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Your Life Guidebook

By

Karin Ireland

I wish my life had come with a guide book, one that showed me how to take care of myself instead of everybody else.

It didn't, so I wrote one for myself. Fifty-two tips (one to practice each week?) that let me be me. They can let you be you, too.

Expect to feel some discomfort at first, and hear some people opine that you're being selfish. But here's the thing: Selfish got a bad rap! Are we here in this life to follow everybody else's rules, to be their version of us? Or are we here to learn and then express who *we* are?

* * *

Be the Real You

In order to be the real me, I have to let go of everything that isn't. I learned how well that works when I sold wine on the phone for a popular winery I couldn't name; when I stopped trying to sound like the other sales reps and started being me, I was more comfortable and I started selling wine. Winning awards, even.

As I practiced letting go of my attachments* to the way things turned out at work, I started letting them go in my personal life, too. As I practiced noticing the stories I told myself about who I am and who I should be, I'd think about who had told me that story. It was always a parent, a boss, a significant other, or

* See *Four Practices That Will Change Your Life* for more on attachments, stories, and behavior patterns.

society as a whole, and when I recognized that my stories were just someone else's opinion, it was easy to let them go.

It's not my job to be who other people want me to. My job is to be the best version of me I can be.

Know What You *Really* Want

I thought I knew exactly what I wanted, and I had pages of pictures of those things, cut from magazines, to use as vision boards. I wanted to travel first class and stay in hotels that were beautiful and luxurious. I wanted to be invited to speak at popular life-changing conferences with people like Wayne Dyer and Deepak Chopra. I wanted to wear trendy clothes and look terrific. I wanted to have a home on the beach where it was sunny and warm.

One day, I looked at those pictures, and they didn't inspire me anymore. That life felt so far from where I was then that the pictures just made me feel tired. I was working hard to understand what I believed and to pull myself out of the depression I'd slipped into, so I asked myself, *Did I still want those things? If not, what did I want?*

I remembered an exercise I'd learned that could help me enjoy what I wanted before I had it, and I wondered if that exercise would help me figure out what I really wanted now. The first step is to go behind the pictures, look at each one and ask myself how I'd feel if I had that. *How would I feel traveling first class? How would I feel staying in luxury hotels? How would I feel doing workshops with people like Wayne and Deepak? How would I feel having trendy clothes and a home on a sunny beach?*

The answers came easily: Traveling first class would make me feel special. Staying in luxury hotels would make me feel rich and serene. Giving workshops beside Wayne and Deepak would make me feel valuable. Nice clothes? A home on a sunny beach? I love feeling like I look good; I love the beauty of nature, especially water, and it would be right there.

The next step in the exercise was to ask myself how I can experience those same feelings in other ways, ways that are already within my reach.

Again, the answers came easily: I could feel special by thinking about all the things I've accomplished instead of the things I haven't. I could feel rich by wearing the nice jewelry I have but usually don't bother with, by going to a fancy hotel in town for breakfast or lunch, or by soaking up the ambiance in the lobby with a good book. I could feel serene by remembering to meditate every day.

As I wrote, I recognized that I don't have to be on stage with Wayne or Deepak to feel valuable; I can feel that just by knowing that my books and workshops have already helped a lot of people. I can look trendy any time I

want; all I have to do is make the effort instead of just grabbing the first things I see in my closet. And I don't need to live on the beach to enjoy nature, I just need to step away from my computer and go outside.

It's easier to have what I really want when I know what that is.

* * *

You Can Be Right *and* Happy

I always used to struggle with the question, "Would you rather be right or happy?" I know the answer is supposed to be happy. And I *do* want to be happy. But I also want to be right. Especially when I *know* I am. Okay, and I want the other person to know I'm right, too.

But during that time when my husband was so ill and I was so stressed, I realized what I wanted most of all was to be calm, and I thought that if I could be calm, I would probably be happy.

As I thought about what being calm would feel like and what I could do to feel that way, I realized that to be calm, all I had to do was let go of thinking and behaviors that made me *not* calm. It really is that easy.

Now, when my first thought is to be right and prove that I am, I try to take a breath and remember what I really want is to be calm. It's okay that this person and I don't agree. It's okay that I think I see a better way. It's even okay when the other person is clearly wrong (just kidding). I can choose to be calm, and I'll probably be happy.

* * *

Remember to Breathe

When did I start breathing such shallow breaths, just enough to keep me from falling off my chair? When I ask myself that, I'm mentally transported to the office where I first worked as a corporate writer. The place where I learned to be stressed out of my mind day after day and pretend it was okay. The place where I chose pleasing my boss by doing the nearly impossible every day over taking care of myself and setting up boundaries about how much I could do or moving on to a job where there was less stress.

Eventually, barely breathing became a habit. When I did move on to another job, I moved the barely ventilated me to the next company, and the next, and the next, and the next, and even to my own freelance business.

But habits are just learned behavior, and we can replace them anytime. I've stuck Post-It notes with *Breathe* on my computer, on my bathroom mirror, on the kitchen wall, and in my car. I remember to breathe most of the time now, and even take deep breaths sometimes. It feels good.

* * *

Manage Your Committee

I used to have a committee that liked to chatter at me from the minute I woke up until I finally escaped into a fitful sleep. It nudged me, it reminded me, it warned me. It wanted me to figure things out, and it wanted me to find solutions to problems before they occurred. Sometimes, my committee was helpful, but mostly, it was exhausting and even stressful.

My committee encouraged me to judge people or situations, and of course, to judge myself. It streamed endless reminders about all the things on my to-do list; it rehashed conversations I'd had going back as far as I can remember and neatly revises them to what I *should* have said instead. My committee nagged at me to work harder, faster, and longer hours so I'd get everything done, even though I'd expressly told it that I wanted to slow down, do less work, and have more fun.

I never used to question the stream of thoughts that chased each other through my head because it just seemed natural; the thoughts were always *there*. I let my mind say whatever it wanted to because I didn't realize that its stories weren't necessarily true or that I had a choice.

One morning I realized I had only thirty seconds of peace after I woke up before my committee started weighing in. I noticed my body tighten up like a runner in the starting blocks. That morning I decided it was time to take charge.

My ego is head of this committee, and it doesn't like to be quieted. But when I remind it that I'm in charge, it has no choice but to do what I say.

My committed still hovers nearby, but I'm good now at telling it to hush.. I imagine the committee members looking startled, angry, perhaps even hurt. But I don't care. It's my mind, and I'm boss.

* * *

Stress Less

I could make a list of everything I think causes me stress: my job, my neighbors, my deadlines, my bank account, and so on. But my wise self knows it's none of those things. What cause me stress are my stories about how people and things should be and my attachments to people and things being different than they are.

The solution is easy. Let go.

It's a challenge sometimes.

But I can.

I can remember to notice when I feel an unpleasant emotion and ask myself what outcome I'm attached to.

I can remember to observe and not judge and stop the instant I start telling myself stressful stories.

I can remember to be easier on myself and everybody else. I can enjoy my life, or I can struggle against it. My wise self whispers that I *can* stress less; it's my choice.

* * *

Speak Up When You Need To

I learned at a very young age that it wasn't safe to tell the truth because too often it wasn't what other people wanted to hear. It wasn't safe to ask for what I wanted because I'd be shamed for being ungrateful, for wanting more than I already had. It wasn't safe to talk about what I didn't want because that was "talking back," and definitely not allowed.

I was in my 40s at a weekend workshop when I learned an important lesson about communication: What I want doesn't have to be justified or appropriate, I don't have to deserve what I want before I ask for it, and I can tell my truth without being a bad person, even if it makes other people angry or sad.

That weekend the coach gave me permission to be honest. But before I could actually be brave enough to ask for what I wanted and needed, I had to change the stories I told myself that said I couldn't. I had to let go of my attachment to having other peoples' approval, and I had to let go of the "not worthy" behavior pattern I slipped into.

In that weekend workshop, I was told that there weren't any guarantees that I would get what I asked for or that the people I communicated with would always understand or accept what I said, and I'd have to learn to be okay with that.

I did learn to be okay with that, and people who weren't comfortable with me speaking up drifted away. I have people in my life now who I can be honest with, and I can see that in the past whenever I was unable to speak up, or when I spoke up but was consistently criticized or unheard, it was a good signal that I was in the wrong place with the wrong people and I needed to change my stories, slip out of unhelpful behavior patterns, and leave; move on to a place where I could say what I needed to say... and be heard.

* * *

Listen

There's a saying that we don't learn anything while we're talking, and the hint is that we should talk less and listen more. Of course we should. But sometimes it's hard to listen when we have so much to say. Hard to listen when we might not want to hear what's being said.

Our ego says that our ideas are wonderful and we need to share them; it wants us to feel important, it wants us to feel right; it wants us to feel admired. It

also wants to protect us from hearing that someone isn't pleased with something we've done.

Four practices to the rescue (see *Four Practices That Will Change Your Life*). When I let go of my attachment to impressing people, it's easy to listen more. When I let go of my attachment to being right, it's easier to let people tell me things I'd rather not hear. When I listen to the stories I'm telling myself, I recognize when they're coming from my ego, and I can tell it to hush. The behavior patterns I slip into when I want to talk more than listen are triggered by my ego, too. Hush.

There's another saying that reminds us we have two ears and only one mouth, and the hint is that we are meant to listen twice as much as we talk.

* * *

Don't Get Stuck with Cudda Wudda Shudda

I was a make-it-happen corporate writer once, juggling publications, special projects, and emergency communications; making sure everything was accurate, typo-free, and to the printer on time. It was a high-energy, stressful job that often exhausted me physically and emotionally, but no one cared what the other two writers and I felt, only what we got done.

Whenever we'd have a particularly horrific day, the three of us would reward one another with one of the silly dollar toys we kept stashed in our desks – wind-up animals or clacking teeth, a paddle with a ball attached by a rubber string, and once a whoopee cushion.

I'd worked at that company for about two years when I went to a huge luncheon hosted by librarians to celebrate one of my writer friends. I spent the morning at work then drove to the hotel where the luncheon was being held. I walked into the ballroom in my corporate suit and my can-do corporate energy, and immediately felt... calm. The energy of the room was soothing. People moved slowly, their voices were soft, they smiled, and everyone seemed happy.

This was probably the first time I was aware that everyone and everything vibrates with energy, and that we can be affected, positively or negatively, by one another's energy. When I wrote a biography about Albert Einstein, I learned that he discovered colors vibrate at different frequencies. I could feel that it was true for people and places, too; I could feel the energy of these librarians, of this room. It was calm, and I liked it.

After the luncheon I went back to work, and I was literally hit with the difference in energy. My coworkers were rushed and intense. Our workspace buzzed with urgency. For a moment I felt out of place, and I realized the driven woman I had become wasn't the real me. The real me was calm, like the people

at the luncheon. The real me had time to play and get together with friends. She had time to do things for herself sometimes.

I promised myself I'd quit one day and go back to the gentler life of writing books. I'd step away from the high-energy competition of the corporate world and go back to being the peaceful woman I'd felt like I was at the luncheon. But first.... But first, I told myself, I had to save some money because I had a house and a daughter to support, and with writing, well, you never knew about the money.

I stayed in that stressful environment several more years. I could have left sooner... should have....

When I was married to my first husband, we talked about buying another house for investment. But neither of us took the first steps to do that. People who did are very wealthy now. If I'd been smart, I would have....

Once a coworker offered to help me understand investments, but I wasn't interested. I should have....

It's easy to look back and see how doing something differently would have led to a better result. But *cudda wudda shudda* is another form of being attached (feeling an unpleasant emotion, regret, because I want something to be different than it is), and *cudda wudda shudda* are just stories I tell myself that keep me attached.

All I have to do to let them go is take a deep breath, exhale, and remind myself that whatever I did or didn't do... it's in the past, and it seemed like a good idea at the time.

* * *

Sometimes Good Enough is Good Enough

In our society, we're encouraged to measure who we are by our job, home, car, clothes, and friends, and then we're encouraged to feel that whatever we have isn't really enough. So we work harder and longer hours to get it all done; to be able to make what we want to have happen happen.

We worry about what people will think if we don't have the latest electronic toy, the cleanest house, the fanciest party. We knock ourselves out making a project perfect at work or at home when all we really need to do is get it done.

It's good to have goals to have and be the best... sometimes. But sometimes, good enough is good enough.

Right now my goal is to be really good at taking care of myself; to be a loving partner to my husband; to write good books that will help other people; to be the woman who is calm and kind and who really knows how to accessorize.

The rest of the stuff I do every day? Most of the time just getting it done is good enough.

* * *

Don't Keep Score

Except in sports, the best score is win/win.

* * *

Work for Win/Win Solutions

I was in a weekend workshop when I first heard about looking for win/win solutions. In one exercise we were given partners and asked to commit to supporting that person through the rest of the weekend, holding their fears and dreams safe in our minds and hearts, vowing not to do anything that would hurt them. From the comments I heard after this exercise, it seemed like most of us had really connected with our partners.

After the break, we were put into teams to compete for the highest score. The goal was to outthink the team in the other room (their goal was to outthink us) and win.

I can still get teary when I remember what happened after the game ended. The leader asked us to think about what we had done: We had committed to support our partners, and not ten minutes later we were plotting for their failure.

It doesn't matter that this was only a game. What matters is that *not one of us made the connection between competing to win – making the other people lose – and the promise we'd made not to harm our partner.*

Whether competition is in politics, in the boardroom, or in our own families, any time we aren't working for win/win solutions the result will be win/lose, or lose/lose.

* * *

Focus

There are several popular writers who encourage us to be in the present, to focus on what we're doing right now, and I'm pretty sure they've got the right idea. I know it's easier to write when I'm not letting my mind wander to other projects I need to work on.

I need to focus more in my personal life, too. In just a few months, I lost a treasured bracelet my daughter gave me, I ran two stop signs I didn't see, I lost a pair of glasses I depended on, and I misplaced several important files.

What was I focusing on when those things happened? I'd very carefully taken off my bracelet so it would be safe while I got a massage, and I'd carefully put it... someplace. I still miss it, and I can't believe I could have lost it, but I did.

I ran into a car when I missed one of those stop signs, and I was amazed and embarrassed and terrified at how much worse the accident could have been. How could I have missed the same stop sign a few weeks later?

I only wear the glasses I lost when I drive at night, so they have to be in the house or the car. What was I focusing on when I put them wherever they are?

I'm paying more attention to what I'm doing now. I haven't missed any more stop signs, and I haven't lost anything important. I'm focusing on the projects I've identified as priorities instead of trying to get everything done at once. If I looked through a pair of binoculars and what I saw wasn't clear, I'd adjust the lenses so it was. I need to remember to do that with my life, too.

* * *

Prioritize

I remember a time when I had a lot of freedom to choose what to do, when to do it, and what not to do at all. Then life sped up; there were so many new possibilities, as well as responsibilities, so many people wanting things from me that my priorities got confused.

Corporate downsizing led to fewer workers but just as much work, and we were encouraged to do several things at once so we could get it all done. The behavior was named multitasking, and we were encouraged to believe that those who could multitask were more valuable than those who could not. One popular writer suggested that motorists read while waiting at red lights. He promised that other drivers would be sure to let us know when the lights turn green.

Except for reading at red lights, I bought into the multitasking craze. Working like this was stressful and unsatisfying. And, studies now show, inefficient.

When I was following my friend's advice to sort out what I believed and I realized how much I wanted to be calm, I knew I had to stop multitasking. Author Stephen Covey says the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Good advice. But what if it seems like *everything* is the main thing? I'd figured out a way to sort my priorities the first time I had cancer, and I decided to try it again.

First, I list all the projects and tasks I'm trying to juggle. Then I list additional things I think I should be doing, and finally, everything I'm not doing that I want to do.

Next, I look at each item on the to-do list twice. The first time, I ask myself how much time/money/effort it will take for me to complete the project or task;

then I give it a number from one to five with one being not much and five being quite a lot. The second time I look at each item, I ask myself how much completing the task will move me toward my immediate goals, and give it a number again.

When I'm finished, I look for the projects and tasks that have the lowest numbers in the /time/money/effort column and the highest numbers in the payoff column. That shows me what my priorities need to be. The final step is to round up the books and files of the projects I'm not going to work on and put them in a closet where they won't stare at me accusingly.

So that those less important projects don't slip off my radar, I list them in a to-do notebook that I can look at every week or so.

When I make it a priority to put fewer things on my to-do list in the first place, I have fewer things to prioritize. And everything that really needs to get done gets done.

* * *

Don't Rush to the Next Thing

When I moved to northern California I was eager to make new friends, so one Sunday I decided to go to a church where I knew there'd be people who think like I do. Toward the end of the service ushers gave each new person a long-stemmed white carnation while the minister invited everyone to visit the Christmas craft boutique in the fellowship hall.

I'd already gone to the boutique, so I left with my mind on the next thing on my to-do list. I was driving down the hill toward the grocery store when I realized my white carnation would have been an invitation for people to come talk to me. My goal had been to be social, but I'd forgotten my goal to answer the call of the next thing on my to-do list.

I was only a few miles away and I could have gone back. But I didn't. I kept going down the hill toward the grocery store.

I realize I do this a lot. I go to the bay near my home to enjoy the birds and the water, but don't stay long because the next thing is calling to me. I start to meditate, but think of something and must write it down so I don't forget. I take a break for lunch and the instant the last bite's in my mouth, I'm on my feet moving back to my office.

Sometimes, I'm aware that I'm doing three things at once: There's a stream of thought that is moving, unrequested, low on my attention level, while I'm consciously thinking of something else and physically doing something *else*. I feel like I'm trying to watch all the acts in a three-ring circus at the same time. I can, kinda, sorta.... But not really.

I need to focus on doing one thing at a time. Preferably, the one thing I'm actually doing. So from now on when my mind whispers, *next*, I'm going to remember to say, *Stop! Breathe. Be here, we're doing this, now...*

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What have I missed by worshiping at the altar of accomplishment?

* * *

Be Patient

The dictionary defines patient as quietly and steadily persevering; my definition would be remembering to breathe and not say the first thing that comes to mind when people and things don't move as quickly as I'd like them to.

I know the dictionary's version is calmer than mine, and I long to be calm. So how do I become the quietly and steadily persevering person I want to be? By remembering that's my goal; by letting go of my attachments to outcomes; by letting go of stories that lead me to judge what's happening; by not letting myself slip into behavior patterns that make me frustrated; by hushing my ego when it pushes me to do things its way instead of quietly and steadily.

And being patient with myself when I forget.

* * *

Be Positive

I can't remember how many years I've known the advantages of being positive, but it's only been recently that I have committed to it.

It's easier to be positive when I don't surround myself with people and things that are negative. I don't watch TV news anymore, and I only flip through the Sunday paper. There was a time I would have worried about people judging me if I wasn't properly up-to-date with world and local news, but I don't worry about that anymore. The buzz is always about the bad news. Often, it doesn't change from day to day or even from week to week, but reporters keep pounding away at it 24/7. Sometimes what they say isn't even true. I've found that when something newsworthy happens that I need to know about, someone tells me.

I don't have what it takes any more to enter into fights to right wrongs, so we leave it to others who are energized by that kind of work and do it well. We rarely discuss anything negative or tragic we hear about – what good does it do to remind ourselves and each other of things we want to forget?

I spend my time with people who see the glass half full instead of half empty. I watch movies and read books that are fun instead of ones that are

disturbing or violent. I avoid TV programs, songs, and video games that turn the worst human behavior into entertainment.

When I focused on things that were negative, I found more negative things to focus on. The same thing is true about focusing on things that are positive. There's an old story about a Native American grandfather talking to his grandson: *I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart*, he says. *One wolf is vengeful, angry, and violent. The other wolf is loving and compassionate.* The grandson asks which wolf will win the fight and the grandfather answers, *The one I feed.*

* * *

Think Outside the Box

When I was growing up, there was a common argument in many families about toothpaste, with anger usually directed toward the people who squeezed from the middle or left the cap off.

Today, people just get two tubes of toothpaste, and if possible, two bathrooms.

I wonder sometimes what solutions I'm overlooking now because I don't take the time to think outside the box.

* * *

Your Life is What Happens After You Say, *Yes, But...*

I wish it hadn't taken me so long to figure out that nothing changes after I say, *Yes, but...* because some of the worst times of my life have followed those two words.

When we say, *Yes, but*, we truly believe there's a reason why whatever someone's suggesting won't work. And while it may be true and it *won't* work, saying, *Yes, but...* closes our mind's door to exploring other options that *might*. Saying, *Yes, but...* keeps us stuck in the very situation we want to move out of.

Once I worked at a small social services company that was run by the owner. She came from a country where employees don't have many rights, and she ran her company as if she were still there.

She said we could have a container of pencils or pens on our desk, but not both. We could arrange the contents of our desks any way we wanted to, but everyone in a department had to have their desks arranged, and drawers labeled, the same way: Supplies; Current projects; Research; Reference materials; Personal supplies, and so on.

Once, when she noticed five bottles of hand lotion in the women's bathroom, she removed all but one. One was all we needed, she said. Same thing with mugs in the kitchen: We only needed as many mugs as there were employees.

Controlling? *Yes, but* I liked the work I was doing to help people adopt abandoned children, so I tried not to let her bother me.

I'd only worked there a month when my job changed terribly. I'd been hired to recruit adoptive parents and answer their questions, but suddenly a nearly full-time job was added – keeping detailed computer records of every call. The program I was asked to use was old and unwieldy, and I'm not quick to understand or navigate even good computer programs. I was miserable. Shouldn't I have quit? *Yes, but* I needed the paycheck.

Early in the second month, my job and the tension got even worse. I couldn't sleep. I dreaded going to work. I should have quit. *I know, but*, I told myself, I'd had cancer twice and I couldn't get insurance on my own; I *had* to stay for at least three months so I'd qualify for COBRA. I'd been in a toxic job when I got cancer the first time, and I had vowed I'd never stay in a toxic job situation again. But I was.

My daughter pointed out the irony: I was holding on to the job for health insurance, and as stressed as I was, I was definitely going to need it soon.

One afternoon, so stressed I could barely breathe, I left work and didn't go back. I didn't quit, I just couldn't go back.

I also let go of my attachment to having insurance through COBRA. I told myself there had to be some other way I could get insurance, and I made it my goal to find it.

I called several medical service agencies and found health insurance through a state program. Because of my previous cancers, I qualified for catastrophic coverage, and I wouldn't have to pay a cent unless I needed it.

I never did.

Yes, but... and its cousins, *I know, but...* *I've tried that, but...* *I can't, because...* and *but first I have to...* are usually just stories that support attachments, and they always close the door to possibilities.

I know a better way of thinking now. Instead of *yes, but* I try to keep the door open to possibilities by saying, *okay, and now....*

* * *

Stay With Possibilities Longer Than You Want To

When we're very young, it seems like everything is possible. We can be president of the United States. We can be an astronaut on our way to Mars. We can drive the garbage truck or work in the corner candy store. And it's all good.

Then the shape shifters get hold of us and teach us what's Reasonable and Acceptable, how things Should be done and how they Shouldn't. Teachers teach us The Way to solve problems and they teach us The Right Results. They teach us

that when things aren't working, The Solution is to work harder, faster, and longer hours.

They're wrong. But we've listened to them for so long we tend to make most of our choices based on two things: what others have told us will or won't work, and what has or hasn't worked for us in the past.

It's impossible to create something new when we only use information that got us where we are.

If we can avoid *yes, but* and its cousins; if we can ignore the urge or the pressure from someone else to grab a quick solution; if we can stay longer than we're comfortable thinking about possibilities, we will come up with new ideas that will help us create something new.

Sometimes when I'm looking for an answer I challenge myself to list ten possibilities. The first four or five come quickly. The next two or three come after a little thought. Then, once I've gotten past all the obvious choices, I look deeper, and often that's when the best possibilities come.

Nearly everything that's ever been invented has come about, not because someone has worked as quickly as possible and only used the past as a guide, but when he or she slowed down and said, *I wonder what would happen if I tried this..?*

Most areas of my life are working pretty well these days. But there's this one thing; I wonder what would happen if....

* * *

Understand Competition

Competition is the act of trying to win, and it seems to be rampant in our country. We've been taught that competition is good. But sometimes it isn't. I've had friends who were always competing with me. I could never tell them anything they didn't already know, never do anything they hadn't already done, never have a great idea they hadn't thought of first. This kind of competition isn't helpful.

My dad ruled arbitrarily, so I've noticed I'm tempted to compete with men who are older than me when they tell me what I should do. The more certain they are that they know best, the more certain I am that they don't. Sometimes I probably shut out good advice by competing with them to be right. This kind of competition isn't helpful.

Competition at work wasn't helpful when I stayed there, sick, trying to be the top seller, instead of going home and straight to bed where I belonged.

There are sports where players are encouraged to injure opposing players so winning will be easier. Too many politicians compete to pass bills that only benefit a small chosen few while harming many others, the economy or the earth.

Whenever winning is more important than living with integrity – it’s not helpful.

For me, competition is good when it excites me, but not when it makes me anxious or afraid. Competition is good when I can keep what I want as a goal and not let it slip into an attachment. Competition is good when I let my ego help me but not when I let it be in charge. Competition is good when it pushes me to reach for the best me.

* * *

Don’t Be Ms. Fix-it

My husband gets credit for this idea, because he was the first to say, “I’m out of the fix-it business.” He said it often, because he really wanted to be. He thought that giving away his tools would make it impossible for him to agree to fix things, but he was wrong. It’s hard not to fix things when you know you can. Giving away his tools just shifted what he can fix from everything to almost everything. But he’s recognized that just because he can do something it doesn’t mean he must.

I want to be out of the fix-it business, too. I never had a garage full of tools, but I have a head full of ideas. Helpful ideas. Ideas I’m sure will make people happier and the world a better place. It’s hard for me not to offer ideas when someone is in trouble; I’ve struggled for so long, and now I want to save people some of the time and tears it took for me to learn what I’ve learned.

Sometimes people are truly grateful for my help. But sometimes it would probably be good for me to just observe. Just because I *can* offer suggestions that will make problems go away doesn’t necessarily mean I should.

I think what I want is to be out of the fix-it mentality. Move into an *available* mode. If I feel an urgency to rush in and help someone, it’s probably my ego nudging me. If someone asks for my help, *then* it’s not about fixing, it’s about being kind, and maybe I can help.

* * *

Get Rid of Clutter in Your Home and in Your Head

Clutter makes me anxious. Anxiety distracts me from the work I want to do. Fortunately, I get excited about the idea of getting organized, and I’m good at letting things go.

Several years ago, when my husband and I were getting ready to set up a home together, we sorted our possessions to see what would move with us and what would go to the thrift shop. He had lots of stuff. I wandered around asking him the questions I’d asked myself when I’d moved to Hawaii with only 17 small boxes: Do you love this? Do you need it?

Did that picture of the ocean hanging over his couch make him happy? Nah. It was just something he'd picked because it was okay and it filled the space. Did he feel happy when he looked at his couch? True, it was newish, and it folded out into a bed, but was it comfortable? Did he like the pattern? Did he enjoy looking at it? Nope. Did he need the bread machine? The rice steamer? The macho food grinder? Nope. Nope. Nope. He's good at letting things go, too.

Over the years, it's been a good gauge for us when we think of buying something: Do we love it? Do we need it? We're good at limiting clutter in our physical spaces.

Clutter can be in our heads, too – grudges, limiting stories, potential disasters, endless to-do lists, frustrations, and fears.

Mind clutter is harder to get rid of than the clutter in my office, but it makes me just as anxious, so I need to let it go. Periodically I need to examine what's in there and ask myself: *Does this thought make me happy? Is this thought helpful?* If not, I need to let it go.

* * *

Learn How Money Works

I've observed that often people have the same relationship with money that their parents or other influential adults in their lives have.

People whose parents struggled with money tend to struggle themselves. People whose parents were wealthy tend to be wealthy, too. Why? Because children watch how their parents behave with money, and then they behave the same way.

My dad worked hard at a salaried job and used that income for all our family's living expenses, and my first husband and I did the same thing. I watched my parents struggle to get by, and there have been times when I've struggled financially, too. If I'd seen my parents make investments to grow their money, I would have been more likely to do that.

But even though that may be true, as long as I tell that story nothing will change. The good news is that it's never too late to learn.

* * *

Slow Down, Take Care of Yourself

One day a work friend asked why I was always hurrying. What a question! I was hurrying to finish whatever work I was doing so I could start getting the next batch done, of course.

I was used to working at that pace. I thought I was being efficient. Look how much I got done! Listen to the applause. I actually felt uncomfortable when I tried to slow down. Coffee breaks? Those were for sissies.

I remember thinking that at some point I'd get enough done that I'd be able to take a few days off. Of course I never did. Hurrying is addictive. If there was an extra minute, I'd look for something to do; never something to do for myself, though. If it occurred to me to go for a walk, sit on a park bench in the sun, or look through recipe books for new menus, I pushed the notion away because those things weren't productive.

Unfortunately, it took illness to convince me that I needed to change. When I had cancer the first time I knew the stress from work was a contributing factor because stress affects body chemistry; it lowers the immune system's ability to fight. I promised myself I'd slow down. And I did. For about a year. Then I started listening to the old stories about how much I could, and should, accomplish.

The second time I had cancer, I promised myself I'd slow down again. And I did. For awhile. Then I slipped back into my old behavior pattern.

When my husband was pushing himself day after day to complete the project he was working on, it was only after he collapsed that he agreed he needed to change.

I wish we hadn't had to learn the hard way that pushing ourselves into nearly constant stress isn't the way life is meant to be lived. We're not meant to turn everything into a race. We're not here to get everything done. We're here, at least partly, to laugh, and play, and be kind to ourselves and each other. We need to be as nice to ourselves as we are to our BFF (best friend forever).

One day I wrote myself this note:

Dear Best Friend: I think you are way too hard on yourself. I think you expect more from yourself than you would from anybody else; why is that? Can't you just slow down for awhile? Can't you take care of yourself for a while?

Once I was part of a cancer writing group asked to write for seven minutes about vigilance. This is what came out:

My life is one of vigilance.

Even though I know so many other ways to be,

It seems I know them intellectually

But not yet in a way that lets me be them.

I am like a rock collector charged with picking up rocks to clear a field.

Each rock must be picked up.

The bag grows very heavy, but do I stop?

I can't. I have this job, you see, and I have to get them all; every last rock.

How is it I can teach what I can't seem to do?
Maybe all teachers are trying to teach themselves first.
As I say with each cancer, OK, I got it, I need to slow down.
This time, I promise, I really do promise, I'll slow down.
Other people can pick up a few rocks.

* * *

Enjoy the Journey

On road trips, children famously ask, "Are we there yet?" As adults, we understand that the journey to move physically from one place to the next takes time. We're patient. Often, we even plan for interesting stops and side trips along the way.

But in our daily lives, we try to rush through our projects so we can move on to the next. Do we enjoy the journey? Do we plan for stops and side trips along the way?

In a world of instant gratification, enjoying the journey is a challenge. But rushing to get something done doesn't always make us happy; sometimes, even getting it done doesn't make us feel the way we thought it would.

I've read the suggestion to imagine we only have a month to live; what would we do with that time? We probably wouldn't rush to finish our to-do list. We'd slow down to notice and appreciate the people and things that matter; we'd make interesting stops and side trips along the way.

I want to remember that I don't have to be ill for that to happen. All I have to do is notice my attachments to outcomes and turn them into goals; I need to listen to the stories I tell about why I have to rush, and change them to ones that make it okay for me to slow down; I need to challenge my ego to stop nagging and come up with some really fun things to do, instead.

* * *

Everyone Has an Agenda

One day I realized that everyone has an agenda; something they want us to think or do. It started with our parents (poor folks, they get blamed for everything): everything they taught us came from their agenda. In school, teachers had their agendas. Friends, bosses, coworkers, and significant others... agendas, agendas, agendas, agendas. The books and magazines we read and the TV we watch – every message we hear is someone's attempt to get us to do or say or think what they want us to.

Our parents' agendas might have been to help us grow into our potential, or they might have been to turn us into who *they* wanted us to be.

Some teachers wanted us to learn because it made them feel good and they wanted us to succeed, and others just wanted us to be quiet. Our friends, bosses, coworkers, and significant others want us to make their life easier or more pleasant or both, and the media wants us to buy what they have to sell.

We have agendas, too; we try to get other people to do what we want them to do. Agendas aren't good or bad, they're just a fact of life. Now, I listen to peoples' messages, and then ask myself: *What do they want to sell me? Is it something I want to buy? Does what they want me to do help me get what I want or where I want to go?*

* * *

It's Okay to Say No and Not Feel Guilty

Saying no was something we were very good at as children, but we got it trained out of us. The people who didn't like to hear us say no told us stories that we got good at telling ourselves: *It would be selfish for me to say no; They'll be angry with me or they won't like me if I say no; If I asked, he'd do it for me, so I need to do it for him; I'm not sure I'd be justified saying no because....*

Like everyone I know who grew up hearing those stories, I've let them control me. I'd either say yes, grudgingly, and feel angry at everyone including myself, or I'd say no and feel like a terrible person.

As I practiced recognizing my attachments and stories, I saw that worrying about what others would say or think or feel or do kept me from taking care of myself.

I have new stories now: It's okay to say no when I want and need to; it's good to have boundaries, good to decide what I am willing to do and what I'm not, and then kindly but firmly say no and not waver. If someone is angry or says they feel I've let them down, I remind myself it's not my job to make everybody else happy. It's not my job to take care of everyone and, in fact, I probably help them more when I let them figure out their life on their own.

It was hard, at first, to say no without feeling guilty, so I practiced: *No. I'm not comfortable agreeing to that. I already have something planned. I really need you not to push me on this. I can't, and I know you'll figure this out.* Practicing the phrases out loud made me feel more comfortable saying them when I was facing the person asking.

If someone tries to make me feel selfish, I remember what the airlines say: *Take care of yourself first, and then you can take care of others.* Do others think they're being selfish when they ask me to do something I don't want to do?

No.

* * *

Don't Take Anything Personally

People have written whole books about this idea, but it doesn't take that many words to explain: Nothing anyone says or thinks or does is about you. Really! It's always about them. When someone is impatient, rude, even cruel, it's because of what's going on with them. You may have pushed their buttons, but the buttons always belong to them.

I wish I could have learned that before I spent most of my life taking everything personally. One of my stories was that everything was my fault and I needed to change because the people around me *told* me that. It was *my* behavior that made them angry, *my* behavior that made them say and feel whatever unpleasant thing they said and felt. If *I* would change, everything would be fine.

But that's not true. I did try to change, but I couldn't keep them happy for long. Because it wasn't ever about me.

* * *

Forgive Everyone, Including Yourself

My mother died unable to forgive her cruel stepmother. My mother believed that forgiving was the same as saying what someone did was okay, and she could never, ever feel that.

Today, people who write about forgiveness tell us that forgiving doesn't mean we think what the person did was okay. It means we're just not going to carry that painful thinking with us anymore. Forgiving isn't a gift we give the person who hurt us; it's a gift we give ourselves when we choose to stop hurting because of something in the past.

When I need to forgive, I stop telling the story about what happened, and I let go of the behavior patterns that keep me feeling like a victim. Sometimes I can forgive by simply changing a thought. Sometimes I have to try a little harder: I close my eyes, relax my body, breathe, and I imagine what the person I want to forgive as a vulnerable, small child. Usually I see pain, frustration, or helplessness, and that helps me see the adult version with compassion.

I have to remember to forgive myself, too: sometimes for things I've done to other people, but more often for things I've done to myself.

Unfortunately, even after I've forgiven, I can still fan the flame and feel the anger or pain if I'm careless about the stories I tell myself. It seems that forgiveness, like eating, isn't something you can do once and for all.

* * *

Be Grateful

I read about a woman who said that one day all she could be grateful for was that she hadn't been hit by a truck. There have been times when I felt like

that, but now I realize that's not what gratitude is about: It's not about waiting for good things to happen to be grateful for, it's about looking for things I already have and then being grateful for them.

Once, I started a gratitude journal where the author suggested readers fill a page every evening. I started with the obvious: I'm grateful for my husband and his family, who have embraced me from day one; I'm grateful for my daughter and her family, who are as important to me as life.

I'm grateful I have a nice home and a faithful car, enough money for food, for doctors and medicine, and for fuel to cook and to heat my home. I'm grateful for indoor plumbing, hot showers, a comfortable bed and warm blankets. I'm grateful for my computer, for books I can borrow free from the library, and colored paper clips that make me happy. I'm grateful I have an umbrella when it rains, a jacket when it's cold, and a few dollar bills to give when I see someone who needs them more than I do. I'm grateful there are flowers and sunny skies and parks where I can walk.

When I look deeper I see that there are things I can be grateful for that aren't things: I'm grateful I can smile at people and mean it, that I can walk without hurting, that I can find solutions to most of the problems I have.

I'm grateful to live where the sky is clear, where flowers bloom, where people are basically good. I'm grateful that I have success when I do, and that I can be optimistic when success seems farther off than I'd like it to be. I'm grateful that I've been able to survive the cancers I've had, and that my family has largely been untouched by tragedies I read about other people experiencing.

I'm grateful that I am pretty much free to create the kind of life I want to – maybe not with everything I want, but with everything I need.

It seems that the more I am grateful for what I have, the more I have to be grateful for.

* * *

Act From Your Heart Instead of Your Ego

There are families who act mostly from their hearts instead of their egos, and there are schools where teachers do it, too. The result is a group of people who like and respect one another, who speak up when they have something to say and listen when others do; they look for solutions instead of someone to blame and are willing to compromise without feeling like victims.

Imagine a neighborhood, a workplace, a world where everyone acted from their hearts instead of their egos. We'd respect other peoples' differences and opinions, and look for ways to help one another instead of ways to compete; we'd take care of people who aren't able to take care of themselves; we'd teach more and punish less, and wars and terrorists would be a thing of the past

because our time and money would be spent looking for ways to get along instead of ways to get even.

We can create this if each of us remembers to ask ourselves often, *If I were acting from my heart right now, what choice would I make?*

* * *

Most Coincidences Aren't

You've probably heard people say, "There's no such thing as a coincidence." Actually, maybe you've heard *me* say it. Coincidence implies that meeting someone you'd been thinking about or being led to something you'd been looking for happened merely by chance. I don't believe things happen by chance very often.

I do believe in synchronicity. Synchronicity is defined as a seemingly accidental occurrence that connects events which are highly unlikely to connect, and the connection is meaningful to the observer. Synchronicity is when situations line up to bring us what we want or lead us to it: like having an unexpected urge to go to work a new way and finding a table just the size you've been looking for sitting by someone's trash, or going to a different place for coffee and meeting the man you will marry.

Some say God arranges these experiences for us, others say it's the universe, guardian angels, our higher selves, or it's simply a matter of energy responding to the energy we create with our thinking. Whatever. It doesn't happen merely by chance.

When my first husband and I were getting a divorce, he said it made him sad to think he'd just be a Disneyland dad; a dad who only saw our daughter on outings. I suggested we share custody so he could stay involved. He was skeptical, but I felt sure that joint custody would be a good thing for all of us.

Later that day I went to the library, and there, facing me at eye level on the new book shelf, was a book on co-parenting. I took the book home, read it, and my then-husband and I chose a model we used successfully for the next five years.

Finding that book didn't happen by chance. I expressed a need and was guided to the answer.

I used to long to live in Hawaii, but I told myself all kinds of stories about why I couldn't. Then one day, between one heart beat and the next, I knew that I would move there, and in the next few weeks my health food store started playing Hawaiian music. Later that week, I was sitting on a bench looking out at Balboa Bay, and a woman sat next to me and started talking about when she lived in Hawaii. A few days later, I ran into a man I knew, and he'd just come home from a traditional Huna healing workshop... in Hawaii.

Those things didn't happen merely by chance.

A few weeks before I moved, I arranged to stay at the Honolulu Y while I looked for an apartment, but then a friend told me that a friend of her friend rented rooms in their home and had one available. Did I want it? Yes!

Once, I told a friend I was looking for a chair for my kitchen table, and he offered to give me one a friend had given him. It was the exact match of my other kitchen chair.

Once I got a huge discount on a shirt because an impossible-to-match button was missing. I went home and found an exact duplicate in my sewing box.

One of my apartments in Hawaii was on the grounds of a large house, and since my landlord was legally blind, I wanted to put up my own mailbox. The post office told me I couldn't because my apartment wasn't listed as an address. I told a friend, and she said her son was the postmaster of the post office that delivered my mail and she'd talk to him. He said okay to my mailbox as long as I took it down when I moved.

When I moved to Hawaii, I expected to live there for the rest of my life. The joy I felt was physical, and I couldn't imagine ever leaving. But I like adventures, and after seven years on Oahu, I felt like I knew every beach, every restaurant, the view around every corner. My connection to Hawaii loosened, and eventually I knew I'd leave.

One night I was watching TV, and I saw a news clip of a flooded river in Austin. Water rushed around tall, thin trees, and I was fascinated. Days later, I still couldn't get the picture out of my mind. I did some research, and a few months later I bought a one-way ticket to Austin. It wasn't a coincidence that I saw that news clip; four months after I moved to Austin I met my soul mate, the man I'd been calling to me for years.

When my husband and I moved to Pacific Grove, I told him I wanted a table lamp with a round red clay base that I could swirl with green paint. I found one a few days later at a thrift shop.

I had a casual, but persistent desire for red shoes and I also wanted real Crocs without having to pay the full price, and one day on vacation, thrift shopping with a friend in a tiny town in Colorado, I found a pair of red Crocs exactly my size for \$5.

I thought it might be handy to have a second little cart to carry laundry from the apartment to the laundry room and two days later my husband found a cart in the trash/recycle shed. Exactly like the one we already had.

Someone sent my husband a gift but addressed it to an apartment that didn't exist. When the apartment office closed at five, my husband worried that the UPS driver would return his gift to the sender. He put a note on the office

door, and I made a mental request that when I left that evening for a meeting, the UPS truck would be out front.

I was disappointed when I pulled out of the driveway and the truck wasn't there, but then I "just happened" to look toward the corner in time to see the UPS truck fly down the hill half a block away. I followed, and got my husband's package at the driver's next stop.

One morning I said I wished I could be like a friend of mine who always seems so calm, and my husband said, no, just be you. I'm not kidding; an hour later I saw a license plate: jstBU

I could go on.

I've had people tell me that they don't doubt this happens for me, but that it doesn't happen for them. I think it probably does, but they don't notice when it does, or they don't act on little urges to do something different that would lead them to what they want.

I keep a log of serendipitous events now, and it seems that when I'm in the mind frame to notice them, more happen for me to notice.

Here are four steps I suggest to people who want to experience synchronicity: Have a clear intent about what you want to be led to, what answer you want to find, and let people know; follow up on hunches that nudge you to go someplace or call someone "out of the blue"; be aware of your experiences so you notice when you receive what you want; be grateful.

Still doubtful? Try this: Instead of thinking that it doesn't work, try wondering, *what if...?*

The Blame Game Keeps You Stuck

We've been taught that it's wrong to be wrong. Our stories say that if we did things the "right" way, we would be successful. So when what we do doesn't turn out the way we want it to, our ego is quick to assign blame.

When I struggled to sell wine on the phone I had a mental list of reasons why no one would buy from me. I blamed the economy, the price, the training, and the lead list. My excuses made my failure not my fault.

The blame game annoys others, and it keeps us stuck having what we don't want because if it's not our fault, our stories say, there's nothing we need to do differently.

We're human. No one can be right all the time, and when we accept responsibility for our behavior, we can communicate honestly with others, and look for other solutions.

There's a saying in sales: SWSWSW. Some will (buy), some won't, so what? It's meant to remind people in sales that they will never succeed all the time.

Those of us who aren't in sales can have our own version of SWSWSW: Sometimes I **W**ill Succeed, Sometimes I **W**on't, So **W**hat will I try next?

* * *

You Create Everything in Your Life

The first time I heard that I create everything in my life, I was in a class at the Church of Religious Science, now called Centers for Spiritual Living. This church has touched the lives of writers like Louise Hay, Wayne Dyer, Marianne Williamson, Lisa Nichols, Les Brown, and Michael Beckwith to name a few.

My classmates and I looked at our teacher for a bit, and then we looked for exceptions. Did we create the clerk who was rude to us? Yes. The date who stood us up? Yes. The driver who ran into us? Yes. Did we create the unpleasant coworkers, angry neighbors, unreasonable significant others? Yes, yes, yes. Not because we *wanted* to, but because that energy matched energy that was already in us.

Centers for Spiritual Living teaches universal laws that resemble the laws of physics in that they have a predictable behavior whether we believe in them or not. The law of gravity says that if we step off a platform, we will drop. The law of attraction says that if we put our attention on something, we will attract it, or its energetic equivalent, to us.

The teacher explained that the law of attraction doesn't distinguish between what we want and what we don't want. What we say, think, feel, and do – positive or negative – all create energy that finds its match and brings that to us as experience.

Before that class, I would have said I was just telling the truth when I complained, *That always happens to me*, or, *That never happens to me*, and *I can't have/do/be that because...* What I learned in the class was that I was right: As long as I told myself those stories and believed them, they would continue to be true in my life. As long as I sent out that energy, it would find its match and bring the equivalent back to me.

Do I believe I created my toxic bosses? Yes, they mirrored the energy inside me that was demanding, controlling; I attracted them to me with the stories I told about all the other difficult bosses I'd had. I attracted bosses whose energy was about being in control with my energy of being a victim. Did I create my challenging finances? Yes; I hadn't let go of the stories I'd heard from my parents about not having enough money to pay all the bills, and I hadn't taken the steps I needed to take to learn to master money myself.

Do I believe I created cancer eight times? Yes, I do believe that. I used to obsess about not having cancer (but the focus was on cancer); I didn't take care of my body by giving it the right food and enough rest to build a healthy immune system; and cancer gave me an opportunity to slip into my old familiar victim role to escape a toxic job I couldn't give myself permission to leave.

I've met people who don't like to think they create the unpleasant experiences in their lives, but it comforts me. If I created what I don't want with what I say, think, feel, and do, I can change that and attract what I do want instead.

After I'd been divorced from my first husband for awhile, I felt ready to be in a long-term relationship again. I cut out pictures to paste on a vision board: couples walking on sandy beaches; couples having romantic meals at the water's edge; couples laughing on sailboats. I put that vision board where I'd see it every day, and in a few months I started dating Gordon. He lived in an apartment building in a Southern California marina. He had a sailboat. He planned to work two more years, then let go of his apartment, sell his car, and sail around the world. Forever.

That was more boat and water than I wanted. And when I put together my vision board, I'd forgotten to think about attracting a man who didn't have a baggage cart of anger. Gordon and I didn't work out, but I learned a valuable lesson: I *will* attract what I put my attention on, so I need to be sure I put my attention on exactly what I want. My next vision board had beaches and homes and men who looked happy and kind.

Before I moved to Hawaii, I'd visualized living in an apartment on a large piece of property with rent that was low because the landlord didn't really need the money. After I'd been in Hawaii awhile, I visualized having a second bedroom and an ocean view for the same price I was paying for my one-bedroom.

Friends rolled their eyes, but one day one of them called to say she'd found the apartment I was looking for while looking for one for herself. It was on a huge piece of property owned by a man who was nearly blind and the rent was lower than I'd been paying. The man didn't need the money, but he wanted someone nearby in case he needed help.

Sometimes what I want comes almost instantly; other times it seems to take forever. I'd visualized my soul mate for years, puzzled that everything I'd truly wanted had come to me except him. When I bought a one-way ticket to Austin I thought I was going for the adventure; turned out I was going to meet my soul mate, the man of my dreams.

* * *

There's a Secret Behind *The Secret*

One of the times when my husband was ill and I was following my wise friend's advice to figure out what I believed, I thought about *The Secret*, a popular book and video by Rhonda Byrne. It's been a huge success around the world. *The Secret* promises that we can have whatever we want. All we have to do is know what that is, visualize having it, and believe that we can. When we do this, the folks in the video tell us, the universe will line up people and events so that what we want appears.

I believed that. I'd visualized and created what I wanted hundreds of times. When I'm clear about what I want, when I visualize and *feel* optimistic about having it, and when I follow up on subtle urges to do something or say something that might be out of the ordinary for me, what I want appears in surprising ways.

Here's what I didn't understand: I knew the universal laws the folks interviewed in video talk about, so why were they wildly successful and in a popular video while I was only modestly successful in my own writing career? Why were the people in *The Secret* video there without me?

I know, they create what they put their attention on by using visualization, but I do, too. They've written books about what they know, but so have I. I stopped thinking about what seemed like the unfairness of it all, and started really looking at what was different between them and me.

Here's the difference: They didn't stop with writing books. They made CDs and DVDs about the law of attraction and promoted themselves tirelessly around the country. They gave popular workshops and became well known so when Rhonda Byrne looked for participants for her video, they were visible, and participating was their logical next step.

I hadn't been that focused. I'd written books about a variety of subjects. When I did teach workshops based on the law of attraction, I'd been timid about putting myself out in the community in a big way, choosing instead to do workshops with small groups in community college settings. With my thinking and my actions, I was telling the universe I didn't want to move out of my comfort zone, and the universe was meeting my limited thinking with limited success.

In order to be more successful than I am, I need to decide to be; I need to make sure my thinking and my actions match the level of success I want to experience.

We create not only what we focus on, but what we create matches the level of energy we put into it.

That's the secret behind the secret.

* * *

Energy You Can't See is Still Real

I recognized that I responded to other peoples' energy decades before I understood what was happening. My simple explanation was that I liked being with people who were like me, or people who were unlike me but I felt comfortable with.

Now I understand what's at the core of those instant (or not so instant) feelings of liking or not liking someone.

Energy.

Scientists tell us that everything that is is vibrating energy, including us. We create the energy that vibrates as us with what we think, do, say, and with where we put our attention.

We tend to be comfortable with people whose energy vibrates at about the same level ours does, and uncomfortable with people whose energy is very different. That's why people can *feel* they will like someone or not the instant they meet.

I felt uncomfortable the moment I saw the woman who answered my ad for a roommate, but I didn't understand I was reacting to her energy. I told myself stories about being judgmental because she was a bit odd, and I let her move into my home. Our energies never matched; in fact, it felt like they bumped into each other. We were never comfortable with each other.

I felt uncomfortable energy the day I showed up for an interview for a sales job, but I told myself stories about job seekers not being able to be that fussy, and people not always liking where they worked but so what, and I accepted the job.

I didn't quit the first day when my body begged me to escape; I didn't quit the first week, or even the first month when each of the other six new employees quit. I didn't quit when a wise older man came to visit me and asked if I knew the energy was very bad there. Instead, I slid deeper into my behavior patterns of denial and struggle. I didn't leave until I was diagnosed with cancer (behavior pattern: victim) and realized I had no other choice.

Here's another thing about energy: Author Carolyn Myss says we leak our energy when we're around people who pull it from us, or when we use it complaining, stressing, being angry, frustrated, guilty, judgmental, and so forth.

Imagine, she suggests, that every morning you receive one hundred energy credits to spend during the day. If you spend thirty working with people you don't like being around, twenty thinking about someone who made you mad last week, twenty worrying about the conflict you're afraid you'll have with your partner, and ten in imaginary conversations, past, present, or future, that are upsetting, you only have twenty energy credits left to use the whole day to create the experiences you want to have.

The solution is to become aware of the energy we're leaking by noticing how we feel; then stop the leak by turning our attention someplace else.

New-age authors used to suggest that when we were unhappy, angry, frustrated, afraid, or feeling any other unpleasant emotion, we could neutralize that energy by hugging a tree. Sweet idea, I thought. I intended to do it once, but the tree I'd intended to hug had ants, so I pretty much lost interest.

Instead of hugging trees, I can often neutralize uncomfortable energy by taking a step back – physically, and emotionally. I can walk away from who- or whatever is draining my energy, and I can neutralize energy by observing what's going on instead of judging; by breathing deeply instead of holding it; by noticing what I'm attached to, what stories I'm telling, what behavior patterns I'm slipping into, and making the change I need to make.

Taking care of our energy is about more than just feeling good. When we stress, our bodies create the fight-or-flight hormone cortisol. Cortisol helps us run from danger, but when it stays around too long it overwhelms our immune system. The illnesses it can create are very real.

* * *

You're Not Supposed to Struggle

I struggle when I'm not satisfied having what I have. Sometimes I need to push myself a bit. But sometimes I don't, and I push myself anyway because it's just a habit.

I used to boast about being a type A personality, and I was proud of how hard I worked. The attention and admiration I imagined I got from others motivated me to stay in that behavior.

My husband believed that only quitters quit, and people who are responsible put work in front of fun, and they work through fatigue or pain. That thinking made him very ill.

When the economy worries us, we believe we have to struggle to afford all the things the media tells us we deserve: tropical vacations, luxury cruises, homes in upscale neighborhoods, our children in the best schools; the media tempts that we deserve to drive late-model cars, eat at terrific restaurants, and wear fashionable clothes. Sounds good. But then we have to work hard to pay off our credit card bills.

It's easy to let struggle become a habit.

I lived in Hawaii on very little money. I could have probably enjoyed my job selling display advertising for one of the papers if I hadn't slipped back into my old behavior pattern of wanting everything to be perfect. I worked too hard on nearly every ad I sold; I worked too hard trying to ignore (and later fix) the toxic atmosphere of the office; I worked too hard trying to get my boss to be

reasonable. I accepted the struggle as inevitable, and told myself I had to grit my teeth and stay until I finally made some good money at Christmas.

Turns out, I didn't.

Cancer came along to show me that my struggles at work weren't nearly as necessary as I thought they were.

Changing isn't always easy, but I'm proof that it can be done. For me, change starts with a block of quiet time, a notebook, and pen for lists. First, I need to get clear about what's going on and what change I want. Then, I need to get clear about what steps I need to take to make the change. It helps me to post reminders so I am always reminded of the change I want to make. And, finally, I need to make them.

Struggle is a habit, but I've learned that not struggling can be a habit, too.

* * *

Once, my cancer writing group was asked to write for seven minutes on the word discipline. This is what I wrote:

Discipline marches me, like an obedient soldier, to work long hours under less than ideal situations.

Discipline says I have to work hard to succeed.

I have been hard-wired with this kind of discipline.

But there is another kind of discipline I need to learn; the discipline it takes to stop.

Odd to think it takes discipline to remember to play!

That it takes discipline to slow down and simply be sometimes instead of always getting things done.

* * *

Meditate

I wish I'd been given a book years ago about why I should meditate. Oh, wait, I was. I read the book, listened to tapes, and attended workshops, always with good intentions but spotty follow-through, until one day I decided to meditate daily and I've never stopped. The other times, I'd sat, determined to stay the whole time, determined to do it because I knew I should. I was determined, but not relaxed.

This time it was a choice that I relaxed into. Now, I don't do it because I should; I do it because it feels right, like brushing my teeth. I suspect meditating is one of those things no one can talk us into: We're only ready when we're ready.

On a continuum from casual to formal, my meditation practice is solidly on casual because that's what works for me. I try to meditate in the morning, but if I have early appointments, I meditate later. I sit on my bed with my back against the wall; I close my eyes and I notice my breath: the way it sounds, the way it feels going in and out of my nose. When my mind wanders, I gently bring my attention back to my breath.

Sometimes while I meditate, I shift my attention to feeling my heart beat, and I can feel how it's a pump. Sometimes I focus on a mantra instead of my breath. Or I'll mentally hear myself saying, *huusshhh* as I exhale.

Occasionally, I meditate on a park bench or in a waiting room. I'm usually more aware of my surroundings than I am in my bedroom, but I remind myself that studies show meditation is helpful whether we have a good experience or not.

Walking meditation, tasting meditation, touching and listening meditation, guided meditation, and other forms of mindfulness also help me let go of stress by focusing my attention away from busyness.

Neuroscientists have found that when we meditate, there are changes in the brain wave pattern that moves us into what's known as the alpha state, and in this state the brain releases feel-good endorphins that both calm us and help boost our immune system. Meditation is easy, free, safe, beneficial, and it doesn't really take long. What is there not to like?

* * *

You Become What You Practice Most

This seems obvious: In baseball, pitchers become great pitchers by throwing the ball, not by hovering at third base trying to tag runners out. Attorneys practice law, doctors practice medicine, actors practice acting – people spend time practicing what they want to become.

I don't want to be a pitcher, an attorney, a doctor or actor, but there are things I want to be that we don't usually think of practicing.

When I first heard about "acting as if," I was confused. I wanted to be wealthy, but I couldn't see how spending money as if I were rich could be a good idea. Turns out, that wasn't the point. The point was to act – think, and feel – like I was wealthy instead of acting – thinking and feeling – like I was broke. Wear the good jewelry; use the good china. Talk about the money I have and not the money I don't.

I think it was Wayne Dyer who wrote about going to a party where everyone was invited to show up *as if* they were living the life they wanted to. My husband and I did that one night for dinner, pretending we'd just met. We

shared stories *as if* we already enjoyed the success we were moving toward, and it energized us both.

There's another area of our lives where practice shapes us that we may not be conscious of: If we spend a lot of time complaining, we become a complainer. If we spend a lot of time being grumpy, we become a grump. If we spend a lot of time being impatient, rude, a whiner, or a nag, it will be easy to stay in that behavior.

Often, I'd like to be more patient than I am, and when I'm in line at the bank or the post office I've got a great opportunity to practice being patient, to act as if I am.

When I'm frustrated, I can practice, I can act as if I'm a little more optimistic than I am, a little bit more confident....

When we practice having what we want, we create energy that will go into the universe to find the object of our focus and bring us back the match. When we practice being who we want to be, we already are that person.

* * *

See Abundance Everywhere

While I was a single mom and working at the winery, I struggled with money. I was always worried about having enough to pay the bills, and the more I worried, the more it seemed I *should* be worried.

A friend suggested I focus on noticing everything that was undeniably abundant, and I agreed to give it a try. *Look at all those leaves on those trees, I'd tell myself. Look how many blades of grass there are in that lawn. There seem to be endless grains of sand on the beach.*

Silly? Maybe, but it worked. With that simple change of focus from lack to abundance, I felt different. My new thinking calmed me and helped me be optimistic, and that helped me sell wine and develop some loyal customers.

We can make the same shift with health, good relationships, and anything else we want more of. Noticing the abundance around us fills us with the perfect energy to see and attract more.

It can be really hard to make that shift when we're feeling overwhelmed, but, of course, that's when we need to do it most. And we can by changing our stories.

* * *

There's Enough for Everyone

I was raised by parents who had experienced scarcity – not enough love, not enough money, not enough confidence in themselves – and I was taught by

society to grab what I could get, indulge myself with what I deserved, and charge it all on plastic if I didn't have enough cash.

Me and millions of other Americans.

A president took us to war claiming it was to protect us, but really it was about greed. Companies wiped out pension funds claiming it was just business, but really it was just greed.

It's said there's plenty of food to feed everyone, but poor people don't receive it because of someone's greed.

There have never been more millionaires, more billionaires in our country than there are now. There have also never been more men, women, and children living at- or below the poverty level. This is what greed does.

Greed says, me first, me most, me best. It's easy to point fingers at CEOs who make millions while laying off workers who need jobs to feed their families. It's easy to complain that movie stars and sports figures are paid more than teachers and social workers. It's easy to see incomprehensible greed and shake our heads, but as long as there's enough for us, shaking our heads seems to be as far as we go. It's not because we don't care; I think it's because we don't believe we can change the system.

We are more powerful than we believe we are. It's not about fighting for what we want: America has had wars on drugs, cancer, HIV, poverty, domestic violence and many other things that only seem to get worse.

I believe our power comes from being conscious about the way we live our lives and generous enough to make changes that benefit people beyond our own circle of family and friends, even as far ahead as the seventh generation (a philosophy inspired by the laws of the Iroquois Indians).

We can choose to change our focus to include ways to help people before they choose drugs or guns to solve their problems, and we can put more energy and money into rehabilitation than incarceration.

We can search for ways to avoid cancer and HIV that work instead of ones that fit a group's ideology or a drug company's sales goal. We can agree to pay a little more in taxes to help others out of poverty, and spend a little more of our time working to help people in our communities than we do watching TV.

We can imagine our lives, our world, if everyone took just what they needed, or even what they passionately wanted, and left the rest for others. We can, as John Lennon suggested, imagine a world without greed.

Boggles the mind, doesn't it?

* * *

Learn the Difference Between Judgment and Intuition

I think we've been misled by what we were taught about both judgment and intuition. We've been encouraged to judge, to have strong opinions, to be decisive, to make judgments quickly and stick to them.

On the other hand, we've been taught that judging is bad. We shouldn't judge people, we shouldn't be judgmental.

Is judging right, or is it wrong?

It depends.

Judging can be helpful when we use it to help us choose a house, a car, a computer, and which apple or orange to buy. It's helpful when we use it to make snap decisions when the result doesn't matter much, or important decisions after carefully weighing facts.

It's harmful when we use it to label ourselves, people and things good or bad, valuable or not, right or wrong, without accurate information. It's harmful when we judge what we think happened or why it happened or who said or did what and why without enough information.

It's harmful when we judge people and events against our stories of how people and things "should" be. Judgment is harmful when it's based on stories we tell ourselves that make us feel superior or inferior, powerful or confused and overwhelmed, and it can lead us to decisions that aren't the best ones.

Intuition is different. It feels softer than judgment, and the guidance we receive is always helpful. Some believe intuition is guidance that comes from universal consciousness – that place where the energy of everything that is or has been is. Some believe it comes from our higher self, guardian angels, or God.

Intuition nudges us to be where we need to be to meet someone who knows the professional we've been trying to find. Intuition nudges us to take the next step that we worry we can't take. Intuition nudges us away from people who won't be helpful or safe. This kind of intuition can give us information we have no earthly way of knowing.

There are times when I thought I was being judgmental, but I was actually getting guidance from my intuition. When the woman answered my ad for a roommate, I wasn't comfortable with her, but I told myself I was being judgmental, and I said okay. We were not a good match, and my intuition tried to tell me that. I've felt I needed to escape jobs but judged myself for being weak and stayed. Each time, my intuition was talking to me.

Here's how I've learned to tell the difference: Generally, a judgment jumps into my mind. When I'm judging, I hear the story first: good, bad, right, wrong, too this or not enough that, and after the thought comes a feeling. Often, a strong one.

Intuition comes to me first as a feeling that makes me want to move, physically or emotionally, closer or farther away, makes me *feel* comfortable or not. After the feeling, my mind gives it a name.

Intuition guides me to go to the library shelf where I'll find the book with answers I need; it guides me to tell a friend I want a chair without knowing he has the exact match he'll be happy to give me; it guides me to move from Honolulu to Austin so I can meet my soul mate.

We can use both judgment and intuition to guide us to be happy, healthy, and successful, and once we learn how to recognize which is which, they will guide us well.

* * *

Ask for Help From the Right Source

Growing up, I was taught it was good to ask for help, good to trust the experts because, I was taught, I didn't know anything myself. I was okay asking for help. But I was never taught how to decide *who* to ask for help. Imagine my confusion when the advice I got was contradictive or ended in disaster.

I've heard that if a friend wants to play matchmaker, look at who she has chosen to date or marry. If the two of you don't share the same criteria for choosing a partner, you probably won't be happy with the person she wants you to meet.

I think that's a great idea for every area of our lives. Before we ask someone for advice, we want to consider how well the person we're asking manages his or her own life. We want to ask someone who's demonstrated he knows what he's talking about, and we want to ask someone who shares our outlook, our values.

But once we've gotten advice from others, we need to ask ourselves how the advice feels. When we do that, we can use judgment and intuition together.

* * *

Learn to Recognize the Voice of Your Inner Guidance

My mind has always been crowded with voices (not the crazy kind, just the kind we know as thoughts). Some are what I call outside voices: they gnaw on the past and worry about the future; they plan constantly, they nag at me to do more. Some tell me what a good job I'm doing, but mostly they're negative or critical of me and other people and events. My outside voices repeat messages I've accumulated from other people; messages that keep me busy but are rarely any help.

Outside voices tell us what a "good" child/parent/friend/significant other "should" do. Outside voices tell stories about how a respectable person must

behave. Outside voices talk about things like responsibility, duty, loyalty, and putting everyone else first.

Outside voices often shout and nag, they warn, and accuse; they push us into attachments and behavior patterns that keep us stuck.

Our ego was trained by outside voices. It wants to make sure we do what it needs us to do to feed its addictions to being right, being in control, being respected, appreciated, approved of, and loved.

The more we let outside stories play in our heads the more connections our brain develops, and that makes it easier for them to play again.

Outside voices aren't always wrong, but we need to examine the messages to see if they help us or if they keep us stuck.

There's another voice I hear that I recognize as my inner guidance. It guides me to take certain actions and not take others. Often, this voice leads me to people and experiences that make my life easier or more enjoyable.

The voice of my inner guidance comes to me like intuition does, as a hunch, a wish, a longing, a feeling of joy, or simply an idea. Occasionally my inner guidance feels like dread if I'm moving in the wrong direction. It usually comes to me first as a feeling and then the words come to help me understand what the feeling means.

My inner guidance speaks softly but persistently. It is calm and patient and wants only the best for me. It never suggests that I harm myself or anyone else (though if someone is attached to my doing something I don't want to do, that person might want me to believe I've hurt them).

For years, my inner guidance nudged me to leave an unhappy marriage, but my outside voices accused me of being selfish for thinking about myself and my happiness; the voices said that I owed it to my daughter and her dad not to separate them. My outside voices warned that on my own, I wouldn't have enough money to buy a bottle of shampoo. I listened to those voices, and they became my stories for years.

Then one morning my inner guidance said it was time, and between one heartbeat and the next, I knew that I would get a divorce. I was afraid and yet calmly determined when I told my then-husband I didn't want to be married anymore.

After that, it took me several years to recognize that the longing I felt to live near the ocean was my inner guidance urging me to move. I'd spent years listening to the voices that said I shouldn't move my teenage daughter three hours from her dad and her friends, and that as a woman I wouldn't be able to get a home loan.

I finally told those voices to hush and everything worked out fine. My daughter saw her dad regularly, and she had opportunities with her new friends

at her new school that she would have never had at the old one. I qualified easily for a loan, and I felt joy every day to be able live where so many streets led to views of the water.

When I realized that my longing to live on a tropical island was my inner guidance nudging me to move again, I told all those outside voices – the ones that said a good mother didn't move across the ocean from her daughter; that warned that such a wonderful, expensive life was too big a dream for me – to hush. Instead, I told myself that my daughter was about to finish college and she wasn't planning to move back to Southern California; I knew how to live frugally, and I'd just do that in Hawaii. I'd imagined moving to Hawaii for years, and my daughter encouraged me to live my dream.

Those outside voices hushed, and a few months later, I bought a one-way ticket to Honolulu.

I thought I'd live in Hawaii forever, but my inner guidance nudged me to the mainland, where, after being divorced for twenty years, I met and married my soul mate.

My inner guidance doesn't just talk to me about the big things. Sometimes it asks me to take a break when I'm working too hard. It asks me to drink more water, to get up and stretch. It encourages me to spend time doing things that nourish me when I'm determined to just be productive. Always, it asks me to be kind to myself.

It's easy to be pulled into being a workaholic. It's tempting to say yes when we mean no, familiar to have good intentions but wind up taking care of ourself last. Listening to our inner guidance goes against decades of training. It takes practice, but it can be done, and the result is being able to live the life we want to live, the way we want to live it.

It took awhile for me to sort the voices out, but once I did, and when I listen to the right ones, my life flows and I don't have to struggle.

Notice your longings, notice what you tell yourself you'd do if only you could. If you had no one to answer to and no one to be responsible for, what would you do? These longings, these dreams, are your inner guidance talking to you. Maybe you can't leap toward them right away – but maybe that's just a story. Ask yourself what you can do right now to move toward your dreams. And then trust and tell yourself stories about knowing you can.

* * *

Learn to Trust Yourself

When we were young, we knew exactly what we wanted, when we wanted it, and we weren't shy about demanding it. Then we were taught we

should want other things, we shouldn't demand anything, and we were taught that other people in our lives were the experts. Even about us.

But they aren't.

I trusted myself and got divorced, and I trusted myself and moved to Newport Beach and then Hawaii. Those challenges were easy compared to what I faced a few years later.

On October 16, 1997, I had a six+ centimeter lump removed from my right breast. A few days later I sobbed while my surgeon told me about my kind of cancer. Not the good kind, she said. This kind usually spreads. She said she hadn't gotten clean margins, which means that when she'd removed the cancer, she hadn't gotten healthy tissue all around it, so there might be some left.

She said I needed to have a mastectomy to remove the cancer that might still be there, and she was sure my oncologist would recommend chemo and radiation, too. She said there were no guarantees that I'd survive even with this treatment, but it offered my best chance.

I sat on Sid's lap and sobbed. Everyone I knew who'd had cancer had died quickly, so I believed I would, too. I'd have one more Christmas, one more birthday... if I was lucky....

She pushed me to let her make an appointment for the mastectomy, and a voice in my head screamed NO! She told me time was important, we needed to do the surgery quickly. I pleaded with her to help me find a way to be well that wasn't so drastic, but she said there wasn't any. I hushed the voice that said what she wanted me to do felt so wrong, and reluctantly agreed to surgery the following week.

When Sid (a former boyfriend who was then my best friend) and I left her office, we went to my apartment and cried. We slept some, he left, and I cried some more.

A couple of days later I told one of my coworkers that my doctor was pushing me to have a mastectomy, and he pleaded with me to watch a video he said he'd loan me about cancer and oxygen therapy. The message was that cancer can't live in an oxygenated climate, so trained practitioners administer oxygen in the hopes of boosting the immune system so it can fight cancer.

I write about this in my memoir, *Learning to Trust Myself: Lessons from Cancer and Other Life Dilemmas* (available on Kindle), so I'll give you the short version here. The video showed me that my surgeon was wrong; There *were* alternative treatments available; just not ones blessed by JAMA. Oxygen therapy didn't feel right for me, but knowing there was one alternative available made me determined to find others.

I rushed to get second- third- and even fourth medical opinions, each time hoping one of the doctors would help me find a way to be safe without making

myself sicker first. But I was in Honolulu, and doctors in any given area tend to think alike, so they all agreed with my surgeon.

As I met with the doctors, then went off on my own to search for alternative treatments, I began to notice the way I felt when I talked to the doctors – shut down, dreading, like a helpless victim. But when I was looking for a less toxic way to be well, I felt optimistic and strong. My body was sending me a message, and I had two options: trust the doctors, the *experts*, the ones all my stories said knew more than I did, or trust the way I felt when I considered the options: trust the voice of my inner guidance. I chose to trust myself.

My surgeon protested, but I cancelled the mastectomy. As I talked to other women in Honolulu who'd been successful dealing with breast cancer using alternative medicine, three suggested I go to a wellness clinic in San Diego where a diet of raw green foods would flush toxins from my body. Three people told me to read a book on alternative healing edited by Burton Goldberg, and two people recommended I work with a naturopath, and both named the same man.

I've learned that when I get the same message from two or more different sources, it's guidance I'm supposed to listen to. I made a reservation and spent two weeks at the wellness clinic, I used Burton Goldberg's book to create the wellness plan I used for a couple of years, and I worked with the naturopath for more than a year.

Trusting myself instead of the doctors wasn't nearly as easy as I'm making it sound. I'd stare at myself in the mirror and wonder if I was refusing the mastectomy because I didn't want to lose a breast. Was I refusing chemo because I didn't want to lose my hair? Was I so attached to how I looked that I was going to die for it? I didn't feel like that was true.

Still, I was often terrified. I listened nonstop to tapes two women had loaned me from Carolyn Myss' workshops, and they reminded me to notice when I was leaking energy (when I was telling myself stories that made me afraid) and call it back.

To interrupt my scary stories, I practiced a visualization where a TV cameraman puts a microphone in front of me and says, "So tell me, Karin Ireland, did you always know you'd be rich and famous?" I'd been a writer for ages and I always thought I might write a best-seller, so in this visualization I'd smile and modestly say to the cameraman, "Yes, I always did."

In an instant I'd changed my story, my behavior, *and* the way I felt. I did that dozens of times every day for nearly a year. I reminded myself that when I'm behaving as my wisest self, the right thing to do is what feels like the right thing to do.

I believe that each of us is here in this life to explore what we want to do and how we want to do it, to be who and what we want to be. Sometimes, it's a

hard to remember when everyone in our life is trying to tell us to do things *their* way.

But when we notice we don't feel good trying to live the way other people want us to, we can decide to get back in touch with our own inner guidance and then trust ourselves.

* * *

Be Brave

When I was eighteen, I longed to move to San Francisco. But I told myself I wasn't brave enough to risk the unknown, and that story became my behavior pattern. Oh, I was fine with unknown things like new jobs and new friends, but I wasn't brave enough to walk up to a cute guy and let him know I was interested. I wasn't brave enough to challenge someone who was rude to me, to trust myself more than the experts, or to follow my dream to move around the country.

Decades later, I signed up to be part of a support group where the focus was on helping one another understand how strong we were. I went every week for nearly two years, and each week I repeated an affirmation about letting the universe handle the details. I listened to my partners remind me what a spiritual and powerful woman I am. I remembered that I create my experiences with what I say, how I feel, what I do.

I was part of that support group when my inner guidance nudged me to move to Hawaii. Because I'd been so focused on how powerful I am, I knew I could, and would move.

When I felt guided to find my own wellness plan instead of following doctors' orders for toxic treatment after my first cancer, it was scary – but I did that, too. When I felt guidance to leave Honolulu and move to Austin, I did. And, after being single for 20 years, I got married!

These days, my new story is that I can be as brave as I want to be.

* * *

It's All Good

One year I volunteered to be part of an anonymous group to distribute toys and other Christmas gifts to families the social service agencies said needed help. Before we left with vans full of presents, we were reminded that not everyone would behave the way we might expect them to. We stood in the parking lot holding hands and listening to this reminder: Everything is perfect; just the way it is, and just the way it isn't.

The reminder was helpful that night. Some families invited us in, thanking us tearfully, and we all felt grateful to be able to be part of their happiness. But as my group pulled up in front of one house, the kids came running out, calling to

us: "Are you the ones with the bikes? Here, we'll take them," and they carried bags full of presents into the house, closing the door after them. Deep breath. Okay, then. We reminded ourselves that that was perfect, just the way it was, and just the way it wasn't.

It's a helpful phrase to remember every day. People disappoint us, we disappoint ourselves and others, things don't go the way we wish they would. But when we can take a breath and say, *Everything is perfect, just the way it is and just the way it isn't* and mean it; it is all good.

* * *

Let It Go

I remember a movie about a man who saved newspapers. He'd saved them for so long his apartment only had room for a tiny pathway from one room to another. It was easy to recognize that the man had a problem and that his life was more difficult because he couldn't let go of his papers.

Sometimes, my mind has been like that man's crowded apartment; full of stories and memories that make my life more difficult.

When I was at the winery learning about letting go of attachments to outcomes I only knew one way to detach, and that was to breathe in and imagine letting the attachment slip away as I exhaled. That's still the easiest, but if an attachment or a story or any kind of unwanted thinking takes more to let go of than that, I've discovered several other techniques that work.

For example: Put an image of your unwanted thinking on a mental chalk board, and then imagine erasing it. Watch the thought or feeling disappear; then replace it with an image of the ocean or something else you love. (If you don't imagine by seeing, just think about the image.)

My husband and I came up with the Tortilla Toss when we lived in an apartment with a deck that overlooked a wilderness area. We'd take a stale corn tortilla, give it the name of a thought or problem we wanted to let go of, then we'd toss it Frisbee style into the woods. If it sailed nicely, we considered the thought or problem gone. If the tortilla wobbled and landed too close to the deck, the rule we made up was that we needed to be a little more intentional, and throw again until we got one to sail.

I don't have a wilderness area where I live now, so when I want to let go of a thought or problem that I can't let go of with my breath, I have other methods. One is to write down Twelve True Things. The purpose of the twelve true things is to turn my thinking in a more helpful direction.

Here's an example: When my husband and I moved into one apartment, a neighbor let us use her parking spot overnight so we wouldn't have to park our U-Haul on the street. The next day I left her a note thanking her, inviting her to

coffee. She left a nice message on my answering machine, but didn't take me up on my offer to get together.

At first I felt (but only slightly) confused, then miffed, then hurt. Why didn't she want to have coffee with me? I didn't want to take this personally, but I sort of was. I could tell I wasn't going to be able to just breathe and let this go, so I challenged myself to write twelve reasons about why she might not want to have coffee with me that could be true and *that had nothing to do with me*. One: She was working hard, and didn't have time. Two: She had lots of friends, and wasn't interested in another. Three: She was a loner. Four: She was moving soon and didn't want to get involved. And so on.

The first few true things are easy. The next batch, not so much. By the time I got to ten, eleven, and twelve, I'd put so much attention on finding reasons she didn't want to get together that weren't about me, that it no longer *was* about me.

Sometimes I visualize my unwanted thinking as an image on a slide show. To let it go, I say, "Next!" and replace it with an image of nature or someone I love. It works to put an image of unwanted thinking on a TV screen, too. I aim the remote and change the channel.

These next two letting-go techniques help let go of unwanted thoughts or feelings and even physical pain. Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably. Close your eyes, and relax, then notice what is upsetting you. Notice the place in your body where you feel the discomfort. Then mentally give the discomfort a shape – either see it or just know what shape it is. Sometimes the shape will be round, but sometimes it will be sharp or jagged.

Next, imagine using one of your hands to remove the shape; then imagine dropping it into a bucket your imagination has placed at your feet. Enjoy "hearing" the satisfying clunk.

Repeat these steps until the bucket is full, or as full as you want it to be. Then take your foot and nudge the bucket off the cliff that your imagination has provided for you.

Keep removing these shapes, tossing them in the bucket, and nudging the bucket off the cliff as long as you feel there is discomfort in your body you want to let go of.

Here's the second technique: Turn your attention to the thought or feeling you want to let go, then give it a shape and a color. Next, instruct your mind to shrink the shape and fade the color. Clear your mental screen, and do it again. Repeat until there's nothing left.

You can finish both of these techniques by imagining a vacuum cleaner wand vacuuming out any straggling pieces, or by seeing straggling pieces turn into a vapor and float away.

Once you've eliminated the thoughts and feelings you don't want, fill up that space with white light or with thoughts that reflect what you do want. Make sure the new messages are ones you can believe because we create with the energy of our feelings, and if you can't believe a message is true it won't be helpful to you.

Here's an example: If you say, *I'll find a great job tomorrow*, you might have a hard time believing it. But you probably could believe this: *I haven't found the right job yet, but I know what I want, and I will recognize it when I see it.* Instead of *She shouldn't be treating me this way*, you can say *I'm not going to let her behavior make me unhappy*, or even, *I will find a way to leave this relationship if I decide to.*

The more we practice letting go of mind clutter, the better we'll feel and the more our life will begin to resemble our new thoughts.

See that bucket at your feet? See that cliff?

* * *

Trust in a Higher Power

You are not alone. Man has come up with hundreds of philosophies about gods/guides/angels and so on and as many philosophies about what happens to us after we leave our physical bodies.

In 1986, when Shirley MacLaine wrote, *Out on a Limb*, people who didn't identify as metaphysical thought she was a little nuts. Today, we have first-hand accounts of people who have died, seen the afterlife, and returned to tell us about it. We have documented cases of spirits sending messages to family and friends who are still living. Scientists are proving some of what were once far-fetched notions true in their laboratories.

Even if you aren't convinced, what do you have to lose by choosing to believe that there is *something* that is there to comfort you, to guide you, and while perhaps not bringing you your heartfelt wishes, to love and support you as best it can?

Laugh, Play, Dance

Reminders like this are popular on greeting cards and wall hangings, but they aren't messages I ever heard while growing up, in the workplace, or even in relationships once the honeymoon was over. The messages we hear instead are that we have to work hard to be who we want to be, do what we want to do, get where we want to go, and have what we want to have. The same voices that tell us that, also tell us what those things are.

In my early days as a workaholic, I was proud of how hard I worked, how dedicated I was, how much I got done. Even though decades of stress eventually led to illness, I was addicted. My brain had been rewired to believe I had to be

busy, had to be doing something productive or... or what? Well, even after I knew better, not being busy left me anxiously looking around for something I should be doing.

Life has a way of teaching me what I seem reluctant to learn, though, and now, health matters are making it very clear that working hard is not going to make me healthy and, in fact, laughing, playing, and dancing just might!

Look for Balance

The word, *balance*, caught my attention back in the days of big computers with desk-top monitors. I had a yellow sticky-note posted on the left side of my monitor frame with that word on it.

Unfortunately, it took decades before I could finally bring balance into my life.

Even now, I find it's hard: I'm inclined to either sit at my desk for days to finish a project, dash around town crossing tasks off my to-do list till I'm exhausted, or crash on my bed and read for hours at a time.

Not perfect, but better than it was. At least now I do have some down time. And I've come to realize that sometimes balance doesn't mean equal halves every day; equal halves of a week are better than it used to be.

Think Before You Agree to Do Something. And Then, Notice How You Feel.

I was at a popular weekend workshop when I was introduced to the idea of being really conscious when I offered or agreed to do something – the goal was to encourage us to be conscious while committing, so we wouldn't realize later that we couldn't honor the commitment we'd made.

It was decades later that I learned to notice how I feel when I make decisions. If a decision doesn't *feel* good, this is a warning I don't want to do what I'm being asked to do, and I'm considering overriding what will make *me* happy in order to make *someone else* happy.

Sometimes, I have to do things I don't want to do. But more often than not, I don't.

The goal is to sort the two out. Often, if I take the word *should* out of the question, my answer is clear.

Practice, Practice, Practice

I lived this book into being. I practiced what I wrote about, I stumbled, and I practiced, and wrote some more. I know what I believe, and I know what I need to do to be happy.

But I'm human, so I'm not always going to do everything right. I get it right more of the time, though, when I set my conscious intent in the morning; when I'm conscious of my intent as I move from one task to the next.

Sometimes I put Post-It notes on my mirror to remind me to notice my stories. Sometimes I buy a small talisman to put on my desk to help me remember.

When I hit every traffic light red, when a salesperson is indifferent or rude, when the woman in front of me tells her life story to the check-out clerk, I try to remember to say to myself, *Ah, another opportunity to practice....*

When I find myself in an old behavior I catch myself sooner than I used to, and it's easier to change my thinking from what isn't helpful to what is. Almost all the time, I catch myself before I say things I'll have to apologize for. I don't blame anyone when things go wrong because I understand there's no one to blame.

I grew up hearing that practice makes perfect, but I don't want to be perfect anymore. What I want to be is peaceful, happy, helpful, kind, and successful in my own way. I am that when I practice being it.

Wouldn't it be fun to live in a world where we are all peaceful, happy, helpful, kind, and self-empowered? Maybe if we all practice....

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