

The World According to Byron Katie, Part 1

Trade your Story for Truth

By Dan Ofstedal – November 17, 2025 ¹

“It’s life’s illusions I recall

I really don’t know life, at all.”—Joni Mitchell, “Both Sides Now”

“Either everything that happens is good, or God is a sadist.”

Does that sound crazy? It did to me. The only reason I kept reading was her husband, Stephen Mitchell—the renowned translator who gave us the Tao Te Ching, The Book of Job, Gilgamesh. If he took her seriously, maybe I should at least give her book a chance.

That was over 20 years ago. I’ve now read and re-read each of Byron Katie’s four books (including her first book “Loving What Is”), three co-written with Mitchell. And each time, her directness wakes me up like cold water in my face.

If you are willing to invest just a few minutes, I can show you the most incisive, direct path to the place that mystics throughout the ages have dwelled. It’s a place where all is well, always—despite appearances. Thanks for reading Despite Appearances! Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work.

“When I argue with reality, I lose—but only 100% of the time.”

Katie’s foundational premise is that God is benevolent and includes all of reality.¹ It necessarily follows that reality is always benevolent. It’s a simple philosophical proof that theologians have been twisting themselves into pretzels for millennia to avoid.²

So when we resist what is—no matter what it is—we’re fighting a benevolent force. Her work echoes the Stoic philosopher Epictetus: “We are disturbed not by what happens to us, but by our thoughts about what happens.” This understanding has been echoed throughout the ages.³

From this perspective, reality itself is inherently good, always unfolding in our favor. “Everything happens for me, not to me.” As she puts it more directly: “Reality—the way that it is, exactly as it is, in every moment—is always kind.” And even more radically: “Nothing bad has ever happened, and everything that has ever happened—everything that CAN happen—is good.”

From this perspective, “This shouldn’t have happened” or “Life is unfair” signal internal confusion rather than truth.

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Katie goes further than traditional acceptance. The Buddha and the Stoics taught non-resistance—don't fight what you can't control. Katie teaches something more radical: active love of what is—every single thing. Not merely tolerating reality, but embracing it. Welcoming it. This isn't resignation—it's enthusiasm for reality exactly as it shows up, no matter what shows up.

As Katie puts it: “We live in paradise and haven't even noticed.”

Now I know what you're thinking: “This sounds like passivity; this sounds like approving of horrific behavior. And anyway, who would I be without my story?”

For starters, without your story you would be free. Free from anger, free from regret, free from resentment. And you would see every situation with more clarity, so you would also be free to respond more effectively, rather than feeding the never-ending cycle of reactivity we observe in the world. People in default mode act out of upset, which generates only more upset.

As Katie says, acceptance leads to “fearless action,” rather than passivity. If you take a moment to think about, this all makes sense. And any resistance you're feeling right now is your story—your ego—trying to maintain its control over you.

Well, that's pretty much the entire kit and caboodle. Yes, it really is that simple. But let's approach it from a few different angles to clarify:

“You are the cause of your own suffering—but only all of it.”

The mind constantly generates thoughts. Each is part of the story we tell to maintain a sense of self. These stories, not reality itself, cause our suffering.

Life is never difficult. It's your thinking that makes it difficult. When we believe thoughts that contradict reality, we experience internal conflict—stress. Katie's process of inquiry—asking if a thought is true and exploring who we are without it—dismantles the ego and resolves inner conflict.

As Katie puts it: “Stress is the signal that your thinking is not aligned with reality.”

This parallels Advaita Vedanta and Dzogchen Buddhism, where “the self” is understood as fiction—a bundle of thoughts with no inherent substance; an identity we create. Katie's twist is practical: once we question our thoughts, they lose their power. The identity we believed we had dissolves, revealing our true nature—awareness itself.

This is the truth mystics from the East and West—including the Christian mystics—have been pointing to for centuries.

“Sanity doesn't suffer, ever.”

Katie has a method consisting of four questions. First, write down the thought troubling you—for example, “He/she shouldn't have said that to me.” Be specific. Then ask:

1. Is it true?

2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?
3. How do you react—what happens in your mind—when you believe that thought?
4. Who would you be without the thought?

Questions 3 and 4 make the point clear: it's your thoughts, not the situation, causing stress and anxiety.

The process shifts you from believing the thought to seeing through it. Done honestly and deeply, it transforms perception and dissolves suffering. Katie describes inquiry as “a way to intervene between thinking a thought and believing a thought.”

Question 4 is particularly powerful: it lets you see who you would be without that thought, which is *who you really are*. As Katie teaches: “You are what exists before all stories. You are what remains when the story is understood.”

“A clear mind doesn't suffer. That's not possible.”

A clear mind is a joyful mind. It doesn't resist, doesn't fear, doesn't suffer. Katie puts it plainly: “Happiness is who you are once your mind is clear.”

From clarity arises loving action and fearless response—not passivity. A mind that loves what is becomes highly effective. It doesn't act from fear or defense, but from wisdom and love. It runs toward problems, not from them. It *responds*, rather than *reacts*.

Katie also teaches that “a clear mind sees that the past is just a thought.” When we realize this, we're no longer imprisoned by our stories about what happened. The past loses its power to cause suffering in the present moment. If you are troubled by anything in the past, write it down, apply the four questions, and see for yourself.

There's natural abundance in a mind that loves what is. In fact, that's all it sees—abundance and gratitude. Arguments with reality are the only true poverty. Joy, love, peace—these are our birthright, always present beneath the noise of thought.

Katie offers a practical test for spiritual understanding: “The litmus test for self-realization is a consistent state of gratitude.” True spiritual understanding shows up in the most mundane and challenging moments of daily life—not just in meditation or “good” times, but in difficult conversations, getting a speeding ticket, unexpected setbacks. Are you grateful in those moments? For everything?

“Life is simple. Everything happens FOR you, not to you.”

Katie's teaching becomes intensely practical when we understand this perspective: “Everything happens at exactly the right moment, neither too soon nor too late. You don't have to like it—it's just easier if you do.”

Again, this isn't about passive acceptance. It's about recognizing that our resistance to *what is* creates unnecessary suffering. The event itself—whatever it is—is neutral at worst, benevolent at best. Our thoughts about it determine our moment-to-moment experience.

Katie even applies this to our mistakes: “When you make a mistake, you realize immediately that it wasn't a mistake; it's what should have happened, *because it happened*.” This doesn't mean we don't learn or improve—it means we stop torturing ourselves with thoughts about how things “should have been different,” which from the point of view of reality, is insane.

What's Next

In Part 2, we'll explore the radical implications of this teaching: the dissolution of the separate self, the transformation of relationships, the end of victimhood, and the practical application of The Work in daily life. We'll see how Katie's metaphysics lead to instant forgiveness, fearless action, and always “loving what is.”

Because if reality is always kind, and we are the cause of our own suffering through believing untrue thoughts, then the path to peace is simpler—and more revolutionary—than we ever imagined.

- 1 - This applies even to atheists, who can simply substitute the word “reality” for “God.”
- 2 - Here I am referring to theologians of the Abrahamic religions, who tie themselves into knots trying to avoid the conclusion that God is responsible for only the “good” and not the “bad,” rather than take the obvious mystical view, described by Meister Eckhart among many others, that everything is ultimately “good.”
- 3 - For example: “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” from *Hamlet*