

Try Softer: A Fresh Approach to Move Us out of Anxiety, Stress, and Survival Mode--and into a Life of Connection and Joy

By Aundi Kolber, MA, LPC

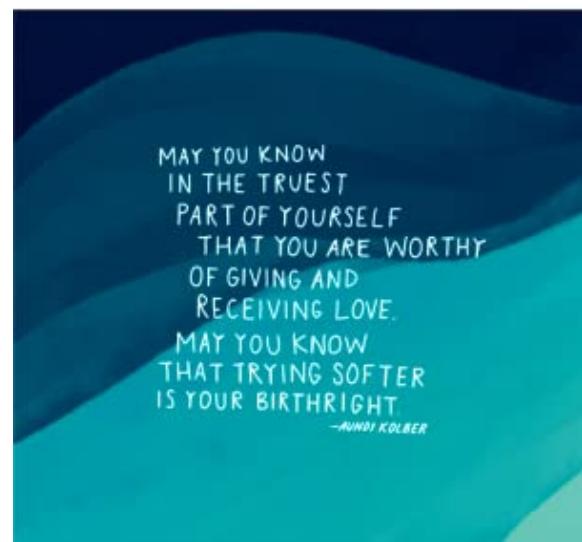
Reader's guide by Katy Attanasi Barker, Minister of Formation, Broadway United Methodist Church with Retina Dick, LPCC

Katy's Introduction

It's been a rough year. I don't even know how many times I have reached the end of my ability to deal, only to have to start again the next day. To those of us who are tired of the anxiety of survival mode, Aundi Kolber offers a different path to connection and even joy. This road is paved with self-compassion and other practices--like gentleness and attending to our bodies and experiences. As we engage with Kolber's work, our prayer is that we can continue to move through the disappointments and trauma of life to healthier ways of living into the people God has created us to be.

Here are some things to know as you begin reading:

1. This is not a perfect book, but it *can* be an extremely helpful book. Take from it what is helpful, and know that you can always go back through as needed.
2. If the first few chapters feel harder to wade through, focus on the main ideas, read the chapter summaries (below), and see where you connect with the behaviors/responses (even if you're not sure they originate from the same place). The second half of the book may feel more relevant--it gets more into the nuts and bolts of daily living and practice.
3. At the end of each chapter, Kolber has included some extensive reflection and journaling prompts. These are excellent. In this guide, we've suggested a few reading questions just to make sure you're hitting the high points. You are welcome to do either, both, or neither. I've also included some video and written sources each week.
4. Our group meetings will be framed around the group discussion questions.
5. You can find a wealth of podcasts and other resources on Kolber's webpage, www.aundikolber.com



Week 1

(Week of April 25, Intro, Ch 1)

Available for free here: <https://www.tyndale.com/p/try-softer/9781496439659>

Psalm 139:1-6

Introduction

The Introduction outlines the book's main theme. Author Aundi Kolber defines "trying softer" as "compassionately listening to our needs so we can move through pain--and ultimately life--with more gentleness and resilience" (4). Throughout the book, Kolber urges readers to adopt a more gentle approach with themselves. The first part of the book will explain how we become "hardwired" (conditioned or form a habit) to "white-knuckle" our way through life; the second part offers resources and tools for becoming more self-compassionate, with a focus on attending to the body's signals. Kolber comes from a Christian perspective and explains her goal for readers to understand themselves according to God's perspective--as people of inestimable value and worth who were created and loved by God. Kolber says,

Our world overvalues productivity and others' opinions, so we learn to ignore the messages our bodies are giving us--through our emotions and physical sensations--and instead push through our pain and pretend we have it all together. What's more, we've been so socialized, parented, and wired to overfunction that we don't recognize when our bodies are stressed, traumatized, and exhausted until the consequences are dire. It's then, when anxiety and adrenaline have worn us down to a nub, that we may find ourselves depressed, exhausted, and disconnected (5).

"Introduction" Reading Questions:

1. What does "white knuckling" look like for you?
2. What messages might your body be sending you that have been hard to heed or hear?

Chapter 1, "But How Long Will It Take?"

This chapter highlights the importance of being honest with ourselves and of going at our own pace through the process of acknowledging our pain and our wounds. When we "white knuckle" we "consciously or unconsciously ignore internal warning signs from our minds and bodies to cope with situations that are overwhelming or disturbing" (19). This means refusing to acknowledge physical signs (like hunger and exhaustion) or mental signals (like emotions or numbness). When we arrive at these places of pain Kolber advises maintaining attentiveness to our "bodies, minds and spirits" so each part can receive what it needs for healing (17). When we consider our minds, that includes the will, our thoughts, concepts, judgements, inferences. Spirit is the nonphysical, the hidden or inner world of the human self. Trying softer means listening to our bodies and minds and spirits; it means approaching ourselves (and our past experiences) with honesty and acceptance, all the while living in the here and now.

Chapter 1 Reading Questions:

1. What parts of your story make you most uncomfortable or sad?
2. It can be challenging to “own our stories” and acknowledge/accept the ways that we are both shaped by the past and yet have choices in the future. Which struggles feel most present to you--issues in the past or concerns about the future?
3. Is there anything hindering you from acknowledging the parts of your story that are contributing to struggle? “When we deny the reality of our experiences, we don’t become more of who God designed us to be, but less. There’s no way to have cohesive stories unless we truly embrace all of it: the good, the hard, the bittersweet, the sad, the joyful, the lonely, and the painful. It all counts.”(16) Do you notice any effect on your spirit?

Week 1 Discussion Questions (Intro. Ch 1):

1. When we “white knuckle” we “consciously or unconsciously ignore internal warning signs from our minds and bodies to cope with situations that are overwhelming or disturbing” (19). Which signs of “white knuckling” on p. 19 resonated most with you? What signals does your body give you that you have learned to heed?
2. Do you find it easy or hard to be self-compassionate, and why? Have you found yourself becoming more or less self-compassionate in the past year?
3. Kolber says on p. 5, “we know God is with us through it all, but that doesn’t mean life hasn’t cracked you open.” What are some ways that God has been with you in your journey? Can you see any places where the cracks allowed the Light in?



Additional Resources:

- Andrea Hollingsworth on Self-Compassion:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8kD6IKdvbs>
- Andrea Hollingsworth, “Compassionate Inner Presence Meditation,”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0dtz0vmZ20>
- David Benner, “Being and Becoming: Learning from the Mystics”
<http://www.thebrazosblog.com/2012/07/being-and-becoming-learning-from-the-mystics-by-david-g-benner/>
- Leonard Cohen, “The Anthem,” <https://youtu.be/6wRYjtvIYK0>

Week 2

(Week of May 3, Ch 2-3)

Read Psalm 139:7-12

Chapter 2, "Mind Your Brain"

In this chapter, Kolber outlines how the sympathetic nervous system stimulates the adrenaline and cortisol production that mobilizes us to fight or flight in stressful circumstances. She highlights a third lesser-known "fawn" response, which leads our bodies to "neutralize prolonged danger by pleasing or accommodating others rather than acknowledging our discomfort" (26). Old wounds may trigger fight/flight/fawn reactions even in moments when we are actually safe. Kolber says that "Whenever hard things activate us, our bodies are showing us they want to move toward healing and integration" (39). As we integrate those experiences, we move ourselves toward healing.

As I pay compassionate attention to my whole self, I can better determine if this feeling is warranted or if instead I need to help regulate my body and remind myself that I have choices now that I never had before; I can set limits and use my voice in any way I need. I remind myself that my fear is valid but that I do not need to allow it to drive me anymore. I am safe now (40).

Chapter 2 Reading Questions:

1. The nervous system reacts automatically in stressful situations. As you reflect on your experiences of stress, do you tend toward fight, flight, or fawning? (Review the signs on p. 33 of hyperarousal and hypoarousal and the feelings associated with big T/little t trauma on p. 36.)
2. Can you think of a time when you might have been triggered by a past event and had your sympathetic nervous system activated despite being in a position of safety?
3. What practices that Kolber suggests do you think might be most helpful to you?

Chapter 3, "Attached: Why our earliest relationships matter"

This chapter delves into attachment theory and the ways that our experiences as children with our primary caregivers affect the way we respond to people today. Repairing unhealthy attachments styles enables us to "try differently in our relationships" (55). Whether or not we feel like our behaviors stem from attachment issues, it can be helpful to read through the behaviors to see which ones may resonate with our challenges and experiences (Cf. 57). Kolber suggests that we begin to "observe where we feel wounded in areas of attachment and [then] 'reparent' [these areas] when we feel rejected, isolated, overly self-reliant, or scared" (59). A further step of healing takes place as we become better able to own our stories and tell them from our own perspective (59). Ultimately, we can look to God and God's presence as a loving parent in our lives when those around us have failed.



Chapter 3 Reading Questions:

1. Where do you see yourself in the descriptions of behaviors associated with attachment styles on p. 57?
2. How would you describe your attachment to God? Reading through the scriptures on p. 64, which verses feel most relevant to you?
3. How does our understanding of God shape the way that we see ourselves in relationship to other people?



Week 2 Discussion Questions (Ch 2-3):

1. What are three reactions of the sympathetic nervous system that our bodies try to respond to? (fight, flight, fawn, p. 26) Which feels most familiar to you?
2. Do you feel your sympathetic nervous system is kicking in more or less as you've faced the challenges of the past year? (ch2)
3. Kolber says on p. 63 "the work of paying compassionate attention is, in a sense, learning to steward for ourselves what God already believes about us--that we're valuable and loved" (63). How do we know--and what do we believe--about how God sees us?

Additional Resources:

- "Attachment Style and Your Stress Response," by Kelley Munger
<https://www.fueledschools.org/blog/how-your-attachment-style-impacts-your-stress-response>
- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Identifying Needs: A Relationship Meditation,"
<https://youtu.be/dNGCgdfwKJs>

"Every time I dare to meet God in the vulnerability of my sin and shame, this knowing is strengthened. Every time I fall back into a self-improvement mode and try to bring God my best self, it is weakened. I only know Divine, unconditional, radical and reckless love for me when I dare to approach God just as I am. The more I have the courage to meet God in this place of weakness, the more I will know myself to be truly and deeply loved by God (49)" --David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*

Week 3

(Week of May 10, Ch 4-5)

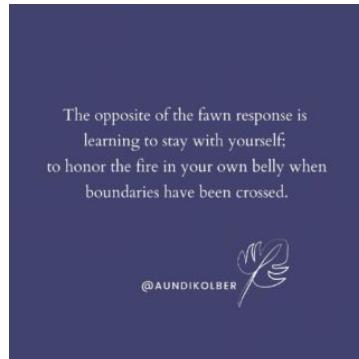
Ps. 139:13-16, 23-24

Chapter 4, “Too Hot, Too Cold...Just Right: Finding Your Window of Tolerance”

Kolber says that each person has a Window of Tolerance, which is one's ability to bear the discomfort of sitting with and tolerating feelings and experiences. This is the sweet spot where we are able to listen to ourselves (and not others) because “the brain stays integrated with the prefrontal cortex, which allows us to pay compassionate attention to ourselves and to try softer” (72). Expanding upon earlier themes, Kolber reminds readers that it is better to be compassionate to ourselves and our biological responses than to feel shame about our physiological responses of anxiety or disconnection. We can grow and heal as we remain engaged with and aware of our bodies' responses. As we “practice feeling our emotions in the presence of another person’s more grounded nervous system” we are able to grow our window of tolerance (82). Kolber recounts a holiday memory of an experience of God’s presence in the midst of her awareness of the “hardness” of the Christmas season. She recounts: “In order to feel the good, I had to acknowledge the hard...I was learning this is part of what it means to try softer; it requires listening to what is actually going on inside of me.....on this night I began to notice something new in this place of ache: a sense of God’s nearness with me as I considered my story--and not simply in the logical way. I also felt His presence in a physical way” (83). She experienced God’s nearness as she became open both to God and to the truth about herself (84-85).

Chapter 4 Reading Questions:

1. Review the chart on p. 78--what are the most important characteristics of your Window of Tolerance, and how do you know when you’re there? How do you get there when you’re not?
2. Which verses listed on p. 84-85 speak most clearly to you as characterizing the reality of being God’s beloved?



Chapter 5, “Boundaries Bring Us Life”

Kolber discusses boundary setting in terms of the “fawn response,” which entails channeling energy “into overaccommodating others as a way to neutralize a perceived threat” (93). People who respond with the fawn instinct may have a smaller window of tolerance and frequently have trouble trusting and advocating for themselves; they suppress their own emotions in order to focus on others’ demands. Kolber points to Jesus as an example of someone who chose his path, set limits, said no, and communicated his preferences to others (94-5). God wired us for connection. “Through Jesus we see that we were also made to become our own selves--to be interdependent, not completely dependent on or avoidant of each other” (95-96). Jesus gives us a model of healthy boundary setting while he remains loving toward others. Setting boundaries can be extremely difficult, especially if we have been taught that our feelings and experiences are less valid than others’. It can feel like setting boundaries and disappointing people will bring

intolerable pain. Kolber says that appropriate boundary setting requires safety, which means we “(1) are in our WOT; (2) don’t feel threatened; and/or (3) believe we have the resources and support to keep ourselves safe should threats arise” (101). When we honor our limits, we can stay out of exhaustion and resentment and be grounded in the reality that “we are beloved no matter what” (103). Kolber also recommends such internal reminders as “I can leave whenever I need to; I can set boundaries; and I can use my voice” (105). As we get better at setting boundaries, we can reestablish our ability to honor our own voices, limits, and experience (109).

Chapter 5 Reading Questions:

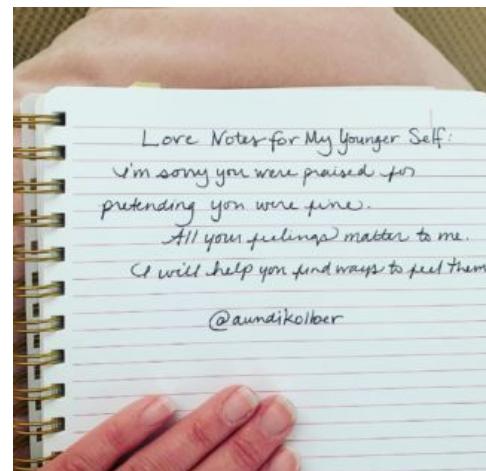
1. Are there people and situations with whom you find it especially difficult to set boundaries? Are there beliefs about yourself and your obligations to others that make it hard to set boundaries?
2. What is a boundary that you successfully set--how did it go? How did you feel? What made it successful?

Week 3 Discussion Questions (Chapters 4-5)

1. What does it mean to live as the Beloved child of God? What is your experience of God’s presence in your life? How does it affect your Window of Tolerance and your ability to set boundaries?
2. What sticks out to you about the differences between hyperarousal, hypoarousal, and the window of tolerance? Where do you see yourself in the chart on p. 73? Does this give you any insight into how you interact with God and others?
3. What did you find most helpful about the discussion of Window of Tolerance? Setting Boundaries?
4. What are some beliefs about God and ourselves as beloved children of God that we can use to remind us of the importance of boundaries?
5. God is ever present, but much of the time we fail to acknowledge this truth, how can we turn to Him in times of pain to invoke that presence in our lives? How can we be more attuned to the presence of the Holy?

Additional Resources:

- Andrea Hollingsworth: “Compassionate Inner Presence Meditation”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0dtz0vmZ20>
- Breath prayer, “Peace. Be still.”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGscckkvBXg>
(there are dozens available on YouTube)
- Brene Brown on empathy and boundaries:
<https://www.legendsofreport/brene-brown-how-to-set-boundaries-to-increase-your-compassion-for-others/>



Week 4

(Week of May 17, Chapters 6-7)

Psalm 91

Chapter 6, “Try Softer with your Attention”

Trying softer with our attention entails “cultivating compassionate attention for ourselves” (119). Ideally, we learn to *integrate* our hard experiences rather than having them stay at a heightened intensity. Healing comes when we are able to honor our pain and provide ourselves the care we need to get through difficult times. Kolber gives several tools for putting this strategy into practice. The first, mindfulness, challenges us to combine a moment-by-moment awareness with a non-judgmental perspective of both external and internal things. The second, attending to ourselves, can be challenging amidst a culture that urges us to pay more attention to others than ourselves. Kolber points out the hazards of focusing disproportionately on others: “When we’re not paying attention to our inner worlds, we are susceptible to emotional burnout, exhaustion, emotional dysregulation, and chronic pain” (125). It’s especially important because we *can* train our brains to notice ourselves and what our bodies are saying. Other practices helpful for building these skills include pendulation, beauty hunting, and tracking (noticing your sensations and emotions as they change). These practices are grounded in the belief and knowledge that cultivating and attending to the self is part of God’s design, as stated eloquently by David Brenner: “Leaving the self out of Christian spirituality results in a spirituality that is not well grounded in experience. It is, therefore, not well grounded in reality. Focusing on God while failing to know ourselves deeply may produce an external form of piety, but it will always leave a gap between appearance and reality” (132). We love our neighbor AS (and) ourselves through attunement (being responsive to our needs) (132), which better enables us to listen to humanity and to hold space (to bear non-judgmental witness) to others’ pain (135).



Chapter 6 Reading Questions:

1. Were you the recipient of messages that caring for yourself is selfish, and caring for others is good/godly/right?
2. Why do you/why do we find it difficult to attend to our needs?
3. Do you find it difficult to listen to what your mind and body are telling you? How can being more mindful to the truest parts of you, without judgement, help you listen?
4. Kolber says, “As we do our own internal work, we quite literally develop the capacity to listen to and love others more fully than before” (133). How do you interpret this statement?

Chapter 7, “Try Softer with your body”

There is a danger in seeing the body as separate from the soul. Kolber’s goal in this chapter is for readers to understand the importance of integrating our bodies, of imagining the body as part of who we are, and of embracing the reality that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus valued physical bodies: he truly became fully human; he interacted with bodies and healed bodies--sometimes suddenly and sometimes in a process. The challenge is that so many times we are disconnected from our bodies--or we fear them or hate them, which leads to neglect or mistreatment. Another challenge is the way that Christians privilege the spiritual world, and see the constraints of our bodies as problematic--we think we have to punish them, or we think that our bodies should be ignored. Kolber lists signs our bodies may be sending us (150) and outlines three sensory feedback systems that provide us this important information (152-154). The chapter concludes by highlighting the ways that women in particular have been conditioned to feel like we should not "honor our abilities, strength, and fire" (155). Kolber reminds us that it is okay to feel strong, and it is okay to be afraid, but most important we can listen to our bodies and use the sensations we experience as a pathway to understanding our whole selves (156).

Chapter 7 Reading Questions:

1. Do you have struggles with body issues related to appearance, chronic pain, or traumatic injury?
2. What are the challenges to accepting and embracing our bodies as part of who we are?
3. What did you think of Kolber's claim about the challenges women face in honoring their own abilities? Did this resonate with you?

Week 4 Discussion Questions (Chapters 6-7):

1. What are some barriers that keep us from listening to or attending to our bodies and our experiences?
2. What correctives does Kolber suggest to the theology that would say that spirituality is about Spirit and not about bodies? What difference does it make to remember that Jesus became human? When Benner says, "Focusing on God while failing to know ourselves deeply may produce an external form of piety, but it will always leave a gap between appearance and reality" (132), what does this tell you about a relationship between knowing ourselves and knowing God? What is the reality to which he refers?
3. How does God's presence and direction help you navigate the challenges of attending to and integrating our bodies?

Additional Resources:

- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Mindfulness and your Body," <https://youtu.be/77SxbY3qJc4>
- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Self Compassion and Body Shame," <https://youtu.be/pQpBU9AA984>
- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Feeling Strong," https://youtu.be/2TCg0GU_gjg *this is one of my favorites

God created our bodies to tell a story about our joy + our pain.

May we become attentive listeners when they speak.

@AUNDIKOLBER

Week 5

(Week of May 24, Chapters 8-9)

Psalm 25, 55, and 143

Chapter 8: “Try Softer with your Emotions”

We are frequently taught that emotions are untrustworthy. This chapter helps us understand that emotions should not be ignored; they provide valuable information about what we are experiencing. According to Kolber, God created us as emotional beings. From the Psalms to the Gospels, the Bible shows people expressing big emotions. Even Jesus wept at the news of his friend’s death. Our emotions connect us to the image of God, according to Peter Scazzero, which means that “to minimize or deny what we feel is a distortion of what it means to be image bearers of our personal God” (169). Emotions enable us to love others and God well—they are good servants but poor masters. By way of definition, *emotions* are the “sensations and nervous system states that we experience in our bodies” and *feelings* are “the names we give those expressions” (170). As such, we can see that the body is the starting point for information about our emotions. Our minds can then identify what we are experiencing and thereby avoid the disorientation that comes from unnamed emotions. (Kolber provides a very helpful list of feelings on p. 172.) When we name our emotions, we can “integrate the right and left hemispheres in our brains and … calm down the firing in our limbic system” (174). Through time and practice, we can strengthen our ability to tolerate emotions. The tools Kolber gives to process emotions include “riding the wave” (of the emotion), practicing containment, employing curiosity, and speaking grounding statements. We are not our feelings, and we are not “less than” because of our reactions (184-5).

Chapter 8 Reading Questions:

1. In your emotional life, do you tend toward overwhelm or disconnection?
2. What are some challenges for you in tolerating feelings? Which feelings/emotions do you find hardest to tolerate? (See especially p. 172)
3. What practices do you find most helpful if you are experiencing pandemic-related anxiety? Are any of the grounding statements from p.184 particularly helpful?

Chapter 9: “Try Softer with your Internal Critic”

The goal of this chapter is to help us learn to be “gentle with ourselves in the face of pain that is keeping us stuck” (193), because love—not shame—motivates us to growth. So many of us face the challenge of staying out of shame—which says that “*who we are* is not valuable, lovable, or worthy, and therefore we are undeserving of connection” (192). Shame differs from a healthy guilt that “allows us to recognize that we are loved and valuable even though we are imperfect” (191). A key word in this process is *self-compassion* because it allows us to extend kindness and understanding to ourselves. Drawing on Kristen Neff’s work, Kolber gives three elements of self-compassion, which include (1) prioritizing mindfulness versus overidentification (meaning that we “observe something [e.g., our suffering] in a nonjudgmental way” to avoid getting stuck there (19)); (2) embracing self-kindness instead of self-judgment; and (3) understanding

ourselves as part of common humanity (in which all suffer) and not isolation. In all of this work, our God is kind and good, meeting us and reminding us that we are beloved (201).

Chapter 9 Reading Questions:

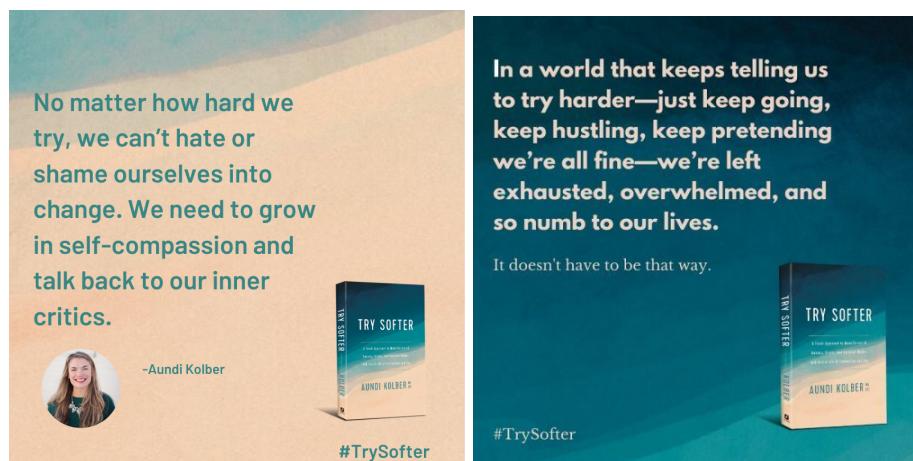
1. Do you have an inner critic? What does your inner critic tell you? Could your identity in some way be linked to the messages of this inner critic?
2. What are the challenges and rewards to looking at your mistakes or shortcomings in a nonjudgmental way?
3. Where do you see God in your conversations with your inner critic?
4. God's posture towards us is gentle, gracious, and compassionate (190), what are your thoughts around God's posture towards you?

Week 5 Discussion Questions (Chapters 8-9):

1. These chapters circle back to the importance of trusting our emotions, which entails listening to our bodies and being gentle with ourselves. What does listening to your emotions and being gentle with yourself look like in your life?
2. What practices have been helpful to you as you have tried to listen to your body and try softer? (e.g., grounding exercises, mindfulness, etc.)
3. Why is it so hard for us to attend to our emotions and silence our inner critics? What messages from our cultures and our faith should we listen to, and which ones should we oppose or ignore?

Additional Resources:

- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Quieting the Inner Critic," <https://youtu.be/JP9IZ6HkoTI>
- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Meditation for Healing the Self-Criticism," <https://youtu.be/EKc3TIIlfK7Q>
- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Introducing Self-Compassion," <https://youtu.be/L8kD6IKdvbs>
- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Meditation Dealing with Big Emotions," <https://youtu.be/826qhRtM9Ec>



Week 6

(Week of May 31, Chapters 10)

John 10:10

Chapter 10, "Try Softer with Resilience"

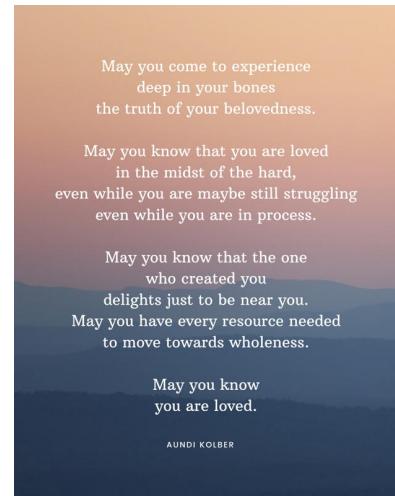
In this concluding chapter Kolber talks about surrender in terms of "feeling safe enough to release our grip" to handle what comes our way. She emphasizes surrender as a free choice:

Surrender--when done voluntarily, not from coercion--is a way to be gentle with ourselves, recognizing that trying to control everything can wear us out rather than lift us up. When we give ourselves permission to try softer in this way, our minds can become integrated, our nervous systems are better able to stay within our window of tolerance, and the prefrontal cortex is better able to stay online. We remain attuned to our own experiences, which enables us to connect to our truest selves (213).

In this way, we move toward that "integration, wholeness, and peace...and grow in our resiliency" (213). We can expand our windows of tolerance, live out new stories, honor our strengths and achievements, and grow our perseverance and courage. In doing so, we can find and embrace the abundant life to which Jesus calls us.

Chapter 10 Reading Questions:

1. Which of the questions from p. 214--the Try Softer language--seems most important to ask for your own wellbeing?
2. Do you find it easy or hard to surrender? What does surrender have to do with resilience?
3. What would your life look like if you could embrace the abundant life Jesus promises?



Week 6 Discussion Questions (Chapter 10):

1. What is your biggest takeaway from this six-week journey?
2. What element of trying softer is most challenging for you?
3. What practices or perspectives would you like to incorporate into your life?



Additional Resources:

- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Self-Compassion and Emotional Resilience,"
<https://youtu.be/32b7JUzE6D8>
- Andrea Hollingsworth, "Compassionate Inner Presence Meditation"
<https://youtu.be/Q0dtz0vmZ20>
- Audi Kolber on Poema Podcast (on spirituality)
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/poema-s5-027-try-softer-with-audi-kolber/id1044862627?i=1000447981353>