engage our stories, bodies, and strength.

Integrated strength: Through care and support, our bodies are able to digest the intensity we have felt and the pain that has plagued us. We gain the capacity to learn from and reflect on our experiences, and the wounded parts of ourselves experience various levels of repair. Increasing levels of internal safety give us the capabilities to extend love, hope, and safety to ourselves and others.

THE FLOW OF STRENGTH



Though different types of strength are required in different situations, compassionate resourcing (safety and support) is the current that moves us along the flow of strength toward a more holistic and sustainable way to be in the world.

Learning to identify and flow between each, then, is the source of our most expansive strength. Our power comes not from the wounds, but the tending. Not from the trauma, but from the way it's cared for. Love is the building block for true resilience.

BODY-CENTERED EXERCISE

I'm a big advocate of compassionate resourcing, the idea of “*coming alongside* and *remaining responsive* to the parts of ourselves and our stories that *do not yet* feel safe” (*Strong like Water*, page 75). Psychologist Dr. Arielle Schwartz defines such resources as “anything that communicates safety to our bodies in the present.”¹ For our first body-centered exercise, then, I want to remind you of several foundational resources to build safety such as grounding and containment. You'll find them on pages 95 and 96. If you've traveled with me through both *Try Softer* and *Strong like Water*, you know that these resources are where I always begin; truly, their importance cannot be overstated.

Now, as you're able, take a moment to do a body scan while reflecting on each of the types of strength. Picture a laser going over your body from the top of your head down to your toes, noticing any sensations or emotions that may come up. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers here. For now, simply notice how your body is interacting with each of the prompts that follow.

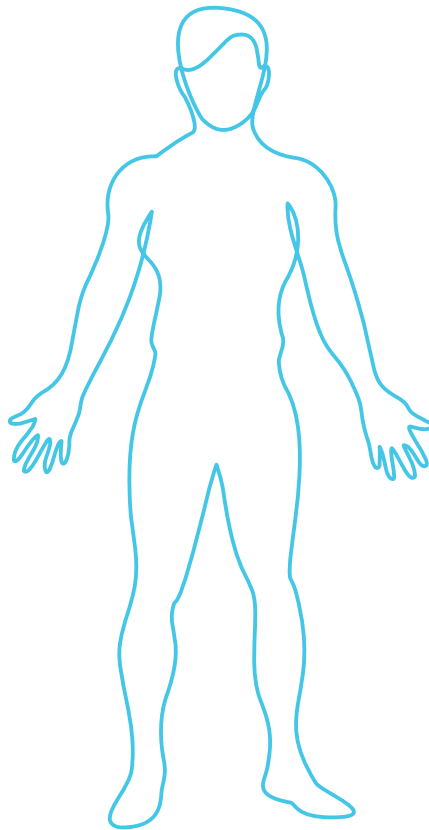
If at any point the sensations that come up feel like they might be overwhelming, you can choose to stop this activity. An alternative to stopping altogether could be to place a hand on your chest or on any part of your body where you feel discomfort. This is a way you may provide embodied support to your system. Take a moment to notice if that changes your experience. Do you notice softening? A sense of opening? A sense that you can be with what is coming up?

1. A body-centered lens in therapy reminds us that the sensations and emotions that are evoked when we reflect on a concept, memory, or event are vital information. In a way, we can consider this a means by which our body “speaks” to us even below

SESSION 1: EMBODIED PAIN REQUIRES EMBODIED HEALING

our cognitive stories. For this next exercise, I want to guide you through getting curious about what comes up in your own body when we reflect on the various types of strength.

Take a moment to think about the concept of situational strength: the kind of strength that may feel like your only option when you're trying to survive, no matter the cost. As you're able, consider what you're noticing in your own body as you reflect on the concept. (Notice that we're just reflecting on the concept, not necessarily the situation that put you in that state.) You may notice straining, clenching, overextending, or even feeling disconnected, trapped, contracted, heavy, or more. (As much as possible, simply observe these sensations without getting lost in them.) Where in your body do you feel these sensations? If it's helpful, mark them below.



STRONG LIKE WATER GUIDED JOURNEY

2. Now, consider what you notice in your body when you think about moving toward transitional strength: the kind of strength in which you feel at least a bit secure. You may have one foot in survival mode, but you have some resources that enable you to cope—perhaps even to move through your emotion.

To begin this exercise, take a moment to orient yourself to the room you are in. Pay attention to what you see, hear, and smell. This is a means to come back to the present moment while still honoring what your body is telling you. Once you've allowed your senses to establish you right where you are, use a body scan to observe what you are experiencing internally as you consider transitional strength. Do you notice any shifts in sensations or emotions as you consider what resources are available to you? A lightness? A sense of being able to observe your experience rather than getting lost in it? You may even want to jot a few notes below. This interplay of being *with yourself* as you consider transitional strength is a way to begin to attend to yourself.

3. Finally, I invite you to do a body scan as you consider the concept of integrated strength: the kind of strength that comes from knowing—deep within you—that you have worked through something hard. Often there's a sense of completion, settledness, or embodied knowing of who you are and what you need in that moment. You may notice a feeling of hopefulness, peace, or clarity. And if you have rarely experienced integrated strength in your own life, that is completely okay. For now, we are simply assessing how your body is responding to the concepts. If you'd like, use the space below to write a few notes.

SOMATIC VOCABULARY

An important part of moving trauma and stress through your body is learning to tune in and describe your bodily sensations.² Once you do so, you can decide how to move or otherwise support your body so that the feeling doesn't remain stuck inside you.

This vocabulary list might be a good starting point for you, but I encourage you to remain curious and add your own words as you learn to attune to the sensations of your body.

- achy
- airy
- anchored
- buzzy
- clear
- cold
- contracted
- electric
- expansive
- full
- fuzzy
- grounded
- hard
- heavy
- hot
- light
- loose
- lukewarm
- open
- pointy
- prickly
- pulsing
- radiating
- rough
- satiated
- saturated
- small
- smooth
- soggy
- tender
- tense
- tight
- tingly
- trembling
- vibrating
- wobbly
-
-
-
-
-
-

SESSION 1: EMBODIED PAIN REQUIRES EMBODIED HEALING

3. In *Strong like Water*, I note that “in temporary, short spurts, situational strength is extremely helpful, necessary, and even protective” (page 21). When has situational strength helped or protected you? Which of the situational strength strategies in the table on pages 26–29 of *Strong like Water* feel especially familiar to you?

4. As you feel able, consider why you’ve perceived that you need to be “the strong one” in the first place. Though it may not be possible or even desirable to continue to live from situational strength, in what ways do you think your body might have done so to try to protect you?

STRONG LIKE WATER GUIDED JOURNEY

5. What do you believe God's posture toward you is when you are in pain or survival mode? Where do you think this belief stems from?

6. "Love changes us in ways that fear and danger cannot" (*Strong like Water*, page 36).
What do you think that means? Has that ever been true in your own experience?
In what ways does this feel connected to the verse "Perfect love drives out fear"
(1 John 4:18)?

INVITATION TO JOURNAL

Have you ever felt like you've had to be "the strong one"? If so, why?

SESSION 1: EMBODIED PAIN REQUIRES EMBODIED HEALING

How does a strong-like-water perspective challenge what you've been taught?
How might that change how you're showing up to your life?

STRONG LIKE WATER GUIDED JOURNEY

If it feels helpful, consider how often strength is viewed as a paradox in Scripture (e.g., “When I am weak, then I am strong” [2 Corinthians 12:10]; “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” [Matthew 18:3]). If doing so feels like a resource, consider how that paradoxical lens might affect your perspective on strength.

A PRAYER FOR HONORING

As you feel comfortable, find a safe space and settle into these words. You might even put your hand on your heart and, after reading through the prayer, close your eyes to reflect further:

God, here in this moment, empower me to honor everything that arises in my body, mind, and soul today; even if it means I have to return to it at another time.

Creator of all things, remind me that in honoring my experiences, You help me affirm dignity to the parts of myself that have at times felt stripped of it.

God, help me know that my desire for safety and connection is valid. In Your wisdom You designed me to need both.

But as I'm able, grant me the ability to open up to the possibilities of healing and newness while staying connected to the reality of Your love.³

INVITATION TO CREATE

The concept of water is overflowing with meaning and metaphor; even the way it can change from ice to liquid to gas provides phenomenally rich images. In one way, in fact, water's mutability mirrors the way we can learn to be flexible in the stages of our strength, flowing from one form to another depending on our situation.

Of course we know that water—which makes up about 60 percent of our bodies—is vital to our very existence.⁴ Though water is critical for physical life, throughout the Bible water is often used symbolically to convey our spiritual need as well. The Gospel writers point out that Jesus is the One who can truly quench our “thirst.” As Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14).

At other times, water represents the struggles we have to overcome or work through:

When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.

ISAIAH 43:2

Interestingly, as different as these metaphors are, each reveals a new truth: God is both our life-giver and the life force that sustains us even when we travel through threat. I also love that there are layers of complexity to each picture. As one of my former colleagues would say, “It’s all grist for the mill.” Each way of looking at water can spur us on to listen to and honor the internal landscape God designed within us, as well as the ways we are invited to partake of the “living water”—Jesus Himself.

For this first creative activity, I invite you to consider the ways that water has impacted your own life. Where have you experienced it as life-giving? Does that memory or the experience of water itself feel like a resource to you? Where, if at all, has it felt treacherous? I invite you to take a moment to sketch or paint what comes to mind as you think of these scenarios. As you do, notice what colors, shapes, or themes you are drawn to. Does any poetry, Scripture, or music come to mind as you create? What are your takeaways from what you are noticing?

The truth is, having to live from situational strength can be quite costly. That's not to say there aren't ways for us to work *with* what we're carrying, but it is important to acknowledge the weight and reality of it.

As you consider this, I invite you to take a moment and review the “Getting to Know Your Container” exercise from page 59 in *Strong like Water*. Reflect on the challenges, pain, or trauma that may be filling up your container while staying connected to your own window of tolerance (the range of arousal in which you can feel or experience something in a way that is tolerable to your body). Consider how you might express what you're carrying—not through words, but through painting or drawing. What colors appeal to you? Which shapes? Do you want to take up a little space on the page or a lot? Do you notice any relief or shift as you let the paper also hold what you're carrying?

WHAT ARE YOU CARRYING?

Examples of what might be filling your “container”:

a history of unresolved trauma	a demanding job
racism	job loss
anxiety	loneliness
depression	discrimination
chronic illness	caregiving
other health issues	poverty

You may be carrying other heavy experiences, including the day-to-day stressors of life that may not feel “disturbing” on their own but that when paired with everything else might lead you to rely on situational strength.



TRAUMA IS NOT WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU.

IT'S WHAT HAPPENS INSIDE YOU

AS A RESULT OF WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU.

DR. GABOR MATÉ