

*Inspiration*  
for a Woman's Soul™

CULTIVATING  
*Joy*

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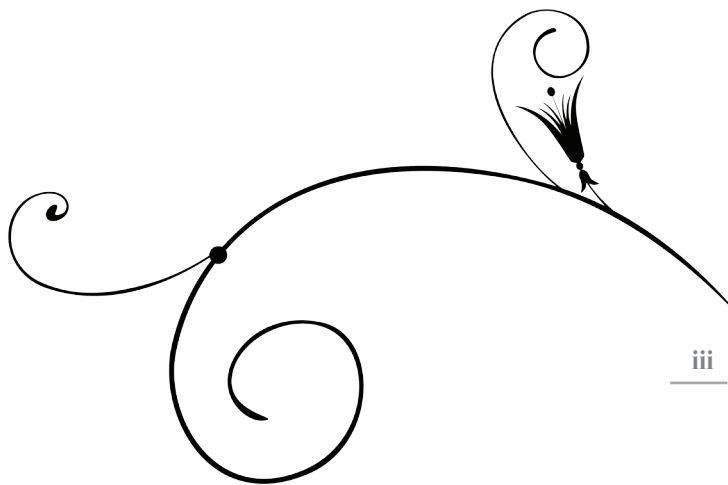
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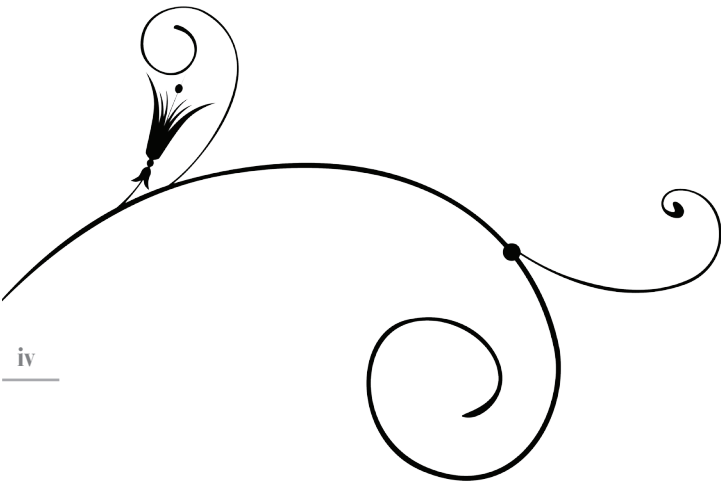
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# DEDICATION



*This book is dedicated to ...*

Every woman who bravely chooses to step onto the path of healing and self-discovery, and commits to removing the layers of old stories and masks which have prevented her from owning her truth, living authentically, and shining her light.

Every woman who has heard the whisper of her soul, and courageously followed it despite the perceived obstacles that threatened to derail her journey.

Every woman who keeps love, joy, and hope alive in her heart, even in the toughest times.

*And also to ...*

My family: Your love and support inspire me to be the highest version of myself. You fill my heart with love and my soul with joy. I'm blessed beyond words.

My sacred team and soul sisters: Rachel Dunham, Brand Strategist and creative visionary at [www.YourBrandTherapy.com](http://www.YourBrandTherapy.com), who, for the last ten years, has been capturing the visions in my heart and bringing them to life; Bryna René Haynes, Editor at Inspired Living Publishing and [www.TheHeartofWriting.com](http://www.TheHeartofWriting.com), who has lovingly guided over 120 of our authors through the birthing of their intimate stories; Kim Turcotte, my Web Project Manager at [www.KimTurcotte.com](http://www.KimTurcotte.com), who brings my websites to life; and Nichol Skaggs, my assistant extraordinaire, who keeps things running with ease and grace.

*And also to ...*

The visionary authors in this book who entrusted me with their stories: it is an honor to walk this path with you and bring your stories forth into the world. Your courage, vulnerability, and authenticity continue to inspire me.

*And, finally, to ...*

You, the reader. May the words, truth, and wisdom that these thirty-eight women share empower you to see your value, hear your truth, and follow the whispers of your soul.



# PRAISE FOR *CULTIVATING JOY*

“This collection of stories will ignite a new sense of wonder and awe, helping you reconnect to your best self with joy as your inspirational compass.”

– **Shannon Kaiser**, the Joy Guru and best-selling author of *Adventures for Your Soul*

“Connecting with other people through the stories of their inspirational journeys is one of the most uplifting blessings I can think of—and *Cultivating Joy* is a beautiful resource that does exactly that. Linda Joy has a talent for compiling stories that touch, comfort, and inspire, and I have no doubt that *Cultivating Joy* will help many on their journeys.”

– **Dina Proctor**, best-selling author of *Madly Chasing Peace: How I Went from Hell to Happy in 9 Minutes a Day* and creator of 3x3 Meditation

“This book is an essential read for women wanting to bring more joy into their lives. After reading these inspiring women’s stories, you will feel joy in your body, heart, and soul ... allowing you to express your own joy more each and every day.”

– **Stacey Hoffer**, Online Tribe Builder, Women’s Circle Holder, best-selling author

“The sweet spot of your joy rests between the worst day of your life and the best day of your life. It is the e-ticket to your truth, your highest calling, and your authentic self. *Cultivating Joy* eloquently shares passages of its spirited women authors’ brave moments of tragedy to triumph. Linda Joy has an uncanny way of bringing poignant moments in our lives, gift-wrapped in her book, where you will discover the ‘how’ to your true joy.”

– **Jackie Ruka**, America’s Happyologist; author of the best-selling book, *Get Happy and Create a Kick -Butt Life!*; Founder of [www.GetHappyZone.com](http://www.GetHappyZone.com).

“There is but one word to describe *Cultivating Joy*, and that is ‘uplifting.’ Covering important themes in the lives of women—from motherhood to self-love and adventure, *Cultivating Joy* is a true inspiration, and a testament to what it means to experience a life of joy as a woman.”

– **Bailey Frumen, MSW, LCSW**, therapist & Lifestyle Design Coach

“Cultivating Joy shares touching and triumphant stories from women of all ages. This book shows us that joy is available in every moment and situation if we only open our eyes and behold its beauty. Read this book and be uplifted.”

– **Amy Leigh Mercree**, author of *The Spiritual Girl’s Guide to Dating: Your Enlightened Path to Love, Sex and Soul Mates*

“With warmth, humor, and courage, the stories shared in *Cultivating Joy* will touch your heart and transform your life. No matter where you are on your journey, the deeply personal stories shared in this book will inspire you to invite more joy into your daily routine. Infinite love and gratitude to the extraordinary women who contributed their stories to *Cultivating Joy*.”

– **Shann Vander Leek**, Transformation Goddess, best-selling author, award-winning podcaster

“In each season of life, there’s a time to plant and a time to reap. *Cultivating Joy* is a book about planting joy in your life, and reaping the harvest of that joy! The beautiful stories shared in this tremendous book will make your heart smile! The reflections at the end of each chapter help you to list out action steps that will move you toward a life filled with more joy. These remarkable stories from talented authors make this book a must-read for bringing more joy into your life—and we all can use more joy!”

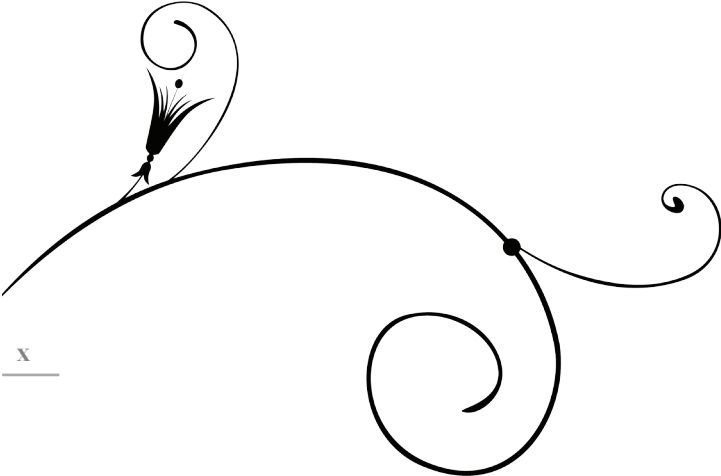
– **Kellie Poulsen-Grill**, Happiness and Relationship Marketing Expert c/o Happy Success Ranch Retreats & Send Out Cards

“*Cultivating Joy* is an inspiring and touching book full of rich, authentic stories of discovering joy while in the midst of life’s many challenges. Each beautiful story is followed by powerful journaling exercises that help you to identify and release whatever stands in the way of your own radiant, spontaneous expression of joy. It’s definitely a ‘Must Read’ for joy-seekers everywhere!”

– **Kari Joys**, Psychotherapist and creator of the JoyIAm Heart-Centered Process for Integrative Psychotherapy









# FOREWORD

*Kristi Ling*

**O**n a hot California afternoon when I was three years old, an extraordinary thing happened.

I'd just finished munching on a slice of ice-cold watermelon when an incredible realization took place in my curious young mind. It occurred to me that if I planted those little black seeds I'd just enjoyed spitting onto the pool deck, they just might sprout and grow more watermelons. I quickly scooped them up, and made my way over to the sandbox on the side of our house with big plans.

With the utmost care, I pressed the seeds into the sand. I used a plastic cup to scoop water out of the swimming pool, and poured it over my little patch of magic with bubbling excitement.

For the next several days, I ran outside as soon as I awakened to see if anything had sprouted, repeating the pool water ritual each time. After a few days of this purposeful dedication, it happened. There, glistening in the morning sun, were three tiny green sprouts.

It was like witnessing a miracle that *I'd* helped to create! I was frozen with joy. It was the first time I can remember a moment actually taking my breath away.

I didn't know it at the time, but those seedlings were teaching me a very important lesson. One of the keys to living our very best life is gaining the unwavering knowledge that we must actively create and *cultivate* those things we want to experience consistently and with abundance—including joy.

I've spent the last thirteen years studying happiness, life coaching, positive psychology, and the elements of authentic success, and the single most valuable thing I've learned is that we must be willing to

take responsibility for, and actively participate in producing, those things we want to experience more of in life. In fact, I'm so passionate about sharing this truth that I've written an entire book to expand on it.

Those who live life with the most light, love, happiness, and joy do so because they are willing to expend the effort needed to cultivate those things. I'm not saying it's difficult; in fact, with mindful practice, this process of creation can become quite easy. It's rather like riding a bike: a bit wobbly at first, but a skill that, once learned, will never desert you.

My friend Linda Joy, founder of Inspired Living Publishing and publisher of this book and the other anthologies in this series, is one of the most passionate people I know when it comes to creating joy and inspiration. (No wonder her last name is Joy!) In the indispensable volume which you now hold in your hand, she has gathered an amazing group of visionary women to share their powerful stories of joy creation. Each of them has made a conscious decision to choose joy: to dance with it, to cherish it, live it in every moment, no matter what else is transpiring in their lives.

Linda's unique ability to envision and bring books like this one to life is such a special gift. Contained within these pages are your tools to find inspiration, change your perspective, and create life-shifting moments of your own. I'm so excited that you're ready to be *moved* and to cultivate more joy in your world.

As you move through the pages of this book, I encourage you to write down the things you relate to, feel empowered by, or want to try yourself. Utilize the three journaling prompts at the end of each story, or write your own questions. Create checklists. Share your ideas (and this book) with the people you love.

Then, take action. All amazing things begin with some kind of action.

Every woman who shares her story in this book has been through tremendous trials. We all have, right? You may even be experiencing a time like that right now. But, just as all storms pass and all mornings

begin with a sunrise, we can emerge from our darkness with new knowledge and energy as long as we choose to learn the lessons that the night and the storm have presented to us. We always have the power to create change, cultivate joy, and transform our lives.

What else do storms passing and suns rising have in common with our experiences? They require *movement* and *action*. So plant your seeds of joy, and water them daily. When they sprout, keep them growing with loving care. Some will grow like weeds, and some will take time—but with conscious and deliberate effort and nurturing, they will all produce colorful leaves, blooms, and fruits with reckless abandon.

Welcome to your own joyful, beautiful, *incredible* life.

Much love,

Kristi Ling,

Los Angeles, California

Happiness Strategist, Transformational Life and Business Coach

Author of *Operation Happiness: The 3-Step Plan to Creating a Life of Lasting Joy, Abundant Energy, and Radical Bliss*



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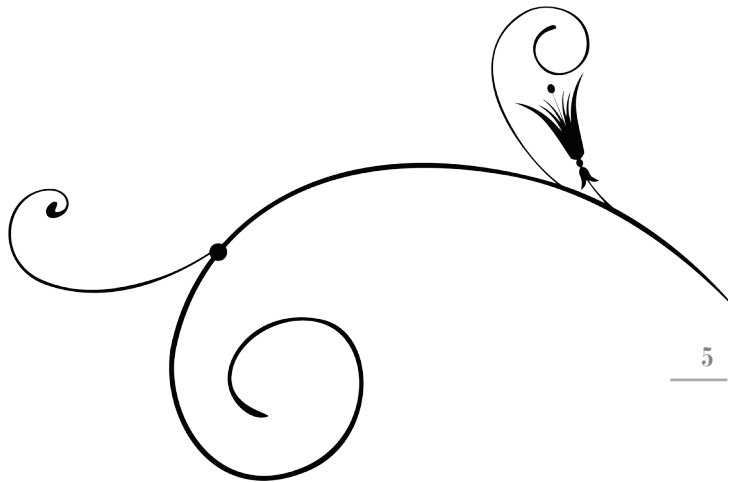
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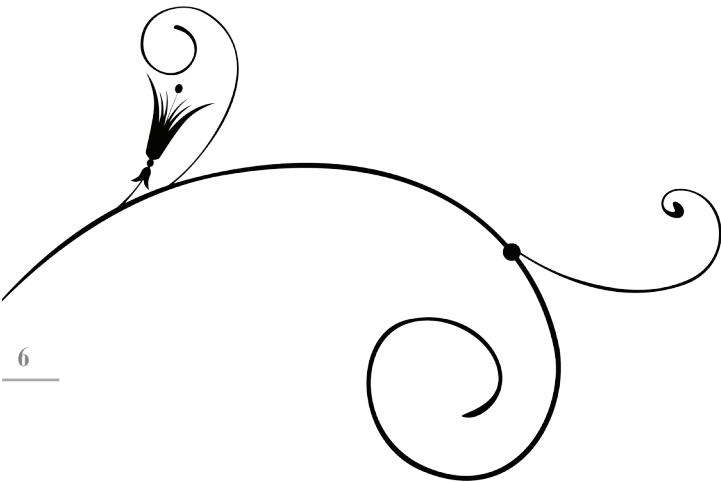
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# INTRODUCTION

*Linda Joy,*  
*Publisher*

*D*o you remember being a child, and how you giggled when you felt a breeze on your cheek, or saw a firefly in the field at night? Do you remember dancing for the sheer delight of it, or singing at the top of your lungs simply because you loved the song?

Joy is a part of all of us; it's our natural state of being. But somewhere between childhood and adulthood, between innocence and experience, it gets buried under layers of expectation, fear, disillusionment, or just everyday busyness. The only way to reclaim it is to go within: to go deep into the truth of ourselves, and bring our souls back to light.

As a best-selling publisher, Authentic Marketing & List-Building Expert, and media host, I can honestly say that joy is the essence of who I am. It's my foundation and my path—but it wasn't always that way. On my own healing journey, which began over twenty-five years ago, I set out to uncover the layers of shame, self-doubt, and insecurity that were muddying my connection to joy. Excavating those layers allowed me to plant new seeds in the garden of my soul. As I tended those seeds of hope, self-love, forgiveness, self-compassion, and lightheartedness, the essence of joy began to bloom in my heart. Now, joy fuels my passion for life and my creative spirit, fills me with love, and empowers me to take leap after leap into the unknown, in both life and business.

All of the soul-inspiring women who share their stories in this book have made the same commitment: to embrace joy in their daily lives, and to live as an example to the world of what conscious, joyful creation can look like. Utilizing the Authentic Storytelling™ model

that is at the heart of our mission at Inspired Living Publishing, they have reached deep within themselves to draw forth some of their most intimate moments of personal growth, realization, and transformation. Their stories are profound healing tools; now, they offer them to you in perfect love and perfect trust. I know that you will see some part of yourself in every one of them.

Although the themes of their stories are diverse—love, loss, motherhood, self-reclamation, survival, and adventure, to name a few—a single underlying theme resonates throughout. In order to live a truly joyful life, you have to *cultivate* joy. You have to grow it, nurture it, believe in it. Every single day.

Oprah once said, “What I know for sure is that you feel real joy in direct proportion to how connected you are to living your truth.”

Cultivating joy is about peeling back the layers to reveal what’s always been there: your most authentic self. No matter what your life looks like right now, healing and joy are possible for you—just as they were possible for me. You already have everything you need to live a juicy, joyful, amazing life. All you have to do is plant the seeds.

Wishing you love, happiness, and joy!

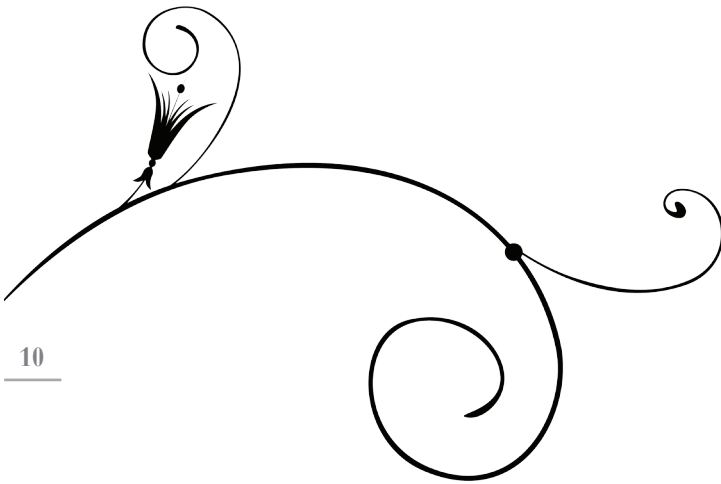
Linda Joy

A large, light gray decorative flourish consisting of several elegant scrolls and a tassel-like element at the bottom right, framing the chapter title.

*Chapter  
One*

*Joy* IS...

**GETTING REAL**





# I'M NOT BROKEN

*Dr. Mary E.  
Pritchard,  
PhD, HHC*

“**W**hy are you always so happy?” my colleague asked me.

I stopped, and turned to smile perkily at him.

“It’s really annoying,” he continued. “Don’t you ever have a bad day?”

I reminded him that while everyone has bad days, happiness comes from within. We choose how to react to life’s little curve balls.

Beaming, I went on my way. I didn’t let my smile fade until I reached my office—where, behind closed doors, I could let my guard down.

I wanted to cry, but fought back the tears, lest anyone see my red, watery eyes and think something was wrong with me. Truth be told, it felt like *everything* was wrong with me. And it was all my fault.

You see, that morning, the third man with whom I had ever felt comfortable enough to talk about my infertility had rejected me for that very same reason. I couldn’t bear his children, therefore he didn’t want me. In my successful/unsuccessful relationship count, that made me 0 for 3.

I first heard the word “endometriosis” when I was eighteen. After six years of spotty periods, heavy flow, and sometimes severe menstrual cramps, I was given a tentative diagnosis. (The only way to confirm a diagnosis of endometriosis is through surgery, and, at the time, no one felt it was worth it to put me through that.) That year, 1992, I embarked on a twenty-four-year roller coaster ride that would see me alternately feeling thrilled and hopeful to miserable and victimized—especially when the pain from the endometriosis was so severe I was literally doubled over on the floor.

At the tender age of eighteen, I didn't really understand how endometriosis could impact my life (aside from the pain, of course). Having grown up with the American dream of having 2.5 kids, a dog, and a white picket fence, I couldn't acknowledge the possibility that I might not attain that standard. Yet, three years later, at the age of twenty-one—and less than three months before I was to walk down the aisle to marry a man who shared my American dream—I was formally diagnosed with endometriosis and told by my doctor that it would be a cold day in hell before I ever had kids. As bearing children was now deemed impossible for me, she put me into drug-induced menopause.

My husband and I talked about adoption; we hoped beyond hope that one of my many surgeries would make it possible for me to get pregnant. We dreamed of the day when modern medicine would find a way to “fix” me.

When I was twenty-five, a reproductive specialist told us, “I can get you pregnant.” Our hopes soared. We went through our first round of fertility treatments certain I would get pregnant. I failed. The doctor revised his promise, saying that I *might* be able to get pregnant, but there was only a twenty percent chance—and that was only after I tried in vitro fertilization.

By the time I was thirty-nine, I had racked up quite the roll sheet: six years of drug-induced menopause followed by nine years of natural menopause, six surgeries, four failed fertility treatments, and one near-death experience. All of that took its toll. After eighteen years of marriage, my husband and I parted ways. Less than a month later, he was dating a woman with two children. He had finally gotten his American dream.

I, on the other hand, still hadn't achieved anything close to my dreams. Newly divorced and recently turned forty, I was depressed and resentful—of my ex-husband, myself, and most especially my body.

So I went on a dating spree.

If I'd learned nothing else from my marriage, it was to be up front with men about the kid issue. I'd been burned once, and the issue was still too painful and fresh to brush aside. Therefore, one of the first things I shared with men who showed an interest in dating me was

that I couldn't have kids. They would all assure me that was fine, no problem, they didn't want kids anyway ... right up until a decision needed to be made about whether to turn this into an actual dating relationship. Suddenly, these men went from, "I definitely don't want kids," to "Well, I'm actually not sure if I want kids, but I'd like to leave my options open. And since you can't have kids ..." They got out of a potential relationship with a "defective" woman, and I got my heart stomped on.

At this point, you may be asking yourself, "What does all of this have to do with cultivating joy?" Well, here's the thing: that day when my colleague accused me of being too perky while I prayed he wouldn't notice my watery, fresh-from-another-rejection eyes, I realized something.

I was a fraud.

I wasn't really all that happy. I'd simply learned to suppress my feelings in an effort to protect myself from the pain of rejection. I faked bliss in the hope that, one day, I would finally find it—but I never did, because in my core, in my heart of hearts, I didn't think I deserved to be happy. How could a woman so flawed, so less than, so *defective* ever be truly joyful?

She couldn't.

At least, not with *that* attitude.

I'd like to tell you that my realization that day prompted me to change everything; that I became really and truly joyful. I didn't. I still had a couple more years of feeling not-good-enough to work through.

What I did learn that day, however, was that I needed to take my own advice.

Life happens *for* you, not *to* you. This means that everything happens for a reason, based on whatever lessons the Universe and your own higher self think you need to learn. It's not always easy, or pretty, or even desired at all—but it is always, in the end, just what you need.

That day in my office was my first wake-up call; the day I realized that maybe, just maybe, I wasn't flawed or broken. It took a couple of

years before I could actually *believe* that to be true, but that was my starting point.

I realized that, by rejecting me, those men I'd been dating had done me a huge favor. The hurt I felt finally made me realize that for years—decades, even—I had been rejecting myself. I fell into the trap, and accepted the blame and shame for something that was not my choosing. Never once did I think, “What if they're wrong? What if I'm not broken?”

I walked out of my office that morning with my tear-stained face held high for all to see, and went to teach my class. Upon seeing me, one of my students told me, “You look good today!” Another said, “Are you okay? You look like crap!” To which I replied, “Yes, I'm good.” And the truth was, I *was* good. Sad? Yes. Wishing things had turned out differently? At that moment, yes. Grateful that I'd found out what this guy was made of before I invested any more time or effort into the relationship? Absolutely.

That day, I decided once and for all to seek out only those people who accept me for who I am, one hundred percent. To do that, I needed to learn what brought me bliss. By faking happiness and shutting down my emotions, I had inadvertently blocked myself from feeling not only the pain of life (which can't truly be blocked, no matter how hard we try), but also the pure, unbridled ecstasy that we get to experience each day just by living.

Today, cultivating joy in my life means valuing myself exactly as I am, and letting life in exactly as it is. There's a power in truth that can't be found anywhere else—and the truth is, I'm not broken. I never was.



# REFLECTION

*Have you ever been afraid to “let life in?”*

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*Are there any areas in which you think of yourself as broken, flawed, or less than? How do those thoughts impact your relationship with yourself?*

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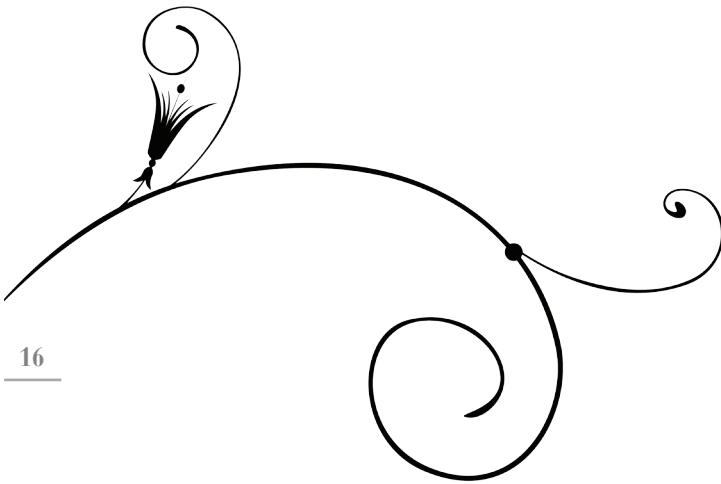
*What would happen if you chose to approach your life from a place of your own inherent wholeness?*

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# HAPPY, JOYFUL, AND WHOLE

Peggy Nolan

I remember well-meaning friends hooking me up on blind dates. I wondered if my divorce scared them, or if they thought my new state of singleness was contagious. Whatever the reason, I felt the pressure to become part of a couple as fast as I could. The gaping hole my nineteen-year marriage had once filled seemed to go on forever, an abyss with no bottom.

I remember the advice I received from a stranger: “If you don’t heal within yourself and fix your internal love radar, you’ll end up with someone just like your ex ... or worse.”

I brushed off the advice. Who was this stranger to tell me I had something to fix? I wasn’t the one who cheated, lied, and broke trust! And, I already knew *exactly* who I didn’t want: anyone remotely like my ex, who had been diagnosed with a certain personality disorder a month before I filed for divorce.

Yes, I had a laundry list of “Don’t Wants,” but sure enough, after feeling the mad pressure to couple up, I started dating every Tom, Dick, and Jerk Face.

There was the Vice President of Product Development who wanted to move in with me after our first date. The professional photographer who told me he had no idea how to be a part-time dad. The cousin of a friend who was still mad at God for the death of his first wife. The man who’d separated from his wife, but still lived with her ...

The stranger’s advice echoed in my mind. I hated that he was right—but here I was, still attracting fixer-uppers and terribly wounded souls. In many aspects, these men were just like my ex.

I had to fix my mojo.

I planned a dating sabbatical over the holidays. It wouldn't take too long to get my groove back, I told myself. Three months, tops.

While I was busy trying to blow the learning curve on the dating game, the Universe had a bigger set of lesson plans waiting. Ten days after Christmas, I was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness: breast cancer. Right before my mastectomy, I remember looking at the sky and asking, "What else do I have to learn?"

Over the next eighteen months, the lessons came flooding in. Sometimes I felt like I was drinking water from a fire hose.

Before my diagnosis, I'd had no clue how emotionally unhealthy I was. I had no idea what real happiness or joy felt like. I'd spent most of my time dimming my light so my first husband could feel *better than* and *more than*. I was nothing more than steroids for his ego—but no matter what I did, I came up short.

In his eyes, I was never good enough, because I didn't need him the way he *needed* to be needed. When I graduated from college with my BA, I was number one in my class. So he found someone needy and clingy, and had an affair with her. And then, silly me, I graduated with my Master's degree, also at the top of my class—and sure enough, he started seeing Mistress Number Two.

Through it all, no one saw the lie we lived. I wore a mask of fake smiles and became an expert in people-pleasing, sucking it up, and walking on eggshells. Even my closest friends thought I had the perfect marriage. They were shocked when it finally fell apart.

As I healed from my illness, I put a lot of time and effort into unlearning my unhealthy patterns of inner soul suppression, caretaking, and trying to control every single outcome. I discovered that it wasn't my job to fix everyone, make others happy, or say "yes" to every request. I learned to not just set my boundaries, but to enforce them. And guess what? No one died when I said "no!"

When it came to finding love and joy with another person, I learned the biggest lesson of all: in order to attract the love of my life, I had to *become* the love of my life.

I didn't wait for someone to take me to the art museum, the science museum, or Six Flags: I took myself. I didn't wait for someone to hand



me tickets to see Billy Idol or Rod Stewart: I got my own. I didn't wait by the phone for someone to invite me to dinner and movie: I took myself. In a world of pairs, power couples, and dynamic duos, I spent eighteen months becoming the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

Apparently, I passed the test.

A year after my last surgery, my doctors gave me a clean bill of health, and I got busy planning the rest of my life. My contract at work was ending, and I had no desire to renew it or even stay with the company. I had one daughter graduating from college and another from high school, and I was looking forward to being single, footloose, and empty-nested. I had been accepted to Kripalu's yoga teacher training program, my house was on the market, and I'd made arrangements to move myself and my two dogs into my father's empty vacation home in Vermont. I was over-the-moon happy to become the earthy, granola-crunching, yoga-teaching, crazy dog lady.

My last day of work arrived two weeks earlier than anticipated. I'd driven into Boston expecting to work a normal day, but my boss cut me loose because there was no more money in the budget for my project. My inner cheerleader broke out in a happy dance.

I arrived home before my daughters, hugged my puppies, and sat down to check my home e-mail. I'd received four e-mails from Classmates.com. Delete, delete, delete ...

Wait a second. What was that last one?

*You have just received an e-mail from Richard Nolan.*

I stared at the screen for a very long time. Rick. The first boyfriend I ever had. High school. Geometry class. To-die-for blue eyes. That electrifying smile. And the way he kissed me ...

Rick. The first boy I ever fell crazy, upside-down, stupid in love with. When had I seen him last? Twenty-five years ago—and even now, my hands were shaking and I was breaking out in goose bumps all over my body.

I clicked on the e-mail, only to find out I had to pay fifteen dollars to actually read it.

*Hi Peggy, I read. (Yes, he spelled my name wrong.)*

*It's been a long time. I know we haven't seen each other in 25 years but I'd love to catch up with you. I hope you will let me know. Would love to see you again.*

*- Rick*

I responded the only way I knew how.

*Rick!!! (I'm fond of exclamation points)*

*I would love to catch up with you! Here's my phone number ...*

*Call me!*

*Peggy*

*PS: Here's my cell phone, too!*

I hit the send key. I checked for a response every five minutes, which drove me nuts. My insides felt like bug splat. I read and re-read Rick's e-mail a thousand times just to make sure it wasn't some absurd dream.

Two hours later, I turned off my computer and dragged my neurotic self to bed.

Richard called the next day at exactly 5:00 p.m. I let the phone ring three times before I answered (not wanting to seem overeager after sending him an e-mail with both my phone numbers in it). His voice sounded exactly as I remembered it from high school. In less than fifteen minutes, we had time-traveled and covered twenty-five years of history. Marriage, two kids, divorce, and breast cancer for me. Marriage, four kids, divorce, and war in Iraq for him.

As we spoke, I remembered making out with him in the hallway in high school, my back up against the lockers, his body pressed hard into mine. I remembered Mr. Boudreau, my psychology teacher, interrupting our make-out session. As he pulled me into his classroom, he admonished, "Young ladies don't behave this way in public."

If that was the case, I didn't want to be a lady.

Back in the present, I cut to the chase. "Are you busy tonight?" I asked. "Do you want to meet for coffee?"

I didn't care if I was too forward or brazen. He didn't, either.

An hour later, I pulled into the Denny's parking lot. When I walked in, I saw him immediately; he was sitting in a booth, facing the front door so he could see me. I smiled nervously, and hoped I looked good. He stood up, and we hugged hello—this *incredible* hug. I let go, but he still held me. When we finally sat down, I couldn't believe that I was sitting across from my first boyfriend.

We split a hot fudge sundae. We drank more coffee than I thought humanly possible without ever getting up to pee. We talked for hours. We were there for so long that we got to witness firsthand who comes into Denny's at 3:00 a.m. (A man with a blue spiked Mohawk and a Frankenstein neck piercing, another guy with a tattooed and pierced face, and a Goth girl with bitten-off black nails and bright red hair.)

Rick leaned in and whispered, "Let's get out of here."

"Why?"

"Because the dude with the Mohawk is staring at us staring at each other."

I laughed.

We talked for another three hours in his truck. We made out like we were in high school. I felt like I was sixteen years old again—only this time, there was no teacher warning me to act like a lady. As the sun rose over the parking lot, we made plans to see each other again in a few days.

I drove home knowing I would never kiss another man as long as I lived.

*Five Months Later ...*

On the last day of summer in 2006, just as the sun was setting, Richard and I said our wedding vows in a private park overlooking Joppa Flats in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

Little had I known that, when I chose to get real with myself, the Universe would return to me my first real love. Richard was no fixer-upper: through his own journey of survival, he unlearned many of the same things I did. It was like the Universe was preparing us for each other. There were so many uncanny synchronicities of timing. The day I had my mastectomy was the day he landed in Iraq. The day I started chemo, he walked out of a building that moments later got leveled by a mortar. (Seriously. I can't make this shit up.)

When we said our vows, we gave each other the best gifts we had to give: ourselves, as whole, complete people. Nine years later, we still marvel at the fact that two whole people who come together in relationship can create something spectacular.



# REFLECTION

*Peggy had to unlearn many unhealthy behaviors that kept her from a joyful life. What behaviors could you unlearn to invite in more joy?*

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*Peggy's healing began with a scary diagnosis. How have the hard times in your life prepared you for bigger and better things?*

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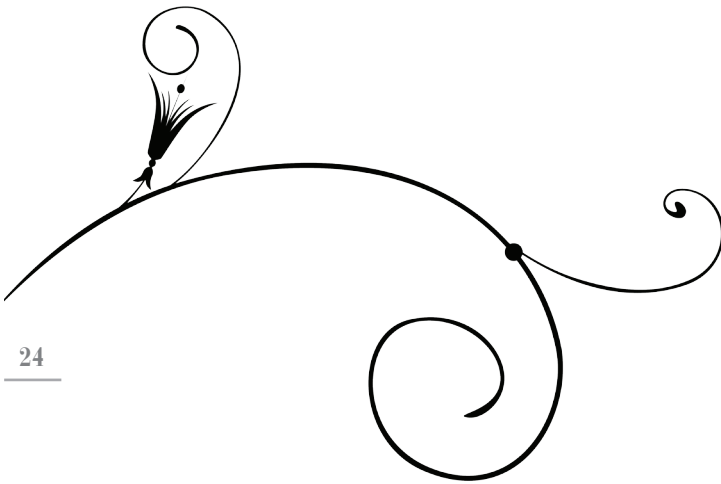
*Are you comfortable bringing your whole self to your relationships? If not, what do you think would happen if you did?*

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# IN THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE



*Felicia D'Haiti*

When I was growing up, only the “bad” kids got called to the principal’s office—the students whose behavior was so uncontrollable that their teachers could do nothing more with them. If you got sent down the hall to that office, you had already erred so greatly that punishment was sure to follow.

I never got called to the principal’s office as a child, but that sense of fear and judgment lingered. Which was why, years into my teaching career, my stomach immediately tied itself in knots upon hearing the words, “Mrs. D’Haiti, the principal wants to see you.”

Nearly two weeks before, I had filed an electronic resignation form. I filled it out, hit the “send” button ... and it was done. It was followed by silence. No one asked me about it. No one even mentioned that they knew about it—but obviously, it had been received. Which was why I was being summoned now, like a disobedient child, to that dreaded office off the main hall.

When I entered the office, the principal gestured for me to have a seat. It was as if neither of us knew where to begin.

“When were you going to tell me you were resigning?” he asked at last. “I checked the electronic submissions every day until the deadline, and I didn’t see your name.”

I didn’t have an answer. I had, after all, sent the form.

“Why do you want to leave?”

The question hung heavy in the room. I imagine he was surprised; I’d never said anything to him before about leaving. My emotions swirled like a tornado. How could I put into words the myriad reasons why I just wanted *out*?

Teaching in a public middle school was not a new experience for me, so it wasn't that. And, though middle school children can be quite challenging to work with, it wasn't the children who brought the greatest stress: it was the adults and their ever-increasing demands.

"But what is it exactly?" he asked. "I want specifics."

Maybe it was the overwhelming feeling of never being able to completely finish the piled-up paperwork. Maybe it was the pressure of always needing to do *more*, and to prove my worth to the school. Maybe it was the pressure to complete numerous home visits outside of work hours, despite the fact that I had four children of my own who were waiting for me an hour away in a good day's traffic. Maybe it was the superintendent's promise that *every* day would soon be an extended day, keeping students and teachers alike for an extra hour, allegedly to close the achievement gap.

Or maybe it was the knowledge that, despite how hard I worked every minute of every day, a single observation or evaluation could seal the fate of my salary, my job, and my employment for the following years. When my students came to me several grade levels behind, I wanted only the best for them—but my successes weren't measured by their overall gains, but rather by the results of a single test. How was that fair to anyone?

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the internal storm. Slowly, I expressed some of my concerns to the principal, concentrating on the possibility of extended daily hours and the increasing pressure of evaluations which took away from my time with my own children and my husband.

The principal took it all in. When I was finished, he sat back and said, "Mrs. D'Haiti, I cannot control your stress level."

Those words struck me like a dagger in my heart. *He doesn't care. I thought. He wants me to be stressed and unhappy. He's just like everyone else in this organization. They'll work you to death, suck all the life out of you, and then wonder why you complain!*

"Of course I don't want you to stay in a place where you're stressed out and miserable," he continued. "But before I accept your



resignation, please take some time to think about whether you really want to leave. You can get back to me after the spring vacation.”

During the break, I did a lot of reflecting about that meeting. My emotions ran the gamut: I was angry with him, then overwhelmed, then angry with myself, then stressed out again. I pulled oracle cards, meditated, and wrote in my journal about my experiences with this job as well as my last one. One of the major reasons I’d left the last job was that I felt trapped, like the demands upon my time were increasing along with the stress levels. I felt as if my freedom was being slowly taken away.

I realized that many of the same feelings had followed me to this new job. Had I just jumped from one bad situation to another? Perhaps the issue had simply become larger in order to force me to finally deal with feelings that had been building up for a long time.

And through it all, the principal’s words kept tugging at my heart. After much deliberation, it occurred to me that he was correct: he couldn’t control my stress level, or the way I thought about events that occurred at work.

I decided that I had been angry with myself for becoming consumed in the drama and negativity at work. But if I stepped back and looked at the events of a regular school day objectively, I could see that the meaning of the day was assigned by the thoughts I gave to it, and by the feelings associated with those thoughts.

What if, instead of leaving it all behind, I simply changed the way I felt about being at work?

What was my purpose for being a teacher, anyway? I wondered. What was it about this work that fulfilled me?

Though both my parents were educators, I swore I would never become a teacher. And yet, there I was—always helping others to discover new ideas and create new ways of being. Now, as an adult, I could admit it: I love teaching. So why was I allowing myself to hold on to thoughts and emotions that created a negative picture of my environment? I was the only one who was in control of my thoughts and emotions, and I was the only one who could turn them around.

Once I became clear about the part I was playing in my own misery, I started to brainstorm about what I could do to pull myself out of the situation. By the end of the spring break, I had withdrawn my electronic resignation. I decided to stay another year with the goal of seeing my work through a different lens.

To facilitate my new vision, I made some fundamental changes in how I started each day. First, I started getting up a bit earlier each morning to sit quietly and envision how I wanted the day to unfold. I focused on the feelings I wanted to have throughout the day and at the end of the day. I expressed gratitude for being able to do what I love—to teach, to guide, to assist others in finding their way.

Didn't I realize that the first lesson was to teach myself how to find my own way?

As I began to incorporate these daily practices into my life, I became less anxious about going to work each day. I practiced being present, and learned to separate the stressful thoughts and emotions from the events at work. I became an observer, reflecting on what it was about the event that caused me stress. I was able to separate myself from the “shoulds” I had created in my mind, and actively choose what I did and how I felt about it. I learned to turn my focus away from all the negative future possibilities—the things I didn't want—to what would bring more joy to me and to others.

Since then, new worlds have revealed themselves. By choosing to manage my own thoughts, I have chosen joy and freedom in every area of my life.

Never did I imagine that my call to the principal's office would open the door to such a joyful path!



# REFLECTION

*Where in your life are you allowing external events to create stress for you?*

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*How can you shift your thoughts about your current situation to invite in more joy?*

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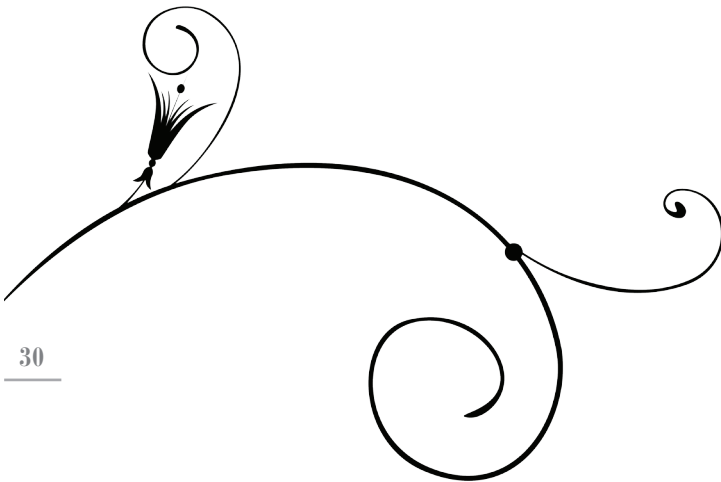
*Felicia started a practice of “creating” her day each morning. Do you have a daily creation or mindfulness practice? If not, how would it feel to start one?*

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# A JOYFUL NOISE

Christine  
Malenda, MhD

“**A** wise woman builds her home, but a foolish woman tears it down with her own hands.” (Proverbs 14:1) “*Work brings profit, but mere talk leads to poverty!*” (Proverbs 14:23) “*The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the godly will flourish.*” (Proverbs 14:11)

Passages like these always ignited my soul. As a child, I loved to hear, “Make a joyful noise!” in church. At that young age, I already felt the message of *making* life joyful.

My aggressive research about healing and abundance began in college, when my mom was battling cancer. Searching for tools to help her, I immersed myself in ancient books of wisdom, meditation, and the great world religions. I was elated to discover the Universal laws by which yogis reportedly performed miracles and attained self-mastery.

Eventually, I manifested my own healing, cars, money, and more. My belief in all things being possible with God was rock solid.

This passion evolved into my profession. After I married and we welcomed our first child, I followed my heart and left the cold corporate world to offer holistic healing services full-time. It felt like the icing on the cake of my life. “I love Christine” was written inside the walls of our custom-built home many times during construction. Our family handprints were indelibly pressed into the concrete foundation, together. After so many years of looming sadness and fear during my mother’s illness, life felt truly lovely to me. I was applying everything I’d learned to create a joyful life—and it was working! My fairy tale was becoming real.

My professional practice was building in tandem with my education in metaphysics. This was a world away from the ideas I had inherited, and these new concepts of healing were astounding to me. Since my mother's passing, I had developed an insatiable desire to learn and teach. From time to time I would invite my spouse to discuss topics of spirituality. Unfortunately, he never seemed to share my enthusiasm, but I had enough for us both. And it was all right: he loved me, and I loved him. It didn't matter if we didn't see eye to eye on everything.

The more I experienced, the more I was alive! Graduating as a Doctor of Metaphysical Healing and an Ordained Minister blew my heart wide open. All of my past pain now had purpose. The suffering I witnessed, especially with my mom, made sense. Gratitude for this life and my work was now an all-encompassing mindset.

My perception of love was like a warm shower running inside of me, washing away sadness and fear. I wanted to share this with everyone. I treasured the romance in my marriage, and the children in our life brought great joy. We even began an adoption process. In my eyes, the only hurdle that remained was to stabilize our income. I was intrigued by the idea of teaching what I most wanted to master, so I committed to learn and share as fast as possible. Prosperity for everyone!

After a best-selling book venture, I learned about a new class in the city for "movers and shakers." *That's me!* I thought. *Expand, and there will be greater happiness for all.*

I had been rather shocked at my husband's nonchalant response to my book's success; now, the same disinterest was expressed about this exciting class. As I packed, I vacillated between excitement and wariness, because his behavior had definitely shifted over the past several months. The adoring husband I had known was gradually becoming cold and indifferent.

Leaving always caused my heart to ache, but the payoff was sensible. After all, I pursued education for the highest good of my family and clients. This event was particularly exciting: I was seated next to Louise Hay, whose work I had admired for years!

Oddly, though, nothing was clicking for me. I fumbled in my reply to Louise when she asked about my work. When I called my husband, he tried to sound interested but was clearly apathetic, and our usual amorous exchanges fell flat. When I asked to talk to the children, he claimed they were too busy.

This was unprecedented. Suddenly, all interest in the event evaporated. I was anxious to get home safe and sound.

When I got back to our house, I ran to the door, tried to enter ... and rebounded off of an invisible wall. I literally bounced backward. There were no exterior lights on; I could see my spouse sitting in the living room, ignoring my arrival. I felt a foreign, frightening energy as I stepped into the darkened foyer. The air felt thick, as if poisoned.

Another woman might have gotten annoyed. I was alarmed. This was seriously uncharted territory.

Waves of memory made me dizzy. Snapshots of intuitive messages whipped through my mind. Past dreams of him engaging with other women and spiritual messages to “clear the house as if you are moving” suddenly came together. I had been forewarned about this for several years—but I had rejected every sensation because they all felt like nonsense. Of course, that resistance was contradictory to everything I believed and taught ... but why would I move? We designed our house, built it, loved in it, lived in it. It was home.

Until now.

For the next several months, I remained steadfast as a wife and mother, despite my husband’s erratic behavior and frequent disappearances. I still believed that love could trump all—even this stereotypical male mid-life crisis behavior. Before Christmas, I approached him with a reminder that he was loved unconditionally, and that, whatever he was doing, he still had time to stop.

“Please,” I begged him. “Wake up and see our beautiful life!”

He turned to me and said, “You and the children are not my joy anymore.”

Those words struck me with the force of a sledgehammer. I hid in the bathroom and got sick. This was impossible! This was the man

who had written, “I love you” on this very bathroom mirror every morning. We were so blessed—surely he would wake up and see!

Then, the day came when the Grim Reaper knocked at the door; in his hands were a year’s worth of text messages from my husband to another woman.

For years, I’d prayed “. . . for the Highest Good.” Now, I railed and fought, insisting that this breaking apart of my marriage and family was not—*could not*—be for the highest good. I screamed from the core of my being, “Please, take this back!” as the countless love notes unraveled from my heart like a tornado.

Sadly, it was those texts, and not his cold and ruthless treatment of me for all those months, which finally dismantled my fairy tale. I realized that, for years, I had found my value through his proclamations of love for me. I had been so blindly in love with the idea of our life that I’d refused to allow the signs, messages, and destructive behaviors to budge me. How naïve and unenlightened I had been!

All that was over now. What wasn’t good for my well-being would be swept out of my life. Fairy tales were not real; they were not true. And so God had released the binding from my marital vows, and it was time to live the full measure of my own potential.

The divorce felt surreal. As more painful discoveries arrived, I “cleaved to Christ,” as Mother Teresa taught. I lost my home, my car, and my money. But under my tears was a certain faith that my boys and I were destined to live a life of richer standards.

In order to have a greater life—a truly joyful life—the time had come for me to surrender in faith to the unknown. In my studies, I had learned that there is no greater arrival to joy than through the darkness; now, that understanding was personal. My vulnerable heart chose healing in an abundance of children, friends, family, clients, and even kind strangers. I prospered by receiving their love and kindness.

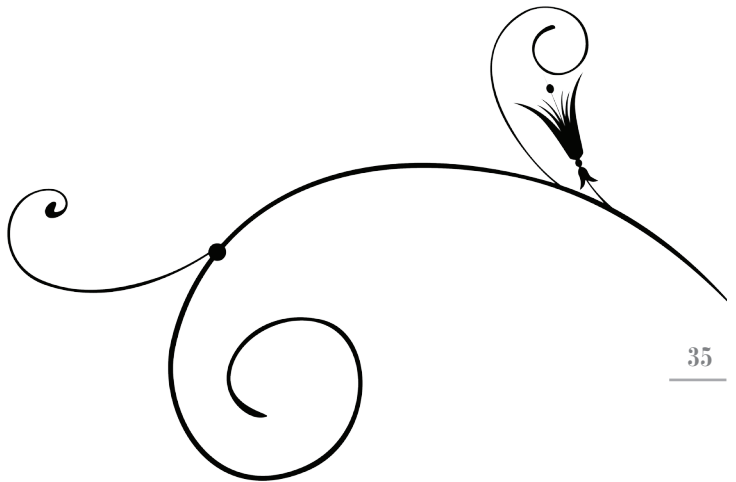
Mother Teresa instructed us to ask ourselves, “Have I really experienced the joy of loving?” I humbly reply that I remain teachable about the joy of loving. In time, I welcomed the gift of a new partner with whom I can share equivalent values. I now work on believing in



love based upon people's actions and not just their words. I am diligent about keeping my eyes as open as my heart, and life feels lighter through faith and honesty. Compassion remains a daily practice, and a soft heart is my prayer.

In the days of healing following the divorce, my youngest son reminded me of my lesson to him. "Love, patience, kindness, joy, gentleness, self-control, generosity, faithfulness, and peace equal a good life!" This is what I choose to enrich, and these fruits of the spirit make my life bloom. My unexpected journey has afforded me a grander vision of abundance and joy. A healthier new love, a new home, new friends, and new opportunities would never have been mine if I had settled and remained in denial. What I have now is not a fairy tale, but a real life story of joy, mindfully created.

Now, when I hear the verse, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord," it resounds as a call to live in truth—because the truth has set my soul free.





# REFLECTION

*Do you think your view of your life is grounded in truth? Why or why not?*

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*Although learning the truth about her marriage was hard, Christine ultimately grew from the experience. How have you benefitted from learning the truth in your life, even when it was challenging?*

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*Christine writes that she “remains teachable” about the joy of loving. What do you want to learn about love?*

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# LOST AND FOUND

*Dr. Angela  
M. Joyner*

*H*i, I'm Angela, and I'm in recovery.

No, it's not from alcoholism, although I admit that I love a good glass of wine. Shopping binges? I do treat Nordstrom's annual sale like an Olympic trial and train accordingly, but I have not been diagnosed as a shopaholic.

Perfectionist? Overachiever? Now we're getting closer.

My recovery is from my distorted belief that I am not good enough ... yet. I thrive on doing the impossible: setting a goal, and then blowing past it. Through my accomplishments, I love proving to others that I do, indeed, belong—intellectually, financially, and socially. My treasure chest of accomplishments includes educational endeavors to spiritual practices, and everything in between. My titles (Vice President, General Manager, Founder), degrees (PhD, MBA), and distinctions (Bouche Honor Society, ACC, CPCC) are my proof that I am worthy.

My pursuit of excellence started in kindergarten. My family had just moved from New Jersey to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was excited to meet new friends and explore all the wonderful things my new school had to offer.

On the first day of school, my mom escorted me to the classroom and introduced me to my teacher, Mrs. Bills. The teacher showed me to a table already occupied by a friendly group of girls and boys. Everyone was excited to meet the new girl, and we quickly set to work on a cool art project.

I was given crayons, paint, and construction paper. Mrs. Bills instructed me to draw a picture with the crayons; later, she would

show us how to use the paint to create a secret scene. My creativity was bursting at the seams, and I was anxious to please my new teacher, and show her how smart and creative I was.

What happened next would irrevocably change my life.

When Mrs. Bills came to review my artwork, she scolded me and said that I did not follow directions. I drew too many shapes, and my art was not good. She then proceeded to walk me to the coat closet and tell me to stand there until I was invited back into the classroom.

I couldn't understand what I had done wrong. When I looked at the other students' papers, their art had just as many shapes as mine! Why was I being singled out? As I stared at the cubbyholes in the closet, tears streamed down my face. I felt stupid, ashamed, and embarrassed.

My new friend Marla kept asking Mrs. Bills, "Why is Angela being punished?" But Mrs. Bills didn't answer.

When my mom found out about the incident, she was livid. Turns out, Mrs. Bills had no justifiable reason to put me in a coat closet. Her behavior was inexcusable, and she was reprimanded.

That day I learned a powerful lesson that would shape the rest of my life: people could discriminate against and dislike me despite my intelligence or friendliness. As a result of that morning, I secretly vowed that I would never look stupid or be excluded again. Thus, an overachieving, people-pleasing perfectionist was born.

My achievements became the threads which wove the fabric of my identity. My self-worth was a mosaic of my experiences, titles, and honors. I truly believed that being smarter than others and doing more than what was required would bring me satisfaction and joy.

As an adult, my pursuit of validation via achievement only intensified. I graduated with honors from North Carolina State University and earned my MBA from Duke University. I did not consider myself a runner, but I thought if I could put my mind to it, I could do it; over the next decade, I ran three marathons, and walked 180 total miles for various charities. I purchased my first home, a luxury convertible car, and other status symbols that suggested a successful and joyous life (according to society). Even my vacations were jam-packed with impressive activities and a "Top Ten" list to

conquer. While vacationing in South Africa, I went on safaris and petted cheetahs. In Italy, I rode on gondolas, tracked down Italian masterpieces, and drank wine in centuries-old monasteries.

My pursuit of significance consumed my spiritual life as well. Leading a women's Bible study in my home every Monday night, singing on the worship team, and teaching Bible study classes on Sunday mornings grounded me despite the demands on my schedule. As time went on, though, I realized that with each spiritual practice, I was desperately searching for more meaning, fulfillment, and joy. Even the stillness of my daily prayer time was tainted by my tendency to rush through it—as if it was just another item to check off my list.

I wondered: why did I always have to be in pursuit of the next challenge? Why did I believe that accumulating things would increase my self-worth? Amassing titles, promotions, and money was actually having the opposite effect of what I'd intended. I wasn't more joyful or fulfilled; I was dissatisfied and exhausted.

The breaking point came in the summer of 2014, when I received my doctoral degree in Organization Leadership. As I walked across the stage in front of thousands of jubilant graduates, distinguished professors, and my family, I felt tired and unfulfilled. In that auditorium full of people, I realized that I had not connected with anyone at a deeper level during my doctoral studies. I was pleased that I had successfully completed my doctorate, but had an unnerving suspicion that this most recent achievement was just another way for me to try to be the “ideal” woman.

It was still not enough.

The day after my graduation, as I was cleaning my office, I found a list of goals that I had created ten years before. When I reviewed the list, I realized that I had accomplished almost everything on it, with the exception of getting married and starting a family. In fact, I'd achieved even *more* than I had imagined I could.

As I read, I was overwhelmed by sadness and confusion. Here was proof that I had everything I'd ever wanted in life—so why was I still so dissatisfied? With every pursuit, I'd gotten closer to the person I thought I wanted to become, but now that I had achieved my goals,

I felt lost. I could always continue to do more, become more—but in the end, would I still end up here? Would I still have this sense of emptiness once I did more things?

All of a sudden, I couldn't breathe. I felt like the walls were closing in around me. I ran to the bathroom, and as tears mingled with the cold water I splashed on my face, I stopped to stare at myself in the mirror. Who *was* this tired, restless, anxious woman? It was like I was looking at a stranger; it was a real case of identity theft.

I felt like I was wearing a mask held together by fear. I had spent so much time trying to be the ideal woman that I'd lost the woman I was in my soul. My need for validation and acceptance had become the brush which painted layer upon layer of protection over my true identity. In my quest to become somebody that everyone would respect and love, I suppressed who I was authentically. But could that love and respect be true, if I was compromising my entire being to find it?

The longer I looked into the mirror, the more somber I became. I had moved my world and compromised my identity to make others more comfortable. I disproportionately gave more than I received in relationships in exchange for the mere *possibility* of love and acceptance.

My achievements at work, in school, and in life were earned through hard work, but I desperately needed to become reacquainted with the little girl who was “just enough” before that pivotal moment back in kindergarten. I wanted to fall in love with the woman sans the titles, distinctions, and irrational need to prove herself.

Could I truly and fully embrace the woman I would discover? Would she be as interesting, smart, and loving as the Angela everyone knew?

My work was definitely cut out for me. I had filled my life with things I thought would make me happy, but my days were often filled with endless social obligations and commitments that did not bring me joy. In my effort to free myself, I had to unravel many of the things and relationships in which I'd become entangled.

After my mini-meltdown in the bathroom, I booked a trip to London. I didn't make any detailed plans. “Top Ten” sightseeing lists

were banned from my itinerary; instead, my objective was to pause, slow down, and reflect. I traveled alone, and started an “electronic detox,” which meant weaning myself off of my phone, e-mail, and Pinterest. Even my alarm clock was off limits.

The freedom to slow down and truly explore what was possible each day was intoxicating. I discovered so many things about myself as I explored the city without an agenda. I rediscovered reading for pleasure, and the luxury of losing myself for hours in a good story. Dining alone, I tried new cuisines, and actually looked forward to eating as a sensory experience instead of powering through each meal. Instead of taking taxis, I walked everywhere; this simple act forced me to slow down and take notice of my surroundings. When I took the time to really observe the city and be with people, my experiences were so much richer—like watching a black-and-white film remastered in Technicolor.

The most valuable thing that I discovered was that I could find joy in the simplest of things. I realized that I don’t need credentials or someone else’s acceptance to validate my self worth. I am perfect because I am God’s creation. Letting go of people and commitments that no longer served me is not an indictment of my character, but a way to clear space for things that give me joy.

Since returning home, I have begun to intentionally make space for more joy in my life. I have rearranged my schedule, and filled it with activities that truly satisfy my soul. I’ve created a beautiful reading space in my home. Journaling and photography help me capture my life in a meaningful way. On Sunday nights, I write letters by hand. At least once a month, I explore a new part of the city or visit an art gallery. This is what contentment and joy look like in my life: room to just *be*.

Looking back at my life, I am humbled by all of my experiences and accomplishments. I don’t regret the winding roads that I have traveled. But the most valuable gift I’ve received came to me in London, where I met and fell in love with a beautiful, vibrant, amazing, passionate woman—

Me.



# REFLECTION

*Do you feel a disconnect between your outward accomplishments and your inner world?*

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*Where in your life have you been painting layers of protection, or hiding behind a façade?*

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*What would it feel like to fall in love with yourself?*

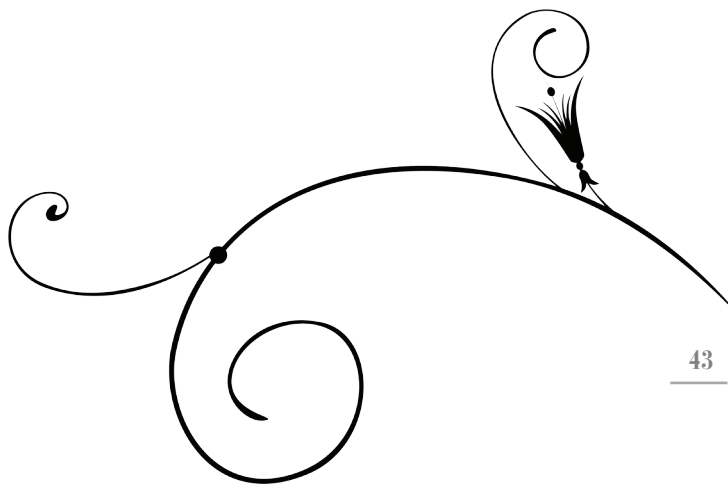
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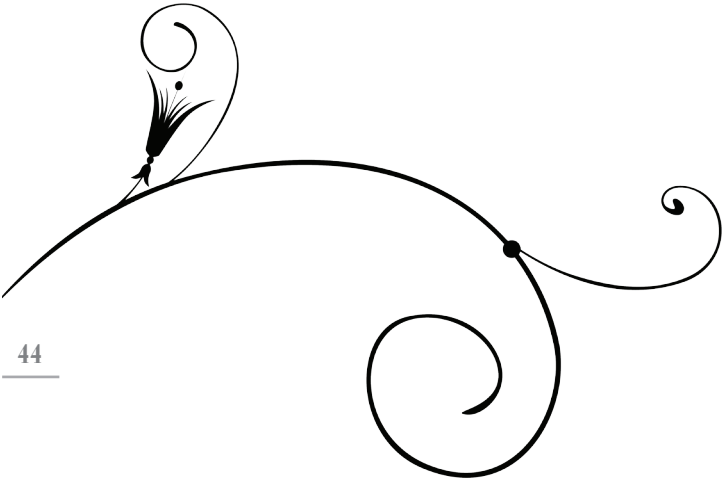
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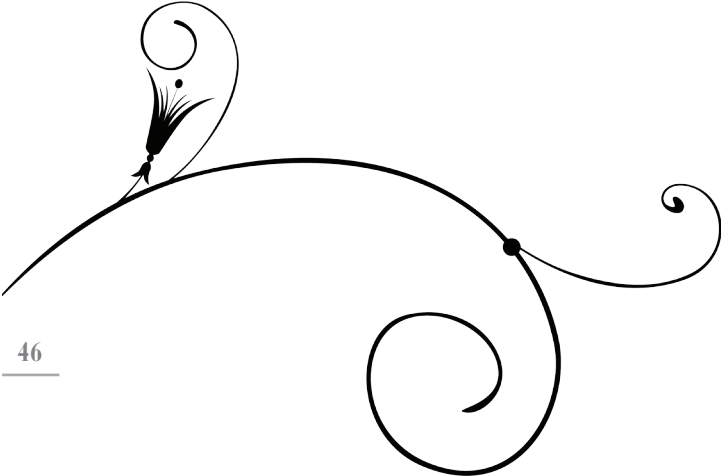




A large, light gray decorative flourish consisting of several elegant scrolls and a tassel-like element hanging from the bottom right.

*Chapter  
Two*

*Joy* IS...  
A NEW  
PERSPECTIVE



# THE JOY OF LAUGHTER

Sheila  
Callahan

“**W**hen was the last time you laughed so hard you cried?” Stephanie asked me, looking up from her note pad.

Stephanie had been my therapist since my first marriage ended several years earlier. She helped me move through a painful transformation and find the courage to better advocate for myself in a stressful work environment. Now, I was counting on her to help me meet my Superwoman responsibilities with more energy.

In response to her question, my brain played life files in reverse as I waited for the most recent laughing scenario to emerge from my databank.

I considered the ceiling for a while. I shifted my eyes to the framed print of a peaceful lake on the nearest wall, inhaled deeply, and drew my brows together. There had to be something ...

Stephanie chuckled.

“What?” I spluttered. “I’m thinking!”

Stephanie wrote something on her pad, and then looked up at me again. “Sheila, you are one of the most serious people I know. How might you loosen up and *enjoy* your life?”

She was right. At thirty-eight, I was more focused than I had ever been, and with good reason. In the course of one year, I’d gone from being a single mom with a twelve-year-old son to being a married woman with seven kids aged newborn to twenty. I was managing a demanding career and a house full of kids in the early stages of family blending. It was clear that my new husband Tom and I had completely different parenting styles, and there was, to put it lightly, a mutiny against parental authority of any kind amongst four of the five sons at

home. The girls were off at college and glad for the distance, even if it was only twenty miles. Only our youngest son, not yet a year old, seemed to love and admire us without fail.

Yes, I was focused. Yes, I was intense. Yes, I ironed my Superwoman cape every morning, dammit. Seriously, who had time for laughing?

I was sitting in Stephanie's office on this Friday afternoon because I felt completely over-the-top. It wasn't a new feeling, but I'd finally started to realize how much my heroism was draining me. The less energy I had, the harder it was to do the things I needed to do, and the more overwhelmed I felt. My daily life was starting to look like a losing battle, and I was barely holding on.

I explained to Stephanie that my seven-year-old adopted twins had been fired by the piano teacher because they were too much to handle and never practiced their music. I had pleaded with the teacher, to no avail.

Stephanie smiled.

"It's not funny," I informed her.

"It will be one day," she promised. "Just wait."

Next, I shared the story of Ms. Pippin, our nanny, who, thinking that she was having a heart attack, had left me a note on the kitchen counter saying she was going to the hospital and would never be coming back. When I called the hospital, sure enough, she was there. The next day, Ms. Pippin's daughter returned our house key—but we never heard from Ms. Pippin again.

"But the nanny is okay, right?" Stephanie asked.

I nodded in the affirmative. Stephanie dropped her head into her hand and chuckled. "Don't you see how comical your life is?"

I was not amused. Oh, it was easy enough for my happy-go-lucky therapist to find humor in my hardship, but ... It. Wasn't. Funny.

Stephanie took a deep breath, put on a straight face, and agreed that my life was indeed challenging. "So, how do you feel about doing something fun with Tom this weekend?" she asked. "Sounds like you two could use a little time for yourselves."

“I think it’s a possibility,” I lied. On Saturday, we were running errands, painting the playroom, and taking the twins to their basketball game. On Sunday (my thirty-ninth birthday, I suddenly remembered) the girls were coming home for a family dinner. But before I even started cooking, I had to clean the house, and tackle the mountain of laundry ...

*Nope*, I thought to myself. *Ain’t happening*.

Stephanie’s soft chuckle brought me out of my thoughts.

“What now?” I asked, not bothering to hide my frustration.

“I didn’t ask you what you thought; I asked you how you *felt*. Do you realize that, whenever I ask you how you feel about something, you always default to logical reasoning?”

I shook my head. “I’m just doing what I have to do to get by.”

But her words hit a nerve. I sank deeper into the cushions of the chair as a wave of exhaustion washed over me.

“I don’t have time to feel,” I said softly.

Sensing she’d pushed enough, Stephanie asked gently, “What meaning do you think your life will have in ten years, or twenty, if you never allow yourself to feel any of it?”

Once again, she was right: I had to lighten up. I just didn’t know how. Still, before our session ended that day, I promised to look for moments of humor with my hubby, seven children, and two dogs.

I didn’t have to wait long.

The early part of the weekend was a forgettable blur, but Sunday dinner proved to be one of the funniest I can remember. With all the kids sitting around the table, Tom, in a show of love and devotion, handed me a birthday card.

While the kids chatted noisily and Ryan, the baby, dropped green beans on the floor for the dogs to eat, I opened the envelope and slipped the card out. Tom returned to the kitchen for the cake. As I began to read the long poem on the front, I realized that something didn’t sound right. Thinking I had missed an important line, I started over.

Then I realized what that “something” was. The card was intended for a man.

*My poor husband*, I thought. *He's as over-the-top as I am!* Even though I felt sorry for him, I couldn't suppress the giggles bubbling up. I read the card again, line by glorious line, and let the laughter rip. Around the table, the kids stopped talking and stared at me. I'm quite sure they thought I'd lost my mind.

When Tom returned to the dining room, glowing birthday cake in hand, I was in tears. I passed the card to Alex, who sat nearest to me, and asked him to pass it to his sisters, who were old enough to get it.

Tom placed the cake in front of me. "What did I miss?" he asked. His question only made me laugh harder.

I wiped my eyes and waited for the girls to read the card. Then I heard Jessica, the oldest, say, "Oh my God!" as she, too, began laughing. Katy followed. For those around the table who didn't understand, Jessica informed everyone that Dad had bought me a birthday card meant for a man. An uproar of laughter commenced.

Only Tom wasn't laughing. In fact, he looked embarrassed, and a little hurt. I reached for his hand and told him it was okay, that I really needed a good laugh. The girls reminded him to be grateful I wasn't offended that he didn't take the time to read the card before he bought it.

The laughter on that Sunday afternoon released a part of me that had been unexpressed for far too long. When I went to bed that evening, I felt happy and relaxed. A smile still lingered on my face. Tom might have been embarrassed by the whole incident, but I was truly grateful.

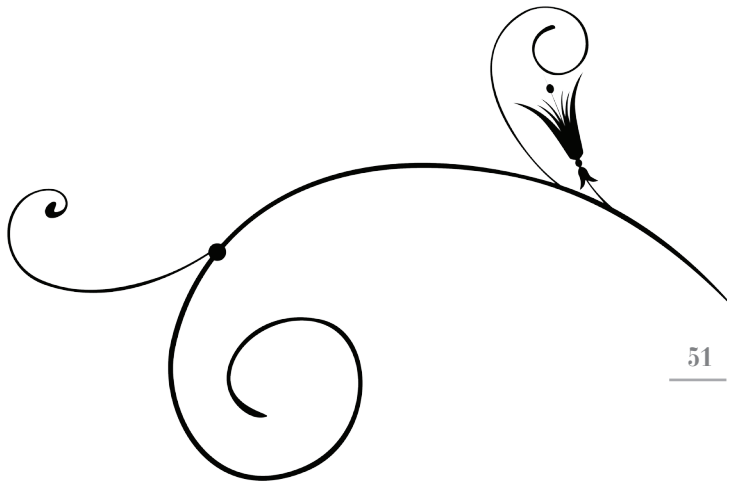
Twelve years have passed since that Sunday dinner, and these days, even Tom can laugh about it. I remain grateful for Stephanie's wise words about *feeling* the life that I'm living, and taking the time to enjoy it every chance I get.

I'm grateful as well to know how powerful laughter can be—not only for my own health and well-being, but as an example for our children. Not long ago, one of our sons was home for the weekend. As he was leaving, he told us that what he most enjoyed about coming home was waking up to the sound of laughter as Tom and I joked over our morning coffee. His words were an amazing affirmation that once again proved the value of relaxing into the humorous side of life.



Yes, life can be challenging. But once I laid down my Superwoman cape and began to *feel* the moment, the lighter side of life began to shine through, giving me plenty of opportunities to laugh joyfully.

As for the twins being fired from piano lessons, and almost giving the nanny a heart attack ... Well, you can bet we'll be sharing those stories on their wedding days!





# REFLECTION

*When was the last time you expressed yourself through laughter?*

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*How can you make more space in your life for humor and joy?*

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*What is your favorite way to get in a good laugh?*

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## SEA GLASS

*Marianne  
MacKenzie*

*H*ave you ever had one of those moments where you realize that your whole life just changed, and will never be the same again?

That is what happened for me when, somewhere in those over-planned years of teenagers, mortgages, and crazy schedules, our family was given the chance to live abroad in Ireland. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and one we didn't take lightly. We knew it would be a time of great transformation, cultural adaptation, and learning.

However, nothing could have prepared me for the transformation that was about to take place within myself.

The time leading up to our move was crazy and emotional, full of the highs of anticipation and excitement, and the lows of details, paperwork, and planning. My two sons, my husband, and I would all be thrilled one moment, and at each other's throats the next.

And then, almost before we knew it, we were boarding the plane to Ireland.

Moving to a foreign country is a total experience of the senses, and our small village outside of Dublin was no exception. The streets offered up the warm smells of freshly-baked breads and cakes from the local bakery. Bin after bin of brightly colored fruits and vegetables filled the farmers' shops, and the strong scents of herbs lingered heavy in the air. My eyes caught the crevasses of centuries-old stone walls, and paused in delight to notice the tender wildflowers blooming there, as if planted intentionally. The air *felt* different from the air back home, and seemed to remind me of another time and place ... something so familiar it had to be lived to be felt so strongly.

All this newness threw me into discomfort. Nothing was the

same. My mind was always *noticing*, and my body always feeling new sensations. At the end of each day, I would fall into my bed in sheer, exhilarated exhaustion. Something about the way people lived in this small, proud country made me wake up to new sensations and feelings. I learned to move through my day with my senses on full alert, and yet remain open and relaxed to receive whatever the moment had to offer. It was an entirely new way of being for me.

Back home, I'd been a planner, and could make things happen through sheer tenacity. That tactic didn't work here. People simply didn't respond to my assertiveness like they did in the corporate environments I'd come from. Often, I felt I was swimming upstream against a current—and in a way, I was: I was moving against the natural energy of a much more relaxed state of being.

Mind you, I said “relaxed.” It wasn't a lazy environment at all, just one where energy didn't seem to be *pushed* so hard. For instance, it seemed to me that nobody was willing to stand in line (or “queue,” as they called it). They just sort of ... gathered. The grocery store was void of familiar items, and everything was sold in smaller quantities. Carts were going every which way in the aisles, and when it came to the register, everyone just crowded in from different directions, rather than forming a line. To top it off, the checkers sit down to scan groceries! As you can imagine, this makes the whole process slower. By the time I would leave the store and return my cart (which I had to pay a coin just to use), you can imagine how frazzled my nerves were. And if I needed assistance finding a product ... well, that was a whole other story. In the end, it was either scream in frustration or soften up and release my judgments. To preserve my sanity (and to my children's appreciation), I chose the latter.

I was home-schooling my two boys and my niece (who was living with us at the time). Our agreement was that, if I let them sleep in until 10:00 a.m., they would hit their studies hard and not give me any attitude. I loved the agreement because it allowed me several hours to myself each morning. I spent the early morning meandering through my mind, journaling and meditating. Once the sun came up, I would

throw on my backpack and set out to explore.

Our village was right next to the ocean, and the smell of the Irish Sea drew me almost every day. The weather was often soft, and the morning mist only added to the enjoyment of my walk.

Because I was unable to work in Ireland without a work visa, our disposable income was stretched pretty thin. My favorite thing to do on our creative budget was to look for sea glass. I grew up landlocked in mountainous Utah, and the ocean has always drawn me to it; when we were on vacation, I was always the woman walking the beach at sunrise looking for treasure. Sea glass was the ultimate find. In all my years of exploring the coasts of America and Mexico, I had found only a few little pieces, but at low tide the Irish coast yielded handfuls of beautiful, jewel-toned shards.

Each time I discovered a piece of sea glass, I noticed a simple little thrill inside my chest. It wasn't how that thrill happened that surprised me, however; it was the overall state of my mind, body, and soul when I was out in the Irish air searching for my treasures.

Sea glass is beautiful to me, and I discovered with time that different pieces held different energies. I often would wonder how long a particular piece had been tossed around by the ocean, and just how far it had traveled. I discovered a couple of books which helped me date some of my finds to hundreds of years ago. My delight was an open feeling of wonder and curiosity, an expanded state where time alone couldn't drive that wonder to the back of my mind and pull me out of the present moment.

Through this exploration, I came to realize that spontaneity and a more connected life experience are just some of the beautiful benefits of living in a state of joy. This state of being would often lead me to explore places and do things that I otherwise wouldn't have allowed myself to do.

One such moment will forever be marked in my memory. While walking past Coliemore Harbour, a sleepy, picturesque harbor that was the main entry for Dublin City in the middle ages, I saw a woman exit a small footpath on the Vico road. The path looked like it headed straight off the edge of the cliff. Normally, my logical mind would

have talked me out of walking on an unknown path—especially one that looked like it dropped straight into the sea—but I was feeling that heightened sense of connection and curiosity, and I took the turning.

As I followed the path, my logical mind started wrestling with my joy. “Nobody knows where you are. What if you disappear? What if you fall into the ocean, or someone abducts you?” On and on the fearful mind went—and yet, my curiosity won out.

Soon, I found myself at what I recognized as the old baths that I had read about. The bath was cut from the stone of the cliff, and created a platform that dropped off into the deep Irish Sea. It was a clear morning, and the waters were as calm as a mountain lake. I always find the ocean fascinating, and scan the water’s surface for signs of life or activity. (What I’m really looking for is a shark’s fin, right?) From this quiet vantage point, I could see a long, long way out.

Then, just as far out as my eye could see, something broke the surface.

“Did I really see something?” I asked myself.

And then, there it was again! An inky black fin was cresting the surface, then slipping back underwater. As I stood there alone, I realized I was so elated, so engaged in watching this fin rise and fall, that I’d forgotten to breathe.

The fin came closer and closer with each resurfacing. I was mesmerized, and started silently calling it toward me, wishing this unknown being closer so that I could really see it. And it came!

As it neared, the size of that fin started to turn my elation to fear. I was standing right on the edge of that platform, and imagined some great creature of the deep leaping up to snatch me up in one bite!

I took a step back. The creature was only about thirty feet away now, swimming directly below me.

“What *are* you?” I asked.

If the experience so far hadn’t woken up every nerve in my body, the voice that answered me did.

“He’s a porpoise,” declared the wee Irish man who was perched just above me, watching the drama unfold.

I just about jumped out of my skin.

I turned to get a better look at the porpoise—which, of course, was what the creature was—and then looked over my shoulder again. The sweet little man who'd witnessed my moment was gone, as suddenly as he'd appeared.

My walk home was like walking on air. All of my senses had been engaged in that moment, and I felt more alive than I had ... well, maybe *ever*. Something as simple as taking a new path created a state of joy that I still connect with a decade later.

My life as a businesswoman, mother, and wife helped me develop the tenacity and assertiveness to get things done, and get them done *now*. Those skills had helped me get to where I was in life, but it was in Ireland that I was called to develop presence and patience. I experienced firsthand how sweet it can be to connect to the simple, natural timing of things. Just as I couldn't will a flower to open from a bud, I couldn't have forced the opening of my world that Ireland offered me. It simply *happened*, in its own time.

Returning home to the United States was as challenging, in its own way, as entering Ireland had been. The aggressive pace of life was an assault on my senses. The temporary, throw-away nature of our society left me feeling gluttonous; I knew now that simplicity can offer us an even higher quality of life. Slowing down and connecting with people became very important to me, and patronizing the local butcher and farmer became a top priority. For years, I took afternoon tea, a ritual that I came to treasure, biscuits (aka cookies) and all.

My adventures in Ireland helped me feel more confident in being spontaneous and exploring unknown places. I now know how a deep, open curiosity can lead me to my joy. From this joyful, open state of being, life is a totally different ride.

As for my sea glass ... I'm still enjoying it as a collection. Maybe someday I will find a project worthy of all those glistening memories.



# REFLECTION

*Have you ever lived abroad, or do you dream of doing so? What is it about this different way of life that attracts you?*

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*Do you have a favorite hobby that takes you “out of time?” What can you learn from that state of being?*

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*In Ireland, Marianne learned to let life unfold, rather than pushing it forward. Where can you explore presence and patience in your own life?*

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# THE JOY OF RECEIVING

Jill  
Celeste, MA

The envelope was addressed to me, but I had no idea who it was from.

It was December 2, 2001, and 9/11 and the Anthrax scare still had our country reeling. As I held the envelope in my hand, I worried about what might be inside. Could it be Anthrax?

This envelope, though, was not like the ones I had seen on the news. The penmanship was neat and feminine. The return address was from my hometown.

Curiosity was getting the best of me. With shaking hands, I opened the envelope and peeked inside.

The first thing I saw was a Publix grocery store gift certificate in the amount of \$100. I pulled it out, looked back inside the envelope, and saw ... more paper. Assuming it was a note or explanation, I pulled the paper out.

“What the hell?” I asked aloud.

I didn’t find a note. What I *did* find were four more \$100 Publix gift certificates.

This must be a mistake! Who would send me \$500 in gift certificates? Why wasn’t there a note inside the envelope?

Then, I started to get angry. Where was this person’s generosity three months ago when my husband was unemployed? Or even three weeks ago, when I was on maternity leave? We’d just gotten back on our feet; we didn’t need charity now.

While I should have been grateful or at least relieved, instead I was annoyed. The thought that someone felt we *needed* this help—but

couldn't be bothered to identify him- or herself in a note to explain—galled me.

I knew what I needed to do: find this person and demand an explanation. I didn't need these gift certificates, so why send them to me? I had a return address, the gift certificates' serial numbers, and the Internet. How hard could it be to find this mystery giver?

I began my research the next morning. First, I discovered the return address was for a furniture store, so I called them and explained my mystery envelope to the store manager. He had no idea why his address had been used.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said. "Sounds like they intentionally used a false address."

It was a dead end.

I then called Publix and spoke to their store manager. His response was equally unhelpful. "Someone wanted you to have a gift. Maybe you should leave it at that."

*I'll be damned*, I thought.

At lunch, I told my work colleagues about the gift certificates and explained how I was searching for the person who sent them to me. They suggested that maybe the person sent the gift certificates to reimburse us for food for my grandmother's recent funeral, or perhaps as a belated gift for my son who was born two months earlier.

No, no, no. I knew those were not the reasons.

My search left me with more questions than answers. When I got home from work that evening, I threw the envelope and gift certificates on the counter. I wanted to stomp my feet in frustration. I decided if I could not find who sent the gift certificates to me, then I would not use them.

To be sure, my mood matched that of my two-year-old.

Later that evening, I went to my computer to check my e-mail. As I watched the e-mails file into my inbox, one caught my attention. It was from someone named Mrs. Mock, with the subject line "You are making me nervous."

As soon as I saw it, I grabbed my mouse and clicked on the e-mail. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was from the person who sent me the gift

certificates! Mrs. Mock was not her real name, but her message was definitely genuine.

Mrs. Mock wrote that someone once had helped her, and she was paying it forward but wished to remain anonymous. She asked that I stop trying to find out who she was, and that, while I may not need these gift certificates now, one day I would be glad to have them. She concluded her e-mail with a request that I pay it forward one day, too, and that I accept her gift with love because it brought her great joy to send it to me.

I read her message over and over again, trying to process what was being communicated. I still had so many questions. Why me? Why not someone else? What did she mean that I would need them one day? Why should I accept her gift when I didn't need the help?

I began to write back to Mrs. Mock. Angry words flowed from my fingers. *No, this doesn't feel right*, I thought.

I tried again. The words were less angry, but still full of confusion and "whys" and "you-shouldn't-haves." Rereading it, tears welled up in my eyes. How could I be so ungrateful?

I erased everything I had just written, because there was really only one thing I could say.

I typed the words "thank you," and clicked "send."

I pushed away from my computer and went back to the kitchen. I grabbed the gift certificates, placed them under a magnetic clip on the refrigerator, and regarded them with a sense of surrender. I would respect my benefactor's wish to stay anonymous, and stop looking for her. The conversation I wanted to have with Mrs. Mock would never occur. I had to accept it.

I thought, too, about giving and getting. Why was it so hard for me to receive someone's generosity? Why should receiving a gift cause anger, confusion, and frustration? Is it because I was a woman, wife, and mom who always gave, gave, and gave?

Didn't I deserve to receive, too?

Gift-giving is a two-way street. You give, and you receive. The happiness I experience as a giver is the same happiness Mrs. Mock experienced when she gave to me. Receiving should not be tumultuous,

but rather a place of joy for both people. By being angry and ungrateful, I wasn't holding up my end of the bargain.

I knew then that the gift I'd received from Mrs. Mock wasn't just of monetary value, it was a life lesson as well. My heart, so constricted up until now, swelled with gratitude. I was truly thankful for this amazing, unlooked-for gift I had received.

Two days later, at work, my director called me into his office. When I walked in, I noticed that a person from Human Resources was there, too. I sat down at the table with a sense of dread.

"Jill," my director said, averting his eyes. "I'm sorry to inform you that your position has been eliminated."

The human resources person pushed a letter toward me. It was my severance letter, awarding me five more weeks of pay and a resume workshop.

As I stared at the letter, a flood of images flashed before my eyes. *It's Christmas time, and I still needed to buy presents for the boys. How will I pay my mortgage? How can I get another job at this time of year? Why is this happening to me?*

I was scared shitless.

I left the office and went back to my desk. The HR person handed me a box and helped me pack up my things. She then escorted me out of the building and wished me luck.

When I got in my car, I sobbed. I had no idea what I was going to do. Those images kept replaying in my mind—and new ones were joining in. *Should we cancel the cable subscription? Should we sell one of the cars? How the hell am I going to pay for diapers and baby food?*

Then, I remembered those Publix gift certificates, pinned under the magnet on my refrigerator.

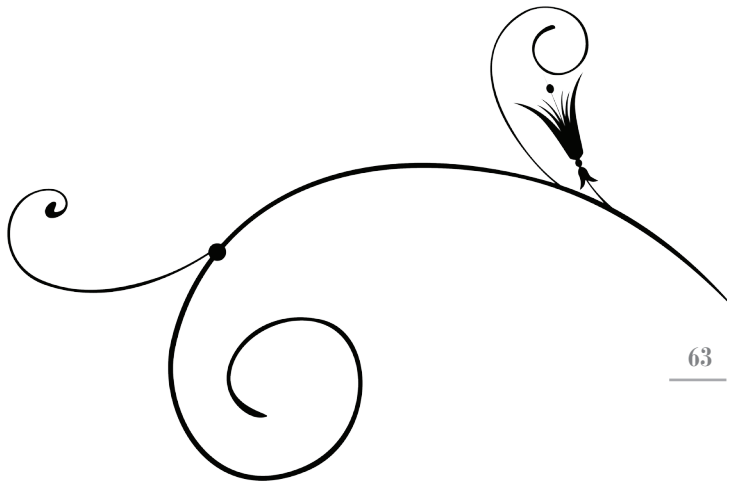
*I have \$500 in grocery store gift certificates!*

Relief flooded my body. I did not know how I would pay the mortgage, or where my next job would be, but I knew this for sure: my family would not go hungry during this process. Mrs. Mock had made sure of that.

Two months later, still unemployed and out of severance pay, I handed one of the \$100 gift certificates to the Publix cashier. She saw the amount and said, “Wow! That’s a nice gift.”

I smiled back at her and said, “Yes it is. And I am so grateful to receive it.”

To this day, I have never forgotten the generosity of Mrs. Mock’s gift, and the lesson I learned about giving and receiving. This balance is how I cultivate joy in my life. Whether it’s my birthday, Christmas, or “just because,” I now accept *all* gifts with love and gratitude. I no longer ask why; I simply accept, and remind myself that I am deserving of every gift I receive.





# REFLECTION

*When someone gives you a gift unexpectedly, how do you react?*

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*Jill attributes some of her discomfort with receiving to being a wife and mom who was always giving. Is there a difference in the energy of how you give and how you receive? Why do you think that is?*

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*How can you cultivate more gratitude in your life on a daily basis?*

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# THE STORY OF JOY

*Kailean Welsh*  
MS, LPC

**T**he task seemed simple: Identify a joyful event in your life and write about it.

“Easy enough,” I thought.

I started with memories of my childhood. Hmm ... Nothing joyous stood out there. I hadn’t fit in as a kid. I liked to learn and usually had my nose in a book. “Go play,” my mom would say.

I grew up on a farm, with lots of room to run and explore. When the chores were done, my seven brothers and sisters were on the go. I didn’t join them very often. They were jumping off the barn rafters into the hay. I was too afraid. They were sledding or building snow forts. Not me—I didn’t like the cold. I felt out of sync, like something was wrong with me.

I searched my teenage years for a joy moment. I was a quiet, pudgy, nice girl with glasses. I was always on the fringe, enviously watching the popular kids, but rarely included and sometimes picked on. My memories were mostly of embarrassment and self-consciousness. That wasn’t the place to find joy.

I thought about the important events of my adult life: my wedding, the births of my children. Surely, I would find joy there.

I recalled my wedding day, a perfect early summer day with white fluffy clouds and a soft, gentle breeze—ideal for a small outdoor wedding on the farm where I grew up. It was a beautiful setting, but I was churning inside. My inner voice was telling me that saying “I do” was not a good idea. But I didn’t feel I had a choice. I was pregnant. I had “made my bed,” as I had been clearly reminded. Now I had to lie in it.

People often commented on my beautiful smile. It was my mask, hiding the messed-up person I saw behind it. I put on my smile that day, and did what I thought I should. The divorce came a few years later.

I searched for joy when my children were born.

Samuel Christopher was my first child, conceived before I was married with a man who lived several states away and didn't want to be a dad. Though I had good support from family and friends, I felt lonely and ashamed. I often cried at night, but by day I would wear my smile. I told myself that everything would be all right, that I could make a good life for us.

At nine months and a few days, my water broke. When I got to the hospital, there was no heartbeat. Samuel Christopher was stillborn the next morning.

No, there was no joy there. There was only sadness.

My thoughts moved on to the births of my three living children. I could say I was happy when Jesse, Sam, and Rachel were born, but joyful? No, I didn't find joy in those memories either. I recalled the fear of being pregnant again, the alcoholism and domestic mess of my relationship, the financial challenges, the loneliness ... and the overwhelming sense of failure, of feeling stuck and not knowing how to break free.

I loved my children deeply, but I didn't like my life. I felt badly that I wasn't doing better for them. I was afraid that this was all life was going to offer us. But I accepted my lot. I worked hard. I tried to be a good person. I did my best to be a good mom and to make a living. I did what I should. I lived with my guilt. I thought I was managing pretty well—

“Take a few moments to finish up.” The voice of the workshop leader broke into my reverie.

Finish up? I hadn't even begun.

*Maybe, I thought, starting to panic, I don't really know what joy is!*

I noticed that everyone else was writing. *I can't be the only one who has never experienced joy. Why can't I find it?*

*Does joy even happen in real life?* I wondered, my mind spiraling, frantically trying to figure it out. *Isn't it just a Christmas thing? It has*



*something to do with God and angels, right? I'm a spiritual person, so this should be easy ...*

*What's wrong with me?*

I began to cry. I sat with tears rolling down my cheeks, mourning with heartache the vision I saw as my life.

Then, from deep within, I felt an opening. Quietly, a memory arose.

I was with my mom and four sisters, sitting on an island in Greece a couple of years earlier. It was a magical trip, one I had jokingly requested for my fiftieth birthday. Unbelievably, my dream had become reality.

It was early evening, and we were waiting for what was expected to be a beautiful sunset. As the sun dropped lower in the sky, the temperature dropped, too, and we huddled together on a rock ledge to keep warm. We laughed. We talked about our lives. Our interaction was open and honest and real. There were no masks. I felt close and connected in a way I never had before.

Oh! *That* was joy!

The realization jolted me back into the room. The warmth of the memory comforted me, wrapping me up like a soft, cozy blanket. My tears changed. The walls around my heart had shattered. I moved beyond the narrow focus of grief and hardship that I had seen as my life to discover a deep place of beauty and love, which was mine as well. I felt wonderful, blissful. I wanted to jump up and shout and dance.

My journey into joy, and healing, had begun.

I felt dazed and light-headed as the workshop continued. My consciousness and my vibration were shifting. We spent the afternoon learning how to experience more joy in our lives. I took it all in.

I began reading all I could on the topic. I saw how limited my perspective had been, and that I had become completely focused on the negative. I saw that I had been putting tremendous energy into resisting life, almost from the very beginning. When I felt criticized and unaccepted as a child, I started to constrict. Sure that I was somehow flawed, I closed myself off and put on my smile, my mask. When I made mistakes, I walled myself up in guilt and extra

pounds. When life got hard, I clenched even tighter, and made myself busier. When life became painful, I locked up my heart.

It was time to do things differently.

I began to express my truth, as best as I was able, even when it terrified me to do so. It took practice and support, but I learned how to play, laugh, and find pleasure. I began to make choices based on self-love—on what I knew was right for me, not what others thought. I began treating myself as I would a dear friend, with compassion, acceptance, and understanding, and allowed myself to be vulnerable with others. I created deeper, richer relationships based on unconditional love, acceptance, and trust.

Most of all, I began looking for, and appreciating, the good—and I found it, both in the present and in the past.

About eight months later, my phone rang.

“Dina died today,” I was told.

I had known the call would come, but I still wasn’t ready.

Dina had greeted me at my first Al-Anon meeting over twenty years before. I laughed the night we met; I hadn’t laughed that freely in years. Dina showed me I could take my mask off. She accepted me—all of me, the good and the bad—and helped me open to the possibility that I was worthy and lovable. She helped me see hope, and we became great friends.

Tears flowed as I felt the sadness of her death. And unexpectedly, with the grief, came a profound experience of joy. I felt filled to the brim with peace and unconditional love, and realized that my vision had expanded. I could see beyond heartache and despair, if I chose to. I could see beauty in the sorrow. I smiled, recalling moments we’d shared, and saw her freed at last from the physical limitations that had impeded her for several years.

Even as I cried, I celebrated her.

In that moment, I realized how deeply I have changed. I have learned to see life through new eyes. I can look beyond the barriers I constructed in the past which blocked the joy that was always there. I see my childhood as blessed with loving, hard-working parents who

did their best for their family. I see myself as a child who lived by her own inner music, even if it put her out of step with the other kids.

I learned much from my marriage. Through that experience, I found an inner strength I didn't know I had; without it, I would not be the person I have become. Today, when I look in the mirror, I see a woman who embodies wisdom, confidence, and self-acceptance.

And sweet Samuel Christopher ... His death sent me on a quest for the spiritual understanding that now fills my being with a deep passion and peace. There was joy in the births of every one of my children, and each of them brought their own unique blessing.

Joy is a quality of the soul that is uplifting and beautiful. Although it gets buried under layers of fear and self-limiting beliefs, it is always present and available—and most definitely worth searching for. Once you find it, it will sustain you through the most difficult times. Through joy, we access our highest selves, and are transformed.

When I found joy, I set myself free.



# REFLECTION

*When reviewing her life in the workshop, Kailean recognized that she was only holding on to the negative experiences of her past. Where can you shift your focus from what went wrong to what went right?*

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*Kailean often used her smile as a mask. What are your masks? Why do you wear them?*

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*What do you think would happen if you took your mask off for a day?*

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# DANCING WITH JOY

Zinnia Gupte

*I* went to the island to get as far away as I could from my divorce and the noise of New York.

I'd had enough. I had thrown myself into work and distracting romances, but neither cured my heartbreak. Divorce felt like spiritual abandonment; it was crippling, frustrating, and joy-stealing. Some days, I locked myself in my office and cried for hours, thinking, "Who will love me now?"

I was an advertising executive working in San Francisco and New York, but I dreamed of a life that looked very different from my current high-powered, high-stress career. One year in the Mediterranean: that was what I wanted.

It was time, I decided, to reinvent myself.

I'd always been scared to pursue my dream. But now, feeling like I had so little left to lose, I finally asked myself, "Why not?"

And so, I took the first step, and created a vision board for "My Life in Spain."

I lit incense and white candles, put red roses in an ornate red-and-gold vase, sipped hibiscus from a tea cup, and listened to flamenco music. I cut out pages from travel, beauty, and health magazines, and spread all the images on my bed. Piece by piece, I wove the images together on emerald-green paper, the color of abundance. I wanted the vision board to hold all of my heart's deepest desires.

I wanted to heal and feel healthy, so I collaged images of turquoise blue waters, a woman in red silk dancing in the sea, fresh green salads and strawberry smoothies, and happy people toasting with wine glasses in the sunlight.

I wanted a pure white home with skylights and a spacious veranda with silk curtains that flowed in the breeze. I wanted a community, so I fitted images of people praying in an ashram and women dancing in a circle, their muslin veils flying through the air. Tears fell on the board like large raindrops as my heart began to open.

Finally, I placed a flamenco dancer, her wild skirt aflame, and a dancer flying over the ocean in ecstasy. And in the center, a radiant, golden Goddess.

Then, I took out my journal, and wrote about the possibilities of this experience. There were so many voices that cautioned me out of it. What would my parents say? What about my job?

I trusted the words that poured out of my soul: I followed them. I trusted my inner voice and my inner vision: I *chose* it.

I filled hundreds of pages with the voice of a woman whose soul has been set on fire. My body tingled all over. My heart pounded, and I felt excitement and passion flow through me for the first time in what felt like forever.

On those pages, I laid down a new vision for my life. Now, it was time to create it.

I arrived in Ibiza with enough money to live there for a few months, retreat, and rejuvenate. The island's soft green hills were scented with jasmine and pine, and the sea shimmered silver in the moonlight. The people there followed the rhythms of nature. They even had a word for it: *tranquillo*. Life was meant to flow naturally here—not rushed, not forced.

During my first week, I met locals who invited me into their homes and cooked heart-warming meals for me. I met them for beach picnics and to watch the sunsets.

I took long walks by the sea, spent time meditating on my desires, enrolled in belly dancing classes, painted, and wrote poetry. My second week, I signed up for a Reiki class and met a local healer named Belinda. After the class had finished, she served hot carrot-ginger soup and warm bread. We each chose a medicine card; I received Swan.

“You are the swan,” Belinda smiled. “You’re going to transform on this island.”

A few days later I responded to a call for dancers to perform at an Oriental cabaret event. I met the producer, who, after hearing that I was trained in Indian dance, booked me for the whole summer season!

I bought swirling red skirts with mirrors and velvet, round gold earrings, and bracelets that chimed when I swayed my arms. I danced at weddings in magnificent villas overlooking the ocean. I danced for myself on cliffs, on the shoreline, nude in the midnight ocean with the lunar light floating upon me. I did everything my wild soul wanted and connected with a beautiful, sacred, magical part of myself that I had barely known existed.

Every day I felt stronger. I ate fresh salads and fruits, swam in the turquoise Mediterranean waters, ran the twelve-kilometer ocean road, learned new spiritual skills, and co-created with a sacred community who embraced me.

But then, the time came to leave Ibiza ... and I wasn't ready to go. I immediately asked Belinda for her advice.

"You can't leave," she said. "You have to dance at the Ibiza Healing Day Festival."

One month later, I found myself at the most popular healing festival in Ibiza. Thousands of people walked among the orange groves in a Balinese-style luxury hotel, exchanging ideas and showcasing their gifts.

I walked into the dance temple and slowly created a Goddess altar with red rose petals, incense, and a photo of Goddess Lakshmi. The music began, and I closed my eyes. The sounds of tabla, flute, and sitar flowed through me. I swayed, swirled, and opened my heart to the sky. The other dancers, with their crimson veils, followed with grace.

Something was in the room with us that day. A light. A force. I could feel it. *We* could feel it. That day, in the temple, we were all flowers blossoming, turning our hearts to the sky, mouths open in awe; women dancing in pure ecstasy.

The creativity I felt, the freedom and feminine life force, the joy ... It had a name. *Shakti*. And I was meant to teach it.

I stayed in Ibiza and continued dancing at healing festivals, weddings, fashion shows, and concerts with famous sacred musicians.

Within a year, I was invited to dance in Turkey, Greece, and even Bali. Within two years, I was being interviewed in magazines, on the radio, and on television about dance and the teachings of Shakti. By the third year, I had written a book and opened my own company, Shakti Priestess, to guide, mentor, and coach women.

I looked at the vision board I had created three years before, and wept. Every image had manifested in my life: a harmonious home, dancing, teaching, being healed by the sea, being *seen*. I felt all the passion, power, joy, and ecstasy I had been longing for when I visioned my new life.

Soon after that, I received a package. My divorce was final, and I was a free woman. All I had to do was sign the papers.

I was walking along the beach, papers in hand, when my ex-husband called me. Soft, warm waves lapped at my feet as we spoke about the final details.

“Are you happy there?” he asked.

I looked out over the ocean, with all its limitless possibilities, and felt a flutter in my heart. “I’m beyond happy,” I told him.

“What will you do next?”

“I’m going to help other women feel joy again.”

I told him that I wished him well, and that I honored our friendship. Then, I hung up—and once I did, something deep within me shifted. I raised my arms to the sky as if I had grown wings, and let my heart soar open.

I was done with my three-year retreat on the island of Ibiza. I had finished the lessons that life held for me here. Now, a new set of opportunities were presenting themselves. It was time for me to shine, and expand even more.

Inside every woman there is a magnetic force, a fountain of power and joy just waiting for her to be brave enough to touch it. She can create anything with this power: a life she loves and deserves, full of joy, passion, and purpose. Every woman has this power, this wisdom, this vision. And it is medicine for the world.





# REFLECTION

*Do you employ visual tools (like Zinnia's vision board) to help you create your dreams? What has been your experience with these practices?*

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*What does the term "healing retreat" mean to you? How can you create a piece of that experience in your life, right now?*

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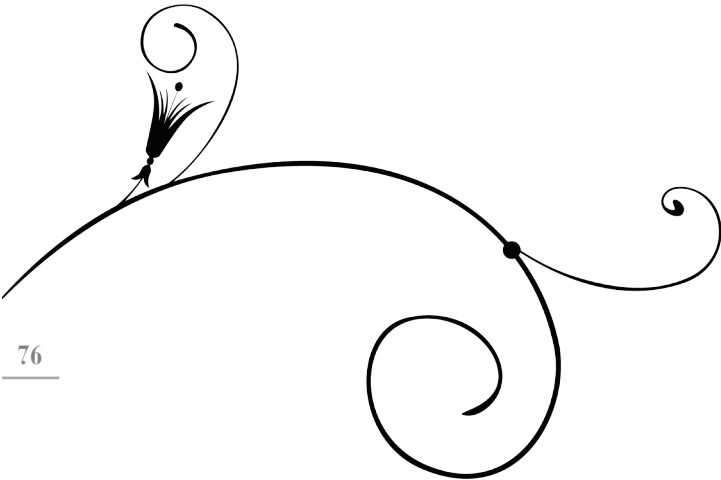
*Once her divorce was finalized, Zinnia knew it was time to move on from Ibiza. When have you moved on from a place, relationship, or experience that was nurturing for you? How did you know it was time to make a change?*

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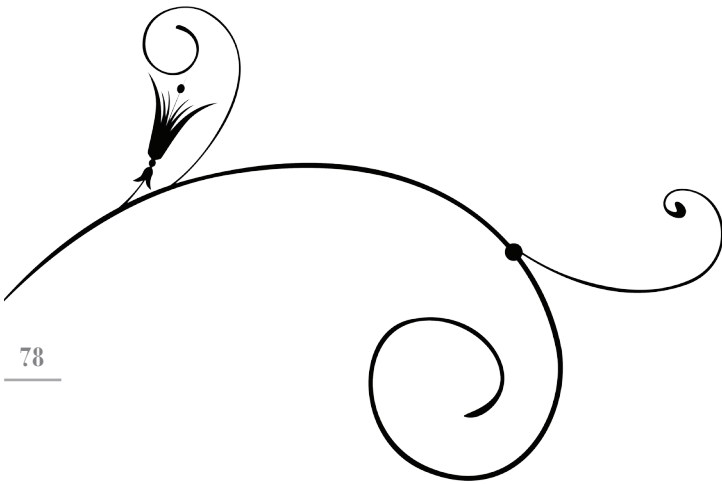
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*Chapter  
Three*

*Joy* IS...  
**OVERCOMING**



# THE SEEDS SOWN IN THE STORM

*Jen Flick*

*H*ow was I ever going to tell my children that I had cancer? How could I help them understand what our family was facing without terrifying them?

My son, Ben, was ten years old when I was diagnosed. He and I share a deep soul connection, so although I still had to find the words, I felt fairly confident in my ability to convey the information without destroying his childhood.

My daughter and I are profoundly connected, too, but she was only five. How could I tell my baby girl that her Mama was about to become nauseous, tired ... and bald?

Some children have blankets, some suck their thumbs. My daughter had my hair. From her earliest baby days, she would reach for my hair when she felt anxious, and twirl it between her fingers. During every bedtime story, she snuggled close to me and stroked my tufts like other toddlers rubbed their blankets. My hair was her chosen source of comfort and security—and I was probably going to lose it all.

My conversation with Ben went as I expected, and we shared a soulful experience. I told him that he would develop sensitivities in these coming months that would build his character, and help him become a magnificent man someday. We talked about some of the yucky times ahead, but promised each other that we would remain aware of all the blessings in our lives.

When the horrific time came to tell Olivia, I prepared myself by praying. “Please God,” I begged. “Give me the words. Give me the strength. Give me the courage.” I prayed and prayed and prayed.

Then, I called my baby into my bedroom.

Olivia climbed up onto the bed and into my lap. With heavenly support, I began speaking.

I explained that the doctor had found a bump inside of me that needed to go away. The bump was growing fast, so in order to make it go away I would need special medicine, *smart* medicine, that could find fast-growing things and make them disappear. But although this medicine was smart, it wasn't quite smart enough to know the difference between the *bad* things growing fast in my body and the *good* things growing fast.

Then I asked Olivia, very gently, if she could think of anything else on my body that grew fast.

She shook her head. "No."

"What about Mama's nose? Do I ever say, 'My nose is getting so big, I need to get it trimmed.'"

She giggled. "No!"

Then I asked, "What about my toes? Do I ever say, 'I keep tripping over my toes, I need to get them trimmed.'"

Innocently unaware, she chortled, and again answered, "No!"

Then *the* question came, and through God's grace I found the strength to ask it, "What about my hair? Do I ever say, 'My hair is getting too long. I need to get it trimmed.'"

What followed was the single most difficult moment of my life. I witnessed my baby girl's heart—and world—shatter. "No!" she wailed, and this time, there was no glee, only utter devastation.

"No, Mama! No!" she sobbed. "No, No, *No!*"

Olivia cried uncontrollably for over half an hour. I held her, stroked her face, kissed her cheeks. I whispered to her that it was okay; she was allowed to be this sad. She was even allowed to feel scared. As she sobbed, I assured her that I wasn't sad, and I wasn't scared—and surprisingly, this was the truth.

I believe God answered each of my prayers that day. I was given the words, the strength, and the courage to get through this. In the most painful moment of my life, I kept it together, for Olivia.

As it turns out, this moment served an immensely sacred purpose in my life. It awakened me. Holding my brokenhearted daughter, I fully took on the promise I had made to my son. I would focus on the blessings in our lives. I committed, right then and there, to find joy each and every day. This diagnosis would not become a pity party. Sure, I'd allow everyone their moments of sadness. This emotion serves us as much as any other, or God would not have given it to us. But my family and I were not going to stay stuck there. Sadness could visit us from time to time, but *joy* was being welcomed as a permanent house guest!

Within days, a port had been surgically placed inside my body, and we began preparing for my first chemotherapy treatment. Simultaneously, our kitchen floor was scattered with crayons and markers, and a large, bright, handmade banner proclaiming, "Slow and Steady WINS the Race!" adorned our living room wall. When my hair began to fall out a few weeks later, I gently coaxed Olivia to pull some strands from my scalp. I wanted her to know that I was okay with losing my hair, even if she wasn't. She hesitated at first, but in time gave in, and a soft chuckle followed. As a ten-year-old boy, Ben didn't need any persuasion. He was grabbing fistfuls and laughing up a storm.

We continued to celebrate living in joy. Every single card I received was hung on my bedroom walls. Talk about *seeing* your blessings! My husband and I purchased a king-sized bed so that our whole family could share time together on my worst days. Wonderfully, at nineteen and fourteen years old, Ben and Olivia still climb into our king-sized bed most weekend mornings, and we share some of our best conversations about life.

One of my favorite joy practices came in the form of a wall sticker we hung above the front door of our home. It says, "Scatter Sunshine." I challenged my husband and children to go out into the world each day as conscious sunbeams. Nine years later, it still adorns our doorway and has gone from being our healing motto to our family mission.

Perhaps the most glorious lesson I learned is that when we intentionally plant seeds of love and joy, they *do* grow—whether or not we know it.

I lived through chemotherapy and a double mastectomy, and was in the final lap of six weeks of radiation. I had held it together and remained positive for nearly an entire year—but as they say, every camel has a breaking point, and it usually is the little, light piece of straw that brings it down. For me, the straw was a teeny-tiny sticker, with a teeny-tinier black dot on it known as a radiation marker. These stickers were essential in lining up the equipment for my treatments. One day, during my last full week of radiation, a sticker fell off and swished down the drain during my morning shower. After all I had endured, and all I'd carried my family through, losing that little sticker unhinged me. I flopped out of the shower and onto the bathroom floor dripping wet, breastless, burned, beaten, and bawling.

My family came running and surrounded me in comfort. I cried uncontrollably and kept babbling about losing my sticker and failing at keeping it safe. My husband and children offered me what I had given them the whole past year. They met me right where I was, let me feel it, and then helped me walk through it. They began to explain that I still had all of my other stickers. I took pause. They told me I couldn't possibly be the first radiation patient in history to lose a sticker. I smiled at the certain fact. They told me it would be all right. I took a calming breath and decided to believe them.

Then, something miraculous happened. My precious baby girl, still only five years old, climbed into my lap exactly how she had on that day when I told her the most difficult news of her life. Olivia held me tightly and began to stroke my face. She kissed my cheeks while whispering to me that it was okay. She said I was allowed to be this sad, and that I was even allowed to feel scared. My daughter was comforting me with the same words I had used to comfort her nearly a year before. Olivia *heard* everything I said to her that day, and embodied it. My words had taken root and grown.

I looked down into my daughter's deep, beautiful hazel eyes and found a profound truth. Our love will heal us. Always.





# REFLECTION

*What is the most challenging conversation that you've ever had?  
What did you learn from it?*

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*What does the term "joy practice" mean to you? What daily joy practices  
do you observe for yourself? With your family?*

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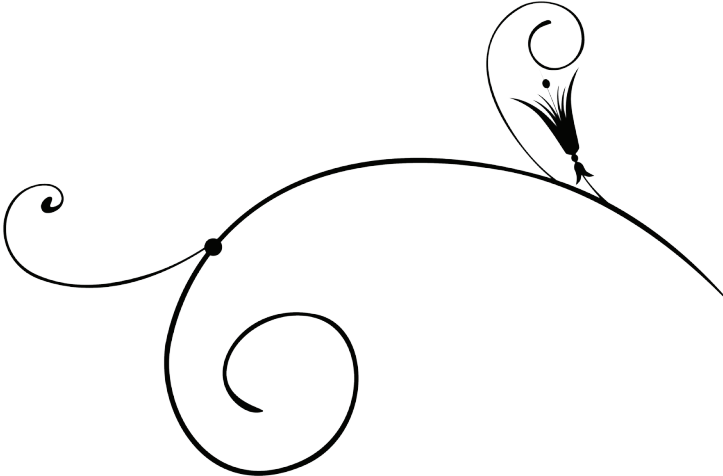
*When have you witnessed your own "seeds" of love and kindness growing?*

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## LET IT GO

*Dr. Véronique  
Desaulniers*

**T**o the outside observer, I looked like I had it all together.

I had three beautiful, healthy children and a very successful chiropractic and wellness practice. I drove luxury cars, and vacationed several times per year.

Yes, “Dr. V” had it all, and then some.

Like many women juggling career and parenthood, I was really good at swallowing my emotions. I learned how to hide my feelings at a young age. My story is probably similar to that of anyone who grew up in a household where alcohol was used to numb the pain but, paradoxically, was the cause of so much pain. I was a sad, wounded little girl—but now, I was a woman, and all of that was a lifetime behind me.

Or so I thought.

All those years of stuffing my emotions deeper and deeper into the little recesses of my mind and heart took their toll. As time went by, they manifested themselves as “dis-ease” in my body.

And, as Dr. Lisa Rankin so aptly concluded, “If you don’t grow in your life, you grow a tumor.”

In the spring of 2004, I was rushing off to work as usual. I stepped into the shower, like I did every morning, and began scrubbing myself down with my scented organic soap. I raised my right arm and began to palpate my right breast with my left hand, as I encouraged so many other women to do in my wellness practice, checking for unusual lumps and bumps. It was a cursory inspection; I didn’t expect to find anything.

I then switched sides, and began to follow the same pattern with my right hand. It was then that I felt the lump.

As soon as I touched it, my heart sank, and a rush of stress hormones surged through my body like lightning. I moved my arm in different directions, continuing to gently press my fingers around the breast. I knew, innately, that this was no benign cyst.

And yet, my mind didn't want to accept the truth. I was "Dr. V!" How could someone like me develop breast cancer? I ate organic before organic was in style. I had home births, and breast-fed all three of my children. I ran and exercised several times per week. I taught people how to be healthy, for goodness' sake—and yet, *I* had cancer?

I'd supported thousands of people on their healing journeys, but I never imagined I'd be facing that same demon. I was devastated.

There was no doubt in my mind as to what I had to do to heal my body. I applied all that I knew about evidence-based natural medicine, and kept digging for more clues. An impatient perfectionist to the core, I had unrealistic expectations about healing my body in just a few months. Things were *not* happening as fast as I wanted, and the frustration kept building. I diligently kept to my routines of tinctures, homeopathic remedies, enzymes, supplements, colonics, juicing, and a dozen other healing techniques, but I was hitting walls left and right, and the tumor was still growing.

I stubbornly refused to stop and ask myself the important questions—like, "Why did this cancer show up in my body? What did I do to help create this situation? Is there an emotional component to this 'dis-ease' in my body?" I was too busy trying to heal the symptom of the tumor to look into my heart for the cause.

Things finally shifted in the middle of my morning coffee enema.

I lit the candle, turned on the meditation music, and prepared my soft, cozy floor mat. As I lay on my mat in the bathroom, trying to relax and to enjoy the moment, I felt a surge of nausea. Dizzy, I sat up, and immediately broke into a hot, drippy sweat.

I kept swallowing because I could not understand why this was happening.

My heart pounded in my chest. Panic rose, and I felt my throat tighten up—but I refused to vomit and kept swallowing.

Suddenly, something inside me said, “Let go!”

I refused. I kept swallowing. More sweat. More panic. More tension in my throat.

I heard it again, “*Let go!*”

Feeling as though I was being pulled to the commode, I sat on the stool with my head in the toilet and let go. Sweat poured from every pore in my body, and I shook uncontrollably.

Finally, I regained my physical composure ... and felt my eyes well up with tears.

I flashed back to a scene in my house when I was a young child. I was hurt and afraid about something, and tried to express my fear to my mother. She snapped at me, and told me to swallow my tears because, “You have nothing to cry about.” Crying was a sign of weakness, and only whiny people did it. There was no place in our household for that kind of behavior.

I realized that that incident, and others like it, may have been the foundation of my challenges with expressing emotion and allowing myself the space to cry.

And here I was, still fighting the tears with everything I had.

The voice came again. “Let go!”

I felt like I was on the edge of a cliff, and someone was telling me to jump. Terror gripped me like a vice, squeezing my chest and lungs.

“LET GO!”

I let go. I threw myself on my mat and sobbed uncontrollably. I felt like I cried a million tears in a millisecond. For a moment, I thought I was dying, because all I could see were flashes of hundreds of events in my life—some happy, some sad, but all stages of my life moving toward the present moment. There was an instant where I actually felt like I was in a tunnel, surrounded by these three-dimensional images of my life.

The voice spoke again. This time, it said, “Stop being so hard on yourself.”

I looked around to see if there was actually someone in the room, because that voice was as clear as day.

Again. “Stop being so *hard* on yourself.”

And just like that, a calmness came over me, like a warm blanket wrapped around my very soul. I lay on my mat, consciously taking deep breaths, trying to assess what had just taken place. Was I dreaming? Was I delusional? Did I make this up? Who did that voice belong to? And yet, as my mind churned, I noticed that my heart—both literal and figurative—felt calm for the first time in decades. I felt physically lighter; I was exhausted, but energized at the same time.

*Stop being so hard on yourself.* Such a simple idea—and yet, so profound.

From that moment forward, I decided, I would explore the “how” of not being so hard on myself. I wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but I knew that if I pressed forward with faith and commitment, the answers would come.

The next day, I headed to the bookstore and spent several hours browsing through the personal development/self-help section. Interestingly, there were many books to choose from, which was kind of an “ah-ha” moment. *Obviously, I am not the only one who has had this struggle*, I thought.

Louise Hay’s book *You Can Heal Your Life* sounded like a perfect fit since I was on a healing journey for my physical body. It was one of many books that would be instrumental in helping me cultivate joy in my life. That little girl inside me found her voice and learned to express her feelings. There was no longer any need to swallow her tears; she could now feel safe and nurtured because the healed, adult me would always take care of her. I even helped her learn to play—and that’s where tennis came in.

Tennis was a sport I’d always wanted to participate in, so I moved to a tennis community and started to enjoy the Zen of tennis. Playing tennis allows me to release all the cares of the day while I move my body in the sunshine and celebrate each successful stroke.

Daily mirror exercises have also been instrumental for me. I have learned to look deep into my own eyes and express my appreciation for

my wonderful body and mind. Every morning, I find quiet moments to fill my mind and heart with encouraging and positive thoughts that I can pull out and reflect on throughout the day.

With my emotional healing journey came, at last, the physical healing I'd been searching for. When I was officially pronounced cancer-free, it was simply a confirmation of what I already knew. It wasn't about getting rid of the lump, but rather about a total transformation of mind, heart, and soul.

It is difficult, now, for me to imagine how I could have lived so many years without that sense of joy in my heart. I have learned to detach from the pressures and demands of being "perfect," and concentrate on being *real*. I can now truly empower women to live their best lives through healing of body, mind, and soul, because I have lived that healing myself.

As I often tell my patients, "You have to address the emotional wounds in order to truly heal, because if you keep doing the things you have always done, you will get the same results!"



# REFLECTION

*Véronique learned at a young age to “swallow” her true feelings. When intense feelings come up for you, what do you do with them?*

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*Véronique was shocked by her diagnosis, because she took good care of her physical body: Where in your daily practices can you add emotional and mental healing techniques to supplement the physical ones?*

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*What activities or practices help you to express both mental and physical energy?*

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## THE RIDE OF MY LIFE

Martha  
Tassinari

*I* was so excited for this weekend that I could hardly contain myself! The car was packed, the bikes secured on the back of our SUV, and my husband and I were driving to Cape Cod to celebrate our fifth wedding anniversary.

We love cycling together. And so, when we arrived at our lovely bed and breakfast, the first thing we did was hop on our road bikes for a leisurely fifty-mile ride.

As we rode, I admired the scenery and thought about how perfect everything was in my life. I am blessed to be married to my soulmate, the love of my life, the man who is perfect for me. (He even loves to cook and clean. How cool is that?) We had just bought our dream home in Sandwich, Massachusetts, and would be moving next month.

*Life, I thought, can't get any better than this!*

Little did I know that our lives were about to change forever.

As we approached the thirty-five mile mark, I was starting to feel quite winded and fatigued, which was highly unusual for me. There was a slight pain in the right side of my chest, along with a pesty cough—but I ignored the discomfort and kept pedaling. I was not about to let a little discomfort get in the way of our anniversary weekend!

As we continued the ride, the symptoms seemed to subside. I made it—all fifty-five miles!—and we headed back to the B&B to get ready for dinner. Over plates of penne at our favorite Italian restaurant, my husband surprised me with Martina McBride tickets. Martina is one of our favorite country singers, and she was playing that night!

The coughing got worse as dinner progressed. Every time I tried to take a bite, I felt like I was going to choke. It was like there was a vice around my throat, squeezing my airway.

My husband, concerned, asked, “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I smiled. “It’s allergies, I think. Maybe another glass of wine will help.”

The concert was amazing. Martina’s powerful voice rocked the stadium as I sat next to my husband, holding his hand. My excitement was bubbling over.

Then, she started to sing her song, “I’m Gonna Love You Through It.”

Even now, years later, the memory of this moment gives me chills. The song is about a woman who gets a phone call from her doctor, telling her that she has cancer.

*Her husband held it in and held her tight  
Cancer don't discriminate, or care if you're thirty-eight ...  
Just take my hand, together we can do it  
I'm gonna love you through it.*

Suddenly, hundreds of women—maybe thousands—were standing up in the audience, waving their arms over their heads, singing their hearts out. They were cancer survivors, and their amazing strength and courage took my breath away. I wanted to hug them all.

Tears were streaming down my face, and I wasn’t really sure why. Was I just feeling overly sensitive and sentimental?

A voice in my head asked, “I wonder what it’s like to be a cancer survivor?”

At that moment, I knew that the cough I’d been fighting on our bike trip wasn’t allergies, or a cold. It was cancer.

I decided, immediately, to let the thought go. I know that what we focus on, whether positive or negative, expands, and I did not want to focus on having cancer! I decided not to share this thought with my husband. After all, it was only a thought, not anything real ...

Exactly one month later, I was diagnosed with lung cancer.

The doctor told me, “You have a malignant tumor in the right middle lobe of your right lung. The tumor is literally blocking your airway, so we should do surgery sooner rather than later.”

“How is this possible?” I asked, floored.

“Sometimes,” he said gently, “There is no ‘why.’”

But I couldn’t live with that answer, because it wasn’t an answer. *There must be some mistake, I thought. I don’t smoke. I’m a cyclist, a yogi, a holistic healer, and a life coach. I only eat meat once a year! This can’t be happening!*

My husband and I left the office with tears in our eyes. We were supposed to move into our dream home in two days—and now, our lives had been turned around completely. That night, I drowned my sorrows in Pinot Grigio, but that did nothing but give me a massive hangover headache.

I wasn’t only sad and scared for myself. My husband had lost his wife to lung cancer over fifteen years before. He had already lived through this once; what a trigger this must be for him! My heart ached for him—and for myself.

One month ago, our lives had been perfect. Now, it was as if all the life force had been sucked out of my body. I was overwhelmed with fears and what-ifs. *What if the cancer spreads? What if I bleed out? What if my lung collapses? What if I’m on oxygen for the rest of my life? What if I can’t bike ever again?*

There was one thing I did know for certain, though: I wasn’t ready to die.

I decided that I needed to prepare for this surgery. I was going to do whatever it took to shift my mindset, raise my energetic vibration, and rise above my situation with strength and courage. This was my lesson: to learn to remain in a state of joy no matter what my circumstances. I created an affirmation: “Victory is my mantra.” I recited it morning, noon, and night.

I remembered those women at the Martina McBride concert, and the joy they embodied. I downloaded the song, and started dancing around and singing it at the top of my lungs. I was going to be a survivor, too! I am woman, hear me roar!

I reached out to my circle of mentors, healers, and my sister (who is my angel). I needed feminine support to raise me up. Soon, I had women all over the world praying for me and sending me distance healings.

As a holistic healer and life coach, I'm aware of how we can hold on to "issues in our tissues" from the past or present. Was there, perhaps, an emotional or energetic wound I was still carrying? What soul lesson did I need to learn?

Searching for the answers, I immersed myself in deep spiritual healing and extreme self-care. I repeated Tony Robbins' quote often: "If you're going to make a change, you're going to have to operate from a new belief that says life happens not *to* me, but *for* me." I meditated at a deep level and accessed my spiritual connection daily, asking for divine guidance, clarity, and protection.

One day, the divine download hit me. I was holding on to anger, grief, and resentment towards myself which had been buried in my heart and right lung since childhood. Unconsciously, I had pushed these emotions down into a tightly sealed container; now, the seal was ready to burst, and all that pain was surfacing to my conscious awareness.

I truly believe that our deepest moments of grief can lead to our greatest moments of growth. As I walked through the darkness and acknowledged those old, painful emotions at a deep soul level, I didn't let myself run, or resist the storm that was raging inside me. Rather, I embraced everything, and gave myself permission to witness these feelings, accept them, and surrender them to God.

Tears started to stream down my face as I heard again the old judgmental thoughts: *I'm not enough. I'm not smart enough. I should be further along in my life.* I realized that I'd learned, as a young woman, to protect myself through perfectionism. I believed that if I did everything "perfectly," I wouldn't be judged. But instead of protecting me, this energy paralyzed me in many areas of my life.

These harsh self-judgments had literally become part of my DNA and cellular structure. They were the "issues in my tissues" stopping

my breath and blocking my heart from opening. They were literally killing me, and it was time for me to let them go.

I also realized that, although I'd been fighting the idea of surgery, I needed to go through with it. This would be a spiritual surgery as well as a physical one; it would remove both the tumor and the emotional pain which had created it. My mentor told me, "Sometimes, surgery is necessary for a total release and healing to occur."

And so, I embraced the resistance, and allowed myself to step into the power of courage.

The surgery wasn't easy. In fact, there were complications that led to a second surgery, and a much longer recovery time. But through it all, I was able to find joy in connecting to the Divine, to gratitude, and to my own unbeatable spirit.

During my recovery, a new truth came to me: this life transition of cancer would be my new mission. I was being called upon to help other women struggling with challenging life transitions, and help them navigate their challenges in a way that allowed them to shift from victimhood to empowerment. And so, the Holistic Life Transition Institute was born.

Fear is the opposite of joy. And while there have been moments of fear in plenty, I know, deep down, that I have the tools I need to weather any storm—even cancer. Today, I'm back on my bike, ready to go the distance with my new purpose and vision.

I beat the odds, just like the ladies at the Martina McBride concert. I still wish I could hug them all; they were an incredible inspiration.

And my husband, Allen ... Well, let's just say he "Loved Me Through It." I couldn't have done it without him.



# REFLECTION

*Have you ever had a profound moment of “knowing?” What did you do when you received this message?*

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*Are there any parts of your body that seem to hold more pain, tension, or “stuckness” than others? Do they have any messages for you?*

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*Martha asked for prayers and healing from her community all over the world. When you are in need of healing and comfort, to whom do you reach out?*

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# THE DAILY CHOICE OF JOY

*Kelley Grimes,*  
*MSW*

“*H*ow did I get here?” I asked myself as I stood on the curb, thinking about how easy it would be to step in front of the next passing car. The weight of my despair and hopelessness was overwhelming, and in that moment, I couldn’t imagine the possibility that life could be any different.

Stress and difficulty were nothing new to me. My teenage daughter Fiona had been living with epilepsy since she was two years old. Our introduction to this unpredictable disorder began dramatically, with her first seizure—a fifty-five minute ordeal which nearly resulted in her death.

I will never forget the terror I experienced seeing her tiny, naked body seizing on the gurney. There was blood all around, a result of the unsuccessful attempts of hospital staff to place an IV into her shuddering arms and legs. The ER doctors and nurses were visibly stressed, and had called in the Children’s Hospital ICU transport team. Blessedly, they were able to place the IV in Fiona’s ankle before putting her in the ambulance. After trying multiple medications, they were finally able to stop the seizure. What followed were three awful days at Children’s Hospital, as we watched our firstborn being poked, prodded, and tested with spinal taps, CT scans, and EEGs while she cried and whimpered and begged for the boot which housed her IV to be taken off.

We survived that harrowing experience and a hundred more like it during Fiona’s childhood. It never got easier. Each time Fiona had a seizure, my fear and grief would resurface—sometimes crashing over me like a powerful wave, and other times seeping in like a rising flood.

My sense of purpose in supporting my daughter buoyed me during these times of intense emotion, and allowed me to carry on. I even began leading a monthly support group for the Epilepsy Foundation, so I could support other families who were coping with this difficult disorder.

Over time, we were faced with the secondary challenges of epilepsy, including medication side effects, impacts on learning, injuries from seizures, anxiety, depression, memory challenges, missed school ... and migraines.

Fiona was eight years old when she started suffering from migraines after her seizures. The excruciating pain could last up to five days, and was accompanied by light and sound sensitivity and terrible nausea. No medication would relieve the symptoms, although every option was tried. And so I would sit with her, helpless, and attempt to nurture her through the pain.

A new level of grief and despair arrived with every migraine. My beloved daughter was struggling in pain, begging me to make it stop—and there was nothing I could do.

Even with my highly-developed coping skills, I still lived in constant fear and vigilance. When would the next seizure come? How bad would it be? I started worrying about Fiona's future, and her ability to finish school and live on her own. I never shared those fears with her, of course—I always kept up my hopeful outlook around her—but inside, I was in crisis. Every time the phone rang, my heart jumped. Every morning, I woke up wondering if I had anything more to give.

Then, one day, Fiona had a seizure. That seizure triggered a migraine—but this one was different. It didn't stop after five days. On day nine, I took her to the emergency room, where they were able to stop the pain with morphine—but only for half a day. One of the medications they gave her prior to the morphine actually triggered another seizure.

Over the next year, my teenaged daughter and I endured more doctors, appointments, medication trials, hospitals (including the Mayo Clinic), holistic healthcare practitioners, treatments, supplements, food



restrictions, and other healing approaches than I can count. And at the end of it, Fiona was still in chronic pain, depressed, and hopeless.

And this is what led me, at last, to contemplate stepping in front of a car. I just couldn't live like this anymore. I was totally devoid of all joy, energy, and hope that there might be a different life for my daughter, my family, and me.

In that moment, I finally recognized how profoundly depressed I had become. Something had to change. I couldn't be the mother, counselor, or human being I aspired to be just by surviving the daily battle. I had become an expert at coping—but coping, and surviving, weren't *living*.

So what was the antidote to this terrible despair?

Joy, of course.

It hit me with great clarity: in order to move beyond simply surviving, I needed to choose joy. The curb I was standing on was both an actual and a symbolic representation of this choice. Where I stepped next was up to me.

Walking home with this new insight, I experienced a great freedom, as if some of the weight had been lifted off my heart. I felt a powerful shift in my thinking, and knew a transformative process had begun. That I could *choose* joy had never occurred to me before—but now that I saw this option, I could not ignore it.

This new awareness energized me. I started exploring the multiple ways I could cultivate joy in my life. I began by deepening my practice of mindfulness and meditation—which at first was very challenging due to the intensity of the emotions I'd suppressed for so long. Each time I sat in meditation, my sadness would engulf me. Tears would stream down my face. The enormity of my grief was terrifying. I thought that if I allowed it all in, I would be unable to feel anything else ever again.

But I continued to practice, and one day, an amazing thing happened: I became aware of feeling more than just grief and sadness. There was finally room in me for ... more.

With each new experience of presence, my self-awareness and self-compassion began to grow. I began to trust my ability to simply *be* with any emotions that surfaced. My meditation cushion became a bridge between my old existence of hopelessness and a new life where joy might be cultivated.

I also recognized that the intensity of my feelings wasn't constant; it ebbed and flowed. And in the spaces where there was less sadness, I could choose joy. I engaged in daily nurturing practices like walking in nature, practicing yoga, spending time with my family, and reading uplifting books and articles. As I began to look at my life through the lens of possibility, I weeded a lot of things out, too. I began to say yes only to activities that brought me joy and recharged me. I built with Habitat for Humanity. I joined a women's singing group. I wrote and traveled.

With each instance of choosing joy, I felt more empowered. My ongoing feelings of overwhelm, grief, and depression began to recede. The profound sense of helplessness I had experienced for years was transmuted into empowerment as I started seeing the remarkable difference my efforts were making in my own life, and for the people around me—especially Fiona.

Joy allowed me to see more possibilities for both of us. I was able to develop a “joy reserve,” so I was more resilient and did not feel as devastated when a treatment was not successful.

And as I changed, so did Fiona. Even when she was in pain, my joyfulness practices increased my ability to be present, compassionate, kind, and creative. I was able to find humor in our challenges and make empowered decisions for us. My attitude, in turn, impacted Fiona's; she began to regain her sense of humor, her confidence, and her belief that things could be different.

We also became deeply grounded in the understanding that

Fiona was on a healing journey—a complete transformation of our lives of constant health crisis, hopelessness, and despair. With this new perspective, the quality of our lives improved dramatically. And slowly but surely, things began to change. Four years later, Fiona is

now living mostly pain-free. Through this process, she has learned so much about herself, her health, and what a difference embracing joy can make.

Joy has become the foundation of my self-nurturing practice. Every time I am faced with a challenge, I see myself back on that curb, and I'm so grateful I chose joy. The remarkable gift of that moment of choice continues to save my life and inspire my life's work.

In the words of Henri J.M. Nouwen, "Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy, and keep choosing it every day."



# REFLECTION

*Have you or a loved one dealt with chronic illness? How did it affect you? What did you learn from the healing journey?*

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*Where in your life do you feel helpless? What do you think would happen if you changed your perspective to one of empowerment instead?*

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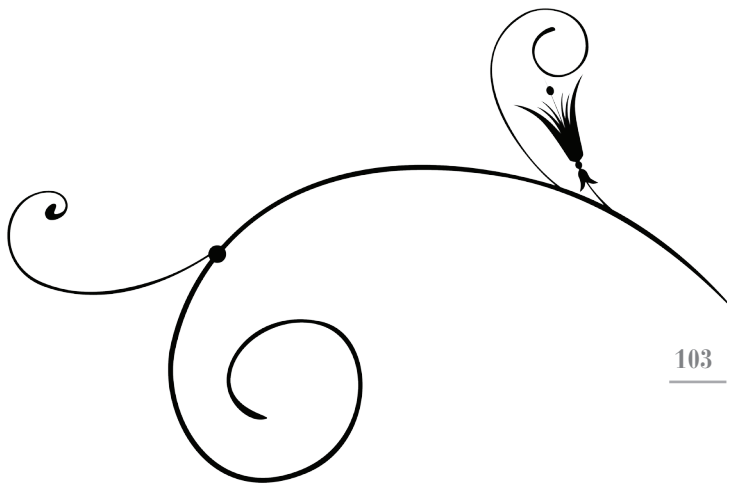
*How can you choose joy today, right now?*

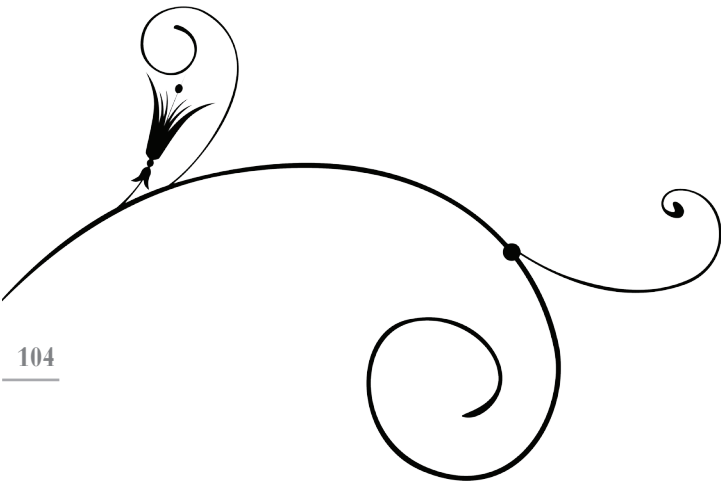
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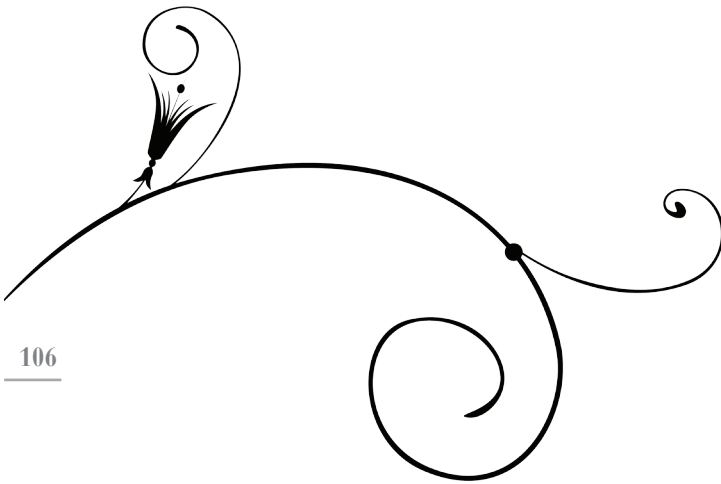


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*Chapter  
Four*

*Joy* IS...

**MOTHERHOOD**





## A CHILDLIKE SPIRIT

*Debra L.  
Reble, PhD*

*I* waited anxiously for the bell to ring, feeling the knot in my stomach intensify. Queasy, I laid my head down on the beat-up wooden desk, and let it hold me like an old friend.

While the wall clock ticked the seconds away, the other children in my third-grade class squirmed in their seats in anticipation of recess—but I dreaded that awful, unstructured time when I was forced to wander the playground lost and alone. While everyone else played jump rope and four-square, or huddled in giggling groups, I worried about what to make for dinner, whether to give my brothers a bath that night, and how to stop my mom from getting high. I had neither the time nor the energy for play. Constantly locked in survival mode, I took myself and life very seriously.

As I lay across my desk with my head cradled in my arms, shame and disappointment filled me. I fought back tears, putting myself in the dissociated state of suspended animation that had become my saving grace. I could still hear the wall clock keeping time, and the other kids all around me—but at the same time, I was outside myself, and elsewhere, watching myself in this new life as if I was a stranger.

When I was seven, my parents got divorced. Now, I was at a new school, and living with my mother and two younger brothers in a run-down tenement far from our former home. My mother's drug addiction and self-destructive behavior was spiraling out of control, and my brothers' survival depended on me. The little girl was forced to step aside, put away her dolls and play ponies, and become the adult in the household. There were no more birthday parties, trips to the

beach, or music lessons. My beloved upright piano had to be pawned for food money.

On the weekends, we went to stay with our father. Every Sunday night, I begged him not to send us back to the apartment—and yet, responsibility weighed on me. My mother needed me. I was the one who got her out of bed in the morning, made her breakfast so she wouldn't shake or pass out, and helped get the questionable men she brought home out the door.

And so, every Sunday, we went back. But despite my best efforts, I couldn't save my mom.

I came home from school one day to find my four-year-old brother, Chuck, crying on the concrete steps outside our building. He was freezing, and his pants were soaked where he'd wet himself. Our door was locked and bolted from the inside. I had no choice but to run to our neighbors' apartment and call 9-1-1.

My father arrived on the scene not long after the paramedics. With my nose pressed against the glass of his car window, I watched as my mother was wheeled to the ambulance on a stretcher and driven away. She'd tried to commit suicide, and they were taking her to a psychiatric hospital.

Shortly after that, my mother escaped the institution with a fellow patient while on a field trip, abandoning us for good. I never saw or heard from her again.

We went to live with our father, and soon found ourselves with a new stepmother and four stepsiblings. For a while, I had hope that life would return to normal, but it didn't. My stepmother was a paranoid schizophrenic, and unable to care for us—and so I remained the primary nurturer and caretaker for my brothers, feeding them, bathing them, and tucking them in at night. The freedom and carefree joy of my early childhood never returned.

I spent the next twenty years pretending my mother never existed. I suppressed any memories of her, and any feelings that reminded me of her. I buried my anger, hurt, and sadness deep inside, preferring the limbo state of dissociation to the pain my true feelings caused.

And then, one spring day in 1983, everything changed.

I carefully placed the plastic stick on the sink, set the timer, and waited. Nervous thoughts ricocheted through my mind. Had I followed the directions exactly? Had I set the timer correctly? Did I really want to know the result?

Clutching my abdomen, I knelt beside the sink and prayed for a miracle. “Please God, I’m not ready to be pregnant. I don’t know how to be a good mother. I need more time!”

Yet, in my heart, I knew it was too late for prayers.

The timer went off, startling me. I took a deep breath to quell the panic mounting within, and picked up the plastic stick that would determine my future. The result window showed two blue lines.

“Why now?” I cried. “Why was this happening to me?”

Dizzy, I clutched the edge of the sink. The stick fell to the floor—and I followed, crumpling into a heap on the cold tile. The mere thought of bringing a child into this world unleashed a wave of unresolved grief that I couldn’t suppress. I was terrified: terrified that I might repeat my mother’s legacy, abandon my unborn child, or lose myself. The feelings of loss and desolation were so deep, and so overwhelming, that I thought I would rather die on that floor than face motherhood.

I know now that, up to that point, I had been avoiding my life. I was going through the motions, doing what I thought everyone needed me to do, watching the seconds tick by on the wall clock while I waited, outside myself, for something to happen. But in that moment, faced with the awesome responsibility of becoming a mother, I emerged all at once as if from a coma.

If I was going to bring a life into the world, I had to resolve the pain that had prevented me from living.

My pregnancy resuscitated me like a pair of electrical paddles. It brought me back to life—but it wasn’t easy. In fact, it broke open every aspect of me that wasn’t whole. At the time, I was in graduate school studying to be a psychologist, and I found it almost impossible to admit that I was struggling with depression, anxiety, and even thoughts of suicide. I felt hollow, like my spirit had deserted my body. I wanted to run away and pretend I wasn’t pregnant; yet, at the same time, I didn’t want to abandon my child like I had been abandoned.

Finally, I mustered the courage to call a therapist. Making that appointment was the first step in a series of conscious choices on my path to healing and self-love. Revealing my pain in a safe space of acceptance allowed me to begin to heal my unresolved past and open to the possibility that I could become a good mother.

Over the next year, I slowly emerged from a cocoon of experiential death—and when I did, I realized that my childlike spirit had never really disappeared. Being a new mother opened my heart in ways I could never have imagined. I immersed myself in my son’s presence, and the more I played with him, the more I experienced my spirit at play.

My daughter, born seven years later, did even more to unlock the joy that lived in my heart, because she infused her daily life with it. A bundle of pure energy, she fluttered from one moment to the next with a passion that bubbled up and overflowed into a sea of possibilities.

“Come on, Mommy,” she’d say. “Let’s run in joy!”

My children reminded me that I, too, knew joy as a child: splashing in puddles after a warm rain, or building fairy altars in the backyard. They reintroduced me to the wonders of stargazing, the timelessness of summer days, and the glee of chasing butterflies. Most of all, they showed me how to pay attention to the ordinary things which make life extraordinary.

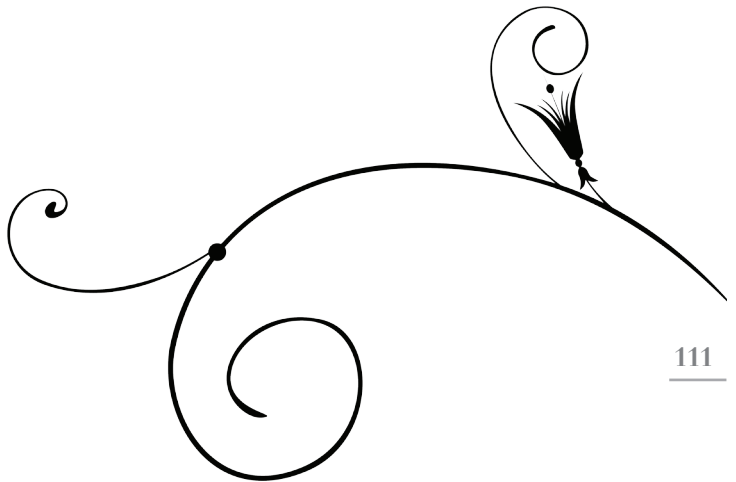
Through my children and my own intense healing process, I have learned that my soul journey is unique. I am not my mother, and I did not make her choices. Whereas I spent my younger years in a rictus of worry, fear, and control, now I cultivate a playful philosophy of “What’s next?” and “Let’s see.” Life is a mysterious adventure, and I want to participate in it fully and fearlessly.

Today, I listen to and follow my heart even when it’s seen as irresponsible or immature. I dance spontaneously in the grocery store, let myself get drenched in the rain, and sing aloud while wearing headphones. Moreover, I invite others to join me while I walk barefoot on the grass or float on my back in the pool—because the best way to create a treasured moment is to share it with another heart.

Years ago, I closed my heart to block the pain of my mother’s

abandonment and my father's unhealthy relationships with emotionally unstable women. But my children and my own healing journey taught me how to open my heart and trust again.

Now, I'm no longer looking through a window at my life; I'm right there in it, connecting to the infinite energy of the Divine, and living as an ambassador of love and joy.





# REFLECTION

*Where in your life have you taken on responsibilities that were not ideal for your life, age, or situation? How did the experience change you? What did you learn from it?*

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*Debra's way of dealing with her childhood experiences was to close herself off from feeling. What in your life (past or present) are you avoiding? What would happen if you embraced it instead?*

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*What would it mean to you to become an "ambassador of joy?"*

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# A MOMMY IS BORN

*Kim  
Lachapelle*

**T**oday is Mother's Day, and I am feeling very anxious.

Is this the last Mother's Day I will physically spend with my son—the child I was so frightened to have? The child who brings so much joy and unconditional love to my life; the child I cannot fathom living without?

I have become the mommy I thought I could never be. And in a few short months, my son is leaving home to join the Navy.

From the ages of five through fifteen, my life was full of abuse: physical, sexual, mental, and spiritual. It was like a black cloud followed me everywhere I went. I remember thinking, "Am I so broken, so bad, that I deserve all of this? Or is everyone's life like mine, and they're just hiding it too?"

In high school, I found a way to deal with my pain—or so I thought. It started as a way of fitting in, but I soon discovered that I had no cares in the world when I was loaded. Soon, I would do anything to escape myself and forget who I really was.

At the same time, I learned to play any part necessary to feel significant and wanted. Full of self-hatred, I grew malicious and spiteful—but I never let it show, because I thought if I slacked off on the people-pleasing, I would be really, truly alone. It was a horrific existence, and it lasted all the way up until I was twenty-four—when, at last, I hit my lowest, most shameful point.

My grandmother was in the hospital, struggling through her final battle with cancer. On her final day of life, I showed up at her bedside. I hadn't slept or eaten in at least three days; I wasn't even able to form a sentence. But she still looked into my eyes with nothing but love.

I sensed my grandmother with me all the time after that. No matter how badly I messed up, she had always told me to walk with my head held high. To stand tall. To be proud of who I was. Now, from wherever she'd gone after her body died, she was still telling me these things. I could sense her watching over me. I had no feelings of remorse about my life—no feelings about anything, really—but through the fog, I could still feel her presence. And somewhere in the darkness of my soul, part of me sensed her, and listened.

Three years later, I finally cleaned up. As my body healed, my mind started to clear and open. The pain of my past also intensified without the drugs to mask it—but I was determined to keep moving forward, and deal with each feeling as it arose. Soon, the pain began to fall away.

I got married. I started building a life that didn't revolve around getting high. But even after so many other fears had been put to rest, there was one thing that still scared me to death: children.

I couldn't play with them. I couldn't hold them, let alone cuddle or kiss them. I definitely couldn't look into their eyes and share a smile. My innocence had been taken from me at such a young age; how could I be trusted around such purity?

Then, I got pregnant.

Panic set in. "I am too broken to be a mommy!" I told myself. I didn't know anything about being a parent. How could I bring a child into a world like this one? How could I protect my baby from the predators I knew all too well were out there? Was I worthy of experiencing a child's innocence?

Did I have enough love to give, when I'd hated everyone—especially myself—for so long?

I shut my husband out and sat alone, crying and rubbing my belly, for hours. In my darkest moments, I found myself talking to my grandmother, praying to her like I was praying to God. The feeling of her presence was the only thing that calmed me.

Close to my due date, I woke up feeling that something was wrong. I went to the doctor and, after running some tests, she told me, "You have no fluids. You need to go to the hospital right now."



Petrified, I sobbed in my car before driving around the corner to the hospital. Once I was admitted, everything happened so fast.

In less than four hours, we were born.

Yes, *we*.

Birthing my son was my birthing, too. I felt truly alive for the first time in my life. I latched on to him with an open spirit, an exposed heart, and an overwhelming sense of gratitude. The moment he emerged into the world, it felt like all of my self-doubt was gone. All of my self-hatred vanished. I had no feeling of lack. All darkness had passed. I had found myself through him.

When my best friend Jennifer walked in to the delivery room, I was gleaming at my son, exhausted but exhilarated, holding him against my chest.

“Oh, my God,” she said. “A mommy has been born!”

From that point forward, everything changed. Life was no longer about me. My worries and fears were no longer the same. Everything I thought, everything I felt, and everything I did was about loving, guiding, and protecting my son. I wanted him to feel my joy shining through my heart, mind, and spirit, so he could experience and cultivate it in turn. This desire to lead by example gave me great strength to move forward, even when things got rough.

Since our birth, my goal each day has been to ensure that Michael feels unconditionally loved and supported. I know that I have fallen short in many ways; we all do, as parents. There are no perfect moms or dads. There’s no rule book that works for everyone. What there are, though, are opportunities: to share hope and joy, and to experience unconditional love.

One of the hardest things for me, as a parent, has been to deal with the fear that Michael might somehow be exposed to the same kinds of abuse I was. I never wanted him to know a touch that wasn’t loving, or hear words from me that cut him down. I hugged him constantly, and caressed his sweet little arms while he slept. I looked deep into his eyes, and let him look into mine. We still end every day, and every conversation, with “I love you.”

On the flip side, I was constantly scrutinizing his friends, his friends' parents, his teachers, and his camp counsellors for any sign that they might become abusers. I knew I couldn't keep him locked up in the house, but sending him to summer day camp was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I had to do a lot of letting go in order to let him live.

Learning to love my son has taught me, also, how to love and honor myself. I've let go of many unhealthy relationships, including my marriage to Michael's father. I've learned that I am, and have always been, responsible for discovering my own happiness. Most of all, I know that I, like my son, deserve to experience the purest form of love.

I have learned to be proud of who I am. I've learned to stand tall. No matter what is in the past, no matter what is in the present, and no matter what the future holds, I am worthy of every ounce of greatness that comes my way.

And soon, the greatest of those greatnesses—my son, Michael—is leaving to go his own way.

It's time to honor his personal journey. My responsibilities as a mother are different now; I need to let go, and give him the opportunity to walk his own path, find his own way, and cultivate his own joy.

I am the mommy I never thought I could be.



# REFLECTION

*Kim's childhood experiences led her to believe that she was unworthy of love. Where in your life are you letting your past experience define your present?*

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*Becoming a mother was the catalyst for Kim's shift. What defining moments can you think of in your own life? What did you learn from them? Are you still following those lessons?*

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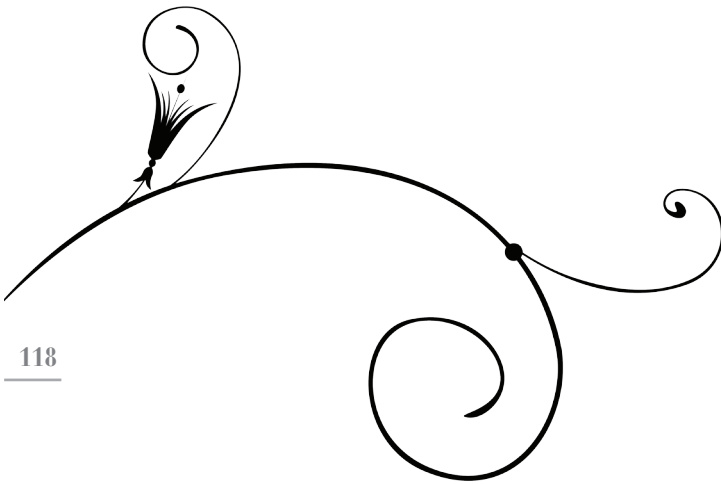
*Often, to nourish ourselves and others, we need to let go of our own fears. What can you let go of today to more fully love and connect to the people you value?*

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# GAIA, MY DAUGHTER

Sara Turner

*M*y bare feet stand on the land of my dream cottage just outside Bordeaux. The Earth tells me, “*You are home,*” and I feel Her truth deep in my core.

I’m surrounded by red and orange poppies, and the song of blackbirds. Vines reach their tendrils towards me. I bask in the balminess of summer in the South of France, and the bliss of being outnumbered by the nature kingdom. I have been here just a few days, and still I’m allowing the reality of what my partner and I have achieved, and all that is before us on this next stretch of life, to sink in.

I have found Nature, and She has found me. It’s all I have ever really wanted.

Thirty years ago, I was blessed to find my forever man—my partner to this day. Yet, my life wasn’t joyful. I was in a job that drained me, and in a life that lacked color. I had not yet awoken to the magic inside of me.

One morning, when I was in my mid-thirties, I awoke with an inner knowing of my next step.

I said to my partner, “Let’s have a baby!”

He was shocked. “Why would you want to do that?”

I didn’t know the answer. I just knew there was a piece of me missing, and I was ready to find it. Having our baby, I thought, would allow me to open up the place of love and nurturing within myself that felt like it was missing.

And so began ten years of pressure, heartache, and loss.

I read every book I could find on natural conception. I consulted natural health practitioners, many of whom told me I was too old to conceive.

“Why would you want to have a baby at your age?” I was asked.

How could they not see how it broke my heart to hear those words? How cruel of them, to shatter my dream without understanding my desperate need to feel loved and completed.

My own thoughts hurt as well. Why was conception easy for so many, and yet so very, very hard for me? Shouldn't my body know how to do this, easily and naturally? There were days that becoming a mother felt nigh impossible.

And yet, despite the heartbreak of those years, something compelled me to keep trying. If only I could find the key to unlock the treasures of my womb, and allow in the seed of the man I love! I felt something larger than myself pulling me forward, keeping me focused on bringing our baby through.

During my quest to become a mother, I learned so much about myself. I searched my past, my ancestral line. I took herbs. I got acupuncture and reflexology. I engaged in psychotherapy. I also began a training in Flower and Vibrational Medicine that was to literally change my life.

In this space of nurtured study, a deep connection to nature awoke in me. I began to make friends with the flowers and trees who were my teachers and allies. I awoke to the memory that they had *always* been my friends.

And then, one day, when I was least expecting it, the magic occurred.

I remember dancing around the toilet, waving the positive pregnancy test stick in the air, with my cat Polly looking on. I was forty-three, and pregnant naturally! I had finally allowed my womb to open, and welcomed in the seeds of the man I adored.

I was also terrified, and deeply conflicted about my choice. I'd wanted this for so long ... but was it really the right thing for me? For *us*? My freedom was precious to me; how would I cope with

putting another person before myself? Was I really too old? Would my body be able to deal with the physical demands of pregnancy and motherhood? And what about my beloved? After all, this was my dream, rather than his. Was it fair to expect him to change his whole life for me and our child?

Looking back, I think maybe I knew, deep inside, what was to come.

Twelve weeks into the pregnancy, our baby left us. Much of the process happened at home. Wracked with the most pain I have ever felt, a pain that even strong painkillers couldn't touch, the only way I could get through was to connect with deep breaths and transcend the physical reality. In this dream time of breath over agony, I entered a space of healing.

In this between-place, hovering between the physical pain and the spiritual solace that I found via my breath, I was told that I had been given a key to my future. I could now walk forward, and do what I had come here to do. There was no going back.

I knew, deep in my core, that these words were true, and that the light of healing had passed through me. I heard a whisper: "*Your daughter's name is Gaia.*"

Yes, Gaia had passed through me.

It was a beautiful, sacred moment; a wondrous gift from the soul of our departing daughter. Now, in this space, I was complete. My body would never be the same now that her cells had merged with mine.

My body recovered quickly with the help of my loving partner, family, friends, and my Chinese doctor. My heart took much longer. I cried myself to sleep on many nights with my teddy bear in my arms. No one knew just how much I hurt inside. Even today, I still feel the loss of what might have been.

For a while after my miscarriage, I still believed that if I'd done it once, I could do it again. A part of me couldn't bear to be a "failure" as a woman and concede the fight. How, I wondered, could I be esteemed in the world if the most important part of my female self did not

work? And so, the push to become a mother continued. The pressure continued. And my life continued ... but with little joy.

I had invested so much of myself into becoming a mother—but it was time to let it go. Looking back, I see that the key to my healing was finding a bridge between my old life of hard work and self-applied pressure to a new life of surrender and flow. My daughter had given me the key to access this new way of being; Gaia was the bridge. With her walking beside me, I was finally able to let go of my overriding desire to bring physical life through my body, and start looking at the future in a new light.

When I first heard Gaia's name whispered to me, I did not know that Gaia is the name of the World Goddess, the personification of the Earth. I knew her only as my daughter in spirit. As I at last let go of my old ways of being and started to follow the dream with which my daughter had gifted me, I finally understood: Gaia was my daughter's name, but Gaia—Earth herself—is my child.

The more I focused on offering back the gifts of nature, the more I could accept that, in this lifetime, I had no need to be a mother. In fact, my soul path leads elsewhere. My children in this life are the flowers and trees that grace my world, and the healing essences that flow through me into the world.

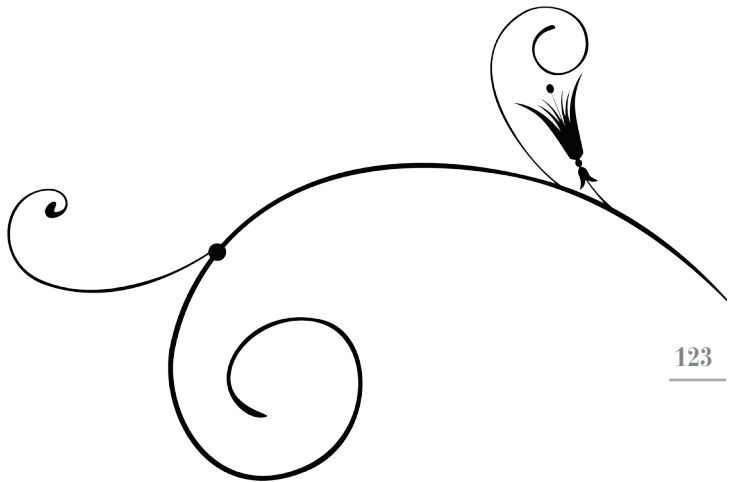
With the pressure toward motherhood finally lifted, I had new energy and focus to bring forth life in other ways for myself, my partner, and my animal family. I now give back to others the gifts of soul retrieval through Nature. Using my teacher self, a mentor, and my own courage, I began building a healing business that merged my expertise in the field of Flower and Vibrational Medicine with human/Nature soul connection.

This leap onto my soul path also brought forth a much-needed stream of income which now allows us a life of freedom beyond what we'd ever dreamed possible. It was hard work—and yet, it was easy. Once I committed fully to my path and aligned with the elements (and elementals) that wanted to join my team, it was as if all resistance simply fell away. Everything—health, joy, clients, income, and the perfect property in France—lined up almost effortlessly.



And so it is that I find myself here, in the South of France, standing barefoot on my own patch of Earth in the summer sun, having reached the culmination of a long-held dream. I have a light behind my eyes, and life under my skin. Each day, I bring forth new life through healing, and new joy through simply *being*.

I am a child of the Earth, and the Earth is my daughter.





# REFLECTION

*Are any of your current life dreams causing you stress, or robbing you of joy? What would it feel like to let them go and open to a new path?*

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*Sometimes, our biggest realizations come to us in the moments of greatest constriction. What have your challenges or losses taught you?*

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*Sara came to understand that her biggest dream—opening that place of love and nurturing within herself—could be attained in other ways beside physical motherhood. What goals could you expand to allow different expressions of the same result?*

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## THE CIRCLE OF LOVE

*Casey Kerr*

*I*t was my birthday weekend. Not just any birthday—my forty-sixth. This was the big one.

My mother was forty-six when she died. I'd spent the last twenty-seven years wondering what turning forty-six would feel like—but on this day, I was filled with a sense of joy so great I could barely contain myself. This was going to be the best year of my life so far.

"We're on an adventure!" I cried, bursting with joy, as my husband Johnny and I drove down to Cape Cod for my birthday weekend.

Johnny and I are soul mates, married since September 2007. As our dating relationship flourished into marriage, my relationship with myself flowered into something I'd never imagined. I knew I had to help other women discover this inner power for themselves—and soon, I was birthing a business that filled me with a passion I can barely describe.

My company was my baby—and so, although Johnny and I talked about kids, I couldn't even think about having an actual baby right away. A year after our marriage, I lifted the "baby ban." I still didn't feel ready—but hey, other women juggled businesses and babies, so why not me?

Turns out, at forty, my eggs were too old. But an even bigger obstacle was my fear: that I had no idea how to take care of a baby; that I couldn't be a great mother *and* have a successful business; that I'd have to choose between the two things I wanted most, and that I'd make the wrong choice.

My baby and my business were in constant competition. Every time my energy was in my business, I felt like I was pushing my baby

further away. When I took time off for IVF, I felt like I was letting my business down. The hormones, emotions, and conflicting loyalties put me under a ton of stress. Every month I held my breath, hoping I was pregnant. Every month, I was disappointed.

It was Thanksgiving, and we had just completed what was to be our last IVF cycle. I was forty-three-and-a-half, and all the early signs of the baby implanting herself into my womb were there. I had pictures of the embryos in a locket, and was sure at least one of them was beginning to nest within me. But within a day or two, my hopes died for the last time.

The doctor told us, “You’ve reached the end of the IVF road. Your options now are adoption or donor eggs.”

Looking at potential donors felt like I was picking a new wife for Johnny. The adoption agencies didn’t feel right to me, either. We had reached a dead end.

A few nights later, I was standing in our spare bedroom looking out the window into the darkness when I sensed a little girl in a bed behind me, settling in for her first night with us ... and I *knew* she was my daughter. It was the first moment since we’d started the IVF process that I felt fully at peace.

My path was clear: we would become parents to a child who was already here, and who needed us. Within days, we were on the path to becoming pre-adoptive foster parents through the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

We completed our training, and waited. And waited.

In a way, this waiting was easier for me than the fertility treatments. I was no longer angry with my body, and I could relax and focus on my other “baby,” my business, knowing that the timing would work itself out.

One day, in April, I got a call. “Hi, Casey, this is Deirdre.”

My heart pounded. Was this the call we’d been waiting for?

“I’m not calling about a baby.”

“... Oh.”

“I’m calling to invite you to a support group for waiting families.”

I nearly hung up, but something told me not to—and we talked for nearly two hours!

Deirdre awakened something within me that I didn't realize was asleep. Despite everything I knew about the Law of Attraction, I had let my fears and "common sense" dictate my future. I wanted a baby, not an infant. But all the information said, "You'll never get a baby through DCF unless you're willing to suffer the risk that her birth parents will come back for another chance." I didn't think I was strong enough to recover from that, so I stayed in limbo, asking for what I thought was possible even though it wasn't exactly what I wanted.

Once I shifted that kind of thinking, things really started to happen. In June, DCF called. Could we take a baby boy temporarily ... that day? It was one of those moments where you know that what you say next will change your life. Although I had nothing but an unassembled crib in the attic, I said, "Yes!" For two hours, I raced around excited and scared—and then I got another call. False alarm.

It didn't matter: the signal was received. Johnny and I spent that weekend creating a room for our baby, knowing she'd be coming to us very soon.

Three weeks later, on Cape Cod for my birthday weekend, we were surrounded by mothers and sons. There were no little girls anywhere! By the pool, I was mesmerized by a beautiful fifteen-month-old boy, and for the first time in years, the sight of someone else's baby made me feel happy.

In that moment, I knew that we were getting a son—and he was already on his way to us.

On July 14 (my actual birthday), we headed home to find a cryptic message from our social worker—but it was already 5:15 p.m., and after two unanswered calls I resigned myself to wait until morning to hear her news.

And what great news! "You two are the first choice for a baby boy!" she told me.

There are no words to describe the rush of emotion that flooded through me: excitement, shock, joy, disbelief, relief ... and not a little fear. Was I getting ahead of myself?

“What exactly does this mean?” I asked shakily.

“It means that, unless you say no, you’re the new parents of a sixteen-month-old baby boy!”

Of course, we didn’t say no.

I’ll never forget the moment I saw Jojo’s face for the first time. He was *my* baby. He looked like he could have come from our genes. Tears of joy streamed down my face as Johnny and I played with him, hugged him, kissed him . . . and fell hopelessly in love.

On the ride home, we were both exhausted. Totally wiped out. I don’t know if it was the surrealness of the whole thing, or playing for hours with a tireless toddler, but we were beat!

Turns out, we didn’t know what tired really meant.

Two weeks later, Jojo came home with us for good. We spent the weekend getting settled in, but come Monday, I was alone with him . . . and my fears. Could I handle this? Could I really work and take care of him? I don’t know how many times I called Johnny crying in those first few weeks, but it was a lot.

I’d spent so many years daydreaming about those sweet “mommy and me” moments, of hugs and kisses and snuggles at bedtime. None of those dreams ever featured my baby hitting me, or beating up the dog. Wolfie, our poor French Bulldog, went from being king of the castle to cowering under the table in terror. I felt guilty for all the trauma he was suffering, and disgusted at my own inability to control the situation. When Jojo threw food, toys, and tantrums, refused to eat, or wouldn’t lie still when I changed him, I was reduced to tears. I felt like I was being terrorized by this little being, and I was wholly unprepared for it. I had no idea what to do with the shame and shock.

Well-meaning people kept telling us, “There’s no manual that comes with kids.” Okay, but most people have nine months to prepare for the arrival of their little bundle, and another year before that bundle is totally mobile. We had *two weeks*.

I love asking people, “For how long were you parents before your little darling locked himself in a room?” For me, it was three weeks. Jojo ran into our seventy-plus-year-old neighbor’s house and locked

himself in a room full of dollies, curios, and very breakable crystal. We had to break in through the window and pull him out.

We had everything we'd been wishing for—and all I felt was overwhelm. Not every minute, of course, but far more than I'd wanted or expected. I missed my work, and our freedom. I missed sleeping in on weekends. I missed those spontaneous, unplanned moments with my husband. And I felt so guilty for feeling that way.

The same fears that had once kept me from getting pregnant were still there. Only this time, I *had* the baby, so I had to figure them out.

As the days turned into weeks, and the weeks crept into months, I realized I *was* figuring it out, and it was getting easier. I was getting better at being the mother I knew I could be, and learning to trust my instincts. More, my connection with Jojo was growing. I loved all the little moments just between us, and knowing all the things about him that only a mother can know. Every day as he grows and evolves, I wonder if I can handle the next phase—and then, I take a deep breath, and remember that *I am doing it*. All I need to do is look into his eyes, and get in the moment with him. Love will take care of the rest.

Before Jojo came, I'd nearly given up hope that I could experience the kind of unconditional love that exists between mother and child. When my mother died, I didn't know how I'd go on—but now, I have what I've been missing since she left us, the love I've always known was waiting for me.

This is the joy of life: the circle of love.

And now my heart is open again. This time, I'm waiting for the precious daughter I saw that day in the bedroom. I know she's on her way to me—and when she arrives, our family will open our arms and our circle of love to receive her.



# REFLECTION

*Where in your life are you letting fear place conditions on your dreams?*

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*When Jojo arrived, Casey struggled with guilt and overwhelm before she realized that she was “doing it.” Have you dealt with similar feelings? How can you let go of wishes and “shoulds,” and let things flow?*

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*What does the phrase “Circle of Love” mean to you?*

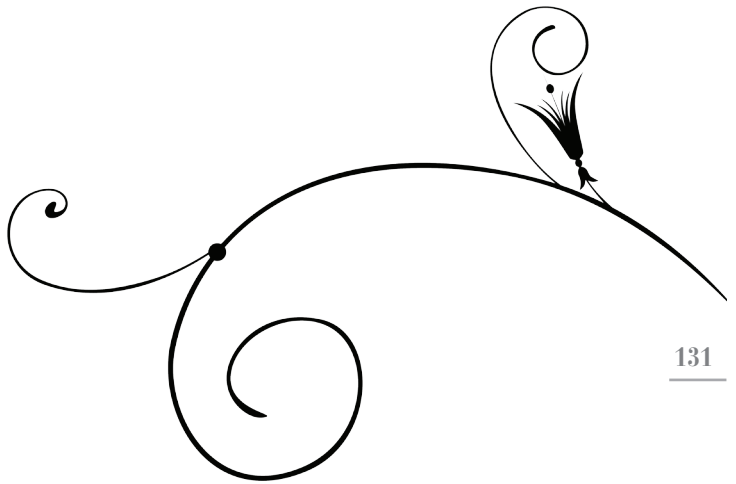
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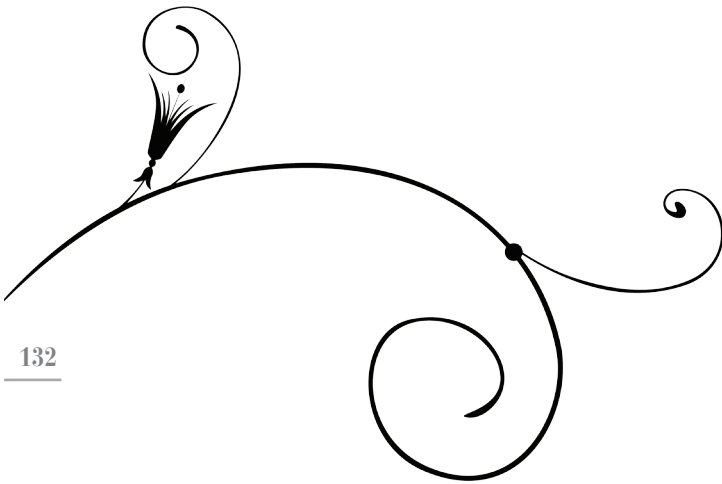
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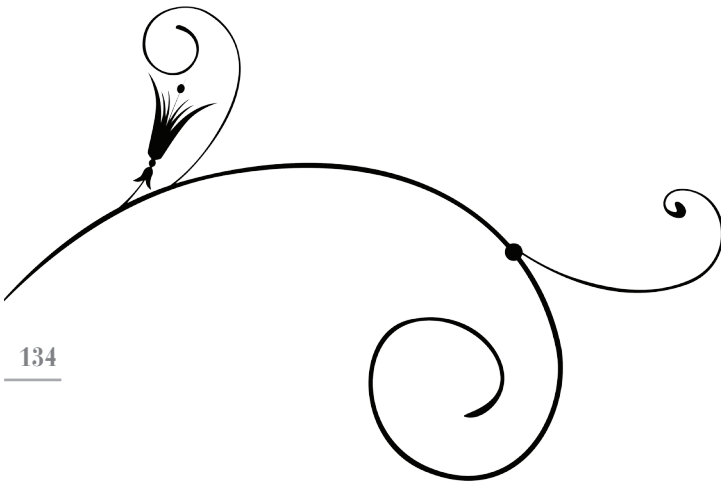




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*Chapter  
Five*

*Joy* IS...  
**THE CIRCLE  
OF LIFE**



# WHERE THERE IS GRIEF ...

*Pamela Henry*

*E*arly November, 2014

“Your mom is not well.”

I felt my dad’s words like the punches of a thousand boxers in my stomach. I hung up the phone and collapsed into my mom’s favorite chair.

My mom had been admitted into the hospital a few days before with what was considered to be a twisted colon, but there was no clear diagnosis.

My dad had called with the daily update on her condition, but his final words were the ones that struck me across the miles. And so, within a couple of days, I was on a plane, hometown-bound.

Over the days that followed, I spent a lot of time flashing back to the previous five years of my life. In that span of time, I made, and kept, an unwavering commitment to my personal development journey. I embraced new ideas, learned several energy healing modalities, connected to my inner voice, and reclaimed my creative power. This growth process allowed me to tap into a deep sense of expanding joy.

Up to this point, 2014 had been one of those pivotal years that you can look back on and say, “This was the year everything clicked.” My book proposal and demo for the companion music album were complete. I had started a coaching program to support my dream of helping women create the life they desire. My website was live, and I had embraced social media. Inspiration was flowing—and through it all, Mom was by my side, cheering me on as she combed through each

piece of my writing with immaculate attention to detail.

Just a few days before, I had been hooked onto my authentic path. Now, I could barely breathe. I felt like a trap door had opened beneath me, and I was free-falling into an abyss of uncertainty.

Mom's last three days at home flew by in a blur of denial and pain management. My joy evaporated as the truth of her situation became increasingly apparent. I felt paralyzed, but I couldn't sit still. She was fading away before my very eyes, and there was nothing I could do. All the energy work, prayers, affirmations, and positive visualizations weren't working the way they were supposed to. I watched her letting go with grace as I held on for dear life.

On the third evening, she collapsed into my arms. When the paramedics arrived to whisk her away, my heart exploded into a million shards as the fear of what the next few hours held consumed me.

As the hours turned into days, I felt increasingly helpless. Doctors came and went in a turnstile of test results. Her cancer was spreading so quickly that the only action plan was to keep her as comfortable as possible.

I felt like I had failed her.

I asked for a miracle as I projected a false sense of hope. I was being called to fully step into the transformational shoes that I had been wearing for the past five years, but I was standing on broken glass in bare feet.

Then, I received the most beautiful and unexpected message. One afternoon, while wandering the hospital halls, I found myself in the healing garden. Before me was an exquisite pink orchid. It was as if I had been called from Mom's room across the hospital.

As I sat there, captured by the healing essence of this peaceful flower, a sense of calm came over me. Within the stillness, I experienced a profound sense of gratitude for this heart connection which had revealed itself in the exact moment I needed it. I closed my eyes, opened my journal, and allowed this poem to pour out onto the fresh page:

## The Pink Orchid

*I am strong  
I am graceful  
I am a pink orchid  
With a healing message of love.*

*Let me infuse your being  
With beauty  
This healing essence  
Of pink light.*

*Open your eyes  
Sweet one  
See the possibility  
That shines  
From deep within.*

*This delicate balance  
Of well-being  
Surrounds you  
It is you.*

*Relax and breathe  
Receive this pink light  
That's all you have to do.*

When I returned home that evening, the pink orchid was still fresh in my mind. I went into my parents' bathroom—and there, on the counter beside the sink, was a pink orchid. Tears flowed as I received this undeniable message: *Slow down. Return to stillness. Connect to Spirit.*

That moment sparked a sense of relief that I hadn't experienced in weeks. I realized that the deep thankfulness I felt was my lifeline to joy. This awareness would call me back to my path repeatedly over the days and months that followed.

*December 7, 2014, 8:00 p.m.*

“Breathe, Mom.”

The hospital room was silent. My heart raced as I listened for her next breath. It came.

“Good, Mom!”

Another long pause.

“Breathe, Mom. Breathe ... *Mom?*”

I screamed for help. As the nurses rushed to her aid, my heart pounded in almost unbearable grief.

I watched in a haze. The nurses scurried about. The doctor came in to make it “official.” I could barely hear her words above the internal din of shock and despair.

The room was spinning in slow motion as I made the phone call to my family. The angel I’d hung on the wall in front of Mom’s bed watched as I pulled up a playlist of recently recorded songs on my iPhone. I held her hand as we listened to a track I’d named “I Am Home”—a song I now know I wrote for her.

*Christmas, 2014*

The season of joy was upon us, but it didn’t feel joyful. Christmas was Mom’s favorite time of year; this first holiday season without her was the most difficult experience I’d ever faced.

I felt angry and disconnected from myself and my family, but there were still glimpses of joy to be found. I often turned to the pink orchid and remembered the call to stillness. I focused on my deep gratitude: for Mom, and the infinite blessings she showered on my life; for Dad’s laughter in the next room as he found relief in his favorite sitcom; for my partner and his loving support; for the comfort of family and friends.

I returned home to the coast with the numbness of the holidays still wrapped around me like a frozen blanket. I didn’t know how to process the swirl of emotion that bound me, but I knew it was time to move forward. I deeply desired to feel joy once again.



I resumed journaling and writing my weekly blog posts. I focused on my coaching classes and clients. I surrounded myself with caring friends and colleagues. I committed to techniques and processes that support inner knowing and gratitude. I laughed more. My appreciation for everyone and everything around me deepened.

As time went by, I began to feel lighter, but I was still plagued by moments of crippling sadness.

*May, 2015*

In rural Canada, where I grew up, May is the time for seeding the crops. In a time-honored farm tradition, Mom and I would prepare meals and take them out to the field so my dad and brother could keep up the momentum.

This year, I was on my own.

Spending those days alone at my parents' home forced me to come to terms with my new reality. I wandered around the house, heart aching, confronted with the grief I had been unable to let go. One day, as I stood in front of the mantle saying my usual "good morning" to Mom's photo, I finally acknowledged that I had been hiding behind my busyness in an attempt to suppress my despair.

It was time to drop the oars, and allow the stream of my life to continue. Time to be gentle with myself, and accept that it's okay to be exactly where I am, in this moment. Tears flowed as I felt these truths vibrate to my core. My mom was a beautiful soul, and I know that her loving essence will always be with me.

Joy is choosing gratitude, even when you feel like you have nothing to be grateful for. It's taking pleasure in the beauty of each moment and reflecting on the sweetness of the gift of life. Within the expression of thankfulness, the life force of joy is patiently waiting to burst forth and overtake your life in a garden of wonder. It's always there, glimmering beneath the layers of our human suffering.

Where there is grief, there is joy.

Where there is gratitude, there is joy.

Where there is love, there is joy.



# REFLECTION

*When Pamela lost her mom, her reaction was to draw inward in anger and numbness. What is your instinctive reaction to grief? How does it serve you?*

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*What challenges in your life can you meet with gratitude instead of anger?*

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*Where in your life are you using busyness to escape deep or challenging feelings?*

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## I CHOOSE JOY

*Paula  
Houlihan*

*T*he grandfather clock stood in my parents' living room, ticking steadily. Funny that I didn't remember it being so loud. In fact, I don't recall noticing it much at all, before—but now each persistent tick reminded me that another moment had passed.

My dad was dying.

I was shocked at his condition when I saw him. I didn't realize how much his cancer had worsened since my last visit, just two months ago; photos sent by text are deceiving. He was only seventy-three.

Excitement glinted in his eyes when he saw me, and he smiled. It was all I could do to contain my tears. I kissed his cheek with a forced cheerfulness. Gesturing around the living room where he'd taken up residence, I teased, "Nice room. You'll do anything to get Mom to wait on you!"

My mom and sister were just about to get him up and ready for the day, and I used the opportunity to get my bags and collect myself. I barely made it around the corner before my body betrayed me. My knees gave out. Sobs overwhelmed me.

This was going to be my last visit with my dad. I was glad I had come.

Dad had moved into the living room so he could be attended to more easily. He insisted that his clock be always in view. He liked to keep track of the time; it was the first thing he checked when he woke up, and the last thing he noted before going to sleep. While he never said so, I suspect he was keeping track of what time he had left, and didn't want to sleep it away.

Our days started when Dad awoke, which was usually before the sun came up. Mom and I would put on the coffee and bring out the lift to carry him from his bed to his wheelchair. We had to be careful when moving him, as the slightest bump caused him severe pain and risked fracturing his frail bones.

Once he was ensconced in the wheelchair, we'd get him dressed, which was difficult. His range of motion was limited, and his joints were particularly sensitive. Dad would often comment how getting old was like being a newborn—you had to rely on others to take care of you. He thought it was curious how we end the way we start in life.

When it was cold, we'd sit in the garage, opening the overhead door just enough for Dad to see outside while still keeping in the warmth. When it was warmer, we'd go out on the approach to take in a view of the mountains. We'd sit there and talk—sometimes for an hour, sometimes two if Dad had the strength.

We talked about all the places we lived, the people we knew, and the things we did. He told me how much he loved us and how proud he was of us. He spoke of how much he loved my mom, and of all that they accomplished together. He talked about his legacy. To him, nothing was more important than family. I cherished each moment and hung on every word.

When I was alone, though, I wanted to scream. I had always believed things happen for a reason—but that didn't mean I had to like it. I wanted to be *selfish*! I didn't want my dad to die! I couldn't imagine a world without him. I didn't *want* a world without him. What could possibly be the reason for this?

Unlike mine, Dad's spirit never wavered. As time went on, and his body weakened, I watched him discover another thing he couldn't do ... and then another, and another. Each discovery was met with confusion and a touch of sadness, quickly replaced by acceptance and a renewed focus on what he *could* do. This determination continued right up until his last day.

It had been raining all day. Dad wanted to go out on the back deck with his favorite view of the mountains, but the chill was too much. I promised that we would go out tomorrow when the weather looked

more promising. We sat instead in the garage with the overhead door open. We talked a bit, but not as long as we had in earlier days. He listened more than he talked this time. He was very tired, and had difficulty even lifting his hands.

After about thirty minutes, he looked at me and said, "I'm ready."

I thought he meant that he was ready to go back inside. "Okay, let's go."

I wheeled him up the ramp to the house. As we reached the top platform, he said, "Wait. Don't forget to close the garage door." I believe now that he wanted to take one last look at the mountains.

I pressed the button, and we watched the overhead door slowly descend.

Back in the house, the sun was streaming in through the windows, casting a golden light over the living room.

"This is my favorite time of day," I told him. "It's so magical, when the sun is setting and everything turns golden."

Dad nodded.

We got him undressed and put him back in bed. I brought him water, positioned his pillows for comfort, and sat by his side while he settled in.

Dad looked over to the foot of his bed, and his face lit up. He smiled and said, "Hi, Mama."

I followed his gaze. There was no one there.

"Who are you talking to, Dad?" I asked.

"My mom. She's there with her baby."

My grandma had passed away when I was ten years old. Her firstborn had died before Dad was born.

Tears fell. I leaned over and kissed my father's forehead. "You tell Grandma I said hi, okay?"

"Okay."

He slept peacefully after that. The grandfather clock ticked on, chiming the hours through the night. I woke repeatedly, expecting to hear him calling us to get up, but the call didn't come.

The next day dawned beautiful and warm. *Today*, I thought, *we'll go out on the back porch. Dad will be so happy to see the sun.*

But he continued to sleep.

And the grandfather clock ticked on, marking the moments until Dad took his last breath.

My mother, sisters, and I stood around him in disbelief. It was quiet. There was no drama, no “This is it!” He simply stopped breathing. My sister and I stopped the clock to mark the moment. I wanted to rewind it, thinking that somehow, if I did, it would bring my dad back. But I didn’t, because it couldn’t.

I realized then that I had a choice. I could choose to lose myself in the grief and despair of my father’s loss. Or, I could follow Dad’s example and look for joy in every moment.

I chose to feel joy for the time I had with him. I chose to feel joy that I was blessed to have such an amazing man as my father. I chose joy because *he* chose joy.

He hadn’t wanted us to mourn him. (“Well,” he’d joked, “Maybe just a little.” He was a kidder, even at the end.) He wanted us to move on, and celebrate the life and the legacy we shared as a family.

It’s been six months now since my dad passed. Not a day goes by that I don’t miss him. Since then, I’ve questioned the purpose of death, and I’ve come to the conclusion that if death has a purpose, it is to remind us to live.

Death shakes us from the illusion of promised tomorrows. It prompts us to stop putting off what we dream of today, and—like the ticking of the grandfather clock—it reminds us how quickly time passes.

Dad showed me the grace of acceptance and the beauty of a life well-lived. Despite my grief, and in some ways because of it, I have a deeper appreciation for life. I’ve learned that life is not always easy. There will be good times, and not-so-good times; both offer opportunities to experience sadness and joy. Both are there. Both are real. The difference is that one holds you back, while the other moves you forward.

I choose joy.



# REFLECTION

*What has been your experience with death? How did it affect you?*

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*Paula chose to honor her dad's legacy by choosing joy in the face of her loss. Where do you have the opportunity to choose joy right now?*

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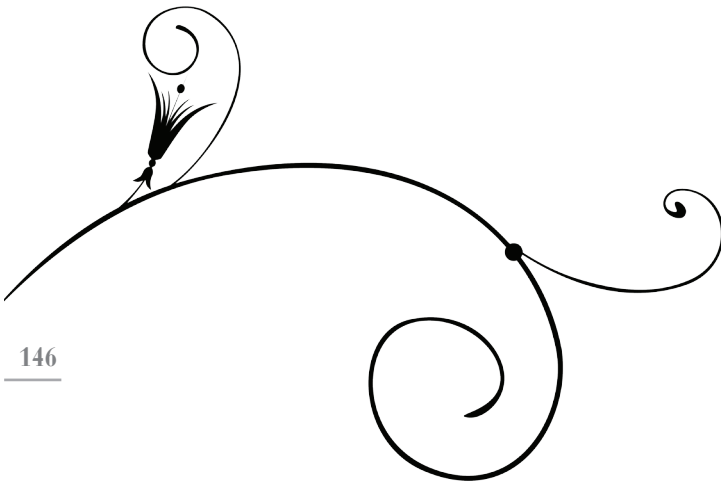
*Paula writes, "Death shakes us from the illusion of promised tomorrows." What actions, conversations, or experiences are you putting off? How can you engage with those actions right now?*

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## KARIS CLOUDS

*Jill E.  
Greinke, MSW,  
LCSW, SAC*

*I*t's a glorious day here in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin—the first really spring-like day, the kind of day that Wisconsinites dream about during the long, cold, tumultuous winters. Everyone is out. There are parents walking with their kids, and people washing their cars. The sound of lawn mowers is accompanied by the scent of fresh-cut grass. There is not a cloud in the sky, and the sweet smell of blossoming flowers and trees is almost intoxicating. It's simply delicious!

As I make my way out the door and head down the block, I run into my neighbor, Alexia. I stop to say hello, and we agree on the glory of this day.

“How are you doing?” she asks.

I flash back to early December, when Alexia came to my door with one the best meals my husband and I have ever eaten. She came to give her condolences and love because my daughter, Karis Anne Ross, had committed suicide a week and a half earlier. I was still in a state of shock at the time, weeping non-stop, feeling like I had to claw my way through every moment of every day. But Alexia's wonderful food, made with such love and care, gave my husband and me a lot of joy. The space she held for me helped even more. She sat with me, listening to me as my aching heart called out for my daughter.

Karis was not only my greatest joy, she was the most authentic person I've ever known. She was my hero. She taught me the art of joyful presence, and how to live fully in every moment. No matter how dark I felt, she had a way of lifting my spirit and bringing a smile to my face. She knew the right words to say, the right joke to tell.

What would I ever do without her? How could I live a joyful life without the person who inspired me the most?

That December night, Alexia held space for me to reflect on the journey I had undertaken as the mother of this beautiful, yet very complicated, soul.

You see, my Karis was born a female in a male body. I knew it from her toddler years on. She came out as being gay when she was sixteen years old, and I accepted it from the get-go—but I was always so frightened for her in a parental and protective way. I loved her so much that I was willing to do anything. I stood with her as she shared her truth with her closest friends and family members. I was both scared and awed by her courage and commitment to live an authentic life, one that brought her joy.

When she was twenty, she called me from college and asked me to rename her as a woman. So I did. “Karis” is derived from the word “grace” in Greek, which seemed to fit her perfectly. A few years later, she made a physical transition from male to female, and became a beautiful young woman, which seemed to lighten her up even more. She was finally becoming who she was always meant to be.

In her suicide note, Karis thanked my husband and me for our help in her transition, and for giving her five solid years of truly authentic living. After her death, we were told by countless friends what a beautiful soul she was; although melancholic, it gives me joy to know that I had a part in helping this magnificent human being live the way she wanted to.

Despite the many uphill battles she faced, Karis tried to keep a joyful outlook. She used to say to me, “Mom, can’t you just be happy?” And I would tell her that it was tough for me. I explained my belief that people are on a spectrum where joy is concerned. Some are closer to the “joy” end of things than others. To quote one of my business mentors, I was simply a person who had to “build up my joy muscles.” I’ve always been predisposed to negativity and depression, just as my ancestors were. Joy and happiness, therefore, have become a daily walk intertwined with my self-awareness, authenticity, and spiritual connection.

Karis taught me how to be bold, and how to take courageous and complicated actions for the sake of that joy. Even in the face of controversy, she remained a true trailblazer, determined to align with who she really was, beyond the external definitions of gender and appearance.

To celebrate what would be her last birthday on Earth (although I didn't know it at the time), I took her to a beautiful resort on Lake Michigan. It was chilly, and the clouds were heavy and gray—but Karis and I walked the beach anyway, hand in hand, laughing and smiling. We truly enjoyed each other's company, and celebrated her life in a grand way. After that trip, she told me that she felt closer to me than ever—and I agreed. The connection between us had only deepened.

Now, when I see those gray, lowering clouds, I call them “Karis Clouds” because they remind me of that weekend. Despite their gloom, they help me look for the joy, and embrace the bitter with the sweet.

I continue to strive for that balance every day. I know that I have Karis as a guide; I feel her presence with every breath that I take.

Flash-forward again, back to today's walk and Alexia's question. I tell her that my emotions remain up and down, triggered by the smallest of memories. It's not uncommon for my eyes to be filled with tears, both joyful and sad, as I reflect on a life with and without Karis.

It makes me wonder if joy can also be classified as bittersweet.

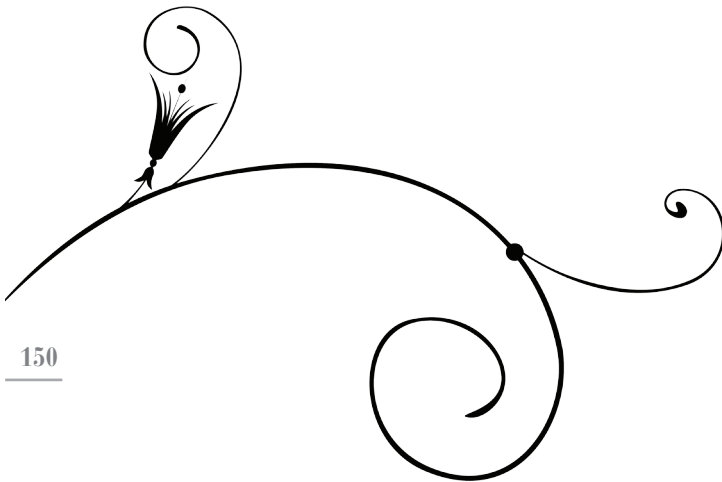
For the last five months, several of Karis's friends and I have been planning a Life Celebration for her. We've been making lots of plans—and, along with settling my daughter's estate, my day-to-day moments remain bittersweet. I consciously search for joy each and every day, flexing my “joy muscles” over and over. Without Karis to tease me, I'm painfully aware of the extra effort.

And yet, the joy is there.

I find it in meditation, yoga, my dogs, my husband, and the rest of my family. I find it in the simple pleasures of life—like this stunning spring day. And though, in these past five months, the joy has come in company with tears, it is always there if I allow it to embrace me.

Back at home, I sit with the windows and doors open, taking in the smells of the season. There are no Karis Clouds in the sky today—but she is always with me. In my bathroom, there’s an ornament hanging on the mirror. It’s etched with the words, “Be kind to yourself. Karis Anne Ross.” It was a message Karis spread to everyone she came in contact with.

And now, speaking through me, she leaves it with you.





# REFLECTION

*What does “authenticity” mean to you?*

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*What can you do, right now, to honor your greatest truth?*

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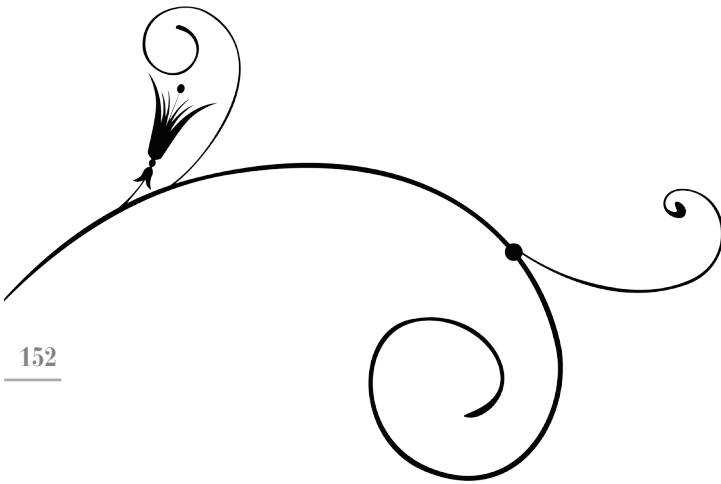
*Jill mentions learning to strengthen her “joy muscles.” What exercises or practices can you do today (and every day) to build up your own joy muscles and help joy come more easily into your life?*

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## UNDER THE BOUGHS

*Laura Clark*

“*I* think I found Tarsi,” said the volunteer on the other end of the phone.

After eight days of searching, this was the call we had hoped for—the call that would bring my Tarsi back to me.

Tarsi (short for the tarsal bone in the foot) and Tali (short for another bone in the foot) were littermates and sisters. They were best friends from the start and, until Tali’s passing a year before, were inseparable. They had chosen us as their fur-parents.

People warned me, “Don’t get two dogs. They will never bond to you.” This was far from the truth. I felt deeply connected with Tarsi from the first moment I held her. She chose me just as much as I chose her. No more than the size of a Coke can when she was born, she was tube-fed for the first six weeks of her life. No one knew if she would survive, let alone thrive. But, with the Spirit’s nudging and some loving sibling rivalry, she did. Indeed, it wasn’t until she was six years old that we discovered that most of her spine was fused together. Her vet wondered how she could walk without pain, but she rarely complained.

Tali and Tarsi took after their names just as I’d hoped they would: always together, and always at my feet. After Tali passed following a courageous and blessedly short fought with cancer, Tarsi held strong, and I began to fully understand why Tarsi had chosen me. She was my soul dog. With her near, I grew stronger in my connection to Spirit and my ability to integrate the laws of the Universe into my life.

And she’d been missing for eight days.

Missing, in fact, since I had received another call, this one from my guy (and Tarsi's dad), Michael, telling me about the accident he'd been in. I fired off questions, and he answered them just as rapidly. Yes, he was okay. Yes, the car was totaled. Yes, the goldens (our two other dogs) were fine. But Tarsi had run away from the scene, and no one could find her.

And so, the search began. Flyers were made and posted within hours. We checked with animal shelters and the local police.

Then, I saw the car. Action stopped in the face of reality. The SUV was a shell of itself, having rolled multiple times. It was a wonder Michael or any of the dogs had survived. I stood there and wept.

By evening, there was still no sign of Tarsi, and there was nothing to do but go home. Before going to bed, I created a sacred altar for Tarsi, to be a guiding light for her as she made her way back to us. I sent Reiki to her. And I let words come to me, as they so often do—a mantra, for my soul dog. “I am safe. I am supported. I am strong. I am sacred. I am Spirit.”

I repeated them again. “You are safe. You are supported. You are strong. You are sacred. You are Spirit.” As I chanted, I was engulfed with a sense of peace and serenity, and the storm of my emotions subsided.

The next day began with the same words. “Tarsi, we are safe. We are supported. We are strong ... Please come home today.”

I logged on to my computer, and was amazed that the few postings I'd made about Tarsi on Facebook were being shared. I thought, “How nice of my friends to help out.” But when I looked closer, I realized that the posts were not just from people I knew, but from complete strangers as well. So many people reaching out, asking me if she had been found, asking how they could help, offering their prayers and support. I wanted to thank everyone personally, but the call to search for my baby was too strong.

As we walked through neighborhoods and knocked on doors, my heart continued to fill with gratitude for the compassion total strangers were showing us. Many were genuinely concerned, and offered to



keep an eye out for Tarsi, while others joined our efforts, walking with—and for—us.

While out and about, I got a call from someone who'd seen a post on social media. John lived in the area and, having endured the search for a lost dog himself, was able to offer both ideas and support.

The second day came to a close. It tugged on my heart to leave the accident scene with no sighting and no news of Tarsi. But while the day's search was over, the support continued.

I opened my computer and gasped, shocked. I couldn't believe what I was seeing: hundreds of sharings, dozens of private messages ... and John's gift, a "Tarsi's Search" group message board to help me organize the search effort.

Michael and I weren't out there walking the scene tonight, but the search was continuing, physically and virtually, with hundreds of eyes watching out for my Tarsi. The love that surrounded all of us was palpable, and it brought me hope, even in the absence of news.

One day led into another. Each morning began with a search, and ended with plans for the next day and me spending time with Tarsi at her altar. Two more days went by. Four days. Six. I was doing all that I could to stay in faith and trust that the Universe would bring my girl back to me.

In the meantime, social media continued to explode—but now, people were reaching out to express their concern for the length of time Tarsi had been gone. They were losing faith, and I could feel it.

The moment came when my own faith lapsed, too. I stomped outside to yell at the sky: "Why us? Why Tarsi? This is *not fair!*" The words rang familiar from a time, long ago, when I lived without faith and joy in my daily life. I cried, and allowed myself to release some of the pent-up emotion of the past week.

Then, I came back to myself—to the wiser, more intuitive me I've become—and quieted my mind. As I reached out to embrace my inner wisdom, the message came through loud and clear: *Surround yourself with positive energy. Focus on Tarsi's essence and detach from the outcome. Stay in faith, so joy may follow.*

Throughout the search, I had been focused on staying positive and connecting with Tarsi and her spirit—but I desperately wanted her to come home safe and healthy, and I was doing my best to manifest that. I hadn't detached from the outcome.

I know from experience that it's in the detachment that the fullness of peace and joy comes through. You can have some of this with being positive and staying in faith. But it's when you let go of attachment—and yet continue to take consistent, courageous action—that everything shifts.

I asked for a sign, so I would know how to take my next courageous step forward.

The phone rang. “Hi, Laura. How can I help today?” It was John, my angel, who'd been steady from the first.

“Do you think you can coordinate Tarsi's Team today?” I asked. “I can't keep up with the questions about how people can help.”

We came up with a master plan, and he quickly tasked everyone on the team. Grateful, I went to my computer, and posted what was in my heart:

*Tarsi is still missing, but please don't be worried. Please do not send prayers with concern. Rather, send your love and surround her with light. Send us and the volunteers your positive energy. If you need help doing this, repeat: “I am positively expecting great results and nothing but that. I release this intention with Faith that the Universe is rearranging itself for Tarsi's best interest. And, so it is.”*

I hit “post,” closed the computer, went to Tarsi's altar, and began to talk to her. I reminded her of all the endearing things she did: her morning stool hugs, the way she rested her head on my lap as she guided my journaling each morning, the way she would smile and bound to the door when I would ask, “Are you ready for anything?” I told her how much I loved her, and how I knew we were both safe, supported, sacred, and Spirit.

And I went out searching, ready for anything.

That day was so much easier than the others. The support for Tarsi came through without all the angst and worry of before. I went to sleep that night knowing that, wherever she was, Tarsi was absolutely surrounded by loving energy. She was safe, supported, strong, sacred, and united with Spirit.

Day eight began. As we started out the door, I turned to Michael and asked, “Are you ready for anything?”

We both smiled.

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“I think I found her,” Sheilah, another angel volunteer, repeated.

On the ten-minute ride to where Sheilah waited, Michael and I repeated Tarsi’s mantra together. “We are safe. We are supported. We are strong. We are sacred. We are Spirit.”

We arrived to find Sheilah within one hundred yards of the accident scene. Tarsi was there.

Michael saw her first—and when he nodded, I knew she was gone. She was in Spirit.

Her furry form was nestled against a tree, deep under the boughs, where she’d created a warm nest for herself amongst the leaves. She was, indeed, safe, supported, strong, and sacred.

I was filled with a mix of emotions. There was sorrow and grief, of course, and shock and relief at having finally found her. But even though Sheilah wept, I could not—because in this moment, I was at peace.

During her transition, Tarsi touched so many lives and hearts. She had endured so much in her lifetime, and yet she chose to be joyful and serve her purpose, right up until the end. She was, indeed, my soul dog, who taught me to be ready for anything.

In her transition, she had done again what she did best: she brought joy to me, and everyone else who was willing to be touched by her light. Over our eight-day quest, she brought out the best in people, and showed us that with community, compassion, and love, you can always find joy. It’s right there, under the boughs of the tree, waiting for you to nestle in.



# REFLECTION

*When Tarsi went missing, the community rallied around Laura’s search. How does your community support you?*

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*Do you have a personal mantra? How can you use words to help you create joy from within?*

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*Tarsi was Laura’s “soul dog.” What roles do animals play in your spiritual life? How do they help you connect to joy?*

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## LOVE LIVES ON

Shelley Riutta,  
MSE, LPC

“**S**helley, can I drop Erin off at your house?” my stepmother asked hurriedly when I picked up the phone.

“Sure,” I replied. “Why?”

“I have to take your dad to the hospital. He’s been in severe pain since last night. We’ve been driving back home from Milwaukee, and we’re going straight to the ER. I’ve never seen him in so much pain. We don’t know what’s going on, but it’s pretty serious.”

I hung up the phone and went into panic mode. *What could be causing him that much pain?* I wondered.

A few minutes later, they knocked at my door. I lived only five minutes from the hospital so it was convenient for them to drop off my little sister to me on their way there.

As I held and played with Erin, I started to pray. “Please don’t take Dad from us! I know I can handle it—I’m twenty-six and grown up, but Erin is only five years old, and I couldn’t bear to see her grow up without our loving dad!”

My father was diagnosed with an aortic dissection, which meant that his aorta (his largest artery) had split open, and he was bleeding to death. Miraculously, emergency surgery allowed him to survive.

On the night of his surgery, my siblings and I slept in the waiting room because we wanted to be near him when he was taken to the recovery room. When they wheeled him out of surgery, alive and breathing, I had never been so relieved in my life.

Later, at a spiritual study group I was participating in, I ran into the doctor who had accurately diagnosed my dad’s pain. It was that

diagnosis, and the immediate surgery that followed, that allowed my father to survive. When he walked in to the meeting, I was amazed.

“Thank you so much for saving my dad’s life!” I gushed. “You will never know how grateful I am to you.”

He said, “Shelley, I’m just as amazed at what happened as you are. I just followed the strong intuitive message I was getting to explore aortic dissection as a possibility for your dad’s pain.”

One of the consequences of the aortic dissection was there was quite a bit of damage left behind. Over the years, my dad developed aneurysms at various points along his aorta that needed to be repaired. On top of this, he was a smoker who had a very difficult time quitting; this made his situation all the more dangerous. The smoking made the aneurysms get bigger and become dangerous faster. I felt like he was a ticking time bomb, and I could feel this anxiety rippling through our entire family.

Quite frequently, the subject of our family conversation was the next surgery that he needed. Each time he went to the hospital, we would all be on edge for days. What was going to happen? Would he survive? What were the possible complications of the surgery, and what were the dangers if he left the aneurysm alone?

For the first few years after his initial surgery, I felt like I was always on red alert. I visited my dad frequently, wanting to spend as much time with him as I could because “I don’t know how much longer he has.” After a while, though, I began to realize how this anxiety was pulling me off-track in my own life. My dad’s well-being was always at the forefront of my mind, and I’d lost my focus with regard to the other priorities in my life. Walking on eggshells around his health was beginning to take its toll on me.

This shift was happening right around the time I was beginning to study joy, and learning to create joy in my life no matter what was happening. I realized that I had a pattern of holding external situations as determiners of my own happiness. I would let things that were going in my friendships and business affect the level at which I allowed myself to feel joy. I would wait for those moments when everything was how it “should” be, and then say to myself, “*Now you can feel happy.*”

I noticed that, since my dad's first surgery, I hadn't allowed myself to let go and feel joy or happiness. It was like a part of me had tightened up in fear, trying to control what was happening through my constant state of hypervigilance. It was like I was frozen in time with this trauma, and hadn't reentered the land of the living.

I wanted to begin to live again.

I began to practice staying in a state of trust with regard to my dad's health. Every time the anxiety would roll in, I would breathe deeply and say, "My dad is in good hands. Everything is okay. He is spiritually and physically guided and supported by the Divine."

It was this act of tapping into my spiritual connection that finally allowed me to relax my grip on the situation. In that release, I was able to actually enjoy each moment. Instead of feeling worried whenever I saw my dad, or dwelling on how little time we might have left together, I would focus on taking in the full experience of being with him, and feel joy and appreciation for the time we *were* getting to spend together. I gave him more hugs, took him out for lunch, and asked him the questions I had always wanted to ask.

I was also able to shift my reactions to his surgeries. Instead of getting pulled off track completely for days or weeks at a time, I was able to stay focused on my life and path while still being present for him. One of his more serious surgeries took place at the UW Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin. The level of danger of this surgery was second only to a heart transplant. I traveled down to Madison, and stayed with my sister. But instead of getting overwhelmed by the intensity of the situation, I was able to keep my equilibrium. I remember sitting next to my dad while he was sleeping in the recovery room, working on an article for my business. I was present with him, and yet focused on my path at the same time.

I began to sense from my dad (although he never said anything to me about it) that he appreciated the shift I had made. My new outlook also helped my other family members, who had struggled with their own challenges through Dad's health crises.

Almost twenty years after that first aortic dissection, my dad needed one of the most complicated surgeries he'd ever had. He

researched hospitals across the country that could do it less invasively, and ultimately decided on an excellent surgeon and facility in Houston, Texas. I wondered if he was strong enough to make it through the surgery, as his body was still weakened from his last operation a few years before.

“Dad, do you think this is the right time to do this?” I asked.

But he was very clear that he was doing the right thing, and so we went ahead with the plan.

Over the course of many years, beginning not long after my dad’s first surgery, I had developed a dialogue process to engage with Spirit. Through my journaling, I would receive messages about all areas of my life, particularly with regard to the higher purpose of events that were happening. Just before Dad’s surgery in Houston, I got a message that he was ready to transition, that it was time for him to leave his physical body.

I hated to know this. But the other part of the message was that Dad would be able to be more helpful to me, and the rest of the family, from the spiritual realm than here on Earth. Over the years, I’d worked through so many layers of grief over losing him; now that the time had come to say goodbye, I was, in a way, prepared.

I shared the message with one of my sisters. The other siblings, I didn’t tell; I didn’t want to scare them. But I did encourage everyone to spend as much time as possible with Dad before this surgery.

Dad made it through the twelve-hour surgery without a problem. My sister whispered to me as we celebrated, “What about that feeling you had?”

“I’m glad I was wrong!” I answered.

Several days later, I received a call in the early morning from my sister Erin, now twenty-five years old. “I’m so sorry, Shelley,” she cried. “But Dad is gone!”

Apparently, he’d been feeling good enough to stand and walk around—and the movement had caused a blood clot to break loose. It caused a heart attack, and he went very quickly.



Interestingly, I was scheduled to meet with a client for a VIP day the very next day. This client is a grief expert, and focuses on bringing the message that “love lives on,” and that loved ones are still with us in spirit. I was amazed at the divine timing of this. I was able to meet with her briefly, and she generously shared her wisdom, comfort, and resources with me and my family.

The message of cultivating joy in the midst of challenge continued through Dad’s funeral. He had the most joyful priest I’ve ever met. The eulogy was a celebration of my dad’s life, not a lament.

On the program for the memorial service, my stepmom had put the quote, “We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” After Dad passed away, she’d begun receiving communications from him during the early morning hours. One day, before she was fully awake, she received the message from him that, “I can be more helpful to you here than I was in my physical body.”

I had never shared that message with her. Not before Dad passed, and not after.

My connection with my dad has continued. I feel him with me often, and can sense when he’s in the room with me. I am able to use my spiritual dialoguing process to talk with him and feel his immense love, support, and guidance. Knowing that our connection will never be lost, I feel more courageous in my life.

All of my siblings have had experiences with him as well. My sister dreamed that he was doing cartwheels on the beach with all of us. Another sister can hear Dad laugh when her kids do silly things. Even from beyond the veil, he’s looking out for us.

Truly, love lives on.



# REFLECTION

*When your loved ones are hurt or sick, what is your “go-to” reaction?*

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*When Shelley shifted her thinking to embrace more joy, she was also able to bring joy and peace to her dad and the rest of her family. How can you shift your view of a challenging or fearful situation in your life?*

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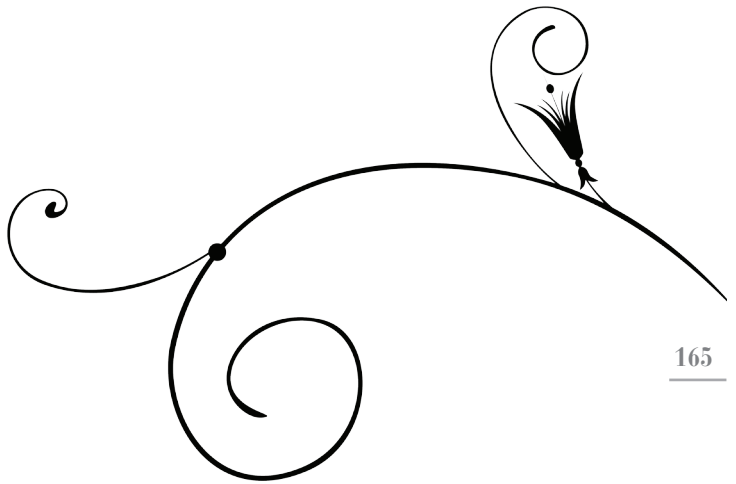
*Shelley uses journaling to connect with Spirit. What messages have you received through journaling?*

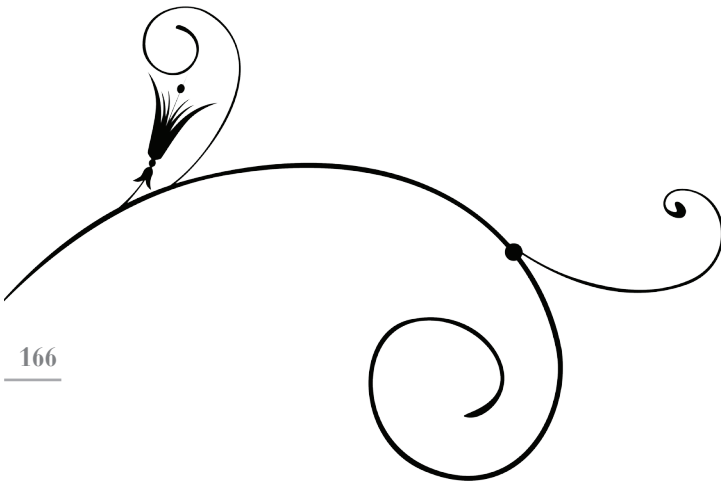
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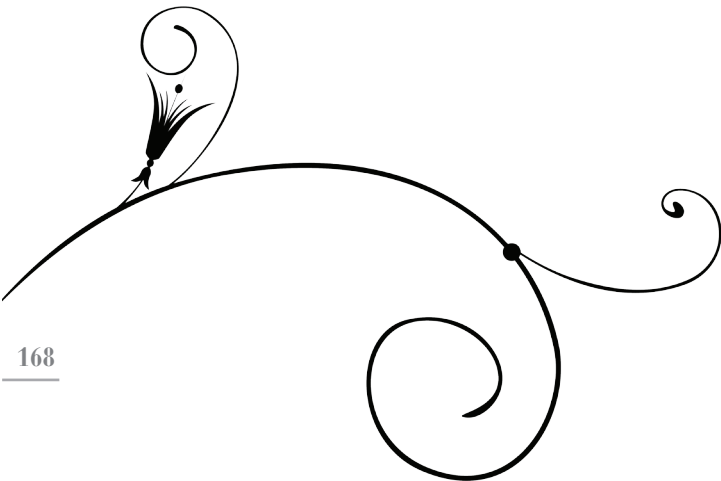


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*Chapter  
Six*

*Joy* IS...

**FINDING YOUR  
BLISS**



# AN AMERICAN MIDWIFE IN MEXICO

*Stacey  
Curnow*

**T**here has never been better advice than Joseph Campbell's "Follow your bliss." But what does that mean in a world where you must make a living, and "bliss" is unlikely to top the list of your job requirements?

I asked myself this question four years into my career as a nurse-midwife, at the age of thirty-one. I was working full-time in a busy private practice, and often felt overwhelmed by the daily (and nightly!) demands of the job. I wanted something more ... but what?

After a lot of reflection, I realized that what I enjoyed most about my job was interacting with the few Latina women who came to the public health clinic I staffed one morning a week. I dreamed of becoming fluent in Spanish so I could better communicate with these women.

Even more, I realized that I craved a great adventure. Before I welcomed my own baby into the world, I wanted to do something amazing. Earlier that year, I had completed the Boston marathon with a time of 3:23; now, I figured I needed a bigger challenge.

I devoured *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer's account of his trip to the top of Mount Everest, and for a while was taken with the idea of climbing Everest myself, though I didn't own a pair of crampons. Then I picked up *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* by the mountaineer W.H. Murray, and was struck by something he wrote:

*"The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves, too ... Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now."*

I knew then that I could do anything I set my mind to. Climbing Everest wasn't really what I wanted (the thought of falling into an icy crevasse scared me too much); however, the dream of living and working in a Spanish-speaking country suddenly felt completely attainable.

Sure enough, when I took my first step, Providence moved.

I applied to Doctors Without Borders and within a month was offered an interview in their New York office. As it happened, I was going to be in New York anyway to run in the New York City Marathon, and could easily set up a time to talk with the organization's director. I quickly learned that there were no positions for midwives in Latin America—but since I wasn't interested in any other placement, the director said she would keep my application on file.

Within two months, I got the phone call.

The Dutch office of Doctors Without Borders was starting a new maternal health project in Mexico, and the project's director wanted me to join the medical team. It took all of twenty seconds for me to say, "Yes!"

People thought I was crazy. In a time when there were few positions for midwives, I was leaving a great job in the States for a volunteer position in a remote Mexican village. While my husband stayed behind to maintain our home, I would be living in a region of the world where there was no electricity, no running water, and no option for a quick rescue if anything went wrong. Doctors Without Borders made it clear that they had chosen this region because the Mexican government was persecuting the indigenous people who lived there.

I was leaving the known and comfortable for something totally unknown and filled with risks. But, like Murray, I believed Providence had moved to create this opportunity for me to commit to my dream and cultivate even more joy in my life, and I was not going to be dissuaded.

In June of 2002, I packed up and departed for southwest Mexico. Once there, I dove right in. Working with an all-Mexican medical team, I helped set up clinics in remote areas of the region referred



to as *La Montaña*, The Mountain. We ran clinics in various villages from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., took a break from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m., and reopened from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. We gave preference to women and children, but saw everyone who needed attention and were available for emergencies twenty-four hours a day.

The women came in a continuous string, often with five or six children in tow. As expected, there were a lot of respiratory and intestinal infections, but also many skin problems like rashes and infected bug bites. Other than these immediate problems, most of the people we saw were relatively healthy, and happy in their lives and their work.

My most memorable patient was a woman named Celia. She had wide, soulful eyes and an emotional gravity that belied her nineteen years. When I met her, she was in bed and complaining of abdominal pain—but it was clear that the problem went deeper than that.

As we spoke, I learned that, eight days earlier, she had started labor with her second child. The contractions grew stronger all night, but there was no evidence that the labor was progressing. In the morning, her family and the *partero* (a male midwife) realized something was wrong, and decided to seek help from the closest medical clinic. This meant a seven- to eight-hour walk, plus a five-hour drive to a regional hospital. But after almost an hour of walking, they realized the road was impassable. Discouraged and in great pain, Celia decided to turn back for home.

Once they were back in their village, the *partero* again tried to facilitate the birth. When the contractions diminished, he gave her two injections. While the *partero* wasn't on hand when I saw Celia (he was in the countryside tending to his animals), I suspect he gave her Pitocin, a synthetic form of the hormone oxytocin, which causes strong uterine contractions. Anyone can buy the medicine without a prescription in Mexico, and it can have serious side effects. About ten minutes after the injections, the baby's head emerged, but the rest of the body was stuck. The *partero* did what he could, but by the time he was able to deliver the body, the baby had died from lack of oxygen.

After I examined Celia, I diagnosed a uterine infection and gave her an antibiotic. I visited her several times a day for a week, and tried to provide comfort as well as care. As it turned out, Ana, Celia's two-year-old daughter, was a source of joy for both of us. Although Celia was always a little reserved with me, Ana was not. This little girl didn't yet live in a world of learned boundaries, of hesitation and holding back. By living so wholly in the present, she helped both Celia and me let go of the past and look forward to the future. By the time the medical team left her village, Celia and I were both better off than when I arrived.

I remember other things about my time in Mexico—like the evenings when my Mexican colleagues and I would walk twenty minutes to a natural spring that fed into a little lagoon before flowing into the river. It was a treat to walk through the cornfields at the end of the day, as the air cooled with the setting of the sun. We always arrived hot and dirty, but left clean and refreshed.

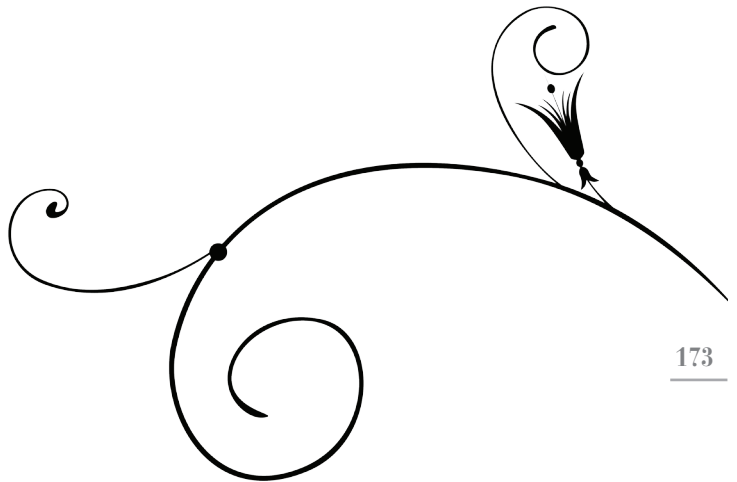
Every morning, I got up before sunrise to walk around the village. The air was cool, and the stars still shone brightly. On these walks, I saw a lot of things I didn't notice during my busy daytime hours. I saw baby pigs the size of kittens, and baby goats the size of terriers, with their dried umbilical cords still attached, all tottering around after their mothers. I felt the ebb and flow of country life in my blood. It was a special time—a time when I could just *be*. I also knew that the joy I found watching these new families was an indication of the joyful world that was waiting to be discovered inside of me, when at last I welcomed a baby of my own.

A year later, back in the States, I started looking for work, and eventually found the job I'd been longing for when I started my journey: a hospital position in a public health practice serving a large number of Latina women. My patients reminded me of the women I served in Mexico, and I was grateful that my language skills and knowledge of their culture allowed me to care for them as they navigated life in a foreign country.

My time in Mexico changed my life in other profound ways. Mexicans value faith, family, and community above all else. They have a palpable connection with God that is as much in their hearts as in their churches. Their lives revolve around simple pleasures: lingering over home-cooked meals, playing pick-up soccer games, and talking for hours in the town square. They express gratitude for everything in their lives, from the quotidian to the sublime.

After I gave birth to my son, our little family adopted these same values, and we maintain them to this day. Our time is focused on each other rather than on overextended schedules, and we enjoy a slower, more thoughtful pace in our daily lives because of it. I have learned to honor my intuition over logic, and let it guide my actions even when it seems, on the surface, to run counter to “common sense.”

My journey to Mexico was the first step in what has become a lifetime path of following my bliss. If I had never stepped off my familiar path, I might never have appreciated the many gifts my life has to offer. I still haven't climbed Mount Everest, but I've taken plenty of other uncertain steps in my life. Every time I do, I move with the confidence that Providence won't let me fall.





# REFLECTION

*If you knew that you would be fully supported, what would you do right now to follow your bliss?*

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*Stacey discovered her bliss in the smallest parts of her work day. How can you magnify those aspects of your life or work that bring you joy?*

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*Stacey and Celia both discovered joy through Ana, Celia's daughter. What can you learn through the children in your life? What can they teach you about presence, bliss, and joy?*

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# UNSHAKABLE

Stacey  
Martino

*I*n December of 2008, Paul and I were living our dream.

We were entrepreneurs, working from home running our businesses, free from corporate structure and anyone telling us what to do. When we tallied our revenue for that year, it came in just shy of the half-million mark.

Everything seemed to be moving along smoothly. So smoothly, in fact, that I never saw the hit coming.

In January 2009, the economic recession that was enveloping our country showed up on our doorstep in a profound way. In a period of two weeks, *all* of our current consulting clients contacted us to say that they were ordered into a “consulting freeze.” Our income dried up as suddenly as turning off a faucet. We tried everything to secure new business, but it seemed like everyone was in the same situation.

January 21, 2009 was effectively the day our consulting business went under.

A few friends and former clients asked me if I wanted to come and work for their department. My internal voice said, “Oh, no! No way! I’m wired as an entrepreneur. I’m a horrible employee. I can’t work for a corporation anymore. *Anything* but that.”

I pushed harder, reaching out to my waiting list of potential clients, but nothing seemed to work.

Not surprisingly, there were many moments of fear and tears as we struggled to find work. But even in the midst of the struggle, there were moments of laughter, joy, and delight. Paul and I woke up grateful and full of love for each other and our two children, and we went to sleep passionately in one another’s arms.

In fact, we had never been more grateful for the years of work we'd put into our relationship prior to this moment. We did the work to create a magnificent love affair that would carry us through, regardless of the current economic situation or anything else that might come our way.

As the economy got worse, we watched other couples around us fall into blame and crumble under the stress of financial crisis. One day, after picking our son up from kindergarten, Paul told me that another family we knew from school was divorcing.

"They have little kids, Stacey, just like us!" he said. "And if they had just done the work that we did to create the kind of relationship we have now, those kids might still be sleeping with two parents down the hall tonight, instead of just one.

"We have to get out there, Stacey, and teach more people how to create what we have! We are unshakable. We know how to do this, because we *did* it. We have to teach people, Stacey. We are being called!"

I could feel his passion. I felt it, too. After all the years that Paul and I dedicated to creating the magnificent love affair that we get to enjoy today, I knew that helping other people with their relationships was our mission. In fact, I wished I could do it all day. But we were kind of in a financial crisis here, so ...

"It's kind of a shitty time for this 'calling,' don't you think, Baby? I'm with you; I know we can help people. I just don't see how it's going to happen."

Months later, deeper in monetary crisis and doing everything we could to avoid bankruptcy, Paul and I both did something we thought we would never do again: we took corporate jobs to be financially responsible to our family.

We thought it would be okay. However, it quickly became clear that the cash from the jobs just wouldn't come in quickly enough to allow us to pay our bills.

In October of 2010, we tucked our two children into bed and walked downstairs to sit at our kitchen table with my brother, Andy, my sister, Jane, and my brother-in-law, Dennis.

Paul and I had \$1,300 left in the world.

We told them everything. Yes, we had secured corporate jobs, and we thought we could pull out of this without having to declare bankruptcy. But we simply didn't have enough cash to make our mortgage payment for November. We didn't know what to do, and we were too deep in our fear to think clearly.

My siblings helped us make a plan. Dennis, God bless him, wrote us a check for \$10,000 then and there—enough to get us through until our jobs started bringing in enough money to sustain us.

With tears rolling down my cheeks, and my hands trembling, I took off my engagement ring—the only thing of value that we had left—and gave it to Dennis.

“I can't take a handout,” I said. “So please, take this until we can pay you back.”

“No,” he shook his head. “I won't take your ring from you.”

But I couldn't wear it, either, because in my mind, it was collateral for a loan. I put it in our safe, where it would stay until I paid Dennis back in full.

I started my job—or as I thought of it, my Fate Worse Than Death—and when my first paycheck came at last, I gave \$1,000 of it to my brother-in-law. He said I could wait a while before paying him, but looking at my empty ring finger, I insisted he take that check.

Slowly, we started to pay off our bills. I went to work every day, and hated it. I literally got nauseous every morning on my drive in. Each day felt like an eternity.

One night, after the kids were asleep, Paul sat me down on the couch. “Stacey, you are suffering unnecessarily. It's time to flip your switch.”

I stared at him.

“You have to work right now, Stacey. But the company you work for is awesome, and you like the people. The work is even interesting for you. And yet, you're going in kicking and screaming every day. If you're going to be there, find a way to love it every day, Stacey. Each day is precious. It's only *you* who's making you miserable, and it's only *you* who can change it.

“Let’s change it now.”

He proceeded to show me everything I could be grateful for and appreciative of. And through his eyes, I started to see an opportunity that I had not recognized before.

I was going to be *paid*. Every two weeks. No matter what. And they only needed, like, thirty-five hours of my time each week. That left me with about twenty-five hours to do whatever I wanted!

And that meant ...

“It’s time, Paul! It’s time to heed that calling! Let’s dive in and figure out how we can teach others how to create the unshakable love and unleashed passion that we have!”

For the next year, I spent twenty hours a week training and studying for my certifications as a marriage educator, divorce preventionist, and strategic interventionist. The year after that, Paul and I started figuring out how we would teach what we knew. We started documenting what we did in our own lives that really worked, and honed in on the “best of the best” of what we learned during our fifteen years of relationship study. Then, we started testing our tools with other people, refined our process, and eventually created our trademarked 8-Step Relationship Transformation System™.

When we were finally ready to go “live,” Paul and I had both been working our full-time corporate jobs for more than four years. We were totally debt free and financially secure again, and ready to commit to bringing our proprietary system and mission business to serve as many people as we could.

Our business grew fast! Every day, we were empowering more and more people to transform themselves and how they show up in their relationships, and create their lives by design! Now, two and a half years in, I’ve left my corporate job. We serve approximately six hundred clients all around the world, and every week, through our content, we help tens of thousands of people create better relationships—and therefore, better lives.

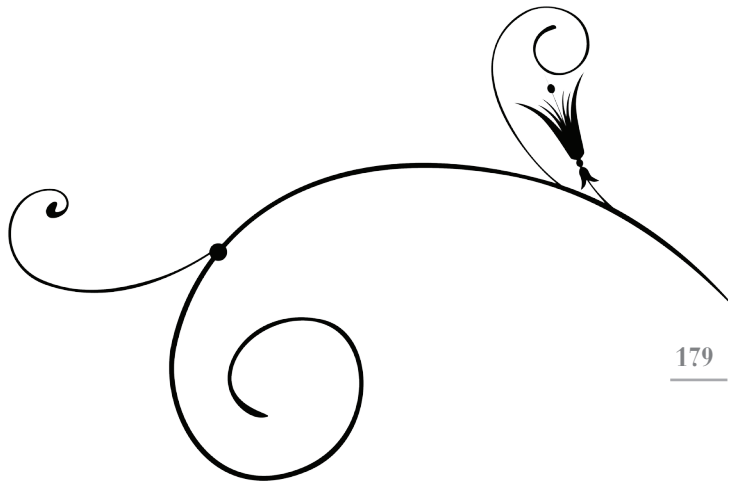
We are just getting started.

I think many people hear the words “cultivating joy” and think it means “self-care,” like taking pottery classes or sitting in a bubble



bath. To me, those things are about *pleasure*, not joy. Joy is something I actively cultivate by creating it, and tending to it. Then, I get to live the results of my efforts. To me, *that* is joy. Every minute of my work day is devoted to helping people transform themselves and how they show up in relationship to others. It hardly feels like work. I'm living my purpose, working alongside the man I love, and fulfilling our mission in the world—all while getting to be at home every day with our kids.

The journey wasn't easy, but it sure was worth it!





# REFLECTION

*When was the last time you had to ask for help? How did it feel? What was the result?*

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*Stacey reframed her aversion to a corporate job and turned it into an asset while she built her business. How can you shift your attitude to find more ease in your daily life while you make plans to create change?*

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*Stacey worked on her education for the new business while still at her corporate job. What steps can you take right now, in the free time you have, to create the life you really want?*

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## THE SPARK

*Beth Marshall*

**O**n a gorgeous April afternoon in 2007, my sister, Kristine, was at my house trying on dresses for an upcoming event. I was enjoying the rare moment of connection. My life always seemed to be going at warp speed, with little room to stop and breathe.

As she changed dresses, Kristine smiled and said, “I have some exciting news to share, but you have to keep it a secret for a little while.”

“Of course,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“I’m pregnant!”

The look on her face and the feeling in my heart said it all. By year’s end, we would welcome a new member into our family: her first child, and my first nephew. Happy tears rolled down my face as we hugged and celebrated.

After my sister left, a powerful wave of emotion welled up inside me. Was this joy? It had been so long since I’d felt joy that I couldn’t be sure.

Over the last few years, I’d been crawling deeper and deeper into an emotionally numb and unavailable cave. The exuberant emotions coming through me now were unfamiliar and uncomfortable. I felt as though my whole world was spinning. But my soul tingled, and though there was discomfort, I wasn’t willing to let that feeling go so quickly.

And while things felt uncertain, one thing quickly became clear: the flicker of joy I felt at my sister’s news that day would be the spark that finally lit my life on fire.

Ever since I can remember, I've loved to teach. There are few things that give me as much joy as seeing a light go on for someone based on something I've shared, or when I've been supporting them in a breakthrough.

Yet, at seventeen, I lacked the courage to stay on my path. I didn't trust myself fully—who does, at that age?—and so, despite the fact that I felt like I was leaving a big piece of myself behind, I accepted the advice I was receiving from others, and took the “safe” road toward a degree in accounting.

I'd been an achiever for my entire life. (Actually, if I'm being honest, an overachiever.) I graduated near the top of my high school class, I was in the Honors Program at college, and had a job offer from one of the prestigious “Big Four” accounting firms before I started my senior year of college. I always ran at the front of the pack, and it was important to me to do things well.

And where did all of that get me?

Ten years into my career as a CPA, auditor, and business consultant, I was miserable. I felt like a square peg trying to shove myself into a round hole. Every day, I felt another part of my soul shrivel.

Most days, I just wished for quiet. I'm an introvert by nature, but I was constantly working in large teams with rushed deadlines that gave me little time to indulge in the silence I craved so badly. I could feel my soul trying to communicate with me, but I couldn't hear it over all the noise.

And even if I was being called to something more, how could I leave behind a lucrative career to which I'd dedicated so much time—and which, by most people's standards, was everything I should want in a job?

I remember thinking to myself one morning, *every day feels like Groundhog Day*. Same numb feeling, different date on the calendar. Get up. Get dressed. Infuse caffeine. Put on a happy face even if—*especially* if—I don't feel like it. Enter noisy, bustling conference room where I can barely hear myself think. Put out fires for three-quarters of the day. Escape to the ladies' room for ten minutes just so my coworkers will leave me alone. Go home, collapse from exhaustion.

Get up. Get dressed. Infuse caffeine ...

I'd known for many years that I was heading down the wrong road. But it wasn't until my sister announced her pregnancy that I realized that, despite all my hard work and "good" decisions, there was little to no joy in my life. I had all the outward signs of success, but inside I felt numb, exhausted, and totally unfulfilled.

It was time to start asking the hard questions.

*Why do I feel so "blah" all the time? Why have I bought into the story that I am a "career woman" with little else to look forward to—like motherhood? Why is it okay to wear my long work hours and constant overwhelm like a badge of honor?*

I was stuck in a holding pattern of mediocrity, and knew it—but at the same time, I was scared to break free. I wasn't someone who particularly enjoyed change, and I knew that once I started answering my own questions, everything was going to shift in a big, big way.

But scared or not, it was time for me step back onto my true path. Without much to go on other than my own strong intuition, I drew a line in the sand. From this point forward, I would no longer allow life to simply happen to me. I would *choose* my life. I would find more of that heady, world-spinning joy I had tasted that day with my sister. I would not be an absentee aunt for my first nephew.

When I look back, I think of that moment of choice like a match that I struck to light the fire of my dreams. Someone beautiful, curious, and strong was awakening inside me, and I couldn't wait to get to know her.

I applied to graduate school to open my mind to learning and new possibilities. I transitioned to a new role within my firm—this time in human resources. This allowed me to have a new challenge while simultaneously taking some much-needed time to reflect on what I really wanted from my life.

That felt like a lot of change. I managed it as gracefully as I could. Turns out, it was just the tip of the iceberg.

Two weeks after I changed my job, my father was diagnosed with brain cancer. Three months later, my aunt died suddenly at the young age of fifty, after years of battling lupus. Later, in 2012, I had my own

breast cancer scare that rocked my world. It felt like my faith was being tested over and over again.

Each time a new crisis emerged, I wondered if I was strong enough to handle it all. I began to question my so-called “powerful choice” to create my life. I desperately wanted all of these tests to stop—and yet, I knew I had to keep charging forward. I uncovered and honored the intuitive skills I’d kept buried for so long. I learned to allow my feminine spirit to take the lead instead of chasing the masculine model of success.

These were fast-paced years. My role in the HR department was eliminated in 2010. I suddenly found myself unemployed and scared—and at the same time, excited about reinventing myself professionally. Thankfully, my parents had taught me to manage money well, so I didn’t have to worry about making my mortgage payments while I considered my next steps.

More than anything else, I had to force myself to stop running around like the world was on fire, and slow down and *listen*. When I did so, my intuition would guide me to the next action step.

I decided to put my financial know-how to use as a personal finance coach. Sure enough, I was guided to someone who had an established financial coaching business, and she agreed to hire me.

I learned a lot in that job, and I was grateful for the mentoring I received. But before long, I started receiving signs that it was time to go it alone. Like every overachiever, I was terrified of the “F-word,” failure. Was I smart enough to be an entrepreneur and create my own income?

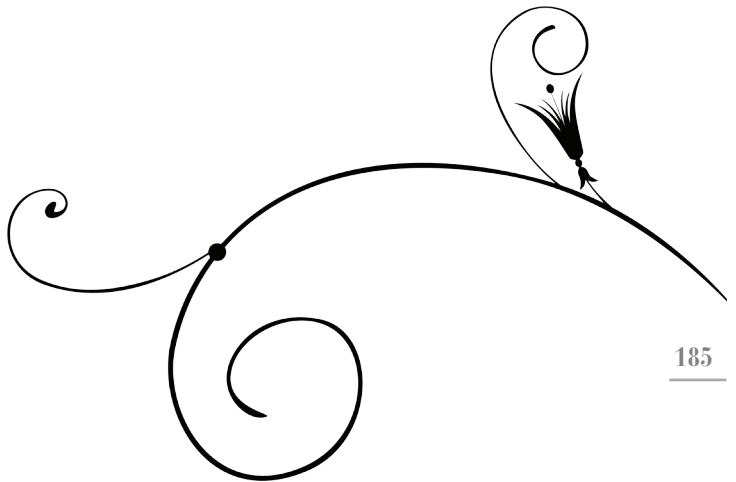
Just by *thinking* about starting my own business, the signs started pouring in. The name of my company popped into my head out of nowhere: it was a moment of clarity unlike I’d ever experienced. As I stepped forward hesitantly, I encountered amazing mentors and a community of like-minded entrepreneurs who encouraged me and supported me with more love and resources than I could have ever imagined.

The journey back to my soul’s path has been both exciting and excruciating—and totally worth it. It has led me to personal growth

and fulfillment beyond my wildest dreams. I have reclaimed my purpose as a powerful teacher, leader, and motivator, and I use my personal experience to connect with and inspire others. My spiritual, intuitive, and creative flow has returned and guides me at every turn, and I know that as long as I keep listening and stepping forward in trust, even the biggest challenges will eventually reveal themselves as opportunities.

Now, my inner fires burn bright, instead of burning me out. I have ample time to enjoy the quiet that I once yearned for, and I'm the furthest thing from an absentee aunt. I feel and express my emotions, instead of holding them in. I choose faith over fear—and change and I have grown to be, if not good friends, then at least staunch allies.

Life—*real* life—is now. And I'm thankful every day that I've found it.





# REFLECTION

*Do you believe that you are following your soul's path? Why or why not?*

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*If money, time, benefits, etc. were not an issue, what would you be doing differently?*

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*Do you like change? Why or why not? What do you think would happen if you made peace with it?*

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## MY HEART'S DESIRE

Kellyann  
Schaefer

I paced back and forth through the center of my kitchen, phone in hand. My husband, on the line, had just said to me, “It’s time. Put in your two weeks’ notice.”

I stopped, and stared out the big bay window at the birds fluttering by outside. He was right: it was time to leave my nursing career behind and pursue the dream of starting my own business.

I could feel the butterflies of nervous possibility inside my soul—but instead of feeling joyful, I was terrified, full of dread and an inner sense of loss. Every reason not to do this (in fact, to run screaming in the other direction as fast as I could) was popping up in my head.

I didn’t understand. Why was I so afraid?

The truth is, I’d been hoping and praying for this moment for years. The field I once loved so much had begun to eat at my soul. I would come home after fifteen-hour shifts and sob tears of wrenching hurt—but the tears I cried on the outside were small in comparison to the sadness my soul felt on the inside.

For a long time, I didn’t realize that giving so much of myself without filling back up was killing me from the inside out. I couldn’t sleep. I dreaded each and every shift, but I still put my whole heart into my work day after day, hoping that if I just gave a little bit more, things would change. But the environment never got any better.

Now, after years of punishing hours, unsafe working conditions, and angry, bitter coworkers, I was being given an opportunity to walk away and never look back. But the fear ... the fear was *so* big. How would we pay our bills? Our medical insurance costs would triple without my benefits. Our son’s asthma medication alone would cost

hundreds more per month. And I might not have an income for several months while I got my business up and running.

Surely, this plan was insane.

Even harder than losing the money would be losing the identity I'd built around my job. Back when I was a single mom, I spent years working the third shift so I could earn my nursing degree during the day. My young daughter had to spend days at a time with my family or a close neighbor just so I could get that degree. If I gave up the career for which we'd both sacrificed so much, would all those days we spent apart have been wasted? Would she hate me?

And then, beneath the fear, I felt it again: that glimmer of excitement.

I wanted more in my life. I'd been thinking about it for months. *What else can I be?* I asked myself. *What else can I do?* On several occasions, I said (only half-jokingly) to my husband, "All I know how to do is take care of people and be a mom!" Slowly, as I started to really listen, I saw what was possible for me to do with my love of taking care of people. I could take that love and spread it throughout my whole community. I could make love my business—and it would be a business without limits.

So, was that first moment of clarity and desire the point where I decided to put in my two weeks' notice? Hell, no! I had a demanding job that had me working fifteen-hour shifts, and four children to raise. I had no time to write a business plan, let alone take on more work hours. I didn't even know what running my own business would look like. I didn't know any entrepreneurs, other than the people I saw on television. It was a totally new concept to me, and felt foolish and unrealistic. But ...

The seeds had been planted. My soul was coming alive again. I researched how to set up a business entity and get the proper insurance. My husband even crafted the *coolest* name for my new company. I got excited every time I thought about the impact I could have through this new work.

And still, I resisted.

“When are you starting this business?” my husband would ask. “I can’t while I’m working,” I’d reply. “It’s just too much.” I hid behind this excuse for months—until, finally, the Universe intervened on my behalf.

My job expectations changed, putting more stress on me during every shift. I didn’t listen; I stayed. Then, my manager put me back on weekends, which I hated because the long shifts meant I didn’t see my kids awake from Friday night until Monday morning. Again, I ignored the Universe’s nudge. It felt like I would be leaving based only on what I wanted, not what was best for everyone else—and I wasn’t allowed to do that, right?

And then, in August 2010, my manager called me at home and said, “Kelly, we’re rotating you to the night shift”—something I dreaded more than anything else.

This was the sign I had to listen to. This was the turning point—the point where I would have to choose, fully and finally, between joy and suffering.

That day was the day I called my husband from our kitchen, and he said these words to me: “Put in your two weeks’ notice. It’s time to quit, Baby, and start your own business. It’s what you’ve wanted, and it’s time.”

And so, my journey as a business owner began. To be honest, it wasn’t quite what I had envisioned. For the first few weeks, I settled in to just being a mom—getting the kids ready to go back to school, and enjoying not having to do anything. I knew I would have to get to work on the business soon, but I was floundering, unsure of my first steps. Yes, I’d done the research, but the newness of it all was overwhelming.

About three weeks into my new life, I crumbled.

I had never done anything just for me before. Now, for hours out of every day, I was responsible to no one but myself. I felt so alone and unneeded in the world, and quickly started to tumble into a hole of unworthiness. Day after day, I would cry, spinning my wheels, feeling like I had no purpose in life anymore. I may have wanted to leave my

nursing job, but it had given me my only true certainty in life back when I'd been a single mom, and I was grieving it now.

One night, as our family ate dinner, I found myself sobbing over my plate. It was one of those cries where your entire body shudders, your nose starts oozing, and your eyes swell up for days afterwards. "I have no *purpose*," I kept saying, over and over. "I don't know what to do!"

I honestly don't think I've ever been more scared in my life than in that moment.

My husband regarded me from across the table. "You can do this, Baby. You just need to get your ass in gear and *start*."

Still sobbing, I bobbed my head up and down in acknowledgment, knowing he was right.

The next day, I began.

I'd be lying if I said those first few weeks and months were easy. Often, there were whole days when I wasn't sure what to do—but when I faltered, I recommitted myself to my purpose, which was taking care of people. Each day, I did what I could, and each little bit was a step forward.

After a couple of months, I got my first client. When we got off the phone, I jumped around the room, crying and screaming, "I *can* do this! I *can*!"

Since then, my life has changed in amazing ways—ways I never could have imagined during those first few weeks after I left my career behind, when I was still terrified of the unknown. I will never again have to ask permission to take a day off. I'll never again have to work on Christmas, and miss my kids' smiles under the tree on that magical morning. I'll never again have to dread my work, or come home sobbing at the end of the day. I will never have to live those things again.

190 What's more, *I* have changed.

I was always the person who latched on to certainty and familiarity. I *hated* change—and because I hated it, I often stayed in situations and relationships far longer than I should have. Now, I'm learning to

embrace the newness each day brings, because I know that if I'm not changing and evolving, I will stagnate, and begin to wither from the inside out.

Are there days when I want to give up? Of course. Are there days when I long for the certainty of a regular paycheck? Hell, yes. But no paycheck is worth giving up this new aliveness in my heart and soul.

To me, joy is being brave enough to take steps toward my soul's calling; to listen to my inner needs and desires, and cultivate a life of happiness and abundance which fulfills those desires. Today, I have more friends than I ever thought possible—people who truly care about me, my business, and my family. They lift me up when things get rocky, and cheer me on when I'm living my dream. When those fears of the unknown resurface, I remember to slow down, take a breath, and follow my heart's desire; when I do, I will always be led in the right direction.



# REFLECTION

*Have you struggled with guilt about giving up a career, relationship, or behavior whose time has passed? How can you release that guilt in order to move forward?*

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*What do you see as your “purpose?”*

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*How can you integrate your purpose with your dream, and give yourself permission to step forward?*

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## INNER IGNITION

Patricia Young

*I* was sobbing in my car in the parking lot at work. Again.

I watched myself crying in the mirror. Mascara was running down my cheeks, and I knew that everyone would look sideways at me when I finally walked back in to my office, but I couldn't stop the tears.

The thought of facing another day in the corporate world was too much to bear.

For twenty years—which is a *very* long time—I worked in jobs I dreaded. I worked for a paycheck, going through the motions, instead of living on my own terms from an authentic place.

“How did I end up in this place?” I wondered.

When I was a kid living in Venezuela, I wanted to go to college for psychology or journalism. I wasn't sure precisely what I wanted to do with my life—only that I wanted to connect with people, and help them in some way. This meant that I would have to move to Caracas, and attend the university there, since my local college didn't offer courses in these subjects. My parents, trying to protect me, told me that they could not, and would not, support me if I chose to move to the city. So, instead, I ended up getting a degree in Business Administration at a private university in my hometown.

For years, I kept getting messages that what I was doing for work was out of alignment with who I really was. I really disliked the idea of selling my time for a paycheck, even if I needed the money, but I couldn't see a way out. It was as if I was living on autopilot; like a robot, I completed my tasks each day, but never found anything in the experience to feed my soul.

“How can I possibly do this for another fifteen or twenty years?” I

asked my reflection in the car mirror. “Is this really all there is to life?” The very thought was enough to make me feel ill.

Eventually, I wiped my face and went back to work. All around me, I saw my coworkers living in the same state of dissatisfaction I was experiencing. Often, everyone seemed to be in a bad mood; sometimes, they were nasty to others, constantly backstabbing to get ahead or snag a promotion.

I didn’t belong here—but if not here, then where? There was so much fear inside me at the idea of starting something new; I had no idea where to begin.

And so, I went back to work the next day, and the day after that.

I started getting panic attacks. Sometimes, they happened in the middle of a conversation with a coworker or my boss, and I would have to excuse myself as gracefully as I could. I would run to the bathroom and take deep breaths over the sink, or sneak out to my car to cry. The whole situation was overwhelming and painful—not to mention confusing.

I also carried a deep sense of guilt and shame over my feelings of unhappiness. If I shared how I felt with my family and friends, the feedback I received was usually along the lines of, “Well, we all have to work to pay our bills. You should be grateful that you even *have* a job in this economy.” So, not only was I feeling totally empty and unfulfilled, but I was supposed to be grateful for it? I was constantly beating myself up.

Deep in my heart, I knew that I was meant to be doing something more meaningful. I was supposed to be making a difference. In 2013, I started looking into some options for starting my own business, trying to find what might strike my passion. Around that same time, two close friends of mine passed away from cancer, just two months apart. They were both part of a group of friends I’d known since 1993. It was devastating to know that they would no longer be here, and heartbreaking to see the kids and spouses they left behind.

During my grieving process, I dealt with so many raw emotions: shock, numbness, disbelief, anger, and a deep, deep sadness. But inside all that was a huge gift: the wake-up call I’d needed for a very



long time. The loss of my friends was one of the biggest catalysts for me to reevaluate my life. I didn't want to look back on my life one day and realize that I didn't have the courage to claim a fulfilling and meaningful life for myself. I didn't want to leave this world without making a difference.

I really started digging deep. I had taken meditation, Reiki and massage therapy courses years ago, so I already knew that my passion was connected to the holistic and spiritual path, helping people and making a difference. Since I didn't want to go back to school for psychology, I decided to explore and enrolled in a Life Coach certification program, but felt I needed more training and guidance. I prayed for a mentor, knowing that I'd been in a rut for so long that I couldn't get out of it alone.

My mentor appeared as an answer to my prayers. One day, while browsing Facebook, I saw my mentor's post in a group I'd joined. I ended up gaining my Holistic Coaching certification through her program. It was exactly what I'd needed to connect all the dots.

I could feel that there was something inside of me just waiting to emerge: that potential that we all have; the deep drive that ignites the force within. It really was possible, I discovered, to find myself in the midst of all this chaos. Coaching felt so right for me. I was excited to be able to support other women going through experiences similar to mine, and live from an authentic place. I never dreamed that I'd be able to support myself financially while doing so—and yet, that's exactly what has evolved for me.

Life is short, and it's our birthright to live the life we came here to live—but we have to claim it. It's our responsibility.

For the first time in my life, I truly understand that the results we get in life are based on our choices. We are the gatekeepers of our thoughts and our lives. It's up to us to choose what—and who—we are surrounded by, what conversations we engage in, what books we read, and how we spend our free time. In order to fully claim my life, I had to break out of the “victim” mindset that I'd settled into as a kid when I felt that my choice of education was taken from me. By taking responsibility for my own life and choices—even those long-

ago ones—I have not only been able to find my courage, but forgive everything and everyone I once blamed for my unhappiness, including myself.

Life is a beautiful adventure. We know when it started for us, and while we have no certainty about when it will end, everything that happens in the middle is on us. I no longer choose fear, stuckness, unhappiness, and constriction; instead, I choose to live my truth, and connect with my joy through self-love. Embracing the power of choice helped me find my way back to the core of my being and my deepest truth.

Joy, for me, is doing what I love. I wake up every day excited to do the work I've chosen. And while I'm thrilled to say that my business now supports me financially, it's not only about the paycheck. I know that I'm making a difference in the world, and that the life I've created is both meaningful and inspiring.



# REFLECTION

*Do you consider your current life fulfilling? Why or why not?*

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*What does the phrase “self-fulfillment” mean to you?*

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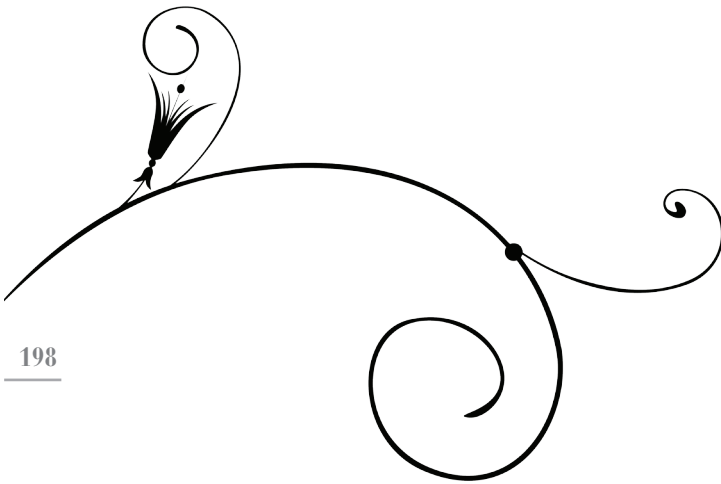
*What choices can you make to invite more joy into your work life?*

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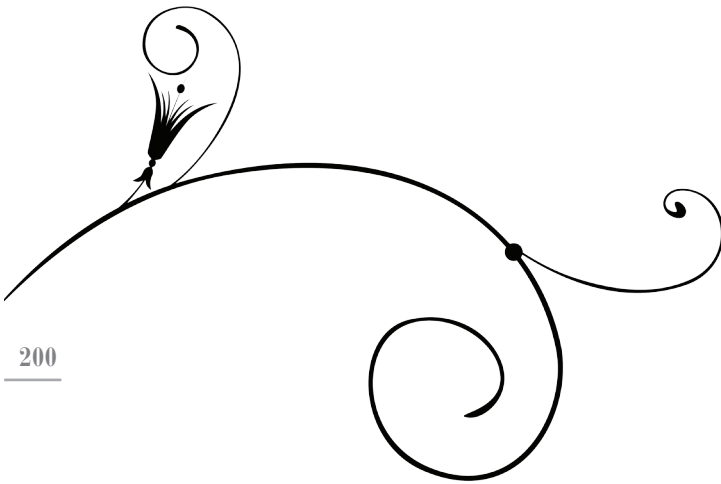


A large, light gray decorative flourish consisting of several elegant, swirling lines that curve across the top half of the page. It ends in a small tassel-like detail on the right side.

*Chapter  
Seven*

*Joy* IS...

**INNER  
CONNECTION**



## WHAT IT MEANS TO CHOOSE

*Katie  
Mazzocco*

**T**his was supposed to be a vacation, carefree and sun-filled. But somehow, it had none of the hallmarks most fifth-graders expect on a trip to the beach. Instead of leaping over the waves and running on the white sand, I was lying on the cold tile of the bathroom floor, oscillating between clutching my abdomen—which was in so much agony it felt like it might split in two—and vomiting fiercely into the toilet.

What was happening to me? My eleven-year-old brain couldn't understand. Why couldn't the doctors fix my belly? Why did the new medicine they gave me right before our trip seem to be making things worse, not better?

I hoped that my next doctor's appointment would finally solve the mystery. Sadly, it didn't. Neither did the next specialist, the next natural healer, the next test, or the next supplement. Nothing could take away my unrelenting pain.

Don't get me wrong: I had good moments, hours. Sometimes, half a day when I didn't feel like my organs were being shredded inside me. But for the most part, my life revolved around my illness. Wake up in torment. Check. Arrive late to school (or miss school altogether). Check. Miss half of swim practice, sick in the locker room. Check. And on and on it went.

In the beginning, I thought doctors could fix anything. That was what they were there for right—to heal people? As I entered middle school, though, I learned that I fell into a category no doctor likes to talk about: “The Un-Diagnosable.”

Or, as I understood it, “The Un-Helpable.”

In fifth and sixth grades, I kept up hope that they'd figure out what was causing my pain, or that it would go away on its own. But in seventh grade, as an almost-teenager and the veteran of a two-year battle with this agonizing and seemingly immortal affliction, my hope was withering, and desperation was setting in.

Standing at the helm of a life that felt completely out of my control, I slipped swiftly into depression. No one could help me. No one even knew what was *wrong* with me! Over time, I let the helplessness pile up so deep and dark that I didn't think there was a reason to keep living. I started gambling with my life and making suicide journals with my friends.

One night in eighth grade, I found myself clutching the wire fence at the back of the football stadium bleachers, staring at the thirty-foot drop to the sidewalk below. I fantasized about killing myself: how free I'd be, how happy I'd be, how there would be no more pain or disappointment.

But after bawling my eyes out for what felt like hours, I let go of the fence, walked down the bleachers, and left the football game.

Something was shifting.

Over time, I learned to keep things in perspective. My connection with Spirit was a bridge out of my despair. On sleepless nights when I was a slave to the toilet, when light and sound hurt and I didn't think I could bear my pain another moment, I'd plug my ears and eyes, rock rhythmically back and forth on the floor, and pray desperately that this unnamed demon would leave my body in peace. "What can you teach me, Spirit?" I'd ask. "How can we be closer? Please, help me survive this!" Without fail, Spirit was always with me.

With Spirit as my compass, I survived not only middle school but the start of high school as well. I made a pact with myself to live each day as the adventure I desired.

It wasn't until my senior year of high school, bedridden and on narcotic pain killers due to a two-month-long acute episode, that the doctors finally diagnosed me: Acute Intermittent Porphyria. AIP is an extremely rare genetic liver disorder that affects the liver pathways that are supposed to detoxify the body. As a result, my body saw most



things as poison and reacted with excruciating abdominal pain. Even the hormones of my monthly cycle were perceived as invaders, and acted upon accordingly.

The diagnosis brought both hope and a new form of despair. I was glad to know what was plaguing me, and to have strategies in place, even if they were only preventative dietary restrictions. It was frustrating, though, that there was no medication or procedure to fix my liver. I was eighteen years old, and I had been given a life sentence of pain—one that I might even pass to my future children. It was almost too much to take. But I was not going to succumb to depression again, and I made the choice each day to focus on my zeal for life, and do the things that brought me joy.

The following year, I had a chance encounter with an acquaintance at a Christmas party. She offered to pray for me, and I accepted, as I had accepted offers of prayer thousands of times before. This time was different, though. As she prayed, a clarity descended upon me, and I suddenly *knew* that I wouldn't be sick forever.

I had no idea what it meant, and didn't tell a soul what had happened. Nevertheless, it rang out in my heart and my head over and over, like the brightest light and deepest truth I had ever heard

*I won't be sick forever.*

Now, in case you missed it earlier, my disease was *genetic*. According to every shred of medical knowledge, it would never go away. It could only be “managed” (a strategy which, to date, had been roughly as effective as herding cats). But suddenly, nothing I had been told about my disease mattered anymore. This newfound knowing was a clarion call to a new future—one which I now believed was inevitable.

“What does a person *do* with information like this?” I wondered.

The answer I came up with was, “Believe, and share.” So I did.

From that day on, every time someone asked me how I was feeling (which happened a hundred times a day), my response would sound something like this, “I was throwing up all night, and I'm in a lot of pain right now—but it's okay, because I'm going to be healed someday.”

Over and over, I believed and repeated this.

Most people took it in stride; others questioned it. My response to those who doubted was always, “I don’t know how; I just will.” I was totally unattached to the timeline. Most of me expected a medical breakthrough or miracle drug. The rest was at a loss for explanation.

I’d like to say that my health got easier after this breakthrough, but it didn’t. I was still in daily pain, fighting for equilibrium, and weary from the nearly decade-long battle being waged in my body. It didn’t matter; I kept believing.

Following my zeal for life, I decided to volunteer at a horse ranch a few hours from my house. I worked long, hard days, pushing through the pain as I had for years. Still, my mantra rang true, and touched the ears of all who asked.

Spring and summer blew by, and fall blew in. One October afternoon, surrounded by nature and prayer, I was enjoying a meeting with my coworkers. One woman was praying for a friend’s back pain when, suddenly, she switched her focus to me.

I was filled with the most uncanny feeling. I couldn’t believe the energy that was flowing through my body. As if by divine guidance, a message entered my mind: *You can be healed in this moment, if you choose it. The choice is yours.*

I froze. I didn’t know what to do.

As soon as the prayer ended, I grabbed my friend and dragged her up the hill to the pasture gate. I quickly told her what had happened.

“That’s amazing!” she said. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

That night, I tossed and turned in my bed. My thoughts raced. *What does this mean? What should I do?* Obviously, I wanted to be healed. I wanted to live a normal, pain-free life more than anything else in the world—but I suddenly realized that, over time, I had come to regard my pain as an old friend.

The worries flooded in. *Without the pain, how will I communicate with Spirit? How will I learn? How will I know how to be? What does it mean to choose?*

*Why do I have to choose?*

Eventually, I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, the knowing was still there, and so was the pain. For what seemed like eons (but was really only a couple of days), I grappled with my decision.

Then one night, as I journaled my heart out, I realized that if Spirit could carry me through the agony of the last decade, *of course* it would still be with me if my pain disappeared. In fact, it would be able to guide me in new ways—ways I couldn't even imagine right now.

That night, I decided I was ready to be healed.

The next morning I woke up ... and there was *no pain*. It was my first pain-free morning in over a decade, and it was a gift like none I'd ever received before.

In the nearly ten years since that day, I've never once relapsed or experienced a moment of liver pain.

For months after my healing transformation, I was tentative about sharing my experience with people, afraid they might think I was crazy. Those I did tell asked many questions, the most common of which was, "What did the doctors say? How did they explain it?" The truth is, I was never retested for AIP; it's a long, complicated test, and you have to be in an acute attack to get accurate results. I didn't return to any of my medical specialists either, but I did see my primary care doctor. As I shared my story, he progressed from surprised, to tentative, to accepting. When I finished talking, he shrugged, and continued our appointment like everything was completely normal. It was anticlimactic.

Others who heard my story argued that I must have made some physical change to bring about such a radical healing. They would interrogate me about changing medicine or supplements (I wasn't taking any, nor did I start), taking something out of my diet (after my healing, I actually ate anything I wanted), or undergoing a medical procedure (which I didn't). My responses to these questions had varying impact on my listeners: mystification, infuriation, inspiration.

I understand each one of those feelings. Mine isn't an easy story to wrap your mind around. I used to get hung up on this, and hide the truth to make others comfortable. Now, I own it.

My old reality is so far removed from the life I'm living now that I sometimes forget that I was ever sick. As I wrote this story, I had to spell "Porphyria" for my husband. We've been together for five years and married more than a year, and he doesn't even know how to *spell* Porphyria. Realizing this made me cry with joy.

Ten years ago, I heard a call, and believed the words of truth that were given to me. When the opportunity presented itself, I *chose* my new reality: a life free of pain, a life of abundance and joy. My wish today is that, by sharing my story, I can inspire you to choose the same for yourself.



# REFLECTION

*If healing was possible for you, right now, would you choose it?*

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*When have you believed something so strongly that nothing could shake you? Did the thing you believed in manifest in your world? What did that look like?*

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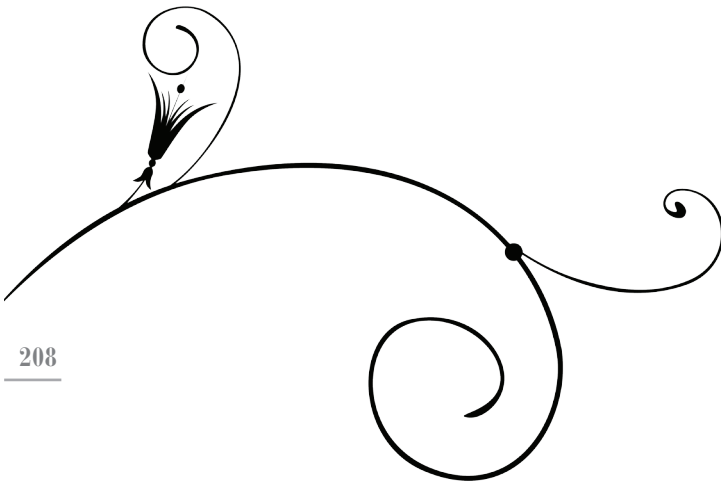
*How can you use the tools of prayer, faith, and unshakable belief to manifest change in your life right now?*

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# ADVENTURES ON THE JOY SPRINKLE TRAIL

Tina van  
Leuven

One early morning, I sat by the blazing fire with the cat curled in my lap. As the first rays of sun streamed into the room, I let my thoughts wander, traveling through galaxies. Warmth filled my body as every cell was bathed in golden radiance.

The cat snuggled deeper into my lap, and my heart burst open wider than ever before. Tears of joy streamed down my face. Here I was, housesitting for a month in the beautiful wine-growing region of Western Australia. My heart was home. The very trees seemed to whisper, “*Welcome. We’ve been waiting for you.*”

How had I created this magnificent life for myself?

“*Step by step,*” the trees answered.

The wine country home in which I was staying was just the latest stop on a magnificent journey that I like to call my “Joy Sprinkle Trail.” This trail has led me around the world and into an entirely new way of being—and it started with the longest walk I’ve ever undertaken.

It’s said that when Saint James calls you, you start walking to Santiago de Compostela. I first read about the pilgrimage in Shirley MacLaine’s book, *The Camino: A Journey of the Spirit*. It seemed like a wonderful thing to do ... one day.

That day came rather unexpectedly, much sooner than I expected. In 2011, a girlfriend of mine decided to undertake the pilgrimage and wanted me to accompany her. She wouldn’t take no for an answer.

I had no idea what I was saying yes to, but I knew I had to go. When I shared my plans with my mentor, I told her that it felt as if I was going on a walk with grace.

She offered a few questions for me to take with me, including,

*How can I hold on to grace?*

*What can I let go of?*

*How can I put this directly in the hands of the Divine to be released?*

Thus armed, I packed my bag, and set off on what was to become a soul-changing adventure.

Thousands of pilgrims walked the Camino before us with the intention of giving up their daily comforts and pleasures to release their inner demons, burdens, or sins. They sought to grow through sacrifice. I didn't fully realize it at the time, but by dedicating this pilgrimage to grace, I had chosen to grow through joy instead. Little did I know that this would bring up all the ways I had ever bought into the idea of transformation through physical and emotional self-deprivation.

We set out that first day at what seemed at first to be a leisurely pace. Before the day came to an end, however, I was forced to come to terms with how hard my inner drill sergeant had been pushing me. With less than four miles to go to reach our hostel, my muscles cramped up so intensely that I couldn't move.

Looking back, I have to laugh at the way divine intervention kicked in. When the pain literally stopped me in my tracks, we were passing through a small village, and it just so happened that there was a comfortable motel right around the corner. I didn't want to hold my friend back, but I had to choose a course that would cherish and nurture me—even if it resulted in her disapproving of or abandoning me.

Much to my delight, she chose to stay. After a long, hot shower, I massaged my sore legs and back with copious amounts of muscle balm, and felt my body releasing what felt like aeons of sacrifice stored within the memory of every cell.

For the next nine days, I walked and cleared. Every step transformed ancient vows to grow through suffering and pain into a commitment to grow through joy. I felt this transformation not only within myself, but in all who had walked this path before me, and all those who have yet to travel it.



I'd had no idea how deeply embedded the old habits and collective agreements of sacrifice had been stored in my body. Every step heightened my awareness as the chakras and energy channels in my body started to fully open up. The aches and pains moved around to different muscles and joints as my body sought to restore equilibrium. At the same time, I experienced a profound freedom—and a brand new appreciation for my legs and feet as they carried me through life.

On day five, I had my first mystical experience.

My right Achilles tendon had been cramping, and it was very painful to walk. I had adjusted my shoes and applied several bandages, but nothing eased the discomfort. Now, the pain had become excruciating.

I asked my tendon, “What do I need to let go of?”

I saw a snapshot of a time long ago, in a life long past, when I had shut down my full power. In that life, I knew how to weave magic, and people would come to me for healing of all kinds of ailments. This seemed threatening to some, and they tried to stop me. I kept serving those who needed me—but when my oppressors threatened to harm my loved ones, I made a vow to never publicly display my powers (as they called them) again. I lived the remainder of that life in hiding, so as not to put anyone else at risk again, thereby denying the divine expression of my gifts.

As I returned to the trail, I realized that that past life experience might explain the inner conflict I'd always felt about “going public” with my own soul-inspired business—as if my calling had to be kept under wraps. Obviously, that was impossible when I was sharing on social media!

“I can show you how to release the pain and embrace your power again,” a voice told me.

I looked to my left, and saw one of my spirit guides walking next to me!

I was used to communicating with my guides, but no one had ever appeared “in person” the way this guide was doing. At first, I wondered if I was hallucinating—but no, everything else on the trail was still the same. And the pain was still crippling me.

I could see my friend in the distance; she'd gotten way ahead of me while I limped along. There was no way I could continue like this.

"What do I need to do?" I asked.

He looked at me with the most loving gaze, and smiled.

"Visualize a pink rose in your tendon. Allow it to absorb and transform the pain. Then, place a rose in every part of your body that is hurting. Imagine these roses opening, releasing their pure essence into every cell."

I did as I was instructed—and within fifteen minutes, the pain was completely gone. I was shocked. I wiggled my foot around in the air just to make sure I wasn't imagining things. I jumped up and down. Not even a twinge.

My guide walked beside me for the remainder of that day, and reminded me of many things I had forgotten: He assured me that he would be with me throughout the rest of this journey, and would gladly answer any questions I had. There were many.

Then, he gave me an assignment for the next few days to anchor this new frequency of joy and healing in my body. Every morning, I was to infuse a pink rose into every major chakra point and each of my joints, so that this vibration could work its magic throughout the day. When I asked about the significance of the pink rose, he replied, "She is the queen of flowers, who resides in your heart. The pink vibration offers tenderness and compassion as keys to loving and accepting yourself. Anyone can use this, and you are free to share it—but you needed to first experience it in yourself."

When we reached the top of the next rise, I ran down the hill to meet my friend.

Over the next few days, I did as I had been instructed, and felt the energy in my body shift yet again. Healing occurred as I walked, and sometimes while I was resting. When I woke up on day ten, I knew the clearing was done. Now, it was time to simply walk and enjoy the rest of the pilgrimage with a pain-free body and a lighter soul and heart.

A few days later, as we approached Santiago de Compostela, I noticed a cramp starting in my right leg. With only two miles to go, it

was tempting to just tough it out—but there was a sunny, inviting field right next to the road, and my heart was telling me to stop and rest. My guide asked me if I was willing to accept some extra support. I gladly agreed.

The next thing I knew, he was introducing me to none other than Jesus, Mother Mary, and Mary Magdalene.

I do not subscribe to any religion. I have no idea why they appeared to me this way—and I didn't think to ask. As they stood around me, they infused my being with so much love that it felt as if I'd just been plugged into an electrical socket and hit with a love surge.

When I got up, the cramp in my leg was gone, and I continued into Santiago with a bounce in my step.

At the edge of the city, my guide bid me farewell. Although I still feel his presence, I have not seen him, nor any other spirit guide, in physical form again since.

Our journey continued to Finisterre, the final stop on the Camino, where people used to think the earth ended. When we reached the zero kilometer signpost it dawned on me: this Camino had been a symbolic retracing of the steps of my life, and all the choices I had made up until this point in time. Now, I had finally reached the “zero point,” where all energy exists as pure potential, and is available to be infused into whatever creation the consciousness can conceive.

Saint James called me to walk the Camino at a time in my life when I was gaining increased visibility teaching heart-centered entrepreneurs via social media. My classes were infused with energy alignments to release my clients' fear of being visible and getting their messages out into the world.

I guess the Saint thought I could use an expedited clearing in this department myself—and funnily enough, it was by slowing down to walking pace that I was finally able to release what I'd been running from.

Four years after completing the Camino, I'm still following my Joy Sprinkle Trail. It has led me from the Netherlands, to France, and finally home to Australia after twenty years.

It's taken a lot of practice to learn to trust those joy sprinkles—but when I accepted the call to walk the Camino, I declared my intention to walk through life guided by joy, and they have led me there. Now, I'm living the life of my dreams: living location-independent, coaching clients around the world, and expressing myself creatively through writing.

I wonder where the joy sprinkles will lead me next?



# REFLECTION

*When was your last great adventure? What did you learn from it?*

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*Tina felt called to undertake the Camino pilgrimage by a force she couldn't explain. When have you been called to action by Spirit?*

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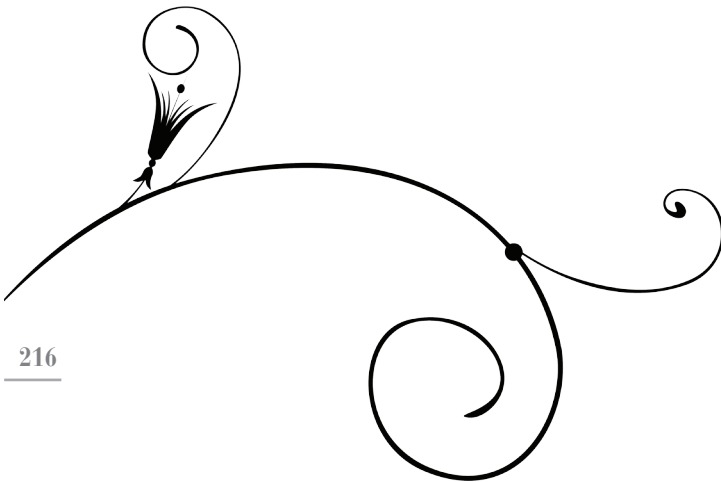
*It was by slowing down and honoring her pain, not pushing through it, that Tina was able to find her healing connection. How can you make more space to slow down and listen to your body, your heart, and your spirit?*

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# JOYFUL SHADOWS



*Cindy Hively*

*I* find it amazing what I remember from my childhood. I'll share my memories with my mom, and she'll reply in her Southern Virginia accent, "How can you possibly remember that?"

I remember all the creative play I engaged in, and how I loved to create joy—not just for myself, but for everyone around me. My feet were always black, and I smelled of heat and sweat on the hot summer days. Every night, just before dark, I'd come home from my adventures, only to be swept off my feet and carried to the tub to wash off the day's fun.

Each day, I would get a small brown paper lunch bag and fill it up with frogs. Gently, I'd pour them out on the grass and play with them. I think they actually enjoyed their frog parties. If there was an animal to play with, I was curious. If there was an animal injured, or a stray wandering lost, I would bring it home. As I got older, I graduated to the little people in the neighborhood—those who weren't well taken care of because of alcoholic or drug-addicted parents. I had enough love for everyone.

My memories of growing up are the foundation of who I am today. I still walk barefoot in the grass, and get down on the ground to play with my furry boys and dig in the dirt of Mother Earth. I still feel a deep love and connection to my parents; to this day, each hug and kiss I receive feels like it did when I was that four-year-old girl.

I'm also connected to my grandmas—especially my great-grandma. They all toiled in the soil, made home remedies, clothes, canned goods, and quilts, and knew how to keep the fires burning for the love of home and family.

It was always a grand adventure to visit Great Grandma in North Carolina. Her place had no running water; we had to use an outhouse, and bathe in a huge tin tub on the back porch.

My high school years were busy. Something was always going on with my youth group. I had boyfriends and girlfriends, and played every sport possible. Then, one day, freedom came; it was called college. I knew how to have fun and stay out of trouble at the same time.

I embodied joy inside and out—and, innocently, I didn't even know it.

I took off my college graduation gown by noon, and put on my Ann Taylor suit and heels to report to work at 1:00 p.m. I was the manager of a high-end boutique, ready to conquer the retail world—and I did. Several years later, I was married with a beautiful daughter, and still steadily climbing the ladder of corporate retail. I loved my career path, and felt like I was doing just about everything right.

Then, the dark times came.

I hadn't felt great physically in a few years. I'd gained weight, I tired easily. I thought I was just aging—but as the months went by, it got worse. Getting up in the morning was hard, and most nights I was in bed by 7:00 p.m. I fought severe muscle and joint pain, fever, and chills. My emotional health suffered, too—especially when I started going numb in my hands and feet, and losing my memory.

One morning, I suddenly realized that I was standing on my deck, soaking wet, with only my underclothes on. The only memory I had was of getting into the shower to get ready for work.

I couldn't deny it any longer: something was really, really wrong. I scheduled an appointment with a rheumatologist the next morning. After a thorough exam, extensive tests, and several scans, I was diagnosed with Lupus, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and three other diseases.

My doctor took me out of work for six weeks and ordered me to rest. *Right*, I thought. *He doesn't know me. I'll take this medication and be back at it in a week.* But as the weeks went on, I became more and more ill, and one day I realized that I would never be going back.



My career had been my life. It was the one thing besides my family that gave me purpose and validation. And it was gone ... just like that.

I crashed and burned.

I spent the next year in bed trying to recover my physical health, but it was hard. I was in a deep, dark depression. I lost interest in everything; I just wanted to be left alone with the curtains pulled.

And then, one morning in early January, things changed.

It was snowing. Oh, how I love snow and a cold winter's morning! I awakened early, and was sitting up in bed, just watching those big flakes come down. Suddenly, it was like I was standing in a fireplace. Every cell in my body seemed to heat up.

Then, the message came: *You can live life from this bed, looking out the window, or you can get yourself together, get up, and start where you are in this exact moment and time.*

I was weeping because I could feel a Divine purification process taking place. For the first time in a year, I didn't look back: I looked forward.

My life shifted. Soulful friends became guides to me. I started learning about body chemistry, mindfulness, yoga, meditation, and the true healing arts of herbalism and essential oil blending. Everything we need to heal and feel better, God has already placed within us and upon this amazing place we call Earth.

Being intuitive and curious has always benefited me well. Soon, others in need of assistance were placed in my path, and I became the light unto their journey of healing. As women would ask for encouragement and prayers, I realized I had more to offer them just that. I had experience—oh my goodness, did I have experience! My own journey had taught me more than I'd ever realized. I didn't have a degree in psychology, but I had a degree in life school that was priceless. I am still mentoring the first woman I connected with six years ago.

Since getting out of bed that January morning, I have reconnected with the essence of who I am: the childlike joy that I once brought to

every moment of every day. I now look at myself as a Shaman, a true medicine woman of knowledge.

Through my healing journey, I've learned many great truths. One of these is that, even in the midst of darkness and difficulty, we are always able to find light—even if it's just a tiny crack. It was by following that light—my light—that I began to be able to find the gift of joy in any circumstance. It's not always wrapped up in fancy paper, and it's not always what I expect to see, but it is always there. (Who needs paper, ribbons, and bows, anyway? They just get tossed out!)

Living in joy is not a one-time magickal spell that lasts forevermore. It's hard work! But once I accepted that I chose, in some way, the trauma, lack, and dark times I've experienced, I was also able to accept that, *by choice*, I have the ability to shine my light on those experiences, and create joy among the shadows. I have the power to intervene directly in my own well-being. I can choose joyful empowerment over victimhood. All I have to do is remember where I started—in joy—and remember to come home to myself.

In other words, when life gives me frogs, I can run screaming ... or I can have a frog party!

Anybody want to join me?



# REFLECTION

*Do you still connect with your childhood joy? If not, when did you “forget” how to be joyful in that way?*

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*Cindy experienced a challenging illness that forced her to re-learn how to access her joy in the dark times. When have you faced a similar challenge? What was the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual outcome for you?*

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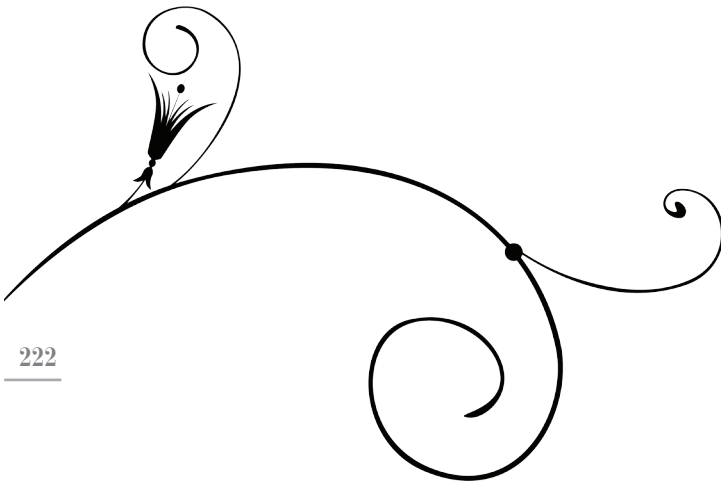
*What is your plan for the next time something challenging occurs? How can you have your own “frog party?”*

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# THE AMAZING GRACE OF GOD

*Maggie Chula*

*T*here was a time in my life when I was stressed out from the moment I woke up in the morning until the moment I went to bed.

I looked forward to sleep and the time each day when I could shut off the world. I knew I had once been joyful, but the memory was like a shadow dream; I was sure that I had once known what it meant, and hoped that I could do so again, but at the moment I couldn't bring it fully to mind.

I had recently become divorced, and my children and I were moving to the suburbs. I'd found a lovely townhouse that I could actually afford while still having a little left over in my monthly budget. I had recovered from a life-threatening episode of Crohn's disease, and was feeling hopeful that this new home would help me and my children start over and release the fears, pain, and trauma of the last few years.

The real estate climate of the day was a bit of a free-for-all. It was like all the rules went out the window. To facilitate the sale of my home in the city, I agreed to let the couple buying my home move in before the closing date, while I moved into the new townhouse. It seemed like a win-win for everyone.

And then, the closing date came.

Everything was expected to go smoothly. The couple who had moved into my old house were supposed to be signing the papers for the sale of their own former home that morning, celebrating over lunch, and then heading to the office of my mortgage lender to sign the papers for our transaction.

At five minutes before the hour, though, I started to sense that

something was wrong. I just had the feeling they weren't coming. We all waited another ten minutes.

"They're just coming back late from their celebration," the couple's Realtor told us. She gave the same excuse again, fifteen minutes later.

It was then that the noises started. No one would talk to me, but the whispers were all around. The Realtor stepped out to call her clients, and when she came back ... well, it doesn't take a psychic to recognize the signs of defeat. She huddled up with the other professionals for another quarter hour before I finally learned what was going on.

The buyers weren't coming. They weren't closing on my home that day. They'd decided that, while they still wanted the home, they wanted to buy it for less money, on another day.

I was in shock. I had moved myself and my two young children out of my home, and a new school year was starting in a week—but if I didn't sell my house, I couldn't buy the townhouse. I'd used up every bit of my savings to hire professional movers two days before. Broke, scared, completely alone ... How was I going to face my kids when I picked them up from summer camp? I'd told them we were going to be celebrating, but now I had to tell them we were homeless.

How could something like this happen?

That moment in the mortgage lender's office brought me low in a way nothing else in my life had done before. I was totally blind-sided—and so was everyone else, with the exception of the couple who were supposed to be buying my home.

My Realtor was wonderful. She helped me navigate the murky waters of the failed sale, and negotiated with the owners of the townhouse so that I could live there for two weeks before I had to either buy it or move out.

I made the decision to stay in the townhouse, and over the next few days, things began to feel a little less dire. The bank decided that I did, in fact, make enough money to purchase the townhouse without selling my old house first. Signing the papers, I felt satisfied that at least I wouldn't be bullied into selling my home at a discount. I would

put it back on the market, and new buyers would show up soon. I would be grateful that I had options.

And then, it got worse.

My Realtor called and shared with me that I could not, in fact, put my home back on the market. Apparently, when the closing documents were written, they did not specify that the house would be released if the closing did not happen as scheduled. The couple living in my house were still insisting that they wanted to buy the property—so, in legal terms, the closing was merely “postponed” until we could agree on terms. If I wanted to negate the sale, I would have to hire a lawyer to sue them to sign the closing documents or release their hold on my house.

Postponed? This was unheard of. I couldn’t believe anyone could actually get away with this! I hired the lawyer—and then I got scared. I was so upset with my lack of control over this situation that I couldn’t see a way out.

The next Saturday morning, when the kids were with their father and I was safely alone, I finally lost it.

I railed at God. “How could you do this to me? What kind of test is this?” I had worked so hard to regain my health—only to lose every shred of security to this fiasco.

“I can’t take this anymore!” I cried. “I surrender. I’ll do anything you say, but this is now in Your hands. I can’t live like this anymore. I’m sick of being unhappy.”

And there I sat, in my bubble of pain. Life sucked, and I was finished. I had no skills I could use to make this situation better. I didn’t have any legal recourse. I’d been so hopeful about my new life—but had I been living a lie? Did my improving health mean nothing? That couldn’t be the case ... could it?

Then, I did something I’d forgotten to do for months. I put away my fear, and listened to my higher wisdom. I visualized energy coming to me from God—and as I did, I saw a crystal shell around me splinter into a million pieces. I saw the documents freeing my house signed and filed. I saw the earnest money going to the lawyer for his fees. I

saw my old home with a “Sold” sign on the front lawn, and a family with two kids smiling joyfully as they moved their belongings in.

“Finally,” I breathed. “It’s my turn.”

I felt the sense of peace I’d remembered from those shadow dreams, and knew that God had sent me an angel to comfort and hold me. I was no longer alone. The worst was over, and I would get through this.

After I changed my outlook, the situation improved rapidly. The couple released their hold on my property. My best friend’s new boss was looking for a nice, family home for herself and her two children. She fell in love with my house, and the day after the house was legally set free, she signed the purchase agreement.

I couldn’t believe how much support and joy came to me as a result of my prayers. The bubble of fear I’d built around me needed to be shattered. The moment I surrendered my pain and sorrow, I was set free. How had I forgotten how much it meant to see the evidence of God and His angels in my day-to-day life?

Never again will I let my daily ritual of connecting to the grace of God fade into the memory of a shadow dream. There is a better way for me to be in the world, and stay protected from negative energies and influences.

For me, maintaining a joy-filled life is all about these daily acts of surrender. No matter what happens, I am secure in the knowing that this life is “my turn.”





# REFLECTION

*When was the last time you were in a situation that felt completely beyond your control? How did you react?*

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*Maggie dealt with her loss of control by surrendering everything to her Divine power. How can the act of surrender help you find more joy in your daily life?*

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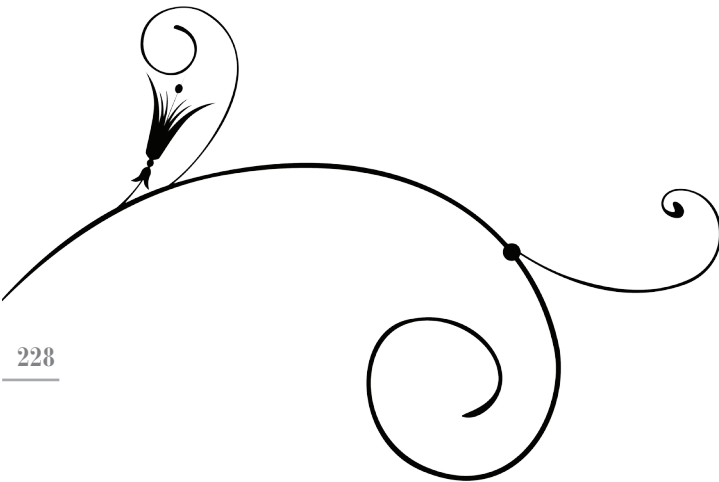
*Do you have a daily ritual of spiritual connection? How does this contribute to your joy?*

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# THE MAGIC OF SELF-LOVE

*Paula Foster*

**“I** love and accept myself,” I said to my reflection.

The words caught in my throat. *This exercise is ridiculous*, I thought. *Seriously, who talks to themselves like this?* I was half-certain that the woman in the mirror was going to laugh at me, or tell me I was crazy for trying this silly self-help stuff.

Ugliness of mindset was something I understood all too well. Joy and self-love, on the other hand, were things I’d only witnessed in others. It had been a hard sell—but I finally felt ready to welcome this new way of thinking into my life.

If only I wasn’t so afraid to say those words out loud: “I love and accept myself.”

Where I grew up, joy was in short supply. When your extended family legacy includes depression, alcoholism, domestic violence, chronic disease, and obesity, it tends to show life in a rather harsh perspective. When my cousins’ father dragged them into the other room and beat them, their mother sat quietly nearby, not quite able to cover the bruises on her own body. I could smell the fear and desperation, but there was nothing I could do. We were there because “that’s what supportive families do for one another,” but during those visits, all I wanted to do was escape. I remember feeling so lucky that I was never hit by either of my parents—but I still learned to walk on eggshells, waiting for a physical or verbal explosion that I didn’t understand.

My grandmother often told me stories of my grandfather, and how charming he was when he wasn’t drunk. Her dating advice was, “There will come a moment when you will no longer be able to escape

a bad man.” As if all men were evil under the surface, and they were just waiting for their chance to use and abuse me. I was thirteen at the time, and hadn’t even kissed a boy yet. Her advice made me feel sick and confused. I could feel the heaviness in her soul.

Trauma (of any kind) was a persistent theme in my family. My maternal grandmother and my mother’s sister both died young. One cousin on my dad’s side of the family committed suicide; another died in an accidental shooting. And while my mother tried to “keep it together,” her depression often caught up to her. I remember coming home from school to find her sitting in the dark, crying. Another time, when I was about twelve, I brought her a cold drink when she was working late in the yard. I had scrubbed my face clean and put the drink in a pretty glass on a tray, just to surprise her. When I reached her, she was sobbing. I handed her the drink, thinking it would cheer her—but her only response was, “Why would you go through all that trouble?”

Dad, too, was usually scowling from stress or worry. Nothing I did or said seemed to help either of them.

I didn’t want to see the trauma anymore, or hear the ugly rehashing of prior traumas that passed for conversation so much of the time, but I felt powerless to stop any of it. I started to escape into my thoughts as much as possible during these family visits, rejecting, in my mind, the idea that any of this was “normal.”

But what my head rejected, my heart absorbed—quietly, and almost without my noticing.

As a young adult, I decided that the pursuit of the American dream and its material comforts would take me out of the cycle of ugliness and abuse that was my family legacy—and on the surface, it seemed like I had broken free. I was in a loving marriage, and had a successful job. But beneath it all, I was just going through the motions. I literally ached for more kindness and compassion. I hated my corporate job, and found it soulless and uninspiring. My life looked very different from my family’s, but it wasn’t necessarily a *happier* life.

Naturally a private person, I had become very skilled at putting up walls and hiding my emotions. If I showed my true feelings, I

believed, all of my “ugly stuff” would come out—and who would want to be around me then? It was only when I was alone, away from my everyday life, that I could let my emotions surface. I would sit quietly and allow myself to cry, releasing everything that I couldn’t show to the rest of the world.

I wanted to experience more loving thoughts and actions from myself and others, and not dwell on the ugliness of life as I’d been taught to do as a child. But I’d become so good at hiding my true feelings that, whenever I let my guard down and “fell apart” in any way, the people close to me would look at me like I was an alien. “What’s your problem?” they’d ask. “Why are you so ugly?” Of course, this just made me want to hide my emotions even more.

Unbeknownst to me, help was on the way.

I believe that there are angels who walk this earth masquerading as people, and that they are put in our path when we need them. My angels came in the form of new friends that I met after moving to a new state. They also accepted me for who I was—ugly family baggage and all! As we openly shared the pain of our pasts through tears and laughter, they also exposed me to metaphysical teachers and tools. They shared with me that we don’t have to let our family legacies define us. We can choose for ourselves who we want to be.

One of my new friends, Susan, gave me a copy of Louise Hay’s book, *You Can Heal Your Life*, and it was there that I first learned the mirror mantra that was so challenging for me. That book was a lifeline for me; I grabbed it, and didn’t look back!

I soon delved into *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior; A Course in Miracles*, and other books by Martha Beck, Wayne Dyer, and others in the field. The first time I listened to Marianne Williamson’s interpretation of *A Course in Miracles*, one statement brought me to my knees:

*“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?” Actually, who are you not to be?”*

I had never heard such inspiring self-talk. Hearing these words brought me back from the brink of despair. As my spirit continued to awaken, I learned my greatest lesson: I could, and *did*, love and accept myself.

Once I flipped that switch, I only wanted to live from that space. I immersed myself in everything metaphysical and spiritual: positive affirmations, yoga, mantras, chanting, meditation, journaling, Reiki, subliminal hypnosis, and more. I utilized Martha Beck's tool of metaphorically zipping myself into a protective bubble before I entered family situations that I knew would be emotionally toxic—and, lo and behold, it worked!

I wish I could say that once I discovered these healing modalities and a more enlightened mindset that my life was permanently “fixed.” But the more I practiced self-love and acceptance, the more I seemed to lose. As my happiness increased from year to year, I began to have a visceral reaction to negative people and places. However, many of my closest friends and family members continued to live in a lower vibration. They were only happy when they could bring me down with them. I learned that I can choose to remove myself from emotionally toxic people and places when I need to—it's as though I have a loving, magical force pulling me away—but that removing myself from the negativity often means removing myself from the relationship as well.

Nowhere was this choice more challenging than in my marriage. While my emotional health blossomed, my husband's did not. We were a good team most of the time, and he was always there for me—but he had his dark side as well. I tried to cheer him up and help him through his setbacks, but eventually it was too much for me to manage. The truth was, I couldn't help him, because he wouldn't accept my help. In fact, he rejected it. And so, we separated, and eventually divorced. Oh, how that knocked me to my knees! But I came to realize that letting go of what you have no control over can be a gift.

I continued my spiritual studies, and soon decided that I no longer wanted to be a programmer. I had embraced a much healthier lifestyle in recent years and wanted to make this my new work. I went back to school to become an Integrative Nutrition Coach and Let Your Yoga

Dance teacher. During my training, I became the healthiest I had ever been physically, spiritually and emotionally.

While my health radically improved, my mother's health dramatically declined. She had battled obesity and untreated depression for years, but now, as she dealt with congestive heart failure and complications from Type 2 diabetes, her weight spiraled out of control. Her passing in the spring of 2014, at the age of seventy-one, was the most painful loss I'd ever endured. I know in my heart that her profound unhappiness was the fuel for her diseased body. How I wish she could have learned and embraced some of what I now practice in my life!

But, as we know, all loss happens to allow for the new. I know that my mother's passing has made room in my life for something greater—something magical yet to come.

Since that day when I first recited that simple mantra to my mirror, my life has truly changed for the better. I am so grateful that I grabbed the lifeline and found the courage to say “yes!” to self-love and greater joy in my life.

Now, instead of building walls, when I need support and guidance I ask for it. I throw up my hands, ask my question, lay my ripped-open soul at the feet of the Universe, and surrender. I no longer have to hide who I am or what I feel.

That, to me, is the magic of self-love.



# REFLECTION

*What is the emotional legacy of your family?*

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*In what ways do you carry the burdens of your ancestors? How can you let them go to make room for more joy in your life?*

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*Paula found resources to help her self-growth in metaphysical books and a group of “angel” friends. Where do you find loving support for your personal journey?*

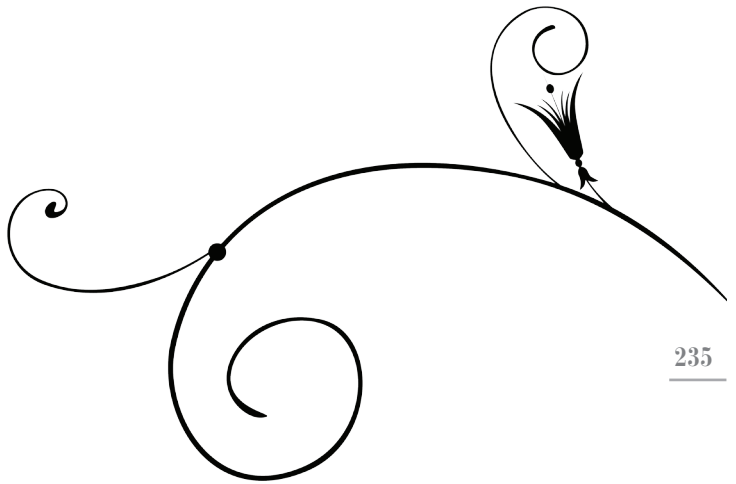
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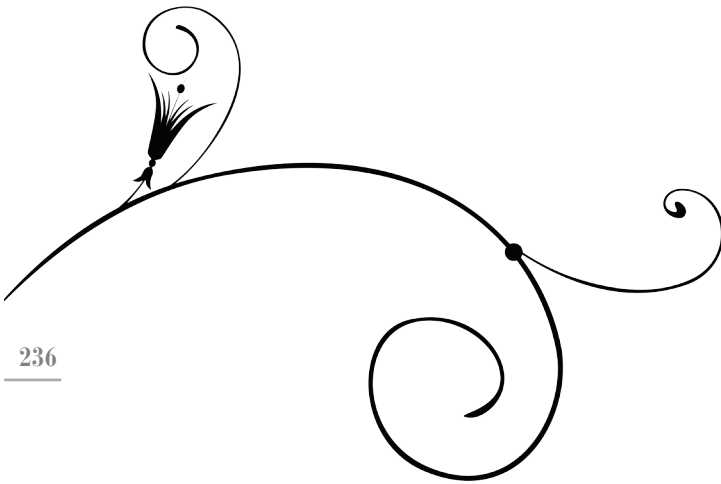
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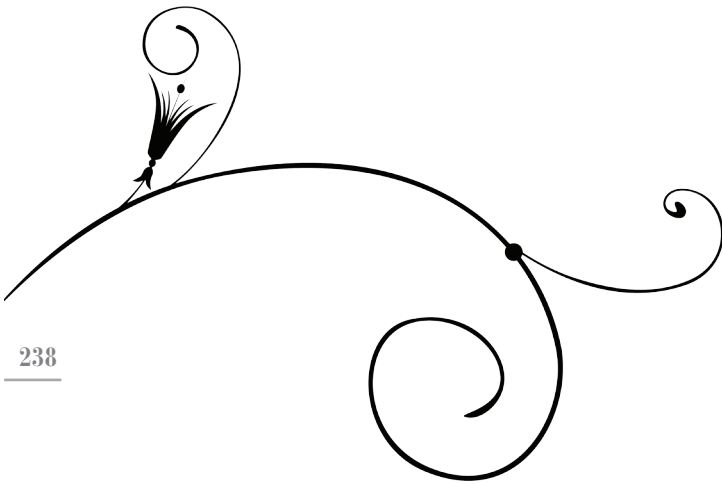




A large, light gray decorative flourish consisting of several elegant, swirling lines that curve across the top half of the page. It ends in a small tassel-like detail on the right side.

*Chapter  
Eight*

*Joy* IS...  
HONORING  
YOURSELF



## A LINE IN THE SAND

Melissa  
Rapoport

I awakened in the early morning with pain in my chest. Not the racing heart of a panic attack (which I'd experienced for the first time several months prior) but a "Hey, I'm talking to you! This is serious!" kind of pain.

Sitting in the back of a cab as it wove through Manhattan morning traffic, I found myself drifting. *What happens if I die?* I wondered. *What will happen to my girls?* To be honest, my teenage daughters were the only reasons I could imagine for wanting to live.

As the cab screeched to a halt, I told myself: *Whatever it is, fight to live.*

Dr. Tsang, my doctor for over fifteen years, had a small office on the top floor of an elevator building in Chinatown. In the treatment room, I peered at the art on his wall, and listened to the soothing trickle of water in the fountain. I started to relax, and as I heard his laugh through the wall of the adjoining room, I thought, *Please, Dr. Tsang, take care of me. I just want someone to take care of me!*

My life was in shambles. My café, which I'd owned for over twenty years, was gone in a flash, the victim of increasing rents. The new café I'd opened in its place was a constant source of irritation, and the landlord's unfulfilled promises had landed me in court. To top it all off, a failed relationship had left me broken-hearted.

Dr. Tsang knocked softly, and entered. Moving slowly and calmly, he took my vitals, listened to my heart, took an EKG.

His diagnosis? "You are one step away from a stroke."

While I was not having a heart attack, as I'd originally thought, my blood pressure, which had been low all my life, was now dangerously

high. He gave me a mandate to bring it down within two weeks, or face medication. His holistic prescription included dietary changes, mindfulness, and ... a vacation.

“Go away,” he said. “Drop everything. Your life depends on it.”

He was right.

I booked an eight-day trip to Spain to visit Gina, a girlfriend I hadn’t seen in close to twenty years. When I arrived at the Madrid airport, I had an e-mail from Gina saying that she was ill and wouldn’t be able to meet me. She gave me directions to her neighborhood, and said she would call on her way back from the doctor’s office.

I set up shop at an outdoor café with my luggage, phoned my daughters at their dad’s house, and set about eating tapas and sipping *café blanco* (coffee with cream). A couple of hours went by, but still no word from Gina.

Feeling perplexed and abandoned, I wondered, *What am I going to do?*

It was at that moment that my life began to change.

In rusty Spanish, I spoke to the café owner, who helped me find a clean, inexpensive hotel room in the neighborhood. He even closed up shop for a few minutes to walk me through the unsigned streets. When he left me at the check-in counter, I thought about returning home. I felt so alone! But in my heart, I knew that wasn’t the answer. There was a treasure for me in Madrid. I just had to find it.

The hotel was more like an inn. The lobby was abuzz with social activity, a mix of local businesspeople, tourists, and backpackers. People were talking and laughing, and a small group was crowded around the maps spread out on their table, sipping sangria and planning their excursions. I sat there, taking it all in.

I noticed one gentleman who seemed to know everybody; he was shaking people’s hands, clapping the men on their shoulders. I thought perhaps he was the inn’s owner. I needed to do something to shake the loneliness and turn my trip into an adventure, so I approached him, and explained how I’d landed at this hotel. “I’m all by myself,” I told him. “Will you have dinner with me?”

He took me to an out-of-the-way tapas restaurant and introduced me to everyone he knew. His happiness and joy for life was infectious. I started to feel uplifted, less weary. Rather than focusing on all my worries, I was intoxicated by the sounds and smells swirling around me.

Over the next several days, I planned day trips, walking tours, and an overnight trip to Toledo. Everywhere I went, I had three things with me: a camera, a writing journal, and a book, *Finding Your Own North Star* by Martha Beck. Every time I sat down, whether at a café, on a park bench, or at my hotel, I would open that book. Soon, I began to notice that I was nodding my head in recognition as I read, thinking, *Yes! That is me!* Exhausted. Sick. Moody. Floundering.

The book was resonating so loudly that I started to reread it from the beginning. As I started to question my motives and behaviors toward work and love, I realized that I was operating on autopilot, doing what I was doing because that was what I always did, day in and day out. It was familiar. It was also killing me.

I wandered through gardens, explored museums, ate at quaint cafés, examined architecture, and allowed the days to drift by with wonder and awe. Parts of me long buried under a shroud of others' wants and expectations were being unearthed. I found myself smiling, humming, embracing freedom. Where I had been closed, I was opening.

I planned my trip to Toledo on the one night the hotel didn't have space for me. Toledo is a medieval walled city where synagogues, mosques, and churches stood together until the Inquisition. I couldn't wait to photograph the diverse architecture, now beautifully restored, in the old city.

I left Madrid at the break of dawn, and, after checking in to my hotel (a seventeenth-century marvel and a gift in its own right), I headed out with my usual tools—camera, journal, and book—and walked directly to the restored Synagogue of El Transito, an architectural wonder finished in 1356.

I spent hours canvassing the entire structure. The very walls seemed to speak to me in heady voices of grief, loss, love, and beauty. In the meditation garden, I wrote and reflected. When the tears came, they were a tangled mix of grief for the terror that the Jews must have

endured during the Inquisition, and my own losses. I, too, had been afraid and grieving.

Many photographs and tear-stained pages later, I left the synagogue, exhaled, and let go into an altered state of being.

Later that day, Toledo gave me a second priceless gift.

As I walked the narrow alleyways on the side of a steep hill, a car sped toward me. The road was so tight, however, that I had to jump into a doorway to avoid being clipped. A few doors down, a man grumbled about the driver, and I laughed. When he saw my reaction, he started laughing too, and proceeded to say something so fast I could barely pick it up.

We started walking and talking—my Spanish better than his English. He took me to his gallery, where he showed me his exquisite paintings, and serenaded me with his guitar when I inquired about the gold record displayed proudly on his wall. We had a late lunch at an outdoor café, and shared wine, laughter, and conversation. I was having the best time I'd had in years.

And then, suddenly, it was time to catch my train.

He asked me to stay, to spend the night at his estate. He would drive me to Madrid whenever I chose to return, he said. But I chose to leave. I needed to take care of myself, strengthen my stature, and find peace in my heart before giving away any part of me.

As I walked to the platform at the train station, a car screeched outside—and my suitor jumped out, yelling my name. He was clutching a beautiful bouquet of flowers.

“Happy Mother’s Day,” he said, breathlessly.

I’d had no idea that this was the day mothers were celebrated in Spain. My heart was full, and my head was clear, as I hugged him and thanked him for this most glorious gift—an open heart.

You may be wondering why I left. A handsome artist, a whirlwind romance . . . That is the stuff of dreams, right? But I’d learned something about myself in the last few days: for many years, perhaps for my whole life, I didn’t understand what “setting boundaries” meant. I was always so afraid of losing people that I would give up my wants and needs to make them happy. With one hand, I’d motion, “Yes!” and



with the other, “No! No!” I was so desperate to hold on to things I didn’t want that my heart was closed up tight.

My suitor taught me a new way. I drew a line in the sand. I would not stay with him in Toledo. I listened to my inner voice and followed my instincts. By holding my line firm, I felt a strength and desirability well up within me that I had never experienced in the past. The beauty and sexiness I felt came not from the man in front of me, but from *within*.

My beauty, my strength, my joy: all these were already inside me. They had been there the whole time.

I never spoke to my suitor again. That day remains a pure memory, movie-like, and it brings me great comfort. My only physical remembrance is a photograph I took of him proudly holding his guitar next to his gold record. Every time I come across it, I feel again his warmth and compassion.

Back in Madrid, I walked into the hotel lobby to find the group of people I’d befriended on my first day eating together. “Melissa!” they cried. “You’re back. Come, join us!” Everyone had made a dish from their home country in the hotel kitchen: Spanish, Portuguese, French, Scottish, and Albanian. The sense of community was joyous.

The next day, Gina finally surfaced. A nasty combination of bronchitis and stress had kept her home-bound for many days. When I saw and embraced my dear friend, it was like no time had passed since our last meeting. We picked up where we’d left off nearly two decades earlier.

“Are you angry?” she asked, when the subject of my days alone came up.

“Absolutely not!” And I wasn’t. In fact, I felt blessed to have had those days alone, because it was in that space that I learned that I could create my life, and my future.

Upon my return to New York, I applied those lessons to my messy, stressful life. Spain taught me that I didn’t need to wait for things to happen to me; I could envision what I wanted, and create it. Just because I’d been a café owner for two decades didn’t mean I had to *stay* a café owner. I envisioned myself happy in a new neighborhood

with my girls, carrying bags of groceries from the local market. I put my Transformation Blueprint on paper. And, less than a year later, I closed my café, moved to a new apartment, and started building a new life.

My suitor presented me with the opportunity to say “no” without fear, guilt, or doubt. I soon realized that I could say “yes” the same way. This gift has allowed me to manifest everything I want in my life, over and over again. My joy has come through finding my voice, expressing my needs personally and professionally, and remembering how to infuse joy in every moment.

*Muchas Gracias, España. Te Quiero.*



# REFLECTION

*How does stress show up for you physically? What steps can you take, right now, to alleviate it?*

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*When was the last time you traveled/ate dinner/explored on your own? What did you learn about yourself from the experience?*

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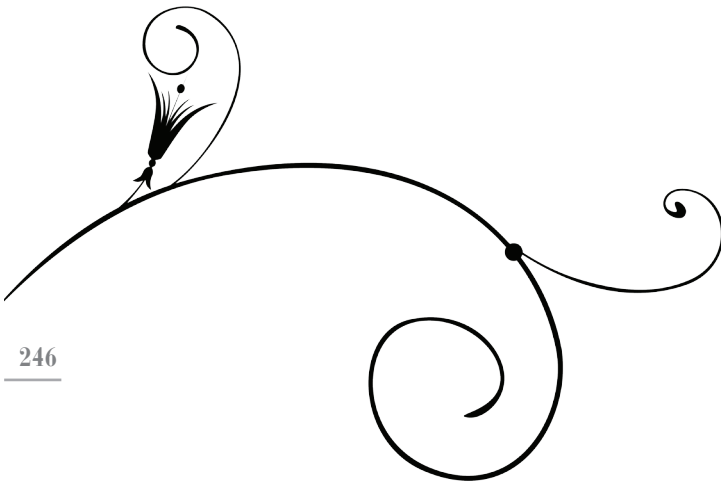
*Melissa “drew a line in the sand” with her suitor in Toledo. When has saying “no” empowered you? What does it mean to lovingly enforce your boundaries?*

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# NO ONE TAUGHT HER

Tiffany Kane

At the time of this writing, it has been a little more than three years since my mom left this world.

I loved her very much—and still do. We had the exact same sense of humor, and could find laughter in the most mundane experiences. It wasn't uncommon for us to finish each other's sentences, or share a look across a room that communicated volumes. My husband used to say that we shared a brain.

So much has changed for me since her passing. I wish I could share this transformation with her here, in the physical world—but honestly, I'm not sure she would understand it.

Therein lies the rub. Despite our closeness, I'm not sure my mom ever really understood me—the *real* me, the truth of who I am.

I am an empath. While that term is most commonly applied to science fiction characters with a paranormal ability to connect with external energies, in my experience it simply means that I am extremely sensitive to other people's emotions. I actually feel the emotions of others as my own, and sometimes have trouble separating what I'm feeling from what the people around me are feeling.

My mom was born in Scotland near the end of World War II, not long after the bombing raids devastated London. Everyone in her world was living in fear for the basic things. There was no room for emotional vulnerability. The mantra of the time was "Keep Calm and Carry On." As a child in that climate, you had to keep your head and obey your parents, no questions asked; it was the only way to ensure your physical safety. How frightening that must have been to a young girl!

The trauma of the war years, combined with her family's very clear ideas about social norms and "civilized" living, created a rigid box of limitations around my mom. But, like most people, she had no idea there even *was* a box. "Things are the way they are," she used to say, and that belief shaped her experience in life. One of the truths she lived by was that feeling emotions—never mind expressing them—was dangerous.

So when I showed up, feeling and expressing all over the place, she did her best to teach me to shut it down. My constant displays of emotions made her uncomfortable. "Here come the water works," she'd say. "What are you crying about *now*?"

In her mind, she was teaching me how to protect myself. But what she didn't understand (and what I couldn't express to her) was that I was sensitive to not just her words, but the energy behind them. Because her words came from her own unresolved fears, I interpreted her messages to mean that there was something wrong with me—that there was something inside me to be afraid of.

Of course, she never said anything of the sort. In fact, I'm sure that she would be horrified to know that she had inadvertently caused me to think these things about myself. But despite her best intentions for me, the negative messages piled up.

There was the time when, on a visit to Scotland when I was ten, I took what was left of my spending money for the trip and went to the local post office (which in Scotland is really more like a corner store) and bought presents for all of my friends back in California. I was so excited that I actually had enough money left to get something for everyone.

When I returned to the house and showed my mom, I thought she would be proud of my thoughtfulness and generosity. Instead, she said, "You'll never have any money. You spend money like a man with no arms."

Not quite the response I'd expected, or wanted. But, me being me, I caught the emotional undercurrent of fear and lack that was tangled up in her words, and the "truth" I took from them was, "It's not possible for me to be generous and still have money."

Then, there was the belly thing.

When I was five, I thought it was hilarious to hunch over in the tub and create rolls in my belly. I thought it was awesome to be able to change the way my body looked just by shifting position.

“Look, Mom! I have three tummies!” I giggled.

She responded with a stern, “Sit up straight!”

Confused, I did. Maybe it wasn’t good to have three tummies, after all.

In high school, I joined the cheerleading squad. I was so excited about our first performance. The tummy butterflies were out in force! I couldn’t wait for my mom to see the results of the summer’s efforts; after all, she’d been the one driving me back and forth to practices every other day.

The performance went well. Once it was over, I searched excitedly for my mom. *She’s going to be so proud!* I thought.

And she was ... sort of.

I don’t remember everything she said, but these words stand out with excruciating clarity. “It was great, but it would have been better if your tummy wasn’t sticking out so much. Why didn’t you hold it in?” She didn’t see all the hard work and practice, or the effort we’d put into designing our uniforms. None of that mattered, because my tummy was sticking out. To say I was crestfallen would be a vast understatement—but tears would only invite more harsh words.

“Thanks a *lot*, Mom,” I managed to croak.

There were other “truths,” too, that stuck around long after my childhood was over. (One that comes back strongly as I write this story is, “Never put anything in writing; someone might read it and use it against you.”) For much of my early adulthood, I worked very hard at jobs I loved, but which paid very little. I wore my low income like a badge of honor; if I had to choose between generosity and wealth, I’d pick generosity every time.

I’ve also had a tendency to downplay my accomplishments (which are many) as being “no big deal.” The hidden truth is, I’ve been afraid that, if you look too closely, you will notice that my tummy is sticking out—and once you do, none of my hard work will really matter.

I suppose that, on the surface, it would seem natural for me to be angry about the erroneous messages I received from my mom. And I suppose that, for a time, I *was* angry—but that anger was not an easy or fruitful path. It was painful. It was frustrating. It kept me stuck, without resolution, incapable of moving forward.

And in the end, I couldn't sustain that anger. I couldn't keep blaming my mom; she had always done her best for me, based on what she knew at the time.

It wasn't her fault. She didn't know. *No one taught her.*

Looking back, the pattern seems so clear. From my earliest childhood, I had—as all children do—an intense longing to be seen; to be valued and cherished for exactly who I was, always. In direct opposition was my strong desire to avoid the pain of rejection, of being seen as *not enough*. When I was in a heightened emotional state, I wanted to share that with my mom, because it seemed so much a part of who I was. I wanted my humor, my generosity, my accomplishments—and yes, even my tears—to be acknowledged, approved of, celebrated. But fear doesn't mix well with vulnerability, and her reactions were often confusing to me. No matter what her words said, the feelings behind those words were fear, worry, and judgment. I then internalized those fears and translated them to mean that *I* was wrong.

One of the things I teach my clients is that we, as humans, are “meaning-making machines.” The meanings we adopt as children are often difficult to change because we've been telling ourselves that what we believe is true for *so* long. Even if our adult brains know that our “truth” is far from the actual truth, our hearts have a hard time accepting it.

When we have an experience, our brains go to work creating meaning from that experience. In particular, our brains make up stories about what that experience means with regard to who we are in the world. This meaning is the beginning of our identity. Once identity is created, every other experience is accepted or rejected depending on how it conforms to that identity.



When an experience opposes our current identity, it creates what is known as “cognitive dissonance”—a distinctly uncomfortable sensation. In order to relieve this discomfort, we either dismiss the new experiential information, or adjust our identities to incorporate this new learning. And back to the beginning it goes.

When I started paying attention to the beliefs that were running my personal show, I began to unravel many of the unhelpful, fear-based patterns my mom unknowingly gifted to me. I began, finally, to peel back the layers and reveal the truth of who I am to myself, and to the world.

Coming out of the emotional closet was a slow process for me, more a series of small awakenings than one big “ah-ha!” moment. A succession of epiphanies, combined with my learning about cognitive dissonance and other subconscious phenomena, allowed me to slowly but surely shift my self-identity and embrace those parts of myself I had hidden for so many years.

Today, I no longer suck in my tummy. I no longer play small in my work, or hide my generous impulses. I no longer hold back my tears, or my smiles, or my giggles. I take pride in what I have done, and what I can do. Most of all, I allow myself to be vulnerable with the people I trust, and know that this vulnerability is my greatest strength, and an expression of my unique gifts.

*This* is the change I wish my mom could have witnessed. I wish she could have seen me opening up, like a blooming lotus, to show my vulnerable heart—and seen that the blossoming is not only safe, but loving and beautiful and necessary. I wish she could have seen what real, unfettered joy looks like for her emotive, expressive, empathic daughter—because maybe, just maybe, it would have given her permission to feel that joy, too.



# REFLECTION

*What beliefs do you carry with you from childhood? How do they show up in your adult life?*

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*Do you carry anger or blame for your parents (or other role models) about those beliefs? How can you release that in order to heal?*

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*What does “vulnerability” mean to you? Are you comfortable being vulnerable?*

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# THE BEST INVESTMENT

Lisa Marie  
Rosati

With trembling hands, I dialed Mike's number on my cell phone.

The pit in my stomach was cavernous, and the butterflies careening around in that cavern made me want to hurl just to expel them. *What is he going to say? Will he be mad? Will he laugh at me, or rage and say horrible things?* My thoughts were racing about like little unruly trolls.

The truth was, I needed my husband to be okay with what I was going to ask of him—but given the hugeness of my request, how the hell *could* he be?

It was 2012, and I was at a three-day women's empowerment and money manifestation retreat in California. After forty-something years of sticking close to home, I had gotten on a plane and flown three thousand miles from my husband and children. It was a bold move for someone who was afraid of practically everything, and it triggered a cascade of crazy-making thoughts—particularly with regard to my relationship.

Mike and I were not in a stable place at that point. We were looping in a toxic cycle, and lately, when we argued, he would threaten to leave me. I pretended like I didn't care, but every time I went out shopping or running errands, I wondered if he would still be there when I got home. In return for his pushing my abandonment button, I became the Queen of the Blame Game—and around and around we went. Ozzy and Harriet we were not!

Flying across the country for three whole days was probably the scariest thing I'd ever done. *What if he packs up and leaves while I'm*

*gone?* I wondered. *A lot can happen in three days!* And then, a new level of paranoia: *What if he packs his belongings and some of mine and leaves while I'm gone for three whole days? And what if the plane crashes and I die? Will my kids even remember me?*

Yes, that's where my head was at the time. And with all this mental drama going on, I was calling Mike to ask for his blessing in doing something time-sensitive and huge.

While at the retreat, I'd met a number of lovely, like-minded women—many of whom I still call Soul Sisters today. During the program, a magnificent high vibration of hope, gratitude, and love enveloped us. We listened to and learned from our wise mentor on the stage, and on day number two, the offer to help us take our lives and our businesses to the next level floated out of her mouth. And this amazing year-long program would only cost eight thousand dollars.

I wanted so much to take this next step, and continue to grow and expand my business, but the investment ... ouch!

Deep down, I think I knew that Mike would completely support me in going after my dream. But, being a people-pleaser, I was worried about gaining his approval—and wondering how many times, once I signed on that dotted line, this investment would be thrown in my face.

Spending money has never been an issue for me. I have most definitely spent more than eight thousand dollars on stuff over the years: vehicles, luxury items, houses. But after fifteen-plus years of acquiring expensive things, it became boring to me. I found myself being pulled toward spending on experiences instead—like the group business program I was attending. I'd already generated some debt by investing in private coaching and having my web site professionally created ... and now I was asking for more.

I wanted with all my heart to take this next step, but in the same breath I was scared to death to invest that much money on my dream. What kept coming up was, *can I actually be successful? Am I enough? Do I deserve to invest in myself and my dreams at such a level?* I knew, too, that I would feel beholden to pay back the money, and I didn't want to feel trapped by that debt.

Big Mike answered my call with his usual greeting: “Is this my beauty?”

I began to cry harder (in public, might I add, something that I *never* do). “Yes,” I sniffled.

Immediately, he heard that I was crying, and asked what was wrong. I had no strategy for how to approach this conversation, so I just blurted it out. “Mike, I really want to do something, and it costs a lot of money.”

“Okay,” he said gently. “How much?”

“Eight thousand dollars.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of money.”

“I know. But ...” We talked back and forth for the next few minutes, and I began to calm down. I told him my biggest fears about investing in my soul work—and myself—at such a high level. Mike expressed his concern over the debt.

Oh yes, the debt. I was nervous about that, too. However, I was feeling more compelled than ever to step into a bigger and more powerful version of myself—and Mike could sense it.

“Mama,” he said. “That’s a lot of money. But I believe in you. Go for it!”

Just as I was about to start gushing in relief and appreciation, he added, “Just pay it back.”

I’d known it was coming. But I was determined not to let his comment, or my own doubts, stop me from enjoying this moment. I told him I loved him, and hung up the phone.

Looking back, I can see that my entire life was leading me to that pivotal moment. All the drama, all the crap, all the stretching and expanding, healing and forgiving ... it was all to prepare me for this opportunity to say “yes” to myself and my dream.

I handed my credit card to the team working the event, and in thirty seconds they banged a whopping eight grand onto it. As I signed the credit card slip, all the hairs on my body were standing at attention. I’m not sure if it was excitement, fear, or both—but I was electric, plugged into possibility. In that moment, I was in a vibrational state of pure bliss.

Later that night, I opened the sliding door to my hotel room balcony and stepped out into the night. I spoke to the moon and stars, as I've done since I was a little girl, and placed my hands over my heart.

"I promise to pay back this entire investment in one year's time," I vowed.

And that's exactly what I did.

Back home again (and yes, Mike was still there), I felt the unspoken pressure to live up to my investment, to be a success and make money. I didn't completely believe I could be successful doing work I loved, but I *wanted* to believe it, and so I took a leap of faith into my desires with a determination and resolve I'd never found within myself before.

I got up every morning and walked the twenty-five feet to my office as if I was a high-powered executive. I intentionally showed up to my work day after day as if I was making multiple six figures. I worked when I was sick, and when I didn't feel like working. I took aligned action towards my desires—and it has paid off in miraculous ways.

Up until that day in California, my biggest investment in my own learning had been trade school. This new step was big, and scary, and uncomfortable. But they say that the more you do something, the easier it becomes—and it's true. Over the last three years, I've invested thousands of dollars on learning about my craft, my desires, and myself. It's something I've actually grown quite comfortable with.

To this day, I continue to get tingles of joy every time I say "yes" to my desires and invest in myself. It's a high I'm proud to be addicted to, be it from higher learning, a retreat, playing with girlfriends, self-care, or a vacation. Living each day in this place of expansion, pleasure, and possibility has given me priceless gifts: a sense of self, purpose, improved relationships, and continuous joy. These benefits are greater than material possessions could ever deliver.



# REFLECTION

*What does “investing in yourself” mean to you?*

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*What holds you back from investing time and money in yourself? How can you lovingly set your fears aside and move forward?*

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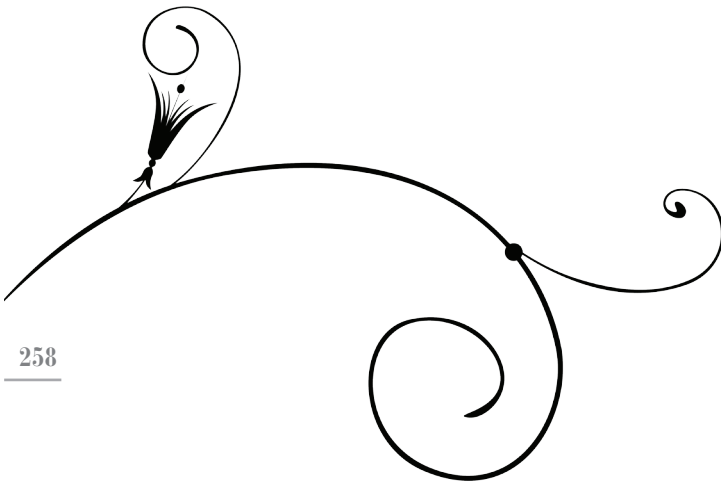
*What can you do today to invest in your dreams?*

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# LOVE IS



*Mazie  
Zdanowich*

**J**ohn and I stood in the kitchen of the home where we grew up. He was leaning against the sink, telling me excitedly about his new business, Light Wave Communications. For our entire childhood, we'd had conversations at that sink while I washed the nightly dishes and he dried.

That day, he told me that fiber optic cabling was the wave of the future. He knew his company would be successful—and he wanted me on board.

It was the early 80s, and I was enjoying selling computers for IBM. I loved the camaraderie and fun-loving spirits of my colleagues. We discussed my being Light Wave's Vice President of Sales, and laughed as we envisioned our entrepreneurial future together.

We were the closet brother and sister team I knew.

It didn't start out that way. When John was born, it was winter, and cold. My dance lessons stopped because my mom could no longer drive me to the studio. This made me very unhappy about my brother's arrival; I was four years old, and already my dancing dream was done. Once he reached school age, I always had to watch him and take him along wherever I went—even to my friends' houses. I can still hear myself asking, "Mom, can I go to Mary's?" Her response? "Take your brother."

Fortunately for me (and him), John was a smart kid, and happy to play however we wanted. He seemed to enjoy hanging out with us older kids.

This tag-along pattern continued as we grew up. We began to really like, and love, each other. Adventure and freedom, imagining and

creating new games to play; these things bonded us. The neighborhood kids liked to be with us because fun was what we did—and every day the fun was different. Some days, we'd go bike riding; others, we'd head to the playground. How I loved to sing on the swings! Then, some days, we'd just play in the backyard, using our imaginations to act out our wildest childhood fantasies.

Even after I graduated from high school, John and I remained close. On two occasions, we chose to live together: first, in downtown Boston (on Commonwealth Avenue near Fairfield Street); second, in Fairfield, Connecticut, our hometown. The first was a result of John's diagnosis with Hodgkin's disease while he was at college in Boston. He dropped out of school for treatments, then resumed after his remission. Serendipitously, I was living in a spacious apartment with no roommate, and invited him to move in.

His diagnosis was a wake-up call, in that it motivated me to love more fully, give more freely, and live more openly. After all, you just never know how long you have left here on Earth.

Several years later, John and I were roommates again in Connecticut. As adults, we never argued. We shared mutual respect, values, and the desire to live our best lives. We were still the masters of fun, and we laughed a lot. We always ended our conversations with, "I love you."

On one weather-perfect Saturday in June, the captain, crew, and I brought the sailboat to the Lake Candlewood dock. My spinnaker expertise had paid off, and we'd won the race! As I disembarked, a stranger approached the boat and told me I needed to call my family. Confused, I crossed the grass to the boat shed where the pay phone was located. With shaking hands, I dialed my parents' house—only to be told that John was dead.

Stunned, I couldn't talk. I just sobbed uncontrollably. My wonderful brother was gone? I'd never be able to see him, or talk to him, or hug him again?

No more fun. No more laughter. No more dreams. No family business. Our life as brother and sister was over. I was in shock. My heart was shattered, my body lifeless, my psyche numb.

He'd been out with friends the night before. Feeling unwell, he'd returned to our parents' house around midnight. He was dead by 8:00 a.m.

*But we just spoke a few days ago in the kitchen about his new company. It's so unfair. Why did he die?*

His final autopsy stated, "Cause of death: spinal meningitis."

*He's such a wonderful human being—so loving, kind, smart, and funny. He's my rock. My go-to. The one person in this world who loves me unconditionally. How could he leave me?*

*How could he be gone?*

The wake, funeral, and the weeks following were a blur of tears. I felt as if someone had completely ripped my heart out. I was simply a robot going through the daily motions of living. The pain of losing him was rooted deeply in my being. I needed comfort, solace, someone to talk to who knew and understood me.

I needed John.

That August, I was driving out of New York City to IBM's office in Westchester at 6:30 a.m. when I stopped for a traffic light at the corner of 2nd Avenue and 76th Street. And there he was—my brother, at age six, playing on the corner sidewalk with his blond hair glistening in the early morning sun. He crouched down, laughing, to push a toy truck on the cement.

I felt a rush of love and happiness. My insides leaped for joy. He was having fun, and looked so happy. I felt his being, and a sense of peace and calm washed over me. I wanted to hug him, feel his warmth, his arms, his love. Tears streamed down my face.

I glanced away for a moment. When I looked back, he was gone. The light turned green, and I drove away, wondering, *why did I see him? What does it mean?*

I didn't tell anyone about my vision; I didn't think they'd understand.

When diagnosed with scoliosis at the age of eleven, I started a daily practice of stretching movements and singing on my swing. Both activities made me feel good. In college I realized that I'd actually been practicing yoga and meditation—but I didn't know the true value

of my daily rituals until I queried my brother's death.

Listening to my inner wisdom during one meditation, I heard answers. My train of thought went something like this:

*John wants me to know he's playing.*

*He's having fun. He's happy. He's with me.*

*He loves me. He is love. I am love. We are ONE.*

*Love is the answer.*

I sort of understood, but not totally. After all, my last words to John were, "I love you"—they were my "answer."

In a subsequent meditation, I reviewed two possible choices: to have shared love with John for twenty-eight years, or never at all?

Pure clarity.

Of course, I'd choose love. Our relationship was so special. He was my teacher, and his lesson was that the giving and receiving of unconditional love are the greatest gifts on this plane. In fact, they were my purpose, my reason for being.

I intentionally began giving love. However, it was very painful at times, because I was expecting *reciprocal* love. In many cases, my expectations were not satisfied. I'd feel exhausted and used—like my "love supply" was drained.

And why wouldn't it be? I wasn't giving unconditional love to myself.

Afraid of being judged as selfish, I had totally failed to love the most important person in my life: myself. In addition, I was depending on others to love me. To maximize my love supply, I needed to love myself, first and foremost.

I laughed at myself when I realized this. How silly, to seek love from others when I wasn't loving myself. All of my love pursuits changed with that profound realization.

My spiritual journey and self-growth path now include conscious awareness of what, where, and when I'll love myself every day. It's a simple concept: unconditionally love myself first, then unconditionally love others. When love is unconditional, it illuminates joy.



# REFLECTION

*Do you have a special relationship with a sibling or family member?  
How has that relationship helped you grow?*

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*Mazie used her grief to connect more deeply to love and her personal mission. What have you learned about yourself from grief and your grieving process?*

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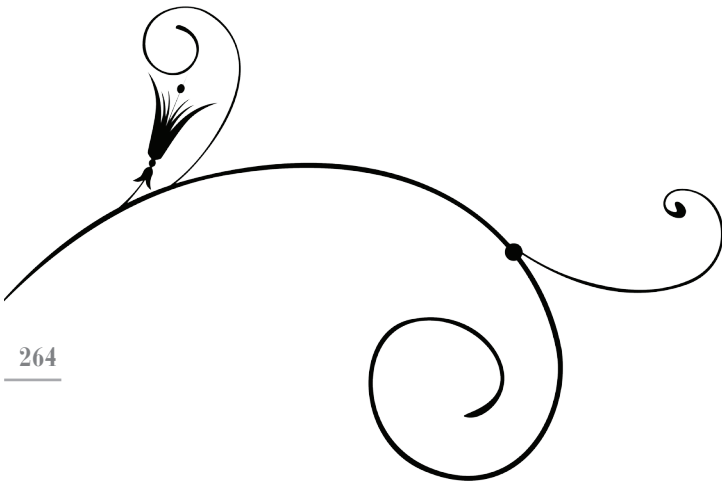
*How can you give yourself unconditional love every day?*

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# IT'S NEVER TOO LATE, IT'S NEVER NOT TIME

Shelley  
Lundquist

**O**n the silky, sienna sands of the beach at Pono Kai, I bask in the rays of the morning sun as it crests the horizon and sets fire to the sea. Its blazing ascent presents a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes that bounce playfully across shimmering waters to greet me. The ebb and flow of ocean waves mirror this place of peace deep within me—a place where love lives, and I am free to be.

It is here that I find my joy. For so many years, I'd believed that I was not worthy of great things, of passion, or even of happiness. I played small in my world, helping others achieve their dreams and living vicariously through their successes. I understood deeply the gift of giving, and everything I chose was about helping others. And yet, I always felt incomplete.

Looking back, I see what was missing: my honoring of me. Whenever an opportunity arose for any venture that would take me closer to my dreams, I was always ready with an excuse for why I couldn't dare. I was ensconced in resistance, shrinking at every suggestion that crossed my mind or was aimed at me. "You're not pretty enough." "You don't fit in." "You don't deserve it." And the *pièce de résistance*, "You have an abnormally small head, and must look really funny wet." That last one was given to me by a friend, who no doubt forgot the words as soon as he uttered them. I, on the other hand, gave energy to this absurd and limiting belief for over twenty-five years. Such is the power of a passing comment to create havoc in a mind where no quiet can be found.

An old mentor once said to me, "I've never met someone who has so much confidence in what she can do, but so little confidence in

herself.” I felt stripped bare before her, because she was right. I knew I was smart, resourceful, and could achieve anything to which I set my mind—but I hadn’t yet deemed myself worthy of being added to my list of priorities. Yet, for as long as I could remember, I’ve heard my soul’s pleas for freedom, adventure, and the unsuppressed expression of who I am.

When I was nine, I already knew that I would travel the world helping people, and that I was going to be a writer. At that point, I already fancied myself quite the wordsmith, scribbling poetry and writing in my journal at every chance. But before long, it was time to “grow up,” stop my foolish dreaming, and focus on being responsible. For years thereafter, I avoided my writing because I could not bear the truth that emerged in its revelations—the truth that I wanted more.

After twenty years of being weighed down by the agony of unacknowledged passion, I’d had enough of the drudgery and was beginning to awaken to all the possibilities before me. In the stillness, I could hear my heart. Yet, even as I found the courage to begin to forge a new path, my fears continued to test me. “Who are you to think you’re good enough?” they asked. “It’s too risky to follow your dreams. What will people think? You don’t have the time or the money for that anyway.” And so on. For so long, I’d forgotten that I was in charge of my mind, and not the other way around. Taking back the reins of my thought was a daily challenge, but one I had to rise to if I was going to move forward in my life.

Part of me also feared that it was too late for me to create a more joyful life—but the Universe, as it always does, provided me with what I needed to realign my thoughts with purposeful direction. The message I most needed to hear was divinely delivered to me through my six-year-old grandgirl, Emma. At the bottom of the drawing she made for me, she’d written, “It’s never too late. It’s never not time.” Tears of hope and joy streamed silently down my face when I read those words.

And so, I decided to follow my heart and honor my calling, because it wasn’t—and could never be—too late.



It was as though the words floated off the page when I first saw the post for the Hay House seminar, “Writing From Your Soul,” which was to be held in Maui. I knew instantly that I was going. No hesitation. No idea how I would make it work; I just knew I would. I booked two weeks in Hawaii to indulge my thirst for adventure at the same time.

The Universe is always conspiring to help us achieve, but we still have to be willing to do our part. I had finally come to a place in my life where I was not only willing to pay attention to the signs, but I was also willing to take unequivocal action in the direction they pointed.

And so it is that, only a few short months later, I find myself on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, following my bliss.

The Hawaiian Islands are draped with emerald valleys, majestic cliffs, cascading waterfalls, and a rugged beauty that takes my breath away. Even the roosters are charming, despite their raucous morning anthems. The energy of this magical place nourishes my eager spirit, and has given me the strength to unravel some of the limiting beliefs I’d struggled against for so long.

Yesterday’s hike took my partner, Sean, and me up the Kalalau trail to Hanakapi’ai Falls. What I thought was going to be a short morning walk turned into an eight-hour ordeal. While we navigated ten grueling miles of exhausting climbs, slippery slopes, narrow cliff paths, and treacherous river crossings in the oppressive heat, my ego kept whispering, “Turn back. You can’t do it!” But I pressed on.

When we got to the falls, my perfectly coiffed hair was piled in a knot on my head, and my clothes were drenched in sweat. I collapsed on a boulder and cried. Yes, I’d made it to the falls—but we’d started the day with only a small bottle of water and some trail mix between us, and we were out of supplies. How were we ever going to make it back down to the car?

Closing my eyes, I listened past my complaining body to the voice which resonated from within. “You made it this far. You’ve got this. Let’s go!”

And so I did. I even felt sprightly for the first couple of miles. When I began to flag again, and each step felt like a mile, the Universe

sent a traveller our way who was willing to share his water. It was just enough to get us through.

As I stepped off the trail and headed for our car, I was exhausted, elated, and deeply in awe of myself. I'd just discovered what I was really capable of—which seemed to suggest I was capable of even more.

Empowered, I decided I'd had quite enough of giving my power away. So, I faced yet another fear. Back at the resort, I donned my bathing suit, marched down to the shore, and, with only a moment's hesitation, dove into those healing waters and emerged sanctified. It had been over thirty-five years since I'd frolicked in the ocean. How glorious, to ride the waves and not care who could see my wet head! I floated on my back, gazing up at the night sky with my ears under the water, listening. Echoes of laughter and memories of playing floated back to me from my soul as my own salty tears mingled with those of the sea.

Standing on the beach this morning, I feel freer than I have in years. How wonderful it feels to have finally become an honoured guest in my own heart.

I'm filled with gratitude for the gift of this day, and all I will bring to it—for today is the day we leave Kauai'i for Maui, and the Hay House conference.

I whisper a soft, "Mahalo," and head off to pack. "I am a writer," I have the audacity to declare—and I giggle at my boldness.

As I climb the resort stairs back to our room, I put my hand in my pocket, and let my fingers graze Emma's note, which has traveled all these thousands of miles at my side.

*It's never too late. It's never not time.*

My time is now.



# REFLECTION

*What words or judgments are you holding onto from your past? How can you release them?*

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*By testing her physical limits, Shelley learned that she is stronger than she thought she was. What can you do today to break free of your own limiting self-definitions?*

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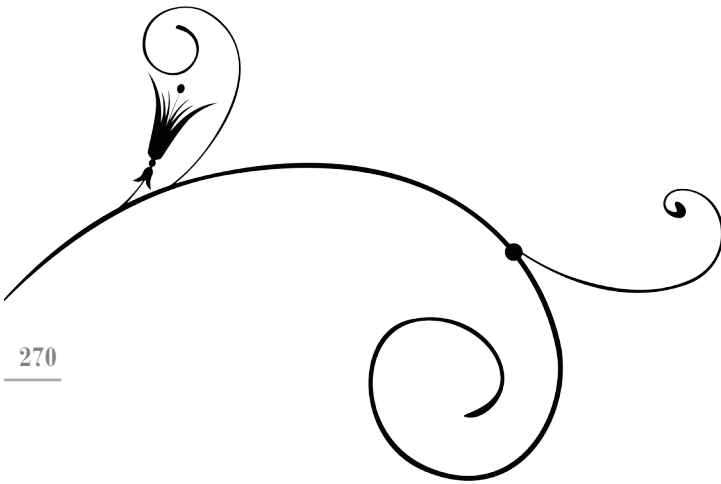
*Shelley claimed her dream by declaring, "I am a writer." How can you take ownership of your dreams right now? What actions can you take to support that ownership?*

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

*Bryna René  
Haynes,  
editor*

**T** rue to its title, this book has truly been a work of growth, learning, and *cultivation*.

Thirty-eight amazing authors have poured their hearts and souls onto these pages, and their collective dedication to the work of joy creation permeates every word.

In terms of intensity, it's my opinion that this book has surpassed any project I've been privileged to edit to date. The stories here are raw, vulnerable, and honest in the most wonderful ways. It's as though each and every author has taken a flashlight to her own soul, probing into the darkest corners, laying bare all the secrets of her human condition—and in so doing, opened a door for us to witness the potential in our own imperfect beauty.

While the subject matter of many of these stories may seem dark at first glance, the message at their hearts is one of lightness, liberation, and transcendence. As Thich Nhat Hanh wrote (and subsequently titled his book), “No Mud, No Lotus.” Without the fodder of life in all its messiness, without the murky challenges of the unknown path, the beauty of the blossom cannot fully be appreciated. And so it is for all of us.

In the process of creating these stories, many of the authors went through intense emotional healing and release. Their willingness to engage with the raw material of their own life experiences was a revelation to me. Every revision, every rewrite, led them deeper into their own truths, and into a greater appreciation of their own strength, resilience, and ability to forgive. The energy of these deeply personal

transformations has imbued these pages with divine potential—which can now be harnessed by *you*.

It is my profound hope that the truths contained in these pages have touched your heart and opened new pathways for understanding in your life, work, and relationships—for it is for you that these stories were written. They are your touchstones for transformation, your magical portals into a new way of being. They are the fertilizer for the seeds of joy you are planting with every breath.

This book is complete, but *your* story starts now. May it be a joyous one!

With love,

Bryna René Haynes  
Editor, Inspired Living Publishing

## ABOUT OUR AUTHORS



**Sheila Callaham** is an author, motivational speaker, and life coach with a passion for helping women discover their passions and live their dreams. Sheila delights in facilitating transformational shift through her writing and coaching practices. Learn more at [www.SheilaCallaham.com](http://www.SheilaCallaham.com) and download Sheila's free gift, "Five Steps to Release, Reboot & Reconnect to Your Dreams."

**Jill Celeste, MA** is the founder of the Celestial Marketing Academy, an online school for purpose-driven entrepreneurs who want to learn how to become the Director of Marketing for their businesses. Committed to offering affordable marketing instruction, Jill believes that entrepreneurs should not go in debt to get the marketing help they need. Visit [www.JillCeleste.com](http://www.JillCeleste.com) to download your Director of Marketing Starter Kit and other free resources.

**Maggie Chula** is a Psychic Medium, Medical Intuitive, and Channel for the Master Teachers of the Akasha. Her book, *Open the Doorway to Your Soul*, contains an inspirational collection of channeled messages from the master teachers. Together they created the spiritual healing and psychic development course, "Open the Doorway to Your Soul: The Akashic Vibration Process." Maggie is passionate about helping people connect to their soul wisdom to create balance and health within their life. Learn more at [www.MaggieChula.com](http://www.MaggieChula.com) and download "Awaken Your Soul Connection: A Daily Ritual."

**Laura Clark** is known as the Soul Wise Living Mentor. She works with overwhelmed professionals who want to shift their negative thought patterns and get off the emotional rollercoaster for good. She uses a unique blend of spiritual tools to awaken clients' intuition and help them hear their own inner wisdom more consistently, understand it with more clarity, and act upon it more courageously for a life filled with purpose and joy. Learn more at [www.soulwiseliving.com](http://www.soulwiseliving.com) and download her free gift, "Your Intuition Navigation Kit"

**Stacey Curnow** is a purpose and success coach who recently left behind a twenty-year career in nurse-midwifery to help women (and some very cool men) give birth to their BIG dreams. She is the author of the critically-acclaimed children's book, *Ravenna*, and coauthor of the international best-seller *Inspiration for a Woman's Soul: Choosing Happiness*. She's currently working on her fourth book. Learn more at [www.StaceyCurnow.com](http://www.StaceyCurnow.com) and download your free gift, "The Purpose and Passion Guidebook."

**Felicia D'Haiti** is an Energy Empowerment and Feng Shui Coach, who guides clients in shifting their perspectives and environments to move beyond perfectionism, fear, and self-imposed limitations. Felicia is a long-time educator and a contributing author to *Soul Whispers III: Soul Wisdom for Living the Life of Your Dreams*. She lives in Maryland with her husband and four children. Connect with Felicia at [www.FeliciaDHaiti.com](http://www.FeliciaDHaiti.com), receive a complimentary gift, and explore her offerings, including certification courses.

After thirty years in active practice, **Dr. Véronique Desaulniers**, better known as "Dr. V", decided to "retire" and devote her time to sharing her non-toxic healing journey with breast cancer. Her experience culminated in The 7 Essentials System™, a step-by-step program for preventing and healing breast cancer naturally. Her personal healing journey has touched the lives of thousands of women around the globe. Learn more at [www.BreastCancerConqueror.com](http://www.BreastCancerConqueror.com) and download your free e-book, *Your Hormones – Friends or Foes*.



**Jen Flick** is an author, designer, yoga teacher, Reiki Master Practitioner, and Theta Healing Practitioner. She is an avid student of metaphysics and a firm believer in integrating modern medicine with holistic treatments to achieve optimal health. Jen was awakened to her true self after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006. She now lives a vibrant, healthy, joyful life and her mission is to encourage and support others who want to do the same. Learn more at [www.JenFlick.com](http://www.JenFlick.com) and download your free e-book, *7 Keys to Activate Your Joy*:

**Paula Foster** is a transformational health coach and founder of Beautifully Empowered. She helps busy, professional women feel strong, sexy, and inspired by guiding them through positive, empowering changes to their health and happiness that last forever. She guides her clients toward their most Beautifully Empowered life; a life that is ripe with juicy possibilities, joy, happiness, vibrant health, increased energy, vital self-love, self-care, community, and positive change! Learn more at [www.BeautifullyEmpowered.net](http://www.BeautifullyEmpowered.net) and download your free guide, “3 Powerful Tools for a Beautifully Empowered Life.”

**Jill E. Greinke, MSW, LCSW, SAC** is an author, spiritual and holistic teacher, psychotherapist, and coach. Jill’s clients have referred to her as “a touchstone” and “the people whisperer,” aiding individuals to feel connected to their soul and authenticity. She teaches people to see life through a different lens—one that reveals their own creative truth, self-awareness, and higher consciousness. Learn more at [www.JilleGreinke.com](http://www.JilleGreinke.com) and get your free gift, “5 Steps to Miraculous and Profound Living.”

**Kelley Grimes, MSW**, is a counselor, speaker, author, and self-nurturing expert. She is passionate about empowering overwhelmed and exhausted individuals to live with more peace, joy, and meaning through the art of self-nurturing. Kelley also provides professional and leadership development to organizations dedicated to making the world a better place. She is married to an artist, has two empowered daughters, and loves singing with a small women’s group. Learn more at [www.KelleyGrimes.com](http://www.KelleyGrimes.com) and download your free gift, “Top 5 Ways to Create Peace in Your Day.”

**Zinnia Gupte** is an inspirational author, speaker, priestess, and sacred dancer who helps women embrace their sacred feminine power. She is an expert at connecting women with their souls' desires. Her forthcoming book, *Shakti Power: Awaken Your Inner Power, Beauty, Intuition and Magic*, will be in the world soon. She teaches sacred dance every year in Spain at the Ibiza Spirit Festival. Reach Zinnia at [www.ShaktiPriestess.com](http://www.ShaktiPriestess.com) and receive your complementary Shakti Goddess Gift Bundle!

**Pamela Henry** is a Transformational Life Coach, author, and singer-songwriter. She specializes in helping women reconnect with their inner wisdom and reclaim their creative power to live their most inspired and heartfelt dreams. Using proven strategies and tools, she empowers women to develop authentic self-confidence and step into the life they have always known is possible. Learn more at [www.PamelaHenry.com](http://www.PamelaHenry.com) and receive your free e-book, *Pocket Full of Love: 21 Daily Quotes To Open Your Heart and Transform Your Life*.

Transformational Intuitive **Cindy Hively** is a renowned Healing Catalyst for women. She's the Goddess Creatrix for her new brand In Her Fullness, an Awakened Living Mentor, columnist, and published author. Cindy empowers spiritual women to create an abundant life, remove blockages, and strategize and optimize each key area of their life by using Awakened Living Alchemy. It's Cindy's life passion and soul work to help women experience a Rhythmic life full to overflowing. Learn more at [www.InHerFullness.com](http://www.InHerFullness.com) and receive your free gift, "My Sensuous Body Meditation."

**Paula Houlihan** is The Money Alchemist. A money mystic, coach, author, and award winning speaker, Paula empowers women around the world to live a life filled with passion and purpose. She teaches you how to activate your money magic so you can bedazzle your brilliance, business, and bank account! Paula knows that when you follow your bliss, magic happens. Learn more at [www.PaulaHoulihan.com](http://www.PaulaHoulihan.com) and claim your free copy of Paula's *Activate Your Money Magic* e-book to discover how you can create more money in your business and in your life.

**Dr. Angela M. Joyner** is the Founder of The Wonder Loft, a positive leadership coaching practice for women. Through her writing, teaching, and leading curated workshop experiences, Angela helps women discover their unique brilliance, have more confidence and flourish. Her mission is to nourish the minds and souls of women around the world. Learn more at [www.TheWonderLoft.com](http://www.TheWonderLoft.com) and get your free CD, “Have More Confidence.”

**Tiffany Kane** works with parents who have a nagging inner knowing that things could be better, yet struggle to identify exactly what to change or how to make it happen. Through Connected to Your Core Programs and private coaching, parents clarify their purpose, values, and priorities eliminating the need to rely on a parenting default that no longer works for them. Clients have praised Tiffany for cutting through the mind chatter that distracts from parenting peace. Get your free copy of Tiffany’s e-book, *Top 10 Mistakes Made by Well-Meaning Parents*, at [www.ConnectedToYourCore.com](http://www.ConnectedToYourCore.com).

**Casey Kerr** is a motivational speaker, life and leadership coach who helps women make the breakthroughs that elevate them to their next level. For nearly twenty years, Casey has helped clients achieve their goals, fulfill their missions, and embrace their futures by guiding them to capitalize on their strengths and uniqueness to evolve into the leaders they aspire to be. Learn more at [www.FindYourROAR.com](http://www.FindYourROAR.com) and download her free gift, “Ignite the ROAR-rior Within.”

**Kim Lachapelle’s** extensive background in life and leadership coaching allows her to express her greatest passion: helping women shift into self-worth in a friendly, safe space. More than anything, she wants you to be able to speak and act from your own truth, knowing it is as powerful and worthy as anyone else’s. Learn more and download Kim’s free e-book, *The 6 Stage Spiral: Why You Are Feeling Unworthy & How to Break Free*, at [www.KimLachapelle.com](http://www.KimLachapelle.com).

**Shelley Lundquist** is an international best-selling author, motivational speaker, and Self-Mastery & Success Coach who uses her intuitive gifts and powerful transformational breakthrough processes to empower her clients in leveraging the unlimited power of their own potential. By guiding them through a journey of self-discovery and a shift in the way they perceive themselves and the world, Shelley helps her clients to create their best life—a peaceful, harmonious life of joy and abundance that acknowledges body, mind, and spirit. Learn more at [www.LetMeMoveYou.me](http://www.LetMeMoveYou.me).

**Marianne MacKenzie** is a liberator of life, radically passionate about the sacred journey of your life and how you bring your desires into being. Marianne is an expert in transforming professionals, executives, and entrepreneurs into living their lives with deeper meaning, greater joy, and increased purpose. This level of engagement is radical and will enhance every aspect of your life. Through business, we explore how we bring mastery to our relationships, life balance, wealth, and how we choose to express our greatest gift—our beautiful self. Learn more at [www.MarianneMacKenzie.com](http://www.MarianneMacKenzie.com).

As a Doctor of Metaphysical Healing, **Christine Malenda, MhD** teaches intuitive development and active meditation. Her unique system includes spirituality, philosophy, psychology, and holistic healing. Christine mentors women to clear the hidden blocks of the subconscious mind, revealing their own greatest life! She is devoted to her own evolving wisdom and lighting a path for fellow seekers. Visit [www.Doctor4WomensWisdom.com/free-gift](http://www.Doctor4WomensWisdom.com/free-gift) and experience the video series, “7 Ways in 7 Days: Feeling Fabulous for Women.”

**Beth Marshall's** passion is to work with self-motivated professionals and entrepreneurs to help them heal and transform their relationships with money by teaching them how to use their money as a divine tool that allows them to have more freedom, choice, and peace in their lives. As a CPA, an MBA, and a financial coach, Beth offers a uniquely-blended practical and spiritual approach to finances that is action-oriented, non-judgmental, and compassionate. Learn more at [www.FinanciallyAuthentic.com](http://www.FinanciallyAuthentic.com), and download your free copy of “3 Steps to Design Your Financial Plan, Save Money, and Get Out of Debt.”

Sought-after Relationship Expert **Stacey Martino** knows that Better Relationships Equal a Better Life™! Stepping out of the old relationship paradigm of couple's coaching, Stacey and her husband Paul empower individuals with the tools and strategies to transform not only their love relationship but ANY relationship—and you don't need your partner's participation for this to work for you! Stacey is the founder of [www.RelationshipDevelopment.org](http://www.RelationshipDevelopment.org) and creator of RelationshipU®. Download your free gift, "How to Transform Your Relationship," at [www.RelationshipTransformationSystem.com](http://www.RelationshipTransformationSystem.com)

**Katie Mazzocco**, The Small Business Systems Strategist, is the founder of the Operations Mastery Process™, the proven step-by-step process that enables you to transform your small business overwhelm and business plateaus into increased income and increased impact in the world. To get your free checklist, "33 Systems Every Small Business Must Have to be Successful™," visit [www.FullSpectrumProductivity.com](http://www.FullSpectrumProductivity.com).

**Peggy Nolan** is an international best-selling author and Sacred Bad-Ass Warrior. She is passionate about helping others let go of the past and discover health and happiness in the present moment. She is a Registered Yoga Teacher and 3rd Degree Black Belt in Muay Thai Kickboxing. Peggy lives in Derry, NH with her husband, Richard. Learn more at [www.PeggyNolan.com](http://www.PeggyNolan.com) and download your free copy of "30 Ways to Boost Your Positivity."

**Dr. Mary E. Pritchard, PhD, HHC** is a Psychologist and BodyLove Expert, an esteemed blogger at Psychology Today and Huffington Post, and a frequent contributor to *Aspire Magazine* and *Bella Mia Magazine*. She is also coauthor of the international best-selling book *Inspiration for a Woman's Soul: Choosing Happiness*. Dr. Mary is passionately dedicated to empowering today's women in healing their relationships with food, their bodies, and themselves, reconnecting with their Inner Goddess, stepping through their perceived fears, and embracing the truth of who they are. Learn more about how to reclaim body love and re-ignite your Inner Goddess, and receive your free "7-piece Goddess Path to Self-Love and BodyLove" at [www.DrMaryPritchard.com](http://www.DrMaryPritchard.com).

Consciously merging her practical tools as a psychologist with her intuitive and spiritual gifts, **Debra L. Reble, PhD** empowers women to connect with their hearts and live authentically through her transformational Soul-Hearted Living™ program and podcasts. Debra is the author of *Soul-hearted Partnership* and her new book, *Being Love*, is scheduled for release in 2016. She is also a coauthor of the international best-seller, *Inspiration for a Women's Soul: Choosing Happiness*. Visit [www.DebraReble.com](http://www.DebraReble.com) for a sacred free gift.

**Shelley Riutta, MSE, LPC** is the founder and President of the Global Association of Holistic Psychotherapy and Coaching. She is a Holistic Psychotherapist and creator of a 6-figure Holistic Psychotherapy practice. Because of her success at creating a thriving Holistic Practice, she launched the Global Association of Holistic Psychotherapy and Coaching (GAHP), which supports Holistic Therapists, Healers, Coaches and Health Practitioners to develop Thriving 6-Figure Holistic Practices and learn about Holistic Methods™ to accelerate the results of their clients. Visit [www.TheGAHP.com](http://www.TheGAHP.com) to claim your free gift.

**Melissa Rapoport** works with savvy individuals who are ready to reclaim their bodies and love their lives once and for all. She creates personalized programs that incorporate nutrition, life goals, and developmental psychology that result in lifetime change. Ready to give up diet books, unfulfilled dreams, and failed attempts? Reclaim your body and love your life with real answers and real solutions at [www.MelissaRapoport.com](http://www.MelissaRapoport.com).

Visionary and Intuitive **Lisa Marie Rosati** is a renowned Transformation Catalyst for women. She's the Creatrix of The Goddess Lifestyle Plan™ and the Sugar Free Goddess Program™, Expert Columnist for *Aspire Magazine*, and coauthor of the best-selling books, *Embracing Your Authentic Self*, *In Pursuit Of The Divine*, *Success In Beauty*, and *Inspiration For A Woman's Soul: Choosing Happiness*. Lisa empowers spiritual women around the world to magically create an abundant life they love using her signature process, Goddess Lifestyle Alchemy™. Learn more at [www.GoddessLifestylePlan.com](http://www.GoddessLifestylePlan.com) and download your free gift, "The Magical Goddess Lifestyle Swag Bag."

A skilled, multi-tasking mother of four, Registered Nurse, and international best-selling author, **Kellyann Schaefer** is the CEO and Founder of Task Complete, a personal assistance and concierge service company. In business today, she upholds a mission of giving families and busy professionals reliable and compassionate assistance so they can focus their time on living a joyful abundant life. She is also the creator of The Concierge Academy, where startup concierges learn how to become profitable industry leaders. To learn more, visit [www.TaskComplete.com](http://www.TaskComplete.com) and download your free gift, “The Secrets to Doing Less and Living More.”

**Martha Tassinari** is the founder and President of the Holistic Life Transitions Institute. She is a motivational speaker and life coach who works with spiritual, growth-orientated women who are stuck in fear, stress, and anxiety with challenging life transitions. She inspires women to embrace challenging life transitions as a catalyst for spiritual and personal transformation so that they can manifest their deepest vision of themselves and create a life full of joy, passion, and purpose. Learn more at [www.HolisticLifeTransitionsInstitute.com](http://www.HolisticLifeTransitionsInstitute.com) and download your free gift, “Road Map to Transformation: 5 Powerful Tips on Embracing Life’s Transitions.”

**Sara Turner** is an experienced Flower Essence Trainer and Sacred Money Archetype Coach. Through Essentially Flowers, she runs an accredited Diploma in Flower and Vibrational Medicine program. Sara’s passion is helping women experience the magic of their true potential and live meaningful, authentic lives with nature as their guide. Sara helps coaches and therapists merge the Divine Feminine energies of nature with practical skills to create magical lives and businesses. Learn about Sara’s courses at [www.EssentiallyFlowers.com](http://www.EssentiallyFlowers.com).

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**Patricia Young** is a Holistic Success and Purpose Coach, Reiki Master, and Founder of Inner Prosperity Academy. She’s a coauthor of the international best-seller, *The Power of Being a Woman*, and a frequent blog contributor to *Aspire Magazine*. After twenty years in the corporate world, she now inspires her clients to go from working for a paycheck to working for a mission, so they can give their greatness to the world and make a difference in *big* ways—all while creating the meaningful, joyful, and prosperous lives they long for. Learn more at [www.InnerProsperityAcademy.com](http://www.InnerProsperityAcademy.com) and download Patricia’s free report, “5 Mistakes People Make When Finding Their Life Purpose.”

Power Boomer™ founder **Mazie Zdanowich** works with curious, aspirational, value-conscious baby boomers who want to use their imaginative wisdom, unparalleled experience, and exclusive talents to cultivate extraordinary lives. As a mentor, Mazie motivates many to lose weight, cherish love, make more money, or start businesses. She’s a visionary; strategist; risk-taking life artiste; creative entrepreneur; spiritual yogi since age eleven; industrial engineer; fun-loving, dancing foodie; and Power Boomer™. Mazie’s passion is unconditional love. Visit [www.PowerBoomer.com](http://www.PowerBoomer.com) to learn more and download free gifts.



## ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

*Linda Joy*

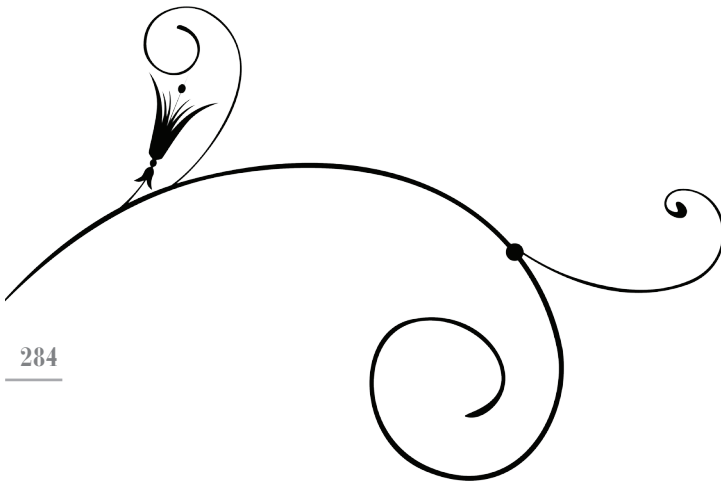
**B**est-selling inspirational publisher, Host, and Authentic Marketing and List-Building Catalyst Linda Joy is one of today's premier voices in women's inspirational publishing. Her six multimedia brands serve over 43,000 women who embrace her message of love, feminine wisdom, and self-empowerment. Ms. Joy is passionate about encouraging women to rediscover and reconnect with their inner wisdom, and empowering them to live deeper, more authentic, inspired lives both personally and professionally.

Linda is the publisher of *Aspire Magazine*, the premier inspirational magazine for women ([www.SubscribetoAspire.com](http://www.SubscribetoAspire.com)), as well as the Creatrix behind Inspired Living Publishing, through which she has created three best-selling anthologies, *Inspiration for a Woman's Soul: Choosing Happiness* (2015), *Embracing Your Authentic Self* (2011), and *A Juicy, Joyful Life* (2010). *Inspiration for a Woman's Soul: Cultivating Joy* is Inspired Living Publishing's much anticipated fourth book. Over 125 visionary women have become best-selling authors thanks to these books and the support and expertise of Inspired Living Publishing's heart-centered team. Learn more about upcoming print and Kindle publishing projects at [www.InspiredLivingPublishing.com](http://www.InspiredLivingPublishing.com).

In her role as an Authentic Marketing and List-Building Catalyst, Linda offers high-visibility marketing, publishing, and list building programs to select heart-centered female entrepreneurs, coaches, and visionary authors. Linda's proven feminine collaborative model puts

her clients' brands, messages, and wisdom in front of the women they are meant to serve while enhancing their expert status.

Learn more about Linda's programs, projects, and upcoming events at [www.Linda-Joy.com](http://www.Linda-Joy.com).



## ABOUT THE EDITOR

*Bryna René  
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**B**ryna René Haynes is an experienced editor, published author, yoga instructor, musician, photographer, and “general creative” with a passion for helping others live in greater awareness and joy. Her editing portfolio includes numerous successful non-fiction titles, including three previous best-selling Inspired Living Publishing anthologies: *Inspiration for a Woman’s Soul: Choosing Happiness* (2015), *A Juicy, Joyful Life* (2010), and *Embracing Your Authentic Self* (2011).

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