

# THE STAGES OF DECONSTRUCTION



David Hayward

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## Are You Losing Your Faith?



When I say, “losing your faith”, I don’t necessarily mean losing your faith altogether, although this may happen. I mean losing the faith you once had. I mean your beliefs go through an intensive traumatic change so that your spirituality looks different.

Why do I care about this? Because even though I have asked many questions down through the years, in 2010 a serious bout of deconstruction hit me full force. As a result, I ended up leaving the ministry and the church. At first I thought I was okay. As we shall see, I was in denial. Over the next four years the other expressions of grief struck me hard. I documented my way through it like a map maker. I’ve seen so many people suffer without any support or resources. That’s why I’m doing this. I care.

Have you heard about the stages of grief and loss? Kubler-Ross shared her research on the progress of people who are dying and the five stages of grief and loss that she identified.

I compare this to the grief feel when we change or lose our faith... or lose our beliefs... or lose our ideas of what we thought God was or who we thought God was.

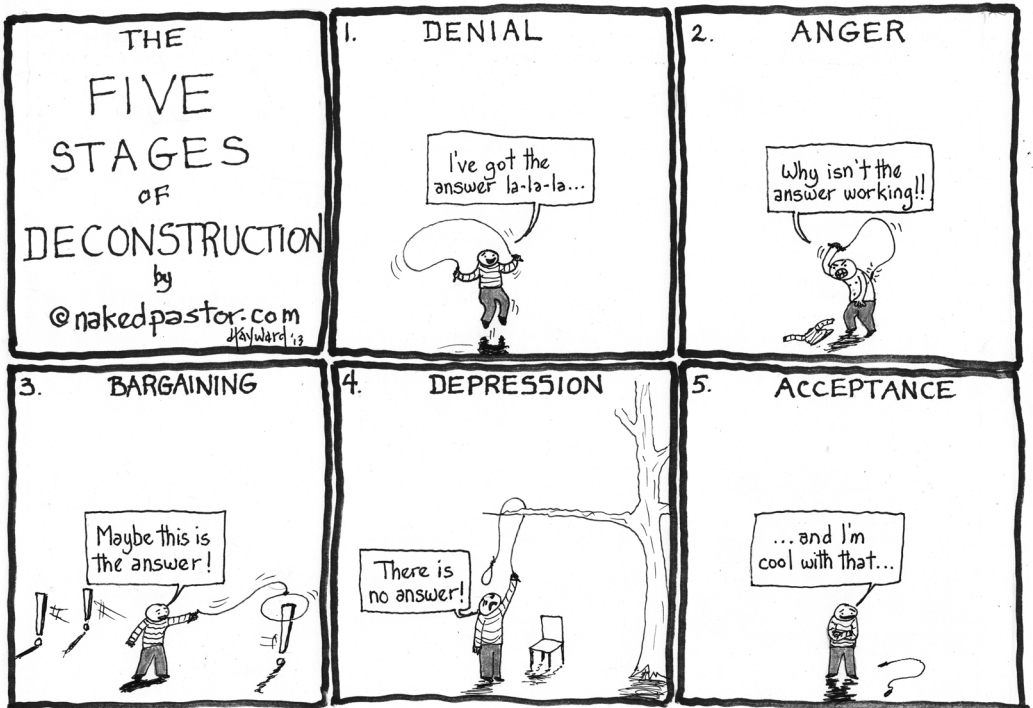
I'm talking about the pain of traumatic spiritual transitions.

I'll compare the process of the deconstruction of our beliefs to the process of death and dying. By deconstruction we mean the erosion of our beliefs and belief system.

Here's a disclaimer:

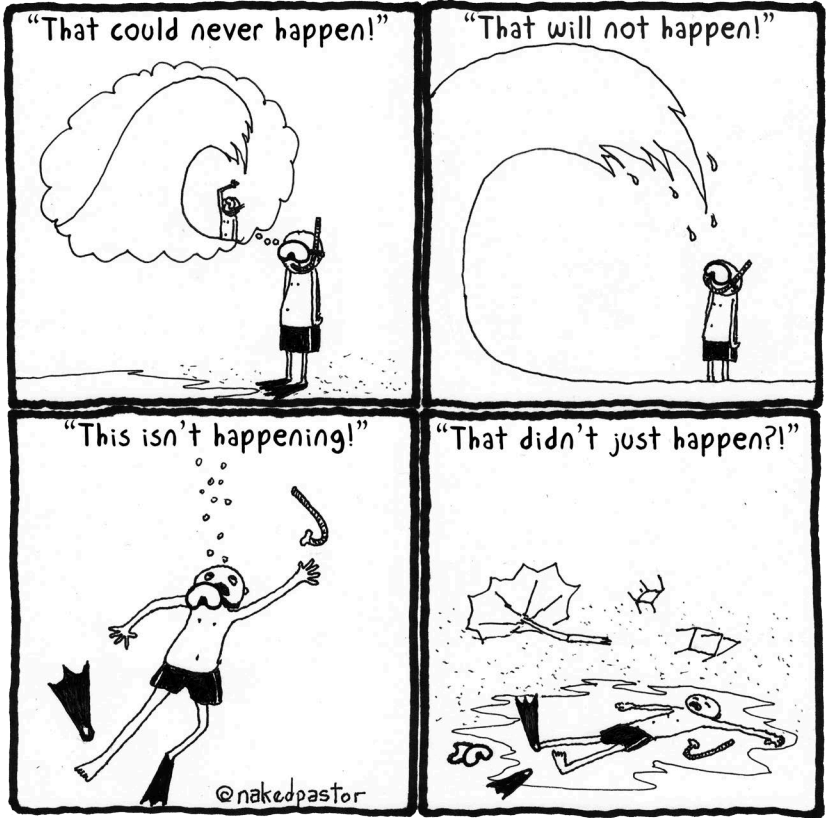
We may not go through all of these stages. We may not follow the order in which they are described. We might spiral through them or revisit them or skip them. We each travel our own journeys differently. However, these can be helpful in identifying what we are feeling and experiencing during times of intense change.

These are only a description, not a prescription. So let's look at the five stages of deconstruction.



# 1 DENIAL

## THE FOUR STAGES OF DENIAL



The first stage of grief is accepting that you're losing something: life, limb, love, or even your faith.

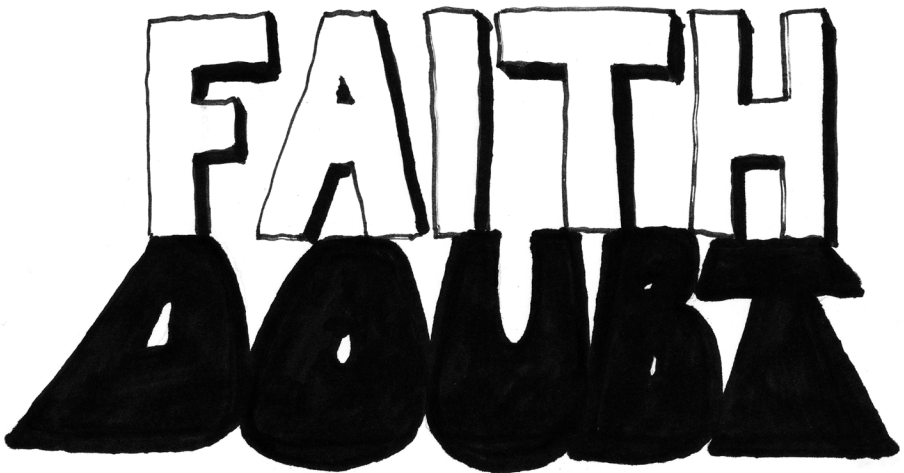
Your doctor says, "You have cancer and you've only got six months to live." It's so shocking that it's hard to believe.

We can have the same reaction to this spiritually. It's like your theological doctor says, "I'm sorry, but you have doubt and you've only got six months to believe."

The first response is often denial. "No! It's impossible. It can't be true. I don't believe it. This can't be happening to me! I'm going to go for a second opinion. I've been a strong believer my whole life. God has been so real to me. I've had an intimate relationship with Jesus. The Spirit's been so close to me. This can't happen. I can't doubt! This can't be happening to me!"

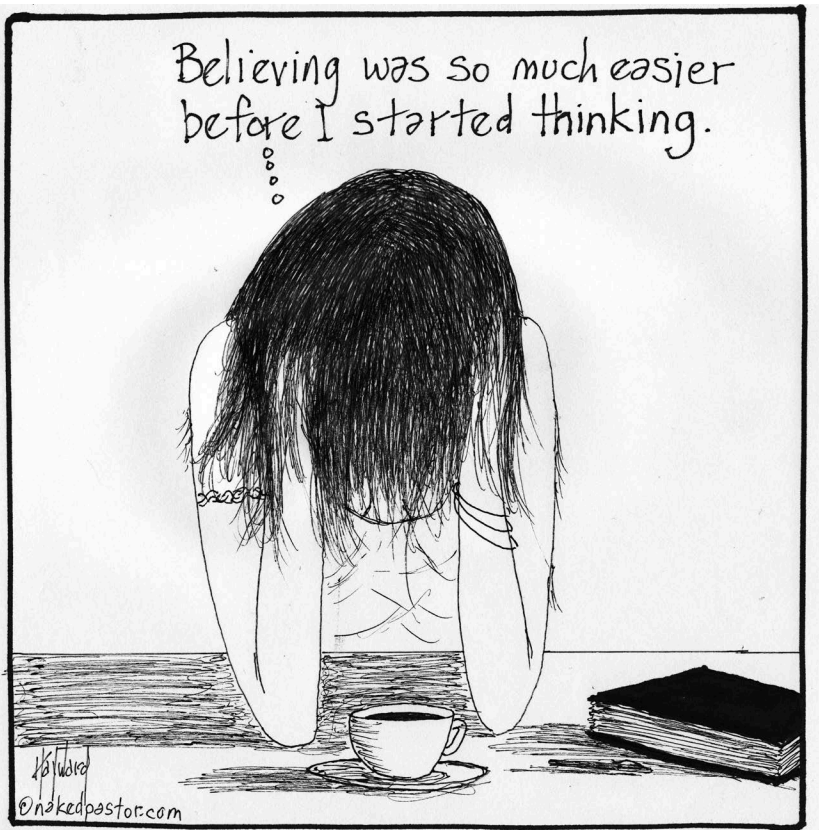
Have you ever said, “I’m still a believer and I always will be!” We may read between the lines. Maybe someone said to you, “You’ve got some doubt in there! You need work, and there’s no guarantee that you’re going to survive this.” We deny it by convincing ourselves that it isn’t happening and by trying to believe even harder.

When we’re in denial, maybe we sound defensive and confident about our beliefs. We might say things like, “No, I’m still a believer and always will be. This is just a passing cloud!” We try to help everybody by being encouraging and delay the inevitable shock that lies ahead. “I love Jesus. I love Christmas. I love Easter. I believe in the resurrection. And you should too! Don’t give up on God. He hasn’t given up on you!” It may sound a little like whistling in the dark.



# 2 ANGER

2



Anger realizes that it's really happening but it's unacceptable.

It may sound like this: "How can this happen to me? I've been such a strong believer. I've read books! I've prayed! I've studied my Bible! No way!"

Yet you've contracted the disease of deconstruction and you've only got so long to believe like you did. You're so angry. You just can't believe this is happening to you. It affects you in all different kinds of ways.

You're angry at God for allowing this.

You're angry at Satan for tempting you so much.

You're angry at your church for dropping the ball.

You're angry at your spouse for not understanding.

You're angry at yourself because you let yourself go!

Now you're losing your faith. How could you let this happen?

Anger is normal. It's healthy. It's something we need to go through. It's not something we can skip. It's not something we can beautify. It's anger, plain and simple. Feel it!

What do we sound like when we're angry? Maybe edgy with a little swearing? We're laying it all out here. We're so angry we can't keep quiet. We've got something to say. We've been betrayed. We've been misled. We've been taught false ideas. We feel silly because of the things we believed. Venting and ranting is characteristic of this stage.





# 3 BARGAINING

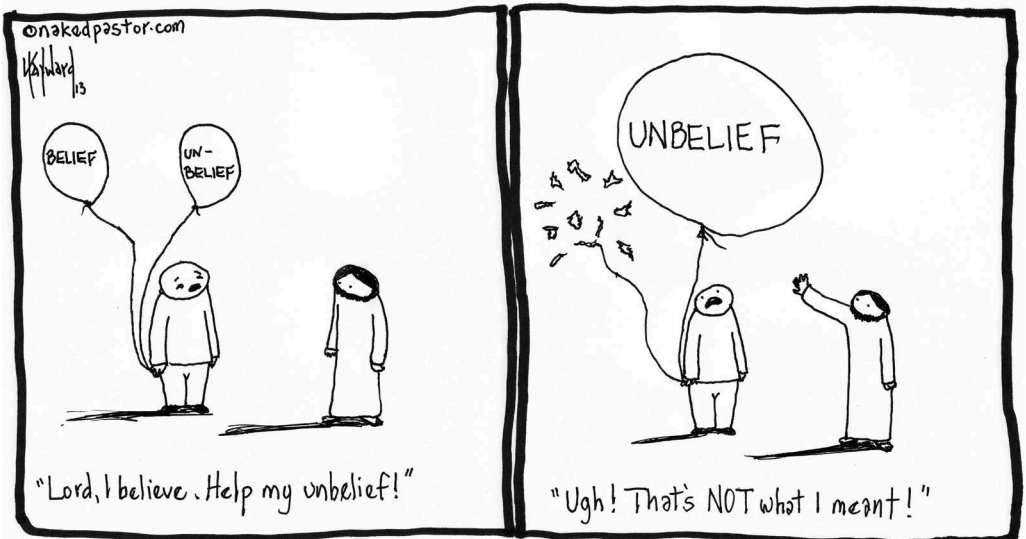


You've received a diagnosis that you've got cancer. Bargaining says, "Dear God, I'll quit smoking now! I promise I'll never smoke again! I'll give half of my money to the poor! I'll do whatever it takes! Just give me another chance. Please!"

When we deconstruct our faith, we might say, "God, don't abandon me. I'll inspect all my beliefs. Let me keep the parts I want. Remove the bad parts. Just don't go, God! Whatever happens, just don't let me become an atheist! I can't do this without you! I promise to be the perfect Christian."

Here we mix and match.  
We go for second opinions.  
We read new writers.  
We try different churches.  
We investigate various spiritualities.  
We experiment with other practices and beliefs.  
We explore religions.  
We try to find a way to keep our lives together and somehow stay alive spiritually.

What do we sound like when we're bargaining? Excited about possible options? We might experiment with becoming more liberal as a way to keep our faith. We might say things like, "Hey, I've read this, and I've read that, and this and that, and it's so interesting!" We're trying to mix in all our new discoveries to find the secret recipe to a legitimate spiritual life. We're going for second opinions, third opinions, fourth opinions. We're still figuring out ways to still stay faithful. We're working out deals with all kinds of religions, spiritualities, philosophies and ideas. We're just trying to stay alive spiritually.



# DEPRESSION

## 4



This is when you finally realize that living in denial isn't working.

Your anger isn't working.  
Your bargaining isn't working.  
You get depressed.  
You feel like giving up.

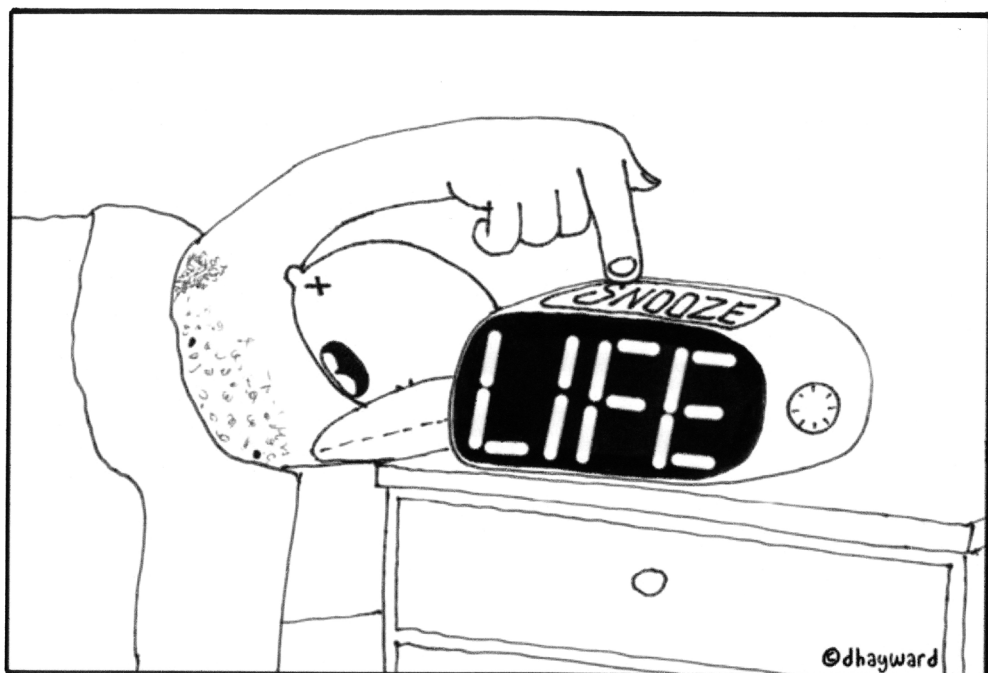
This is where you finally realize,  
"Oh no! I've lost my faith!"  
"Is there a God?"  
"Did Jesus even exist?"  
"Is the Spirit real?"

This is a sad place to be.

All of these years of studying.  
All these years of prayer.  
All these years of Bible reading.  
All these years of church.  
All those years of giving offerings.  
All those down the toilet.  
It's all been wasted.  
It means nothing anymore!

You don't know what to believe. You lose everything. It's all gone.  
That's depressing!

You feel it's useless to fight it anymore. You've lost everything. You're no longer sure. You've fallen into a deep dark hole. You can't see your next step. The inevitable has happened. It's staring you in the face. There's a very good chance that you are going to lose your faith, or your faith is going to go through a drastic transformation and will no longer be recognizable.



I'm not even talking about your relationship with your friends. During deconstruction many people experience the loss of relationships because sometimes their acquaintances, their friends, and even their families and spouses give up on them and leave. Not always. Sometimes. It can be a very sad process that may take years. It did for me!

It is important during this stage to embrace it fully and push through it. Many people get so afraid of the radically unpleasant feelings that they revert to denial... previous beliefs and behaviors with determination never to go near the edge of deconstruction again.

What do we sound like when we're depressed? Hopeless and slightly quiet? We hardly ever speak. If we are really courageous or desperate, we will say something like, "I'm not doing so well right now. I'm having suicidal thoughts. I'm in a very dark place. I feel hopeless and scared." Religion isn't very tolerant of depression, so most depressed people experience shame and isolation and are afraid to admit it. Therefore, most of the time we are very quiet here.



# 5 ACCEPTANCE



Acceptance is the final stage. It's inexplicable. It's a mystery. It's peaceful.

I was a pastor for about 30 years. So I've seen this many times. I've visited people who are dying. Many of them reached this stage of acceptance. They finally experience a mysterious and deep peace. They've accepted that they're dying. Not in a hopelessly resigned way, but in a genuinely peaceful way.

They no longer deny.  
They are no longer angry.

They no longer bargain.  
They are no longer depressed.

They stop fighting.

They've accepted what is. They become very deep, patient, gracious, loving and passionate. Sometimes even joyful! Many dying people cared more for me than I did them by trying to assure me that everything was okay. Especially people I've really loved and cared for. Dying friends have said to me: "I'm okay. You're going to be okay. Everything's fine!"

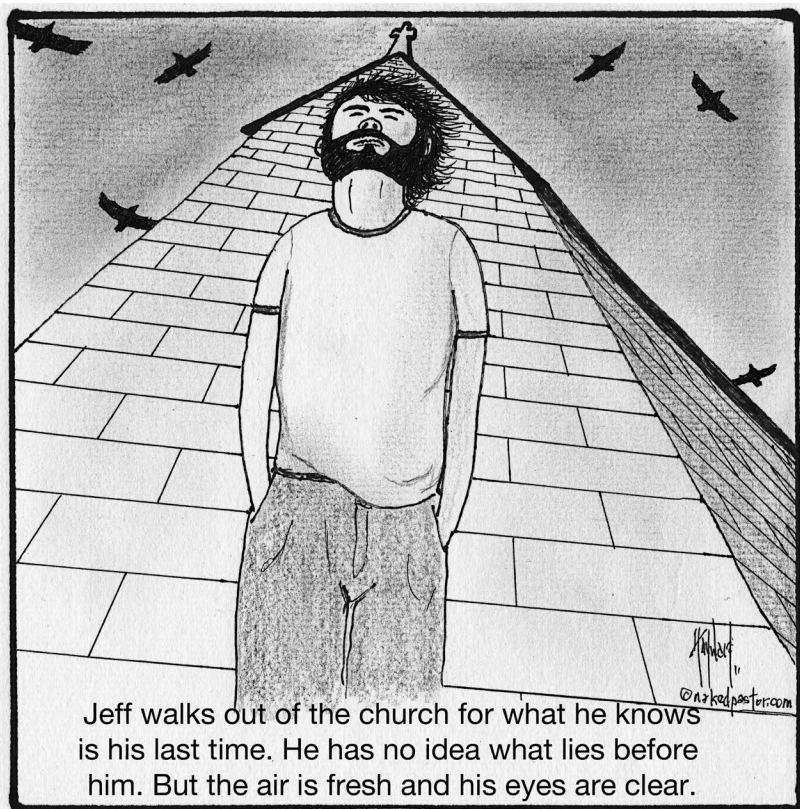
They're comforting me! Nothing's changed. They're still dying. There's still loss. But they are at peace with it. This acceptance, this place of peace, can be experienced spiritually. I know because I have and I still am.

Even though nothing's changed.

Even though I've lost much.

Even though I've changed substantially.

Even though my beliefs transformed radically.



I'm okay. Everything's fine. There are no more answers and no less mystery. There is peace.

What do we sound like when we're accepting? Maybe frustratingly patient? There's a difference between acceptance and quitting. Some people, when they realize they doubt, just opt out of it all immediately. All or nothing! Like some people, when they receive a terminal diagnosis, they just quit. They live out the rest of their lives, then, suddenly, they're dead. Nobody around them had the chance to process because they didn't process it themselves. Some do that spiritually too. When they feel like they're doubting, they just walk away. They opt out. They don't want to talk about it. They've left the faith. The whole thing's false and they reject the whole thing.



It's Sunday morning. Sarah has driven to her church. She's parked. But she can't seem to force herself out of her car. She just can't do it anymore. She looks on, watching the people she has gathered with for years going into the building. Suddenly they all seem like strangers to her. She will watch them for a little longer. Then she will say goodbye to them in her heart. Then she will drive away.



That's not the same thing as acceptance. Acceptance is when you work through it and you come to a place where you accept what is. "Hey, I no longer believe the same things. I've changed my mind. I've gone through a radical transformation. Lots of stuff died. But everything's okay." This is a place of peace.

So those are the stages . . .denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

With denial, you hope you've still got the answer.

With anger, you're frustrated because the answer isn't working.

With bargaining, you look everywhere else for the answer.

With depression, you despair of ever finding the answer.

With acceptance, you realize there is no answer and you're fine with that.

How do we do these stages in the context of relationships and community? I want to tell you a little bit of what goes on inside The Lasting Supper because most of the members have experienced or are experiencing deconstruction.

The Lasting Supper is my online community where we learn to go through these different stages at our own pace and learn how to care for one another while doing so. It is normal to have different people at different stages. This is real life!

It's also healthy to have different people at different stages as a part of the community because we learn from one another and support one another through them. We learn to live, fellowship, communicate, and dialog together. We are going to see these in our relationships with others as they go through their own stages at their own pace. It can make community challenging. It always makes it interesting.

Do we say to those in denial to just get over it? It's all a myth. It's all nonsense. Why believe that baloney anymore? Just get over it already! Or tell them to return to their former beliefs that brought them so much comfort but no longer work for them?

Do we tell angry people to cheer up? To stop being so angry. You're upsetting people? Don't let the sun go down on your wrath. It's not very spiritual to be angry. I can't believe you just swore! You've been angry a long time!

Do we ridicule bargaining people for looking everywhere else for the answers. Do we disrespect them because they are trying something new? Do we warn them that they have doubt and that their faith is going to die?

Do we tell the depressed to cheer up? Just get over it already. Try not being so down. Life's not all that bad so just look on the bright side of life? Do we hand out cliches?

Do we say to those who are at the acceptance stage to get real? Do we insist that there is an objective truth and they should believe it? Do we suggest they're giving up?

If we are allowed to process our strong emotions we will be better able to move on. We just sit with one another, listen, and only speak when invited or when appropriate. It works! Somehow, it encourages us to embrace the level we are in. That enables us to progress to the next one. Like rungs on a ladder, you can't ascend to the next rung until your firmly planted on the previous one.

We do it at our own speed. No rush.

My promise to you is that if you allow yourself to go through all these very challenging stages, you may very well end up at this very beautiful and peaceful place of acceptance. Actually, isn't this the goal of any legitimate spirituality?

What feels like loss and grief is actually gain and joy. I know this from personal experience, and so do many of my friends.

# Come and join us at The Lasting Supper!

[www.thelastingsupper.com](http://www.thelastingsupper.com)

