

## Coach Yourself to a Joyful Life

Imagine setting aside a time and space in your life - a time to reflect on your true goals and aspirations; a time to discover your own unique and special gift; and then slowly, step by step, move into that vision and become the person you always wanted to be.

This book guides you through the steps to set up a dedicated space and envision your most inspired dream. It then provides exercises to help overcome challenges and bring that vision into reality.

The articles cover many aspects of life including career, relationships and life mastery in general.

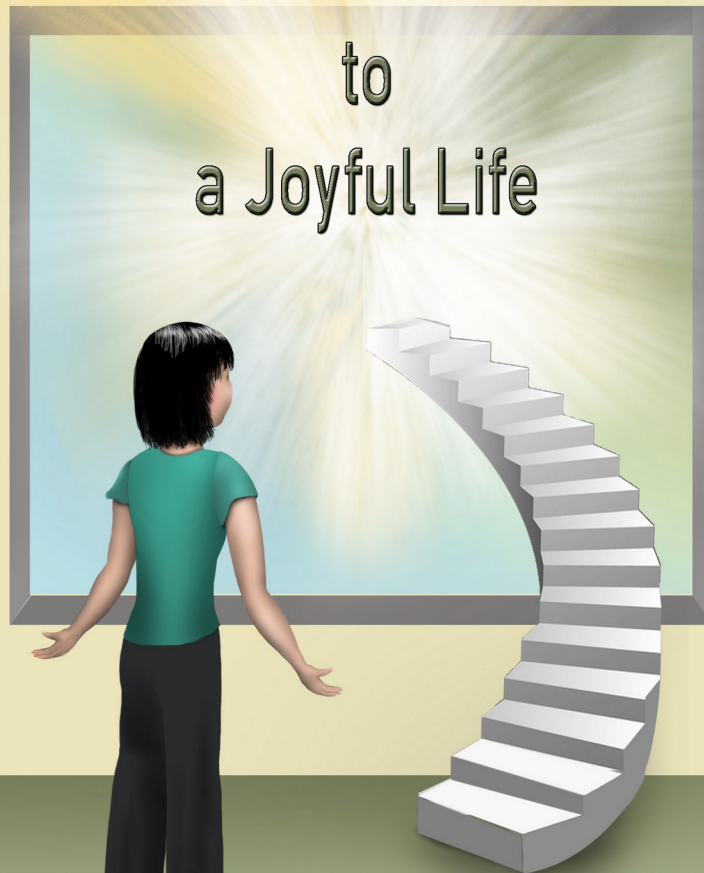
I hope this book will become a dear friend, providing the encouragement and inspiration needed to follow your joy throughout your life.

*Jane*

Coach Yourself to a Joyful Life

# Coach Yourself

# to a Joyful Life



Jane Miller

written and illustrated by  
**Jane Miller**

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## DEDICATION

To all of my former clients who allowed me  
to walk beside them for a while in their life journey,  
sharing their struggles and their dreams,  
and moving ahead with courage and determination  
to a happier and more fulfilling life.

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## INTRODUCTION

In my career as a Life Coach, I have guided my clients towards the goals that they most desired – a more satisfying career, a healthier lifestyle, a more joyful way of being, etc.

Although there is no substitute for a good Life Coach, this book provides articles that will help you coach yourself to a happier life.

The book is divided into five parts.

Part One describes the space that you need to set up for yourself and the coaching process.

Part Two provides guidance and exercises to help you clarify your own personal and unique vision.

Parts Three to Five deal with various aspects of your life – career, relationships and life mastery in general.

These latter three parts are not meant to be read in any particular order or in a continuous fashion, but to be opened up when you need inspiration, encouragement or fresh ideas.

I hope this book will become a dear friend, providing the encouragement and inspiration you need to follow your joy throughout your life.

# Part 1

## Setting up the Space

## Being Held in a Gentle Space



Imagine walking into a space where you are held, gently and compassionately; where you are not judged or told what to do; where you may be who you are, honor your deepest values, powerfully address your fears and follow your most inspired dreams.

The Life Coach sets up this kind of space for you. **The coach 'holds the space'** and you are in that space doing the work of self-discovery, direction setting and planning.

### Self Coaching

In order to coach yourself, you must set up this kind of space for yourself. It's not easy to take an objective perspective, and sometimes it's challenging to look at yourself with compassion. But in order to grow, you must be able to forgive all your weaknesses, comfort your sadness, reassure your fears, and trust in your abilities.

### Assertions and Promises

As you enter the 'Coaching Space', you need to make a number of assertions and promises to yourself in order to provide a fertile ground for your personal growth. (Each of these are covered in detail in the next few articles.)

- "I am OK"
- "I will honor my needs"
- "I am the only one who knows my true goals in life"
- "I have all the resources to make my dream happen"
- "Change is not only possible, but inevitable"

## I am OK



*"I am willing to accept myself,  
exactly as I am.  
Every character trait  
is important and valuable.  
Nothing is broken;  
Nothing needs to be 'fixed'.  
Everything that I am is adaptive for  
this moment."*

When you were a young child just learning to walk, your parents didn't criticize you for not knowing how to walk. They smiled at every stumble, picked you up and let you try again, knowing that this is a natural stage of development.

As you go through the coaching process, you may discover characteristics and behavior patterns that you had been unaware of. These are adapted to your current needs.

If there are some aspects of yourself that you are not happy with, it's important to understand their current function. For example, if you think you're too shy, perhaps it's a valuable strategy to protect yourself from embarrassment. It's important to accommodate that need as you develop the opposite characteristic (e.g. boldness, outgoingness).

Every trait is useful in some way and every trait has a positive or negative aspect depending on the circumstances.

Aggressiveness may be needed when defending someone who is being threatened. A non-aggressive gentle approach may be useful when calming someone who is afraid.

When you get stuck in the mode of self-criticism, you stifle your growth. If instead, you acknowledge each of your current traits as valuable and worthy, you are giving yourself permission to continue to adapt and grow.

Listen to your inner critic and solicit its help in your personal development. Your critic is not saying "You are *shy* and *shyness* is bad". It is saying "You are *shy* and it's time to experiment with being a bit more *outgoing* now and then."

Instead of feeling put down, open up to new possibilities. See every criticism as an invitation to grow. You are being invited to experiment with new ways of being. You won't have to abandon the old way of being. You will simply be adding to your repertoire.

It's also OK to **not** know everything and to **not** be 'perfect'. In fact, there is no such thing as perfection. There is only learning and growth, and that is what we do naturally.

This is a useful mindset when someone else criticizes you. Instead of feeling put down, say, "Oh! What can I learn here? In what ways might I grow? How exciting!"

You're always OK in this moment, and you're always able to change and grow as you wish and as you choose.

Exercise – Ask yourself...

- What are my most pervasive habitual character traits?
- What is the positive aspect of each of these?
- When is each trait useful?
- What is the opposite of each of these traits?
- When might each of these be useful?
- How might I develop these opposite traits to achieve a better balance?

## I will honor my needs



*"I can only help others  
after my own needs are met.  
And so, in this space,  
I commit to honoring  
and taking care of my needs."*

### Self-care

As you move into a self-coaching mode, it's important to give yourself permission to work towards your own personal happiness and to make that a priority. This is not selfishness. It's self-care. In an aircraft, you are told to put your own mask on before you help anyone else, and this applies to life in general.

If you are over-tired or over-stressed, it will affect every aspect of your life and will also affect everyone you have contact with. If you are healthy, fit and rested, you will be better able to be kind and helpful towards others; and if you are happy, that happiness is contagious.

### Time management

You may set up a weekly time to work on your personal goals and then find that other things get in the way. Creating that time slot and sticking to it can be a challenge. But if you manage to get to work on time or take your child to school on time, you can manage to fit in one hour of personal self-coaching a week.

You also need to make progress towards your goals during the week. Write down your plan and keep track of your progress. You may want to find a supportive accountability partner who will call you out if you start to slip.

There will be challenges, and you may make progress more slowly than you hoped, but it's important to keep trying. It is possible to honor your responsibilities **and** take care of yourself as well.

### Down time

Another important part of your self-coaching program will be to take care of your basic need for down time – i.e. time to do whatever renews and revitalizes you. For some it's relaxing with a book, for others it might be going for a bike ride. This will have to be a regular part of your week and is every bit as important as your self-coaching schedule.

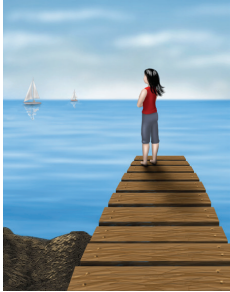
### Workload

At first you may think that adding personal goals to your already busy life would create more stress. But when you have an inspired goal, you will be infused with a sense of well-being and renewed energy. Inspiration will make the impossible achievable.

### Exercise – Ask yourself...

- What day/time will I commit to my coaching sessions?
- What alternative day/time will I set if I miss a session?
- What activities or hobbies do I find rejuvenating?
- What day and time will I commit to these?
- How will I track my adherence to this schedule?
- Who might I ask to be my accountability partner?

## I am the only one who knows my true goals in life



*"I am willing to let go  
of the need to please others  
or live up to other's expectations.  
I am ready to discover and clarify  
my own true goals."*

When I was a teenager, my friend and I used to play tennis without keeping score. We just played for the fun of it. Then one day, we spontaneously started to keep the ball in the air all the time, never letting it bounce on the ground. It became a high-speed (and exhilarating!) game. I remember our laughter and screams echoing in the gym as we jumped and dodged to hit the ball (dashing way out of bounds as well).

A few of our classmates looked in and shook their heads. Everyone thought we were weird. They followed the rules and played to win, but we just had fun.

My friend lived her life that way. She seemed to be hardly aware of rules. I loved her freedom and spontaneity, but I was acutely aware of the **rules** and so I often found myself struggling to stay just on the edge of **acceptability**.

It's not surprising that most of us feel the need to be accepted. We have been judged by parents, teachers, peers, bosses, colleagues and friends all our lives. The feeling of **not-good-enough** haunts us and so we struggle to live up to others' expectations.

But when is it time to turn inwards and ask yourself what you would truly like to do?

Perhaps you've never asked yourself, "If anything was possible and I could do anything I wanted, what would I be doing? What skills would I develop? Who would I be?"

You may need to dig deep to find the answer. You will need to figure out what you truly enjoy. What gives you a sense of purpose? What are you passionate about? What would the **real you** look like?

During the coaching process you will create this picture of yourself, and no matter how far-fetched it may seem, you will find a way to move towards your ideal life.

As you start, many of your friends and relatives may say you're crazy (as mine did when I left a high-paying job and went back to university to study for a lower-paying profession). But just being on the path to your vision will bring such excitement and joy that what **they** say won't matter.

### Exercise

- Write down your craziest ideas on what you would love to be and do in your life.
- Select two or three that make you feel most energized.
- What would a critic say about each of these ideas?
- What would a supporter say to encourage you to pursue your dreams?
- Write down a statement affirming your commitment to discovering and pursuing your own true goals.
- Post this statement where you can see it every day.

## I have all the resources to make my dream happen



*"I am ready  
to quiet my restless mind,  
turn inwards  
with openness and trust;  
and listen in silence  
to discover  
the great wealth of wisdom  
that is within me."*

Many years ago, during my evening meditation, I would sometimes imagine going to a beautiful spot at the edge of a river. There was a rock just in front of a very old tree, and sitting on that rock was my guru – my spiritual teacher.

In my imagination, I would go and sit at his feet. Sometimes I would just sit in silence, feeling peaceful in his presence. Other times I would ask a question – and I would always receive an answer.

Years later, when I studied Life Coaching, I learned about a technique called The Mentor's Table in which you have your client envision sitting with a wise mentor, asking him or her a question and listening for the answer. This mentor can be anyone – living or dead, imagined or real. It could be an expert in any field, your grandmother, your childhood teddy bear – anyone who you feel would have the answer.

It's a very powerful technique in which you realize that you have within yourself a deep inner wisdom. And when you quiet the mental chatter and sit in silence, you can access that wisdom.

Envisioning your mentor and the place where you can meet helps you create a place to return to whenever you need guidance. It may be a seaside or a mountaintop, a cave or a distant planet. At times, you may imagine your mentor walking beside you, and you may access support, reassurance and guidance at any time and in any place.

This mentor is, in fact, your own self. It's the part of you that can step out of the immediate situation and emotions and see a bigger picture from a calm perspective. It can take into account other people's feelings and come up with options that will be fair to everyone.

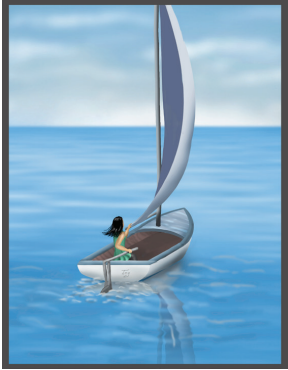
If your mind tends to be in a constant state of chatter, it may take some practice to sit in silence and listen for the deeper wisdom. But once you have heard that voice, you will realize its worth.

### Exercise – "The Mentor's Table"

- Write down a current situation that is challenging for you.
- Sit in silence, close your eyes and envision a wise mentor and a location that you find peaceful.
- Imagine asking a specific question about that challenge.
- Wait for the answer.
- Ask other questions as they arise.
- When done, thank your mentor, return and write down your insights.

*(This exercise may be used within your self-coaching sessions or whenever you face a challenging situation.)*

## Change is not only possible, but inevitable



*"I am ready  
to take responsibility  
for my life  
and move confidently  
into  
my next inspired vision"*

Change is always happening. Change is what brought you to the place you are in right now.

The difference you will make during the coaching process is that you will take responsibility for where you are now and you will begin to take conscious control of the future changes in your life.

You may feel frustrated about your current situation. For example, you may find that your current job is meaningless. But you chose this job. And you are choosing to stay in it now.

Whatever situation you are in was brought about by your thoughts, feelings and actions. You were not powerless then and you are not powerless now.

An old friend of mine used to claim that he never made decisions but allowed life to move him in whatever direction 'it' chose. But in truth, taking no action **was** a decision. And of course changes did occur in his life.

It's like sitting in a sailboat and letting the wind and current take you in whatever direction it would.

The problem with this strategy is that you sometimes end up in situations that you are unhappy with.

By setting your goal and making a clear and focused plan to move towards it, you are taking control of the sail and rudder and becoming the creator of your own life.

During the coaching process, you will initiate changes that will move you towards your own personal goals – perhaps starting with small steps, but by keeping your focus and adjusting as you go, you **will** achieve your goal.

### Summary

Each time you enter the Coaching Space, remember the five assertions and promises:

- "I am OK"
- "I will honor my needs"
- "I am the only one who knows my true goals in life"
- "I have all the resources to make my dream happen"
- "Change is not only possible, but inevitable"

## The Coaching Process



Life Coaching provides a structure that ensures focused and steady progress towards a stated goal. Therefore the first step is to set your goal

### Set an overall goal.

The goal is a single sentence stating what you wish to achieve by the end of the coaching process. It can be general at first and be changed

to something more concrete later on. For example you may start with "Within the next six months, I intend to be in a job I love," and later change it to, "In one year I intend to start my own catering business."

The goal must:

- Be stated in the positive... Instead of "I want to stop getting angry", say "I intend to remain calm at all times."
- Be in your control... Instead of "I intend to make my boss appreciate me", say "I intend to feel confident despite what others think."
- Be achievable... a goal of becoming an astronaut at the age of 85 may have to be toned down a bit, but don't be too pessimistic about your own potential.
- Have a timeframe... e.g. "...within six months."
- Be measurable... Ask yourself "How will I know when I get there?" Sometimes this can be as simple as using a rating scale. For example, "On a scale of 1 to 10 how happy are you in your job now? And where would you like to be by the end of the coaching process?"

Set a regular time and location for your coaching sessions.

Once you have an overall goal, set up a regular time and place – ideally weekly. Make sure it's a time you can commit to and a place where you will not be distracted or disturbed.

Keep a file where you will record your reflections, action plans and progress.

For each coaching session, set a session goal. For example if your overall goal is to be in a job you love, in the first session you might aim to identify some characteristics of a job you would love.

At the end of each coaching session, ask yourself:

- How well did I achieve my session goal?
- What were the key discoveries and insights?
- What **action items** will I set for myself to accomplish this week in order to continue moving towards my goal?

At the start of the next session, ask yourself:

- What were my **action items** from the last session?
- What did I accomplish?
- What were my insights and discoveries during this week?
- What are my current challenges relating to my goal?
- What would I like to set as the goal for this session?

This process is repeated for each session.

Staying on track

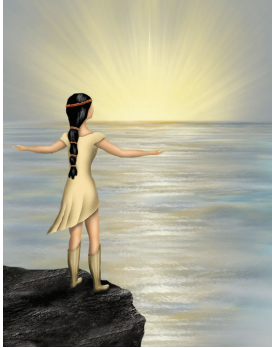
Every once in a while, step back and ask yourself:

- How am I tracking towards my overall goal?
- Are there any adjustments I would like to make to my overall goal?

## Part 2

# Creating the Vision

## Vision Quest



*“Each of us  
is born with a gift  
and  
our purpose in life  
is to give that gift  
to the world”*

A gift can take many forms. You may be born with a gift for music and your purpose is to play music to inspire and uplift others. Or you may have a gift for the sciences and your purpose is to make discoveries that will benefit the world.

Characteristics like strength or compassion are also gifts that may be used in various contexts.

When you realize your own special gifts and live your life expressing and enhancing those gifts, you feel energetic, purposeful and joyful. When you are not living your purpose, you feel listless, uninspired and miserable.

So, you can use your feelings and energy level as an indication of how closely you are living your life purpose.

But many of us don't know what our gift is.

In some of the older cultures, a young person, under the guidance of a shaman, will go on a Vision Quest to discover his or her path in life. Although few of us have this opportunity, there are a number of ways to start on a personal vision quest.

The articles in this section describe various exercises to help you discover your own special gifts.

Let's start here with a simple exercise of looking for clues from your life so far.

### Exercise

- Think back to when you were a young child...
  - Write down the things you enjoyed doing as a child.
  - What came easily and naturally to you?
  - What subjects did you like in school?
  - What games did you like to play?
- Think back over the course of your life...
  - What hobbies and pastimes have you enjoyed?
  - What activities can you get lost in?
  - What inspires and enlivens you?
- Find the common thread.
  - Is it “being with people”, “exploring”, “inventing”, “building”...
- Write an “I am...” statement that resonates with you and use this as a starting point as you create your vision.



## Potential / Passion / Purpose

*(This exercise has been adapted from one developed by:  
Peter Barr-Thomson & Josephine Thomson)*

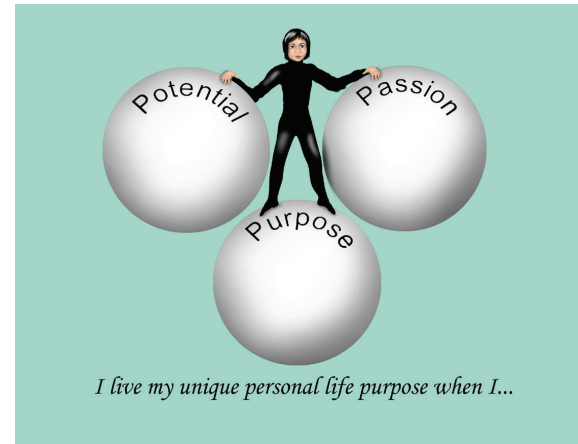
The Potential / Passion / Purpose exercise is a sort of brainstorming exercise that allows you to table many ideas and then home in on common themes.

### Process

Draw three large circles on a sheet of paper. Label these circles "Potential" "Passion" and "Purpose".

1. In the Potential circle, write at least 7 of your positive traits and skills that you have **or** are moving towards having. Take lots of time to do this. When you think you're done, challenge yourself to add more. Dig deeper at least twice in the process.
2. In the Passion circle, write all the things that you love to do (things you are passionate about). Again, take time to add as many items as possible.
3. In the Purpose circle, write things that bring meaning and purpose to your life.
4. Look at all of the things you have written, find links between things in each of the areas, and find the underlying thread.
5. Then, complete the following sentence, incorporating elements from each of the areas.

*I live my unique personal life purpose when I...*



### Outcome

Oftentimes the insights that arise from this type of exercise happen along the way.

- As you filled in the Potential circle, did you discover skills and traits that you weren't initially aware of?
- When you worked on the Passion items, did you realize that there were things you love to do that you haven't done in years?
- As you added items to the Purpose circle, did you start to feel more grounded?
- Finally, as you completed the sentence in step 5, were you able to express your deepest truth?

Once you have completed this exercise, you will have set the foundation for the next step, Timeline Visualization, which will deepen your vision.

## Timeline Visualization



This exercise invites you to imagine and explore your most inspired future.

Unlike the previous Potential/Passion/Purpose exercise which engages your logical left hemisphere, this exercise engages your intuitive holistic right hemisphere.

### Preparation

Make sure you are in a quiet location where you will not be disturbed. Sit comfortably and allow yourself all the time you need to do this, making it a rich experience.

Don't worry if you can't **see** your vision. Some people just feel it or sense it. Just allow your imagination to pick up whatever you can in whatever format. The right hemisphere doesn't use language, so you are encouraged to quiet the chatter in your head and instead, probe deeper for images, feelings and sounds.

Also, try to let go of judgment and analysis at this stage and don't worry about identifying the exact life situation. That will come later. For now, just allow yourself to explore a general idea of the kinds of things that would really give you a sense of fulfillment.

There are a few different ways to carry out this exercise.

- Get a friend to read the following transcript to you, or
- Record yourself speaking the transcript and then play it, or
- Commit the basic concept to memory and guide yourself through it.

Transcript *(To be spoken slowly, in a calm and gentle voice)*

### **Sit comfortably and close your eyes**

Take a deep breath and as you breathe out, relax your whole body. Take two or more relaxing breaths.

### **PAUSE...**

Now imagine yourself floating upwards – very high up. Look down and see your present self directly below you.

**See yourself on a timeline** – your past stretches out in one direction, your future in the other.

Now, look along the timeline to the future.

And now, notice a point on that line where you will be **in a situation you love!**

Imagine there are no restrictions. You can have anything, do anything and be anything you wish.

This is a magic place where anything is possible.

From above the timeline, see your future self fully experiencing **your most inspired life!**

Take a few moments now, watch and notice...

### **PAUSE...**

Now, **step into the picture** and **feel** what it is like.

Take a moment to adjust it until it feels just right.

**BE** the person you want to be.

### **PAUSE...**

When you have it just right, notice...

**Who** are you being?

**What** type of things are you doing?

**Why** is this **fulfilling for you**?

How are **others** positively affected?

### **PAUSE...**

Now, notice the **skills and qualities** that you have as your future self.

Make a mental note of these.

### **PAUSE...**

Now gather together the qualities and the feeling that you have as this future self and holding these, float up high above the timeline again.

**Thank your future self** and let the image fade.

Then **float back** into your present self, knowing that your future ideal **already exists**.

And as you hold the qualities of that future self and **feel** how it feels to **already have it**, know that all you have to do is continue on the journey.

When you're ready, take a deep breath.

Gently bring yourself back.

Then, **write down your insights**.

### Record your thoughts

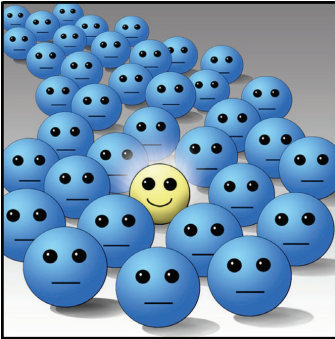
*(Note that at this stage, you may not know specifically what your life situation will be, but only the atmosphere and types of activities you will be doing.)*

- As you reflect on this experience, what strikes you?
- What types of activities were you doing?
- Who else was in the picture? (colleagues, clients, etc.)
- What did you love most about this situation?
- What was the atmosphere of the place? (Large organization, small fast-paced, on your own, etc.)
- What skills and qualities did you have?
- Other observations or insights?

### Your most inspired vision

- Integrate insights gained from the 'Potential / Passion / Purpose' exercise and the 'Timeline Visualization'.
- Describe in general terms:
  - the atmosphere,
  - the type of activities,
  - the type of people you will be interacting with,
  - what gives you a sense of fulfillment.

## You Are Unique



In the exercises so far, what have you discovered?

Are you creative?  
A problem solver?  
A counselor?  
A builder?  
A designer?  
A scientist?  
Or something entirely different?

Don't be afraid if what you love to do may sound crazy or trivial in others' eyes. Everything has value.

Start now. Take the courage to be true to yourself and resolve to do what you love – no matter how crazy it may seem. Even if you start by doing it as a hobby, there's no telling where it will lead. The more you do of what you love, the more opportunities will arise.

Don't hide. Talk to others about your passion. Share the joy. This can open doors in unexpected ways. I've had so many different interests – drawing, writing, web design, etc. – and I've used those abilities in many different projects. A friend of mine loves fashion and helps her friends with makeovers – just for the fun of it. Express your passion at every possible opportunity!

### Inspiring example

A famous example of someone who did what he loved is Bill Cunningham. He used to ride his bicycle on the streets of New York and take impromptu pictures of people who were dressed in fashionable clothes.

Then he created collages which expressed "The life and fashions of New York".

These one-page collages became a popular regular feature in the New York Times for years.

Although he had repeated offers from editors to take a staff position, he preferred to work as a free-lance photographer. He used to say, "Once people own you, they can tell you what to do. So don't let 'em."

Bill provides us with a great example of someone who truly followed his passion in his own unique way.

In a similar way, you can create your own career – perhaps one that has not been heard of before but one that is uniquely you.

### Exercise

- Create a Vision Board... a collage of images that represent the things you are looking for in your life – things that inspire and light you up.
- Put your Vision Board in a prominent place and focus on it every day, with the clear intention that your vision is already in progress.
- Update your Vision Board as your vision evolves.

## Visualization Technique



Every endeavor starts with a vision.

The clearer the vision, the more compelling it becomes and the higher the probability of success.

This is why visualization is the most powerful technique in Life Coaching.

### The Process

#### 1. State a positive goal

Ask yourself, "What is it that I want?" Make sure that you state your goal in the positive. For example, if you said "I want to stop eating junk food", you may change it to the positive – "I intend to maintain a healthy diet." Or state it in terms of what outcome you're looking for – "I intend to be slim, healthy and fit." Or your goal may already be stated in the positive, like "I intend to be in an exciting career."

#### 2. Envision yourself in that situation

Next, visualize yourself being in that positive place. For example, you might envision yourself looking slim, fit and healthy, enjoying an active life, or being in an exciting career. Imagine getting up in the morning, looking forward to the great day ahead. Notice how you feel when you envision this, and notice your energy level.

#### 3. Adjust your vision

Imagine some of the things you would be experiencing during the day. Notice any things you might want to adjust to make your vision truly inspirational.

#### 4. Extend to other areas of your life

Envision how having that goal may affect other areas of your life (relationships, family, friends). Adjust your vision to ensure that all the important areas of your life are fulfilling and joyful.

#### 5. Enhance your vision

What interests and activities might you want to add to your life? Continue to adjust your vision to make it even more compelling.

#### 6. Become that person

Imagine stepping into that vision and becoming that person. Experience how it feels to **be** that person. Then, as you come out of the visualization, **step out as the new you.**

#### 7. Continue to be that person

During the days that follow, hold your vision in your mind and continue to feel you **are** the person in that vision. Imagine that your goal already exists and all you have to do is continue to move towards it. Make small changes in your life to move closer to your vision.

Focusing on the goal and **feeling as if** your goal already exists is a powerful way of drawing yourself to that goal because your actions will start to align with that vision.

## The Call to Creativity



Were you born with the gift of creativity? Were you drawn to the arts (music, writing, painting, dance, design, etc.)?

So many gifted people have been told by well-intentioned parents and teachers that they cannot make a living doing what they love. Many have given in to the pressure and

struggled to get a 'real job' and over time have abandoned their artistic pursuits. And now they feel numb and empty.

Do you have such a gift? Do you feel it's time to admit that creativity is more than just a passing whim, and that it is an expression of who you truly are? And do you feel that it is your life purpose to **be** that person?

The first and most important thing to do is acknowledge who you are. Say "**I am...** a writer (or painter or violinist, or whatever), and carry that image of yourself – your true self – all the time. From that place of **being**, all things will follow.

What about the negative voices in your head that shout... "You need to earn a living!" "Everyone will think you're crazy!" "What about your responsibilities?"

Those voices are actually trying to protect you and they are good, but you don't have to let them shut you down entirely. Instead, collaborate with them to find a viable solution. You may not become a full-time writer, artist, or whatever immediately, but when you hold the vision of who you truly are, every step will take you closer to that goal.

Here are some ideas that people I have coached have come up with...

You might dedicate specific time slots during every week for your creative activity, and start to earn some income from this; but you may keep your day-job until you can ensure a reasonable living from your art.

Find opportunities to mingle with creative people – workshops, courses, etc. Also, associate with supportive people.

Explore jobs where you can use your creative skills. For example, teaching art to children, setting up writing workshops, doing graphic design for web development teams.

If you need further education to pursue a more creative career, you might develop a plan to obtain the qualifications you need and formulate a concrete timeline.

Your path will be unique to you. Start by creating the vision of who you truly are. Constantly hold that vision and, as you take steps that align with your vision, every step of the way will be inspired and joyful.

### Exercise

- Write an "**I am...**" statement defining who you truly are.
- Place that statement where you will see it every day.
- Outline a few small steps that will allow you to express more of your creative side.
- Find a friend who will support and encourage you on your 'journey to yourself'.



## The Song

*"Don't die with the song still in you"*

Why are we so afraid to sing our true song? Fear of disapproval? Ridicule? Do we even admit to ourselves what our true song is? Perhaps you don't know what your song is.

But think about what you love to do, what comes naturally, what you can get lost in. You may enjoy outdoors activities, creative endeavors, problem solving, building things.

Imagine you were given a chance to create yourself anew. What would you be? A dancer? A poet? An explorer?

It may take some time for you to find your most inspired image of yourself. When you find it, you will feel a surge of energy.

What is it about that imagined persona that is appealing to you?

Now... How can you bring a little bit of that into your life now – yes, now!

Get creative. There **is** a way to move just a little bit closer to your true self and to sing your song... softly at first, then with increasing confidence.

## Part 3

## Career

## You Must Be Crazy



1988 - Moving from England back to Canada

My entire life has been punctuated by people telling me...

"You must be crazy!"

When my friends went to university, I took a 5-month course in computer programming. In the days of mainframes and punched cards, this was "an unusual field for a girl".

A few years later, when I was in a high-paying job in that field, I decided to go to university and pursue a new profession – social work. "Why would you move from a high-paying job to a low-paying one?!"

At the university, I hopped from one discipline to another and ended up with a BSc in Psychology in the area of cognition and perception. "What can you do with that degree?!"

When I got married, my mother thought I would at last "settle down". But my husband and I were both bored with nine-to-five jobs and were dodging offers of promotion. No one understood how we could turn down management positions, but the idea of baby-sitting people while they did all the creative work did not appeal. Postgraduate studies allowed us to continue playing an active role in our fields. So the next adventure was going England to do postgraduate studies – not for the prestige or for a higher paying job, but just because it was fun and exciting.

We ended up staying in England for seven years, taking turns studying and working at the university.

By the time we returned to Canada, my qualifications were so weird that potential employers wondered – programming, psychology, statistical consulting, computer models of vision. Luckily, Carleton University appreciated a person with many skills and hired me as a consultant in research and statistics.

After being a statistical consultant for three years, I was asked to work with a colleague to design an internet facility for students. My programming skills were resurrected and, in 1993 (the earliest days of www), I helped to make Carleton the first Canadian university to offer internet access to all its students. This was the most 'fun' job I ever had, interacting with students and professors to design a user-friendly system where they could share course information and socialize with each other.

After a few years, when there were no resources to expand the system, I moved to a small company designing a web-based facility for sign makers and then to a huge organization designing testing procedures for hiring.

Finally at an age when most people retired, I decided to get training and certification as a Life Coach. And now I'm writing and illustrating children's stories – and a coaching book.

### The moral of the story

Over the years, I've learned that you can take care of the practical side of life, and still make sure you enjoy life. Instead of taking a conventional path, you can follow your joy wherever it leads. And it's ok when people tell you you're crazy. They'll eventually get used to you.

## A Career Worth Living



Many people view work as a way of earning money so they can do the things they enjoy. They don't have any real interest in their job, but it gets them what they want indirectly.

My own view is that if I'm going to spend eight hours a day at a job, I want some enjoyment out of it directly.

Another way I differ is that most people who do manage to get into a job they truly love remain in that job for the rest of their lives. But for me, no matter how much I love a job initially, I eventually get bored with it and then I look for something new. I've changed careers and companies many times in my life. I thrive on new learning, challenge and change.

**How difficult was it to change careers?** Each career change was a slow process that sometimes involved a few redirects along the way as I homed in on what I really wanted. But I never minded changing direction because I learned so much along the way. The joy was not so much in the destination, but in the journey itself.

**Were there sacrifices?** Not really, because it was always my choice. At one point, I chose to leave a secure high-paying job and go back to school to study for a lower-paying profession. I wouldn't call that a sacrifice because job satisfaction was more important to me than money. There was sometimes sadness at leaving some aspects of a former career. When I left my job at a university, I was sad to leave the close ties I had with students, but I knew I would not be able to serve them as I had in the past and so I embraced the sadness and moved on.

**Isn't there some risk?** I think if you plan carefully, you can minimize risk. And, to me, the reward of being in a career I love makes it all worthwhile.

**What do I say when someone asks what I do?** I used to hand them five different business cards. That was fun. Now I just smile quietly to myself and hand them my current card.

**What will I do when I retire?** If your job is your passion, the concept of retirement doesn't make sense. For me, at 'retirement age', I started a new career – as a Life Coach. Will this be my last career? Well, I'm already embracing a new career as author and illustrator. For me, change is the only constant.

What about you?

- What are your thoughts about "work"?
- Is your job your passion?
- If not, is it time to pursue something new?

## Do What You Love

In an inspirational TED talk, "[How to Live Before You Die](#)", the late Steve Jobs urges us to pursue our dreams.



Admittedly, there is no guarantee of riches in pursuing your passion, but the reward of doing what you love is something far more satisfying than wealth. And if you think you can't earn a living doing what you love, allow me to take you on a flight of imagination...

What is it that you **love** to do? What energizes and inspires you? Is it painting, writing, building, exploring, being with people, playing a sport...? What cause or group of people do you care about deeply? What do you value above all else?

So many of us have buried our passion. We say we are "comfortable", but we are only half alive. There is no fire in our eyes, no passion in our heart, no real joy – and no sense of purpose or fulfillment in our lives.

The first step is to allow yourself to dream. Think about what you love to do. What can you get lost in? What did you love to do as a child? In your mind and heart, declare that this is who you are. ("I am a writer, designer, technical expert"... whatever you would love to be).

Then imagine doing this for a living. Don't be afraid of all the objections that come up. Listen to those concerns, and slowly, methodically find ways to address each of them, and move step-by-step closer to your dream. Trust that your ideal future already exists. All you have to do is move into it.

I have changed careers many times, motivated only by my desire for a meaningful and fulfilling life. And I've always found a way to earn a living doing what I love, so I know it's possible. Every career change has required time and effort during the transition, but the journey itself was (and is) a reward in itself!

### Career Change Process

- (1) Write down a description of your most inspired career.
  - Dream BIG – you may even invent a new career.
  - State who you will be in that career and state it in the present tense... "I am a ..."
  - Feel your energy level as you make that statement.
- (2) Write down all the objections and risks.
- (3) Find creative ways to address each objection and risk.
- (4) Design a step-by-step plan to move towards your dream.
- (5) Always identify yourself as that person – "I am a ...". This will be your declaration to the world and to yourself that you are committed to your vision.
- (6) Find creative ways to stay on track, like posting inspirational quotes on your bulletin board, building rewards into your plan, getting a friend to be your 'accountability partner' or enlisting a life coach or mentor to support you when needed.

## The Total You Makeover



A few years back, I said to a friend, "I have to get a new hairstyle; I look in the mirror and it's just not me." Well, my friend is a makeover genius.

We experimented with hairstyles, clothes and accessories. It was pure fun. But in that fun, I had a chance to reflect on what I was really up to.

I had just retired from a nine-to-five job and was starting to open up a part of myself that had not had a chance to express for a while – a more creative side.

The clothes and hairstyle were a part of a more extensive change. Aside from Life Coaching, I was rediscovering my passion for drawing and I started to create illustrations for children's stories.

The makeover is a creative and holistic process that can involve all aspects of your life. Imagine stepping into a Total You Makeover parlor. There are a number of cubicles, each dedicated to different aspects of your life – career, hobbies, relationships, clothes, etc.

The process for each area starts with producing a Vision Board, where you play with images of what you would find most fulfilling in that aspect of your life.

You would spend time trying on different possibilities until you find something that truly resonates with you – something that makes you feel vibrant and joyful.

Then the transformation begins – planning, following through, assessing, tweaking.

Young people do this all the time. This is why the university atmosphere is so charged with energy. But as we get older, we tend to sink into a rut and that causes us to become listless and bored.

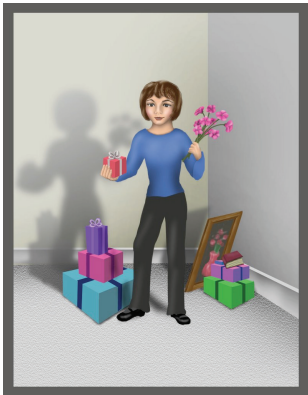
Change is what brings excitement and energy to our lives. Make a habit of asking yourself, "Who will I be today? What will I do that's new? What have I not tried yet?" Get creative. Join a dancing class, piano lessons, art classes or yoga. There are a million possibilities. Then dress the part to help you feel and express the 'new you' more fully.

I like to assume that it's our job to find things to enjoy in this lifetime. And experimenting with different ways of being is one way to enjoy the experience. You can be whoever you want to be and you can change who you are whenever you wish. What feels right for you now?

### Exercise

- Choose an area of your life or yourself.
- Collect pictures that inspire you.
- Create a Vision Board with an appropriate title (e.g. "The New Me" or "My Greatest Career" or "Healthy Me"...)
- Add phrases and pictures that inspire you.
- Then... start to bring that vision into reality.

## Your Special Gift



Every person has a special gift and the greatest joy comes from sharing that gift with others.

Your gift is something that comes naturally to you. It is often discovered by chance, when you are doing something you love. So, that's a good place to start...

1. Notice what you enjoy doing and find ways to do more of that. For example, if you enjoy walking in the woods, do more of that. The joy you gain from doing what you love will touch all those you interact with, at home and at work because joy is contagious, so you are already starting to give to others.

*Doing more of what you love will affect everyone in your life.*

2. Enhance. Ask yourself, "What is it about this activity that I love and how can I enhance the enjoyment even more?" For example, if you enjoy the woodland scenes, perhaps you would like to draw or photograph or write about this. If you enjoy the exercise, perhaps you would like to go mountain climbing or biking. If you enjoy the silence and peacefulness, perhaps you would like to meditate in the woods or camp there for a few days. Or you might get really creative and make an art of building tree houses!

*Building on your enjoyment encourages you to develop your talents.*

3. Share. Once you are doing something you can get lost in, you have found one of your talents. The next step is to think about how this might be shared with others. Sharing your photographs with friends, self-publishing your writings, organizing biking or camping trips, teaching meditation – or teaching others how to build tree houses!

*Finding your joy is wonderful. Sharing it enhances it even more.*

4. Explore. At this point, it can be an iterative process of exploring new interests, discovering new talents and adding new activities. It's an on-going journey as you unfold new gifts.

*Developing new talents keeps your life fresh and exciting.*

## Self-confidence



Many years ago, when I was a computer programmer, I was given a program to re-write. There were no specifications – just an old version of the program with a ‘zillion’ patched-in changes.

It was an extremely complex program, and as I looked through it, I said to one of the junior programmers, “I have no idea if I can do this.”

She looked at me as if I was on my way to the guillotine. Her expression surprised me, because I didn’t feel fear. I actually felt excited by the challenge and jumped in with enthusiasm.

I did complete the task successfully, but even if I hadn’t, I would still feel good about myself because I know that one can’t always succeed.

I see failure as a learning experience. When I failed a driver’s test, it taught me to get back into learning mode and practice so I could try again. When I failed a Philosophy course, it taught me that Philosophy was not for me!

Self-confidence is not a belief that you will succeed in every endeavor, but a willingness to try something challenging and to accept success or failure as a part of the learning process.

It relies on an inner feeling of worthiness that says, “I’m OK even if I fail at something.” And this feeling gives you the courage to try new challenges.

Let go of the need for perfection and the worry about what others think of you. Hold on to the feeling of “ok-ness” and focus on experience, learning and on doing what you truly enjoy.

When your thoughts and efforts shift from what others think of you to the task at hand, you will be able to move forward more effectively and you will also be able to experience the pure joy of learning.

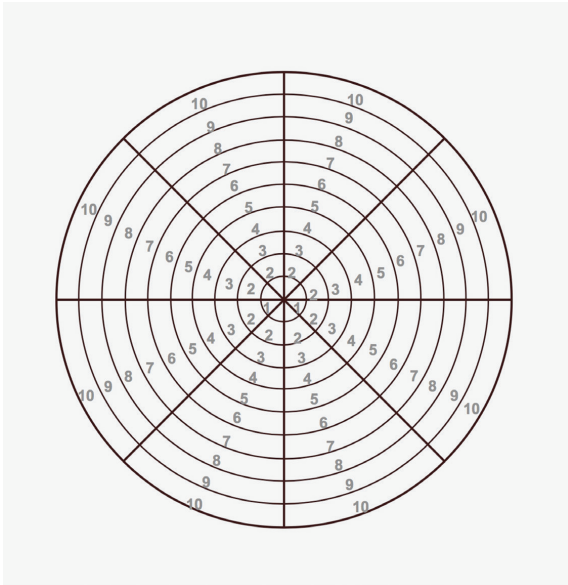
### Exercise

Make a conscious effort of **choosing** thinking patterns that support a feeling of self-confidence. For example...

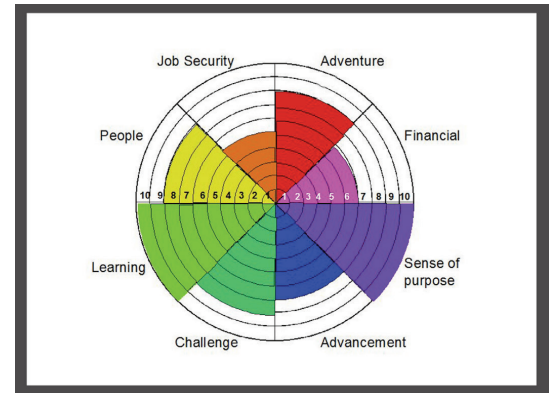
- “I don’t have to be perfect.”
- “I have a better chance of success when I do what I love.”
- “What others think of me is their problem, not mine.”
- “Every failure is an opportunity to learn.”
- “Focus on the task, not the criticism.”
- “I am OK”

## Making Decisions

We often face situations where we have to decide between two mutually exclusive but equally compelling options. In this article, I will describe two techniques that can aid in decision making – *Decisions Wheels* and *The Conference Table*.



This is a blank Decision Wheel that you can copy and use for this exercise. (Make as many copies as you need).



**Decision Wheels** allow you to get a visual picture of how closely your options fit your ideal. This example is about job choices but you can use this technique in any situation where you can define clear criteria. The process is:

### 1. Create an Ideal Wheel

Name 6 to 8 **criteria** that are important in making this decision. Label your ideal wheel with those criteria and rate the relative importance of each. The example in the illustration above shows a possible ideal job wheel.

### 2. Create a separate wheel for each job choice

Label each wheel with same criteria.

Rate each job choice on each of the criteria.

### 3. Compare each job wheel to your ideal wheel

It's unlikely that you will find an exact match, but you can now clearly see which wheels most closely fit the ideal and what compromises you would be making with each choice.



For some decisions, there are many pros and cons, and also many risk factors to consider. In such cases, you may feel totally overwhelmed by opposing inner arguments.

A technique called **The Conference Table** allows you to bring this dialogue into clear focus. You may do this exercise entirely in your imagination, or you may write down the main points as you go. The process is:

1. Set the scene

Carry out this exercise in a quiet location without any distractions or interruptions. Imagine you are sitting at a conference table, and have invited each of your **inner sub-personalities** to express their ideas on each of your options. Let's say you're deciding if you should take a year off work to write a book.

2. Let each 'voice' offer its opinion on each option

You may have two or three major sub-personalities who want their say. Give them whatever names help to define them for you. For example, for the choice of taking a year off, your **Traditionalist** might object, "You're risking financial security". For the choice of continuing to work, your inner **Author** may argue, "You will die inside if you can't focus on your writing for a while." Some of your inner voices are those of your parents, teachers or 'society' in general. Let them all have their say.

3. Wise mentor

Now imagine a wise mentor coming to the table. This mentor is never judgmental or dismissive. He (or she) speaks with compassion and understanding, acknowledging the validity of each concern, and finding ways to address them.

For example, he might say to the **Traditionalist**, "Well, you should be able to take a year off, as long as you have enough saved, and you keep up your network so you will be able to get back into the workforce afterwards."

To the **Author**, he may say, "If you don't take the year off, you can still write your book in your spare time."

The mentor may also offer additional options. For example, "You might be able to arrange a sabbatical or to continue working but cut down on your hours."

4. Open the dialogue

Explore each option, looking at the long-term benefits, considering your deepest values and gauging your emotions.

5. Come to agreement

You will know you've come to a decision when all your inner voices are satisfied. They may not all have exactly what they want but their major concerns will have been addressed.

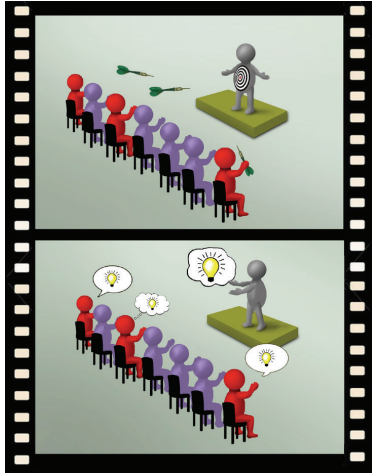
6. Commitment

Make your commitments clear. For example, if you have decided to take a year off, and have promised to keep up with your professional networks, outline exactly what that means and how you will remain true to that promise.

7. Wrap up

Finally thank all the participants and write up the results.

## Presenting



Many people are nervous about delivering a presentation.

Practical tips that may help are:

- Using PowerPoint slides to avoid 'going blank',
- Focusing on individuals to avoid being psyched out by that 'sea of faces',
- Engaging the audience in the discussion,
- Telling a funny story.

But even with these strategies, the underlying fear often remains, and that fear is probably due to the way you're interpreting the situation.

The "fear-based" interpretation stems from two assumptions:  
(1) You are the target. If your idea gets shot down so do you;  
(2) Your audience is there to judge, criticize and attack you.  
This situation would strike fear in even the bravest of souls!

A more productive interpretation is:

- (1) The focus is on the idea.
- (2) The audience are colleagues who help refine the idea.

When you place the focus on the idea (rather than yourself), **you** are no longer the target.

And now that you see the audience as colleagues who share your enthusiasm for the topic, you can partner with them to improve on your idea. You will now invite questions and welcome criticism as an opportunity to expand and refine your idea.

And don't be afraid to admit you don't know something. You can respond, "I don't know but I will note that as an area for future investigation." Or, "Please send me some references to that so I can review it, and then we can discuss it further."

By changing the focus to the idea and embracing your audience as colleagues, you will instill an atmosphere of inquiry and creativity.

Think of the venue as a great big playground where you can toss your idea out there and bounce it around with others, building on each others' knowledge. Every idea is a work in progress and there is nothing more invigorating than inviting others in to join in the process of its evolution.

## Nurturing innovation



There is nothing quite as exciting as working with a team of highly creative individuals in an environment where innovation is valued and nurtured.

I have worked in environments at both extremes of the spectrum: one where rules and procedures stifled every possibility of

creativity; and another where innovation was valued, encouraged and nurtured.

The innovative companies were not only the most enjoyable (and fun!) places to work, but my creative abilities seemed to blossom in those environments.

So, if you're looking for a company that is absolutely sparking with the excitement of creating innovative new products or services, what are some of the things you should be looking for?

The first thing that will strike you about a company that truly values creativity and innovation is the **get away spaces** they provide for their employees.

I remember being shown around a company when being interviewed for a job. They showed me a very comfortable coffee room where they offered fruit, healthy snacks and fruit juice (all for free) to their employees. There were also many relaxing places scattered around the company, where you could sit alone or in small groups, and there was even a pool table and a gym. This company recognized three simple facts:

1. When you're stuck on a problem it's best to get your mind off it for a while.
2. The best creative ideas happen when you're away from your desk.
3. The best products are honed during informal discussions with colleagues.

In addition to informal discussion with colleagues, companies that are truly committed to excellence will hold regular **formal product reviews**. At Pixar Animation Studios, a few dozen animators and computer scientists review each film segment on a daily basis. The group is "brutally critical" and also totally committed to coming up with solutions to fix problems. The lively debate in these sessions results in fresh ideas and out-of-the-box solutions.

In addition to sharing ideas within your project team, some companies hold an **annual conference** in which their researchers present their latest research. This provides an opportunity where ideas from one field might stimulate new insights in another – a concept called "conceptual blending".

Another good sign is if the company has employees **move into different project areas**. This not only helps to develop you as a professional, it also re-kindles your interest and energy level. In addition, you will add a new perspective to the team you are joining. This practice is so effective that 3M takes it even farther – if a product is suffering, an **entirely new team** is brought in from many different divisions of the company. This offers vastly new perspectives and new approaches.

Some companies, like Wieden & Kennedy (the highly innovative advertising agency) **mix total newbies with seasoned employees**. The newbies come up with totally off-the-wall ideas, which are often impractical but it breaks away from boring, predictable ruts of the past. Dan Wieden calls it "incorporating a little weirdness into the creative process".

Highly innovative companies also provide opportunities to **share ideas with other companies** by sending their employees on conferences, courses and seminars; and encouraging them to write papers and/or articles for magazines and journals.

Probably the most striking sign that a company values innovation is if they subscribe to **"the 15 percent rule"** in which every researcher is encouraged to spend 15 percent of his or her time pursuing speculative new ideas. This idea originated at 3M and was adopted by Google and other highly successful companies.

#### Exercise – Make a personal commitment to creativity

Even if you're not currently in a company that nurtures creativity, there are many things you can do to nurture your own creativity in your professional life.

- Go out and converse with people in other areas of your company. For example, go to the company cafeteria, look around for people you don't know and ask to join them. Find out what they do in the company, discuss their challenges and their ideas.
- Look at some of your most tedious tasks and think about ways to improve or automate the process.
- Get on to mailing lists to find out about seminars on a variety of topics – in person, webinars, etc. Broadening your field of interest often stimulates insights in your own area.
- Share your innovative ideas with colleagues and people in other fields and welcome critical debate on feasibility.
- Nurture friendships with creative, innovative people, look for opportunities to learn new skills in different areas, and...

*Never be afraid of doing something wildly different!*



### Light a spark

There's nothing wrong with striving for more – more education, a more fulfilling job, better health, etc. But how you think about your situation has a huge impact on the result.

If you focus on what you **don't** have, you will get into a negative emotional state that weighs you down and tends to make the situation worse. Focusing on misery keeps you submersed in misery.

If on the other hand, you focus on the positive things that you already have, it generates a positive energy that will propel you towards more positive things.

For example, if you would like a more fulfilling job, look at the aspects of your current job that are fulfilling. There's always something. It may be the occasional lunchtime outing with colleagues. Or perhaps you enjoy brainstorming problems or writing reports.

When you start to focus on what you find fulfilling, think of ways to do more of that, perhaps in various contexts. For example, you may decide to do some events planning for your group or start a group newsletter. Then, get in the habit of talking to people about your activities and aspirations.

When you focus on the positive and take advantage of opportunities to do more of what you love, it will light a spark that is unstoppable.

# Part 4

## Relationships

## Relationships



Relationships are central in all aspects of our lives.

How we relate to our colleagues at work, our family at home and every casual contact can make our life joyful or miserable.

When I think of people who excel in relationship skills, I see three essential characteristics: inner security, empathy and a sense of humor.

### Inner security

Before you can relate successfully with others, you need to have a sense of security and wholeness within yourself. If you don't have this, you will be too preoccupied with "making a good impression" and "getting approval and love" to connect with another in a sincere and honest way.

In personal relationships, the early days are usually the best because there is curiosity and a sense of discovery. However, as soon as possessiveness and expectations come into play, the tensions begin and the relationship becomes a challenge and often a burden.

Couples who are totally secure within themselves allow their partner freedom to be who they are and to evolve and change. There is a shared excitement about each other's

development, and even if their paths take them in different directions at some point, there is always a deep affection and caring for each other. Many years ago, a former partner and I split up because our lifestyles were not compatible. However, we parted on the best of terms, and even now we are the closest of friends.

Inner security is also important in friendships. Friends who are totally secure within themselves do not burden the friendship with expectations, but they are enthusiastic about each other's interests and activities. There is an openness, honesty and sharing of successes and failures, joy and sadness. Friends accept each other exactly as they are.

In a work situation, relationships often end up being a game of showing how skilled we are or how much we know. Too often we see bosses or employees who try to pretend they know everything. But when you admit that you don't know something, you are displaying your willingness to learn. The open, honest admission of weaknesses and the sharing of knowledge produce a supportive dynamic environment in which everyone can grow and thrive.

Some people seem to have been born with a sense of inner security, or perhaps they experienced a childhood that promoted this feeling. But many of us feel that little insecure child inside, crying out for comfort, love and approval.

In order to develop a sense of security, you need to be aware of that inner child and help that child grow up by providing all the comfort, love and approval that it needs. Finding those things from an external source will never truly satisfy this part of you. You need to provide this for yourself.

There are many techniques for doing this work – having conversations with that part of you, keeping a journal, writing a letter to that inner child, discovering qualities about that child part that you love and wish to express, etc.

The importance of this work cannot be over-emphasized, because until you establish a secure inner state, you cannot fully develop the next relationship skill – empathy.

#### Empathy

Empathy is the ability to see another person's perspective and **feel** what they are feeling.

When I show up late in the evening at a restaurant and I see many empty tables that have not yet been cleared and the waitress looks tired, I can't help but say, "Busy night, eh?" The simple understanding creates rapport. She unwinds, we chat and both our lives are enriched.

I am not always empathetic and it took me a long time to develop this quality to any degree. When I was a teenager, I did not get along with my dad – nor did my brother. We were both typical teenagers of that era and my dad opposed my mini-skirts and my brother's long hair and beard. Life was a battle and my mother was in the middle of it.

But my mother was an expert in empathy. She could see each of our viewpoints and she knew when and how to talk to each of us. She never raised her voice and she never talked to us when we were angry or upset. Instead, she would wait until we were relaxed and ready to hear what she had to say. The discussions went something like "Now, about what happened this afternoon... I understand how you felt, but how do you think the other person felt, and what do you think would have been the fair thing to do?"

Throughout our tumultuous teenage years, my mother 'kept the peace', but more than that, she changed us.

On my parents' 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, when my dad toasted my mom and acknowledged how she had "made him a better person", she smiled and said, "Oh, you're not perfect yet!" He laughed and hugged her. At this stage of their relationship, the rapport and trust was so high that she could make this joke without offending. He truly had changed.

I have certainly used this skill in many situations and now I use it in my career as a Life Coach, but I guess the real question is why are we sometimes not willing to empathize? I know there are times when I have doggedly stuck to my views and refused to see the other person's side. I must admit that, for me, it's been because the other person was behaving in a way that I typically behave and do not like to admit. My inner dialogue that went... "That person is being an arrogant know-it-all!" was really based on the feeling that I know it all!

The costs of not being empathetic are alienation from others, lost opportunities and loneliness. I've never actually made up with that 'arrogant' person, although I'm beginning to come to terms with my own inner arrogant side. It took a sense of humor to allow me to accept that part of me, and that is the next characteristic that is critical to good relationship skills.

#### A sense of humor

Humor is the most energizing ingredient in successful relationships.

My husband has an amazing sense of humor and whenever I snap at him, he always finds something to say that turns the situation around and makes me laugh.

All of our 'lively discussions' seem to end with laughter because we've both become adept at seeing different perspectives, creating a ridiculous scenario or blowing things so far out of proportion that any issue becomes silly and irrelevant.

I've also learned to chuckle at the difference between my super efficient organized way of doing things versus my husband's more relaxed and random approach to a task. Both approaches work!

Learning to see our many faces (sub-personalities) objectively and accept their good and bad sides is not easy, but having a sense of humor about them helps to break down our resistance to facing up to them. And when we are able to accept ourselves with all our quirks, we can more easily accept others.

In a work situation, humor can be a great team building skill. While working in a large company steeped in bureaucracy, my colleagues and I found ways to use humor to create a productive and energized environment. Whenever anyone went away on holiday, they would return to find their cubicle decorated in some way reminiscent of their trip – the safari was the best, I think! The cubicle was made into a tent with a sleeping bag, a toy jeep, bug spray and jungle creatures.

I must credit my boss at the time for understanding the value of this kind of fun. Despite the disparaging remarks of other team leaders, cubicle decorating would happen at lunch times or after hours, morale and productivity were high and we had the tightest knit team in the building. Whenever one member was caught in a tight deadline, we would all pitch in to help get the job done.

#### Summing up

In this article, I described three characteristics that underlie good relationship skills: Inner security, empathy and a sense of humor.

Inner security allows us to connect with others with honesty and no underlying agendas.

Empathy allows us to truly understand another's point of view.

A sense of humor allows us to lighten a situation and relieve tension.

But why are relationships so important in our lives?

As human beings, we have a deep need for community. When you make an effort to relate to another, you provide an opportunity to form a connection. If reciprocated, there is a mutual benefit, but if not it's important to realize that the seed has been planted and will eventually blossom – even if you never get to see it. So move through life planting seeds of caring. You will never run out because love is like a river that is continuously replenished from a vast ocean.

It doesn't take a monumental effort to reach out to others. Simply observe and notice what strikes you about them – their posture, how they move, the expression on their face. Sometimes it's best to say nothing – all you need to do is send caring feelings. Other times, a word or two is all it takes.

*It's a lonely world without others, so reach out and connect.*

## Perspectives



Situations of differing needs can often result in conflict.

Being trapped in one viewpoint can prevent any chance of calm rational thought and can certainly block the way to a peaceful resolution.

When I was twenty and told my dad I planned to move out, he was furious and we argued. I objected to him “wanting to keep me caged”. I now realize that he was actually afraid for my safety and I could certainly have remained calm and handled the discussion in a more mature way.

We do tend to stay trapped in our own personal perspective and when a challenge appears, we see ourselves as the victim and the rest of the world is our tormentor.

It's not easy to step out of this limited perspective. We generally don't like to take an objective view because the smaller part of us is afraid it will not get what it wants. This is coming from our emotional brain and it is one of our more primitive survival mechanisms. However, when we can step out of ourselves and take a more objective view, we become much more creative about the options available.

From this broader perspective, we can take a balanced view of our place in the drama. We can start to admit that others have challenges too and we become willing to consider solutions that will benefit everyone. We can also consider a larger timeframe and look for long-term solutions.

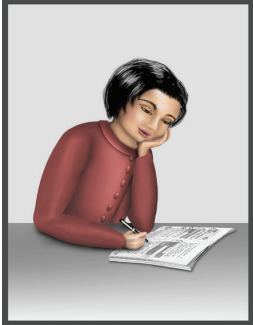
Whenever you find yourself in a conflict situation, imagine yourself floating outside the scene and looking at it from a distant vantage point.

- Start by noticing any of your own physical reactions, like shoulders tensing. Take a deep breath and then relax as you exhale; Relax your facial muscles; Change your posture.
- Then notice the expression on other people's faces and their posture. What does that tell you about how they are feeling? What might be their challenges or concerns?
- How might you deal with the situation to address the concerns of everyone involved?
- What are the longer-term challenges and possible solutions?

Notice that this process allows you to cherish and care for your own emotional needs and also for others.

As you get into the habit of taking this broader perspective, you will develop a sense of community and caring for others, arguments will become rare and discussions will become frequent and productive.

## Rewrite



How often have you wished you had done something differently? And is this a habitual way of responding – a pattern that you really would like to change?

Let's take an example. Let's say it's Friday afternoon and you're looking forward to a weekend ski trip with a group of friends. But just as you're getting ready to go home, your boss comes up to you and says he needs you to come in on the weekend to complete a project that is due on Monday. Without a thought, you agree. And then, as you drive home, you say, "Damn! I'm always doing that! Why can't I stand up for myself? Why can't I ever say no?"

Well, it is possible to change habitual ways of responding. It's gradual, but it's very systematic and, if you're disciplined, it works.

### Stage 1 – Evening rewrite

In the first stage, you spend some time in the evening thinking back over your day, and note if you were in a situation that you wish you had handled differently. If so, imagine the scene and, in your mind, re-write your response, as you would have liked. Visualize it as if you are seeing yourself in a play on a stage. Go over it a few times, modifying your posture, facial expression, gestures and words until you are totally satisfied. Then, imagine stepping into the role and experience what it feels like.

### Stage 2 – Immediate rewrite

Eventually, you will find yourself noticing your habitual response immediately after it occurs. As soon as you do, start to imagine how you might have responded differently. Play it out in your imagination. Rehearse it.

### Stage 3 – Catch yourself mid-stream

The next stage starts to get interesting. This is where you catch yourself in your usual scenario. So, you just go through it and observe yourself, as if from an outside perspective. This is an important step because as you observe, you start to detach yourself from your usual role.

### Stage 4 – Catch yourself at the choice point

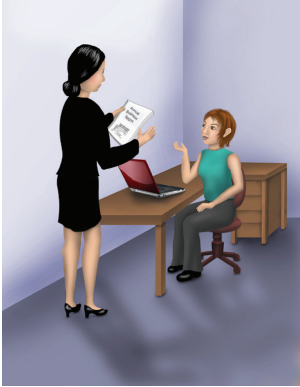
In this stage, you notice just before you respond. This is the moment when you can choose to continue into the usual scenario or respond in a different way. You may not achieve the perfect re-write the first time, but you can continue to do visualizations later. And so, with each new occurrence you can improve your response. And, in time, this will be your new way of being. It will come naturally.

### Stage 5 – Balance and flexibility

A final note about balance may be helpful. Often times, you decide you want to be more of one specific characteristic and less of its opposite. So you push yourself towards one end of the scale. But once you have achieved that, you may need to practice being flexible, depending on the situation.

For example, it's fine to learn how to be assertive but there are some occasions that you may wish to be more gentle and submissive. Ideally, you want to be open to **all** options and decide how to react based on the immediate situation, your values, goals, etc.

## You Choose



Although criticism can sometimes be framed in very negative terms, how you react can transform it into a gift.

Your reaction will also determine your future relationship with your critic.

Let's take an example. Say your boss comes over to your desk with a report that you had written and says, "This is the worst report I've ever read!"

Your initial reaction might be to accept this judgment and feel that you are a failure. But if you go down that path, there is only isolation, helplessness and despair. If you stay stuck in an **I'm-not-good-enough** mindset, it's like being in quicksand.

The alternative is a **learning mindset** that says, "I'm better than that and I can certainly learn and improve."

With this mindset, you might reply, "Oh my! That won't do. Can we sit down and discuss what is needed to make this an excellent report?"

In that simple statement, you have:

- Shifted focus off of yourself and to the report. (i.e. staying 'task focused')
- Shifted from a negative situation to a positive goal.
- Asked for help in finding a learning resource.
- Offered your boss the opportunity to be a mentor.

You have now not only demonstrated that you are enthusiastic about learning, but you have also transformed the relationship between you and your boss.

Whenever you find yourself in a situation that induces anger, fear or frustration, remember that how you choose to respond will mold the future tone of your relationship.

If you stay grounded in the knowledge that you are ok and totally capable of learning, you will most likely be able to find a positive, productive response.

You have a great deal of power in setting the focus and tone of any relationship. Choose wisely.

## The Quest for Love



Aside from the basic physiological needs (food, shelter, safety), love is one of our fundamental needs.

As an infant you depend on the love of your caregivers in order to survive, and as you grow older you continue trying to please others in order to maintain their help and support in your endeavors.

### Seeking love from an external source

The problem comes when you continue to think that you must get love from others in order to survive; and when you search for a life partner, the focus is on “getting an absolutely secure love”. It’s fear-based and so you set conditions: “You must behave in a specific way, you must do some things and **not** do other things.” And if one of you breaks this agreement, the other will withdraw his or her love. This is a relationship based on conditional love.

It is not a very secure relationship and has many pitfalls – suspicion, jealousy, tit-for-tat behavior, etc. It is difficult to remain happy in such a relationship. Even if you do manage to live within the rules, the restrictions take their toll in that you do not allow yourself to follow your heart. Eventually you may totally lose sight of your own personal goals and you become listless and drained. In effect, you starve yourself of your passion and your joy.

### Finding love within yourself

A true maturation process involves developing the ability to love yourself – with all your faults and weaknesses – totally and unconditionally. You see yourself as an evolving being, no better or worse than anyone else, and although imperfect, worthy of love and compassion. At this stage, you will realize that mature love is not an active verb, but a state of being. You will also feel a deep sense of security because you will no longer have to search for love from an external source. And you will radiate love to everyone and everything around you, without restriction, without limits.

### The healthy relationship sets no conditions

When you are secure within yourself, confident that you can be happy and fulfilled all by yourself, there is no need to set conditions when you enter into a relationship. You will feel secure enough to allow each other to follow your passion and you will share the joy these experiences bring.

There will be no need to ask permission. You will follow your heart and do what you love. Perhaps your partner hates skiing but you love it. So you go ahead and plan a skiing trip by yourself or with a friend. While you are away, your partner will enjoy the time to do something he or she enjoys. Then when you get together again you will enjoy sharing your experiences. When you allow each other the simple freedom of pursuing your passions, that joy is shared and your relationship is enriched.

### Exercise

- Learn to love yourself exactly as you are.
- Let the feeling of love expand to everyone.
- If you have a partner, tell each other what you enjoy doing.
- Stop asking permission. Encourage each other to follow your joy, and enjoy sharing your experiences.



## Kindness

Imagine filling your heart with kindness and then letting it overflow – more and more – until it fills the entire world.

It's a sort of objective feeling that flows out in all directions.

It flows inwards... so you're kind to yourself, taking care of your needs, accepting all your quirks and gently allowing your 'imperfections'.

Kindness also flows outwards... so you take the time to look at people – their expression, posture, way of moving. You realize that everyone has their story, their challenges, hopes and fears. And your heart goes out to them, in their joy and in their sadness too.

Kindness breaks down barriers and brings people together.

In this state, there is no judging. There is no "me and them". There is just "us together now".

Part 5  
Life Mastery

## Your True Goal



Life is a continual process of pursuing one goal after another. You may focus on concrete goals like “I want to change careers”, or your goal may be more abstract, like “I want to become more confident”. The focus may be in different areas of your life – career, friendships, family.

Funny thing about goals though... the satisfaction you achieve when you reach a goal is either short-lived or falls short of your expectations; and it is very quickly superseded by another goal.

This is because the goal you chose is not your true goal. Your true goal is related to a state of mind or, more accurately, an emotion. You want a good job so that you will feel secure and valued. You want a good relationship so that you will feel loved.

Think about one of your goals and ask yourself, “If I had that fully and completely, exactly as I want it, what would I have then that is even more important at the deepest level?”

If you repeat this question and go deeper into what you really want, it will come down to a desire for something like peace, wholeness, joy, love.

An even more surprising realization is that this state is not dependent on external circumstances. You can simply **be** at peace, whole, joyful and loving without anything more than what you have right now.

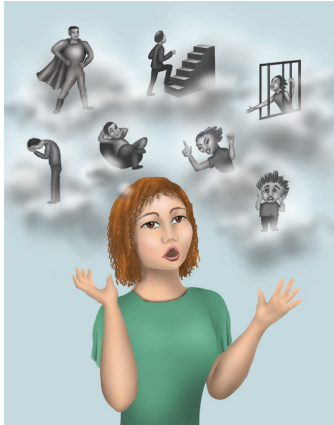
When you are in your ideal mental and emotional state, there is no inner struggle, no regret about the past and no worry about the future. It is a place where you are living fully in the moment, with trust, peace and joy.

You will still pursue goals, but you will do it from a place of wholeness, peace and joy. Instead of being desperate for the goal, you will simply enjoy every experience and accept every outcome.

### Exercise

1. Ask yourself, “What is my most important goal?”
2. Then ask, “If I had that fully and completely, exactly as I want it, what would I have then that is even more important at the deepest level?”
3. Repeat step 2 over and over until you come to your deepest most fundamental goal.
4. Write that goal down and then sit quietly, slowly feeling your way **into** that state.
5. Over the next few days, make a habit of taking a moment now and then to move into that state.
6. Notice how **being** in that state changes how you pursue your goals and how you live your life in general.

## Watch Your Thoughts



Watch your thoughts – like a hawk – especially those that go speeding through like a bullet train.

They are the saboteurs – old thought patterns, childhood stuff, past pain, old fears.

Listen to all those mind patterns. Don't dismiss them. They each have a gift as well as a limitation.

For example, when confronted with the possibility of change, you may catch the thought, "Don't go there! It's dangerous!" This voice may be a pattern you have picked up in childhood, and now it rules your life. It's not really bad. It offers the gift of caution – it enjoys the cozy safe places. But it shuts down the voice of courage and adventure. So the work you need to do is to establish a balance. Reassure this part as you move into a broader life. Be gentle and patient as you grow this part up. But never lose the treasure. Safety is good, but so is exploration. Accommodate each side to create a healthy balance.

You may discover workaholic thoughts that insist, "Gotta be the best! Have to get everything done in record time". There is a gift here too – it can accomplish a great deal. But this side needs to be tempered with the need for relaxation.

Each of us has our own personal tendencies. Some of us are driven by adventure, leaving caution behind. Some are so driven by ambition they deny themselves any relaxation time. It's only when you catch your habitual thoughts that you discover 'who' is driving your behavior.

### Who is in the driver's seat?

Every one-sided inclination is a tyrant if allowed to dominate. It's important to step back and check 'who' is controlling your behavior. If you habitually push yourself to succeed, you may have blocked that quiet little voice that says, "I need to take a break".

When you continually ignore those quiet little voices – those forgotten disowned parts – they eventually find ways of making themselves heard in disruptive ways like seemingly irrational outbursts, emotional breakdowns or illness.

Every voice inside of you needs to be heard and honored. By noticing your habitual patterns and then listening for the opposite side – the soft little voices – you are progressing on the path to wholeness. And when you bring your whole being into balance, you will then be able to open up to a broader range of possibilities and fulfill your true potential.

### Exercise

- Develop a habit of noticing your thoughts.
- Which thought-patterns stop you from doing things that would allow you to grow?
- What reassurance will you give that part of you, so that you can move ahead with comfort?

## Path to Wholeness



Emotional outbursts or thoughtless comments can so often ruin your chances of a promotion, mess up a relationship or just plain get in the way of your happiness. When these things happen, you sometimes look back and ask “Where did that come from? That’s not like me at all!”

Well, in fact, it **is** like you. It’s a part that you have denied and disowned – probably a long time ago. When parents or teachers disapprove of characteristics like selfishness or aggression, we at first hide these, but eventually we may entirely disown these feelings. And if you deny an emotion completely, it will find a way to express in round-about ways, sabotaging your success and relationships.

For example, a person who has disowned selfishness may sacrifice everything for her family; but at some point it all gets to be too much and she starts to have outbursts of anger, saying “Why do I have to do everything?!!” She sees her martyrdom as something imposed from outside, but it is the result of her own decision to ignore the selfish part of herself. That part is trying to tell her (wisely) that it’s important for her to take care of herself. Since she has not listened to this voice, it forces its way through in angry outbursts.

Our disowned parts are not bad. Every part of oneself has a role to play and is important in the right context. It’s only when we deny and disown a part of ourselves that it begins to act out inappropriately. But it’s just trying to get our attention.

In “The Dark Side of the Light Chasers”, Debbie Ford describes how to reintegrate our disowned parts through what she calls “Shadow Work”.

### Identifying disowned characteristics

You first need to identify your disowned characteristics. One way to do this is to notice the traits you see in other people that evoke a strong emotional reaction. A friend was describing someone she knew and said, “He’s such a bragger! I can’t stand people like that!” After some probing, she remembered that when she was young, she used to sing and dance for her relatives, and her mother would admonish her saying “Don’t be such a show off!” Now, as an adult, she backed away from opportunities to allow her talents to shine.

Looking at your family can also give you hints about the characteristics you have disowned. In my family, it was important to be strong and dependable. Weakness and irresponsibility were unacceptable. My dad never missed a day’s work in his life (except when hospitalized). For many years, I followed this pattern. I remember teaching a three-hour class with a terrible head-cold and disguised the fact so well that none of the students noticed.

Another technique is to write down “I am...” and follow with every characteristic you can think of. For example, “I am stupid” / “I am cowardly” / “I am greedy”. As you do this, notice which statements you vehemently deny. Those are your disowned traits.

Give a name to each of these characteristics. (e.g. “Bully Burt”, “Lazy Larry”, “Tidy Tanya”, “Mother Superior”...)

### Find the gift

The next step is to find the **gift** in each of your disowned characteristics. For example, selfishness may alert us to the need to take care of ourselves. Bragging allows us to display and celebrate our talents. Weakness may allow us to be gentle and give in when it is the kind thing to do.

Whenever you notice a characteristic you don't like, bring it out and look for its gift. Is it trying to protect you? Is it asking for better balance in your life? Then, work with that feeling to find an appropriate form of expression.

### Regaining wholeness

Most of us resist so-called **negative** thoughts and emotions. But if you suppress them, they will build up and eventually escape in inappropriate ways. They may even cause health issues.

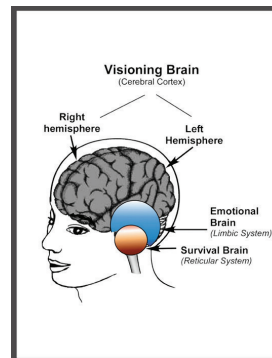
A more productive way to deal with negative thoughts and feelings is to turn our full attention to them, listen to what they are trying to say and address their concerns with curiosity, patience and gratitude.

It's as if we have a world of personalities inside our head. They all have good intentions, wanting to help us achieve happiness. When we welcome their input, we will regain peace and we can make choices based on a much broader perspective.

### Exercise

- Write down names for your disowned characteristics.
- Write down each of their gifts.
- Make a commitment to honor their input.

## Three Brains



Did you know that you have three brains? Four, if you count the left and right hemisphere as separate.

The oldest part of our brain is the reticular system – the Survival brain. It is the tiny enlargement at the top of the spinal column. It controls our instinctual reactions – e.g. jerking your hand away from a fire or dodging a projectile.

Next in terms of evolution is the Limbic system, the Emotional brain, which encircles the reticular system. This part is group oriented, likes routine, safety and comfort. These are instincts we share with animals that function as a group – e.g. wolves and monkeys. For us, as humans, it drives us to seek belongingness and safety in communities.

The most recently evolved part of the brain is the cerebral cortex, which surrounds the Limbic system. This has been called the Visioning brain because it allows us to think beyond the routine, envision new possibilities and plan ahead. This part of the brain is divided into left and right hemispheres. The left is the Conscious mind. It is characterized by linear thinking and it uses language as its medium of communication. The right hemisphere is the seat of Deeper Wisdom. It perceives a much bigger picture, is intuitive, holds our deepest values and uses symbols as its medium of communication.

Most of us are very familiar with the workings of our Conscious mind but we have very little awareness, understanding or appreciation of the other parts of our brains, sometimes to our detriment.

Let's look at an example of how these parts might interact. Imagine you are at work and your boss criticizes your work. Your conscious mind has a momentary thought, "Uh-oh! I'm not doing well!" That fleeting thought triggers the Emotional brain into fear of losing its safety, and that fear triggers the Survival brain to set off a number of physical reactions – tense muscles, increased blood pressure, slowed digestion, lowered immune system response. Over time, these reactions can cause headaches, susceptibility to catching colds, digestive problems, skin conditions; and if these feelings become habitual over a long period of time, it could result in a variety of illnesses such as heart disease, immune deficiency diseases, etc.

How can one prevent this type of scenario from getting out of hand? The first thing to do is notice when it starts to happen. Signs of stress vary from person to person, but some of the typical signs are muscle tension, rapid heart beat, rapid shallow breathing, tense or fluttery stomach, dry mouth.

As soon as you notice this type of stress reaction, try to catch the feeling that triggered it. Was it a threat to your security? Then find the thought that triggered that fear.

Now, you are in touch with your Conscious mind, and you can start to work on a strategy to address the threat. You can enlist the help of both your left and right hemispheres to figure out a strategy – i.e. your Conscious mind and your Deeper Wisdom – using the following technique.

1. Write down the question you want answered. For example, "How might I deal with criticism in a healthier way?"
2. Left hemisphere work. Brainstorm – i.e. write down every possible idea, from sensible ones to totally outlandish ones. When you run out of ideas, push yourself to write 10 more; and then 10 more.
3. Right hemisphere work. Put down your pen, pause, take a deep breath and relax your entire body. Imagine you are inside a peaceful glowing sphere. Take your time to establish a deep feeling of calm. When you're ready, ask "What can my Deeper Wisdom contribute to this question?"

Then just wait and pay attention to whatever comes. The right hemisphere speaks in symbols, so you may get images or feelings. Give it as much time as it needs, and notice what comes from that peaceful place. When you're done, write down whatever you noticed. Ask yourself "What insight does this contribute to the current problem?"

4. Re-read the ideas from both parts of the exercise and integrate them to find a solution that resonates with all parts of your brain, including the Emotional brain.

Exercise - Whenever you notice symptoms of stress,

- Talk to your Emotional brain to calm it down.
- Review your strategy to overcome the problem.
- Make a resolution to continue to refine that strategy.

This takes some practice, but when you learn to recognize and listen to the different parts of your brain, you can start to establish more inner peace and harmony.

## Your Theme Song



Every individual has a theme song in his or her life. It is usually based on one or more childhood events, but it doesn't matter where it comes from. What matters is how it affects one's life now.

What is the theme song of your life?

Try noticing your inner thoughts for an entire day and write down some typical refrains. Then ask yourself, what is the overall refrain? There may be more than one, but try to find the current dominant one.

For me, the thoughts are about achieving excellence in ever-new fields, constantly challenging myself. And as soon as I get good in one field, I look for something new so I can start from scratch and excel in that. My theme song is "I must achieve. I must achieve. I must achieve." I push myself from one success to another without ever stopping to rest.

Now, here's the lesson... Every theme song has a good side and a down side. The good side of my theme song is that it has driven me to experience many exciting and interesting careers and many achievements. The down side is that I never take the time to rest and "smell the roses".

So, when you've figured out your theme song, ask yourself:

- How does this theme song serve me?
- How does it get in my way?

Even if your theme song seems negative – like "I'm not good at anything" – there is a positive intention. Perhaps its purpose is to stop you from attempting anything ambitious in order to protect you from possible failure. The down side is that it stops you from even trying.

So, the next step is to ask, "How might I modify my theme song or add a new song to restore balance to my life?"

As an exercise, you may want to try writing the opposite statement. For example, if your theme song is "I'm not good at anything", write "I can do anything I put my mind to". Now, allow yourself to feel what that's like, and then imagine what effect that song would have on how you live your life.

Even a seemingly positive theme song like "I must achieve" can be improved by modifying it to something like "Between achievements, I can slow down and enjoy the journey along the way".

Experiment with various versions to find a theme song that is more balanced. For example: "I don't have to be good at everything, but I do have my own special talents and I am committed to discovering and celebrating these."

A balanced theme song breaks through limitations and allows flexibility. You will know it when you say it because your ideal balanced theme song will make your heart sing!

### Exercise

- What is your dominant theme song?
- How does it serve you?
- What is its down side?
- What would be a more balanced theme song?

## Trapped



Over the years, I have heard many people say that they feel “trapped” in their current situation.

Well, there is a clear and systematic way to break out of this feeling and change the situation.

Let's start by stating two simple facts:

1. You are keeping yourself trapped by focusing on the bars of your prison cell.
2. You can escape by changing your focus.

Imagine you're in a prison cell, totally focused on rattling the bars, but all you have to do is turn around to see the open door behind you and walk through into a bright and beautiful place. Can it really be that simple?

Well, let's say you hate everything about your job – the work, your boss, your co-workers. And you spend all day grumbling about your situation.

As long as you stay focused on the negative, nothing will change. In fact, things will probably get worse, because no one likes a disgruntled person, so all kinds of great opportunities will evade you.

In order to get to a more positive place, you first need to change your focus to something you like about your current situation. This may seem difficult at first, but it will yield amazing results.

### How to...

There are many approaches that may help you find some positive aspects of your situation.

### Find the positive in the job

Take a different perspective on your job.

Think about the value of your work **to others**... What is the purpose of the work itself? What is the real value? to whom? How might you make it more valuable to those it was designed to serve?

Think about the value of the work **to you**... What skills might you learn from the job? How might these skills be used in an organization you'd like to work for? Or how might you use these skills in a self-run business?

There are so many **opportunities** in every job. You just have to look with an open, positive and imaginative mind. Once you see the things you can improve on or the skills you can develop, everything will change. You will be inspired and motivated, and doors will start to open.

### Find the positive in the people

If there's a person you dislike with a passion, it may be worth figuring out what is going on behind the external behavior. I remember a person who was frustrated with his boss because she was micro-managing. The employee felt she didn't believe he was capable. But in fact, she was watching over him because she felt he had great potential.

It may be possible to discuss your concerns with the individual in a non-judgmental way. Instead of jumping to the conclusion “You think I’m an idiot!”, objectively state what you’ve observed and how you feel. “I have noticed that you check on every detail of my work, and it makes me feel like you don’t have confidence in my abilities.” You may find out that’s not true, but even if it is, you might then calmly and sincerely ask what you can do to change that.

If you feel that an open approach will not work with this person, you may focus on the opportunity to develop a better way of interacting with him or her. For example, if the person is verbally aggressive, you may develop your skills of staying calm and responding in a helpful way.

It may also help to find some compassion for the person you have been having problems with. They may be dealing with issues you know nothing about. Calming the waters and chatting about life in general is sometimes a good way to change the dynamics of your relationship. You may discover that the person is not a tyrant at all, but just someone who has his or her own personal life challenges to deal with.

#### The unfolding

Once you start to see some positive aspects of your situation, and you focus on those, you will feel more energetic and happier. This will start to change everything.

For example, you may spend more time chatting to people, finding out about their jobs and hobbies. You may discover new interests; and discover you have talents in areas you previously knew nothing about.

As you focus more on your interests and skills, opportunities will arise to help you develop those skills.

This, by the way, is the law of attraction...

*“The Universe will give you more of whatever you focus on”*

Note that once you start waking up to new possibilities, it is tempting to get trapped in the cage of “wanting” – wanting a new job, wanting recognition, etc.

As long as you are focused on “wanting”, the Universe will keep you locked in the “wanting” mode. (You will be back to rattling the prison bars).

Instead, set your goal, formulate a plan, then focus on enjoying the journey. The great thing about doing that is that the end goal won’t even matter that much, because you will be enjoying the present. And it will just get better and better.

#### Exercise

- Catch yourself when you start complaining about things. Focus on the positive aspects of your current situation.
- Find ways of doing more of what you enjoy.
- Feel grateful for what you have.
- At the end of each day, reflect on what positive experiences you noticed.
- Note these reflections in a daily journal.

## Changes



Despite the fact that autumn happens every year, we Canadians still complain at the first signs of cooler weather and daylight hours diminishing.

But autumn brings bright forest colors and winter brings beautiful snowfalls. So we can choose to welcome the beauty of every season.

There are changing cycles in jobs and relationships as well. In a job, you move from a learning phase into competence-and-refinement and eventually you may experience boredom and loss of interest.

Similarly, in a relationship, you spend the first phase in rapturous discovery; then you refine the ability to share and enjoy. And eventually things may become comfortable but uninspired.

Each stage has both challenges and opportunities. In the learning phase of a job, you have to be willing to admit you don't know and maintain a passion for learning. In the second phase you enjoy a feeling of competence, but when unexpected circumstances arise, you must be willing to get into the learning mode again and call on your creativity.

The final phase is the most challenging because it often stimulates fear about the possible need to change jobs. But in reality, the primary transformation called for is **self-transformation**. The question to ask yourself is, "Who do I want to be? What change **in myself** am I looking for?"

You may be in a technical job and be yearning for more people interaction. In order to realize this new image, you may decide to move into a training position, or you may start to organize company outings, or you may decide to change careers. There are many options. What is important is that you move towards the new image of who you want to be.

Similarly, a thriving relationship is one where both partners continue to grow, both individually and together. And so, when enthusiasm wanes, it doesn't mean, "I'm bored with you." It means, "I'm bored with myself." And so, it is time to ask what transformation in yourself are you looking for.

You may take up some artistic endeavor, go traveling, or pursue a new field of interest. It is quite common that as soon as one member of a couple finds a new interest, the partner is also inspired to find new interests. This brings renewed excitement to the relationship because you now have new things to share and discover about each other.

Going through changes in life is essential. The cycle of learning, gaining competence and boredom repeats throughout our lives as we move from one skill or interest to another. When yearning for a change, ask what change in **yourself** you are looking for.

### Exercise

- What phase are you at in your job, relationship or hobby?
- What might be some interesting next steps in each area?

## Welcome Everything



Some people live in a world that just isn't good enough. They see frustrations and problems everywhere.

They complain about the cold all winter and the heat all summer.

They also see a very threatening world. And so they adopt a 'survival strategy'.

Some become **people-pleasers** in order to gain others' approval. Others become **controllers**, in order to compel others to please them. Still others **retreat**, remaining silent so as to avoid all possible conflict with others. All of these strategies are based on fear – fear of disapproval, fear of disappointment or fear of conflict.

This view of the world impacts their feelings, their relationships and their lives.

By focusing on the negative, they are always unhappy. By not trusting anyone, they are unable to make close friendships. And because they believe that their future outlook is gloomy, they never allow themselves to pursue their dreams.

### Positive focus

Other people have a positive outlook. Perhaps it's because of a happy and secure childhood, or perhaps it's in their genes. They seem to find something positive in every situation, and they're optimistic about the future.

These people are happier because they focus on the bright side of things. They have better relationships because they are more trusting (and trust usually draws out the best in others). And their optimism compels them to pursue their dreams with such focus and persistence that they are likely to realize their grandest visions.

### The "New Age" movement

A number of books have been written about "the law of attraction", "the power of positive thinking" and "positive affirmations". And many people are making an effort to change their habitual negative thought patterns into positive ones.

But often times, this just turns into another kind of battle. Before, it was "*me vs. them*" and now, it's "*negative vs. positive*" thoughts. As you work on changing negative thoughts to positive, notice what's happening... You are judging every thought. You transform every negative thought into the positive. It's hard work! And you're still in a state of resisting – resisting what you judge to be negative.

### A different approach

Let's consider a different approach... Imagine letting go of the battle. Imagine welcoming all situations and thoughts – allowing them to come and go with neither resistance nor clinging. Imagine there is a vibrant life energy constantly flowing through you, and you just let it flow.

You may notice negative thoughts, positive thoughts, judgmental thoughts – and you welcome all of them and let them go. No resistance, no attachment. The only thing that is constant is your attentiveness and your peacefulness.

When you are in this state, you may at first sound like one of those New Age ‘positive’ people. When something terrible happens, you don’t see it as ‘bad’. However, you don’t see wonderful things as ‘good’ either. Instead, everything just **is**, and you welcome all things with a peaceful heart.

There is a Chinese story of a farmer who used an old horse to till his fields. One day, the horse escaped into the hills and when the farmer’s neighbors sympathized with the old man over his bad luck, the farmer replied, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?"

A week later, the horse returned with a herd of horses from the hills and this time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good luck. His reply was, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

Then, when the farmer’s son was attempting to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone thought this very bad luck. Not the farmer, whose only reaction was, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?"

Some weeks later, the army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied youth they found there. When they saw the farmer’s son with his broken leg, they let him off. Now was that good luck or bad luck? Who knows?

The Chinese farmer never judged a situation as good or bad. He just went with the flow, peacefully accepting and dealing with each event as it occurred.

When you are in this state of mind, you actively participate in life. You experience all sorts of emotions. But you observe from a deeper place. This deeper, inner state is constant and peaceful. And from that place, you savor every moment, every thought and every emotion.

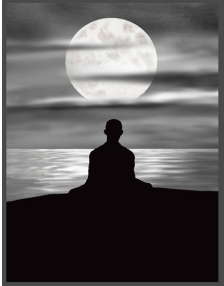
I remember when I was in my early twenties. At times when I had just split up with another boyfriend, I would go and sit beside the river and write poetry. And I remember noticing that as I wrote, I was actually enjoying my sadness. I would **be** with the feeling, allow the tears and turn them into poetry. I was able to savor even my sadness.

#### Exercise - Welcome everything

- Imagine that you came to this life because you wanted to **experience** emotions, challenges, frustrations and joy. But you sometimes get so caught up that it doesn’t seem like fun any more.
- In order to regain your perspective, **step back** once in a while and remember that you are just passing through one little lifetime – a tiny moment in the history of the universe.
- Make the most of it. Soak up the experiences. **Welcome** each situation, each thought and each emotion with open arms, and **then let it go**.

Savor this moment ... and the next ... and the next ...

## Zen Master



Ryokan, a Zen master, lived in solitude in a little hut at the foot of a mountain.

One evening, he returned from a walk to discover that a thief had entered his hut and was looking for something to steal but the hut was totally empty.

Without hesitation, Ryokan greeted the thief warmly and said, "You have come a long way to visit me and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift."

The thief, too astonished to speak, took the clothes and left without a word. Later on, Ryokan sat naked in meditation and gazed up at the moon. "Poor fellow," he mused, "I wish I could have given him this beautiful moon."

There are two lessons in this story. The first is Ryokan's open-hearted welcome. He does not see a thief. He sees a human being in need. And he offers not only his clothes, but most importantly he offers warmth, respect and kindness. He transformed a scene that could have been violent and angry into one of warmth and peace.

The second lesson is that Ryokan does not see himself as a poor man. He feels a deep connection with the universe and so there is no lack. He is able to appreciate the simple beauty of the moon and to feel that he has a treasure. And then he wishes to share this greater wealth – this feeling of bliss.

You don't have to be a Zen master to emulate some of these beautiful traits. I remember walking along a busy street with a friend of mine, when a street person asked for some change. My friend immediately reached into his pocket and gave the man a handful of change. Then he looked him in the eye, shook his hand and said warmly, "You have yourself a good day!" The man looked surprised and visibly straightened up and smiled, saying, "Thank you. Thank you." We were all smiling. There was a connection. I don't know about the man, but I felt a sort of glow all day and I still feel it when I recall that moment.

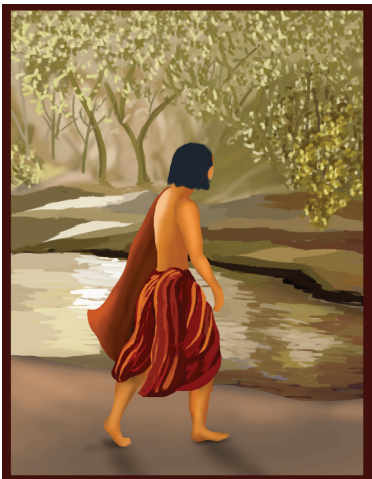
When you are willing to look deeply and see the person behind the role, you will be astonished at what you discover. Everyone has their story and they are in their situation for a valid reason. Connecting with another human being with respect and kindness has a profound affect on both of you and spreads far beyond that tiny moment.

And when it comes to the notion of feeling bliss in little things and wanting to share that bliss, children provide many examples...

When my husband was a little boy his parents gave him a bell for his tricycle. John went off happily ringing the bell. Later on he returned home and his dad noticed that the bell was gone. He asked, "Where did your bell go?" John replied, "Well, I saw this other little boy on a tricycle and he didn't have one."

*There is nothing more joyful than sharing your joy.*

## Letting Go



Sometimes you come across a book that inspires your life.

For me, that book was “Siddhartha” by Hermann Hesse.

It’s about a young Brahman in India who is seeking enlightenment.

He realizes that of all the Brahmins he knows, not one has attained enlightenment, so he leaves his home and goes from one place to another, one lifestyle to another – from living with the ascetics in the woods, to becoming a wealthy man. Finally, after many years of seeking in vain he despairs, ready to end it all.

But in that moment of despair, something changes inside of him. The simple act of letting go opens up a new freedom. From that moment, he simply flows with the tide of life, without longing or struggle.

He ends up becoming apprentice to a ferryman and lives a simple life by the river, learning more from the river than he ever did from all the spiritual teachers of his past.

This is how it is with so many of us. We strive for one thing after another, struggling and fighting against whatever we are faced with. So often we feel the need to ‘push the river’ instead of finding a place where it will propel us into new and unexpected possibilities.

The simple act of letting go changes everything. It allows you to accept what is, feel gratitude and open up to new adventures.

### Exercise

Whenever you are faced with what looks like a roadblock, don’t react immediately. Resist the urge to start pushing and fighting. Instead, step back and reassess your options. For a moment, let go of that focused determination, and open up to a broader perspective.

Ask yourself...

- What might I do if I was a completely different person?
- What if I was about to surprise everyone (even myself) and take an unexpected and exhilarating path?
- What are the many possible options at this stage?
- What is the soft little voice within me saying?
- Which choice feels most in tune with my true self?

Choosing a new path may take some courage, but as soon as you **let go** and go with the flow, all will become easy.

## Pay Attention



Have you ever wondered how much you are missing in any given moment?

We have adapted to filtering out irrelevant input but there are times that our minds are so busy with inner mental chatter that we may miss important (and glaringly obvious) information.

There's a clever experiment (described in "[The Invisible Gorilla](#)" by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons) in which an audience is asked to watch a video of a group of people throwing a ball randomly to one another, and the task is to count the number of ball passes. The audience is so busy focusing on ball passes that hardly anyone notices a man in an ape suit who casually walks into the middle of the play, waves and walks out. This is a striking illustration of selective attention. How can we miss noticing a man in an ape suit?

It may be interesting to stop the mind chatter once in a while and look around to see what you may be missing – facial expressions at a team meeting, a new person in the office, someone you've known for years who looks stressed today, or perhaps simply a beautiful sunset.

Why is it important to notice these extra little things? Well, for one thing, reading people's facial expressions helps you to gauge their feelings.

When I used to teach, I would notice when eyes glazed over and then I would take steps to clarify the topic – inviting questions, going over things in a different way or providing examples.

Years later at project meetings, I would immediately pick up on a team member's frown and ask, "What am I missing?"

In a personal context, it may alert you to reach out a caring hand to a friend in crisis.

At times, simply noticing a beautiful scene may lift your spirits. I remember walking to my office building one day and noticing dozens of cedar waxwings diving on a patch of crab apple trees. While other people walked passed without noticing, I stopped to enjoy the lively scene.

### Exercise

- Set an alarm on your phone to beep 2 or 3 times a day.
- Add a note to your personal meeting agenda.
- Write "Pay attention" in the sidebar of your class notes.
- Jot down your observations during your 'alert' periods.
- Journal about how this practice benefited you and others.

Eventually you won't need the reminders. You will be more present and alert as a matter of course. You will also experience less mental chatter and be living a fuller and richer life in the present.

## One Step



There are times when you know you need to change some aspect of your life.

But when you look at the possible pitfalls, it can appear so ominous that you are afraid to move forward.

It's like facing a long mountain trek, with many dangerous narrow ridges to walk, with sheer drops on both sides.

But however ominous, there is always a way to move forward, and the secret is to move forward very gradually – one step at a time.

With each step, take time to reassess, rebalance and plan the next step.

You may feel fear when you think of the overall journey, but there is no fear in just the next tiny step, so focus on only that step. Commit to only that step. And celebrate your progress with each advance.

For example if you want to pursue a professional qualification, you can start by gathering information on the various institutions offering courses towards that qualification.

Don't think about how you're going to manage the time or expense. Those worries might make you give up before you've given your dream a chance. Just focus on doing some information gathering.

When you've done that, feel proud of your progress so far, take a break, and then focus on the next step.

Whatever your end goal, focus on one sub-goal at a time. Enjoy working on that, and allow it to provide a sense of accomplishment when completed.

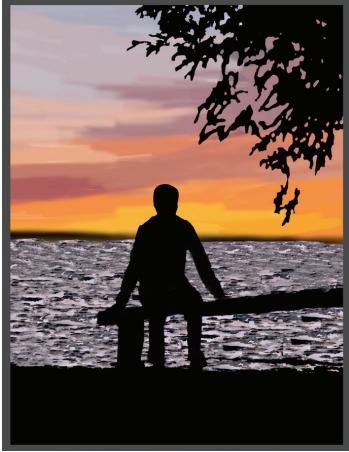
### Exercise

- Write down your next 'big goal'.
- Imagine a timeline and that goal is far away at the end of a long winding path.
- Now look down at the path just in front of you.
- Ask yourself, "What is the small step that will take me just a little bit nearer to where I want to be?"
- Then commit to taking just that one step.

*And whenever you feel overwhelmed, say to yourself...*

*"One step..."*

## That Peaceful Place



Summer is usually the time of year when we get outside more often.

We go out for walks and bike rides; we enjoy the garden; we go for a swim.

It's the perfect time of year to enjoy the outdoors.

My husband and I used to go camping on a little island in

Lake Saranac. The campsites were so spread out that you rarely saw anyone else for the whole time there. I remember how it felt gathering wood, building a fire to cook our food (it tasted fabulous!) and then washing up in the lake. We didn't hunt or gather food, but it still gave me an idea of what it would be like to live close to nature and it seemed so much more peaceful than city life.

It also gave me time to enjoy sitting in silence and watching the sun set over the lake. Tuning into nature this way instilled a deep sense of peace, which I felt the whole time we were there.

When I got back to the city, that peacefulness would remain for a while. I carried it inside myself like a treasure.

Nowadays, I try to keep that sense of peace through daily meditation and by pausing once in while during the day, taking a deep breath and calming my body and my mind.

When I do this, I am sometimes aware of emotions and worries vying for attention. I can picture them like children jumping up and down chattering. When I notice this, I try to deal with any worries or concerns and return to peacefulness.

I'm not always successful. Sometimes, I get carried away by the drama, and then peace is lost for a while. Ah well. This is what life is about – getting caught in the rapids once in a while. But I don't want to stay there for too long. That's why I meditate every night – to return to that treasured peaceful place.

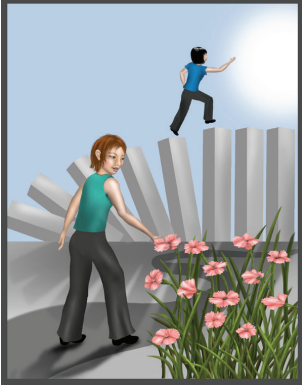
### "Taming the Monkey Mind"

(described by Tibetan Buddhist master, Mingyur Rinpoche)

This may be done as a morning or evening meditation, or any time during the day.

- Close your eyes. Breathe calmly.
- Observe your thoughts.
- For each thought that comes, smile and gently let it go.
- If you notice your mind has wandered, just calmly return to watching.
- In those tiny moments when you are watching and waiting for the next thought – in that moment of silence – this is the treasured peaceful place...

## Enjoying the Journey



When I was a child, I had a recurring dream in which I was leaping from the top of one pillar to another and each pillar started to fall the moment I landed on it, so I had to keep leaping.

As an adult, this is the way I've lived my life – constantly leaping from one accomplishment to another – accreditations, degrees, a variety of careers. My mother used to say it made her tired just listening to me, because I was always pursuing new challenges.

But it struck me one day when I was saying to her, "I can't wait 'til I finish this program and get my certification" and she said, "Don't wish your life away!" She was so right. I was failing to enjoy the journey.

I also realized how different my husband's attitude is. To him, life is a 'walk in the woods'. He truly enjoys each moment.

When we went to England to pursue postgraduate studies, I was always working hard and focused on the goal, while he simply enjoyed the process itself. To him, the goal was incidental but not that important. He was simply enjoying the research he was involved in.

This difference in attitude was even more apparent when we returned from England and searched for employment. For six months, I was frantic and impatient, while my husband enjoyed our little 'vacation'. He said, "Relax and enjoy this time. Before you know it, we'll be back in the grind, with very little time off."

We have both accomplished many things in our lives, but I lived in a state of "gotta get **there**" and he lived in the state "Isn't **this** amazing".

So many people live all their lives waiting for the future. You hear them say "when I graduate...", "when I have a family...", "when the kids are grown up...", "when I retire...". Life happens but we're not there.

Here are five steps that may help you to live and enjoy life fully in the present:

1. Take responsibility for where you are now. Some people say, "Well I have to provide for my children", but you chose to have children and you did that for a reason. So your next choice is to decide **how** to provide for them. No matter what limiting beliefs you have, you do have choices about where to go next.

2. Set your next goal, creatively finding a way to achieve a joyful life, **while** fulfilling your responsibilities. This requires: introspection (to find what makes your heart sing), research (to investigate the possibilities) and courageous leaps of imagination (to overcome limiting beliefs about what is possible).

3. Focus on the moment and savor the journey. As my mother said, “Don’t wish your life away”. Appreciate what you have now and find the joy in every moment. If your children are young, take a moment to appreciate them, because when they grow up and leave home, you will miss these times. So don’t miss it now!

4. Welcome challenges and failures as skill-building opportunities. Challenges help us to get creative. Sometimes you may seek out a mentor. These experiences will also help you to become a mentor to others. All the best teachers tell us about their challenges and failures because these were the times when they learned the most.

5. Remain flexible. If at some point, you feel that this is not the direction you want to go, allow yourself to reconsider and modify your goal to something that truly inspires and energizes you. I have changed careers many times in my life and everyone thought I was crazy, but what others think does not matter – as long as you follow your heart, you can never go wrong.

“Enjoying the journey” does not mean “not planning”. It means planning with both your heart and your mind and then immersing yourself in each moment of the journey with total focus and delight.

## One Word



Some people use affirmations. I like to use single words, like “Gratitude”, “Peace”, “Joy”...

It’s a reminder of how I want to be. For example, if I’m feeling stressed, I may repeat “Peace”, or if I’m feeling frustrated about a health issue, I might say, “Acceptance” or “Trust” or “Patience”.

Imagine you’re a boat and the wind and current move you in a particular direction but you can adjust your sails and rudder to move wherever you choose. In the same way, in a situation that might make you feel frustrated or angry, words like “Humor” or “Perspectives” may help you move into a more positive and productive state of mind.

Words may also help if you’re working on developing a particular character trait. In this case, you may want to stick with a specific word for a while, like “Confidence”. After a while, you might use its opposite (“Humility”) just to make sure you remain balanced. Keep in mind that all traits are important and useful in different situations. Balance is crucial. “Gentleness” and “Assertiveness” are another example of opposite traits that need to be kept in balance.

Finding and using single words can be a creative and powerful practice.

*What word do you need right now?*

## Signs



Do you find yourself confronting the same challenges over and over again?

Well, perhaps those challenges are not negative things to be avoided, but important signs to be attended to.

It may be a situation that repeats, like confrontations with similar types of people. It may be headaches, depression, anxiety or physical illness. It may be repeated failures at work or school.

Whenever you feel annoyed or frustrated by recurring challenges, first change your attitude towards the challenge. Instead of saying, "Damn! I've failed another course" or "I hate these headaches!", say, "Oh! What is this trying to tell me?" and "What do I need?"

By feeling open to and grateful for the warning sign, you are redefining it as something positive and helpful. And when you address the issue, it is likely that the challenge will fade into a distant memory.

If you have been failing at school or work, you may need a change of direction. If you are besieged by headaches, depression or physical illness, you may need a change of lifestyle, some alone time, a new interest, etc.

Whenever something seemingly negative happens, don't fight it. Instead, sit up and pay attention to it. Sometimes it's a worry and all it needs is reassurance or some precautionary measures. Other times, a complete change of direction is needed.

### Here are the steps:

1. Notice when something negative comes up (internal or external).
2. Welcome it as an important sign.
3. Ask, "What is this trying to tell me?"
4. Ask, "What do I need?"
5. Find a way to address that need.

## Holding My Own Hand



When I was very young (just able to walk), my mother and I were walking along the street, and every time we got to a crossing, she would say, "Hold my hand, so we can cross the street."

After a couple of these crossings, before she could say a word, I stood there, with my hands together and said, "Janie holding hand. Janie cross street."

For the rest of my life, every time I expressed any independence (which was often), my mother would say, "Yes I know. Janie's holding her own hand".

(Yes, that's me and my mom in the photo.)

I think that one of the biggest challenges in life is letting go of any concern for other people's rules and expectations and living according to your own values. I started this journey in that moment and it hasn't always been easy.

Many times, when 'fighting the system', I've felt like hiding my true feelings – and actions. This fear of being judged is extremely persistent.

The goal is to be totally secure in who I am, to know my own heart, and to follow its guidance without any concern about what others might think.

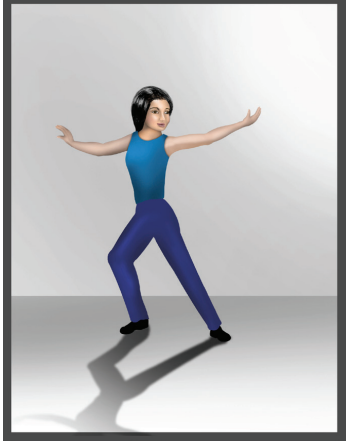
This 'independence of spirit' does not mean being a rebel, or 'standing up to anyone'. It means being so secure within oneself that one would not even think about any possible criticism until it arose and then one would simply accept and be at peace with it, but not feel any pressure to change.

How does one get that secure? Well, I think the first thing is to be aware of your own inner critic – perhaps it's an old recording of your parent or teacher.

When you hear that voice, think of it as a separate sub-personality, take it out and talk to it. Find out what it really wants – usually it wants to protect you. Then, assure it that you will protect yourself against any serious outcomes, and that it's safe to pursue a more adventurous path than it would normally want you to take. **And** it's ok if other people criticize you. This is your life and you must honor your own deepest values and follow your own path.

Once you have collaborated successfully with your inner critic, it will be easy to deal with external criticism. In fact, it's your own inner critic that has been your main obstacle all along.

## Qi Gong



In China, masses of people go out into the parks and shopping malls every day to practice Qi Gong (also spelled Chi Gung).

Qi Gong is all about the energy that flows through your body and maintains your health and vitality.

When you hold tension in a part of your body, the energy gets stuck and you become susceptible to all kinds of disease ('dis-ease'). The Qi Gong practice helps you to let go of that tension and restore the normal flow of energy.

We may look at this and think it's like a calisthenics workout. But it's quite different. The exercises are slow and synchronized with the breathing, and the mind is focused on feeling the energy (the Qi or Chi).

In addition, the practice involves your lifestyle, attitude and way of being throughout the day. The particular form of Qi Gong that I have studied includes additional practices, described below.

### Hugs and Laughter

When you are doing things you love, you automatically feel a surge of energy. The following two practices are recommended:

- Get at least eight hugs a day (big bear hugs!).
- Get at least three belly-laughs a day (laugh 'til tears come to your eyes).

You can add things that you enjoy to this list. For example, dancing, painting, singing, etc. Make a list of things that renew and invigorate you and make these a frequent part of your life. Continue to modify this list, dropping any that have become boring and adding new things. The aim is to keep your energy fresh and flowing.

### Positive, Peaceful and Loving

The next three recommendations deal with mental attitude and how you respond to yourself and others.

- Maintain a positive mental attitude.
- Be at peace with yourself and others.
- Give and receive lots of love.

Negativity creates blocks and shuts you down. Similarly, feelings of anger and hatred isolate and close you. Your energy will only flow when you allow positive thoughts and feelings of love and compassion for yourself and others.

This does not mean you should block your anger. On the contrary, work through it in whatever way is not harmful to yourself or others. Beat a pillow, change perspectives, exaggerate and find humor in it. Stepping outside of the situation and seeing it from an objective perspective is a powerful way to diffuse a negative feeling.

### Nutrition, Posture, Breathing

The next two practices are:

- Good nutrition.
- Maintain proper posture and breathing (from the diaphragm).

Nutrition is an obvious point that everyone knows but many don't follow. What you may not realize is that healthy food can taste fabulous. I suspect that many people have created an association between "healthy food" and "boring" or "tasteless". But do a Google search for "delicious healthy recipes" and turn a boring experience into a culinary delight.

Good posture is another important practice. Every system in your body depends on good communication along the nerve pathways in your spine. If your posture is poor, nerves will become compressed and transmission will decrease. Whenever you catch yourself slouching or leaning back in your chair, straighten your back, drop your shoulders and gently stretch your neck keeping your head straight and chin back. Notice how your energy changes as you do this.

When I think of proper breathing, I remember an aunt telling me that the doctor had taught her how to breath. "Imagine," she said, "I'm 62 and I still don't know how to breathe!"

Most people take very shallow breaths from the chest area. Try taking deep breaths from your diaphragm, extending your abdomen (right below the rib cage) as you inhale, and then compress your abdomen as you exhale. This will transport the maximum amount of oxygen to your system, nourishing and maintaining health. When I first started doing this, I would start to yawn. That's a sign that your body loves this and is craving more. You've been suffocating your body!

Sitting straight and breathing from the diaphragm are the normal ways of being and with practice it will become your norm and will result in a healthier more energetic you.

### Meditation and Exercise

As you can see, the practice of Qi Gong encompasses your physical, mental and emotional way of being throughout the day. Daily exercises and meditation add the final touch to this practice.

- Daily exercises that engage body and mind.
- Daily meditation.

The Qi Gong exercises are done slowly and are synchronized with your breathing. Your mind is focused on the energy and this helps you learn to release any tension or blocks and allow energy to flow freely through your body.

Finally, your mind affects everything in your life, and therefore meditation is the most important practice of all. It will transform an inner state of chaos to one of calm. A focused mind is powerful beyond measure, and it will not only help you to maintain a state of peacefulness but will also help you move towards your goals without distraction.

### Invitation

The practice of Qi Gong is a lifestyle that aims at enhancing health and vitality of body and mind. I invite you to experiment with any or all of the practices described above and discover the benefits that may result for you.

## Reframing



Some people are able to smile and see the bright side of any situation.

These people will face seemingly negative situations with buoyancy and resilience.

If they had just lost a job, they would say, "Well, now I can look for a job that I will find truly fulfilling!"

This type of attitude results in a much happier life, since you never stay locked in a negative emotion, but you are always moving purposefully towards a positive goal.

Sometimes noticing your emotional reaction can help you catch a negatively framed thought pattern. For example, a colleague comes over to your desk and says, "Oh, I noticed an error in the report that you just sent out", and you feel a sense of panic.

As soon as you notice the emotional reaction, look for the thought behind it – perhaps the thought is, "I'm going to look like an idiot!"

In this example, the thought (I'm going to look like an idiot) is certainly not helpful in moving you forward. It keeps you locked in a negative place, so you need to **reframe** it by looking for the opportunity and what you can learn from the situation. The opportunity might be that you can improve your report; and you can learn how to gracefully recover from a mistake. Perhaps you send out a note acknowledging the error and welcoming any other feedback.

As soon as you shift into a **learning mindset** you move past the feeling of helplessness, you move into a position of power and you get creative about how to make this situation an opportunity for improvement.

The initial negative reactions may continue to happen, but with practice, you will become more proficient at switching to a positive, learning mindset and moving forward with energy and optimism.

### Exercise

Learn to change your 'habits of thought':

1. Observe  
Notice any negative emotional reaction to an event.  
Explore the thought behind that emotion.
2. Analyze  
Ask... "Is this thought helpful in moving me forward?"
3. Reframe  
"What is the opportunity in this situation?"  
"What can I learn from it?"

## Find the Gift

*"The universe always brings you exactly what you need in order to grow"*



If you accept the above statement, how might it change your attitude towards challenges you may be facing?

Perhaps instead of lamenting over losses, you would start to look for new and exciting possibilities.

Sometimes you are faced with an involuntary change like losing your job or a partner leaving you. This may seem traumatic at first; but you can decide to focus on the future and ask, "What are the new possibilities?"

With this attitude, you may start to explore completely new ways of approaching your career. You may decide to start your own company or do consulting work.

In the area of relationships, you may join a reading club or cycling group to stimulate new friendships.

The key is to look for the gift in the situation and be open to new possibilities.

Another type of challenge is when illness strikes. How can one find the gift in illness?

The first step is acceptance. This does **not** mean you don't see a doctor or look for a remedy. It means that in addition to that, you also remain open to any learning that it may offer, such as patience, optimism, tolerance, humility; and also gratitude for what you **do** have.

There may also be an opportunity to do new things. For example, if you have to stay off your feet for a while but you're feeling ok, you might decide to start writing that book you've always wanted to write.

By allowing every challenge to open you up to new possibilities and new ways of thinking, you will be able to turn a seemingly negative situation into an opportunity to discover, learn and grow.

In all situations in life, assume that your aim is to continually develop and grow, and every challenge is a wake-up-call to help you get back on track.

Whenever a challenge arises, welcome it and "find the gift".

## Creating

*"Every day of your life is a product of the way you have thought" (Ramtha)*



If the above quote is true, what are you creating with your thoughts right now?

Are you saying things like "I never have enough money or time or love"?

If thoughts do create, what thoughts would create a reality that you would love?

Imagine a situation where you are in a job you dislike and you want a job you love.

Thoughts like "My boss is a jerk; This job is tedious; I hate this place" express a 'stuck' frame of mind and will keep you trapped in this situation.

Thoughts like "I have to get away!" offer some movement, but the focus is still on the situation you're trying to escape. When your thoughts are focused on what you don't want, you are in an 'away' frame of mind and when you go into an interview feeling dragged down by such thoughts, it shows in subtle ways and affects how you are perceived.

In contrast, you can focus on positive thoughts like, "I'm going to use the experiences in my current job to learn things that will be useful in my ideal job" and "Every interview is getting me closer to finding a job where I can truly fulfill my calling". These thoughts propel you to your goal. They are energizing because they put you in a 'to' frame.

Notice how the following thought makes you feel... *"I am ready to leap into an exciting new job where I will shine."*

When you go to an interview with positive future-oriented thoughts, your energy and positive mindset are clearly visible in your body language and tone, and this greatly increases your chances of success.

Your thoughts express in subtle ways and they either keep you stuck in a negative place or propel you to your most inspired dreams.

Thoughts do create!

### Exercise

- Notice your thoughts.
- Rewrite negative thoughts into positive future-oriented ones.
- Practice repeating those positive thoughts.
- Notice the effect that positive thoughts have on your energy level and mood.
- Notice how events in your life also change as you move into a positive 'to' frame of mind.

## The Law of Attraction

*"You attract into your life whatever you think about"*



Many people have become confused about the Law of Attraction philosophy because it seems to make sense, but positive affirmations often don't work. This is because of a fundamental misunderstanding.

The Law of Attraction is not a way of getting what you want. It is simply a statement of how the universe works. Like dominoes falling, your thoughts trigger an automatic series of events. But it's not only conscious thoughts; our emotions also have a powerful creative force.

When you use affirmations to try and get what you want, if your underlying feeling is "I want...", you are basically telling the universe that you are in a state of lack, and you will just end up creating more of that. This is why affirmations so often fail.

If you really want abundance, you have to hold the feeling of already having abundance. And the key to that is gratitude.

## Gratitude

Gratitude involves fully enjoying what you have now. If money seems to be a problem, reach into your pocket and hold some change in your hand and realize how lucky you are to have that. If relationships are a challenge, think about the positive aspects of a relationship that you have and about what you are learning from this relationship. If health is an issue, think of an aspect of your health that is good and feel grateful.

Whatever your circumstances, it could always be worse, so being grateful for what you have is possible. But it's important to notice what happens when you try this.

## The Saboteur / Protector

If you're holding some money in your hand and telling yourself how lucky you are, a little voice will probably pipe up and say, "That won't get you very far!" This is your inner saboteur. And most (if not all) of its worries are about the future. Its thoughts might be... "How will I pay my bills" / "What if my partner leaves me?" / "What if my health gets worse?"

You may try to quiet that voice by using affirmations, but in truth, that voice will not quiet down until you open a dialogue with it. When you do that, you will start to realize that its concerns are real and important. It is really trying to protect you. It is really your protector.

Imagine it as an inner sub-personality, and invite it to sit down and tell you its concerns. Acknowledge the value of its thoughts and outline how you will deal with the issues it is alerting you to.

Talk to your saboteur/protector in the same way that you would talk to a dear friend who had the same worries. Do what is reasonable to prevent a negative future outcome, and assure your protector that you will handle whatever comes up.

When you value that inner voice and address its concerns in a respectful and caring way, you will find that it will calm down and you will then be able to move into a state of gratitude and a feeling of abundance now.

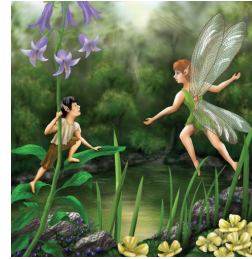
When you are in that state, you will find that more abundance will come your way. That's just the way the universe works. But you can't do this exercise in order to get abundance, because the feeling of "wanting" will creep in and you will get stuck there. You have to be truly grateful for what you have now.

Let me end with a story...

... Many years ago, my brother walked into a store with his three little boys trailing after him. The store owner came up to him and said, "You are a rich man". Paul was surprised and said, "No I'm not a rich man!" The store owner looked at Paul's boys and said emphatically, "You **are** a rich man". Paul turned and looked at his boys and with a big grin, he said, "You're right. I'm a **very** rich man!"

So many things that we already have can bring us happiness. When we learn to truly revel in the joy that those things bring, we strike a chord inside ourselves that will reverberate throughout the universe like a wave and expand.

## Just for Fun



There are things we **have** to do, and things we do to reach our long-term **goals**, and things we feel we **should** do, and things we are **pressured** to do by others.

But when do we do things we **want** to do 'just for fun' – things that appear to serve no purpose whatsoever?

I've always been 'driven', focusing on long-term goals. But now I'm drawing fairies and elves. My 'excuse' was because I wanted to learn how to use PhotoShop and be as comfortable with digital art as with oils, acrylic or ink. But quite honestly, I'm just doing this because it's fun.

I'm sometimes tempted to ask myself, "What will I use these pictures for? A book? Posters? Greeting cards?" But there's something wonderful about the idea that I'm simply doing this because it makes me happy.

### Exercise

- If you allowed yourself time to do something 'just for fun', what would it be?
- What specific time slot might you dedicate to this activity?
- What might be some positive outcomes from doing this?

## Juggling



I know very few people who are not juggling time.

When you're just starting out you might be juggling studies, work, friends, personal time.

Later on, you might have finished with the 'studies' ball and added 'family'.

When you retire you may drop the 'work' ball but you pick up all those things you had missed and now (in theory) have time to do – 'travel', 'writing', 'art', 'home renovations'...

Whatever phase of life you're in and whatever balls you're juggling, the challenge of balancing your time successfully is not trivial. But there are ways to categorize things on your to-do list that can help you prioritize.

### The Important / Urgent Matrix

This matrix is a four-quadrant table, with 'Important' and 'Not Important' along the top and 'Urgent' and 'Not Urgent' down the side. The first step is to place each to-do item in one of the four quadrants.

When judging **importance**, consider what would happen if it didn't get done. When judging **urgency**, ask yourself what would happen if you delayed doing it. Items may, in time, move to the 'Important/Urgent' box, but be realistic about where it is now.

Once you have categorized the items on your to-do list, it will become clear which items have the highest priority – those in the 'Important / Urgent' quadrant.

### Self-care list

Unfortunately, we are sometimes tempted to sacrifice our own personal well-being in order to get all the 'Important / Urgent' tasks done. So we work while having lunch or we get less sleep than we need, and we skip activities that we enjoy (e.g. socializing, hobbies) or we drop our long-term plans (e.g. career change).

So it may be a good idea to create a separate list of items that contribute to your personal well-being. You may call it a 'self-care' list.

### Balancing

Next you need to adjust the time you spend on those 'Important / Urgent' items while still allowing time for your personal well-being. You may have to delegate, delay or drop some of the 'Important / Urgent' activities, but **do** find a way to honor your most important self-care items.

### Protected time

It may help to dedicate a specific time each day (or each week) for specific self-care activities, and to find a way to protect that time. (Get an accountability partner; Turn off your phone; Make an appointment in your calendar.)

### Questions

- How important is each item on your list... really?
- What items might you delegate, delay or drop to allow more time for your self-care items?
- How might you protect time for self-care items?

## A Day for Me



It's Sunday, cold and rainy, and I'm just going to settle down with a book and forget about everything.

How often do you allow yourself a break? Or even better, a treat? Like a massage or a walk in the woods?

Life didn't used to be so hectic. I remember my stay-at-home mom, sitting down and creating a new game for my brother and me. We didn't buy games in those days; There was no Internet; and we didn't even have a TV in the early days. (Yes I'm that old!) But there is something to be said for having time and for having to create your own entertainment.

Today, with many moms and dads in full-time jobs, and children in so many activities that there is hardly even time to do their homework, there seems to be no time for leisure, let alone creativity.

If your life consists only of activities that you **must** do, perhaps it's time to look for some creative ways to fit in leisure activities. For example, invite your colleagues to join you in lunchtime activities or take a lunchtime walk alone.

It's also important to have evening and weekend activities to look forward to.

For those of you with family responsibilities, it may take some dedication and planning to allow personal enjoyment time, but for most people (if not everyone!), this is crucial to your mental and emotional well-being.

You may want to start by making a list of all the things that would make you feel relaxed and 'pampered'. For example: a day at the spa, browsing in shops you like, an entire afternoon of undisturbed reading, going to your favorite breakfast place with a friend, going to a play or a sporting event, cycling in a scenic location. Make a long list!

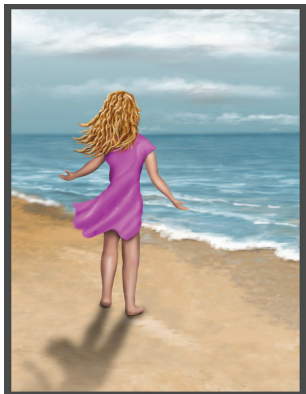
Then decide on a schedule. For example, you may resolve to do one of these things every month – or every week. Or you may say "I will go out for coffee or lunch with a friend at least once a week; I'll do one of the more extravagant activities once a month; and once a year, I'll take a run-away retreat just for me!"

Write down your commitments and keep track of your success. You may want to find an accountability partner who will call you out if you start to abandon your self-care program.

There will be challenges, and you may miss some target activities, but it's important to keep trying. It **is** possible to honor your responsibilities **and** take care of yourself as well.

And don't think this is too selfish. When you pamper yourself in this way, you are not only protecting your own body, mind and emotions from starvation and burnout, you will also radiate a joyfulness that will affect everyone you come in contact with. You will be a *'bringer of joy!'*

## Re-energize



So many people are on a treadmill of 'busyness', and their major complaint is that they feel "drained".

It may be tempting to think that your activities are draining you, but perhaps it's what you're **not** doing.

So rather than ask what you can stop doing, let's ask, "What is missing in your life? What would energize you?"

I remember when I was in my twenties I was feeling down and my boyfriend said, "How can you be down? You're so talented. You can draw and sculpt and write poetry." Those simple words woke me up. I got out my brushes and started to paint. Creating art is what energizes and enlivens me.

Everyone has a passion. It may be a walk in the woods, getting lost in a good book, painting, woodworking, going out with friends, or on a retreat.

It's so important to find out what feeds your spirit and it is absolutely critical to make time for that, because if you don't, you will bring an impoverished version of yourself to others. And that's not fair to them or to you.

I have seen people sit down with their spouse and children and work out ways to make time for 'escape' activities, and in the end it enriched the entire family. For example, a mother who started taking art classes created an art studio at home and displayed her work. "Mom" was now a "really cool person" and it encouraged her children to pursue their own interests. It also added a new spark to her marriage as she now had new things to talk about and share.

One hour a week may be all it takes to rekindle your spirit, but you need to figure out what lights you up.

Often times, as you think about possible activities that you would like, your inner critic will come up with all kinds of reasons why you can't do this. It's important to listen to the objections seriously and figure out how to overcome the barriers. For example, your inner critic may say, "You can't paint unless you take expensive art lessons!", and you might respond, "I don't need art lessons. I'm not aiming to be a famous artist. I'm just doing this for my own enjoyment."

Start with the premise that you **can** do this. Feel the excitement of your desired 'escape time' and imagine stepping into that vision.

Reinforce this image at every opportunity. Tell people what you do – "I arrange flowers" or "I'm a poet" or "I paint landscapes". You may want to change your hairstyle or clothes to reflect this new expression of yourself.

This may mean taking an hour or two away from your family, but when you are with them, you will be bringing a richer and more vibrant you, and it will enrich them as well.

## Play



Did you ever play Laser Quest? You wear a vest with lights and carry a laser gun; If you get 'shot', your gun is disabled for a few tense seconds! The team who makes the most 'hits' wins. It's amazing how a whole group of bored office workers can become children again.

At Christmas gatherings, we were given creative challenges. For example, create the most original gingerbread house that symbolized all the company values. There were teepees, bridges, lights and even a Taj Mahal in the creations.

Then there was the year that each team had to write, produce and perform a song, a dance or a play. After many busy lunch hours and late nights, the resulting performances were astonishing.

Our creativity never dies. When we were children we allowed our creative side to express, but it became stifled as we entered school and for many of us, it has hardly ever surfaced again.

I believe that there is a flow of energy that runs through us and our surroundings. When we are open to that energy, every sensation we perceive sets off a cascading set of associations and feelings, and we can draw on this rich inner experience to inspire and create.

It is this constant free-flowing energy that keeps us feeling vibrant and alive. Whenever you feel lethargic, it is because you are disconnected from that creative flow. (Notice how children who are playing never get tired.) The question is: "How do you re-connect to that energy flow again?"

What are some things you can do to reawaken your creativity and re-establish that flow of energy?

### Be spontaneous

I remember one time when I was a teenager, sitting on a bus with my girlfriend. Suddenly it began to rain... buckets! It was like a monsoon! At the same moment, we looked at each other and said, "Let's get off!" We got off the bus and ran along the street in the downpour, splashing through puddles, laughing and screaming as we got totally soaked. We were quite a sight when we eventually got on the next bus to continue our journey home, but this was just too much fun to miss!

### Doodle

If you're not ready for that much craziness, you can start by doodling. Whenever you're in a meeting, just start drawing patterns at the side of your note paper, and let the patterns grow, inserting objects, faces, animals, etc. Don't think or interpret. Just let your creativity flow and enjoy.

### Change of scene

Another fun activity is to rearrange a room, add a new picture or ornament, get rid of some item you don't like. Just make some changes to your environment. Change the atmosphere.

### Makeover

This can be tremendous fun. Change your hairstyle, clothes, glasses. Think of yourself as an actor or actress, about to play a new role. Try out different styles and find one that you would suit a 'new you'.

### The arts

Many adults say "I can't draw" or "I can't sing", but you never find a child saying that! That's because we all can draw and sing and write and act. Maybe you won't be famous for these abilities, but you do have it in you! Let go of the notion of doing these things for others, but instead just do it for your own pleasure.

When I was in my twenties, going through the 'falling-in-love and breaking-up' stage of my life, I used poetry as a way to vent my joys and sorrows. Here is one I wrote in April of 1976...

The last hour,  
lingering –  
drowsily reluctant  
to drift in to oblivion.

My last smile,  
flickering –  
timidly uncertain.  
Will it be remembered?

Our last day,  
darkening –  
hopelessly clinging  
as night falls softly.

I'll never be a poet in the literal sense, but these poems helped me to experience all of my feelings deeply; and somehow, even the sad experiences became beautifully transformed. I felt richer for the experience and more alive.

So write, draw, dance, sculpt – whatever medium draws you.

### Journal

You might enjoy keeping a journal, jotting down things you noticed during the day. Think of creative things to add to your journal. For example, add a wish list, re-write events as you would have liked them to play out, make up imaginary characters, re-write yourself, cut out pictures that inspire you and paste them into your journal.

### Spoil yourself

Creatively thinking of something that you would really love is a challenge for most of us. We're not used to treating ourselves to something that would delight us. I challenge you to spoil yourself!

### More

Find every opportunity to be creative. Find new ways of doing things, take a different route home, read different types of books, add different spices to your food – and life.

*Why do any of this? Why is play and creativity important?  
Because it keeps us vibrant and alive!*

## Step into Joy



Many people struggle with the question "What is my purpose in life? What will bring me a feeling of joy and fulfillment?" They struggle to find the perfect career, relationship, possessions, in hopes that these will bring joy.

For years, I hopped from career to career and from project to project. Every new project or career was at first fulfilling but eventually became routine and boring.

In time, I came to realize that there is no specific situation that contains this magical thing called 'joy' or 'happiness'. Instead, joy is a state of being that one can hold throughout the journey. You can experience joy even during a time when you are frustrated with a situation, because within that frustration is the heartbeat of life.

You don't need anything external to be joyful. You can simply step into that feeling. It's so simple...

If you want to be joyful, just BE joyful now.

### The Joy Visualization

- Close your eyes.
- As you inhale, imagine breathing in 'joy' and letting it spread throughout your body.
- As you exhale, imagine 'joy' radiating in waves outwards.
- Allow other feelings to come forward, and when they do, listen to them with compassion. BE fully with each feeling and gently bring each into the warm radiance of joy.

When joy becomes your 'way of being', the rest of your life will unfold without any effort. You will experience life in all its depth and richness, and the state of joy will remain constant.

Your purpose in life is simply the journey itself and you're already on that journey.

*Embrace the joy that is already yours  
and dance the dance of life*

## About the Author

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Jane Miller thrives on change and new challenges. Her many careers have included computer programming, web development, statistical consulting, leadership development and Life Coaching in the area of career transitions.

Continuing to follow her joy, Jane has returned to her life-long passion for art, and is embracing a new career as an author, illustrator and artist.