

INSPIRE 2026 – International Schema Therapy Conference, Thessaloniki, Greece

Working with Distressing Thoughts

Thoughts and the imprisonment by thoughts

So we'll close together with a few moments of quiet, and the words of Rumi. Just take a moment to close your eyes and come into stillness. Sense this as a pause for arriving. Let your senses be awake.

Rumi: *»Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open? Move outside the tangle of fear thinking. Live in silence. Flow down and down in always widening rings of being.«*

»Watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become your actions; watch your actions, they become your habits; watch your habits, they become your character; watch your character, it becomes your destiny.«

– Lao Tzu, author of the Tao Te Ching (The Way and Its Power), 3rd century.

Why Thoughts Persist: Five Drivers of Mental Entanglement

1. The Habit of Generating Thoughts

The mind is a thought-producing machine by default. Without deliberate interruption, it generates a continuous inner commentary – on the past, the future, oneself, others. This is not a malfunction; it is how the untrained mind operates. It just causes an endless stream of thoughts (even when unnoticed).

Why Thoughts Persist: Five Drivers of Mental Entanglement

2. The Absence of Counterbalancing Skills

Most people are never taught to pause, slow, or disengage from thinking. There is no cultural training in cognitive deceleration – in stepping back, letting a thought pass, or simply not following it. The result is not that thoughts are unusually strong, but that there is no practiced alternative.

(Note, this is the "skill gap" framing, it de-pathologises the client. It's not that something is wrong with them; they simply weren't taught this.)

Why Thoughts Persist: Five Drivers of Mental Entanglement

3. Strong Emotions as Fuel

Emotions – particularly fear, shame, and anger – act as amplifiers. They don't just accompany distressing thoughts; they drive and sustain them. A thought attached to anxiety feels urgent and real. A thought attached to shame feels like identity. The emotion gives the thought its apparent weight and necessity.

(In schema therapy language, the vulnerable Child mode generates the emotional charge that makes certain thought loops feel inescapable.)

Why Thoughts Persist: Five Drivers of Mental Entanglement

4.1. Belief in the Thinking Self

“*I think, therefore I am*” – Descartes' formulation has become a kind of implicit cultural assumption: that thinking is the seat of existence, and that the self is constituted by its thoughts. This creates a subtle but powerful resistance to letting go of thoughts. If I am my thoughts, then not thinking feels like a threat to existence itself.

(Note, this is where Buddhist *anattā* (non-self) can become clinically relevant – not as metaphysics, but as a practical loosening of the identification with mental contents. The question “Who is aware of the thought?” for instance can create a distance between the observer and what is observed. Also links to ACT's concept of cognitive fusion, and its opposite, defusion.)

Anattalakkhana Sutta:

“*This is not mine. This I am not. This is not my self.*” (*n'etaṃ mama, n'eso'ham asmi, na m'eso attā*)

Applied on thoughts

“*This thought is not mine. I am not this thought. This thought is not my self.*”

Why Thoughts Persist: Five Drivers of Mental Entanglement

4.2 Belief in the Thinking Self

The Buddha's Three-Part Formula – Applied to Thoughts

Background

- The Buddha applied a three-part reflection to all mental and physical phenomena to loosen identification and reduce suffering
- Applied to thoughts, the formula becomes a direct antidote to cognitive fusion

The three statements:

- “This thought is not mine” – it arose through habit, conditioning, or emotion; I did not choose it
- “I am not this thought” – I am not identical with its content; the thought does not define me. If I were the thought, I would disappear with it – but when the thought is gone, I am still here.
- “This thought is not my self” – even if it passes, I remain; my existence does not depend on it

Clinical relevance:

- Directly addresses the belief “I think, therefore I am”
 - Counteracts schema-driven thought loops by interrupting identification at the root
 - Compatible with ACT defusion, but older and more experientially direct
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Why Thoughts Persist: Five Drivers of Mental Entanglement

5. Mistaken Belief in the Significance of Thoughts

Thoughts feel important. They arrive with a sense of urgency, meaning, or truth, as if they were reporting reality rather than constructing a version of it. This overestimation of significance keeps people engaged with thoughts that, on reflection, carry little actual weight or relevance.

(This connects to cognitive defusion in ACT – the shift from “I am bad” (fused) to “I am having the thought that I am bad” (defused). Also: Buddhist teaching on the arising and passing of mental phenomena – a thought that is not fed simply dissolves.)

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Overview

Finding Distance to Thoughts

1.1 Counting Thoughts

1.2 Naming Thoughts

1.3 Creating Distance Through Reframing

1.4 Inquiring into the Origin of Thoughts

1.5 The Buddha's Three-Part Reflection

Advanced Practices

2a. Deepening the Investigation

2b. Resting as Awareness (Kornfield)

Specials

3. The Nature of Thoughts

4. Impermanence, Constructedness and Insubstantiality

Mindfulness of Thoughts

1. Finding Distance from Thoughts

1.1 Counting Thoughts

Background:

- Thoughts appear in different forms: as images, as words, or as both together
- Some people think primarily in images, others in words, many in both
- Thoughts can also be very subtle – background whispers barely noticed
- Like the breath or body sensations, thoughts can become an object of mindful attention

The practice:

- I will ring a bell, when it rings start to simply count for one minute each thought as it arises
 - Do not follow, analyse, or judge – just notice and count
 - Include subtle background thoughts (e.g. "not many thoughts yet")
 - Duration: one minute
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

Practice Instruction (spoken)

Just as it's possible to direct attention to the breath, to body sensations, or to sounds, the same mindful, loving awareness can be directed to observe thoughts.

To explore this, we'll try a one-minute practice of counting thoughts.

You may notice picture thoughts and word thoughts. Some people think primarily in images, others in words, and some find both arising together. Just notice – there is no right or wrong here.

There might also be very soft thoughts moving in the background – things like 'there haven't been many thoughts yet,' or 'am I doing this right?' Those count too.

Your only job is to sit for one minute – like a cat at a mouse hole – and simply number each thought as it appears. Not catching it, not chasing it. Just noticing it arrived.

I'll ring the bell to begin, and again to end.

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Reflection (spoken, after the bell)

Take a moment before you share.

- Who had more than 20 thoughts – raise your hand;
 - 15, 10, less than five – raise your hand;
 - What did you notice?
 - How many thoughts appeared – more or fewer than expected?
 - Were they mostly images, words, or both?
 - And what was it like to simply count – rather than follow?
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

1. Finding Distance from Thoughts

1.2 Naming Thoughts

Background:

- Once we can count thoughts, the next step is to name them – not their content, but their quality
- Naming creates gentle distance without suppression
- A named thought is no longer just happening to us – it is being witnessed

The practice:

- Return to breath and body as home base
 - When a strong thought arises and pulls attention away – note it gently by its quality
 - Simple labels: *planning, remembering, judging, worrying, imagining, fearful thought, happy thought, painful thought*
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

Practice Instruction (spoken)

Now we'll extend the practice. Find your breath again – the sensations of breathing, or the felt sense of the body. Let that be home.

As you follow the breath, there will be a stream of thoughts in the background. Let them be. Let them rise and fall like waves of the ocean around the breath.

But periodically – whether after three breaths or six or ten – a stronger thought will arise and carry your attention away. That's not a mistake. That's just what thoughts do.

As soon as you notice it has happened, name the thought gently – not its content, but its quality:

Planning. Remembering. Worrying. Judging. Imagining. A fearful thought. A happy thought. A painful thought.

Just that – a soft, quiet label. Then return to the breath.

You may notice that once named, the thought begins to loosen its grip. It may dissolve on its own – like condensation on a mirror, present briefly, then gone without a trace (or like breath fogging a cold mirror, it forms, lingers for a second, and dissolves on its own). This is not something you force. Just notice. You are not trying to stop thoughts. You are learning to witness them – with steady, loving awareness.

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Reflection (spoken, after the bell)

Take a moment before you share.

- What did you notice?
 - Were you able to name a thought before it pulled you in – or did you only notice it had happened afterwards?
 - What kinds of thoughts came up most – planning, worrying, remembering, something else?
 - And did naming change anything – even slightly – in how the thought felt?
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

1. Finding Distance from Thoughts

1.3 Creating Distance Through Reframing

Background:

- The same thought, framed differently, produces a measurably different bodily response
- Fusing with a thought ("*This is all too much*") and observing a thought ("*I am having the thought that this is all too much*") are two fundamentally different relationships to the same content
- This is the core of cognitive defusion – made visible through direct body experience

The practice:

- Round 1: Think a familiar, recurring, burdensome thought clearly and fully – then scan the body. Where does it land? Heart area, stomach, face, throat?
 - Round 2: Take the same thought – and place "I am having the thought that..." in front of it. Then scan the same body areas again.
 - Notice what has changed – or not changed
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

Practice Instruction (spoken)

Bring to mind a thought that visits you fairly regularly – something that carries a little weight. It doesn't need to be the heaviest thing you carry. Just something familiar. Something like: 'This is all too much.' Or: 'I can't do this.' Or: 'I'm so stressed.' Your own version.

First round.

Think that thought now – clearly, fully. Let it land as it normally does. Don't soften it.

And now – bring your attention into the body. Notice what happens. Perhaps around the heart – does something tighten there? The stomach – any contraction, any sinking? The face, the jaw, the throat? Just notice. Don't fix anything. Just observe what the thought does in the body.

Take a breath.

Second round.

Now take the very same thought – and place these words in front of it:

'I am having the thought that ...'

So: 'I am having the thought that this is all too much.' 'I am having the thought that I can't do this.'

Say it to yourself now – with that prefix.

And again – bring attention to the same places in the body. Heart area. Stomach. Face. What do you notice here now? Same? Different? Subtly shifted?"

[Short pause – 1 to 2 minutes of silence]

“We’re not trying to make the thought disappear. We're not positive-thinking it away. The content is exactly the same. Only the relationship to it has changed – just slightly. And the body noticed.”

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Reflection (spoken, after the bell)

Take a moment before you share.

- What did you notice in the body – in round one?
 - And in round two – was there any difference, even a small one?
 - Did the reframing feel artificial – or did something actually shift?
 - And what does it mean that the same thought, held differently, lands differently in the body?
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

1. Finding Distance from Thoughts

1.4 Inquiring into the Origin of Thoughts

Background:

- Rather than observing a thought once it has arrived, we turn attention to its source
- Where does a thought come from? What is there before it forms?
- This inquiry does not suppress thoughts – it simply shines a light at the place they emerge from
- As a side effect, thoughts often stop arising altogether – not through control, but because the mind, closely watched, grows quiet

The practice:

- Sit quietly and ask: Where do thoughts come from – and where do they go?
 - Like watching a wave form slowly from the water – look toward the very beginning, before the thought has fully taken shape
 - The goal is not to get rid of thoughts – but to observe their origin and dissolution
 - Stay at the source – alert, open, unhurried. Like a cat at a mouse hole: perfectly still, completely awake. If a thought comes – you will see it the moment it emerges.
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

Practice Instruction (spoken)

Rather than watching thoughts as they pass through, we now turn attention to where they come from – and where they go.

Sit quietly. And ask yourself – gently, with genuine curiosity: where does a thought come from? What is there before it forms? Like a wave that slowly rises from the ocean – can you find the moment before the wave? The place from which it emerges?

And when a thought dissolves – where does it go? Back into the same stillness it came from?

The goal is not to make thoughts disappear. We are simply observing their origin and their ending. But you may find that as a side effect, thoughts stop coming – not because you are pushing them away, but because the mind, closely observed at its source and being alert, grows quiet.

Like a cat sitting wide awake at a mouse hole. Completely still. Completely alert. The mouse senses it is being watched – and simply does not come out. And if it does – you catch it the moment it forms.

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Reflection (spoken, after the bell)

Take a moment before you share.

- What happened when you turned attention toward the origin of thoughts?
 - Did thoughts continue to arise – or did they slow, or stop altogether?
 - Could you find where they went – where they dissolved to?
 - And what was that stillness like – if it came?
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

1. Finding Distance from Thoughts

1.5 The Buddha's Three-Part Reflection

Background:

- The Buddha applied this three-part reflection to all mental phenomena to loosen identification and reduce suffering
- It works not through analysis but through direct, repeated inner inquiry and observation (introspection) – felt, not just thought
- It is an antidote to cognitive fusion: the belief that I am my thoughts

The three statements::

- *This thought is not mine* – it arose through habit, conditioning, or emotion; I did not choose it, it is just a mental process
 - *I am not this thought* – I am not identical with its content; the thought does not define me. If I were the thought, I would disappear with it – but when the thought is gone, I am still here
 - *This thought is not my self* – even if it passes, I remain; my existence does not depend on it
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

Practice Instruction (spoken)

Bring to mind a thought that visits you fairly regularly – something with a little weight to it. Let it be present.

Now, silently, say to yourself:

'This thought is not mine.' – allow yourself to feel and understand: this thought is just a mental process that arises and ceases, through habit and conditioning. Like a breeze on the skin – I can feel it, I can sense it, but the breeze is not mine.

Allow a breath.

'I am not this thought.' – If I were this thought, I would disappear with it. But when the thought is gone, I am still here.

Allow a breath.

'This thought is not my self.' – Even if this thought passes completely, I remain.

You can repeat this once or twice with the same thought. Or let another thought arise and apply the same three statements.

We are not trying to make the thought disappear. We are simply stepping back from it, just a little. Changing the relationship, not the content.

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Reflection (spoken, after the bell)

Take a moment before you share.

- What happened as you worked with the three statements?
 - Which of the three landed most strongly for you — and which felt harder to connect with?
 - Did the thought change — or did your relationship to it change?
 - And what does it mean: I am still here, even when the thought is gone?
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

Advanced Practices

2a. Deepening the Investigation of Thoughts

Background:

- Having counted, named and reframed thoughts, we can now *investigate their nature* more directly
- These are not techniques but *inquiries* – open-ended explorations
- Each one reveals a different dimension of how thoughts operate

Five further directions of inquiry:

- The body effect of thoughts – which thoughts trigger you most, and where?
 - The interplay of thought and emotion – how each feeds the other
 - The space between thoughts – relax into the space and allow yourself to abide in the gap; if the gap expands, let it expand
 - The open sky – thoughts as clouds passing through awareness
 - Deliberate thought creation – noticing how intentionally generated thoughts affect body and mind
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

Practice Instruction (spoken)

We'll now explore a series of open invitations. Take each one as a direction – not a task to complete.

First: notice which thoughts have a strong effect on your body. Which ones tighten something? Which create heaviness, urgency, contraction? Just note them – without trying to change anything.

Now observe the interplay between thought and emotion. Notice how some thoughts automatically bring emotions – and how some emotions automatically bring certain thoughts. Don't try to interrupt it. Just watch it happen.

Now – look for the space between thoughts. However brief, there are gaps. When you find one, relax into it. Allow yourself to simply abide there. If the gap expands – let it expand.

Now try this: deliberately bring up a sad thought. Notice the effect on your body and state of mind. Now a kind thought – perhaps toward someone you love. Notice the difference. You just changed your inner weather deliberately. That capacity is always available to you.

And finally – imagine you are the open sky. Vast, still, unchanged. Thoughts float through like clouds. Some dense, some light, some dark. The sky does not become the cloud. See if you can rest as the sky.

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Reflection (spoken, after the bell)

Take a moment before you share.

- What did you notice in the body – which thoughts landed most strongly, and where?
 - Did you find the space between thoughts – even briefly? How did it feel – tense, relaxed?
 - And the sky – was that accessible, or did the clouds take over?
 - What happened when you moved from the sad thought to the kind one?
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

Advanced Practices

2b. Resting as Awareness – After Jack Kornfield

Background:

- Our core awareness is like the vast, open sky – thoughts, feelings and sensations pass through it like clouds, without staining it
- 80–90% of daily thoughts are repetitive – many rooted in fear, anxiety, or a contracted sense of self
- We cannot stop being aware – but we often forget to rest in that spaciousness
- “*Just because you have a thought or feeling doesn't mean you have to believe it, much less act on it.*” – Jack Kornfield

The practice:

- Shift from thinking to noticing – from being the cloud to being the sky
 - Watch the weather of the mind – worries, preferences, judgments – without becoming it
 - Bring a quality of loving awareness to whatever arises – benevolent, kind, unhurried
 - Disidentify from repetitive patterns – not by pushing them away, but by recognising: *this is passing through, it is not who I am*
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Mindfulness of Thoughts

Practice Instruction (spoken)

Rest for a moment. Let the body settle.

Now – rather than watching your thoughts, shift your attention to that which is watching. The awareness itself. It has been here the whole time – quiet, open, unchanged by whatever has passed through it. (Kornfield likens this awareness to the sky. The sky does not become the storm. It does not hold onto the sunshine. Clouds appear – dense, light, dark – and pass. The sky remains.)

You are that sky.

Notice the thoughts arising – perhaps a worry, a judgment, a plan, a memory. These are the weather. Watch them with a quality of loving awareness – not cold observation, but warm, patient noticing. As if you were watching children play in a field. Present, caring, uninvolved. And if you find yourself swept into a cloud – into a thought or emotion – that's fine. Just notice: 'I got swept away.' And return. The sky is always here. (Kornfield reminds us: just because a thought arises doesn't mean it's true. Just because a feeling arises doesn't mean you have to act on it. You can simply – watch it move through.)

Rest now as awareness. As the sky. Let everything be as it is.

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Reflection (spoken, after the bell)

Take a moment before you share.

- What was it like – and did it work? – to shift from watching thoughts to resting as the awareness itself?
 - Could you find that quality of loving awareness – warm, patient, uninvolved BEING with the thoughts?
 - And the repetitive thoughts Kornfield describes – did you recognise any? The familiar reruns?
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Mindfulness of Thoughts – Specials

3. The Nature of Thoughts

Background:

- Thoughts are taken to be more real than they actually are
- Direct investigation of their nature loosens their grip more effectively than any technique
- We examine not the content of thoughts but their *substance*

The inquiry:

- Allow thoughts to arise naturally – or deliberately generate one if the mind is quiet
 - Observe and investigate: what form and colour do they have?
 - Are they material? Could you place a glass of water on a thought, as you would on a table?
 - Can you hear a thought? Smell it? Taste it? Touch it – is it warm or cold?
 - Rest in the direct recognition that thoughts are immaterial – not as solid or real as they seemed
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Mindfulness of Thoughts – Specials

4. Impermanence, Constructedness and Insubstantiality of Thoughts

Background:

- A thought is like a wave rising from the ocean – it builds, reaches its peak, and flows back into the water
- Seen up close, a large wave can feel threatening – but it consists of nothing but water; there is no frightening monster in it
- In the same way: a thought arises from the mind – itself immaterial – builds, peaks, and dissolves back into it
- No glass can be placed on the mind; neither mind nor thought can be seen, heard, or touched

Three further investigations:

1. Thought as wave

- Observe a thought arising, building, reaching its peak – and dissolving back into the mind
- Watch this play without interference

2. Thought as constructed meaning

- Take a word-thought with a pull to act: "The light in the basement is still on" or "The stove is not turned off"
 - Notice how it pushes or pulls you to act – as if it had an existence of its own
 - But examine: the letter t in "the" carries no meaning on its own. Nor h, nor e. Meaning is not in the letters – it is constructed by the mind that reads them
 - The urgency, the significance – these are added. They are not inherent in the thought itself
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Mindfulness of Thoughts – Specials

4. Impermanence, Constructedness and Insubstantiality of Thoughts

Three further investigations:

3. Thought as temporal construct

- A thought has a beginning, a middle, and an end – each divisible into smaller moments
- In the smallest unit of now, no information fits – the thought is assembled from remembered past moments, a very brief present, and anticipated future ones
- It is not as real as it feels

Key insight:

- Rest quietly in the recognition that thoughts are constructs – immaterial, impermanent, insubstantial
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Mindfulness of Thoughts – Specials

Practice Instruction 3 & 4 (spoken)

We've been observing thoughts from a distance. Now we go one step further – we investigate what thoughts actually are. Allow thoughts to arise as they will. If the mind happens to be quiet, you can deliberately generate a thought – any thought. Just let something be there.

Now – investigate it directly. What form does it have? What colour? Is it made of matter? Could you place a glass of water on it, as you would on a table? Could you hear it with your ears if the room were silent? Could you smell it, taste it, touch it – is it warm or cold? Take your time with this. Not as a philosophical question – as a direct sensory inquiry.

And if you arrive at a clearer felt sense that the thought is immaterial – less solid, less real than it seemed – rest there. Just abide in that recognition, without forcing anything.

Mindfulness of Thoughts – Specials

Practice Instruction 3 & 4 (spoken)

Now – picture a thought like a wave. It rises from the ocean of the mind, builds, reaches its peak – and flows back. If you are close to a large wave it can create fear. But the wave is nothing but water. There is no monster in it. In the same way, watch a thought rise from the mind – itself immaterial – build, peak, and dissolve back into it. Just observe this play.

[Brief pause]

Now take a word-thought – something with a little pull to it. Perhaps: ‘The stove is not turned off.’ Feel how it pushes you to act, as if it had its own existence, its own authority.

But look more closely. The letter t in ‘the’ – does it carry any meaning on its own? The letter h? The letter e? Each letter is just a mark. Meaning is not in the letters. It is constructed – added by the mind that reads them. The urgency you feel is not in the thought. It is something you bring to it.

And finally – a thought has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The middle connects back to the beginning, forward to the end. Each part can be divided further. And in the smallest unit of now – no information fits. The thought is assembled from remembered past, a brief present, anticipated future. It is a construct. Not as real as it feels.

When this becomes clear – even as a felt sense, even partially – rest there. Quietly. At ease.

Mindfulness of Thoughts – Specials

Reflection (spoken, after the bell)

Take a moment before you share.

- What did you find when you looked for the substance of the thought?
 - Did the wave image help – or did the wave take over?
 - And the word-thought – when you looked at the letters themselves, what happened to the urgency?
 - What does it mean for your daily life if thoughts are constructs – assembled, not given?
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Closing: Thoughts and the imprisonment by thoughts

Rumi, **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.«

(Jalaluddin Rumi, trans. Coleman Barks, The Essential Rumi)
