



*Pathways of
Vitality and
Balance*

Reflections on
Healing, Growing, and Becoming

SANDRA CAREY, PSYD, MS

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Dedication

For all those who wander, there is hope.

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Introduction

In 2016, I opened my private practice and named it the Center for Vitality and Balance. At that time, I was focused on fostering holistic experiences that supported clients in their emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health. Alongside therapy, I longed to create community through seminars, newsletters, and experiences with yoga and cooking that helped people move towards becoming their best selves.

I put out two newsletters that year and some trusted readers offered feedback. To be honest, it wasn't great. But I was open to hearing how to improve. I became curious and listened to feedback which helped me recreate the idea of a blog and newsletter which took a new shape.

Over the years, I worked to find ways to write with more authenticity while providing thoughts, resources, and hope to readers. Recently, one of my colleagues, Dr. Susan Kelenyi, commented on a specific blog, sharing her appreciation for the vulnerability and how that had helped someone with whom she had shared the blog. She suggested I pull together my favorite blogs as a collection. I was grateful for the idea and *this* project came into being.

The blogs that follow have been the ones that I felt most connected with as a storyteller, and they contain the themes that have become the core of both my life and work as a psychologist. They are grouped together in a way that tells an overarching story of how to bring awareness of ourselves, cultivating compassionate understanding towards self, and allowing our felt-sense rise into purpose and hope.

As I write this, the year 2023 is coming to a close. The Center has gone through amazing change in the wake of COVID, and the world continues to shift in response to the conflicts and changes that arise. May whatever you are coming through at this time lead you to places of healing and inspiration.

With peace and love,

Sandra



Awareness

*The past no longer exists and the future is not here.
This very breath is the only reality we can truly know.*

There is power available to us as we bring awareness to our experiences, as they present themselves to us through our emotions, senses and thoughts. The present moment provides a profound opportunity to heal what no longer is occurring in our lives and to help us move towards the future in ways that resonate with our current values and dreams.

Deliberate reflection, meditation, and grief all ask us to be present.

One moment, one heartbeat, at a time.

Run Toward Life

“Life is hard. Life is beautiful. Life is difficult. Life is wonderful.”

Kate DiCamillo

It's my first day of college! I feel exuberant as I bounce up the stairs to the classroom where I will join fellow students for one of the most difficult courses taught by one of the most notoriously demanding teachers in the music conservatory. Her first utterance, borrowed from author M. Scott Peck, is *“Life is difficult. Once you accept that, it is no longer difficult.”*

My first thought was, “Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning!”

Almost like a poetic nod to her ominous welcome, I barely passed her class. Yet, her words of accepting difficulty have followed me through life and taken on deeper meaning as I have experienced life head on, healed, grown, and become who I am today. There have been numerous occasions when I've wanted to run away from what life presented me, and nowhere has that been more apparent than my practice of running.

I just completed another half marathon, and my training has been an unexpected opportunity to strengthen my practice of staying present to the moment. In fact, running has become a moving meditation for me. It has deepened the lesson of how to show up for life whether I like it or not, to run for as long as I intended, and to experience fully whatever comes up. In the months leading up to the 13.1 mile run, I got distracted, felt discouraged, and was bored. But that's not all, I also felt inspired, jubilant, and confident.

As I run, I find that when I lean into and embrace feelings of resistance, everything flows with more ease and grace. Pain decreases, the wind feels less fierce, miles pass by almost effortlessly, and my thoughts are softer. Conversely, when I push back or fight against the process with, “This is HARD. Why am I even doing this? I'd much rather be binge watching TV.” every stride feels heavy, as though I am wearing lead shoes.

Life, like running, requires stamina, presence, and practice. It's easy to when it becomes uncomfortable, uneasy, or downright painful. But if we constantly run away from the hard stuff, we can miss out on the really, really good stuff. Through regular and consistent meditation practice (whether sitting, walking, or running) I have learned how to hold ground for what is—to stay put and be aware. This kind of presence allows me to lean into the flow of life and I find that everything (from difficult teachers to running half marathons) goes so much easier.

The other lesson I have learned is that the inevitable difficulties of life go easier when I am not alone! One of the essential ingredients in preparing for any race is working with in a mentor.

With guidance, I can identify reasonable goals and build plans for my running practice so that I can become the athlete I intend. More importantly, I also have an amazing and supportive collection of friends and family who listen to me talk about running, help me keep my perspective, encourage me to reach my goals, and cheer for me on race day.

Strategies for Supporting Yourself through Stressful Times

- Acknowledge the feeling when you experience challenges by talking to your self with compassion.

Examples include:

- I am having a difficult time right now
- This is hard for me but I'm willing to try
- Ask someone for help or encouragement.
- Ask how you can help someone else.
- Consider practicing other activities that take presence, including meditation or movement, artwork, other spiritual practices to strengthen persevering when the difficult moments arrive.

In the Span of a Heartbeat

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of those depths.”

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

“This is the day I am going to die.” It is the strangely calm thought running through my mind as I stand paralyzed at the entrance to the counseling center at Northern Illinois University. Sirens blare as information slowly leaks to us that there is a shooter on campus, no one knows their current location in that moment, and we are on lock down. Some of the senior staff have left to assess the situation, but as a first-year intern I am told to stay back. I find myself frozen in the place where I learned the news. My feet glued there by fear, I pondered my possible fate that standing there, I would be the first person seen if the shooter walked in.

On February 14, 2008, a lone gunman entered an auditorium classroom at Northern Illinois University and opened fire on the student body. In the end, five people lost their lives and the gunman died. Those who witnessed the shooting along with the community at large were deeply impacted by this random violence and devastating loss. Everything and everyone was raw.

I was a therapist-in-training at Northern Illinois. At that time, my primary interest was cognitive testing and assessment. This path was a second career for me. I spent my young adulthood as a professional musician touring and teaching for many years. I love music (and still perform) but I knew then that I wanted my life to move in a different direction, so I pursued my dream of psychology. On that tragic day in February, my future trajectory changed in what now feels like a heartbeat.

On the day of the shooting and in the weeks and months to follow, I was confronted by previously unknown levels of uncertainty, anger, guilt, confusion, and grief. I saw these intense emotions in myself and other first responders, but the most powerful places I encountered it was in the spaces I shared with students. I experienced the true depth of humanity while being present to those who were suffering the traumatic aftermath of violence. Sitting with people directly and indirectly affected by the tragedy, I learned how to hold ground with and for people who were feeling the most basic and profound of human emotions. I learned how to be deeply present with deep sorrow, rage, depression, anxiety, and fear.

The irony is that I learned to do this for others by facing my own fear, rage, sorrow, confusion, and anxiety. In the presence of others, I had a mirror reflecting to me my challenges, weaknesses, insecurities, and strengths. I realized that if I hoped to develop into a worthwhile

therapist, I had to learn how to listen to and wrestle with my own uncertainty and pain. By practicing how to listen to the emotional experience going on within me, I would be better equipped to listen to others and assist them in finding their own strength, hope, and resilience.

When we can be honest and open about our own experience, we are better able to engage in the intricate dance of communication with trusted others. In those moments, we find a divine place of openness, acceptance, and non-judgment that enables us to examine the darker places in the soul. Practicing compassionate and non-judgmental acknowledgement of what we experience and how we feel about it strengthens our sense of self and purpose. When we can be honest with ourselves about ourselves, we become more vulnerable and better able to support to others towards healing and peace.

It is important for me at this tenth anniversary to acknowledge the tragedy that happened on Northern Illinois' campus. To honor the memory of those lost, to stand with their families and to stand strong with the community of students and staff that were willing to face the resulting agony and through it, become stronger and healed. The event changed my direction of cognitive assessment and moved me towards a willingness to work in therapy. To be present, first for myself and then by helping others.

Practicing Vulnerability Safely

- Choose someone that feels safe for you to talk with.
- Let them know before you share that you are going to be vulnerable and need their support.
- Start small if being vulnerable is a new experience. Notice how you feel while you are sharing and after you have opened up to another.
- Reciprocate vulnerability by being willing to hear someone's story or need without offering advice or fixing—just be.

Grieving Together

“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break.”

William Shakespeare, in MacBeth

“This sucks.”

These two words composed one of the most beautiful sentences I had ever read. It was the signature on a card I received after the sudden loss of someone I loved. That heartfelt thought acknowledged what it was really like for me. No advice, no phrases that I should embrace as I move forward. Just real presence, honest expression. I felt less alone. I have kept that card for 25 years as a reminder of what shared humanity truly feels like.

February is a tender month. Typically a time of promoting love, connections, and being partnered, many of us have lived experiences that feel lonelier or more disconnected than what is marketed. Sometimes, for some us, it feels shaming if our reality doesn't reflect the expectation of the culture around us. The heart is a vibrant part of our being, but it needs special support when it is broken, grieving, hurt, or lonely.

I have had my heart broken more times than I can count and it came in all forms. From the end of relationship, death of a loved one, losing out on an audition or job, disappointing outcomes, sudden violence, money that seemed to dissolve, illness, injury, being picked last for a team, to the phone not ringing (or pinging or alerted). All the ways you might imagine feeling left behind, stunned, or unwanted has occurred—it's true for each of us. There isn't a single person without heartache or struggle. Despite our shared humanity in these losses, it seems that when faced grief we become perplexed about how to respond to ourselves or others.

Someone once told me that to be seen is to be healed. This profoundly resonates with me as a person-centered therapist. As we recover from and integrate the losses in our life we long for presence and understanding, to have someone see our sorrow and just let it be. Below are some thoughts about bringing comfort to your grief as well as some ideas on how to comfort someone else experiencing heartache.

Comforting Yourself During Loss

- Be honest—and give yourself credit by naming what you lost (relationship, status, hope).
- Write down or talk to someone about all the painful, true, and ugly thoughts and feelings in response to the loss.
- Find ways to honor the meaning of the loss. You may want to create ritual that brings

honor and comfort to the loss like planting flowers, donating to a cause, placing significant pictures around, or artistic expression.

- Loss creates change in how we see ourselves, others, and the world. Name ways that you have changed, noting what changes you want to keep, and which changes are left to heal.

Comforting Others During Loss

- Know that you don't have to take away someone else's pain. Tell them how you feel about their loss. Authenticity is healing.
- Avoid giving advice about how to cope. Instead, ask "How can I support you now?"
- Bring food, do their laundry, run an errand. Taking care of the everyday tasks helps others have energy for the emotions of loss.
- As grief ebbs and flows, do check in with "How are you feeling today?"

Compassionate Change

“Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world.
Today I am wise, so I want to change myself.”

Rumi

“Just stop it!” That’s what he said. After I told my friend that I was opening a private practice, he suggested that I name the place “Snap Out of It and Just Stop It!” Mind you, this came from one of the most compassionate hearted people I know, and it made the joke that much funnier. This friend and I have been through enough trials and heartache to know that telling ourselves (or anyone else) to flip a switch and be different was never the road to real and lasting change. If only it were that easy.

I named the practice Center for Vitality and Balance because the words imply awareness, assessment, and action. At this time in January, some of our resolutions and intentions may have melted away into familiar habits, even if it is uncomfortable to be there. But change is still possible. There is hope.

Amazingly, our brains are plastic and the complex neural connections and impulses residing and emanating from there can be redirected with practice. We have the power to literally re-wire our brain to experience ourselves and the world differently. Utilizing the skill of increased awareness, we can observe our thoughts and behaviors and evaluate which of those are moving us in the direction of our intentions and well-being. Looking at what is and what is not working for us grants us the opportunity to bring curiosity about alternate patterns of thinking and doing to move us closer to the best version of ourselves.

With any successful movement towards change, self-compassion must come first. Self-compassion is the practice of observing our needs, desires, and patterns while remaining curious and open. Self-compassion avoids labeling or judging who we are or what we have done as “good or bad”, and instead regards our self with fresh and gentle eyes. In this way, we soften the inevitable and normal anxiety we feel when we contemplate possible change.

A favored question of mine is “How is that working for you?” (no snark or condemnation allowed in the question). With self-compassion and curiosity, we can ask this question to examine what purpose, comfort, or outcome we hope to achieve by engaging in a particular thought or action. When we identify the legitimate need that we’re trying to meet we can better determine if what we are doing, or thinking, is moving us toward or away from the outcome we’re after.

I'm a pianist. I still perform on occasion and enjoy the art form for self-expression. In the past, my habit was to carve out large swaths of time to practice. This is rooted in the rigors of grad school and work as a full-time musician. I would practice for 8 to 13 hours a day during that time, and I got results.

Recently, I felt frustrated with my progress. In response to this feeling, I became curious about my expectations and observed what practice I was actually doing, which wasn't very much at all. As I reflected, I brought compassion to the fact that I relied on expectations and patterns that worked in the past, when I currently had different priorities and goals.

I gave myself permission to acknowledge that my life has changed significantly over the years, noting that long focused practice sessions won't work for me anymore. I gave some love to my younger self for all the hard work she did when music was a career and invited a sense of cooperation with my past and current self. In this way, I changed my intention by creating small pockets of time to practice which I am able to do more consistently.

I had to love the part of me that wanted to do things the old way—the way which brought me success—and shower compassion on my current self who needs more balance today. I can still meet my goals as a musician while honoring what is true for me in the present moment.

Creating Change with Intention

Here are some tips to fine-tune and implement those changes in ways that will be sustainable and long-term.

- Make small goals that are realistic based on your current life demands
- Identify ways to measure any progress. Is it an amount of time? Number of times something is done, number of pages read. Get specific.
- Bring awareness to what thoughts or feelings arise as you practice these new goals.
- After each week, assess what is working for you and what is keeping you from your goals (celebrate the wins along the way)
- Offer affirmations for the changes you are intending, offer statements of compassion for things that may not be working and adjust goals as needed.

Meditation as Going In

“If the ocean can calm itself, so can you. We are both salt water mixed with air.”

Nayyirah Waheed

One of my favorite times of the day is early morning, when the sun is still asleep and all is quiet. I sit with my favorite mug filled with coffee, snuggle in my chair and do some daily reading and writing. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who writes about contemplative practice, provides some inspiration. About love, he says, “*love is what and who you are, in your deepest essence. Love is a place that already exists inside of you, but is also greater than you. It’s within you and yet beyond you. This creates a sense of abundance and more-than-enoughness, which is precisely the satisfaction and deep peace of the True Self.*” I am deeply moved by this thought as it points to the reality that we contain within ourselves everything we need in order to experience love, vitality, and balance.

When we learn to tune into our essence, our true loving self, we can better hear and understand the parts of ourselves waiting for compassionate attention. When we hear and attune to the quiet place within, we can more easily start a journey of listening, healing, and celebration.

The real question is how do we get to this place of inner quiet? One of the best ways that I know to journey closer to the center of being is through mindfulness meditation. This type of meditation is bringing awareness to a single thing such as the breath, a particular thought or mantra, an object. When thoughts wander, or feelings come up, that is okay. Mindful meditation is just the practice of returning. Returning to self, returning to the moment, returning to the place of love.

If you already have a meditation practice, it is always a great time to focus on deepening the love relationship you have with yourself and spirit. If you meditate regularly, consider committing to 5 or 10 minutes more of seated meditation each day to see what it brings to you.

Tips for Beginning Meditation

- Sit or lie in a position that feels relaxed and resilient.
- Choose one thing to guide your return to focus as you meditate.
- Notice any thoughts or sensations that come up, release them, and return your focus.
- Start with 3-5 minutes and build from there, adding a few minutes each week or two.

Whistle While You Work

“Life is a dance. Mindfulness is witnessing that dance.”

Amit Ray

My dad passed away in 2016 after suffering through a prolonged illness. I was privileged to be with him at his last breath and I am grateful for the profound legacy of generosity and presence he cultivated in his lifetime.

My dad was always working on a project. If he wasn't in the house, he was surely in the garage or yard putting away at anything that needed to be fixed or just tinkered with. One of my siblings recently remembered how he would whistle while he worked. Not a specific melody or song, but this very gentle half-whistle, this barely-there wandering tune that sustained the tedious hours his projects required. I chuckled at the reminder of his patient presence.

I wondered if there was something to my dad's characteristic habit, so I started to use the half-whistle whenever I was frustrated, irritated, or rushed. Sure enough, when I whistled, everything in my head and heart slowed down. Almost instantly, irritation ebbed and impatience melted away. Maybe it was because I was remembering my dad, but I think it demonstrates a bigger truth.

Whistling is a mindful practice. It requires a deep breath from the belly, which slows down the sympathetic nervous system, brings the heart into coherent rhythm and allows the body to ramp down from perceived stress into present-moment awareness. The continued deep breathing when whistling can help further slow down thoughts and help the mind to healthfully detach from the story line of frustration, anger, impatience, or whatever the experience may be. Whistling provides the opportunity to observe what is happening, step back and re-assess how you wish to respond to any given situation.

Mindfulness Tips

While my current mindful practice is whistling, here are a few thoughts to ponder about being in the present moment to reduce stress and increase clarity of mind.

- When you are aware of stress, step back for 10 seconds and breathe deeply. Almost nothing needs an immediate response from you.
- Focus on your heart and remember a loving or caring thought or memory. This helps the heart return to its natural rhythm, improving blood flow and clarity of mind.
- Without following a storyline about what is happening, just observe what is actually going on.

- Once you see the situation as it is in the present moment, decide a next step that is in line with your values.

Thich Nhat Hahn says, "*What you are looking for is already in you, you already are everything you are seeking.*" So, whether that is a wandering whistle, deep breaths, loving thoughts, or anything else that comes from within, draw that forward in times of frustration and stress and find yourself more present and able to be your best self.

In Our Grief

“Let go of the battle. Breathe quietly and let it be. Let your body relax and your heart soften. Open to whatever you experience without fighting.”

Jack Kornfield

This past year since the start of the pandemic has been full of loss for us. Not just one experience, but many losses, over and over. Individually and as a nation, we were shifted into the stunning necessity of change and confronted by a view of systems that were not working well. My heart was grieved and grew silent under the weight of the descending pandemic, divisions and injustices, and seemingly endless loss and change.

Grief comes in many forms and initiates a myriad of reactions within us. The loss of a loved one, an unwelcome change in our environment, destruction of things we thought had provided security. All of it can shatter the heart and send us furiously searching for a way to feel put back together. When we are able to listen to the broken heartedness created by grief, we may begin to hear messages that can help us heal. Through the experience of grief, we discover a path that leads us to understand our pain and bring meaning to our experiences.

All of it is necessary. All of it is good. What is most important is that we acknowledge grief, allow the felt sense of it, and discover ways to move through it, bringing understanding to the shifting landscapes of our life. With compassionate awareness and expression, what has been lost to us can create new pathways of being and doing.

Over the past year and a half, grief split my heart wide open and led me to take pause. I took time to stop doing things as usual, was deliberate to reflect, slow down, and question my contributions to the world, both positive and negative. Through meditation, writing, and exploring with trusted others, I was humbled to see the profound need for change, revealed by loss. Working with these messages of grief allowed me to come home to myself. I speak more truth, spend more time for causes that have meaning for me, and changed and strengthened my focus as a psychotherapist.

Colette Baron-Reid, writes, “let this pain, this dissonance, this loss serve as a way back to Source. Let your sorrow break your heart wide open and you will never be left behind.”

Reflecting on the Years Past and the Grief You May have Encountered

I offer a few thoughts for guiding you through your own process of reflecting on grief.

- Be deliberate: Set aside time to consider how you are moving through any grief. Put it on your schedule and allow for a brief and set amount of time that feels validating.

- Take a walk or journal to explore, “What have I learned since I lost my loved one, job, health, (reflect on what is relevant to you here). When the mind wanders or you feel distracted, just start the question again.
- Start a conversation with a trusted other or find a support group that resonates with your values to further explore the meaning in your grief.
- Seek the guidance of a therapist, clergy, or trusted guide to parse out meaning and find ways to learn how to move forward from your experiences.

Understanding

“An unexamined Life is not worth living.”

Socrates

I believe that those seven simple words of Socrates, the great philosopher, point to the path towards our emotional and mental freedom.

Understanding ourselves and our experiences requires initial awareness followed by reflection. When we spend deliberate and disciplined time bringing awareness to our thoughts and feelings we can create meaning from our past to inform our present moment. These insights can transform into hopes for the future, while clarifying the steps to move towards our best self. We get to release judgment or shame and invite our tender heart to absorb what our lives have taught us and what we would like to teach ourselves as we live on.

The Show Must Go On

“Negative emotions like jealousy, envy and guilt have an important role to play in a happy life; they’re big flashing signs that something needs to change.”

Gretchen Rubin

"Can we start now?" the conductor asks without sparing an ounce of snark. I'm in Vienna, Austria, playing lead keyboard in the musical "A Chorus Line". Every night for a week since the show opened, I've been running from the orchestra pit so that I could hurl my guts, get back to my piano, and start the show (with a solo none the less). This night, the conductor challenges me to skip the freak out and start the show on time.

In that moment, I realized I had to face the fear and anxiety that I had been expressing so well by fleeing and heaving just prior to showtime. I asked myself, "Are you going to let this get the better of you or are you bigger than your fear, Sandra?"

I'm happy to report that I averted disaster and successfully performed in the show even though I felt the twinge of anxiety from time to time. This was the first of many lessons about how to move with and through uncomfortable experiences rather than avoiding them. I befriended feelings of discomfort, fear, dread, anxiety, depression, anger, and hopelessness.

These prickly feelings are natural. They are part and parcel of being human and it's common for them to be uncomfortable. In fact, our modern culture of convenience affords a buffet of options to aid in distracting us from the unpleasantness of it all. Television, social media, drugs, alcohol, shopping, are all activities that can be used to soothe cringeworthy moments.

I'd like to suggest another way to deal with painful human emotions. Instead of avoiding these experiences or bulldozing through them with the might of willpower, I recommend taking a position of curiosity. What if every feeling we have is merely a messenger calling us to action?

Perhaps, when the feeling of anxiety unexpectedly leaps into a situation, it's an invitation to find comfort (self-care) or face a fear that's been put off. When depression skulks into the scene, it might be an opportunity to listen to a part of self that is looking for hope. When anger sounds its ferocious roar, it could be a clue that a boundary has been crossed.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes about this so beautifully, "When we have an unpleasant feeling, we say to ourselves, 'This feeling is in me, it will stay for a while, and then it will disappear because it is impermanent.'" Seeing the temporary nature of our feelings can give us hope that we can be with them, find out that we don't have to become the feeling, and possibly take a positive action to meet the need that the feeling is bringing to our attention.

I still perform, and I still feel like throwing up sometimes, but when the nervousness shows up, I think "this is normal, this isn't a sign that anything is wrong, and I can still have fun with the music while I feel this way." Nothing lasts forever, any fear or dread is temporary, but I can grow stronger and more confident every day as I practice supporting myself as I carry on.

Write for Your Life

“We weave our memories into narrative, from which we construct our identities.”

Leonard Shengold

Mrs. Brigham is one of my heroes. Finally, a teacher who understood that desks were not meant to be in rows, that pillows belong in the classroom, and that writing in a journal was the best idea ever! Mrs. Brigham was my second-grade teacher. She had long blonde hair, mischievous eyes, a bright smile, and a knack for taking kids seriously. She created magic in the classroom, instilled wonder and confidence in her students, and personally taught me that writing was a way to make sense of all the thoughts, daydreams, and questions that were usually just bumping around in my head. I have written in journals and created stories my entire life and have had a daily practice of contemplative journaling for over 30 years. It has helped to provide insight into the past, understanding of the moment, and inspiration for the future.

The winter season always draws me closer to the inward practice of writing. Here in the Midwest, we feel blustery winds, deep chills, and watch a sky filled with more grey than blue. The quiet and the weight of winter can feel oppressive at times. However, the internal pull of the elements can be an invitation to follow the rhythm of nature and create a healthy atmosphere of retreat, quiet, and reflection. While it is a time to be less active in our bodies it can also call us to move inward, living from the sustenance created in the seasons prior.

In the slower pace and quieter space, there is benefit to slowing down our pace and our minds through the exploration of our past and current experiences. When we reflect on our narrative, as viewed over time, we can begin to bring clarity to where we have been, which can help us see better how we may want to move forward. Through the telling of our history to ourselves, we can bring awareness to any resolutions for the new year, while limiting shame, guilt, or self-judgment. Listening to where we have been and where we want to go strengthens decisions about how we want to create change in the larger context of our whole being. A gentle and meaningful way to identify new year's resolutions.

Questions to Help You Reflect

- What have I accomplished that gave me the most satisfaction?
- When was I the most disappointed by my choices?
- What do I consider my gifts to share with myself? With others?
- Name a theme for each decade of my life so far. What themes would I like to manifest in coming decades?

- What makes me feel happiest?
 - Are there things I do in my life that I would like to do more of?
 - Are there things in my life that I would like to stop doing?
- These questions are ideas and jumping off points. I hope, more than anything, they open the door for you to your own curiosities, longings, and ambitions. Whatever you discover, may the year ahead bring you many opportunities to heal, grow, and become.

Love is the Answer

“A loving heart is the beginning of all knowledge.”

Thomas Carlyle

I originally planned a post for this month based on the theme “American as apple pie” and how we view food in our families and culture. However, in light of the recent and ongoing violence occurring across the nation, I decided to focus on something closer to my heart. As a first responder to a mass shooting several years ago, my heart reacts deeply to random acts of violence and the far-reaching impact it has on victims, their families, and our communities.

In a recent conversation with a mentor, we reflected together that the antidote to violence and injustice of any kind is compassion. In other words, when confronted with the madness of hatred and boundless fear, relief comes from love. Change emerges with loving action. Fear is transformed in the arms of love. Hatred melts in the face of love. To quote Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of Hamilton, “*Love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love, it cannot be killed or swept aside.*” Love is the driving force, the very rhythm, of life.

I strongly believe we have a choice in how we respond or react to any situation. Often, our knee-jerk reaction is to fight or flee, which may lead to more hatred, feelings of defensiveness, and finally an attack. If we allow ourselves to step back and see the brokenness in ourselves we may recognize the brokenness in others, providing the option to respond with love. This may show up in helping someone who is helpless, forgiving someone who has wronged us, listening rather than demanding we be heard, standing up for what is right and good, holding on to hope when it feels like all hope is lost. These acts of compassion are born of a steadfast faith in the idea that love does conquer all.

How to Increase Love in Your Life

- Meditate with a focus on loving kindness.
- Get involved in an organization that supports your values and beliefs (work towards something not against anything).
- Do random acts of kindness for yourself, those you love, and those you do not know. This will deepen the ability to choose love and increase your ability to respond from that place.

Apple of My Eye

"I have been and still am a seeker; but I have ceased to question stars and books; I have begun to listen to the teaching my blood whispers to me."

Hermann Hesse

In kindergarten, Ms. Putnam asked us to color the apple on the page and stay inside the lines. Staring at the frowny-face sticker on my assignment, I felt shock and bewilderment. I needed to know why I didn't get the smiley-face and I challenged her with the fury and grief of a five-year old.

She corrected my error by explaining, "Apples are red, dear."

I wholeheartedly disagreed with her. "Apples are yellow!" I insisted.

She held firm, but I continued, "My favorite apples are yellow! Apples are yellow!"

Needless to say, the sticker was not replaced.

Ms. Putnam was the first of many teachers I would challenge when I didn't meet their expectations. For all my life I have thought outside the box of convention and questioned the status quo.

Over the years, I have come to accept the truth that I see the world differently. What's more is, I realize that nobody sees or experiences life in exactly the same way. What an amazing gift that is! We get to see the world in a beautifully unique way and when we share that, we help others broaden their own horizons adding depth, color, and gorgeous texture to their life experience.

Growing up, many of us were told what to do and how to do it. We learn to know and anticipate what others expect of us so that we know how to think, feel, and behave. Often, we experience the full weight of shame when we don't live up to expectations because there's something inside us that sees things differently. We learn to question the color of the apples in our life. We allow self-doubt to take up space in our hearts and minds.

In the end, we lose sight of who we are and what we are meant to do in life. We privilege the real or anticipated demands of others at the expense of our marvelously unique sparkle.

No matter where you are on your journey to your best self, I warmly invite you to remember and reconnect to who you are. I've put together a short list of ideas that can support you in reuniting with yourself. These activities can illuminate your inner truth and create an opportunity know yourself even better. Pick the one that resonate for you and create time and space to affirm your unique and wonderful self.

How to Reconnect with Your Uniqueness

- Take yourself on a date. Choose things that you are curious about or like to do but do it alone and experience yourself in new ways.
- Spend time each day remembering 10 things you are grateful for. These are unique to your experience and highlight what is working well in your life. Another option is to acknowledge what's awesome or amazing about you.
- Make a list of 10 things you want more of and explore some of them. This could include things like increased joy, time with friends, or even some new yarn. Discover what excites you!
- Set aside 20 minutes several times a week to journal stream of consciousness. Over time, re-read your journal and discover some truths you have told yourself in the writing.
- Create a vision board that represents things you are dreaming about. Even if a particular thing does not come to be, this allows the creative expression of your heart.

Patience Makes Purrrrr-fect

“The two most powerful warriors are patience and time.”

Leo Tolstoy

I have a reputation. I have no shame in telling you that I am “That Lady.” I am the lady that loves cats and have always had these furry friends in my life. I talk to them, I listen to them, we have play time and I will show you pictures of them in line at the grocery store. I am the Cat Lady. It was destined from the beginning as one of the formal photographs from my early childhood is of me posed with the family pet. Twinkles the cat in her bejeweled collar and me in my bows and puffy sleeves. Ever since, I have been hooked on the quiet, independent, soft, and playful nature of cats.

After the loss of my two long-time feline friends, Mr. Kat and Ginger, I felt the emptiness of the house and knew it was time to adopt again. I went to the local PAWS shelter and found two tuxedo cats in a cage together. There was a big Tom who fearlessly strutted about while surveying all his surroundings. I noticed he was keeping watch for a tiny, frightened cat shaking in the corner of the cage. My heart broke as I realized how much fear she felt from noise of the shelter and a stranger looking in on her. She needed her protector, the big Tom, so I tucked them both into a carrier and took them home that very same day.

The big cat, Simon, took to the house without any hesitation. He needed no gentle introduction and quickly made himself at home. He practically insisted on a full house tour the moment he arrived and adapted to the new surroundings immediately.

But Sophie, the tiny one, stayed under the bed, barely moving for weeks. If I placed food and water near enough to her, she ate and drank alright, but it would take her many weeks to begin venturing from the safety of her hiding spot. And even then, only inch by inch.

In the beginning, I sat on the floor for extended periods of time just letting her know that I was there and had no expectations of her. I communicated with stillness that she was safe and in her forever home. After a couple of months, she started to move towards me, as I held out my hand and just waited. Eventually, she crept over to me and began to sniff and smell my hand, but petting was out of the question.

After a couple more months, she began doing this very particular prance-around-dance that I finally figured out was an invitation to be petted in an indirect kind of way. More months passed, and I could scratch her head. After a year, she took to sitting on my lap in quiet places and, after another year of building trust, she now does all kinds of flips and turns to be sure I

can pet all the places.

Two years! It took two years of waiting and holding still before this gentle (and likely traumatized) being felt safe. Today, she is a constant companion and loving friend for me and that only happened because I chose patience and to hold ground for her. I allowed her to be exactly how she was without rushing her.

Many times, my journey with Sophie reminds me that there is a part in all of us that is scared, tender, and not sure it is safe in the world. That part in us may show a brave face or hide behind someone or something else to feel protected and hidden. Our traumatized hearts may hide from engaging in relationship, drown in addictive behaviors, or disappear in busy-ness to avoid facing and feeling the scary parts within. Through my own searching and healing, I am convinced that the most scared part of us is always there waiting to be seen and heard. Our tender hearts are eager to bloom under the patient presence of our own loving self.

The key is patience and time. When we quiet down our internal pace, sometimes in the faithful presence of others, we can coax out the part of us that is hiding under the proverbial bed of our activity, cravings, relationships, or jobs. Usually, with enough time and loving presence, we understand the underlying fears, needs, or actions not yet taken waiting for attention. We can move steadily towards what we thought we couldn't handle and learn to dance and prance in joy over the discovery of our deepest needs. Over time, we find we can be trusted to meet our inner self with patience and love.

Not unlike the loving vigil that I kept with Sophie, we must sit still, hold ground and allow healing and growth to unfold at its own pace. We do this through daily practices like journaling or meditation. We experiment by taking one small action each week to discover what allows our scared self to rejoice. We stage celebrations when our heart feels open! Whatever it takes to bring healing, be sure to wrap it up in the warm embrace of patience and watch your heart unfold.

Shedding the Mask of Shame

“We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection.”

Brené Brown

This is really happening. It's not a bad dream. I'm standing in front of the entire second grade gym class with my Penelope Purebread underpants on display and my slacks with the elastic waistband by the floor. In my 7-year old stubbornness, I wanted to be the very last person to sit on the line as the teacher instructed. Out of concern, my best friend tugs at the leg of my trousers, begging me in a whisper to sit down so I won't get in trouble. "I will, I will, in a SECOND!" My friend underestimated her strength as suddenly I'm standing alone in a moment that feels like forever and I have WAY more attention than I bargained for. My face burns red hot, my palms get sweaty, and I'm bowled over by my frustration and embarrassment. With a flood of tears spilling down my face, I sit down on the line.

I wish that was the last embarrassing thing that happened to me or that I have done, but like most of us, my list is long. On a date, I inadvertently wore two different shoes because I forgot to choose one while getting dressed. During a performance, I fell off a piano bench and kept right on playing. At my college graduation, I tripped less than gracefully across stage. While backstage at a show and wearing a live mic, I sang along with the performer providing the audience an unappreciated duet. And, on and on and on.

In each of these moments (and countless others left unarticulated), my reaction was the same. I felt shame.

Shame. That dreaded feeling that I am the clumsiest, stupidest person in the world and that I can't get anything right. While this is true of the more hilarious of my embarrassments, I've felt deep shame about more serious things. Like living with depression, failing in relationship, struggling health, what I do for a living, how I look, things I have yet to accomplish. It doesn't take much for me, or for most people, to feel as if our behaviors and experiences are condemnable and that our worth is in question because we may not match some social "norm." We sense we are unworthy of love if we don't step up to an outrageous expectation embedded in our minds of how we are supposed to be, act, think, look—you name it. We live in a culture that shames easily and often so that we learn to rely on outside sources for affirmation and confirmation of our worth. As a result, we doubt the legitimacy of our very being.

There is an important difference between shame and guilt. Shame comes to us when something outside of our self, directly or indirectly, makes us feel that we should slink away because of our unworthiness. Shame gnaws at the core of our being and strengthens any self-doubt we may be harboring. This is different than guilt, which is a healthy experience when we have actually done a wrong that can be addressed in some way or another. As my dear friend Dr. Robert Albers has written, "*Guilt says, 'I made a mistake,' Shame says, 'I am a mistake.'*"

When not named and righted, shame can lead to hiding from others and, ultimately, from ourselves. Shame collects evidence along the way and lies in wait to remind us that we don't belong and we should kindly keep our quirks, idiosyncrasies and "oops" moments to ourselves because we are unlovable. Researcher and author Brené Brown encourages bringing our shame stories to light to help minimize the power of shame. As we do, we find connection as we recognize together that we are all imperfect, as we should be. We can share compassion for each other in the awkward moments, the self-doubt, and the disappointments we ultimately experience.

Dancing Queen

“The mind's first step to self-awareness must be through the body.”

George Sheehan

I blink away the bleary eyes at my early-morning crossing guard post. Far enough away from school, almost no one takes this route. I am alone and bored. I decide to follow my heart's desire and begin singing at the top of my lungs. Creating a tune of my own, I am purely in the moment of being happy. I even do a few dance moves that I like and feel bliss expressing myself. That is, until I notice I have an audience.

My eyes meet with a neighbor lady walking her dog and I know in an instant the smirk on her face is in reaction to my impromptu performance. I had no idea how long she had been out there or how much of my one-woman show she caught, but I was mortified! I wanted to throw up and run away, but I had to stay at my assigned spot. So, I just stood there and tried to ignore myself as the lady and her little dog turned the corner and disappeared.

That was both a beautiful and mortifying moment. Beautiful in that, as a 10-year-old girl, I felt free to listen to my heart's song and just sing it. Mortifying because I felt shame for expressing what I heard inside. I've been writing about digging deeper into silence and into self to hear the messages contained in the quiet places of our hearts and minds. As we practice the art of presence, the delicate gift of listening to self, we begin to hear the messages of our hearts, thoughts, and spirit.

One of my favorite poems is *The Guest House* by Rumi (1207-1273). He writes at one point,

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!

I like this poem because it encourages us to embrace the totality of our emotional experience—the pretty, and the not-pretty. Later in the verse, Rumi talks about how feeling these prickly emotions are a kind of house cleaning for our souls. That by leaning fully into them, we are prepared for something new and delightful to take their place.

How do we get there? First, we must bravely and courageously stay present to the emotional discomfort, remembering that we are not those emotions, but instead, we are a human being feeling the emotions. Then, we engage in the process of learning how to be with ourselves at these times—through silence, through listening, and through sharing (when we are ready).

Once we have explored our emotional experience, we can then consciously move forward, armed with the intel of what's moving through us and is desiring expression. We can take action that is congruent with our innermost self and create vitality, balance, and well-being.

As the World Turns

It's happening again. Shaking in a cold sweat, panic crawling up my chest into my neck, trying to catch my breath. I ruined everything!! I played the wrong notes at the wrong time, the curtain came down too early on the actors, I was supposed to go on stage and take over the leading actress' role, and I was late. This was the worst scenario that could possibly unfold in this moment! Then, I suddenly realize that I'm not actually backstage. There is no stage. I'm not in the orchestra pit at all or responding to angry conductors or a confused thespian. I'm alone sitting up in bed having just awoken from ANOTHER nightmare. Whew!

When being a musician was my full-time gig, this nightmare was a main attraction over and over for about six weeks. I had just completed a grueling months-long music gig as a substitute for one of the regular musicians in a Broadway show. The atmosphere was oppressive, everyone seemed stoic, and almost no one talked to me. I felt on edge and afraid most of the time. To stay sharp during performance, I couldn't let my mind lean into the fear, process the frustration of being isolated and an outsider, and wondering if I had what it took to get through this gig. If I had allowed the feelings, I feared it would dismantle my concentration, paralyze my ability to endure long rehearsals, and really mess with the performance. In other words, I felt on the edge of becoming a shaking, sniveling mess, so I stuffed it down. Once that job was over, my subconscious mind really let the feelings flow in forms of these seemingly endless nightmares. It was my mind's way of processing the stress that I didn't have room to examine during my waking hours.

We're beginning to move into new phases of returning to the world post-pandemic with more room to roam the places we used to belong, connect with others, and experience some of our favorite things in new ways. As we stretch the arms of our bodies and souls, the voices of our loss and the trauma of what we experienced may start to rise as well. What I mean is giving acknowledgement to the trauma that we may have gone through during the pandemic without realizing it. We may have felt things, lost things, and experienced change that we muscled through because it was the only way. But in the softening of our rhythms and isolation, those moments that were difficult may start to rise to the surface. They, too, deserve to come out of isolation and be heard, felt, and released.

Bring awareness to whatever it is you are feeling as you recognize something of loss. Let any feeling come to the surface as you are able. Notice what the feeling is. This could range from anger to sadness to disbelief.

Stay neutral. Don't judge it as good or bad but try to observe this memory or thought that has

come up. Avoid shaming yourself with thoughts of “I shouldn’t be feeling or thinking this.” Respond to yourself as you might respond to a friend having the same thoughts or feelings.

Bring Curiosity — Ask Yourself Questions about the Feeling

- What was hardest about that moment?
- Did I gain anything from that hardship?
- What did I like about the way I responded in the moment?
- What might I do differently in the future?

Invite Loving Action and Care to Yourself

- After recognizing trauma and letting the feelings about it be known, get radically curious about how to nurture yourself in response.
- Find a support group to further explore your experiences.
- Take a vacation or even a day off to do things or be with people that refresh you.
- Ask for individual help to process what may not yet make sense to you about your experience.

This gentle, mindful approach to the wave of thoughts, memories, and feelings appearing as the world opens can help you flourish as we continue to face new stressors and adjustments. While there are more changes that we are likely to have to integrate, we can help ourselves navigate our inner world with curiosity and compassion and, hopefully, a good night's sleep!

You Are Already Home

“One of the most courageous things you can do is identify yourself, know who you are, what you believe in, and where you want to go.”

Sheila Murray Bethel

Ruby slippers, an Emerald City, a girl on an adventure with three new friends, and her little dog, too. These iconic symbols represent *The Wizard of Oz*, a movie I have loved ever since I was a little girl. At age nine, I dressed up as Dorothy for Halloween—complete with a picnic basket, a stuffed dog, and super shiny ruby slippers. Back in my day, there was no streaming (can you imagine?!) and the movie was broadcast on network television each year. It was a big event in my household and a special tradition I shared with my dad as we watched it together.

If you're not yet familiar with the story, a young woman growing up on a farm faces many problems, including loneliness, isolation, bullies, and the threat of having to give up her beloved canine companion. During a tornado, she is hit on the head by debris and rendered unconscious. She enters a dreamscape (or is it?) where she is shown the yellow brick road that leads to help. On her way towards help she encounters new friends, faces challenges, and ultimately learns new things about herself. After traversing the haunted forest and vanquishing the wicked witch, Dorothy learns that she has always had everything she needed right at her feet.

Scared and lost, Dorothy and her friends believed that they lacked something in themselves that they desperately wanted. They were willing to endure great hardship and obstacles looking outside themselves for answers and hope. Once they arrived at their destination, the Emerald City, they encountered and dethroned the Wizard of Oz. Fighting this last illusion, they discovered that the courage, heart, brains, and intuition that they were so hungrily seeking already existed within them. By looking at their past experiences they remembered the ways they already embodied the values they longed for. It was then that they grew in confidence and peace.

As a young girl, I loved the sparkly shoes and the friendships of the movie, but what resonates with me now is this idea that we contain within ourselves everything we need. This includes the ability to listen to and understand our fears that may cover the inner resources that we can build and strengthen. As we travel closer to what we long to be, we can cultivate and nurture our strengths, and manage the obstacles and hardships that are inevitable in life—to ultimately trust that we are already and always home. Thich Nhat Hanh is known to have said, “*What you are looking for is already in you, you already are everything you are seeking.*”

In quiet, curious moments of stillness, we can find our own acceptance, confidence, calmness, compassion, and perspective. When we travel to this place within, the chaos can fall away and we may find that we have always had the capacity to calm, encourage, and inspire ourselves.

How to Return Home to Your Heart

- Create a quiet space for yourself, comfy and away from all distractions. Notice and jot down any thoughts or feelings you have in the quiet.
 - What is true for you?
 - What are you already doing that pleases you in your life?
 - What do you want more of?
- Make a list of the things that you value or attributes you wish to embody. [Here's a list of values to get you started.](#)
- Remember times when you already demonstrated how you have been or had those values.
- Name 3 actions you can take in the next 30 days to learn more, strengthen, and practice the values you are.

I Can See Clearly Now

“Don't try to change life, but change the way you look at it. Make peace with this moment, be kind and be gentle to yourself.”

Ajahn Brahm

Where are my glasses?! I shout in frustration at nobody or whisper to myself when others are around. It's not uncommon for me to misplace this essential tool for living. I started wearing corrective lenses at the age of four when my parents realized my poor skills at tidying up my toys was due to vision problems rather than willful stubbornness (of which I had plenty). Even though I can't see a thing without my glasses, I sometimes purposely take them off and wander through the house. I enjoy the blurry soft edges of objects, the strokes of each object's color blending into the next, and the peace of not having to focus on every vivid detail of the world around me. It's a privilege to have the choice of how clearly I want to see. Recently, it struck me that in the same way that I can change how my eyes see, we all have the opportunity to decide how we perceive our experiences.

When we hear “should”, “must”, and “supposed to” in response to painful experiences, we can choose to shift and sharpen our focus by introducing new language or ways to understand what we see and experience unfolding before us.

The spectrum of human suffering is so vast and varied that the pain of life is inevitable. None of us will escape challenges, hardship, loss, physical pain, emotional distress, sudden change, injustice, shock, grief, or rejection. M. Scott Peck once wrote, “*Life is difficult. Once we accept that, it is no longer difficult.*” To put it another way, pain is inevitable and suffering is optional. What is ours to work through is the way we look at the obstacles we find on our path and the thoughts we nurture which create the distinction between clarity and lost focus.

In the face of pain, hardship, and stress, our brains engage in active problem solving to find a way to return to safety, reduce discomfort, and come back to “normal”. This is how we are wired, and this instinct has helped humanity survive. The brain will conjure any message intended to motivate us into action towards survival. Many of us have been conditioned to manage difficulties and obstacles by adding a layer of shame, guilt, and helplessness to prevent ever feeling discomfort or challenge again.

Some common phrases we tell ourselves in the midst of hardship which add a sharp edge to our pain include:

- If only I ...
- If only they ...
- If only the circumstances ...
- I should be something else ...
- I should do something else ...
- I should have something else ...
- It should have gone differently ...
- It should have gone better ...
- They were supposed to say, or do, or be ...

This kind of shame-based language is intended to protect us from re-experiencing difficulty in the future. However, this adds weight to our suffering. In befriending our minds and paying attention to the language it uses, we can begin to notice shame.

When we hear “should”, “must”, and “supposed to” in response to painful experiences, we can choose to shift and sharpen our focus by introducing new language or ways to understand what we see and experience unfolding before us.

The new language may look like:

- I get to learn ... because of this experience.
- I get to change ... because of this experience.
- I get to understand ... because of this experience.
- I choose to accept ... in response to what I know.
- I choose to adapt ... in response to what I know.
- I choose to shift ... in response to what I know.
- I see my part in this and can decide to ...

When you get new glasses and the prescription is stronger or it's time for the bifocals (or trifocals like I have), our eyes need time to adjust to the new view. The same applies to shifting the way we interpret our experiences and the way our minds speak to us. These kinds of fundamental shifts take time, patience, and practice. The first step is to just notice the messages and the more clearly you see how you're relating to yourself in your thoughts and mind, you'll have an opportunity to make shifts.



Purpose and Hope

"Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong."

Ella Fitzgerald

The fruit of awareness through self-reflection and compassionate understanding can bring us truth that lies within our heart. When we cultivate the art of listening to the inner self, we start to move with the rhythm of our heart.

When we know and accept the core of who we are, we can better hear the messages that lie deep within, sometimes those things that have been with us since birth. These messages are so often about what is ours to create, following our purpose. We can learn how to cultivate the courage to do these things in our lifetime, building confidence within and creating hope in the world.

What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?

“Intentional living is the art of making our own choices before others' choices make us.”

Richie Norton

One of the most exciting parts of the third grade for me was the experience of Career Week. Parents, friends, and neighbors came in to talk to us about their jobs to inspire hope and inspiration for ourselves. After learning about the many possibilities, the capstone event was to create a poster that represented the career we wanted to have. In third grade, I was playing piano, was good at it, and I also liked to sing. In addition, I liked to help people and was known to be talkative, and it made sense to create a career that blended all these favorite things of mine. I decided that the perfect career would be: A Singing Lawyer!

Somewhere in the depths of my home, in a box filled with old school papers lays a poster representing me in a courtroom, in front of a judge, with notes coming out of my mouth while defending my client. Gratefully, my teacher had enough wisdom to not tell me “No one does that for a career” and let me hang my poster in the hallway with all the other kids depictions of veterinarians, electricians, teachers, and nurses.

It's probably not a surprise that I never went to law school, and my music career took some winding roads. But I am reminded by my younger self that without an initial vision for what I wanted, I wouldn't be in this time and space in history doing what I am doing now. It was taking what I knew to be true of me and doing something with it, even in my inexperienced, child-like way.

As we grow up, people may ask us less often, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” but we can pose that kind curiosity to ourselves in different ways. The question can be changed into, “What is my intention for my future, for this year, for today?” Intention is the key that opens the dreams and hopes of our hearts into movement towards actions that will benefit us emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Intentions can shape our habits and relationships, our careers and hobbies, even our thoughts and mood. Building a regular habit of asking yourself, “What is my intention?” can fuel the hours, days, and weeks with deliberate action towards becoming your best self.

Forming Intentions and Living Life on Purpose

- Decide how often you want to be clear with your intentions. Daily, weekly, quarterly?
- Set aside a specific time in a dedicated space to ponder the question what is my intention for (fill in the blank)?

- Questions to ask for clarity about intention may be:
 - What do I want the outcome to be for myself, this relationship, this goal?
 - What value of mine do I want to demonstrate at this time?
 - What would I like to feel about this experience or interaction?
 - If I did nothing about this, what could occur?
 - If someone told me to do (fill in the blank), how would I feel about it?

As you explore the responses to these types of questions, you may come to understand yourself better and begin to richly fulfill the parts of you that are waiting for expression.

On your journey towards intention, may you meet yourself with curiosity, compassion, and clarity.

“I find that mindfully taking a moment to ritualize my intentions helps me to will that best, most exalted self into being.”

Mya Spalter

On the Move

“One can choose to go back toward safety or forward toward growth. Growth must be chosen again and again; fear must be overcome again and again.”

Abraham Maslow

“AGAIN?!?!” my friend exclaimed and looked at me with shock. I had just explained that I was moving and asked to borrow their truck for probably the 7th time in that many years. The thing about me is that I love change and moving into a new environment was a creative endeavor for me in early adulthood. Some of the moves were out of necessity and some a personal preference, but either way I was energized by the possibility of finding new ways to create space and experience life from a new perspective. While my roots are firmly planted in my current community, I still love to morph through one iteration of being into another. Like a fast-growing tree, growth often requires repotting and a change of container to continue thriving.

We may find the need to “repot” parts of our lives and find space to spread out, reach for further ground, and flourish in more open spaces. This could be changes in our physical environment, the shift of new boundaries in relationship, or creating new practices and routines in order to welcome more meaning into our lives. It may even require examining steadfast thoughts and beliefs that aren’t serving us anymore to usher in new ideas that are more supportive in the present moment. It can be renewing to weed out anything that makes the heart feel constricted, small, or suffocated.

Let’s be honest. Creating and settling into a new container can be messy. While the ultimate goal of change may be desirable, and sometimes necessary, the chaos and deconstruction of a long-held routine, relationship, or space can feel unsettling at times. In fact, moving into a new space of thought, action, or a room we love can lead to uncertainty as we face the unfamiliar, strange, or downright different. It is here, in the chaos, when our heart may try to convince us that we are doing it “wrong”. Self-doubt can creep in as we experience new levels of discomfort during shift of habits, environment, relationships, or thoughts. This experience of discomfort is where healing and change happens.

I had a recent conversation with friends about courage. We agreed that courage is not a divine download of bravado, angels singing, and actions that feel oiled with ease. Rather, it is a real willingness to be uncomfortable, afraid, uncertain while moving towards the change we seek. Courage isn’t about feeling strong and unwavering all the time but about trusting that the outcome is worthy of the transformation we have to go through. A “bonus” feature of courage and change is that sometimes the outcome is not quite what we imagined and becomes even

more than we foresaw than had we stayed rooted in the same place in life. In expanding ourselves to greater possibilities, we find our visions and desires may even change into something more fruitful and lush than ever imagined.

Invite some time for your self to look around your containers. What in your life feels too small? What activities or habits leave you feeling parched for something more meaningful? Where would you like to breathe new life into your thoughts, beliefs, or relationships? Consider what actions you can take to repot these things that are ready to grow. May you experience profound meaning and healing in the process.

"The most effective way to do it, is to do it."

Amelia Earhart

In Response to a Global Pandemic

Dear Friends, I hope for you continued strength and peace during this ongoing journey which requires myriad energy and resources. As we experience loss, both large and small, I share my heart to let you know that you are not alone. In our collective suffering and our collective perseverance, we can share hope and resilience as we stay open to our needs and share them with others. May you experience good health, deep comfort, and persistent personal power.

I have been grateful during this time to continue running, which is an integral part of my life and being. Through the dailiness, joys, and hardships of running, I have found the most profound lessons on the road apply to my life, more than just about any other practice of concentration that I have cultivated.

Earlier this year and before lock downs and travel restrictions, I had the pleasure of visiting a dear friend in Denver, Colorado. My soul is always refreshed when surrounded by the beauty of the mountains and broad sky of that vista. While there, I headed out on a typical run and was immediately confronted by whipping wind. My first thought was, "Oh boy—I don't know if I can do this." As I took a turn towards the mountains, I was met by such a steady head wind that I could barely move forward. I was literally running in place for a few seconds! Suddenly, I realized that all I could do was laugh in the moment as I competed with the wind. Eventually that gale force lessened, and I was able to cover some ground. I chose to have fun and experiment with what my run would be like that day, even as I remained challenged by the elements.

As we have recently adjusted our lifestyles in significant ways for the sake of our health and the health of others, it may feel as if we are running headfirst into a wind that holds us back, keeps us in place, limits movement in our lives. It can end up feeling frustrating if not downright impossible at times. How do we hold steady facing a gale of hardship that is not fully in our control?

One of the best pieces of advice I was given about running is "*Ignore the weather—just run.*"

What this means to me is to focus on what I can control: my thoughts, my effort, and response to whatever obstacles are laid down during a run. That idea has helped me limit negative thinking about the barriers I encounter and lifts the burden of "fighting" against something. Rather, I can choose to be "for" my goals, my values, and intentions and put my energy there. Whatever the elements the day or the world brings, I get to decide what to do with my thoughts, how to respond to my feelings, and choose my reaction to any challenge.

When confronted with current and future challenges, there are ways we can lovingly observe

and hold our thoughts and feelings and turn them towards peace and positive intention.

- Observe how you speak to yourself and shift to positive language.
 - "I can't..., I don't..., I hate..." can transform to "I will figure it out..." "I am not sure yet, but it will come to me..." "What I like about this situation is..." When the messages to ourselves change, our mood and actions can change as well.
- Observe challenges as outside yourself rather than viewing situations as what defines how you think or feel. "This wind is making my run miserable." becomes "I am growing stronger by working with this force."
- Sometimes acting opposite to what we are feeling is needed. While it is important to acknowledge our current experience, to create change we can act "as if" to obtain results of peace and energy around a tough situation.
- Connect with your values or bigger goals in life to help guide the choices you make when a challenge confronts those. Help yourself connect with what is true for you to help your mindset and actions align with your best self when the chips are down.

Whatever life may hand us, we have the power to decide how we think about and respond to any mighty wind that blows our way.

I Hear You

“You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

Eleanor Roosevelt

One of my proudest accomplishments? I didn't have a cavity until I was 40 years old (so, just last week). While I wish I could say it was all due to my careful, outstanding oral hygiene, it's mostly due to good genes and the privilege of early access to dental care. Despite my sense of orthodontic pride, I do not love going to the dentist and find the experience quite stressful. I was able to decrease some of that stress after I learned three important words that changed everything for me.

I get to.

I learned more about these words when I attended an event where a guest speaker encouraged us to catch our self-talk. This woman instructed us to listen for the situations in life that yielded an “*I have to*” and to simply insert “*I get to*” in its place. I could shift the sentiment “*I have to go to the dentist.*” to “*I get to go do the dentist and support my health.*” This instantly changed my sense of being afraid and helpless to feeling empowered with the knowledge that I had a choice to embrace this opportunity for my health.

Seems easy enough in this simple example. What about the tough and daunting experiences that we all face? What about the bigger discouragements and fears that drop into our lives uninvited? There is power in shifting self-talk in even the worst of circumstances which may be peppered with “*I have to*” “*I hate to*” “*I don't want to*”.

There is Hope

When I tune in to any negatively slanted talk, this can serve as an alert that some part of me is feeling something significant: scared. When I can notice this voice as it rants and resists, it's a clue that some tender part within needs me to acknowledge that I face something that is full of challenge. If I can acknowledge this fear or uncertainty, I can talk to myself about the situation in such a way that promotes feeling capable, comforted, and courageous to move forward into the difficult.

Neuroscience is developing more understanding about this ability to talk to ourselves with different “voices” or confrontational dialogue. When we turn our attention to what each internal message is saying, we better understand what we actually need and then respond by shifting towards the possible.

Understanding that the initial negative talk is likely a warning that we need something, we can create agency and shift our felt experience, choose how we think and engage with people and circumstances in our life with more peace and ease.

"I have to do something I don't want to do." can become "I get to tackle this challenge and reap the reward of satisfaction."

"I have to go to dinner with so and so." can shift to "I can create meaningful dialogue with a loved one and improve the relationship rather than be resentful."

Ways to Practice

When you catch the warning or negative phrases:

- I have to
- I should
- I must
- (Write your own that you may say to yourself)

Practice new sentence starters for the situation and see how it feels:

- I get to
- I want to
- I choose to

Practice makes progress! Take out some pen and paper, grab a trusted someone to practice with, or just record yourself saying these different types of sentences. See what helps your body relax, increase your sense of confidence and the possibility of hope.

What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do

“Listen to yourself and in that quietude you may hear the voice of God.”

Maya Angelou

Another bottle of ketchup hits the floor and I think, “They are gonna fire me for sure!” My proclivity for graceless movements result in a lot of spilled drinks and broken dishes during my summer of waitressing. Having just relocated to Chicago and in between gigs, I was grateful to have a job, even if it wasn't my calling. Despite the sweaty, sticky hustle of waiting tables and refinishing the floor with a mix of beverages, condiments, and not-so-fine china, there was a particular blessing by way of a regular customer named Ed.

Ed was a seasoned car mechanic who worked across the street from the restaurant. Everyday, he came in for lunch and placed the same order of tuna fish sandwich on rye with a cup of coffee. Ed had zero pretense—what you saw was what you got. He was honest, open, and at ease with himself. He could see right through my nervous energy and youthful illusions. One time, I finished my complaint about the day's current problem with, “I just don't know what to do!” Ed responded evenly, “Maybe you don't know what to do yet, but it will come to you.” I stopped in my tracks and repeated out loud, “*I don't know what to do, but it will come to me.*” I didn't know what a mantra was back then, but still, I took this phrase to heart and carried it with me in the years since because it provided a modicum of solace.

Since then, I have learned a profound understanding by holding this phrase, meditating on it, and repeating it in times of uncertainty. If I stop thrashing around the anxiety of the future and get up from sitting in the muck of despair, I am able to listen to and hear the still small voice that whispers from the core of my being. “*It will come to me*” means pruning back the persistent and nagging automatic thoughts that like to retell the story of the past and rehearse the entirety of the future all while ignoring the present moment. Clarity can only arrive in the present moment—it's not lost to the past or buried in the future. The great Buddhist teacher, Osho, explains it this way:

“Watch every act that you do. Watch every thought that passes in your mind. Watch every desire that takes possession of you. Watch even small gestures—walking, talking, eating. Go on watching everything. Let everything become an opportunity to watch. And when you watch, a clarity arises. The more watchful you become, the more all your hastiness slows down, your chattering mind chatters less.”

One of the places that I hear my inner voice is in meditation. Whether I am in seated meditation, walking meditation, or washing-the-dishes meditation, I am able to let go of the story line of any situation and learn to listen to the heart of the moment. In this space, I grow more still, less judgmental, curious, and filled with increasing compassion for myself as I truly am, which spills over to compassion for life and others. The more comfortable I am being in the very moment, the more easily I can hear answers to the question, "What's next in my life?"

Ed was right.

It will come to you.

One Day at a Time

“At the end of the day, you are in control of your own happiness. Life is going to happen whether you overthink it, overstress it or not. Just experience life and be happy along the way. You can't control everything in your life, but you can control your happiness.”

Holly Holm

With autumn around the corner and the season of picnics, bike rides, and boundless light starts to soften its intensity, I am reminded of the sweet days of summer when, as a kid, I would charge into the house as the sun began to set with a sweat stained face, filthy-dirty feet, and usually a good scrape or two. I lived in a neighborhood where people wandered in and out of everyone else's house and most of the kids made up games in the street that would spill into the endless row of backyards. As much as I liked being part of the neighborhood cacophony, there was something sweetly satisfying as dusk arrived, and all the kid's names would be called from their respective porches signaling that the day's end had begun.

While I am in huge support of rising in the early morning and creating “power starts” to the day (you will usually find me awake and reading before 5:00 am), I have begun appreciating the practice of ending the day in a more deliberate manner. As light gives way to the purple hues of dusk and the blanketing darkness of night, it has often been too easy for me to keep moving until I either dive into some numbing distraction or just plow into my pillow and hope for some sleep. But as sleep sometimes eludes me, and I look up at the ceiling at two in the morning wondering about what was and what might be, I decided to begin the curious practice of examining the day before I fall sleep, offering thanks for what was and preparing for what could be next. In the process of reflecting on the hours that came before, I found some interesting changes happen within.

First, as I began rehearsing what had happened in the day, I was able to start giving credit to myself and, more importantly, to others for all the good and beautiful things that had occurred in each hour. I could take in a small kindness of a stranger, an encouraging word from a loved one, a success on a project or completion of a creative task that I hadn't had the time to really absorb as the minutes rolled by. This review increases thoughts of gratitude which then deepens my sense of well-being. It is healing.

Second, during a day's review, I sense the big-picture of many events, which helps to decrease anxiety about all the “what if's” I had started the day with. As I re-play the day's events and outcomes, I realize that every conversation, experience, or task had a life of its own and that, in the end, everything always works out. I don't have to worry at all because none of the fretting I

had done earlier came to bear. And if it did, it almost was never the tragedy I had envisioned. In other words, there's no use in writing the story of the day ahead of time, because the progressing hours have an ending that comes no matter what I spend my energy afraid of. I've grown in peace and confidence as I drop fear and just experience whatever lies ahead.

Third, reflecting on the day has helped me to deepen the practice of letting go and just being. As I take time to remember, gratefully looking back at all that has occurred, I realize it is actually over. There is no going back to change conversations, no rewinding to become more loving or patient, which leads to a growing acceptance that what was, is. I don't have to conjure more energy grasping for "I should have," "I could have", or "Why did that happen?" It's simply done and the best I can do for myself and the world around me is to turn forward as I allow my mind and body to embrace the reboot that is sleep and allow tomorrow to bring itself to me. I remember that I will have the chance at the next sunrise to recreate what didn't go well in the day before, to celebrate more fervently what had meaning for me and to trust the process that all things ebb and flow.

As I've built this practice of ending the day in a deliberate way, I find myself less often staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night. But more importantly, each day has taken on a sacred quality of its own as I look back and acknowledge the gift that it was and move into the next day with more joy and excitement that we will all be gifted again with another chance to heal, grow, and become.

Creating Ritual Around Ending Your Day

- Journal what went well, what you want to have better in the future and one step towards that goal.
- Speak, write, or sing any and all gratitude, big and small, from each hour of the day.
- Sit or walk outside under the moonlight, perhaps with a cup of tea, and allow yourself to unfurl from activity and connect with the rhythm of nature as it prepares to rest.
- Talk through your day with someone trusted and reflect together all the gifts and challenges of the day and name hopes for tomorrow.

I've Changed My Mind

“Don't shut down your emotions. Embrace them. Your emotions are your internal compass telling you whether or not you are on track.”

Jillian Michaels

It wasn't the first time I had my face in gravel. My torn pants, pebble-embedded hands, and bent fender were all evidence that I had forgotten the golden rule of motorcycle riding—where your eyes go, the bike will go. I let my thoughts latch on to doubt when faced with an obstacle, my awareness slipped, I followed the fear, and ended up eating dirt. Letting fear take the handlebars, me and the bike skidded into the ground. Riding my motorcycle is a thrill for the senses and a great teacher of the life lesson that where we allow our thoughts and feelings to focus is where our life is headed.

A radical truth is that thoughts and feelings are just that—only thoughts and feelings. They don't define us as individuals, we do not have to become the thoughts or feelings or take immediate action based on the fleeting experience in our mind and body. Rather, ideas and emotions are important information to listen to so that we can learn how to let them move us deliberately into the next action.

The key to calm and purposeful action is to bring gentle curiosity to thoughts or feelings as they arise. Learning to first notice and name the belief or emotion we can ask ourselves what these may be telling us about a situation, relationship, or other concern. From that place of interest, we can invite non-judgment when we examine those messages and decide how we want to respond. In a moment we can turn negative thoughts and unpleasant feelings into action that brings understanding, relief, and redirection.

Practicing Increased Awareness

When you notice a thought or a feeling, ask yourself the following questions to help you keep your eyes on the road.

- What would I call this feeling?
- What does this feeling want me to understand about this situation, person, concern?
- Does this thought support my values?
- Is there a way to reframe this thought so that it leads me to move in a direction that feels in line with myself?
- Is there a different thought that I would prefer to practice?

I asked someone to help me get my body and bike off the ground that day, dusted off my dignity, and was reminded that part of the ride is to enjoy the thrill of the open road while remaining mindful to stay focused where I want to be traveling.

Hope Starts Here

“The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.”

J.R.R. Tolkien

“No, Hope!”

“Stop, Hope!”

“Come here, Hope!”

My friend’s new puppy needed a lot of attention. She had suddenly lost her young husband and in her grief, a cloud of anger, frustration, and sadness swirled around her. All her dreams for the future had been shattered. My friend imagined that opening her heart and home to this fuzzy life might bring new energy and a reason to get up in the morning. Intentionally naming the puppy “*Hope*”, she sought to restore a connection to the feeling especially when there seemed to be none as she navigated her grief. Hope, the puppy, also provided an outlet to express the trepidation of creating hope for the future when it seemed impossible.

As a global community, we seem to be in an endless cycle of illness, violence, injustice, fear, and loss. It can feel impossible to nurture feelings of hope. At times, life begins to feel like a futile endeavor which tempts us to abandon faith in the possibility of anything good.

However, our strength and healing come from developing specific ways of exploring, evaluating, and enacting feelings and choices as we respond to the challenge of uncertainty. As we examine our experiences, we can align our efforts with what we value and build strength and courage to hold a hopeful outlook for what might still be.

Building Hope

Explore

Our bodies offer the first experience of our emotions and then our mind comes online to make sense of it. Anxiety may appear as faster breathing, sadness may arrive as fatigue, anger may make itself known by restlessness and agitation. Carving out a few moments to check in with our bodies—to become aware of any shifts or changes—provides the opportunity to recognize the feeling and what it means.

If the felt sense doesn’t show up clearly in the body, ask yourself (or a trusted other) “what” questions, to create clarity. Examples include:

- What is most important to me right now?

- What feels out of place for me?
- What is my response to this news, experience, interaction?
- What am I not feeling that I would like to?

Evaluate

With better understanding of the felt sense you're experiencing, you get to decide what this means for you. For instance, if you are feeling sad you can get curious about what you can do to bring comfort. If you are feeling distress or anxiety, you may wish to explore how to move towards creating effective change. Anger may lead to contemplating what wrong needs to be made right. And if you feel warmth or compassion, you may want to find expression for the overflow of good feeling.

Enact

After identifying the felt sense and what it means for you comes the space where you can build hope. You get to decide how you respond to your feelings and circumstances in ways that align with your values. While we may not always be able to change the outcome of what we experience, the inner work of awareness, curiosity, acceptance is ours to practice. What we continue to rehearse in our minds strengthens the likelihood that it is what we will experience. Taking regular, small, measurable actions in response to our feelings and thoughts is the foundation for creating change. Change in our lives is what creates and fuels hope within. That inner hope can lead to positive movement towards the change we want to see in ourselves, our relationships, and our environment.

Further Practices to Cultivate Hope

- Reflect with yourself, a trusted other, or groups to make sense of your experiences. Ask for help when you need it. We are meant to be in community so let those around you help identify and carry some burdens.
- Brainstorm with others about creating the change you want to see in yourself and the world.
- A mentor of mine, Sarah Greene-Falk, encouraged me to "Go down the rabbit hole of possibility and action." We can choose which thoughts, feelings, and actions we pursue. Deliberately choose thoughts of hope to build resilience and strength in difficult times.
- To move forward is not to discredit the heartbreak and wrong in the world. Rather, it is a way to honor and redeem the suffering. Our staying stuck in unexplored feelings can add to the energy of dismay and discouragement. By moving through it and creating something new, we transform the energy of suffering into something meaningful and hopeful.

Call to Courage

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”

ee cummings

“I failed.” I wept as I spoke this to my mentor reflecting on the last two years living through the global COVID-19 pandemic. My response to shock, anxiety, and the demand of an ever-changing world led to my overwhelm. Throughout, I experienced anger, resistance to change, and at times, mental and emotional paralysis. While I tried to comprehend the unfolding new world, I made attempts to hang onto the familiar and strayed away from my true spirit of curiosity, non-judgment, and action. I was felled by uncertainty and remained in patterns that were familiar to me without questioning if I could also change. Looking back, I did the best I could, but I wish it had been more.

My mentor responded to my sense of failure with great compassion and encouragement. He validated the intensity of the profound changes we faced individually and as a community and spurred me to remember the ways in which I had shown up for myself and others during the recent past. Boosted by his affirmation, I could examine and accept both parts of me: the part that did the best with what I had at the time and the part of me who held back from accepting the present moment with openness and flow.

Teresa of Ávila is quoted as saying “once fear gets into your mind it takes great effort for it to leave.” As I reflected on my own fear and recognized the ways it kept me paralyzed from embracing change it helped to clarify my keyword for 2022: Courage. In his book, *Courage is Calling: Fortune Favors the Brave*, author Ryan Holiday remarks that “we must first learn how to conquer fear, or at least rise above it in the moments that matter.”

Encouraged by these mentors my current mantra is: When I can, I will.

Our brains and bodies are wired to respond to fear. We automatically know how to fight, freeze, or flee in the face of real danger. These are all appropriate and necessary responses to life. Yet there is a difference between responding to real danger and stoking the fire of imagined difficulties. We do well to cultivate awareness and compassion when our fear response transforms into barriers of change. Getting lost in “what if?”, I create scenarios that feel true but are not actually happening. When I am afraid to let go of the familiar, my mind dictates inaction that creates a false sense of safety and inhibits me from experiencing the benefit of transformation. While change is inevitable, the suffering of resistance to change is not.

How to Cultivate Courage

Here are some simple ideas to explore your inner voice and cultivate courage to do what truly serves you best.

- Spend time in reflection by journaling, meditating, or walking to identify any fears that may be present for you.
- Write down any beliefs that may be related to the fear. For example, "I'm not great at technology so I'm afraid to start a zoom meeting."
- Clarify which fears are calling for action now and which fears are about the future.
- Write down at least 5 times in your life when you felt fear and chose action. What were the results? What happened to the fear?
- Identify 3 actions a week that you can do to move out of fears towards your values and goals, for self or others.
- Reflect with a trusted person on what fears or beliefs that you may want to address or shift.

For me, this is the rule of courage: to observe the mind's gallant attempt to not bend with change but to change anyway. When my inner guidance is dimmed by the voice of fear, I will heed the voice within and move towards action. I will cultivate practices that strengthen both my awareness and resolve to honor the power of the human spirit.

Life Is a Marathon

“What lies behind you and what lies in front of you pales in comparison to what lies inside of you.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

I stood in awe, tears running down my face. These were not pretty crocodile teardrops but the brimming-with-emotion-mingled-with-snot kind of weeping as I cheered and applauded. I had the privilege of being present at the 2022 Chicago Marathon and watched some of the fastest runners in the world race by about twenty feet from where I stood. I was stunned. As I saw the beads of sweat on their faces, the strain of muscles as they kept pace, eyes sharp with focus, I was moved by the powerful grace of runners fully committed to the rhythm of their goal.

Throughout the entire 6.5 hours allotted for the marathon, I was stirred by athletes of every ability. Again and again, I was humbled to witness the human spirit moving to the beat of its dreams and aspirations.

I served this year in one of the medical tents at the marathon. As a runner and a psychologist, it was an honor to be on hand to assist athletes move through the pain of injury, the disappointment of time lost, and to help manage the emotional stress of the moment. When I wasn't assisting physicians with a runner down, I remained on the edge of the crowd, observing and cheering on the thousands of amazing athletes throughout the day.

Below are some of the insights that struck me that day as an athlete and as member of the human race.

- You can run and cry at the same time.
- You can laugh while being challenged.
- It is okay to ask for help when you need it.
- Disappointment is best experienced together.
- Cheers from others always makes hard tasks easier.
- It helps to hold hands when you think you can't go on.
- It is safe to acknowledge what you are feeling.
- Compassionate self-talk helps us to go the distance.
- Know your reason for being and put it on a t-shirt (or just tell others who can spur you on).
- It is okay when you think you can't get up and keep going.
- You can usually find your strength after a little rest.
- When you have a clear sense of your purpose, it is all worth it.

Elites to the final finisher, no matter the speed of each runner, I saw thousands of people persevere towards a goal, rely on others to push through, and their determination to strive, achieve, and grow. The human spirit and mind are powerful. When we practice tools such as awareness, assessment, and action we get clear about what we want or need. Then we are better able to move towards our longings and dreams, support ourselves through our suffering and challenges, and ultimately learn more about who we are.

Generating Inspiration

- Make a list of your top 10 achievements this year (big and small).
- Clarify 3 areas in life where you want to create change and growth.
- Share both of these lists with someone who is a great fan of yours.
- Decide how you will celebrate your accomplishments and take next steps towards your goals.

Wherever your heart wants to go, may you continue to find clarity, supportive practices for yourself, and healing and peace in all your endeavors.

When We Must Endure

"If life throws you a few bad notes or vibrations, don't let them interrupt or alter your song."

Suzy Kassem

Suddenly, I was looking into the steaming-mad eyes of the conductor and confused by the flaming darts of rage coming my way. In a split second, I immediately understood—I missed a major cue for my piano solo. My lapse in concentration put the actors off their game and the musicians had to quickly regroup to accommodate my error. By will and a rush of adrenaline, I refocused my attention and began to play as my stomach whirred with panic. This mistake would be the end of my career as a professional pianist. I'd be blackballed for life. This was bad.

The show I was playing contained a lot of dialogue with long stretches of time when the orchestra was silent. After doing 100 plus shows, it becomes incredibly boring and mind numbing to sit and listen to the same lines day after day. It is mentally uncomfortable and seasoned musicians learn how to manage the pain. Some read books, write, or even pay bills, but to be one of the "cool kids", you had to stay tuned to what was happening on stage and be ready to jump in—on time.

This fateful day when I missed my cue, I had completely lost my endurance to sit still and wait. I had checked out with a book and didn't even realize that I was no longer aware. Thankfully, I was neither fired nor blackballed from the theater, but I said a lot of apologies and did other penance to the actors and my fellow musicians alike.

This experience reminds me about those times when life brings more serious situations that demand endurance. Like when we are left hanging in the balance waiting for a diagnosis, treading through grief and loss, bearing prolonged illnesses, rebuilding broken relationships, and accepting disappointment in all its forms.

Endurance asks us to live in the unknown, to find a seat next to the uncomfortable and wait. Endurance is staying the course of what life doles out without disintegrating into worry, fear, or unhealthy distraction.

Endurance is also a practice. Part of that practice is finding a reason to hold still and bear with. To identify a seed of meaning that we can focus on as we slowly plod through the dailiness of life. It is about seeing the shadow of hope glimmering at the end of long paths of frustration, grief, loss, and uncertainty. Endurance is about keeping your heart fixed on what is to come while staying present with the moment you are in. Endurance can mean naming and rehearsing

the outcome without wishing away the road of presence that perseverance requires.

Hope and endurance are a strange paradox—to stand your ground in what is happening while holding on for change or relief. Perhaps another name for this practice is faith. Believing that we each are equipped to hold focus when we are tired, bored, angry, in anguish, or lonely. Holding on to the knowledge that no single experience is permanent and there is always, *always*, another side to the difficulties we live through.

When you find yourself in the middle of hardship that feels too heavy to bear, go gently with yourself. Practice listening to what you need each moment as you wait, as you endure and know that there is always hope to see you coming through to the other side.



— CENTER FOR —
VITALITY AND BALANCE