

The unexplored Room



Dare to enter and find your heart

Greg Loewen

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Introduction

In many ways, this is a book about the forbidden and the unacceptable. It is about the things our parents didn't want to talk about. It is also about the things our culture deemed inappropriate when we were growing up. Perhaps you are wondering why someone gave you this book or why you were drawn to even pick it up. Why would *anyone* want to read about this kind of stuff?

Why indeed.

Despite our best efforts, our own unseen material lingers on silently, like a living entity in the basement. We might not remember putting it there, but when it surfaces, it can be quite disruptive. This forbidden, unacceptable stuff may be interfering with our lives already, if we look carefully.

We can spot elements of what we don't want to look at in ourselves, if we take a moment to notice the very things we hate about other people. We might notice the memories that we have been avoiding when something triggers childhood pain or trauma in our adult lives, or we might discover it within those things we

believe we could never become. This is exactly where this material likes to hide.

Silently and invisibly, these are the very things that hijack us to destinations we weren't planning to visit. The things we were taught to avoid doing and talking about as we grew up are all stored away in a place I like to call "the unexplored room."

If we ever work in this space and gain access to the discarded aspects of ourselves, we become more whole. Our living space doubles. Being *whole* is a lot more complicated than being *happy*. While this book does not exactly claim to bring happiness, it does describe a kind of wholeness that happens when we are able to claim and own the things that we have been avoiding. This ownership of our interior is what gives us the strength to show up for what is difficult. Being whole enables us to face what is.

The fact is, as life unfolds, we eventually realize we are all haunted by those things our parents didn't want to talk about and by what our society and culture taught us to be unacceptable. Eventually we figure out that we want to recover from something.

Addiction is a metaphor for the human condition. It isn't just about alcohol or drugs. It isn't just sex or relationships. It isn't just about power, money, religion, or workaholism. Sometimes we want to recover from a serious illness and everything that surrounds being sick. Addiction is an illness, but any illness can be like an addiction, too.

In our lives, we eventually all want recovery from something or another. Recovery in those of us with alcoholism or drug addiction exposes a common thread that runs through the fabric of everyone's

experience. And if we ever decide to try to recover from something, we are forced to face the hidden and suppressed material that lives on within our own interior.

Life *is* recovery. It is about playing the wrong note, then recovering. If you listen to certain jazz solos, you will hear what sounds like a mistake, but then the musical line shifts. You will hear recovery, as the "mistake" turns into art and beauty. Jazz legend Miles Davis once observed, "There are no mistakes." As a musician, he knew a good solo is less about technique and more about spontaneity and authenticity. Jazz is about noticing the unexpected, then playing with it.

In a similar way, every stand-up comic has told a joke that bombs, but those who are the funniest know how to recover from a failed joke. They don't blame the audience. They point out that their joke just bombed and make a joke about it. Comedy is recovery from the bomb. Every long-term relationship bombs sometimes, too. Relationships aren't just about natural chemistry (which is good) or commitment (which can be good, too); they're about betrayal, disappointment, and then recovery. Recovery contains the beauty, depth, and meaning we all hunger for in life.

Who am I to write such a book? I'm a physician who has struggled with addiction, among other things. I have been in recovery for more than twenty years. When I was desperate to learn how to stay clean and sober, I had to enter my own unexplored room. My own darkish secrets and hidden wounds were the source of a pain that fueled my search for pain relievers. Am I unique? No. I'm unique only because I talk openly about where our ordinary struggles come from.

Because of my determination to stay in recovery from addiction, I was forced to do a kind of personal work with my own material, and this has sustained my very life for many years. For some of us, this kind of work is the only way we can stay on the planet. What follows are the stories about what happens when someone dares to enter his or her hidden interior. They are stories of how I unwrapped my own shadow and found my heart.

What is so extraordinary about this work? The results. The impact of a reunion with the lost parts of our selves brings an extraordinary transformation. Everyone is permanently changed when they enter this place.

No matter what we struggle with, each of us finds some way of medicating our hidden pain, even if we don't want to talk about it. I have taken care of sick patients for more than thirty years, and I am grateful to have listened as they explored what their illnesses seem to be saying to them. Many experience the fear that comes from a serious illness and ask why it is happening in the first place. It requires uncommon courage to talk about our pain, especially if it originates from deep issues that are hurtful or forbidden within our hearts. I treasure such conversations. The root of the word *courage* is *coeur*, which means "heart." If our dialogue requires courage, then it has become wholehearted—any dialogue about our hidden pain is wholehearted.

Have you ever mused, perhaps during an election season, that a little therapy wouldn't kill one politician or another? An inescapable truth becomes clearer as we grow older: we all have stuff to

work on. And I think most modern therapists would agree that our "stuff" is found within a place that has been called "the human shadow." This is the unconscious part of the human interior we all share. The book you're holding is a first-person expedition into this territory. This is a trip that challenges the notion that the shadow is our darker side or is some kind of "demon" we should fear; instead, it shows how the human shadow is a neutral space hidden beneath the figurative house where each of us lives. And it is a good and safe place for us to visit and to work.

You may decide to read this book in a whirlwind of a few days if you are hungry for its message—perhaps you can't get it in fast enough. But you may experience some intense emotions as you go through it; if so, please be gentle with yourself. Some decide to read it more slowly, even as a morning devotional over a period of weeks. Either way, I hope my journey will leave you with a new kind of map for your own inner landscape.

This book is a guided tour of the strangely familiar, and it comes with a simple word picture of our interior. This image of the unexplored room can help you to orient when you return to your life; the moment this happens, it will click all of a sudden. You will recognize where you are standing. You have seen this before. You will know you are experiencing something that has surfaced from your own unexplored room.

I had a similar experience when I started this work many years ago. It was when I first saw how my adoption-related wounds from childhood were getting in my way as an adult. At that moment, I changed forever. You will experience similar moments of clarity, too, if you decide to try this work for yourself.

This is the recovery we all want in life. If we want to be free from our pain relievers, then we have to look at the source of our pain. We have to acknowledge the wound. I will share how I greeted and healed the wounds from my past. But don't get me wrong: This is not a typical self-help book. I am not trying to tell you what to do. Instead, I am just sharing stories about what it was like for me to experience personal work, mostly within the territory of secular spirituality. At the end of each chapter, I include a short reflection, so you can sit with what you have just read. These brief meditations can provide you with a sense of what it is like to work with me in person.

Although this book might have an autobiographical quality, it is not intended to be my memoir, as colorful as that might seem. Instead, it is my intention to share what you might not typically hear from your doctor, with examples from gritty reality. These are stories I share with patients or clients when it seems my experiences would help them. Over the years, many have shared their personal stories with me, too, and these were the exchanges that changed my life for the better. Good ideas are a lot more powerful when they are personal, and the unexplored room is personal.

Personal work is something anyone can do, but sometimes our reluctance to ask for help is tied to a sense of shame. It is not rare for some religious traditions to make personal work more difficult by shaming those who struggle with life issues, such as addiction or broken marriages—this was the case for me. Religion might say to us, "If only you were more spiritual, then you wouldn't have these problems."

But religion isn't the only voice with this kind of message: We live in a society that tends to disparage personal work. If a politician

is accused of seeking treatment for mental illness, then his or her campaign is probably over. Even if we use a softer, gentler term for mental illness (such as *stress* or *unwellness*), some still view getting help as a form of weakness. I have found that the opposite is true in my own life. Doing personal work is at the core of good leadership.

I hate to admit it, but there is another shame-based mechanism that underlies why men don't want to ask for help: the male ego. When in the driver's seat, we typically don't like to ask for directions. We're even less likely to ask for help when some kind of personal or psychological crisis arises. There is a stigma around anyone who dares to ask for help, but I hope my openness about doing personal work will show how ordinary and natural it is to acknowledge our humanity.

Many of us sense that we have issues but hesitate to look inward because of fear. We might have painful secrets from our past that we have decided to forget, such as trauma in adulthood or abuse from childhood. We may no longer possess any memory of the trauma or abuse if we unconsciously stifled it long ago. But regardless of what memories we may have access to, deep fear may rise to the surface when we consider looking inward, and we may find ourselves asking, "How could I ever face that awful stuff?"

One of my intentions as I wrote these words was to try to dissolve the fear of acknowledging the material found in our unexplored rooms. It is possible to do this work and maintain our personal safety. We can open the door gently, as we ask ourselves if we are ready to explore. No matter what we may find there, someone somewhere has already faced it—we are not alone. A few of my own stories could create sensational headlines, but if you read onward with an open

heart, you will find the real headline reads, “You Can Work on Your Stuff.” I did.

None of us can see our own unexplored rooms very well, but the stuff in these rooms is often visible to others. Sometimes, the work we need the most is more obvious to those around us than it is to ourselves. When we eventually decide to work on our stuff, those who know us the best are likely to say something like, “Finally!” or “Thank God!” Sometimes we are the last to see the obvious.

If you have felt stuck with some recurrent addiction (anything from alcohol and drugs to food and shopping), you will read about how I healed the pain we all try to medicate away. If you have silently lived with depression or have ever contemplated suicide, I have been there, too, and I wrote this book especially for you (please see the Safety Warning in the Appendix).

If you have struggled with failed relationships, you might recognize something old and familiar that has gotten between you and your partner. If you have parented your child and found yourself making the same mistakes you hated when you were a child, I will describe how I worked to rewrite this part of my own story.

If you have become disillusioned in your work space, you may read my story and catch yourself looking inward to see something you used to love about your work.

If a serious illness has pushed you to look at your own mortality, or if you care for someone at the end of his or her life, you may identify with my own struggle around death-related issues that surfaced when I faced serious illness.

What would our society be like if we really thought working on our stuff was OK? What if we believed personal work was really a form of internal fitness training? Our divorce rate would decline, for one. Our problems with addiction, alcoholism, obesity, and debt would shrink. How would our politicians behave if they had worked on their stuff? I bet there might be fewer wars and embarrassing sex scandals. How would we treat one another in business, education, law enforcement, and health care if we all had worked on our stuff?

In our journey through the unexplored room, I assume that everyone has issues and that we all have been made in the same way. In the pages that follow, you will find a trustworthy, well-respected doctor and scientist who has worked on his stuff. Many of us out here in the real world have worked on our stuff. If someone ever treats you with unusual empathy and understanding during a crisis, then you probably just met one of us.

My background as a clinical scientist with research and teaching experience led me to honor the domain of science, but in this book, I have been chiefly informed by my own transformation. These are personal experiences that I am ready to share. I am at a point in my life where my heart is full. I have found incredible healing and am now living in a space I never could have imagined when I was younger—and it is only because of doing this work. Healing and transformation: these are the results of work anyone can do. Welcome to the unexplored room.