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The Science of Stress and the Practice of Embodied Boundaries:

Practical Somatic Tools in Times of Overwhelm

with Kristin Honey

Thank you to the team,
and to all of you for taking the time.

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Our Learning Intentions

Gain a foundational understanding of the neurobiology of the nervous system, the organizing principles of Polyvagal Theory and how these shape our experience.

Explore accessible interoceptive awareness practices as beginning tools for establishing and maintaining embodied boundaries and reducing stress.

Map their own experience and identify, at minimum, 1 practical tool or skill to get curious about and explore in their daily life.



“Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.”

the first line in "A Painful Case", a short story in James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914)

Orienting, Outside/Inside and Glimmers

**Someone asked me what I've been up to lately,
but how do you say:**

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**So, I just said,
“Not much. You?”**

(ruthjusttalks)



“...the subtle, consistent erosion of self.”

Sukie Baxter

“...too much, too fast, too soon.” (too long)

“...leaving incomplete survival responses trapped in the body.”

“...not just what happens to us, it’s how we hold it inside in the absence of an empathetic witness.”

Peter Levine, traumahealing.org

“The effects of trauma are stored in the body. Until they are addressed there, words alone are not enough.”

Bessel van der Kolk, MD, *The Body Keeps the Score*

Polyvagal Theory

(“the Science of Safety”)

“Polyvagal Theory is the science of feeling safe enough to fall in love with life and take the risks of living.”

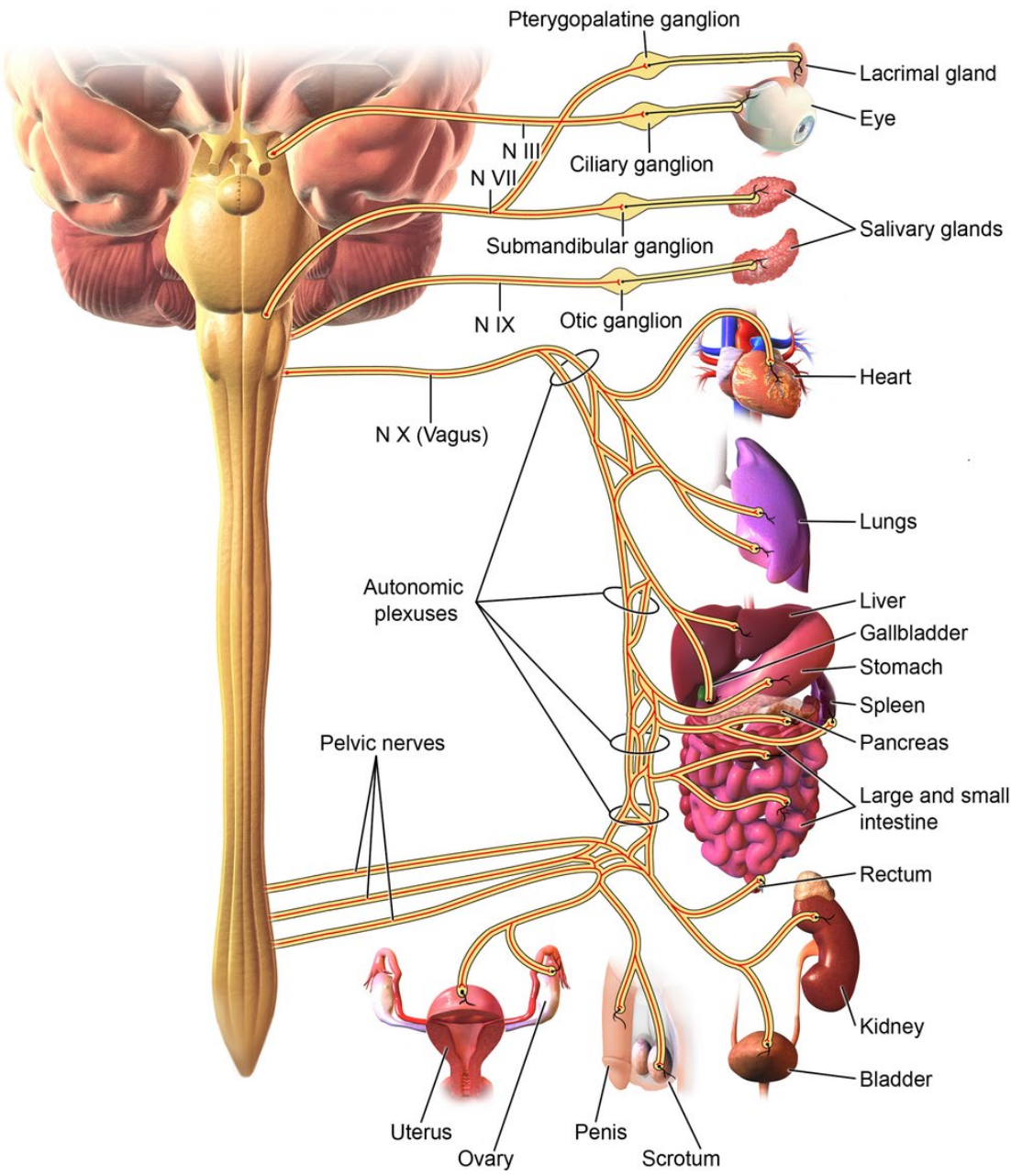
Deb Dana, *Anchored*

Stephen Porges, PhD

(full credentials on website)

stephenporges.com/polyvagalinstitute.org

- Pre Polyvagal: Binary light switch
- 1969: first published study on HRV and its autonomic effects
- 1996: the Polyvagal Paradox
- 1999: invitation to speak at an annual Boston trauma conference
- Application to the treatment of trauma with Peter Levine, Bessel van der Kolk and Pat Ogden. Stephen Porges and Deb Dana, *Clinical Applications of the Polyvagal Theory*



The Vagus Nerve (Wandering)

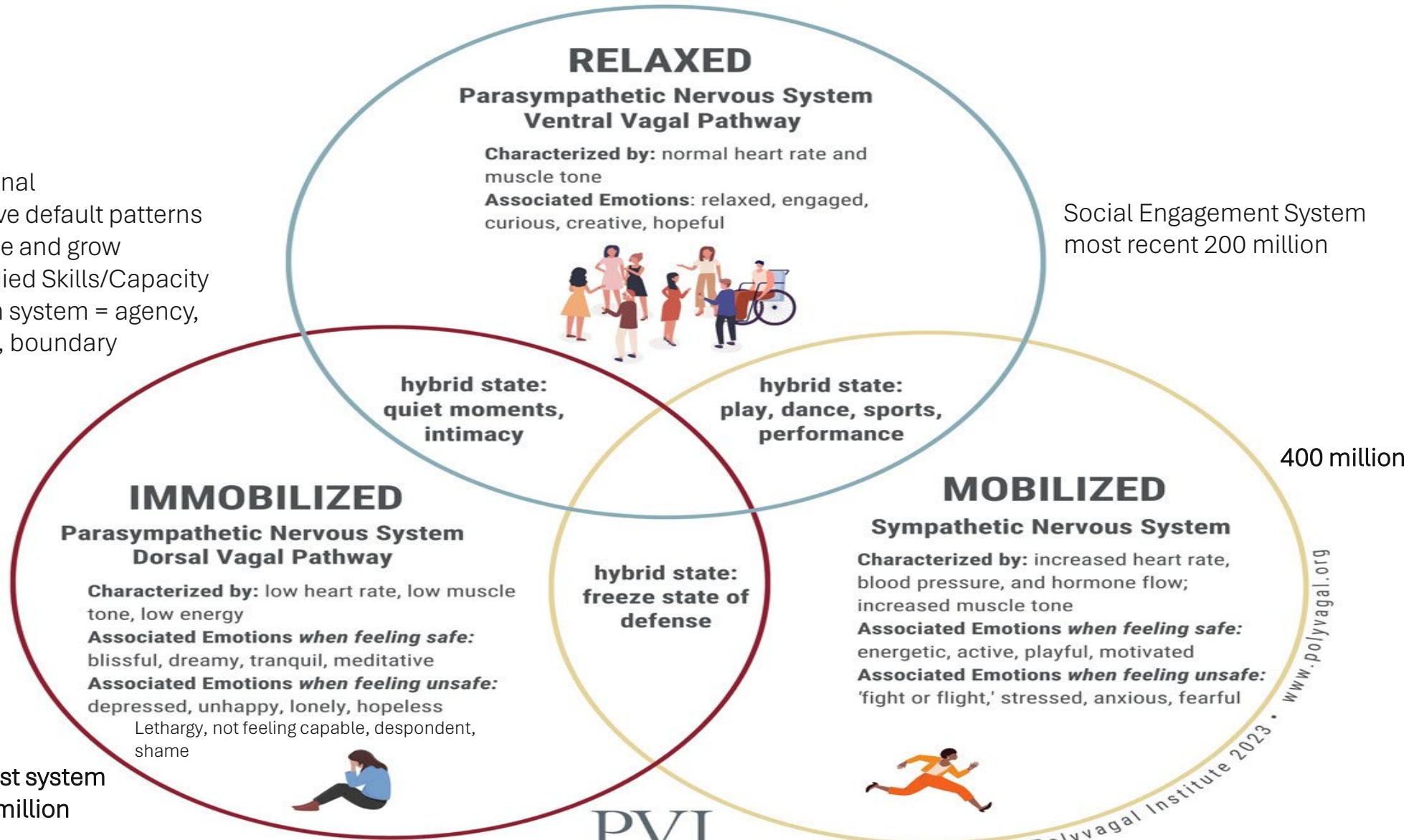
- 10th cranial nerve
- Conduit of BI-DIRECTIONAL communication system between our bodies and our brains
- 80% afferent nerves communicating from our body to our brain and 20% efferent nerves from our brain to the body

Parasympathetic Innervation

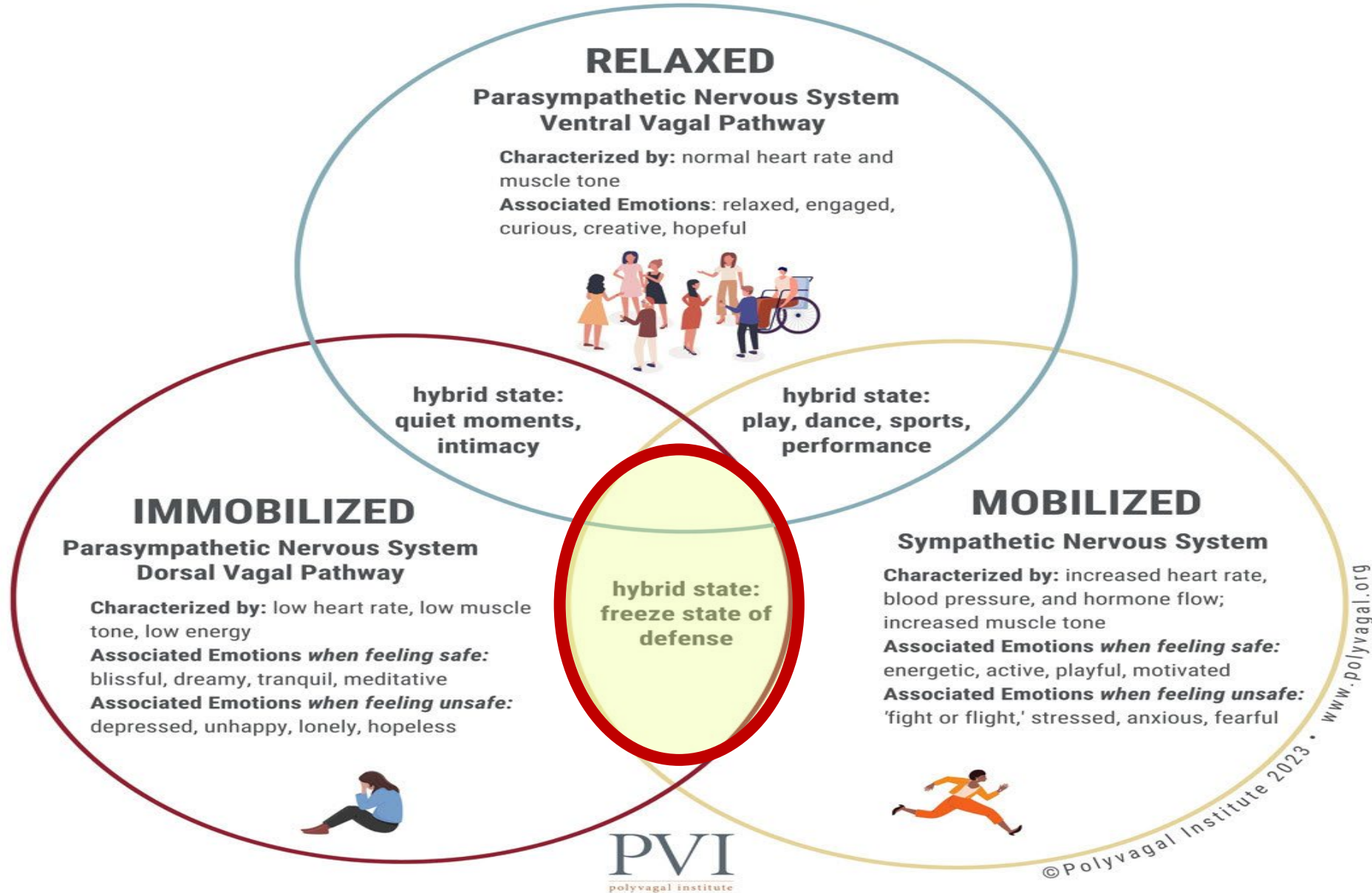
Courtesy Dr. Arielle Schwartz

Autonomic Nervous System States per Dr. Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory

- Relational
- Adaptive default patterns
- Practice and grow embodied Skills/Capacity in each system = agency, choice, boundary



Autonomic Nervous System States per Dr. Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory



Blended or Hybrid States

State that can bring great social reward

Functional Freeze

Sympathetic and Dorsal Vagal
Gas on, Brake On

“...a mental and physical state where an individual remains "high-functioning" - managing daily tasks, jobs, and responsibilities - while being internally numb, detached, and emotionally shut down.”

Deb Dana

Blended or Hybrid States

State that can bring great social reward

Fawn people please, fix, comply

Sympathetic and Dorsal Vagal

Gas on, Brake On / Pressure Cooker

“Fawn types seek safety by merging with the wishes, needs and demands of others.”

Pete Walker

“Fawn is the process of abandoning self for the purpose of attending to the needs of others.”

Dr. Arielle Schwartz

Blended or Hybrid States

Appeasement

Sympathetic, Dorsal Vagal and Ventral Vagal

“...changing and refining how victims are viewed and portrayed in mainstream media. Appeasement emphasises the asymmetry and adaptive strategy used to regulate and calm the captor, thus minimising potential injury and abuse. Stockholm syndrome does not reflect the survivor’s experience, nor does it acknowledge the negative impact that the label has on the survivor.”

Bailey, R., Dugard, J., Smith, Stefanie F., Porges, Stephen W.
Appeasement: replacing Stockholm syndrome as a definition
of a survival strategy, *Eur J Psychotraumatol*. 2023 Jan, *Highlights*

HYPERAROUSAL

Excessive activation/energy in the form of fight/flight responses



WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Optimal zone where you can deal with stress from everyday life

HYPOAROUSAL

Freeze response, emotionally flat, lack of energy and response

- — SMOOTH SAILING
- DYSREGULATION
- FIGHT/FLIGHT/FREEZE

Like a healthy muscle, a healthy nervous system can move fluidly between states of activation and deactivation based on the needs of the present moment. Not **stuck**.



“A real or imagined line that
marks the edge or limit of something.”

Cambridge dictionary

“If you can't say No, Yes doesn't mean anything.”

Gabor Mate

“Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you
and me simultaneously.”

Prentis Hemphill

Boundaries, Porcupines and the Wisdom of Goldilocks



“Boundaries help you ask for what you need, even though you may be told no or risk feeling rejected. Ultimately, healthy boundaries facilitate self-respect and a sense of your own worth.”

Dr. Arielle Schwartz, drarielleschwartz.com/blog/

“If we’ve experienced boundary rupture in the past...we might have learnt to dull or tune out from our own somatic boundaries if asserting them did not feel safe at the time. In trauma-informed work, we gently seek to re-connect to these signals, which are seen as important information about your needs and capacity in this moment.”

Levine, 2010; Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006; Mischke-Reeds 2018, *via The Somatic Project*

“Compassionate people ask for what they need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They’re compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment.”

Brene Brown, *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.*

"Pooh,
how do you spell love?"



'You don't spell love, Piglet ...
you feel it.'

“Bottom Up”

Cultivating Awareness and Curiosity

Pause /Present Moment: What do I *actually* feel now?

“For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present.”


Bessel Van Der Kolk, 2014

Establishing Safe-Enough

Interoception: conscious awareness of internal body sensations, temperature, hunger, heartbeat, breathing

Neuroception: our subconscious surveillance system that evaluates risk and safety through prosody of voice, facial expression, body language

Co-regulation, Belonging and Attunement

A yellow-toned illustration of a forest path. In the foreground, a large bear and a small piglet are walking away from the viewer. The bear is on the right, and the piglet is on the left, holding the bear's paw. The path leads into a forest with several trees. The overall style is simple and sketchy.

“Pooh!” whispered Piglet.
“Yes, Piglet?” said Pooh.
“Oh, nothing,” said Piglet.
“I was just making sure of you.”

Orienting, Grounding
Resourcing in the Present

Tracking Sensation with Curiosity

Titration = Slow, Small Chewable Bites,

Pendulation or Holding more than one thing
Dual Awareness

Completion of Stuck Charge – Discharge

Reflection, Discernment

“We can learn to lay down new tracking, reweave safety along our sensorimotor pathways, and grieve what was missed or lost without getting stuck.”

Marika Heinrichs

Why include a Bottoms Up” Approach?

Includes your body and allows access to implicit memories.

Noticing and reducing the tension/effort it takes to hold in or avoid.

Not another prescriptive model or system “to do”. Justly different focused attention.

It’s you “collaborating with your own experience”. Being in “real conversation with my body” and “identifying the personalized tools that actually work for me” so that I don’t “lose myself in every patient”.

Develops greater self awareness and slowly, safely builds access to other possibilities beyond your default response. This can lead to more options for experience, agency and vitality.

An accessible way to “deeply update your risk detection system”.

Provides tangible, embodied understanding of stress and trauma, “which has grown my compassion, quality of attention and patience for myself and my clients”. Things aren’t so personal.

The transformative power of learning how to feel safe-enough and the ease and freedom it brings.

A photograph of a dense forest with tall, thin trees. Sunlight is streaming through the canopy, creating a bright, hazy glow in the center of the image. The ground is covered in green moss and fallen leaves.

Coherence

Nervous system flexibility and
increased self awareness
allowing more space and
capacity for other options like
choice and aliveness

The Interrupters:

Some Somatic Tools

Five Senses Play

Cold Water Exposure

Movement, Swaying, Shaking, Tapping

Practice Your Embodied No

Brain Dump

Compassion Practices

Sounding, Humming, Gargling

Orienting / Finding an Anchor

Breathing Practices and HRV

Pandiculation

Glimmers

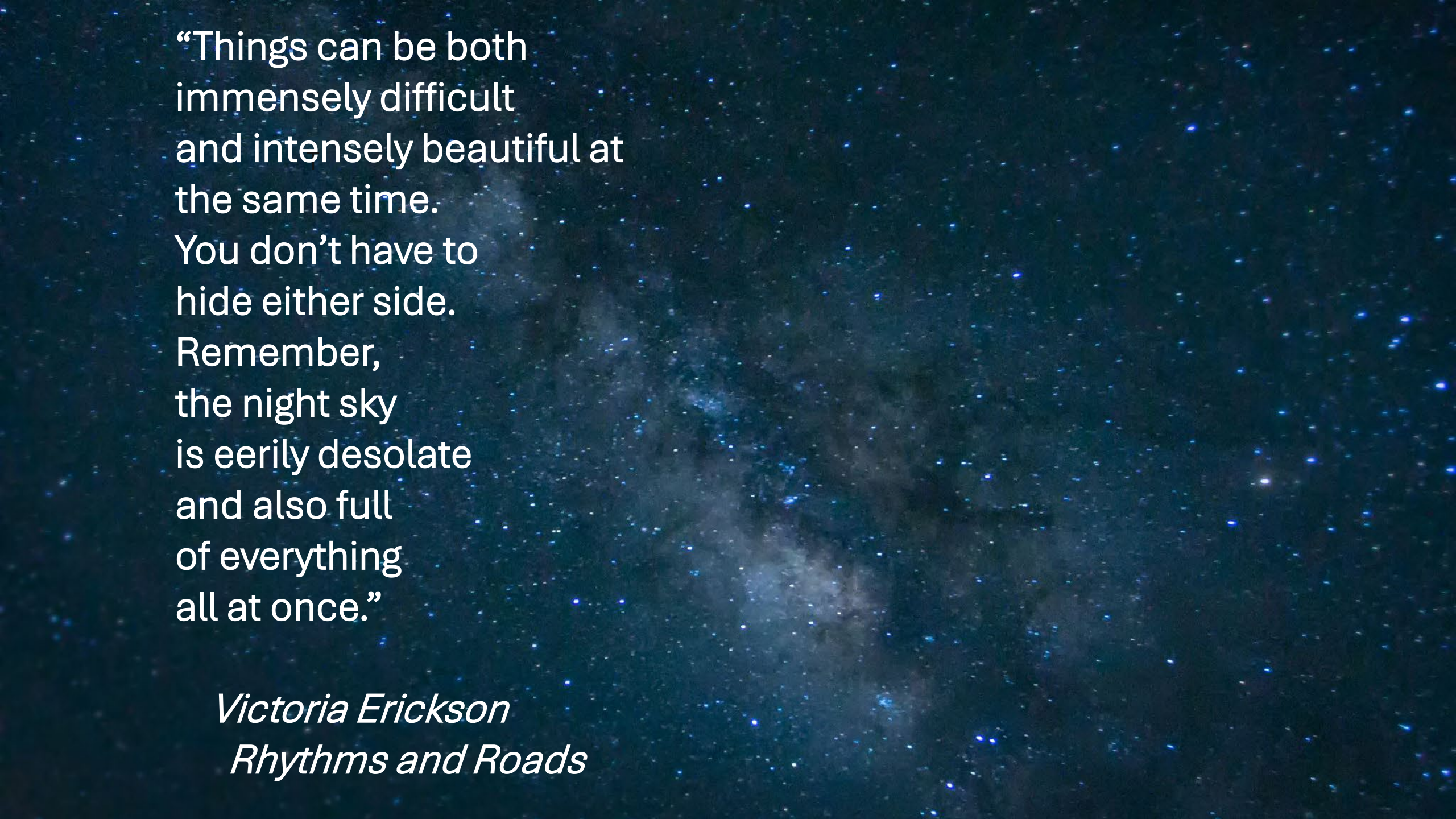
Mindfulness Practices

Self Massage

Containment/Boundary Exercises

Exploration





“Things can be both
immensely difficult
and intensely beautiful at
the same time.

You don't have to
hide either side.

Remember,
the night sky
is eerily desolate
and also full
of everything
all at once.”

Victoria Erickson
Rhythms and Roads

A butterfly, trying to find its way out of a cocoon, can be difficult to watch, and so it's common for people to try to peel back the layers of the cocoon and try to help the butterfly into the air. But a butterfly's lifespan can be greatly shortened if the exit from the cocoon isn't its own doing. The butterfly's struggle is actually a gift to its chances of thriving.

To become who we are meant to become — the becoming must be ours. This isn't to say not to help each other, but to understand the gift we give in supporting one another to make our own way to the sky.

Andrea Gibson





Thank you!