

Ep #15: Choosing Suffering



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With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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Today, my loves, I come to you with a heavy heart to talk about the Buddhist concept of the second arrow. Things happen in this beautiful precious lifetime that we may not like, that may fill us with sorrow, anger, grief, despair.

And in the face of the fact that the only thing we can control is our own reaction to life happening, we have two choices; to accept life on life's terms and to feel our feelings in our bodies so that we can process and release them, or we can blame ourselves, shame ourselves, and make our suffering all the stronger. Sound familiar?

Keep listening to learn about why we do this and how to halt this harmful habit in its tracks.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health! Here's your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, Herbalist and Life Coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello, my beautiful love. I hope this day finds you enjoying this precious moment of life, resting when you need rest, moving when your body asks for it, eating in a way that honors your body's needs. This week, the Buddhist concept of the second arrow is very present for me.

I just found out that we lost a beautiful member of our family, my Tía Celia Nora Echeveste, who we called Coca, in that very South American way of calling everyone a tender pet name and never their given name. While she wasn't blood-related to me, she filled the role of tía, and was ever-present in my life and my childhood, my growing up. She lived with us and was an important and beloved part of our family.

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The news was a shock. Though she was older, she wasn't that old and she wasn't sick. She was doing well, until she wasn't. And I'm sitting with all the feelings of my own sadness, loss, grief, and joy that she went peacefully in her sleep and didn't suffer. And I'm feeling an even deeper sorrow for my Tia Bichi, whose actual name is Marta Laura, for whom, Coca was mother, sister, teacher, student, best friend, and confidant.

And what I move to share with you today is the concept of the second arrow, which is a Buddhist teaching about suffering and pain. So, the teaching goes that life shoots the first arrow. A thing happens, for example, your tía dies or your husband walks out on you and your kid gets sick. And your thoughts about these occurrences produce feelings within you, the way thoughts want to do.

The second arrow is the additional suffering; the arrow we sling at our own hearts, a reaction to the event, our self-blame for the facts of life, the stories we tell, the suffering we choose. And boy, oh boy, did I start to sling that second arrow today? To spin in thoughts like, "I should have gone home more often. I should have called Coca more. I should have sent her a card for her last birthday. I can't believe I didn't do that. Oh, my poor Tia Bichi, she must be hurting so deeply and I haven't talked to her in a week," which is an eternity in some Latina families, including my own.

"I should have told Coca more often just how much I love her and what she means to me. I should have been a better niece, played a bigger role in her healthcare, sent her supplements. I should have, I should have, I should have." But the truth is, I did the best I could from so far away.

I loved her the best I could for the last 40 years and the rest are things I didn't do. Whatever that should-have ends with, it's done, it's over. I didn't go home to Mar del Plata last year to see my Coca and that's what is.

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It's the past and it's done with. Choosing to spin in these thoughts, these self-recriminations, it's just shooting that second arrow right into my own heart and it doesn't serve me. It doesn't bring my Coca back; it doesn't relieve my Tia Bichi's suffering or that of anyone back home. It just compounds my own suffering. And the truth is, it's a choice. Taking on that extra suffering is always a choice.

Sadness, grief, sorrow, these are all a natural, normal part of this human experience. And taking on extra suffering is always optional. See, you can always choose to fight against the facts of life or to beat yourself up for someone else's choices, an occurrence beyond your control. You totally get to make those decisions, absolutely.

You are an adult with freewill and you always get to choose to suffer more than you already are. And the message I want to send to your tender heart and to mine is that the additional suffering is always optional. And to be clear, I recognize and hold space for your pain and mine, your grief, and mine, your regret, and mine.

I'm not negating that pain at all. Oh, it's real. The tía died, the husband left, the bombs were dropped, the thing happened. That pain of loss, of grief, will always be there in your life. I will always hold sadness for the death of mi abuelas, the pain of immigration and living for from mi gente, the grief of not being there in Argentina for the good times and the bad.

But I don't need to compound the facts of the pain by adding self-blame to the facts. This is just harming myself for no good reason. What I get to do and what I've been practicing since that call from my cousin back home to let me know about Coca's passing is to drop the rock of the second arrow.

You get to feel your pain without attaching any extra stories to it, without making it mean anything beyond the facts. Terrible things happen. It's real. The opioid crisis, what's happening in politics, people cheat, people die. I

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mean, lousy shit just happens. Naming it, recognizing the feelings in your body, letting yourself grieve and feel that pain is a beautiful thing and allows you to move through it in a healthy way.

My colleague, Angela, talks about grief like a circus funhouse. At the end of the hall is the true mirror reflecting back your pain. For example, Angela's father died young, and that is at the end of the hallway, and there are 100 mirrors along the way that reflect back not just the truth of what happened, but your worst stories about what a bad person you are, the distorted mirrors that reflect back our fears, the second arrow of feeling bad about ourselves in unhelpful ways and keeping us from accepting life on life's terms.

Everywhere you turn, there's a mirror screaming, "Why did my dad die so young? Why did he have that accident? Why did this happen to me? Why do I have to deal with this? Why isn't life fair? Why do other people get to grow up with a loving father? My life would have been so much better if only I'd had a dad."

Rolling around in these questions, these statements, does nothing to improve or change the situation, to bring your dead father back, to help you move through the pain so you can release its grip on you. These stories, these are second arrows and they're a way to choose further suffering to keep you spinning in the past, which keeps you tied to it, keeps you from being present now so you can build towards the future you dream of. And second arrow stories keep you from seeing your beautiful highest self at the farthest end of that long hall of mirrors.

Second arrow stories send us into a reactive place versus a responsive place. With our hearts and minds full of these questions, these stories, this lack of acceptance of the fact of the first arrow, we avoid our pain and buffer against it. Spiritually bypassing that pain, we rant and scream at the

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universe. And when we don't get the answers we want, we rant and scream at our friends, our families, our children, our coworkers, god, the universe.

In a different setting, say a partner leaving us, we send rambling terrible emails or texts. We show up with anger when we actually feel sad. We show up with venom when we actually feel sorrow. Instead of sitting with and processing the pain, feeling and accepting the fact of it, the second arrow is the reaction, the ways we make the suffering worse for ourselves and find ourselves feeling sadness about the thing that happened plus regret for the way we reacted, the words we used towards others or ourselves or the universe or god, apologizing or knowing that we need to, the pain of burning it all down because we're not managing our minds and accepting our sadness.

Celia Nora Echeveste, my Coca, I say her name, I honor her. I cry it out and work it out and know the sadness will continue to swirl in me for a long time to come, the way the loss of mi abuelas or my young uncle Julito, who died unexpectedly leaving six kids, continues to hurt in that deep place in my heart where hurt lives.

I honor and send love to the patients who died in my care as a hospice nurse, the stillborn babies whose births I attended in Mali, the patients I got to care for in the tent city hospital in Haiti, after the earthquake, who were suffering and passed on, or whose lives were forever changed by the rumbling of the earth that tore that small island and its inhabitants limb from limb.

I can grieve these folks and I can accept the facts of their death, their pain, their suffering, and my own without compounding it with stories of how much more I could have helped, how it could have been different. Those stories don't serve me and they certainly don't serve the dead folks I love and miss.

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I choose not to shoot the second arrow, to stay present to the facts of missing and grief and not to add the suffering of self-blame to my sadness. And maybe you haven't lost someone you love, but you may be shooting that second arrow at yourself in countless small and large ways. Let's say you write a memo and your boss hates it. You could rewrite it, accept the first arrow, wrote memo, man hates memo.

Or you can do what so many of us commonly do and shoot the second arrow, "Damn it, I'm incompetent. I will never achieve what I want to achieve. I'm not worthy of this job. Oh my god, this dude hates me. I'm not smart enough or good enough for this job. Why did they even hire me?" These stories keep you rolling around, indulging in thoughts and feelings that don't serve you and don't help you improve your life.

The fact here is, you wrote a memo and someone doesn't like it. Okay, cool. Now you get to choose, you can beat yourself up and make this fact, "Dude didn't like memo," mean something about you, about your core beautiful human self.

You can choose thoughts like, "He shouldn't be so harsh. He could have asked me about my work along the way instead of waiting until it was done and then telling me to rewrite it. Man, he should be nicer." But none of that is true and gets you nowhere.

Instead, you can accept that you did something that someone didn't like, and that's okay. If you want to do it differently next time, you can ask yourself, "Did I do my best work here? Did I procrastinate? I wonder if I could do some different kind of research next time that maybe could work out better? You know, I could have a colleague read my work before I submit it. That could help."

You could accept that you're a human learning to do a thing and choose to be kind to yourself, accepting of the facts versus reaching out to blame

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others or shame yourself and you can thus create space to learn from what happened. Let's say your partner cheats on you. So I am certainly not saying you need to be happy about that, because to say that would be absolute garbage, but I do think that starting to tell second arrow stories like, "Partners shouldn't walk out, partners shouldn't cheat, if only I had been more attentive, god, if only I'd done X, Y, Z, if only," those stories don't serve you, don't create true space for your feelings.

And when you're blaming or shaming, you're not creating space to learn and grow, much less to feel your own feelings. These thoughts are also putting the onus for other people's thoughts and the feelings they create for that person squarely on your own shoulders; a place they don't belong.

He cheated because he had the thought that that was something he wanted to do. It has zero to do with you. He had the thought that he would cheat and he felt however he did about it that led him to take the action of stepping out. In this situation, you didn't cheat. He did, and you can't control his choices, like I can't control that my tía died or that an earthquake happened.

You sure can get angry about it and you can take yourself right out of your own right mind. I mean, you can ruin your own life, spinning in the story that he did wrong by you, when the fact is, he just did wrong and it has nothing to do with you. And, more importantly, he did what he wanted to do, and how you think and feel about that choice is purely yours to manage.

His choices are his, your choices are yours. His thoughts are his, your thoughts are yours. You don't have to puncture your own heart about it. That extra suffering that led you to send angry texts, to vaguebook, to not so vaguebook, the endless shit talking to anyone who will listen, the should have, could have, would have, none of it serves you and it's all optional.

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And I get it. I mean, I've been cheated on too. There are feelings of abandonment, betrayal, disappointment that come with the moment of learning the fact of it. And you get to feel all of that, to be able to process it through and out of you. But the second arrow stories, that is the part that isn't necessary or useful because we cannot control other people, places, and things.

That first reaction of shock, that's physiologic. That's human. That's mammalian, that's a body going into that fight, flight, freeze place, sympathetic nervous system. And the work is to allow that feeling in your body, even if it feels terrible. And then where you do have power is to decide how you want to react or respond.

You can lash out. You can seek to punish the wrongdoer emotionally. You can spin and spin and spin about it, when in fact, hate it though you might, hate it though I may have in the past, he has a right to do what he wanted to do for his own life, and that had everything to do with his thoughts and nothing to do with you.

So your tía died, your boss hated your project, your husband cheated on you and walked out. Okay, alright, that happened. You get to choose what you want to make these facts mean, to make things worse for yourself, to choose additional suffering, or to allow the pain, to feel it, to curl up in a little ball, to accept the facts, versus struggling against the truth of life.

If you're a frequent listener to the podcast, you know that I love to give practical solutions and lots of homework. And when I was thinking about this, about what I wanted to say and share with you today, my brain that loves to jump to action started coming up with, like, 45 different worksheets, 65 different activities, like this whole thought journaling process.

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So I paused and I sat with it and I realized that the most important homework, the true solution to that moment of recognizing the first arrow, the shitty thing happened, and that second arrow of the suffering we choose to take on is to sit with it. But really, that's it, to feel it in your bones, to start to recognize and see where you're worsening your suffering by fighting against it, creating tension in your body, which is how we create anxiety versus accepting the facts.

And, my love, that's it. your homework for this week is to be your own watcher, to see when are where and why, in the big and little ways, you're choosing to worsen your suffering, to blame yourself for something beyond your control, to shame yourself for the facts of life, to shoot that second arrow at your own tender heart, which keeps you from truly feeling your feelings about what's going on, which keeps you from changing your behavior from the future and learning life's most beautiful lessons.

This week, I want you to write it out and I want to remind you to not just think about it in endless loops, to remember the importance – and this comes from neuroscience – that kinesthetic connection right between thinking something and physically making movements, writing about it. The things we see on paper are the things we can work to shift, recognize, change.

You've got this, my love. I know you do. And as always, my reminder, to be gentle and loving with yourself. I have been working with this Buddhist concept of the second arrow for ages now and when this thing happened, when my tía died and I got that call, my brain started spinning in all the second arrow thoughts.

So, please, be loving. Be sweet with you. If this is a new practice, remember, it's a new practice. If you've been sitting with and working with this concept of the second arrow for ages and it still comes up for you,

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that's okay too. You're just a human being in your process, in your own time. Sit with it, write it out, be loving, and know that change is on its way.

I so hope you enjoyed this episode of the *Feminist Wellness* podcast. It's such an immense pleasure to be able to share my life with you, my thoughts with you, and I love hearing from you too. Take a moment to head on over to my website, victoriaalbina.com to download my free ebook with simple actionable steps you can start to take to increase your confidence, your self-love and to improve your wellness one thought at a time.

Remember, my beautiful love, that when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, you are loved.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of *Feminist Wellness*. If you like what you've heard, head to VictoriaAlbina.com to learn more.