

Positive Disintegration Podcast
Episode 10: Nature, Spirit, and Disintegration

Chris Wells, Emma Nicholson, and guest Eric Windhorst
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Emma: Welcome back, happy listeners, to another episode of Positive Disintegration, a framework for becoming your authentic self. I'm Emma Nicholson, and with me today is co-host Dr. Chris Wells. Hi, Chris. How are you going?

Chris: Hi, Emma. I'm doing well, thanks. How about you?

Emma: I'm doing excellent. It's good to be here back with another guest today.

Chris: That's right. I'm excited to have our guest today with us. We met in 2018 at the Dabrowski Congress in Naperville, Illinois, and I think he's going to be a great guest.

Emma: Cool. Excellent. Well, our guest today is Eric Windhorst. Eric is a counselor, coach and psychotherapist committed to helping others connect with their inner nature, so their true authentic selves and their outer nature. So the wider, more than human world, he specializes in working with individuals who identify as created, gifted, intense, and highly sensitive. Welcome on to the podcast Eric.

Eric: Yeah, yeah. Thanks for the warm welcome, Emma, and nice to be with you again, Chris. It feels like 2018 was somewhat of a lifetime ago, quite frankly, but it's good to hear your voice again.

Chris: I know. I feel the same way. It does seem like it was a lifetime ago, but yeah, it's great to hear your voice again, too. I've heard you on other podcasts, and that is why I thought you would be a great guest on ours. And so I'm looking forward to hearing about your work and your connection with Dabrowski's theory and positive disintegration today.

Eric: Yeah, I'm very much looking forward to sharing it.

Chris: Great. Well, and that's the way that we've been starting the podcast is asking, how did you first learn about Dabrowski theory?

Eric: Yeah, that's a good question. And I was searching my memory as to where I first came across Dabrowski. In 2019, I completed my PhD where I was exploring how gifted adults experience ecological self, so a sense of self that's wide, expansive, connected to nature, connected to the cosmos, somewhat mystical cosmic and scope. And as part of that research, I was really delving into the eco psychology research. And so eco psychology is a field. It's relatively new. It's been around for a few decades, at least in its modern form. And eco psychology seeks to understand humans in nature and the human nature relationship through

ecological and psychological principles. And so as part of that research I came across a book by Joanna Macy and Molly Brown.

And the book is "Coming back to life, an updated guide to the work that reconnects." And so that was about like eight years ago or so. And they actually refer to Dabrowski in that book as a way of understanding what's happening society or culturally at least from like a western mindset. So looking at the climate crisis, looking at increasing societal instability and dysfunction and using Dabrowski to understand how as things are fragmenting and disintegrating and falling apart, there's also a potential that things can come together in a new ideally healthier and more functional form. And I was really struck by Dabrowski's idea. And then I started racking my brain and looking back at my own life history and how this idea of looking at something, which for all intents and purposes, often looks like a psychological crisis or a societal crisis for that matter.

But seeing it through a lens that I find to be a much more hopeful and much more well, quite frankly, positive. Looking for the opportunity to not see pathology, but to see potential. So I first came across it probably about eight years ago. And then as I continued in my PhD research, I was interested in combining some eco psychological ideas, eco therapeutic ideas with Dabrowski's. So in 2017 I wrote a paper uniting Inner Nature with outer Nature. Gifted Adult Development and Ecotherapy. And in that paper, I dovetailed together Dabrowski's ideas with how nature, how having a relationship with nature, being connected consciously with nature might help a person go through a disintegrative period and come of the other side in a positive sense, in a reformed and healthier sense. So that was how I first got interested in theory.

Chris: Actually, that paper is in the same volume of Advanced Development that my paper on the inner experience of giftedness was in. Well, cool. I'm going to have to look up that book that you mentioned because that's very interesting. I'm always looking for more about Dabrowski at the societal level or beyond the individual because obviously, I mean, it's pretty clear that we go through positive disintegration at levels beyond the individual.

Eric: Yeah. And I believe it's a very helpful conceptual framework to make sense of things and to see things, again, when we can see things through the lens of possibility and hope rather than through this lens of a pure pathology or looking purely at the more pathological or negative views of things. I think on various levels that opens up possibilities for growth and positive change.

Emma: Do you feel that approaching it from a societal perspective first made a difference in the way you understand the theory or the way you write about it? Because most people come across this from a personal experience perspective, maybe if they're trying to deal with their own disintegration, or maybe they come to it through overexcitability. So do you think that initial lens that you had makes a difference between what you do and what others do with the theory?

Eric: First of all, that's an interesting question. And as we're talking, where my intuition or my mind went was no, there's a sense of like, I don't know, I feel the theory of positive disintegration. So whether it's happening at a higher level or a larger scale or at a lower level or at more of the individual scale, it feels like a very similar phenomenon to me. I don't think

coming at it from the higher level substantially affected the way that I understand the theory or work with the theory or write about the theory. It feels right. It's interesting that sometimes things intuitively feel right, that this idea is pointing at something fundamentally true, I would say. Quite frankly, about the nature, of the nature of reality and the way that growth and change happen, whether we're looking at the natural world, whether we're looking at societal structures and the more human constructs, or if we're looking at the depth psyche of an individual person, there's something about this theory which points to what to me feels like something fundamental about the structures of reality.

Emma: Which speaks to the integrity of the theory a little. Because if you can shift its applicability and it still feels as true. That sort of tallies with, I think what a lot of people have said on this podcast that they come across it and it feels right, what you're saying about that sort of essential truth to it.

Eric: Yes. And there's that intuitive bodily feeling. And it's interesting, like tying this already together with some of my work with nature. Like, if we think about the body as such an intimate tie, and I mean, I'm splitting this up into body, mind, spirits, but for the sake of argument, it's like the body and our resonance with ideas or resonance with other people or our resonance with natural places. There's something about tuning in that when we feel that resonance with them, it's like a tuning fork of truth. And as much as we can analyze the theory conceptually or intellectually, which is important and valid of course, for me, it always comes back to, no there's something about this which it feels inescapable.

Chris: Eric, tell us about your personal experience of positive disintegration. If you don't mind.

Eric: I'm going to, I guess, tell my story right from the beginning a little bit and how, looking at, I would say particularly two major periods of my life and how theory of positive disintegration, looking at it through that lens makes so much sense. And quite frankly, looking at it through that lens and looking at the more hopeful side of very painful experiences probably saved my life, quite frankly. So, starting right at the get go, I possess a lot of those raw ingredients typically talked about when looking at people who resonate with the theory of positive disintegration or have "advanced developmental potential." I have overexcitabilities, particularly in the emotional imagination realm. There's those, for lack of a better word, there's gifted traits and a certain level of intelligence, and then I have this inner drive, that third factor, this drive to be my own person and figure out who I am in this world.

Although that drive, and again, to my story a little bit, was very much stunted by my environment for the first quarter or so of my life. So a little bit about me. So I'm the younger of two siblings and my older sister Liz is a super gifted writer. She's an amazing person. And I grew up in a pretty conservative environment in a variety of ways. So politically conservative very Christian and I belonged to this Dutch Christian reform church and went to this Dutch Christian school, relatively monocultural, everything from religion to socio demographics. There was a lot of commonality and a lot of quite simple and bland in a lot of ways too. The answers were very simple to life questions. And there very rarely felt like there was any space to explore beyond the scope of that environment.

So, very early on and this is one of the capacities I developed was I learned how to fit into environments in order to psychologically survive, even though those environments were too small for me. So I had to cut off pieces of myself, contort pieces of myself in order to fit in. I didn't necessarily consciously do that all the time. It was somewhat unconscious at times, but it's something I learned to do because there wasn't space for my wholeness. So fast forward a bit to a massive family trauma I went through at age 15. It shattered my heart. I had to numb my emotions. I was so sensitive, and I had such a deep feeler, but I had to numb my emotions to survive.

I further developed this adaptation, this outer shell, in order to navigate the world. But there was one exception, there was one exceptional place for me where I felt like I could be myself. And that was a greenhouse that I worked at. So at about age 16 I got a job at a local family run greenhouse, and there was something about being around the plants, and it was so quiet and peaceful, and I felt upheld. I felt supported. I can even imagine myself now when I would go in, I'd be spending hours watering plants, going through this methodical ritual. And there was something so nourishing about it. As I was tending to these plants, I really felt like they were tending to me.

I wasn't fully consciously aware that this was happening at the time. As I look back, I see, like I was being held, I was being held by something outside of my family, outside of my faith, outside of all of these other aspects of my life. It was the one place where I felt safe, but nevertheless, I was still pretty numb internally. And I was quite lost without access to my feeling life, how can I navigate the world? How can I make life decisions? How can I decide what is really important to me? So I went through a bit of a teenage rebellion as many of us do, got with some relatively rough crowds and did some drugs. But there was still nowhere that I could go. So to put it in Dabrowski terms, it was movement from level one to level two, but I didn't have any resources around me.

I wasn't conscious of these resources that I could go, that there could be something more. I had to come back to the same old community, even when I would challenge my faith or challenge leaders in my church at times. So one example of this is we had a thing called catechism class, which is basically getting trained, young people getting trained in the theory and concepts of our particular denomination. I remember sitting in that class, and we were reading through this catechism book, which is published back in the 16th century. And the first question and answer as the books is formatted, was, what is your only comfort in life and in death? And the answer is or the answer given is that I'm not my own, but I belong body and soul to Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior.

And it goes on and on. And it didn't make any sense to me. It's like, how is that my only comfort in life and death? Like, I don't belong to myself? It sounded absurd to me. And I raised that question, but it was shut down. There was no room for dialogue. I was seen as a troublemaker. And because of my strong sensitivity and ability to read environments, I said, okay there is no place for this. I'm going to shut down that rebellion, which I now see as a healthy tension with wrestling with environments that are too constricting. So somehow, I managed to continue coping. Age 19 or 20 I developed a lot of internal tension and anxiety.

I was really struggling to function as I was graduating high school. And there still wasn't anything that provided me with an existential buttressing to hold me up. I actually became even more religious at that time. And it was like an ironic catch 22 as I was looking to my faith and my religion for comfort, while at the same time that very comfort was constricting me away from being the person that I was. So somewhere in there, I went to university. I met the person who is now my partner which was a very interesting experience in and of itself, because when I met her, something within me tuned in, like that felt bodily resonance, like, that person is the one for you. It was like this one moment during this whole phase of my life where I made a decision that was actually in tune with my authentic nature.

At age 25, I went through what I now see as a massive positive disintegration. I had been holding things together for about 10 years since that family trauma. And it was the birth of my daughter, Natalie, that really blew everything to pieces. So Natalie rushed into the world. We had midwives up here in Canada. We had a couple of midwives. We were going to have a hospital birth, but we went to the hospital. They said basically, things are not moving along too quickly. Go back home and check back in the morning. Well, in the middle of the night my wife entered active labor. We called the midwives. They came and checked everything. And basically, they said like, there's no time to go to the hospital. This baby is coming. I mean, that in itself was its own form of disintegration for me.

I would call it a bit of a minor trauma, quite frankly, the whole birthing process. So, Natalie came into the world, and I was the first person that got to hold her. I held her against my bare chest, and I felt like this person sees me, she can see beneath. I felt completely exposed by her energy. And that's what precipitated this crisis internally, it's like, I can't, like, who am. I can't continue on this way, and I can't pass this lostness onto my daughter. Like, that's not fair. So I managed to hold things together for a few more months, but my symptoms got worse and worse.

I was struggling with significant amounts of anxiety and entering into a deep depression. And it reached a point where I couldn't work anymore. I couldn't function. I didn't really know where to look for help. And my sister actually pointed me to a local therapist who happened to have a Jungian orientation. Yeah. With a lot of fear and trembling, quite frankly. I went to go see him. I guess now from like a clinical perspective, I was dealing with debilitating anxiety and major depression. And yet, when I was sitting in the room with my Jungian therapist, he looked at me through the eyes I think that Dabrowski looked at people. So rather than seeing this person who needs to get medicated, let's do some CBT or some other kinds of therapy, and buttress you back up and get back out there and functioning into life.

He saw what was happening to me as a fundamental breaking down of my self structure. And he introduced me to Jungian ideas, the idea of individuation. And he pointed out that sometimes anxiety and depression can actually be caused by having a gulf between your ego self or your conscious self, and the truth about who you are, the deeper self, or the authentic self, or the inner nature. And again, something inside of me is like yeah, that feels right. That's what's happening here. So in my work with my therapist Brian, we looked at my dreams and I started to have dreams. Like I never really dreamed that much before. I started having these vivid dreams with repeating archetypal motifs. And one of the symbols that continually came up in my dreams was

the symbol of the greenhouse, which was really interesting because I had been working at a greenhouse for six summers as a student. I loved being there.

The greenhouse kept coming up in my dreams. As part of my healing through the Jungian analysis, I started spending a lot of time outside in nature. Countless hours spent on the Hamilton Waterfront with my journal, writing down observations about my dreams, about periods of my life, about what was happening internally, about what I wanted for my life, about who I was, about what it means to be a father, about all of these things. And slowly over time, through the help of my therapist, but also through the help of nature reflecting things back to me, and through these internal whispers and external whispers, hearing messages about who I really am, I started to heal and started to integrate back into something new. And I want to share a poem by one of my favorite poets that captures a little bit about what I was feeling at that time. So the poem is called ["The Journey" by David Whyte](#).

*Above the mountains
the geese turn into
the light again*

*Painting their
black silhouettes
on an open sky.*

*Sometimes everything
has to be
inscribed across
the heavens*

*so you can find
the one line
already written
inside you.*

*Sometimes it takes
a great sky
to find that*

*first, bright
and indescribable
wedge of freedom
in your own heart.*

*Sometimes with
the bones of the black
sticks left when the fire
has gone out*

*someone has written
something new
in the ashes of your life.*

*You are not leaving.
Even as the light fades quickly now,
you are arriving.*

So emerging out of—depending on how you look at it—this massive disintegration, this journey towards wholeness, this individuation process, this clinical anxiety and depression depends on how you conceptualize it. I got to this realization like, I'm going to have to make some outer changes in my life to match this new self that is emerging. And this was extremely inconvenient, quite frankly. At this point, I had two young children. There were financial pressures and also gender norms, societal pressures, the man, in the communities I grew up the man is supposed to be responsible and do the right thing and work hard and not be emotional, et cetera, et cetera. And here I am, all emotion, all passion and feeling called to go back to school to study spiritual care and psychotherapy.

I was terrified. My more conscious self. I knew I had to do it. I didn't feel like I had a choice. There was something driving me internally, but my ego self was still feeling, like how am I going to do this like this? People are going to judge me. I'm not going to be understood. And yet I had to do it. And I did, I followed this thread that I could only see my partner, my wife, thankfully she was very supportive, and she didn't understand what was happening. But she loved me so much that she said, no, you have to do this no matter what. And so I followed that thread, which only I seemed to see at the time, which leads me into a second poem that I was hoping to share. And it's a poem called ["The Way It Is" by William Stafford](#).

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

So, I went back to school. I somehow managed to get together enough financial resources, and things seem to work out, which it seems to me another thing about the nature of the way that, at least in my experience, things work, and I've seen this in other people's lives too, where when you feel called to something or you feel pulled in a certain direction, oftentimes the world meets us halfway. And the world wants to facilitate that for us. And I really felt this powerful force of, if you follow, you will be held and you will be supported. Little did I know that I would discover another very interesting thing as I was studying psychotherapy.

That is when I discovered the field of eco psychology. And eco psychology to me, was like the perfect. At the time it was like, okay, so here's my love of the natural world and my understanding of biology and ecology with my newfound passion for personal growth and human psychology and eco psychology brought the two together. It felt like complete coherence. And so I felt another internal tug. It was this drive, I need to study this, I need to go into this. And I felt, again, like I didn't have a choice. I have to pursue this. So I continued on in my studies. I finished my counseling degree, and I went into a second master's degree, a more academic study where I was looking at how the mental health of university students is related to their relationship with nature.

And it was a mixed method study. It was quite interesting. But then another, a little bit more of a minor crisis happened. It's like, you're not done yet. You have to keep on going. And so I went on to do a PhD. And as part of getting into the PhD, is when I really discovered and started delving into my own giftedness. And understanding how being gifted has shaped my life has, has probably in some ways, I don't want to say like created some of my challenges, but definitely contributed to some of my challenges, and that I needed to have a better understanding of this to move into my role as a therapist and counselor where I felt called to work with creative, gifted and highly sensitive and intense people while bringing together ecopsychology and ecotherapy and marry together that with the understanding of giftedness.

I finished my PhD in 2019, so about three years ago. It was a powerful transformative experience again, in which I realized that the academic study of people, the academic study of ideas itself was a bit too limited for me. And that brings me to the last three years or so of my life probably starting at age 35 and continuing on today is where I'm going through another, I'd say, a more subtle positive disintegration. And it's hard to find words to really name what's going on, but it's like a psychospiritual integration or a bit of like a spiritual awakening. And it's been facilitated in very strange and unexpected ways. So there are two people who I came across and they actually had reached out to me to work with me in a coaching capacity.

And it ended up with both people that I ended up working with them, and they ended up helping me on my path. So one of the people is a shamanistic practitioner and she's very intuitive and open to other realms. And she reflected these more esoteric or spiritual facets of myself, which had never been reflected back before. And it's interesting, going back to my conservative religious upbringing, is I had little glimmers and hints of connecting with God, or connecting with the spiritual realm, but I never had the language, and I never had a person to come alongside me and explain to me that's what was happening for me. And so over the past couple of years, heightened, especially over the past six or seven months she's been helping me integrate these new facets of myself.

And another person that came across who had actually come to me for assistance, I ended up working with him as well. Although by day I think he's a computer programmer, systems analyst. He's also profoundly gifted and has this amazing energetic sensitivity. And he's been teaching me energy work practices and ways of tuning into more subtle aspects of human experience, which has allowed me as an individual to really manage my own intensities and sensitivities. Because a lot of the time, and I didn't realize this until relatively recently, is I'm picking up on information and energy from other people, and I'm picking up energy from ideas

and I'm so sensitive that it comes on to me. And without these practices I often felt like I was going to get trapped in absorbing all of these things with the shamanistic work combined with these energy work practices.

I'm really starting to feel well, quite frankly, like a sense of groundedness and peace and a sense of that homeness in myself and a sense of that homeness in the world that I didn't think was possible. So to put it in Dabrowski's ideas of like the different levels. Level four, I think I have hints sometimes of level five, although I definitely do not feel worthy of that idea. But nevertheless, I get these moments of profound acceptance of peace of what I'm here for as a person. And despite all the things happening in the world and all the dysfunction, all the climate, the uncertainty around the climate, the uncertainty with escalating geopolitical conflict, even amidst all of those storms, there's a sense of like, but don't forget why you are here, Eric.

And don't forget to be grounded in your body. And don't forget that the things that you're doing on a daily basis, whether that's my work with clients or the intentions that I'm setting in my relationships, that every decision that I'm making when it's in line with what resonates deeply in my heart and in my soul. When I'm making those decisions, it's having an effect on the collective in ways you can't imagine. I used to often feel like I'm not making a big enough contribution, or there's these expectations that I have to be something, I have to use these gifts and these abilities for the greatest possible impact. And what I'm learning is that sometimes the greatest possible impact comes from listening to the still inner voice within you and living from that place.

Is that to say that I'm always at complete peace about that? Well no, I'm a complex, multifaceted person. And yet there's this home to come back to. There's this inner nature to come back to. And when I go back and I look at my 25-year-old self or my 15-year-old self, I think, man, you had no idea like what was ahead of you. You had no idea that all of the constriction and the suffering and the misunderstanding, that was necessary in order that you can become the person you are today, and that you can now walk alongside other people who are going through periods of major life transition or disintegration. So I have a sense of, despite all of the pain and despite all of the suffering, I have a sense now of it's okay. For some reason, this had to happen this way. In some ways, in some reason, I chose these things so that I could learn lessons that I could then share with others.

Chris: Wow, that was really powerful, Eric. Thank you so much for sharing yourself and being vulnerable with us like that and being so candid and honest.

Eric: Oh, yeah, absolutely. And thank you for holding the space. And yeah, words probably are not sufficient, but thanks.

Chris: I feel the same way. It's really beautiful and honestly, I hardly know where to start in following up. There's so much here. But one thing that I wanted to ask you about—I think that it must have been a conversation you were having with Jen from InterGifted, where I heard you talk about your daughter's birth and that experience. And I'd like to hear more about your work with gifted adults and how, not just Dabrowski's theory, but all of these things that you've learned about, and you've experienced and that you're still learning about. How it informs your work with them.

Eric: So, I mean, it is complicated, quite frankly, I work with a whole variety of different types of people, but often people who have a certain level of intensity and complexity and drive, and they don't fit into any boxes often. And because of that, they've also suffered a lot often, whether that manifests as similar to my story, in which masking and then having to come back to yourself later on or for other people, they've held onto themselves the whole time and suffered tremendous trauma because of that, of rejection or self-abuse and things like that. In my work with clients, I work very holistically and eclectically because everybody's unique and everybody's complex.

And this is I guess my internal way of looking at it, but the second I adhere to a particular conceptual framework, or I start having, I start, I guess turning onto my mind of trying to figure out a problem or to put something into a box, almost always that that's a horrible thing to do at least in my clinical judgment in working with very complex and quite frankly, fascinating and interesting people. And so what I've learned, and this is partly from my own experience as an individual in therapy, but also in working with a lot of clients now at this point, is I try not to put any boxes on things. I try to bring myself, bring my presence, bring an openness to meeting with another human being without any of the clinical labels, without any of these boxes that are so easy to quickly jump to, whether that's to ease my own anxiety of uncertainty or to provide some simplistic explanation to a person.

So the first way that I often start is holding that open space and then holding that open space and holding that energy of acceptance of the whole person, that's when transformation seems to happen. A person will begin bringing things up that they weren't even conscious of. Conversation will go in areas that at the start of the session we would've never imagined. And if I had followed a more structured route, we probably would've cut off. People come to see me for a whole variety of different challenges. But a regular theme is people who are dealing with similar struggles to what I dealt with, in that they didn't really fit into conventional systems. They either mask themselves or they held onto themselves and face trauma. And they're trying to figure out, how the heck do I figure out who I am or how the heck do I navigate this world?

How do I make sense of things? How do I find belonging? How do I find community? And I guess, I mean, it's really even hard to put into words what happens, but I ask a lot of questions of my clients. So a person may come in with an assumption about themselves or about what their problem is. And I'll ask questions because oftentimes our surface level or conceptual understanding of something is actually masking a much deeper complex network of things. And so I ask questions and I mirror back. I mirror back what I sense in a person. And this is something that I've always seemed to be able to do, but even as a young child, my parents said, like, I sit, I sit there and apparently like observing everything and taking everything in and like in this, it would make people uncomfortable because I seem to see into people.

As I've continued to develop that ability or that skill in some ways, I can sometimes get a sense of a person's true self or their inner nature. And again, like I don't know what exactly is happening there. Is it intuition? Am I tuning into some energetic sense? But I get these little glimpses, these little messages sometimes that's a felt sense in my body. Sometimes it's more of

like an audible message of like, oh this happened to this person when they were this age or this person's inner child is screaming and feels and feels alone and does not trust the adult self.

Sometimes I'll get a glimpse of where a person might be headed in the future. And so I ask questions and I reflect back some of these messages that seem to get. And it sparks this dialogue in this conversation. And things start to mysteriously and somewhat magically happen. A person's sense of self or their identity seems to start naturally shifting. A client that I'm seeing. I had been seeing him for about two years now, from the get go I sensed that there was this inter tension inside of this person. I would ask questions and I would make the unconscious conscious. And he resisted. He didn't resonate with what I was saying and yet I still felt like, it kept him coming back for me intuitively.

And recently, life has thrown him a bit of a curve ball. And he's going through the dark night of the soul, or a positive disintegration. And suddenly he came to our most recent conversation in tears showing this raw emotion he's never shown before. And in my mind, I'm like, oh, thank God that as much as this really hurts right now, now you can start building something that's actually meaningful and authentic for you. And so he's thinking about moving to another location and getting a bit of a fresh start. And I sensed, I sensed this happening at some point, and I had to hold a bit of attention as the therapist.

And yet, trusting my intuition and allowing things to flow naturally. The timing of when something is right to do and when an event is to happen, that's not within my control, which in some ways allows me as a practitioner not to have to hold too much personally. I can resonate with things and see patterns, but I don't have to solve the problem. That's not my job. So oftentimes when people come to me in a period of like deep crisis or a major life transition, a broken relationship, a sense of lost identity, I don't see that through a pathological lens. I almost always see it as an opportunity, an opportunity for growth. That's not to say that sometimes a person's not struggling with clinical symptoms or might benefit from medication or other things, by all means, like multiple things can be happening concurrently.

But getting to work with people at that deep existential level of self and seeing people through our conversations, come to a place of more coherence and wholeness is—it's absolutely priceless. I mean, it's such a meaningful location that I have. And so jumping back to this greenhouse idea. So I worked in a greenhouse in my teenage years. It was this amazing home to me. Then this greenhouse, this imagery of greenhouse kept on coming up in my dreams for nearly a decade. And what I now come to understand is I'm a greenhouse for people. So what does a greenhouse do? Well, greenhouse is its own little subsystem within a wider system. So the wider atmosphere is the elements of nature.

And then in the greenhouse, things are a little bit more controlled. The settings, what the greenhouse is providing, a place with the optimal conditions to grow. I'm not causing the growth. As a greenhouse I'm not causing the growth. I'm providing a setting where the ideal temperature can be reached. There's enough nutrients and water been given to the plants and the sunshine of the spirits coming through the glass, it feels so right. That is what I'm here to do. I'm here to be a place where other people can find a refuge and can grow into what is most authentic for them. I'm not creating that change, but I provide the conditions for that to happen.

Chris: I love that. That is to my mind, an ideal way to look at what you do. I mean, it's so true. And I've sort of tried to think about that recently. I feel sort of similarly, well, I mean there were a lot of areas of what you've talked about in this episode that I could relate to, but the thread is one thing where especially I have felt this so powerfully over the past several years, like what am I going to do with the theory? How am I going to take this information and help people? And I know that I'm a conduit for knowledge. I've done this work of studying it, and it's not that I want to teach people about it, but I want to help them access Dabrowski's ideas and his thinking and his students, and be somebody who can help. And of course, the podcast is helping us and it's letting us have these amazing conversations with people like you. But yeah, there's so much richness to what you've shared with us in this episode. I'm really grateful.

Emma: Similarly, I'm thinking about the thread. Because sometimes it's a very scary place when you don't know where that thread is going, or you can't see like you know you're following your path. It's a dark path and you can't see any more than a couple of meters ahead. So I'm assuming part of what you do, Eric, with helping people follow that is helping them overcome their fear of that. But the other thing that jumped out at me was the spiritual element. Because I know for Dabrowski that was an important part. But I think sometimes particularly when people are very intellectual, they struggle to get in touch with that aspect of self, and they sort of struggle with the very idea of having a spiritual side or having a spiritual nature or what importance that might play in their life.

Eric: Yeah. And increasingly on my own journey, but also in my work with clients and my thinking about the world is that spiritual aspect of human experience is absolutely vital. Particularly given the compounding crises that we're dealing with collectively and some of us are dealing with quite frankly, personally as well. Well, you mentioned following the thread and how sometimes you can only see a couple feet ahead of you or you see that next door that you have to go through. But I mean, sometimes it's terrifying and there's fear and trembling and for a lot of my own life, it's often felt that way of like, you have to do this next thing, and then something else comes along and leads me to that next aspect of the path or the next aspect of the thread.

But as I've been developing these more spiritual aspects of my nature, what I've recognized is that I've never been alone. And from an existential standpoint, it provides me with such a sense of grounding and of homeness. And so what do I mean by not being alone? I mean, that's a little bit cryptic, I guess, in some ways. And quite frankly, I'm a little bit self-conscious about sharing some of this because I've been part of a lot of intellectual communities and there's other elements to my own faith experience and such where some of the things that I'm experiencing and now talking about would have quite frankly gotten me ostracized and or burned at the stake at some period.

And perhaps I was burned at the stake at a previous life. That's potentially true as well. But I now know that I'm not alone. And so what do I mean about that? So, on the one hand, my grandfather is always with me. So my paternal grandfather, my father's father, I never met him. He died in 1980, and I was born in 1983. But I've always felt the powerful connection with him. I remember in grade eight, walking in the back field at my school, the sun shining down on me and having the strong sense of like, my grandfather's smiling down on me. And at that time, I quickly put it

away, or like there was no place for those kinds of experiences, especially in a conservative Christian setting.

But now he's with me all of the time. He's looking out for me. He wants the best for me, he loves me unconditionally. And I've encountered other helping guides as well that are looking out for me. And if I need guidance, and this is the amazing thing about developing some of these spiritual capacities, I actually can find guidance within myself. Well, it's outside of myself, but it's ultimately within myself by asking for guidance from these various helping spirits. So I no longer feel a sense of being like this separate individual, making meaning of the world, having nothing existentially to stand on, because I could deconstruct everything. Most of the things I grew up with, or most of the things out there for me, they weren't satisfying. They weren't undergirding and holistic enough.

And now I have these experiences, which I doubted like for many months, but I kept on having these experiences where I'm being shown what I need to do in a situation. If I'm feeling lost, I can ask for help. And the amount of comfort that comes from that is particularly when things are so unstable in the world around us, is a tremendous gift. And I'm really interested in helping my clients develop those capacities for themselves, as part of an empowerment of the client as well as is like, the therapeutic relationship is a wonderful nexus of closeness and companionship. But when a person can truly tune into their own spiritual knowing and where they're needing to go and develop that sense of agency and trust in themselves and their helpers. That to me, I mean it's the most incredible gift that somebody can get and then can develop.

Chris: My next question for you is that I want to ask you if you're going to submit to the Congress, because I sure hope that you're going to share this stuff with us at the Dabrowski Congress because whoa, what an excellent session that would be.

Eric: So I'm definitely considering doing that whether that's in person or virtually. Although, and this might be part of my own self-consciousness, or I feel like some of the stuff's stretching. It's a bit stretching and challenging, and I would definitely love to share, but want to make it, let's say, digestible and not too far out there. Say for your average of whatever that would mean, your average Dabrowski-ian lover. I very much appreciate the encouragement. So a little bit of a question mark at this point.

Chris: That's fair. We'll let you have the question mark, but I want you to know that I personally love the idea of stretching and challenging. And also, I know now that I'm working with clients how desperately we need people who have some experience working with gifted clients from these frameworks to share and offer perspectives on how this work looks and how it is for you. I think that we need to come together more in a community of clinicians or coaches and develop this practice or create places where we can talk about this work beyond gifted education and saying in NAGC, and it's a special opportunity that we only have every couple years. But yeah, I mean, no pressure. Maybe a little pressure.

Eric: Well, there's the external pressure and I completely agree with you, quite frankly. And then there's also the internal pressure of the thread that I'm forced to follow. So I guess, I'm going to

consciously put it on the shelf for this moment, but I will sit with that and let it percolate, but as you're talking intuitively, like, okay, I see.

Emma: I'm going to throw my highly uneducated 2 cents worth on this. Why not? When you don't know what you're talking about, you might as well go for gold, right? I think you would be surprised; you were talking before about how people mask aspects of themselves, and you would be surprised how many people probably sitting there listening to this with maybe their own spiritual experiences sitting on that, not telling anyone about it. And it might resonate with them anyway, even though on the surface you'd never think it would. And the other thing that I was thinking about is you were talking about, you not being alone. I mean, that's an experience that's applicable to yourself, but even from, I did a blog post recently about how if you're going through disintegration, you'll never walk alone anyway, because previously, or even right now, there are other people going through this experience.

So even while like you're alone in the storm you're actually not. You've talked about the thread and Chris is talking about following her own thread and her own path, which is a very academic, like, logical path. And she knows she's got things to do, but perhaps there's opportunities that are going to fall on her plate that she doesn't see coming, and she needs to be open to. So there's maybe applicability to those things at different levels. And we know Dabrowski loves levels and there might be people resonating with these things in secret on their own terms.

Eric: Again, like resonant, compelling. I think you're absolutely right. My ego says I'm going to think about it, but yeah, I'm having. I mean, there's no counter argument whatsoever.

Emma: Gauntlets are being thrown down.

Eric: Gauntlets are being thrown down internally and externally. I can't escape now. And so as I'm developing these spiritual aspects of myself, I'm actually working with that person, the energy work practitioner who's by night and computer programmer by day. And we're working on a book together, where we're tying together, quite frankly, we're tying together like more conventional psychotherapeutic insights into working with people with energy work insights to create a more holistic picture, more holistic possibilities in working with clients. So bringing that spiritual into the more psychotherapeutic sphere, which in itself is a bit of stretching and growing for the field. But it's amazing in working with clients and even having energy work healings done on me, for example, how quickly things can shift for people.

And I think it's really important to highlight that because psychology, psychotherapy, it can be a very powerful tool. But what I'm finding is when you're working with really highly, very highly sensitive people who I would describe as also very energetically sensitive, helping them develop the tools and practices to manage those aspects of their experience in and of themselves can create outcomes. And not that it's about speed of transformation. I mean, that's not at all what it's fundamentally about, but can create quality of life and outcomes, which it would've taken from a more conventional psychotherapy, taken probably months, if not years. And so I see expanding how we look at humans, how we look at human suffering, and again, taking a more holistic perspective and using some of these tools, which when we think about the chakra system or auras or shamanistic practitioner work, which shamanism is the most ancient cultural slash

religious practice that that seems to have been present across cultures for tens of thousands of years, being able to work with some of these tools that have been present but have been lost is a necessary part I think of both individual change and transformation as well as cultural change in transformation.

I realize these are complex things and there are issues that I wrestle with, things like cultural appropriation and these other things that have to be mindful of, but there's something very human about these tools, and it's been lost in contemporary western societies. And I think helping people connect to these other realms, or connecting to these other aspects of themselves is an absolutely vital, if not somewhat hidden aspect of the transformation that we're going through collectively. So with all that said, I guess I got to present at Dabrowski.

Chris: That's right. And I'm looking forward to your book. It sounds fascinating. I can't wait to read that.

Eric: It's amazing. And in doing those practices, it's really been quite transformative for me and in teaching some of my clients to work with some of these practices as well. It's given them some agency in their life where being so sensitive or so permeable to other people's or other places energy. And I'm sure you see this too, Chris, in your work with gifted folks, like not all gifted folks, but a lot of gifted folks are so permeable. And working with things on an energetic level shifts some of the psychological stuff in a way that setting boundaries doesn't seem to do in the same, I guess the same efficacy.

So I'm really excited to see how this marriage between the psychological and the spiritual continues on. And what I've been shown as like, that's something that I'm here to do. And is it easy? Is it always fun? Well, oftentimes, actually it is quite fun, but it's sometimes extremely difficult and quite scary. And yet if I follow the thread, I can't get lost. You can't, once you start following that thread, it gets harder and harder to let go.

Chris: If I follow the thread, I can't get lost. I love that.

Eric: So one of the things that I often do in my work with people, and we didn't get to a whole lot of depth about it due to time and stuff, but working with nature, and I talk about inner nature. I talk about a person's true self or soul or spirit. It's related to the third factor of the self-determination. I help people connect with their inner nature, often through helping them connect with outer nature, the outer natural world. And there's this reciprocal, this lovely reciprocal connection between being connected with nature and it is reflecting back aspects of yourself and in connecting with nature also, like, wanting to care for nature. Like there's this wonderful reciprocity in that relationship.

And then I've discovered this, what I call this, like this third nature. And this is related to some of the energy work, and I call it kinda like fundamental consciousness, like the energy that ties together everything, the fabric of the universe. And it seems at least somewhat satisfying to me that I think that's what I'm tuning into sometimes when I'm able to see into people and into their experience in a very deep way, is I'm tuning into this fundamental interconnectedness, this web of information. And I'm picking up on little rhythms or textures in that realm. When we look at

the natural world, there's countless examples of positive disintegration. There's the caterpillar to the butterfly, the transformation, or you think of like the acorn to the oak tree.

Like there are so many examples of these shifts, changes in form, but self-determination and self drivenness to become what one is capable of being, what one is meant to be. So this poem it's written by Geneen Marie Haugen, who is the partner of Bill Plotkin, who's a writer on nature and psychology, who has really been a light onto my path. And the poem is called [The Return](#).

*Some day, if you are lucky,
you'll return from a thunderous journey
trailing snake scales, wing fragments
and the musk of Earth and moon.*

*Eyes will examine you for signs
of damage, or change
and you, too, will wonder
if your skin shows traces*

*of fur, or leaves,
if thrushes have built a nest
of your hair, if Andromeda
burns from your eyes.*

*Do not be surprised by prickly questions
from those who barely inhabit
their own fleeting lives, who barely taste
their own possibility, who barely dream.*

*If your hands are empty, treasureless,
if your toes have not grown claws,
if your obedient voice has not
become a wild cry, a howl,*

*you will reassure them. We warned you,
they might declare, there is nothing else,
no point, no meaning, no mystery at all,
just this frantic waiting to die.*

*And yet, they tremble, mute,
afraid you've returned without sweet
elixir for unspeakable thirst, without
a fluent dance or holy language*

*to teach them, without a compass
bearing to a forgotten border where
no one crosses without weeping*

for the terrible beauty of galaxies

*and granite and bone. They tremble,
hoping your lips hold a secret,
that the song your body now sings
will redeem them, yet they fear*

*your secret is dangerous, shattering,
and once it flies from your astonished
mouth, they-like you-must disintegrate
before unfolding tremulous wings.*

Chris: Perfect. What an excellent way to end this episode. Thank you.

Eric: Yeah, absolutely. And poetry often has a way of conveying things, again, like in ways that more conventional language and form often miss. And so I'm grateful for poets and poetry.

Chris: Yes, me too.

Emma: That was a fantastic note to end this on. Eric, thanks very much and thank you for coming on the podcast as well. It's been very insightful. And thanks for sharing your story as well.

Eric: Yeah, thanks again for having me and for the opportunity to share. And I hope it's meaningful for the community and yeah maybe plant some seeds that weren't conscious before.

Emma: And that will one day grow from acorns into trees. And thank you to Chris for being on the podcast as well.

Chris: Well, thank you. I'm glad to be here. Grateful.

Emma: It's a great episode. And listeners thank you to you too for joining us for this episode. If you've got any questions, feedback, or any other topics or anything you want to raise, you can get in contact with us. You can email us at positivedisintegration.pod@gmail.com, or you can follow us on Twitter or Instagram. And until next time, keep walking the path to your authentic self.