

# **What Is True for *Me* About Life's Challenges?**

*A Personal Workbook*

**Developed by Reverend Jane Beach**

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# What Is True for *Me* About Life's Challenges?

## *A Personal Workbook*

Dear Friend,

Anyone who has lived any length of time has known pain. We have been shaken to our core by circumstances we didn't expect and didn't want; it is part of the human experience. This course is about honoring those painful situations and the very human feelings that come with them. It is also about growing *through* those times with the self-respect and self-compassion that dignifies the pain and turns it into an insightful teacher.

"What is True for *Me* About Life's Challenges?" is designed as a personal workbook, a journal in which to contemplate *your* thoughts, opinions, questions, revelations, and everything that comes in-between. You will read articles that present ideas for you to consider, followed by questions that ask you to reach deep inside yourself to discover what *you* truly believe about life's challenges and your response to them.

In this course you can expect to be able to relax, to quit fighting the emotions that you may be afraid to touch and wish would just go away. Instead you will find that the God of your understanding is right where you are, in every feeling and life circumstance, and that you are quite good enough for God, just as you are. You are safe, you are loved, and you matter in this world.

With gratitude and love,

Jane

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# What Is True for *Me* About Life's Challenges?

*A Personal Workbook*

- ♥ Week 1            Acknowledging My Pain
- ♥ Week 2            Responding with Compassion
- ♥ Week 3            Improving the Situation
- ♥ Week 4            Accepting My Emotions
- ♥ Week 5            Standing in My Emotions
- ♥ Week 6            Finding My Purpose
- ♥ Week 7            Taking a Stand
- ♥ Week 8            Making the Most of It



# Class Agreements

## Attendance and Active Participation

Your willingness to acknowledge and grow through the painful times in your life has brought you to this class. Together we will practice honoring ourselves with compassion, accepting our emotions by being present with whatever is in front of us, and standing for who we want to be in the midst of it. Therefore, attendance and active participation are the foundation of the journey, crucial for the experiences that lie ahead.

## Assignments

This journey is personal to you. The path is fluid, with no ending of one week of course activities and beginning of another. The weekly assignments are set up so for logistical purposes only. It is recommended that you start on the next week's lessons as soon as you complete the previous class, as the reading and exercises are meant to take you deeper into your journey. Thus, doing a little each day and giving yourself time for reflection will make your experiences richer.

## Workbook Writing

It is expected that you will spend quality time writing down your thoughts and feelings about each article in the workbook. Write out your thoughts and feelings in full sentences instead of bullet points. Not only does this deepen your personal unfolding experience, it also helps you express your perspective during class dialog and small groups, which in turn helps make your experience real for you.

You will get as much out of this class as you put into it, so bring yourself wholly into the experience. You will be glad you did!

## Final Thought Paper: “Appreciating My Life”

Your final project is an oral presentation of a thought paper entitled, “Appreciating My Life.” Using *specific, real-life examples*, address the following:

*I have practiced honoring myself with compassion and standing in my emotions. I have done my best to be fully present with whatever is in front of me, standing in my values in the midst of it.*

- With all this in mind, what do I appreciate about my life and who I am today?
- How did I come to appreciate these aspects of my life?
- What is my intention for the future?

Your Thought Paper will last five minutes and will be presented in Week 8. You can read your paper or talk about it. Optional: You may also include drawings, photos, poems or any other visual representation of your personal experience.

## **The Importance of Sharing**

You will find that sharing your insights and experiences and learning from others is an important part of the class. The purpose of sharing is multifaceted. It provides an opportunity to share from your own experience, as well as develop the ability to listen and really hear other people, and to benefit from their sharing.

## **Guidelines for Sharing**

### **Confidentiality**

- What is said in class stays in class.
- What is said in the small break-out groups stays within that group. When you share with the whole group, share your insights only instead of the revelation of someone else in the small group.

### **Respectful Sharing**

- Speak about your own feelings and experiences and not about what someone else has shared as their feelings or experiences.
- Actively listen while another person is sharing and then refrain from commenting or giving advice (no “fixing”).
- Once a person has shared, the response of the others in the group is “Thank you,” and then the next person shares. This helps keep the tendency to comment (pulling the attention back to the person speaking) and “fixing” at bay.
- Share one time only in each sharing opportunity. If you later remember something wonderful you intended to share, wait until everyone else has had a turn to speak.
- Be sensitive to the amount of class time you spend in sharing. If sharing is easy for you hold back in order to allow time for others. If sharing is more difficult for you, learn to open up to others.



*Whatever the present moment contains, accept it as if you had chosen it. Always work with it, not against it. Make it your friend and ally, not your enemy. This will miraculously transform your whole life.*

- Eckhart Tolle

## Week 1

# Acknowledging My Pain

*No one else can grow for us; we must each grow for ourselves.*

- Thomas Troward

### **This Week**

This week we acknowledge those unexpected times when everything seems to have turned upside down. They are the overwhelming situations we didn't ask for, we don't want, and often, are beyond our control. In honoring and leaning into the situation – and our pain – we become willing to learn from it as we treat ourselves with loving kindness, coming to know who we truly are at a deeper level.

*The most fundamental aggression to ourselves, the most fundamental harm we can do to ourselves, is to remain ignorant by not having the courage and the respect to look at ourselves honestly and gently.*

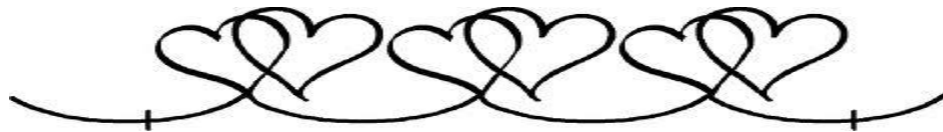
- Pema Chodron

*Healing may not be so much about getting better, as about letting go of everything that isn't you - all of the expectations, all of the beliefs - and becoming who you are.*

- Rachel Naomi Remen

*You can only go halfway into the darkest forest; then you are coming out the other side.*

- Chinese proverb

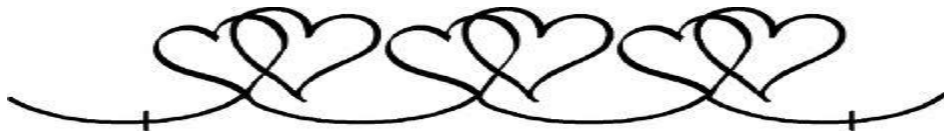


## **What is true for *me* about acknowledging my pain?**

**This is my opportunity to contemplate my feelings about the challenges that have occurred in my life, which includes the lives of my loved ones: changes in relationships, illnesses, financial instability, addiction, loss of a job, and anything else that comes up for me. What emotions stand up to be acknowledged: fear, resentment, anger, guilt, disappointment, hopelessness? Have I been able to be gentle with myself in acknowledging my pain? If so, how?**

**Knowing that this is my personal workbook with no right or wrong answers, I use these two pages for some beginning thoughts about acknowledging my pain today.**

**Acknowledging my pain today (continued)**



# The Slap and the Gap

From *The Reality Slap: Finding Peace and Fulfillment When Life Hurts*

By Russ Harris

When was the last time you received a reality slap? We've all had plenty of them in our lives: those moments when life suddenly deals us a painful blow. It's a shock, and it hurts, and it knocks us off balance; we struggle to stay on our feet, and sometimes we fall.

The reality slap takes many different forms. Sometimes it's so violent, it's more like a punch: the death of a loved one, a serious illness or injury, a freak accident, a violent crime, a disabled child, bankruptcy, betrayal, fire, flood, or disaster. At other times the slap is somehow gentler: that sudden flash of envy when we realize someone else has got what we want; those sharp pangs of loneliness when we realize how disconnected we are from others; that burst of anger or resentment over some sort of mistreatment; those short, sharp shocks when we catch sight of our reflection and we don't like what we see; those painful stabs of failure, disappointment, or rejection.

Sometimes the slap quickly receded into memory: a passing moment, a brief "rude awakening." At other times it knocks us senseless and leaves us wandering in a daze for days or weeks. However, whatever form it takes, one thing's for sure: the reality slap hurts. We don't expect it, we don't like it, and we definitely don't want it. And, unfortunately, the slap is just the beginning. What comes next is much harder: once the slap wakes us up, we then face *the gap*.

I call it "the reality gap" because on one side is the reality we have and on the other is the reality we want. And the bigger the gap between those two realities, the more painful the feelings that arise: envy, jealousy, fear, disappointment, shock, grief, sadness, anger, anxiety, outrage, dread, guilt, resentment – perhaps even hatred, despair, or disgust. And, whereas the slap is usually over quickly, the gap can persist for days, weeks, months, years, and even decades.

Most of us are ill equipped to deal with large reality gaps. Our society doesn't teach us how to handle them, or, rather, it doesn't teach us how to handle them effectively, in such a way that allows us to thrive and find lasting fulfillment. Our first instinct, whenever we encounter a reality gap, is to try to close it; we take action to change reality so it conforms to our wishes. And if we succeed, the gap closes and we feel good. We feel happy, content, or calm, with a sense of achievement or relief. And this is all well and good. After all, if there's something we can do to get what we want in life – and if it's not a criminal activity, and if doesn't go against our core values, and it's not going to create even bigger problems for us – then it makes sense to go ahead and do it.

But what happens when we *can't* get what we want? What do we do when we *can't* close that reality gap – when someone we love dies, or our partner leaves us, or our kids move overseas, or we can't have children, or our child has a serious disability, or we are diagnosed with an incurable or chronic illness, or we're not as smart or talented or good looking as we would like? And what happens when we *can* close the reality gap, but it's going to take a long, long time to do it? How do we cope in the meantime?...

If the reality gap is small or it seems as if we can close it relatively quickly, then most of us handle it reasonably well. But the bigger it gets and the longer it stays open, the more we tend to struggle. And this is why inner fulfillment is so important. Inner fulfillment is a deep sense of peacefulness, well-being, and vitality, which you can experience even in the face of a large reality gap – even when your dreams don't come true, your goals aren't achieved, and your life is harsh, cruel, or unfair.

Inner fulfillment is very different from external fulfillment: those good feelings we have when we manage to conform reality to our wishes, close the gap, achieve our goals, and get what we really want in life. External fulfillment is important; we all like to achieve goals and get our needs met. But external fulfillment isn't always possible...

In this book, then, as you've probably already gathered, we're going to focus on inner fulfillment: a deep sense of well-being and peace that we cultivate from within ourselves rather than searching for it outside ourselves. And the good news is that the resources that enable inner fulfillment are always available to us; they're like a bottomless well deep inside us from which we can draw whenever we are thirsty. However, focusing on inner fulfillment doesn't mean we give up on all our worldly pleasures, desires, wants, needs, and goals; we'll certainly look at how to close the reality gap, if and when it can be closed. What it *does* mean is that we no longer depend upon things outside ourselves for our sense of well-being and vitality and that, even in the midst of great pain, or fear, or loss, or deprivation, we can find a sense of peace and comfort within.

## **The Four Steps**

I didn't see it coming. Around the time of my fortieth birthday, reality was treating me so well, I thought, "Maybe life *really does* begin at forty!" Everything seemed to be going my way. After twenty years of writing and five unpublished novels, my first book was about to be published. I loved my work as a therapist and life coach, and my career was heading off in new and exciting directions. I had excellent health, a strong marriage, and wonderful friends. But all of that paled in comparison to the greatest joy in my life: my beautiful baby boy, who was then eleven months old. I have never known anything like those overwhelming feelings of love, joy, and tenderness that a parent feels toward a child.

Like most new parents, I thought my son was the most beautiful, intelligent baby in the whole wide world – and I often fantasized about his future life. He would be so much smarter than me in every way – and unlike me, he would excel at sports, be popular with all his schoolmates, and be a big hit with the girls when he got older. Then he would naturally go on to university and begin some high-powered career. Ah, the wonders of fantasy land.

By the time our son was eighteen months old, my wife and I were concerned that he was lagging behind in his developmental milestones. Among other things, he wasn't walking, and he had very few words. So we took him to a pediatrician and had him assessed. The pediatrician checked him out thoroughly and assured us he was just slow to develop, as "boys often are." He told us not to worry and to come back and see him if we had any more concerns.

Well, three months later, our concerns had grown significantly. Our son still had very few words, still wasn't walking, and seemed to understand very little of what we said to him. So we took him back to the specialist. Two hours of intensive assessment followed. And again the specialist told us there was nothing wrong: our little boy was just slow to develop. He would soon catch up; there was nothing to worry about.

Over the next two months, we became increasingly worried. Our son often seemed spaced out, in his own private world. He was almost two years old now and still not walking; he was getting around by shuffling on his bottom. It looked cute and funny, but it troubled us. And he had started some odd behaviors, such as rolling his eyeballs, grinding his teeth, and staring out of the corner of his eyes at parallel lines on walls and floors. He was still hardly speaking and he did not even seem to know his own name.

So we went for a second opinion. The new pediatrician was very concerned and immediately arranged for a thorough assessment, which included a speech therapist and a psychologist. And just five days before my beautiful baby boy turned two, he was diagnosed with autism.

My world crumbled. I have never felt such pain in all my life.

*Autism* is one of those words like *cancer* or *AIDS*: when you hear it in everyday conversation, you can't help but shudder. And when you hear it as a diagnosis applied to your own child, it's like someone sticking a knife into your gut and twisting it around, and then slowly pulling your intestines out through the wound.

I cried, I sobbed, I howled. I didn't know it was possible to hurt so much. I've experienced broken bones, been seriously ill, and witnessed loved ones die, but the pain of those events was miniscule compared to this.

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross famously described the "five stages of grief" as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although she was specifically referring to death and dying, these stages apply to all types of loss, shock, crisis, and trauma. However, they are not discrete and well-defined stages, and many people don't experience all of them. Also, there is no fixed order in which these stages occur. They frequently happen simultaneously; they tend to ebb and flow and blend into one another; and often they seem to end and then start again.

For reality slaps of a less violent or dramatic nature, you might not experience any grief, but for major crises and losses, you will almost certainly go through at least some of these stages, so let's briefly discuss them.

“Denial” refers to a conscious or unconscious refusal or inability to acknowledge the reality of the situation. This could manifest itself as unwillingness to talk about it or think about it, as trying hard to pretend that it's not happening, or as a pervasive sense of unreality – walking around in a daze, feeling as if it's all just a bad dream.

In the “anger” stage, you might get angry with yourself, others, or life itself. And, of course, anger has many close relatives that frequently drop in: resentment, indignation, fury, outrage, or a strong sense of unfairness, injustice, or betrayal.

“Bargaining” means attempting to strike deals that will alter the reality; this might include anything from asking God for a reprieve, to asking a surgeon to guarantee that the operation will be successful. It frequently involves lots of wishful thinking and fantasizing about alternative realities: “If only *this* had happened” or “If only that *hadn't* happened.”

Unfortunately, the “depression” stage is misnamed. It does not mean experiencing the same common clinical disorder of the same name. Rather, it refers to the normal emotions of sadness, sorrow, regret, fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, which are natural human reactions to loss and trauma.

Finally, the “acceptance” stage involves making peace with the reality gap instead of struggling with it or avoiding it.

I found, in the months that followed my son's diagnosis, that I went through all of these “stages” many times over. At the time of writing this book, it has been more than three years since that reality slap, and I have learned and grown much during that time. And, although the slap is now a distant memory, the reality gap it unveiled still remains open. Therefore, as we go through this book, I will share with you my journey, to illustrate many of the principles within these pages. At the risk of being called cliché, I will say that, although my journey's been long and hard and painful, it's also been incredible rewarding. Along the way, there's been a huge amount of sadness, fear, and anger, but there's also been plenty of joy, love, and wonder, and I fully expect that you will find the same on your own journey.

Of course, your reality gap may seem very different from mine – and also from those of other people you know. Divorce, death, or disability; illness, injury or infirmity; depression, anxiety, or addiction: they all *seem* to be very different from one another, but, beneath the surface, they are all very similar. In each case, we face a big gap between the reality that we've got and the reality that we want. And the bigger that gap is, the bigger the pain. And the bigger the pain, the less effectively we cope. So in this book, I'm going to outline a strategy that will help you deal with any sort of reality gap, no matter how great or small, or whether it's temporary or permanent. This strategy will help you to close that gap, if and

when it can be closed, and to find inner fulfillment when it can't be closed (either temporarily or permanently).

Basically, this strategy involves four steps:

1. Hold yourself kindly.
2. Drop the anchor.
3. Take a stand.
4. Find the treasure.

Let's take a quick look at these now.

### **Step 1: Hold Yourself Kindly**

When we're hurting, we need to be kind to ourselves. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. For most of us, the default setting of our mind is to be harsh, judgmental, uncaring, or self-critical ... We need to learn how to support and comfort ourselves, and how to handle our painful thoughts and feelings effectively so they have less impact on our lives.

### **Step 2: Drop the Anchor**

The larger the reality gap, the greater the emotional storm it unleashes within. Waves of painful feelings crash through our bodies, and unkind thoughts blow wildly through our heads. When we get carried away by this storm of thoughts and feelings, we are helpless; there is nothing we can do but desperately try to save ourselves from drowning. So when that storm hits us, we must drop anchor and ground ourselves so we can take effective action. Dropping anchor doesn't get rid of the storm; it just holds us steady until the storm passes.

### **Step 3: Take a Stand**

Whenever we encounter a reality gap, it helps to ask ourselves this question: "What do you want to stand for in this crisis?" We can stand for giving up on life, or we can stand for something that matters, deep in our heart: something that dignifies our suffering and gives us the will and the courage to carry on.

Obviously, we can't turn back time. We can't undo whatever it is that has happened. But we can choose the attitude we take toward it. Sometimes when we take a stand, we can close the gap; at other times, we can't. But the moment we take a stand, we experience vitality; we may not have the reality we want, but we do have the satisfaction of living with purpose.

### **Step 4: Find the Treasure**

Once we have put the first three steps into practice, we will be in a very different space mentally. And from this space, we will be able to find and appreciate the many treasures life has to offer. This last step may sound impossible, especially if you are currently in the midst



of great anxiety, sadness, or despair – but it is not. To give you a dramatic example, a few years ago a friend of mine suffered a tragic loss: her three-year-old daughter died suddenly from septicemia. It was the most heartbreaking funeral I'd ever attended: an outpouring of grief without end.

What amazed and inspired me over the ensuing months was the way my friend continued to find fulfillment. In the midst of her unimaginable sorrow, tormented and shattered by her loss, she did not lose touch with all that remained in her life. While making room for grief, she reached out and connected with her family and friends, her work, her religion, and her creativity. And, in doing so, she found love, joy, and comfort. Her pain did not disappear; I doubt it ever will. Her reality gap did not close – how on earth could it? But she was able to appreciate the reality *around* that gap; to appreciate how much life still had to offer...

This, then, is the final step of our journey: to find the treasure buried beneath all our pain. That doesn't mean we deny that the pain is there, or that we try to pretend that it doesn't hurt. Rather, it means we acknowledge that the pain is there *and* we also appreciate all that life has to offer.

**Here I will consider a time when I had a reality slap, something that turned my world upside down. What happened?**

**How did I move through it? Did I find ways to take care of myself?**

**OR**

**Is it still ongoing and I'm in the reality gap? In what ways am I being gentle with myself?**

**Which of the five stages of grief did I go through or am going through now?**

**What have I learned about myself in the process of dealing with this reality slap?**

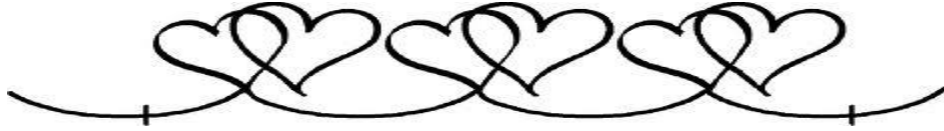
# I Soften My Heart to Love's Touch

From *Prayers to the Great Creator: Prayers & Declarations for a Meaningful Life*

By Julia Cameron

I accept the gift of my vulnerability. I am willing to be vulnerable to love. I am willing to reveal myself in all of my human beauty and frailty. I am willing to be as I am, both perfect and a work in progress. I am willing to be unfinished, unpolished, in a state of change. I am willing to accept myself as I am and I am willing to allow others to see me as I am. I am willing to be unveiled and undefended. I am willing to be seen and understood. I am willing to view myself and others nonjudgmentally. I am willing to be the human being, complete in myself without the need for accomplishment to justify my worth. Blessing myself just as I am, I lovingly open to all I can be.

**How does it feel to accept myself, just as I am?**



## I Am There

From *Prayers for Healing: 365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World*

By James Dillet Freeman, Edited by Maggie Oman

Do you need Me? I am there.

You cannot see Me, yet I am the light you see by.

You cannot hear Me, yet I speak through your voice.

You cannot feel Me, yet I am the power at work in your hands.

I am at work, though you do not understand My ways.

I am at work, though you do not recognize My works.

I am not strange visions. I am not mysteries.

Only in absolute stillness, beyond self,

Can you know Me as I am,

and then but as a feeling and a faith.

Yet I am there. Yet I am here. Yet I answer.

When you need Me, I am there.

Even if you deny Me, I am there.

Even when you feel most alone, I am there.

Even in your fears, I am there.

Even in your pain, I am there.

I am there when you pray and when you do not pray.

Though your faith in Me is unsure,  
My faith in you never wavers,  
because I know you, because I love you.

Beloved, I am there.



# Workbook Studies for Week 2

## WRITING

- Week 1 Workbook:** Finish reading and responding to the Week 1 articles and exercises.
- Week 2 Workbook:** Read and respond in writing to the Week 2 articles and exercises.
- Please be ready to share your thoughts, ideas, and revelations for all your writings in class.





*If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.*

- Jack Kornfield

## Week 2

# Responding with Compassion

*It is a beautiful experience being with ourselves at a level of complete acceptance. When that begins to happen, when you give up resistance and needing to be perfect, a peace will come over you as you have never known.*

- Ruth Fishel

### **This Week**

This week we realize that when we are hurting, we need to be able to comfort ourselves. The one who is always able to be there for us, understanding, validating and empathizing with our pain, and can truly know how much we are suffering is our self. Responding to our pain with compassion invites self-worth and self-love, as we begin to see our self the way the Beloved sees us.

*In all the great spiritual traditions, at their heart is tenderness – just to be kind inside, and then everything rights itself. Fear rests. Confusion rests.*

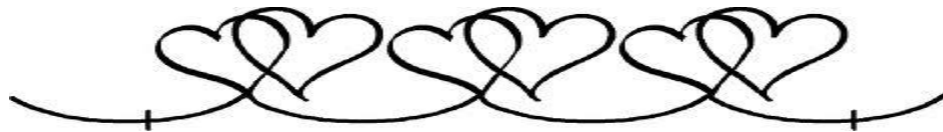
- Pamela Wilson

*In joy and sorrow all are equal,  
Thus be guardian of all, as of yourself.*

- Shantideva

*Believe in yourself and all that you are. Know that there is something inside you that is greater than any obstacle.*

- Christian Larson



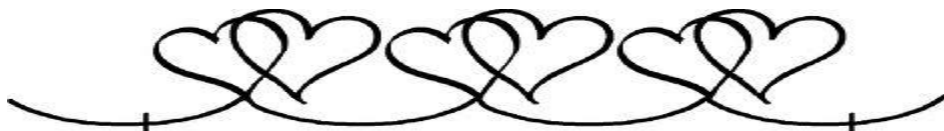
## **What is true for *me* about responding with compassion?**

**When life's challenges hit, what is my first response? Then what? Does self-compassion enter into the picture? If so, when? What does it look like? What does it feel like? Where am I in learning to hold myself kindly, giving myself a sense of comfort, support, and gentle encouragement? Where does the God of my understanding enter into the process?**

**Knowing that this is my personal workbook with no right or wrong answers, I use these pages for some beginning thoughts about self-compassion today.**

**Responding with compassion (continued)**

**Responding with compassion (continued)**



# How Do You Make the World Whole Again?

From *Spots of Grace: Remarkable Stories of How You Do Make a Difference*

By Dawna Markova

*Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for joy.*

– Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart*

Two questions lie at the center of this book: Who helped you know you are unique? And whose uniqueness have you recognized and fostered?

As I write this, I've just returned from Denver, where my older and only sister, Joan, died of a brain tumor. She was the last member of my family of origin and one of the first people who helped me recognize my uniqueness. The world as I knew it has shattered in the middle of my chest. During the fifteen months she was ill, I shuttled back and forth, challenged again and again to open my heart in a very personal hell. It was a pilgrimage of hope that has now ended. What are the stories that will rearrange the pieces and make the world whole again?

How does a hole become a whole? An image arises from the blankness in my mind. The hole becomes a void space. A void space. A sterile, void space. I am closing in on myself to avoid feeling that hollow emptiness – the feeling my sister's death has carved in my solar plexus. Closing in the way the coffin closed on her.

Stop. I am not in the coffin. What if I open it? Open myself to the feeling, give it space. I think about the hollow space in the clay that makes a bowl possible. How can a sterile void become fertile? I think about zero. The zero that makes all numbers possible. I think about a circle, a circle that has no beginning, no end.

I walk with my questions as companions to open the space. I walk to launch them into the great vastness around me. How does “broken apart” become “broken open”? I walk to listen through the soles of my feet, to hear the stories in the earth, to reseed a larger landscape, to broaden the geography in my heart.

As I do so, my mind begins to lay down the stepping stones of a path forward by telling me stories of how I learned to relate to sorrow in the past. A decade ago, when my father died, grief shattered my heart as it has now. I felt skinless. One dark night I wrote a poem titled, "I Will Not Die an Unlived Life." It made it possible for me to breathe, and in breathing, I could float on that ocean of sorrow. Living an unlived life became the new axis of what mattered to me.

Writing that poem, and the book it grew into, opened doorways I didn't even know were shut. Much to my surprise, the poem and the book have passed from one invisible hand to another, circling the world many times. They have woven together an invisible community of people I could not have imagined existed. The emails and letters were threads across time and space. What was true for me was also true for many others. I realized that the questions that string the loom of our days and the stories that shuttle back and forth as we trudge through the events that happen to us form the fabric of life that holds us all. They can integrate fragments and moments into meaning. They can connect me with others, seen and unseen, who have the same human experience, can create a balancing structure to the isolation of despair. Diving deep enough into the darkness, I found the light of a hidden wholeness, rekindling my faith that greater forces are at work in the world than I can know. Thus I too can belong to a community, a circle – empty, fertile, and full.

As I write this, I'm one hour closer to my death than I was when I sat down at my computer. You will be one hour closer to your death when you finish reading it. I don't say this is a Zen koan or to be dramatic. Living with cancer for three decades and the deaths of my father, mother, and sister have taught me that every mindless moment is one less moment that I have to spend. No one, no matter how much they love me or how wealthy they are, can give me any more moments than the ones that exist in the diminishing space between now and my death.

When I was growing up, whenever my parents gave me a gift, they would say, "Use it well." I am acutely aware that the moments I have to live are a gift. I want to be fully alive as I spend each one. I am writing this book, therefore, as a way to make the grief I feel more comprehensible and to make what matters to me more explicit. I am writing it, dear reader, so I can profess and proclaim my faith that you too carry a seed of light, a unique prism of meaning. I offer this book as a companion while you come to recognize and grow that gift.

**Who I am is important to the world. How do I know this? What evidence do I have within my own mind that I am important to the world? If I can't think of something, I will ask people who are close to me.**

**Who I am is important to the world. How do I know this? (continued)**

**As someone who is important in the world today, I now ask myself: What is important to *me*? I will list 10 things here:**

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

**What is important to *me*? (continued)**

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

**In what ways do I experience the things that are important to me? Are they actively a part of my life, or do I mostly wish they were part of my life?**



**In what ways do I experience the things that are important to me in life? (continued)**

**What steps can I take to embrace and nurture those things that are important to me?**

# Have Compassion for Yourself

From *Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time*

By Rick Hanson

Life is full of wonderful experiences. But it has its hard parts as well, such as physical and mental discomfort, ranging from subtle to agonizing. This is the realm of suffering, broadly defined.

When someone you care about suffers, you naturally have *compassion*: the wish that a being not suffer, usually with a feeling of sympathetic concern. For example, if your child falls and hurts himself, you want him to be out of pain; if you hear that a friend is in the hospital, or out of work, or going through a divorce, you feel for her and hope that everything will be all right. Compassion is in your nature: it's an important part of the neural and psychological systems we evolved to nurture children, bond with mates, and hold together "the village it takes to raise a child." (Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas 2010).

You can also have compassion for yourself – which is *not* self-pity. You're simply recognizing that "this is tough, this hurts," and bringing the same warmhearted wish for suffering to lessen or end that you would bring to any dear friend grappling with the same pain, upset, or challenge as you.

Studies have shown that self-compassion has many benefits (Leary et al. 2007), including:

- Reducing self-criticism
- Lowering stress hormones like cortisol
- Increasing self-soothing, self-encouragement, and other aspects of resilience
- Helping to heal any shortages of caring from others in your childhood

That's a pretty good list!

Self-compassion usually takes only a handful of seconds. And then – more centered and heartened – you can get on with doing what you can to make your life better.

## HOW

Maybe your back hurts, or you've had a miserable day at work, or someone has barked at you unfairly. Or, honestly, maybe you just feel bad, even depressed. Whatever it is, some self-compassion could help. Now what?

Self-compassion comes naturally for some people (particularly those with a well-nurtured childhood). But it's not that easy for a lot of us, especially those who are self-critical, driven, stoic, or think it's self-indulgent to be caring toward themselves.

So here are some steps for calling up self-compassion, which you could blend together as self-compassion becomes easier for you:

- Take a moment to acknowledge your difficulties: your challenges and suffering.
- Bring to mind the feeling of being with someone you *know* cares about you. Perhaps a dear friend, a family member, a spirit, God ... even a pet. Let yourself feel that you matter to this being, who wants you to feel good and do well in life.
- Bring to mind your difficulties, and imagine that this being who cares about you is feeling and expressing compassion for you. Imagine his or her facial expression, gestures, stance, and attitude toward you. Let yourself receive this compassion, taking in its warmth, concern, and goodwill. Open to feeling more understood and nurtured, more peaceful and settled. The experience of *receiving* caring primes circuits in your brain to *give* it.
- Imagine someone you naturally feel compassion for: perhaps a child, or a family member. Imagine how you would feel toward that person if he or she were dealing with whatever is hard for you. Let feelings of compassion fill your mind and body. Extend them toward that person, perhaps visualized as a kind of light radiating from you (maybe from your heart). Notice what it's like to be compassionate.
- Now, extend that same sense of compassion toward yourself. Perhaps accompany it with words like these, heard softly in the back of your mind: *May this pain pass ... may things improve for me ... may I feel less upset over time.* Have some warmth for yourself, some acknowledgment of your own difficulties and pain, some wish for things to get better. Feel that this compassion is sinking in to you, becoming a part of you, soothing and strengthening you.

**How easy or hard is it to feel compassion for myself? I will give specific examples.**

**Feeling compassion for myself (continued)**

**This week I will practice the steps for self-compassion and write about my experience here.**

# The Gift of Self-Compassion

From *Happier Than God*

By Neale Donald Walsch

Don't make yourself "wrong" for any negative experience with which you may now be confronted (even if you feel you "deserve" it, or that you "brought it on yourself" – in fact, *especially* if you feel that way), but have compassion for yourself, and know that God has gifted you with the power inside of you to change yourself, your motives, your behaviors, your exterior conditions, and your life itself, *in the instant after this*.

Remember always that you are not your past, you are not who you were yesterday, nor even a moment ago. Let each new day, each new hour, each new moment mark a new beginning. Even if it is the last moment of your life, it is not too late to declare your new and grandest identity, and to claim it.

*What I am saying here is that transformation is an instant-moment thing, open to us and available to us in any and every second. Life starts anew when you say it does. Therefore be gentle with yourself about yourself. Kiss away your (imagined) faults, foibles, and failings, and remember this always: If you saw you as God sees you, you would smile a lot.*

**If I could see myself as my God sees me, what would I see?**

**This moment is a new beginning. The one human being who can always be there for me, no matter what happens, is *me*.**

**What next steps can I take to become my own best friend in the area of self-worth?**

**What next steps can I take to become my own best friend in the area of relationships?**

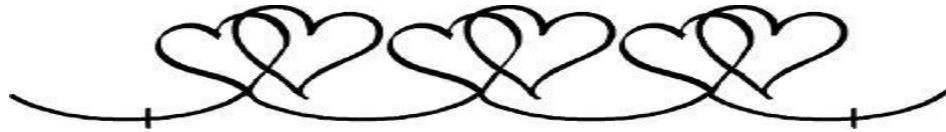
**What next steps can I take to become my own best friend in the area of finances?**

**What next steps can I take to become my own best friend in the area of health and vitality?**



**What next steps can I take to become my own best friend in the area of career/creativity?**

**What next steps can I take to become my own best friend in the area of spirituality?**



## Grace

From *Prayers for Healing: 365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World*

By Paul Tillich, Edited by Maggie Oman

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness.  
It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life.

It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference,  
our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure  
have become intolerable to us.

It strikes us when, year after year,  
the longed-for perfection of life does not appear,  
when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades,  
when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment  
a wave of light breaks into our darkness,  
and it is as though a voice were saying:  
“You are accepted.”



# Home Study for Week 3

## WRITING

- Week 3 Workbook:** Read and respond in writing to the Week 3 articles and exercises.
- Remember to write in full sentences, expressing your thoughts fully and completely.
- Please be ready to share your thoughts, ideas, and revelations for all your writings in class.



*Our past is a story existing only in our minds.  
Look, analyze, understand, and forgive. Then,  
as quickly as possible, chuck it.*

– Marianne Williamson

## Week 3

*Faith is the bird that feels the light when the  
dawn is still dark.*

– Tagore

# Improving the Situation

*I can feel guilty about the past, apprehensive  
about the future, but only in the present can I  
act. The ability to be in the present moment is a  
major component of mental wellness.*

– Abraham Maslow

### **This Week**

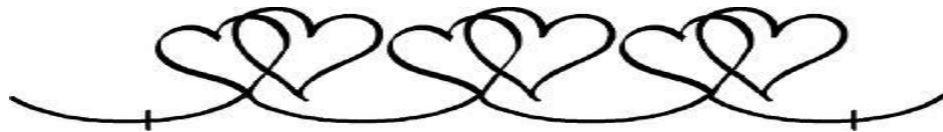
This week we acknowledge the voice inside our heads that contains our opinions, daydreams, predictions, goals and beliefs. These are all stories that we have accepted as truth. This week we reconsider truth vs. story, separating healthy, affirmative beliefs from the ones that cause suffering. We are open to change!

*What would you be doing differently if your  
first priority was living today to its fullest?*

– Alan Cohen

*The religion of love is separate from all forms of  
religion.  
Lovers are of one nation and one religion –  
love.  
And that is God.*

– Rumi



## **What is true for *me* about improving the situation?**

**Whether my current challenge is a big one that knocked me off my feet, or something smaller but equally important like my realization that I just took some harsh words personally or I said something I wish I could take back, what goes on inside my head about the situation? Do my thoughts tend to be positive or negative? Do I feel a sense that things will be okay, or do I tend to look for worst-case scenarios? Why do I tend to turn in that direction?**

**Knowing that this is my personal workbook with no right or wrong answers, I use these pages for some beginning thoughts about whether or not my thoughts improve the situation today.**

**Whether or not my thoughts improve the situation today (continued)**

**Whether or not my thoughts improve the situation today (continued)**





# Your Mind Is a Tool

From *You Can Heal Your Life*

By Louise Hay

You are much more than your mind. You may think that your mind is running the show, but that is only because you have trained your mind to think this way. You can also untrain and retrain this tool of yours.

Your mind is a tool for you to use in any way you wish. The way you now use your mind is only a habit, and habits, any habits, can be changed if we want to do so, or even if we only know it is possible to do so.

Quiet the chatter of your mind for a moment, and really think about this concept: YOUR MIND IS A TOOL YOU CAN CHOOSE TO USE ANY WAY YOU WISH.

The thoughts you “choose” to think create the experiences you have. If you believe that it is hard or difficult to change a habit or a thought, then your choice of this thought will make it true for you. If you would choose to think, “It is becoming easier for me to make changes,” then your choice of this thought will make that true for you.

## Controlling the Mind

There is an incredible power and intelligence within you that is constantly responding to your thoughts and words. As you learn to control your mind by the conscious choice of thoughts, you align yourself with this power.

Do not think that your mind is in control. *You* are in control of your mind. *You* use your mind. You *can* stop thinking those old thoughts.

When your old thinking tries to come back and say, “It’s so hard to change,” take mental note. Say to your mind, “I now choose to believe it is becoming easier for me to make changes.” You may have to have this conversation with your mind several times for it to acknowledge that you are in control and that what you say goes.

## The Only Thing You Ever Have Any Control of Is Your Current Thought

Your old thoughts are gone; there is nothing you can do about them except live out the experiences they caused. Your current thought, the one you are thinking right now, is totally under your control.

### Example

If you have a little child who has been allowed to stay up as late as she wishes for a long time, and then you make a decision that you now want this child to go to bed at 8:00 every night, what do you think the first night will be like?

The child will rebel against this new rule and may kick and scream and do her best to stay out of bed. If you relent at *this* time, the child wins and will try to control you forever.

However, if you calmly stick to your decision and firmly insist that this is the new bedtime, the rebellion will lessen. In two or three nights, the new routine will be established.

It is the same thing with your mind. Of course it will rebel at first. It does not want to be retrained. But you are in control, and if you stay focused and firm, in a very short time the new way of thinking will be established. And you will feel so good to realize that *you are not a helpless victim of your own thoughts, but rather a master of your own mind.*

### Exercise: Letting Go

As you read this, take a deep breath, and as you exhale, allow all the tension to leave your body. Let your scalp and your forehead and your face relax. Your head does not need to be tense in order for you to read. Let your tongue and your throat and your shoulders relax. You can hold a book with relaxed arms and hands. Do that now. Let your back and your abdomen and your pelvis relax. Let your breathing be at peace as you relax your legs and feet.

Is there a big change in your body since you began the previous paragraph? Notice how much you hold on. If you are doing it with your body, then you are doing it with your mind.

In this relaxed, comfortable position, say to yourself, “I am willing to let go. I release. I let go. I release all tension. I release all fear. I release all anger. I release all guilt. I release all sadness. I let go of all old limitations. I let go, and I am at peace. I am at peace with myself. I am at peace with the process of life. I am safe.”

**What are some of the old negative thoughts/beliefs that I have held on to? I will consider three of them here.**

**The first thought/belief:**

**Why have I held onto this thought/belief?**

**Am I willing to let it go? Why or why not? What will have to change?**

**The second thought/belief:**

**Why have I held onto this thought/belief?**

**Am I willing to let it go? Why or why not? What will have to change?**

**The third thought/belief:**

**Why have I held onto this thought/belief?**

**Am I willing to let it go? Why or why not? What will have to change?**

**I will choose one of the thoughts/beliefs and practice the Letting Go Exercise. I will write about my experience here.**

# The Power of Belief: The Symbol of Santa Claus

From *The Fifth Agreement*

By Don Miguel Ruiz and Don Jose Ruiz

There was a time in your life when you completely owned the power of your belief, but when you were educated to be a part of humanity, the power of your belief went into all those symbols that you learned, and at a certain point the symbols gained power over you. In truth, the power of your belief went into *everything* that you know, and since then everything that you know has ruled your life. Obviously, when we are little children, we are overcome by the power of everyone else's beliefs. The symbols are a wonderful invention, but we are introduced to the symbols with the opinions and beliefs already there. We ingest every opinion without questioning if it's truth or not. And the problem is that by the time we master a language with all the opinions that we hear growing up, the symbols already have the power of our belief.

This isn't good or bad or right or wrong. It's just the way it is, and it happens to all of us. We are learning to be a member of our society. We learn a language, we learn a religion or philosophy, we learn a way of being, and we structure our whole belief system based on everything we are told. We have no reason to doubt what other people tell us until the first heartbreak happens, and we find out that something they told us isn't true.

We go to school, and we hear older kids talking. Referring to us, they say, "You see that kid? He still believes in Santa Claus." Sooner or later, we find out that Santa Claus doesn't exist. Can you remember your reaction, how you *felt* when you found out that Santa Claus was not the truth? I don't think your parents had bad intentions. Believing in Santa Claus is a wonderful tradition for millions of people. The lyrics of one song describe what we're told about the symbol we know as *Santa*: "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town!" We're told that Santa knows everything we do or don't do; he knows when we've been bad or good; he knows when we brush our teeth. And we *believe* this.

Christmas comes, and we see a huge difference in the gifts that children receive. Let's say you ask Santa for a bicycle and you were good the whole year. Your family is very poor. You open your gifts, and you don't receive a bicycle. Your neighbor, who was very bad – and you know what *very bad* means – receives a bicycle. You say, "I was good, this boy was bad, how come I didn't receive a bicycle? If Santa Claus really knows everything that I do, for sure he knows everything that my neighbor did. Why would Santa bring a bicycle to my neighbor and not to me?"



It's just not fair, and you don't understand why. Your emotional reaction is envy, anger, even sadness. You see the other little guy riding his bicycle very happily all around, behaving worse than he did before, and you want to go and hit him or break the bicycle. *Injustice*. And that sense of injustice is because you believe in a lie. It's an innocent lie, with no bad intention, of course, but you *believe* it, and you make an agreement with yourself: "From now on, I won't be good. I'm going to be bad, like my neighbor." Later, you discover that Santa Claus is not true; he isn't real. But it's too late. You already released all the emotional poison; you already suffered the anger, the jealousy, the sadness. You already suffered from making an agreement that was based on a lie...

If you're asking yourself why you're so miserable at times, it's because you're telling yourself a story that isn't true, but you believe it. The truth is that your dream has become distorted, but that's not good or bad or right or wrong, because it's happening to billions of other people. You're not the only one in that situation, and that's the good news...

If we have the awareness that we invest our personal power in everything that we believe, perhaps it will be easy to take our power back from the symbols, and those symbols will no longer have any power over us. If we take the power out of every symbol, the symbols become just symbols. Then they will obey the creator, which means the *real* us, and they will serve their *real* purpose; to be a tool that we can use to communicate.

When we find out that Santa Claus isn't the truth, we no longer believe in Santa Claus, and the power we invested in that symbol returns to us. This is when we become aware that we are the one who agreed to believe in Santa Claus. When we recover our awareness, we can see that we are the one who agreed to believe in the entire symbology. And if we are the one who put the power of our faith in every symbol, then we are the one who can take that power back.

If we have this awareness, I think we can recover the power over everything that we believe and never lose control over our own creation. Once we can see that we are the one who creates the structure of our beliefs, this helps us to recover faith in ourselves. When we have faith in ourselves instead of the belief system, we have no doubt where that power comes from, and we start to dismantle the structure.

Once the structure of our belief system is no longer there, we become very flexible. We can create anything we want to create; we can do anything we want to do. We can invest our faith in anything we want to believe. It's our choice. If we no longer believe in all that we know that makes us suffer, then just like magic, our suffering disappears. And we don't need a lot of thinking; we need action. It's action that is going to make the difference.

**What symbols (that are a part of my belief system) do I want to reconsider now? Some options are: father/mother, God, love, success, money, health, relationships, sex, physical beauty and self-worth.**

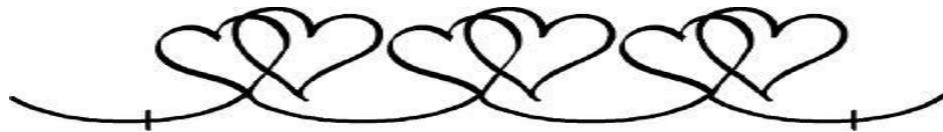
**I will choose two symbols to write about now. I will ask myself: What/Who invited me to believe in that symbol? When did I start to believe in it? Why is that symbol/belief still active in my life?**

**The first symbol:**

**The second symbol:**

**If I no longer believe what I was taught about these symbols, how would my life change?**

**What action will I take?**



## Awareness

From *Prayers for Healing: 365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World*

By Debbie Aliya, Edited by Maggie Oman

God,

Let there be awareness  
Where ignorance now prevails.

Scatter our long hidden fears  
With your bright beam of courage.

And knit fine cloaks of your love  
To shelter us and the world.



# Home Study for Week 4

## WRITING

- Week 4 Workbook:** Read and respond in writing to the Week 4 articles and exercises.
- Remember to write in full sentences, expressing your thoughts fully and completely.
- Please be ready to share your thoughts, ideas, and revelations for all your writings in class.



*Do you not see that all your misery comes from the strange belief that you are powerless?*

– A Course in Miracles

## Week 4

# Accepting My Emotions

### **This Week**

This week we become willing to investigate accepting our emotions, to name them and breathe into them, allowing those feelings to be with us, along with everything else that is present in the process. As we expand our conscious awareness, we fully engage in life, just as it is. This is a time to practice mindfulness and self-compassion.

*If someone comes along and shoots an arrow into your heart, it's fruitless to stand there and yell at the person. It would be much better to turn your attention to the fact that there's an arrow in your heart.*

– Pema Chodron

*Instead of resisting any emotion, the best way to dispel it is to enter it fully, embrace it and see through your resistance.*

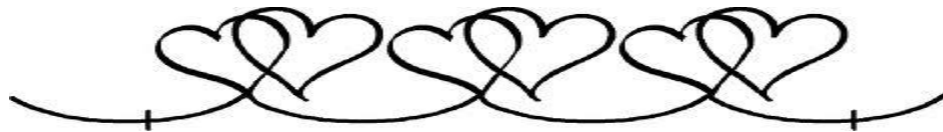
– Deepak Chopra

*To be conscious of Being, you need to reclaim consciousness from the mind. This is one of the most essential tasks on your spiritual journey.*

– Eckhart Tolle

*Sometimes my feelings are so hot that I have to take the pen and put them out on paper to keep them from setting me afire inside; then all that ink and labor are wasted because I can't print the results.*

– Mark Twain



## **What is true for *me* about accepting my emotions?**

**We all know that we have a wide range of feelings, some that feel good and others that we'd like to avoid. Society often says that we need to control our emotions or be controlled by them. Is that true for me? To what length do I try to control my emotions, for fear they will control me if I don't? Am I willing to consider allowing my emotions to be noticed, accepted, and felt? Might I be able to have inner fulfillment and peace while being in the flow of accepting my emotions – *all* of them?**

**Knowing that this is my personal workbook with no right or wrong answers, I use these pages for some beginning thoughts about accepting all of my emotions.**



**Accepting all of my emotions (continued)**

**Accepting my emotions ( continued)**



# Acts of Self-Definition

From *The Holy Experience*

By Neil Donald Walsch

There are two ways to give something meaning: (1) we can pull the meaning from our Past, or (2) we can choose the meaning in our Present, as Highly Evolved Beings would do. Let's pick up our narrative from there...

Lower animals do not *create* meaning, they simply remember it. A deer hears a twig snap in the forest and "decides" that it means danger. The deer doesn't wait around to see if he's right or not. The deer scampers. Because the deer remembers.

The *first* time that deer heard a twig snap, he may have been very young, and he watched his parents scamper. So he scampered, too. Now he scampers even though his parents are not there. What made his parents scamper? *Their* parents scampered. What made their parents scamper? *Their* parents scampered. Deer-scampering has been going on for generations.

Higher animals do not scamper if they hear a twig snap in the forest-- unless they choose to. Higher animals hear the same sound, but go through an entirely different process. They *think* about the snap. They think about who or what might have made the noise, how close the noise is, what it means, and what level of danger they are in, if any.

As soon as you think about something you are *acting*, as opposed to *reacting* (which means to "act as you did before") which is what deer do. You give the snap meaning. Just as you give everything in your life meaning. What meaning you give the events of your life depends on whether you are coming from your Past, or your Present; from your Mind or from your Mind PLUS your Soul, working co-jointly.

Most people come from their Past. In fact, most people find it impossible not to. They make their decisions based on their prior thought about a thing; their Past Data. Masters, on the other hand, make their decisions based on their Total Comprehension (a product of the Mind AND the Soul, working together) and their Future Intention. Memory or Intention. That is the choice. Always.

When you come from your memory, you create one kind of experience. When you come from your intention, you create another kind of experience altogether. Always, with your choices, you are answering a single question: *Who am I?* Remember what *Conversations with God* taught us. Every act is an act of self-definition.

**Here I will contemplate and explain a current challenge.**

**How much of my response to this challenge comes from my Past Data (the beliefs and memories I've held for so long)? I'll be specific. What are the beliefs that are popping up in this situation? Where did they come from? Are they true today?**

**How might I experience the challenge differently if I come from Total Comprehension – a product of the Mind (rational thinking) AND the Soul (Divine wisdom) working together?**

**What is the Future Intention for my life? Is it to live a life of peace, joy, to make a difference in the world? Something else? What does that life look like/feel like?**

**How might my beliefs, thoughts, and actions in this current challenge act to either expand or hinder the Future Intention I choose?**

**What next step can I take?**

# Thoughts, Feelings, Emotions, and Sensations

From *The Reality Slap*

By Russ Harris

When we look at our emotions with open, curious attention, all we will ever encounter are thoughts and sensations. By “thoughts,” I mean words and pictures inside our head; by “sensations,” I mean what we feel inside our body. As for “feelings,” some people use this word interchangeable with “emotions” (as I do throughout this book), but others use it to mean the physical sensations that arise as part of an emotion (as opposed to the thoughts that are also part of the emotion).

The best way to make sense of this is to check it out for yourself: observe your emotions with curiosity. As you do this, you will notice either something composed of sensations or something composed of words and pictures. Or you will notice complex interweaving multilayered tapestries of pictures, words, and sensations. And you can zoom in on specific thoughts or sensations, or you can zoom out and take in the whole spectacle...

The word “curiosity” originates from the Latin term *curiosus*, which means “careful” or “diligent.” This, in turn, comes from the Latin word *cura*, which means “care.” I find this very interesting. When practicing mindfulness, we are caring for ourselves; we care about what we feel and we care about how we respond to our feelings. Avoidance of our feelings is, in contrast, often an uncaring act. We get so focused on trying any way possible to get rid of our feelings that we end up harming ourselves or shrinking our lives in the process. The word *cura* also gives us the word “cure,” and this seems appropriate because curiosity plays such an essential role in emotional healing: instead of trying to escape from our pain, we turn toward it, investigate it, explore it, and, ultimately, make room for it. This is a true act of caring and healing.

So, the next time loneliness, resentment, anxiety, guilt, sadness, regret, or fear shows up, what if you could become really curious about those experiences? What if you could shine a light on them and study them as if they were the prize exhibit in a show?

As we look more curiously into any intense stress or discomfort, we will find that it is composed of two major components. One is the story line, a bunch of words and pictures inside our head: beliefs, ideas, assumptions, reasons, rules, judgments, impressions, interpretations, images, and memories. The other is our body sense: all the different feelings and sensations inside our body...

## **SENSATIONS**

To understand the power of sensations, bring to mind a difficult emotion by thinking about your current reality gap. Once you've tapped into some pain, work through the exercises that follow, step by step. (And if you want a voice to guide you through this process, you can purchase my MP3 *The Reality Slap* from [www.thehappinesstrap.com](http://www.thehappinesstrap.com), which contains recordings for all the exercises in this book.)

### **Notice Your Emotion**

Pause for a moment.

You are about to embark on a voyage of discovery, to explore your painful emotion and see it with new eyes.

Take a slow, deep breath and focus your attention on your body.

Start at the top of your head and scan downward. Notice where in your body this feeling is strongest: your forehead, eyes, jaw, mouth, throat, neck, shoulders, chest, abdomen, pelvis, buttocks, arms, or legs? (If you don't seem to be feeling anything, continue with the exercise, but focus on the sensations of the numbness.)

Once you have located this feeling, observe it with wide-eyed curiosity, as if you are a marine biologist who has encountered some fascinating new denizen of the deep. See if you can discover something new about it – about where it is, what it feels like, or how it behaves.

Notice its energy, pulsation, or vibration.

Notice the different “layers” within it.

Notice where it starts and stops.

Is it deep or shallow? Moving or still? Light or heavy?

What is its temperature? Can you notice hot spots or cold spots within it?

Notice any resistance you may have to it. Is your body tensing up around it? Are you breathing more rapidly and shallowly? Is your mind protesting or fretting?

### **Name Your Emotion**

As you notice your emotion, name it. Silently say to yourself, “Here's fear” or “Here's anger” or “Here's guilt.” (If you can't pinpoint the exact name of the emotion, then try “Here's pain” or “Here's stress” or “Here's numbness.”)

And continue to observe this emotion, as if it some fascinating sea creature. The big difference now is that this creature has a name; you know what you are dealing with.



## **Breathe into Your Emotion**

Breathe slowly and deeply, and imagine your breath flowing into and around the emotion. And as your breath does this, it's as if you expand – as if a space opens up inside you.

This is the space of awareness.

And, just as the ocean has room for all its inhabitants, your own spacious awareness can easily contain all your emotions.

So breathe into the feeling and open a space around it.

Loosen up around it. Give it room

Breathe into any resistance within your body – the tension, the knots, the muscle contractions – and make space for all of that, too.

Breathe into any resistance from your mind: the smoky haze of “No” or “Bad” or “Go away.”

As you release the breath, also release your thoughts. Instead of holding onto them, let them come and go like leaves in the breeze.

## **Allow Your Emotion**

There is no need to like, want, or approve of this emotion. Just see if you can *allow* it.

Allow it to be where it is. It's already there, so why fight it?

Make peace with it.

Let it have its space.

Give it room to move.

Give it permission to do what it's already doing, to be as it already is.

## **Expand Your Presence**

The marine biologist may concentrate her attention on the octopus, but she can also broaden her focus, so she notices the water around it and the rocks beneath it.

We can all widen our focus in a similar way. Thus, once you've made space for your feeling, aim to expand your awareness. Continue to notice your feeling, and, at the same time, recognize that it is only one aspect of the here and now.

Around this feeling is your body, and with that body you can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell.

So take a step back and admire the view; notice not only what you are feeling but also what you are hearing, seeing, and touching.

Think of your awareness as the beam of a powerful torch, revealing what lies hidden in the darkness. Shine it in all directions to get a clear sense of where you are.

As you do this, do not try to distract yourself from this feeling. And do not try to ignore it. Keep it in your awareness, while at the same time connecting with the world around you.

Allow the feeling to be there, along with everything else that is also present.

Notice what you are feeling and thinking.

Notice what you are doing and how you are breathing.

Notice it all. Take it all in.

Straddle two worlds with your awareness: the one within you and the one outside you. Illuminate both with your consciousness.

And engage fully in life as it is in this moment.



As with all mindfulness exercises, the one above can be practiced at any time and in any place for any duration. For example, if you want to develop your ability at expansion, you could stretch it into a long exercise, taking a good ten to fifteen minutes. On the other hand, you can practice a ten- to fifteen-second version just about anywhere: simply notice and name the emotion, breathe into it, allow it to be there, and expand your awareness to connect with the world around you.

Now, you may be wondering, “What’s next? After I expand my awareness and engage with the world around me, then what do I do?” The answer is that if you’re doing something purposeful and life enhancing, keep doing it and engage in it fully; focus all your attention on the task at hand and become thoroughly absorbed in it. If you’re *not* doing something purposeful and life enhancing, then stop and switch to an activity that is more meaningful...

At this point, I need to give you an important reminder: you don’t have to stop using all your control strategies (the things you do to try to control your emotions.) Control strategies are only problematic when you use them excessively or rely on them too heavily, or when they give you relief from pain in the short run but impair your quality of life in the long run. The point is to enlarge your tool kit so you have more options that just “control or be controlled.”

So I encourage you to make the effort, at least several times a day, to take a good curious look at your feelings. And if you find this difficult to do, then take baby steps. No one expects a firefighter to tackle a towering inferno without any training. The trainee firefighter practices on small fires, lit under carefully controlled conditions within specially designed

training grounds. It is much the same when it comes to mindfulness of our emotions. If you've never tried this approach before, don't begin with your most overwhelming emotions. Start with those smaller, less challenging feelings: the hundred different forms of impatience, frustration, disappointment, and anxiety that arise as part of everyday living.

Watch your emotions closely and discover their habits. When do they appear? What brings them out? Which parts of your body do they like to occupy? And how does your body react to them? Where do you notice the resistance, the tension, and the struggle?

When watching a documentary, we can be thrilled at the sight of a shark, a crocodile, a stingray, or a blue-ringed octopus. Depicted on the screen, these deadly, vicious creatures can fill us with awe and appreciation, but they cannot hurt us. Our challenge is to view our emotions in much the same way. For, although our feelings may appear to be dangerous, they are actually unable to harm us in any way. Unlike a real-life shark or crocodile, they cannot eat us. Unlike a blue-ringed octopus, they cannot poison us. Watching our feelings mindfully is no more dangerous than watching a wildlife documentary. So take a curious look, whenever you can. It doesn't have to be a long look – just a curious one.

**This week I will practice the above exercise as many times as possible and write about it here. I will answer as many of the questions as possible, knowing that with each answer I will come to accept and understand myself and my emotions in new ways.**

**Watching and accepting my emotions (continued)**

**“Watching our feelings mindfully is no more dangerous than watching a wildlife documentary.” What have I learned about taking a curious look at my emotions?**

# An Angel Whispered to Him

From *Choices: Taking Control of Your Life and Making It Matter*

By Melody Beattie

Aaron couldn't step into his future. He couldn't go back to his past. He looked around at his life. There wasn't much happening now.

Ten months ago, his wife had come home from work, looked him in the eye, and said she was divorcing him. Then she was gone.

Three months later, he lost his job. It wasn't the best job in the world, but it was his. Now it was summer in the Midwest. He didn't have a relationship. He didn't have a job. He didn't have any prospects. And his bank account was dwindling fast.

He didn't know what to do next. Hell, he didn't know what to do now.

He put on his bathing suit and jumped into the pool.

*When am I going to be happy again?* he wondered, doing laps. What he heard was a quiet thought, almost like it was whispered in his ear: *Why not be happy now?*

Two years later, Aaron would recall much differently that difficult time when he didn't understand what was happening. He would describe it as the beginning of a new cycle, a time when seeds were being planted for career and love that would blossom later. He'd tell you that the most important thing wasn't that eventually he got the money, the job, and a new girl. The most important thing Aaron learned was that it was okay to relax and even be happy when he didn't know what was going to happen next.

Of course we're not going to be happy all the time when we're wandering around in the dark. It's uncomfortable and frightening when we can't see the way ahead and don't know what's going on now.

There are many times when I've felt forsaken by God, lacking intuition, without a clue about what to do next. Nothing I tried worked. And the harder I tried, the less right anything felt and the more fearful and paralyzed I'd become.

When I began skydiving I used to complain to my instructor about the wind. "Be grateful for the wind," he'd say. "You need it to push against. It's how you move your body around in the air. That's what it's up there for – to help you fly."

Step into the darkness. Even the fear is an important part. At least we're feeling afraid; at least we're waking up. In skydiving, the air is what we need to push against. In life, it's often our confusion and fear.

Sometimes we need to take action – push against the resistance we're feeling. Sometimes the external pressure is quietly shaping and forming us into what we're about to become. Those times of not feeling guided, not feeling led, not knowing what to do next can be as powerful as taking clear action.

When we think we're alone, when we're frightened, it's our head talking, not our hearts. Stop trying to figure out the whole picture. You can't see it if it hasn't been shown to you yet. Trying to do the impossible will only make things worse.

Instead, focus on one little thing that's possible. Take a bath. Take a shower. Jump into the pool and go for a swim. Get out of your head and calm those frazzled nerves. If you can't make it better – whatever it is – at least you can help yourself settle down and relax.

Life's magic – call it whatever you will – isn't a force we can grasp for. We're naturally connected to the flow of things. When we just do the next possible thing – whether or not it's connected to solving the problem – life's magic comes to us.

*When we're surrounded by things that look impossible,  
making a simple choice to do something that's possible  
is a powerful thing to do.*

**I will contemplate a time of challenge when I didn't know what to do. What little things did I do – things that were possible, like taking a shower?**

**Even though I have no idea what the outcome of my current life circumstances will be, what small things can I do that *are* possible? I will list 10 of them:**

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

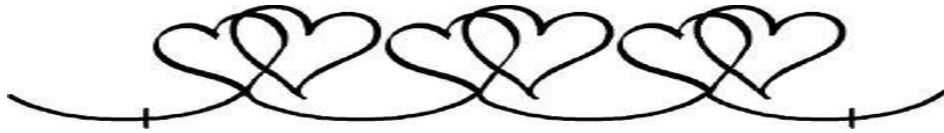
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8.

9.

10.





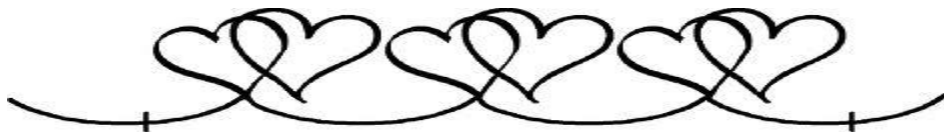
## Prayer

From *Prayers for Healing: 365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World*

By Mark Nepo, Edited by Maggie Oman

Through the great pain of stretching  
beyond all that pain has taught me,  
the soft well at the base has opened, and life  
touching me there has turned me into a flower  
that prays for rain.

Now I understand: to blossom is to pray,  
to wilt and shed is to pray,  
to turn to mulch is to pray,  
to stretch in the dark is to pray,  
to break the surface after great months of ice is to pray,  
and to squeeze love  
up the stalky center toward the sky with only dreams of color is to pray,  
and finally to unfold again as if never before  
is to be the prayer.



# Home Study for Week 5

## WRITING

- Week 5 Workbook:** Read and respond in writing to the Week 5 articles and exercises.
- Remember to write in full sentences, expressing your thoughts fully and completely.
- Please be ready to share your thoughts, ideas, and revelations for all your writings in class.

## FINAL THOUGHT PAPER: “Appreciating My Life”

Start contemplating your final project, which is an oral presentation of a thought paper entitled, “Appreciating My Life.” Using *specific, real-life examples*, address the following:

*I have practiced honoring myself with compassion and standing in my emotions. I have done my best to be fully present with whatever is in front of me, standing in my values in the midst of it.*

- With all this in mind, what do I appreciate about my life and who I am today?
- How did I come to appreciate these aspects of my life?
- What is my intention for the future?

Your Thought Paper will last five minutes and will be presented in Week 8. You can read your paper or talk about it. Optional: You may also include drawings, photos, poems or any other visual representation of your personal experience.

*The “secret” of life that we are all looking for is just this: to develop through sitting and daily life practice the power and courage to return to that which we have spent a lifetime hiding from, to rest in the bodily experience of the present moment – even if it is a feeling of being humiliated, of failing, of abandonment, of unfairness.*

– Charlotte Joko Beck

## Week 5

# Standing in My Emotions

*Hoping a situation will change keeps you at a distance from your true feelings – sadness, anger, fear. Each of these feelings is best appreciated up close. Feel them deeply, and they will cease to bother you. Hope they'll go away, and they'll bother you all day.*

– Gay Hendricks

### **This Week**

This week is about noticing the strength we have within us. When painful feelings feel like a tidal wave, we make space for them, knowing they can't drown us. In a mental state of expansion, we make room for our feelings, letting them come and go like waves in the ocean, keeping ourselves anchored in the present moment.

*Feeling compassion for ourselves in no way releases us from responsibility for our actions. Rather, it releases us from the self-hatred that prevents us from responding to our life with clarity and balance.*

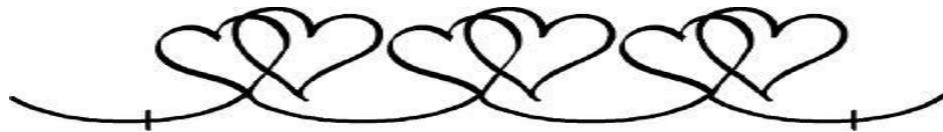
– Tara Brach

*I do not want the peace which passeth understanding, I want the understanding which bringeth peace.*

– Helen Keller

*Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.*

– Thich Nhat Hanh



## **What is true for *me* about standing in my emotions?**

**What have I learned about holding myself with kindness and compassion when life's challenges hit? Can I consider accepting my emotions and know that I am okay? Can I stand in my emotions and give them space in the flow of my life? Am I enough, just as I am, including my feelings? Can I accept *all* of me?**

**Knowing that this is my personal workbook with no right or wrong answers, I use these pages for some beginning thoughts about standing in my emotions.**

**Standing in my emotions (continued)**

**Standing in my emotions (continued)**



# Tapping into the Spring

From *The Places That Scare You*

By Pema Chodron

When I was about six years old I received the essential bodhichitta teaching from an old woman sitting in the sun. I was walking by her house one day feeling lonely, unloved and mad, kicking anything I could find. Laughing, she said to me, “Little girl, don’t you go letting life harden your heart.”

Right there, I received this pith instruction: we can let the circumstances of our lives harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us and make us kinder and more open to what scares us. We always have this choice.

If we were to ask the Buddha, “What is bodhichitta?” he might tell us that this word is easier to understand than to translate. He might encourage us to seek out ways to find its meaning in our own lives. He might tantalize us by adding that it is only bodichitta that heals, that bodhichitta is capable of transforming the hardest of hearts and the most prejudiced and fearful of minds...

*A human being is a part of the whole called by us “the universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening the circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.*

– Albert Einstein

When we were digging the foundation for the retreat center at Gampo Abbey, we hit bedrock, and a small crack appeared. A minute later water was dripping out. An hour later, the flow was stronger and the crack was wider.

Finding the basic goodness of bodhichitta is like that – tapping into a spring of living water that has been temporarily encased in solid rock. When we touch the center of our sorrow, when we sit with discomfort without trying to fix it, when we stay present to the pain of disapproval or betrayal and let it soften us, these are the times that we connect with bodhichitta.

Tapping into that shaky and tender place has a transformative effect. Being in this place may feel uncertain and edgy but it’s also a big relief. Just to stay there, even for a moment, feels like a genuine act of kindness to ourselves. Being compassionate enough to

accommodate our own fears takes courage, of course, and it definitely feels counterintuitive. But it's what we need to do.

It's hard to know whether to laugh or cry at this human predicament. Here we are with so much wisdom and tenderness and – without even knowing it – we cover it over to protect ourselves from insecurity. Although we have the potential to experience the freedom of the butterfly, we mysteriously prefer the small and fearful cocoon of ego.

A friend was telling me about her elderly parents in Florida. They live in an area where there's poverty and hardship; the threat of violence seems very real. Their way of relating to this is to live in a walled community protected by guard dogs and electric gates. It is their hope, of course, that nothing scary will enter. Unfortunately, my friend's parents are becoming more and more afraid to go outside those walls. They want to go to the beach or the golf course, but they're too scared to budge. Even though they now pay someone to do their shopping, the feeling of insecurity is getting stronger. Lately they've become paranoid even about those who are allowed through the gates: the people who fix appliances, the gardeners, the plumbers, and the electricians. Through their isolation, they are becoming unable to cope with an unpredictable world. This is an accurate analogy for the workings of ego.

As Albert Einstein pointed out, the tragedy of experiencing ourselves as apart from everyone else is that this delusion becomes a prison. Sadder yet, we become increasingly unnerved at the possibility of freedom. When the barriers come down, we don't know what to do. We need a bit more warning about what it feels like when the walls start tumbling down. We need to be told that fear and trembling accompany growing up and that letting go takes courage. Finding the courage to go to the places that scare us cannot happen without compassionate inquiry into the workings of ego. So we ask ourselves, "What do I do when I feel I can't handle what's going on? Where do I look for strength and in what do I place my trust?"

The Buddha taught that flexibility and openness bring strength and that running from groundlessness weakens us and brings pain. But do we understand that becoming familiar with the running away is the key? Openness doesn't come from resisting our fears but from getting to know them well.

Rather than going after those walls and barriers with a sledgehammer, we pay close attention to them. With gentleness and honesty, we move closer to those walls. We touch them and smell them and get to know them well. We begin a process of acknowledging our aversions and our cravings. We become familiar with the strategies and beliefs we use to build the walls: What are the stories I tell myself? What repels me and what attracts me? We start to get curious about what's going on. Without calling what we see right or wrong, we simply look as objectively as we can. We can observe ourselves with humor, not getting overly serious, moralistic, or uptight about this investigation. Year after year, we train in remaining open and receptive to whatever arises. Slowly, very slowly, the cracks in the walls seem to widen and, as if by magic, bodhichitta is able to flow freely.



**What do I do when I feel anxious and depressed, bored or lonely? (Some possibilities might be “shopping therapy,” turning to alcohol or food, making phone calls, surfing the Internet, or watching TV).**

**What has been the result?**

**How do I react when someone challenges my beliefs about the government, the environment, religion, the economy, issues of today, my work or home situation?**

**What has been the result?**

**If I quit running away from everyday uncertainties, how do I believe the refreshing water of bodhichitta will begin to flow in my life? How will my life change?**

# Anchor Yourself

From *The Reality Slap*

By Russ Harris

Clearly, there is no escaping the fact that the bigger the reality gap, the greater our emotional pain. And there are two emotions in particular that will almost always show up in these difficult times: fear and anger. This is hardly surprising. When any fish, reptile, bird, or mammal experiences a significant threat, its fight-or-flight response is triggered: the organism gets ready to either run away from the threat or to stay and fight it off. In humans, the fight response instantly turns into anger (or its close relatives: frustration, irritation, resentment, and rage). Likewise, the flight response instantly turns into fear (or its close relatives: anxiety, nerves, doubt, insecurity, and panic). And very commonly, we experience both the fight and flight emotions at the same time.

On top of anger and fear, there may be all sorts of other painful emotions. For example, if the gap involves a significant loss of some sort, sadness and sorrow will arise. And if we have somehow contributed to this gap (or, at least, if we believe we have), then guilt is also highly likely to show up.

These painful feelings can be like a tidal wave: they rise up and bowl us over and carry us away, often before we are even aware of it. You may be surprised to hear this, but there's a time and a place to allow this to happen. Why? Because no matter how big they are, those waves can't drown us (even though the mind will claim that they will). You see, when we get into a mental state of expansion – when we step back and look at those waves with openness and curiosity – we become like the sky: vast, open, and spacious. And no matter how turbulent our emotions are, we can make room for them and let them come and go, just as waves rise up from the ocean and then fall back in. We can accomplish this by keeping ourselves anchored.

When we're in great pain, it's helpful to anchor ourselves, but, obviously, there will be times when we'll fail to do this. Still, as soon as we realize we've been swept away, we can instantaneously drop the anchor. And over time, it will get easier. The waves will gradually start to reduce in size. They may still be large, but they're no longer tidal waves. And sometimes they'll knock us over, but sometimes they won't. And the better and faster we get at dropping the anchor, the less impact those waves will have when they hit us...

## Drop the Anchor

Take five to ten seconds to do the following:

- Push your feet hard into the floor and straighten your spine.

- As you do this, take a slow, deep breath.
- Look around and notice five things you can see.
- Listen carefully and notice five things you can hear.
- Notice where you are and what you are doing.

This brief exercise can be done at any time and in any place, and it instantly brings us back into the present so we can engage in life and focus on the task at hand. And if we maintain an expansive awareness of our surroundings, our actions, and our feelings, this will usually keep us anchored until the wave subsides.

As is the case with any mindfulness exercise, there are all sorts of ways that you can modify it. For instance, you could stand up and give your body a stretch, and hold that stretch, and feel your muscles lengthen. Or you could push your palms hard against each other and feel the muscles contract in your neck, arms, and shoulders. Or you could press your hands down hard on the arms of your chair. Or you could firmly massage the back of your neck and scalp.

Then, using these physical sensations as your anchor, open your ears and reach out to the world. Notice what you can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell; notice where you are and what you are doing. And you can do all this as quickly or as slowly as you like.

In practice, “dropping the anchor” and “holding yourself kindly” happen almost simultaneously. Sometimes we may drop anchor first and then rapidly follow up with a bit of self-compassion, and sometimes it may be the other way around.

**This week I will practice dropping the anchor (or a version of it) when painful feelings and thoughts arise. I will write about my experiences here.**

**Dropping the anchor (continued)**

# The Choice to Love

From *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*

By Marianne Williamson

*The ego is the choice for guilt;  
the Holy Spirit is the choice for guiltlessness.*

The ego always emphasizes what someone has done wrong. The Holy Spirit always emphasizes what they've done right. The Course likens the ego to a scavenger dog that seeks out every scrap of evidence for our brother's guilt and lays it at its master's feet. The Holy Spirit, similarly, sends out its own messengers to seek evidence of our brother's innocence. The important thing is that we decide what we want to see before we see it. We receive what we request. "Projection makes perception." We can find – and in fact, we *will* find – whatever it is we're looking for in life. The Course says that we think we will understand a person enough to know whether or not they are loveable, but that unless we love them, we can never understand them. The spiritual path involves taking conscious responsibility for what we choose to perceive – our brother's guilt or innocence. We see a brother's innocence when it's all we *want* to see. People are not perfect – that is, they do not yet express externally their internal perfection. Whether we choose to focus on the guilt in their personality, or the innocence in their soul, is up to us.

What we think of as people's guilt is their fear. All negativity derives from fear. When someone is angry, they are afraid. When someone is rude, they are afraid. When someone is manipulative, they are afraid. When someone is cruel, they are afraid. There is no fear that love does not dissolve. There is no negativity that forgiveness does not transform.

Darkness is merely the absence of light, and fear is merely the absence of love. We can't get rid of darkness by hitting it with a baseball bat, because there is nothing to hit. If we want to be rid of darkness, we must turn on a light. Similarly, if we want to be rid of fear, we cannot fight it but must replace it with love.

The choice to love is not always easy. The ego puts up terrible resistance to giving up fear-laden responses. This is where the Holy Spirit comes in. It's not our job to change our own perceptions, but to remember to ask Him to change them for us.

Let's say your husband has left you for another woman. You can't change other people, and you can't ask God to change them, either. You can, however, ask to see this situation differently. You can ask for peace. You can ask the Holy Spirit to change your perceptions. The miracle is that, as you release judgment of your husband and the other woman, the pain in your gut begins to subside.

The ego might say in that situation that you'll never be at peace until your husband comes back. But peace isn't determined by circumstances outside us. Peace stems from forgiveness. Pain doesn't stem from the love we're denied by others, but rather from the love we deny them. In a case like that, it feels as though we're hurt by what someone else did. But what really has occurred is that someone else's closed heart has tempted us to close our own, and it is our own denial of love that hurts us. That's why the miracle is a shift in our own thinking: the willingness to keep our own heart open, regardless of what's going on outside us.

A miracle is always available in every situation, because no one can decide for us how to interpret our own experience. 'There are only two emotions: love and fear.' We can interpret fear as a call for love. Miracle workers, says the Course, are generous out of self-interest. We give someone a break so we can stay in peace ourselves.

The ego says that we can project our anger onto another person and not feel it ourselves, but since all minds are continuous, whatever we project onto another we continue to feel. Getting angry at someone else might make us feel better for a while, but ultimately all the fear and guilt comes back at us. If we judge another person, then they'll judge us back – and even if they don't, *we'll feel like they did!*

Living in this world has taught us to instinctively respond from an unnatural space, always jumping to anger, or paranoia, or defensiveness, or some other form of fear. Unnatural thinking feels natural to us, and natural thinking feels unnatural.

*A Course in Miracles* is not about pouring pink paint over our anger and pretending it doesn't exist. What is psychologically unsound is spiritually unsound. Denial or suppression of emotions is unsound. You don't say, "I'm not angry, really I'm not. I'm on page 140 of *A Course in Miracles* and I don't get angry anymore," when you're seething. The Holy Spirit tells us, "Don't try to purify yourself before coming to me. I am the purifier." I was once on my way to giving a lecture on the Course, and I thought about a woman I knew who I was feeling very annoyed at. Very quickly, I tried to hide the thought, as though it wasn't holy enough for me to be thinking at such a time. Then it seemed as though a voice in my head said, "Hey, I'm your friend. Remember?" The Holy Spirit wasn't judging me for my anger; He was there to help me move past it.

We mustn't forget what the Holy Spirit is for. We don't deny we're upset, but at the same time we own up to the fact that all our feelings stem from our own loveless thinking, and we're willing to have that lovelessness healed. Growth is never about focusing on someone else's lessons, but only on our own. We aren't victims of the world outside us. As hard as it is to believe sometimes, we're always responsible for how we see things. There would be no savior if there were no need for one. Of course things happen in this world that make it almost impossible to love – cruel, horrible things – but the Holy Spirit is within us to do the impossible. He does for us what we can't do for ourselves. He will lend us His strength, and when His mind is joined with ours, ego thinking is cast out.



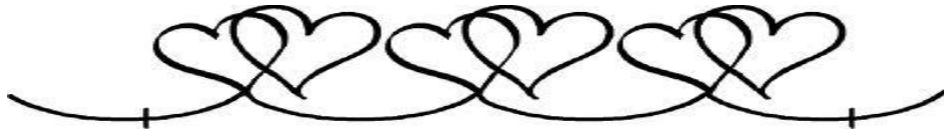
But we must be aware of our ego feelings in order to release them. “He cannot shine away what you keep hidden, for you have not offered it to Him and he cannot take it from you.” It would be violating our free will for the Holy Spirit to change our mental patterns unasked. But when we ask Him to change them, we’re asked to say, “I’m angry but I’m willing not to be. I’m willing to see this situation differently.” We ask the Holy Spirit to enter into the situation and show it to us from a different perspective.

Once I was having porcelain fingernails applied, and my manicurist’s friend came into the room. I couldn’t tolerate her personality. From the moment this woman opened her mouth, I felt like someone was running fingernails over a blackboard. Since my hands weren’t free, I couldn’t leave the room, and since the manicurist was someone who came to my lectures, I felt ashamed of my own reaction. I prayed and asked God for help. His response was dramatic. Within moments, the “obnoxious” woman began talking about her childhood, and particularly about her relationship with her father. As she began to describe her upbringing, it became perfectly clear to me how she would have grown up with little self-esteem, and an inordinate need to develop grandiose personality characteristics, which in her mind would denote strength. Her defenses didn’t work, of course. Coming from fear, they merely put people off. Suddenly, the same behavior that had so irritated me five minutes before, now elicited in me a deep compassion. The Holy Spirit had pointed me to the information that would melt my heart. Now I saw her differently. That was the miracle: Her behavior hadn’t changed, but *I* had.

**Here I will write about a time when I became willing to perceive a situation or person differently.**

**What was the miracle?**

**How did it feel?**



## Light of My Soul

From *Prayers for Healing: 365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World*

By Judith Cornell, Edited by Maggie Oman

Divine Mother, Father God, absolute source of my existence,  
cure the root cause of all my suffering – spiritual ignorance.  
Awaken within my physical body, spine, and brain the memory of divinity –  
my soul's true nature.

Lead my consciousness from the outer deceptive ever-changing  
light and shadows of the physical world  
to that which alone is Real –  
the inner changing pure Light and joy of my soul.

Help me to realize that present within this body temple  
is Your unconditional healing love waiting for my heart and mind's recognition.  
Help your child to become the fully healed and immortal Being  
you created me to be.



# Home Study for Week 6

## WRITING

- Week 6 Workbook:** Read and respond in writing to the Week 6 articles and exercises.
- Remember to write in full sentences, expressing your thoughts fully and completely.
- Please be ready to share your thoughts, ideas, and revelations for all your writings in class.

## FINAL THOUGHT PAPER: “Appreciating My Life”

Continue pulling together your thoughts for your final project, which is an oral presentation of a thought paper entitled, “Appreciating My Life.” Using *specific, real-life examples*, address the following:

*I have practiced honoring myself with compassion and standing in my emotions. I have done my best to be fully present with whatever is in front of me, standing in my values in the midst of it.*

- With all this in mind, what do I appreciate about my life and who I am today?
- How did I come to appreciate these aspects of my life?
- What is my intention for the future?

Your Thought Paper will last five minutes and will be presented in Week 8. You can read your paper or talk about it. Optional: You may also include drawings, photos, poems or any other visual representation of your personal experience.

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work, and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey.*

– Wendell Berry

## Week 6

*It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.*

– J.K. Rowling

# Finding My Purpose

### **This Week**

This week we ask the questions: What matters to me? What do I stand for? What sort of human being do I want to be? How do I want to behave toward myself and others, as well as the world around me? In the midst of pain there is courage, kindness and hope. It reminds us of the humanity that unites us all.

*There is a fire inside. Sit down beside it. Watch the flames, the ancient, flickering dance of yourself.*

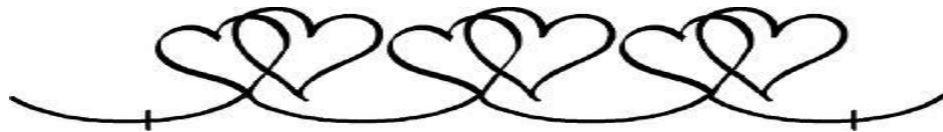
– John MacEnulty

*Every choice before you represents the universe inviting you to remember who you are and what you want.*

– Alan Cohen

*I have always known that at last I would take this road, but yesterday I did not know that it would be today.*

– Japanese Haiku



## **What is true for *me* about finding my purpose?**

**Which values are most important to me? How do I want to behave? Do I want to be kind, loving, sociable, attentive, responsible, authentic, honest, trustworthy, adventurous, or generous? Knowing my values helps me find my purpose, because even in hard times I can still be kind, loving, authentic, etc. How do I want to show up in the world?**

**Knowing that this is my personal workbook with no right or wrong answers, I use these pages for some beginning thoughts about my values and finding my purpose.**

**My values and finding my purpose (continued)**

**Finding my purpose (continued)**





# A Quick Look at Your Values

From *The Reality Slap*

By Russ Harris

Values are your heart's deepest desire for how you want to behave as a human being. Values are not about what you want to get or achieve; they are about how you want to behave or act on an ongoing basis.

There are literally hundreds of different values, but following you'll find a list of the most common ones. Probably, not all of them will be relevant to you. Keep in mind there are no such things as right or wrong values. It's a bit like our taste in pizzas. If you prefer ham and pineapple but I prefer salami and olives, that doesn't mean that my taste in pizza is right and yours is wrong. It just means we have different tastes. And similarly, we may have different values. So read through the list below and write a letter next to each value: V = Very important, S = Somewhat important, and N = Not so important, and make sure to score at least ten of them as Very important.

1. Acceptance: to be open to and accepting of myself, others, life etc.
2. Adventure: to be adventurous and actively seek, create, or explore novel or stimulating experiences.
3. Assertiveness: to respectfully stand up for my rights and request what I want.
4. Authenticity: to be authentic, genuine, real; to be true to myself.
5. Beauty: to appreciate, create, nurture, or cultivate beauty in myself, others, and the environment.
6. Caring: to be caring toward myself, others, and the environment.
7. Challenge: to keep challenging myself to grow, learn, and improve.
8. Compassion: to act with kindness toward those who are suffering.
9. Conformity: to be respectful and obedient of rules and obligations.
10. Connection: to engage fully in whatever I am doing and be fully present with others.
11. Contribution: to contribute, help, or make a positive difference to myself and others.

12. Cooperation: to be cooperative and collaborative with others.
13. Courage: to be courageous or brave; to persist in the face of fear, threat, or difficulty.
14. Creativity: to be creative or innovative.
15. Curiosity: to be curious, open-minded, and interested; to explore and discover.
16. Encouragement: to encourage and reward behavior that I value in myself and others.
17. Equality: to treat others as equal to myself and vice versa.
18. Excitement: to seek, create, and engage in activities that are exciting, stimulating, or thrilling.
19. Fairness: to be fair to myself and others.
20. Fitness: to maintain or improve my fitness; to look after my physical and mental health and well-being.
21. Flexibility: to adjust and adapt readily to changing circumstances.
22. Freedom: to live freely; to choose how I live and behave, or help others to do likewise.
23. Friendliness: to be friendly, companionable, or agreeable toward others.
24. Forgiveness: to be forgiving toward myself and others.
25. Fun: to be fun-loving; to seek, create, and engage in fun-filled activities.
26. Generosity: to be generous, sharing, and giving to myself and others.
27. Gratitude: to be grateful for and appreciative of the positive aspects of myself, others, and life.
28. Honesty: to be honest, truthful, and sincere with myself and others.
29. Humility: to be humble or modest; to let my achievements speak for themselves.
30. Humor: to see and appreciate the humorous side of life.
31. Independence: to be self-supportive and choose my own way of doing things.
32. Industry: to be industrious, hard-working, and dedicated.

33. Intimacy: to open up, reveal, and share myself emotionally or physically in my close personal relationships.
34. Justice: to uphold justice and fairness.
35. Kindness: to be kind, compassionate, considerate, nurturing, or caring toward myself and others.
36. Love: to act lovingly or affectionately toward myself and others.
37. Mindfulness: to be conscious of, open to, and curious about my here-and-now experience.
38. Open-mindedness: to think things through; see things from others' points of view, and weigh evidence fairly.
39. Order: to be orderly and organized.
40. Patience: to wait calmly for what I want.
41. Persistence: to continue resolutely, despite problems or difficulties.
42. Pleasure: to create and give pleasure to myself and others.
43. Power: to strongly influence or wield authority over others (for example, taking charge, leading, organizing).
44. Reciprocity: to build relationships in which there is a fair balance of giving and taking.
45. Respect: to be respectful toward myself and others; to be polite, considerate, and show positive regard.
46. Responsibility: to be responsible and accountable for my actions.
47. Romance: to be romantic; to display and express love or strong affection.
48. Safety: to secure, protect, or ensure the safety of myself and others.
49. Self-awareness: to be aware of my own thoughts, feelings, and actions.
50. Self-care: to look after my health and well-being, and get my needs met.
51. Self-control: to act in accordance with my own ideals.

- 52. Self-development: to keep growing, advancing, or improving in knowledge, skills, character, or life experience.
- 53. Sensuality; to create, explore, and enjoy experiences that stimulate the five senses.
- 54. Sexuality: to explore or express my sexuality.
- 55. Skillfulness: to continually practice and improve my skills, and apply myself fully when using them.
- 56. Spirituality: to connect with things bigger than myself.
- 57. Supportiveness: to be supportive, helpful, encouraging, and available to myself and others.
- 58. Trust: to be trustworthy; to be loyal, faithful, sincere, and reliable.
- 59. Insert your own unlisted value here.
  
- 60. Insert your own unlisted value here.

Once you've marked each value as V, S, or N (Very, Somewhat, or Not so important), go through all the V's and select the top six that are most important to you. Mark each one with a 6, to show it's in your top six. Finally, write those six values out below, to remind yourself this is what you want to stand for as a human being.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. \_\_\_\_\_

**Following these guidelines, I will come up with my six top values and write them on the lines above.**

**In what ways do I see myself standing for these values in my life?**

# Purpose and Pain

From *The Reality Slap*

By Russ Harris

Life is both kind and cruel; it doles out both wonder and dread in generous servings. In my years as a GP, I met many people who had suffered terribly in life. I saw children disfigured by fire and babies with fatal diseases. I saw strong, capable adults reduced to invalids and brilliant minds wiped away by dementia. I saw bodies misshapen and deformed through all manner of injury – the victims of violence and disaster. I saw refugees from foreign lands, struggling to rebuild their lives after rape and torture or trying to start again after losing most of their family. I saw the freshly bereaved, howling in their anguish, distraught mothers clutching their stillborn babies. I saw men with weeping sores and blistering skin and women with broken bones and bleeding arteries. I saw the blind, the deaf, and the paralyzed, the seriously ill and the newly deceased.

And in the midst of all this pain, I saw courage, kindness, and compassion. I saw people reaching out and helping each other, families bonding through crisis, friends and neighbors holding each other's hands. I saw men and women facing death with dignity, love and affection pouring from broken hearts. I saw parents slowly rebuilding shattered lives, finding the strength within to persist and grow.

It never ceases to amaze me that in the midst of great pain we find great passion. A terrible crisis frequently brings out the best in us. It prompts us to open our hearts and search within – to reach inside and discover what we are made of.

Now, obviously, none of us like or wants a reality gap. Indeed, the greater it is, the more intensely we dislike it and the more desperately we want to get rid of it. But we can all make a choice about how we respond to it, and at times of great crisis many of us surprise ourselves. We may doubt or blame ourselves but still rise bravely to the occasion, only to discover courage and strength in abundant supply.

Sadly, many of us only find these inner resources when reality knocks us over and stamps on our head. So why wait until that happens? Why not get in touch with our hearts right now and get clear about what we want to stand for in life so we can align our actions to a chosen purpose? That way, when the reality gap opens wide (and it will), we can be prepared for it. This preparation is important because when we have a strong sense of purpose in life, it is easier to make peace with a reality gap and make room for the pain that goes with it; it enables us to find vitality through meaningful action despite all the pain. Without a sense of purpose, we can easily give up on life when the pain gets too great; we may lose hope, fall into a heap, or put our life on hold. But if we take the time to infuse our life with meaning, we are far less likely to give up on it when the going gets tough...

# The Sweet Spot Exercise

By Kelly Wilson

First, retrieve a memory – it could be a recent one or one from the distant past – which encapsulates some of life's sweetness for you. (Yes, even though life serves up much sorrow and pain, it also serves up much that is rich and sweet.) This memory does not have to be dramatic. It *could* be something momentous, such as skiing in the Swiss Alps, hiking through the Himalayas, holding your newborn baby in your arms, or having mad passionate sex with the love of your life. Or it could also be something as simple as sitting in a café and reading the paper while sipping your freshly brewed coffee, or riding your bike through the park on a sunny afternoon, or playing tennis with a friend, or reading a book on a beach, or having a hug with a loved one, or playing your favorite music. Literally anything that captures a taste of life's richness will do.

Now close your eyes and make that memory as vivid as possible, as if it is happening here and now. See if you can tap right into the sweetness, drink it in and let it flow through you, appreciating the fullness of life as it was in that moment. And you may well find, as you do this, that the sweetness of that memory is mixed with pain. You may encounter some sadness, longing, or regret. This is hardly surprising, because whatever we hold as precious will usually bring us pain. So, as you engage in this memory, be open and make room for all that arises: the sweetness *and* the sorrow, the pleasure *and* the pain.

When you reach the end of this paragraph, put the book down, straighten your spine, let your shoulders drop, and push your feet onto the floor. Close your eyes and take a few slow, deep breaths. Once you are calm and centered, relive your chosen memory in vivid detail. Take at least a minute or two, or longer if you wish. As you relive this memory, look around inside it and explore it and notice what you can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. And savor that sweetness – really let yourself feel it, and, as you do so, make room for all that arises.



So, how was this exercise for you? Did you find it enjoyable? Did sadness or other painful emotions arise? If so, did you open up and make room for them? That was actually just the first part of the exercise. The second part is to go back into that memory, take a good look at yourself, and do the following:

Notice, inside that memory, what you are doing.

Notice, inside that memory, how you are behaving.

Notice, inside that memory, what personal qualities you are exhibiting.

Notice, inside that memory, the nature of your relationship with whatever activity you are doing. Are you connected or disconnected, engaged or disengaged?

Notice, inside that memory, how you are treating yourself, others, and the world around you.

Then ponder the following questions for at least a few minutes:

What does this reveal about the personal qualities you'd like to embody?

What does this suggest about the way you'd ideally like to behave?

**I will practice the Sweet Spot Exercise and write about the experience here:**



**What does this reveal about my values?**

**How can I embody these qualities during times of challenge?**

# Row Your Boat

From *Your Soul's Assignment*

By Chris Michaels

Living in natural harmony with Spirit is like floating down a gentle stream allowing the current to carry you to whatever destination the water dictates. It is a place of complete trust and total surrender! Instead of making life happen, you permit and allow it to unfold. Instead of forcing your good from a reluctant and stingy world, you become an “instrument” of good in the world. Instead of “worshipping” a distant God – you become ONE with Spirit!

Do you remember the childhood sing-a-long song “Row Your Boat?” There’s a powerful lesson about balance and harmony in that little song. In case you’ve forgotten, here is the verse. Sing it, instead of reading it:

“Row, row, row your boat  
Gently down the stream  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,  
Life is but a dream!”

The first line of the song reminds us where to place our attention and effort in life. It says: “Row, row, row YOUR boat.” That means we should give all our attention to our own issues and challenges – and not waste time sticking our noses into other people’s business.

Focus your attention on resolving YOUR issues. Don’t get into someone else’s boat and try to do their “rowing.” You have enough work of your own to get through. You don’t need the distraction. Plus, it will divert your attention away from your own course. Row, row, row YOUR boat.

The second line of the song, “gently down the stream,” reminds us that life isn’t supposed to be a struggle. We’re not supposed to fight our way “upstream” with the salmon. The flow of life is “downstream.” If you’re applying an inordinate amount of effort to make or force something to happen in your life, then you’re going about it the wrong way. Stop! Back off – and allow the natural flow of life to take over. Remember that life wants to work. Good wants to be expressed. You aren’t responsible for making it happen. Row your boat “gently” down the stream!

The third line of the song reminds us that life is designed for joy! We’re supposed to be having a good time, not working ourselves to death. That’s why there are only three “rows ...” in the song. And yet, there are four “merrilys...” That’s to teach us that our efforts at rowing should not exceed the joy we receive from our work. In other words, if it’s not fun, it’s not really worth doing! Do what you love. Give your efforts to something you can pour

your heart into. Life isn't about how much you can accomplish or how many tasks you can cross off your to-do-list. It's supposed to be a joyful adventure!

And finally, the last line – life is but a dream – reminds us not to take it all too personally, or too seriously. The dramas and traumas of our lives are all self-created stories designed to draw out our inner potential. They're just chapters in the eternal unfolding of our souls. The conditions of our lives do NOT define who we are. They're just signposts along the way. You are NOT your work. You are NOT your house. You are NOT your money. You are a perfect expression of God on a spiritual journey of discovery. This "human life" is just one experience along the way. Don't take it too seriously. It's just a dream!

**How does each line of the song "Row Your Boat" fit into *my* life?**

**Row, row, row your boat**

**Gently down the stream**

**Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily**

**Life is but a dream!**

# Outlasting the Fog

From *The Book of Awakening*

By Mark Nepo

*To be near something beautiful or precious but  
to be unable to experience it is the  
subtlest possible form of torture.*

- Robert Johnson

We all have these moments when the rose loses its color for some reason, or the music no longer stirs us, or the sweet, gentle soul across from us no longer seems to soften our heart.

To move in and out of meaning is as natural as moving in and out of light because clouds form and dissipate. It becomes torture, though, when we believe that the rose is no longer colorful, or that the music is no longer stirring, or, worst of all, when we conclude that the person across from us is no longer gentle or sweet.

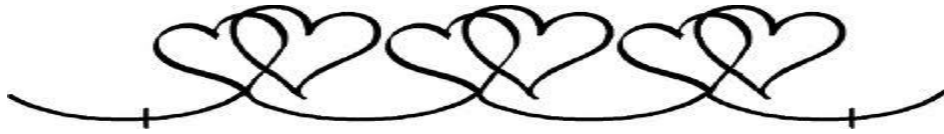
In truth, worse than not seeing at all is seeing but not being touched by what you see. Certainly, things and people change – the simpatico of our needs can shift – but we have no chance of recognizing real change or loss if we cannot recognize and accept our inability at times to feel what we see.

Often, the emotional tragedies of life begin when we rearrange our lives – changing partners, religions, and jobs – in an effort to find a sense of meaning that is sleeping numbly within us.

It reminds me of a man who built a home on a cliff by the sea, only to have a month-long fog roll in. He cursed the place and moved away, but a week after he'd gone, the fog cleared. Being human, we all have fogs roll in around our heart, and often, our lives depend on the quiet courage to wait for them to clear.

- ❖ *Sit quietly with one thing in your life that appears to have lost its meaning for you.*
- ❖ *As you breathe, let your inbreath freshen your heart.*
- ❖ *As you breathe, let your outbreath freshen your eye.*
- ❖ *Enter your day, keeping the thought of this one thing near, and from time to time, look at it freshly.*

**I will practice the “Outlasting the Fog” exercise and then write about what came up for me.**



## Teach Me

From *Prayers for Healing: 365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World*

By The Ute of North America, Edited by Maggie Oman

Earth teach me stillness as the grasses are stilled with light.  
Earth teach me suffering as old stones suffer with memory.  
Earth teach me humility as blossoms are humble with beginning.  
Earth teach me caring as the mother who secures her young.  
Earth teach me courage as the tree which stands all alone.  
Earth teach me limitation as the ant which crawls on the ground.  
Earth teach me freedom as the eagle which soars in the sky.  
Earth teach me resignation as the leaves which die in the fall.  
Earth teach me regeneration as the seed which rises in the spring.  
Earth teach me to forget myself as melted snow forgets its life.  
Earth teach me to remember kindness as dry fields weep with rain.



# Home Study for Week 7

## WRITING

- Week 7 Workbook:** Read and respond in writing to the Week 7 articles and exercises.
- Please be ready to share your thoughts, ideas, and revelations for all your writings in class.

## FINAL THOUGHT PAPER: “Appreciating My Life”

Continue contemplating and organizing your thoughts for your final project, which is an oral presentation of a thought paper entitled, “Appreciating My Life.” Using *specific, real-life examples*, address the following:

*I have practiced honoring myself with compassion and standing in my emotions. I have done my best to be fully present with whatever is in front of me, standing in my values in the midst of it.*

- With all this in mind, what do I appreciate about my life and who I am today?
- How did I come to appreciate these aspects of my life?
- What is my intention for the future?

Your Thought Paper will last five minutes and will be presented in Week 8. You can read your paper or talk about it. Optional: You may also include drawings, photos, poems or any other visual representation of your personal experience.



*You can never cross the ocean unless you have  
the courage to lose sight of the shore.*

- Christopher Columbus

## Week 7

*Argue for your limitations, and sure enough  
they're yours.*

- Richard Bach

## Taking a Stand

### This Week

This week is about taking action, standing for our values – what matters deep in our heart in our everyday lives and in the face of our pain, opening ourselves to life as it is in this moment. We ask, “What tiny step can I take to make a difference in this part of my life?” Then we do our best to find the courage to take that tiny step.

*Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change  
the world.*

*Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.*

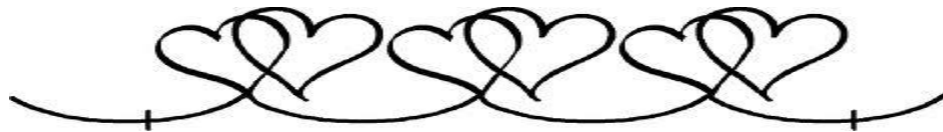
- Rumi

*Strive to close the eyes of the body and open  
those of the soul and look into your own heart.*

- Teresa of Avila

*Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles,  
leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its  
destination full of hope.*

- Maya Angelou



## **What is true for *me* about taking a stand?**

**Who do I know myself to be? What do I want to stand for in my daily life? Does it match what I do? To what extent am I living by my values? If there are areas of struggling to be who I want to be, why do I think this is true? How easy or hard is it to live by my values in times of challenge? Why? What gives me the will to carry on? How does it show up in my life?**

**Knowing that this is my personal workbook with no right or wrong answers, I use these pages for some beginning thoughts about taking action and standing for what is important to me.**

**Taking action and standing for what is important to me (continued)**

**Taking action and standing for what is important to me (continued)**



# First Class

From *Choices: Taking Control of Your Life and Making It Matter*

By Melody Beattie

Marissa checked her e-mails. A lot of junk mail. One from a friend. Then her eyes lit up. My God. She actually heard from *him*.

She read the short note: *Loved meeting you on the plane. Can't wait to have lunch. Let me know what day is good for you. Jeremy.*

She time-traveled back to that day they met. She'd been visiting her folks. She was tired and crabby, waiting to see if she could even get a seat on the plane. Flying standby was inexpensive, but it had its downside, too.

Coach had been full. But the good news was she got to fly first-class.

She found her seat, settled in. The one seat on the plane that was still empty was the seat next to hers.

*Great*, she thought, resting back in the seat. *I was the last person to board. I get to sit alone. I can sleep on the way home.*

Then a man appeared standing next to her.

"Hate to bother you," he said. "But can I get in and sit down?"

She didn't pay much attention to him at first. It wasn't like her to chitchat with strangers on planes. She planned on sleeping on this flight; it was a long one. But she never slept. The two of them talked the entire time.

He was gorgeous. Those eyes. So gentle and deep. He was intelligent. Sensitive. He had read some of her favorite books. And that suit. It reeked of money and success. She loved powerful men.

The only problem was he was married. With kids.

She was surprised when he asked for a date. "I don't believe in dating married men," she had said.

"We don't have to make a big deal out of it. I like your company. We can just meet for lunch," he replied.

Marissa thought about it. What she did next surprised even her. “Here’s my e-mail address. Get in touch with me if you’d like.”

She paused. Then smiled. “I can always say no.”

She didn’t think she’d hear from him. And not this soon. She read the e-mail a couple of times, then picked up the telephone receiver and called her best friend. She told her all about him: handsome, successful, sensitive, and married with kids.

“Hold on,” Marissa said when her friend started hollering. “That’s why I didn’t give him my phone number. I told him I thought it was wrong.”

“It is,” her friend replied. “And I’m not willing to put up with you when you get all crazy and guilty because you’ve violated your standards.”

“But we’re only talking about lunch,” Marissa said. “What’s the harm in that?”

“Tell me all about it, then,” her friend said. “Go ahead. Project. Tell me exactly what’s going to happen at lunch. Think ahead, Marissa. Tell me what’s going to take place.”

“We’ll meet at the restaurant. Probably some quiet place.”

“What are you going to order? Spaghetti and meatballs?”

Marissa thought about it. “I probably won’t order much. Something easy to eat.”

“Why?” her friend asked.

“Because it’s embarrassing to chow down in front of a man.”

“Not if he’s just a friend,” her friend said. “So what happens next?”

“We’ll talk for a while, then go out to the parking lot.”

“Then what?” her friend said.

The whole picture became clear. It ran through Marissa’s mind. She didn’t have to say any more. It wasn’t about lunch. The date was about sex. That handsome, gorgeous hunk with the sensitive eyes was really the devil wearing an Armani suit.

“Thanks,” Marissa said.

“No problem,” her friend said.

Marissa walked over to the computer, deleted the e-mail, and blocked any more messages coming from that address. What helped Marissa was a good friend who was willing to play truth and consequence.

Cause and effect is a game of ironies.

To keep it – whatever *it* is – we've got to give it away. To walk through the door, we need to hold it open for others and let them walk through first.

The real irony of learning to successfully – or as successfully as possible for human beings – play the game is a secret I've spent most of my life trying to learn. In some situations, yes, do what feels right and do what you think. But the voice of reason and intuition often speaks much more softly than the voice that eggs us into drama, addiction and troublemaking. You know that one. It likes to light matches and play with fire.

Besides the hard calls we make, there's another kind, too. It's the little ones we face each day: do the right thing, or stir up the pot. Do the next thing, or sit and sulk. Relax and let go, or obsess. Pick up the phone, call someone, and be of service, or dwell on how stuck and miserable you feel. Feel, or go numb. Do something that feels gentle, nurturing, and nice, or sit and torture ourselves.

We have times when we genuinely don't know what to do next. Confusion runs rampant. But every so often we get this little troublemaking voice egging us on. Making the hard calls isn't just doing the opposite of what we think; often it's doing the opposite of what that troublemaking part of us suggests we do next.

People get bored. We can sit in the dark. Light matches and play with fire. Or we can use our free will to play the game of cause and effect by making the little hard calls that bring light into life.

Stomp. Scream. Cry. Tell someone how it feels. Talk it out, reason it through first.

*The hardest person to be honest with is usually ourselves.*

**Here I will think of a time I took action that was in line with my values. What were the circumstances? What made me decide to do the right thing? How did it feel?**

**Taking action in line with my values (continued)**



# Put Out Fires

From *Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time*

By Rick Hanson

In your heart, right now, you know if there are any vital matters that you're not dealing with: a harm or threat that's not being addressed, or a major lost opportunity. These are real alarms, and you need to listen to them.

For example, there could be unpaid bills on the verge of harming your credit score, a teenager who's increasingly disrespectful and defiant – or caught in the undertow of a depressed mood – month after month without much exercise, a marriage that's unraveling thread by thread, abuse of alcohol or drugs, a co-worker who keeps undermining you, chronic overeating, or a nagging sense that there's something wrong with your health.

Quickly or slowly, “fires” like these will singe a life, and sometimes burn it to the ground.

If something's urgent – such as a clogged toilet, a letter from the IRS, a lump in an armpit – most people will get after it right away. But what if it's important-but-not-urgent – an issue or goal that you can always put off dealing with for one more day? It's easy to let these first smolder – but in the end, they're the ones that usually cost you the most. You still know they're out there; they cast a shadow you can feel in your gut. And eventually their consequences always come home – sometimes during your last years, when you look back on your life and consider what you wish you'd done differently.

On the other hand, when you come to grips with important things, even if they're not urgent, that unease in the belly goes away. You feel good about yourself, doing what you can and making your life better.

## HOW

Open to an intuition, a sense, of whatever you may have pushed to the back burner that truly needs attending. Consider your health, finances, relationships, well-being, and (if this is meaningful to you) spiritual life. Notice any reluctance to face significant unmet needs – it's normal to feel guilty or anxious about them – and see if you can release it.

Ask yourself: what gets in the way of you addressing important-but-not-urgent matters in a typical day? What do you finesse or manage each day but never solve once and for all? Or what do you keep postponing altogether? What's not actually getting better no matter how much you hope it will?

Write down the name(s) of the important thing(s) you need to address. Tell a trusted person about this. Make it real for yourself that this issue *matters*. Face it. Keep facing it.

Bring to mind some of the many benefits that will come to you and others if you tackle this issue. Help them be vivid in your mind. See how your days will improve, how you'll sleep better, feel better, and love better. Open to your heart's longing for those benefits. Let the benefits call you, drawing you like honey does a bee.

Also bring to mind the short and long-term costs to you and others of this issue continuing to smolder away. Be honest with yourself – willing to feel guilt, remorse, or shame in order to do the so honorable, so hard thing of looking squarely at these costs.

Feeling the benefits, and feeling the costs, make a choice: Are you going to put out this fire? Or wait another day?

When you choose to confront this issue, open to feeling good about that.

Then get to work. You don't need to have a complete plan to get started. Just know the first step or two – such as talking about the issue with a friend or therapist, gathering information (e.g., assessing a health concern), seeing a professional, doing one or more small positive actions each day, or getting structured support from others (e.g., a buddy to exercise with, a regular AA meeting). If you're stuck, you don't need a more perfect plan; you need to take imperfect action. The breakthrough will come when you *commit* to addressing an issue and then *structure* ongoing support and action toward that end.

If you find yourself procrastinating or getting bogged down, imagine that you are looking back on your life as you near its end. From that perspective, what will you be glad that you did?

**Here I will become quiet and still, and let one issue surface. It will probably be the very first thing that enters my mind. What is one next step I can take to act on it?**

**How do I think it will feel to complete that action? Why?**

**Now I will become quiet and still once again, asking my Inner Wisdom, “Is there anything else for me to know?”**

# The Four Approaches

From *The Reality Slap*

By Russ Harris

When reality hits us hard, we tend to retreat. This is only to be expected; it's what comes naturally. We use what methods we know to try to escape – anything from movies and music to drinking and drugs. And even if we escape for only a moment, the relief is huge. However, a life lived in retreat is not fulfilling. At the same time, if we spend our days in a constant fight with reality, we will soon be exhausted. So if we want to thrive in the face of a huge reality gap, we have no choice but to stand for something in the face of it – to open ourselves to life as it is in this moment and stand for something that matters deep in our heart.

The capacity for humans to live rich and meaningful lives in the midst of great adversity is often referred to as “resilience.” There is a wealth of scientific research on resilience, but we can boil most of it down to a simple formula, which I have appropriately labeled, “The Resilience Formula.” (You may notice some similarities between this formula and the famous “Serenity Prayer” that is very popular in twelve-step programs.)

## **The Resilience Formula: Four Approaches to Any Problematic Situation**

In any problematic situation, there are four possible approaches to consider:

1. Leave the situation.
2. Stay, and change what can be changed.
3. Stay, accept what can't be changed, and live by your values.
4. Stay, give up trying, and do things that make the situation worse.

Let's take a look at each in turn.

### **Leave the Situation**

To leave the situation is not always an option. For example, if you happen to be in prison, you can't just walk away. But, if you're in a lousy marriage, or a lousy job, or a lousy neighborhood, then it's worth asking whether your overall quality of life would be better if

you left than if you stayed. Of course, you can never know this for certain, but you can make a reasonable prediction based on what has happened up to this point.

### **Stay, and Change What Can Be Changed**

You may discount the first option for all sorts of reasons. For example, some people, no matter how bad their marriage may be, are unwilling to break their wedding vows. They *could* leave, but they choose not to. So if you choose to stay in a difficult situation (or if you have no choice but to stay), then do whatever you possibly can to improve it. In other words, if there's any way to close this reality gap (without creating new ones that are even bigger), then take action to close it.

Clearly, there are some reality gaps we *can't* close, like the death of a loved one, or a permanent disability. But many reality gaps *can* be closed – at least to some degree. If we're unfit or overweight, if we have an addiction, or if we're in a financial crisis, we *can* do something about these gaps. And, of course, there are some reality gaps where we just don't know for certain whether they can or can't be closed. In these cases, the only way to find out is to try our best to close them and see what happens.

Now, whether the gap can or can't be closed, we are still faced with the necessity of action; or as long as we're still breathing, life goes on. So the choice is this: Do we actively choose the direction we wish to take, or do we passively go along for the ride? Not surprising, the greatest vitality lies in choosing to act in line with our deepest values – to steer our life forward in some meaningful direction.

So, how do we do this? We use our values to help us set some goals. We set short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals to get us closer to the life we want to live... Then, once we've set some goals, we take action!

Alas, we can't know in advance if we'll achieve our goals, but we *can* start taking action right away. The moment we do, we will experience a sense of empowerment and vitality – a sense of embracing life and making the most of it instead of letting it pass us by.

### **Stay, and Accept What Can't Be Changed, and Live by Your Values**

If you've chosen to stay (or you have to stay) and you've taken every action possible to improve the situation, then practice acceptance. Accept all those painful feelings: open up and make room for them. Accept that your mind will have lots to say that's unhelpful; defuse from all those harsh judgments and self-defeating stories and give them plenty of space to come, stay, and go in their own good time. Pull yourself out of the smog and engage in the present. Choose to live by your values and engage fully in life irrespective of the challenges you face.

(Note: Options two and three generally occur simultaneously. I have listed them in this order to emphasize the importance of taking action. Also, keep in mind that if you *do* choose the first option (to leave), then practice options two and three as you leave: change what can be changed, accept what can't be changed, and live by your values.)

### **Stay, and Give Up Trying, and Do Things That Make the Situation Worse**

We've all chosen option four at times in our lives. Most of us do it repeatedly! All too often, we stay in a problematic situation, but we don't do everything possible to improve it, nor do we practice acceptance and living by our values. Instead, we do things that make the situation worse – we may worry, ruminate, and blame; we may pace up and down, kick the wall, yell and rant and cry; we may turn to drugs or alcohol or even double-coated Tim Tams! We may pick quarrels with our loved ones or wear them down with our complaining, hopelessness, or bitterness. We may withdraw from the world, lie in bed, or zone out in front of the TV. We may put our life on hold and let the problem consume all our waking moments. We may even resort to self-harm or suicide. And all this does is suck the life right out of us. There is no fulfillment to be found in option four.

**At this time I will consider a problematic situation – it doesn't matter whether it's a big problem or a small problem. I will explain the situation here.**

**Which approach(s) are my best option(s)? Why?**

**What questions do I need to ask?**

**What steps can I take?**

**How does this reflect taking a stand for what is important to me?**



# My Heart

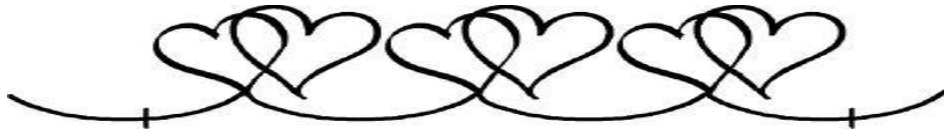
From *Prayers to the Great Creator: Prayers and Declarations for a Meaningful Life*

By Julia Cameron

The heart has dreams and hopes it hides from public view. The heart has secret sorrows, private woes. Listening to my heart, I must listen with gentle ears. If I judge too harshly, my heart will not speak of disappointments and their pain will remain. My heart requires my tenderness to speak its secrets. My heart rewards my love by being the true compass by which I may steer my life.

*Today, my heart is safe within my keeping.  
I offer my heart compassionate ears to hear its dreams.*

**What is my heart whispering to me today?**



## My Prayer

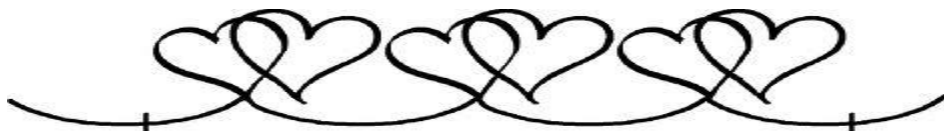
From *Prayers for Healing: 365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World*

By Rabindranath Tagore, Edited by Maggie Oman

Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers  
but to be fearless in facing them.

Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain  
but for the heart to conquer it.

Let me not crave in anxious fear to be saved  
but hope for the patience to win my freedom.



# Home Study for Week 8

## WRITING

- Week 8 Workbook:** Read and respond in writing to the Week 8 articles and exercises.
- Please be ready to share your thoughts, ideas, and revelations for all your writings in class.

## FINAL THOUGHT PAPER: “Appreciating My Life”

Be prepared to present your final project, which is an oral presentation of a thought paper entitled, “Appreciating My Life.” Using *specific, real-life examples*, address the following:

*I have practiced honoring myself with compassion and standing in my emotions. I have done my best to be fully present with whatever is in front of me, standing in my values in the midst of it.*

- With all this in mind, what do I appreciate about my life and who I am today?
- How did I come to appreciate these aspects of my life?
- What is my intention for the future?

Your Thought Paper will last five minutes. You can read your paper or talk about it. Optional: You may also include drawings, photos, poems or any other visual representation of your personal experience.

**SNACKS:** Please feel free to bring light snacks for the break, if you'd like.



*Challenges come so we can grow and be prepared for things we are not equipped to handle now. When we face our challenges with faith, prepared to learn, willing to make changes, and if necessary, to let go, we are demanding our power be turned on.*

- Iyanla Vanzant

## Week 8

# Making the Most of It

*Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word 'happy' would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness.*

- Carl Jung

### **This Week**

This week we congratulate ourselves for dropping anchor and holding ourselves kindly, for taking a stand and doing our best to live by our values. Now we take a look at the whole of our lives, not just the struggles. We seek to take nothing for granted, from noticing and appreciating the small everyday things in life to acknowledging how far we've come.

*Our own life is the instrument with which we experiment with the truth.*

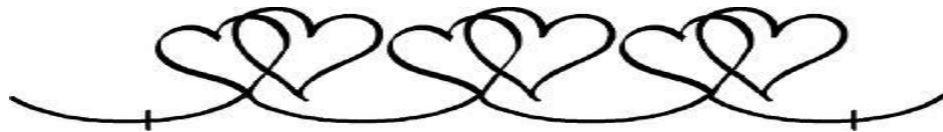
- Thich Nhat Hanh

*How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these.*

- George Washington Carver

*If you're going through hell, keep going.*

- Winston Churchill



## **What is true for *me* about making the most of it?**

**Even in the middle of life's challenges, am I able to notice and appreciate what is around me? Can I notice my whole life and not just the challenge? Can I actually find a sense of fulfillment and purpose in the midst of my pain? Am I willing to "stop and smell the flowers" and find something to appreciate, even while I am hurting? What might happen if I choose to be who I want to be right smack in the middle of my life – can I then appreciate *me*?**

**Knowing that this is my personal workbook with no right or wrong answers, I use these pages for some beginning thoughts about making the most of whatever is in my life today.**

**Making the most of whatever is in my life today (continued)**

**Making the most of whatever is in my life today (continued)**





# Gaining a New Perspective

From *The Unmistakable Touch of Grace*

By Cheryl Richardson

Sometimes the influence of grace offers us a new perspective that shifts our beliefs or way of being in the world. This was the case for me during a cross-country flight to California. Having survived a horrible flight with my parents in my early twenties, I was a nervous flyer (to say the least). Back then, our plane hit severe turbulence and dropped several hundred feet. Everyone on board began screaming, and I can still remember praying out loud, convinced that the plane was going down.

Several years later I was on another flight, reading a copy of Harold Kushner's book, *Who Needs God*. Suddenly the plane hit bumpy air. I continued reading, breathing slowly to try and relax. But soon after, the turbulence got worse and the plane began rocking back and forth. The memory of my earlier flight kicked in and I started to panic. I began to pray, asking repeatedly for God to intervene and stop the turbulence so I could avoid a full-blown panic attack. But it only got worse. That's when I started bargaining.

I began to recite every prayer I could remember from my childhood in hopes of purchasing my emotional freedom. I was terrified and on the verge of becoming sick. The turbulence continued. After several minutes, I gave up praying and resigned myself to the fact that I just might die (the ultimate form of surrender). I picked up my book and started reading in an attempt to distract myself from my fear. It was at this moment that I was blessed by the comfort of grace.

At the exact point where I had left off in the book, Kushner began to describe the kind of relationship most people have with God. He suggested that many of us treat God like Santa Claus, asking for favors or to be relieved from hardship and pain. Instead of asking God to remove our painful circumstances, he recommended that we pray for the courage and spiritual fortitude to deal with them.

As I read his words, I instantly felt calmer. A wave of peace washed over me, and in spite of the turbulence, I started to relax. Then I refocused my prayers. I quietly asked for the courage to withstand the rough ride regardless of how long it lasted. It worked. Although the flight continued to be bumpy, I arrived at my destination with my emotional well-being intact.

Besides being an experience of grace, this incidence provided one of my earliest lessons on the link between surrendering and receiving divine support. Kushner's advice also spurred a critical shift in my relationship with a Higher Power. To this day, whenever I catch myself

equating God with Santa, I remind myself to pray for something far more powerful – the courage and patience to hang in there while my faith is being restored.

**When have I prayed for – and had the courage and fortitude – to move through a challenging time? Here I will write about a situation I haven't considered yet. It can be as simple as being nervous about doing something for the first time.**

# It's Never Too Late

From *The Reality Slap*

By Russ Harris

My dad was a fairly typical guy for his generation. He looked after his kids in the traditional ways: he worked hard to pay the bills and ensured that his six children all had food and clothes, a roof over their head, and a good education. He was very kind and loving in his own way. And, like most men of his generation (and many men of my own), he was terrified of intimacy – the psychological and emotional kind.

To be emotionally and psychologically intimate with another human requires two things:

1. You need to open up and be real, let the other person in, and share your true thoughts and feelings instead of hiding them away.
2. You need to create a space for the other person to do likewise – to be warm, open, and accepting enough that they too can be real and open with you.

My dad never wanted to talk about anything deeply personal. He liked to make intellectual small talk: to exchange facts, figures, and ideas; to discuss movies and books and science. This was all well and good – we had plenty of enjoyable conversations – but it meant that I never got to know him very well. I never got to know about the feelings he struggled with, his hopes and dreams, his setbacks and failures, his most important life experiences and what he had learned from them. I never got to know what made him frightened or angry or insecure or sad or guilty. I knew virtually nothing of his interior world.

At the age of seventy-eight, he developed lung cancer, but he didn't tell me. So, knowing nothing of his diagnosis, I went on a six-week trip overseas. Before I left, my dad had a full head of thick white hair, but when I got back, he was totally bald. He didn't tell me that all his hair had fallen out due to the chemotherapy he'd been having. Instead, he told me he'd shaved off his hair because it was fashionable and he thought it made him look younger. And I believed him.

Of course, as he got sicker and frailer, the true story emerged. But even then, he didn't want to talk about his cancer, or the treatment, or his fears. And every time I tried to talk about it, he changed the subject or went quiet.

Not knowing how long he would live, I tried to tell him what he meant to me as a father: how much I loved him, the role he had played in my life, the ways he had inspired me, the most useful things he had taught me, and the fondest memories I had of him. But he was so

uncomfortable with such conversations, especially as my eyes would usually brim with tears, that he would end them almost as soon as they started.

Miraculously, he recovered from the cancer. I hoped this brush with death would help him to open up a little, but I was disappointed. He remained as closed off as he'd always been, if not more so.

Three years later, at the age of eighty-one, he had a heart attack. He had major blockages in several coronary arteries, and he required open-heart surgery. The operation carried a significant risk of death. Talking to him shortly before the operation, I tried once again to share with him what he meant to me as a father. As usual, tears welled up in my eyes – tears of both love and sadness – and he instantly closed off. He turned away and said, in a stern voice, “Hush now. And wipe away those tears.”

Dad survived the operation, but it knocked him around. He had one complication after another, and he spent most of the next year in the hospital. Toward the end of that year, he became increasingly weak and more and more demoralized. And he still would not allow me to talk to him on an intimate level. Eventually, he decided he had had enough of life and chose to stop taking all his medication. Being a doctor himself, he knew exactly what this meant: effectively he was killing himself. He knew full well that, once the medication ceased, he would have only a few days to live. And even knowing this, he still refused to let me tell him how much I loved him and what he meant to me.

In the last hours of his life, Dad started hallucinating. But in between the hallucinations, he had lucid periods of several minutes in which he would be fully conscious, mentally alert, and in touch with reality. During one of these periods, I tried one last time to tell him what he meant to me and how much I loved him. I was a blubbing mess: tears streaming down my face and snot bubbling out of my nose. And, to my utter amazement, Dad turned and looked deep into my eyes. His face lit up with a radiant smile, full of kindness and compassion, and he took my hands in his and he listened intently to everything I had to say, never once turning away or interrupting. After I had finished sobbing and blowing my nose and telling him everything I'd been wanting to tell him for years, he said, in a voice full of tenderness and love, “Thank you.” And then he added, “I love you, too.”



I tell this story to make two key points... The first is that small changes can have a profound impact. My dad did not transform his personality; all he did was make one small change: he made the effort to stay present and open. And, even though the whole episode only lasted a few minutes, that one small change gave rise to a beautiful and loving experience that I'll remember fondly until the day I die.

Our society bombards us with the notion that, if we wish to find lasting fulfillment, we have to dramatically overhaul our life, radically transform our personality, or fundamentally alter the way we think (or even do all three!) The problem is that, when we buy into these notions, they don't usually help us; commonly, all that happens is we end up placing enormous pressure on ourselves. We push ourselves harder and harder to be different and

better than we are – and we beat ourselves up for not meeting our own expectations. Sadly, rather than raising us up, this just brings us down.

So why not lighten the load? Why not take the pressure off ourselves? Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was a rich and meaningful life. Why not relax a little? Take baby steps. Go slowly. And remember the moral of Aesop's much-loved tale of the crow and the pitcher: "Little by little does the trick."

Trying to make huge changes in a short space of time is almost always a recipe for failure. Occasionally we might manage it, but far more commonly we don't. However, small changes, over time, can make an enormous difference. To quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

The second important point of this story is that it's never too late to start making these little changes. Of course, your mind may not agree with that. The human mind is a bit like a "reason-giving machine": it is brilliant at coming up with all sorts of reason explaining why we can't change, shouldn't change, or shouldn't have to change, and one of its favorites is "It's too late! I can't change now. That's the way I am. That's the way I've always been." But we don't have to buy into such thoughts. Instead of seeing ourselves as "carved in stone," we can acknowledge that we have a never-ending capacity to learn and grow and act and think differently. All we need to do is tune into our hearts and ask ourselves, "What's one tiny change I could make? What small adjustment could I make in what I say, what I do, or how I think that would bring me closer to being the person I want to be?"

I wish my dad had made his change a bit earlier instead of waiting until he was on his deathbed. But I am so grateful for his precious parting gift: he opened up, stayed present, and allowed me to share my true feelings with him. And he did this *willingly*. It is such a beautiful memory, both heartwarming and heartrending at the same time. And it's a powerful reminder that as long as we're still breathing, it's not too late to change.

**"Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."**

- Desmond Tutu

**How can I do a little bit of good where I am?**

**How can I do a little bit of good where I am? (continued)**

**What's one tiny change I could make? What small adjustment could I make in what I say, what I do, or how I think that would bring me closer to being the person I want to be?**

# The Next Right Thing

From *A Life of Being, Having, and Doing Enough*

By Wayne Muller

We make only one choice.

Throughout our lives, we do only one thing – again and again, moment by moment, year after year. It is how we live our days, and it is how we shape our lives.

The choice is this: What is the next right thing for us to do?

Where, in this moment, shall we choose to place our time and attention? Do we stay or move, speak or keep silent, attend to this person, that task, move in this or that direction?

With each succeeding moment, we make a new choice. After each decision, there is another. And another. These are not enormous choices, decisions about whether to change careers, get married, or move to a new city. Our choices are small, quiet, intimate things that flow from us as water tumbling into the next, creating a small stream that somehow, with neither a map nor a plan, through surprising twists and curving around unforeseen obstacles, somehow inevitably finds its way down the mountain to the sea.

If we follow our tiny stream, we will see that at every turn it makes a choice, to go right or left, over or around, or to pool up for a while, waiting to spill over. The stream knows nothing of what is ahead, is not conscious of planning for the future. It simply follows the path of least resistance, motivated by gravity. Still, how does the water “decide” to go right or left when approaching a boulder or fallen tree? Somehow, inch by inch, choices are made, perhaps joining other rivulets or creeks along the way, and by the end of the journey, if we look back, we witness the gradual, evolving birth of the stream.

The stream is born of an ongoing relationship. Through a never-ending conversation between water, gravity, obstacles, and earth, a relationship is born that, over time, gives birth to the astonishing miracle of what we call stream. This ancient and elemental relationship between water and earth creates all the streams that saturate the world.

So it is with our lives. The only choice we make – what is the next right thing to do – responds to a similarly vital inner gravity, an invisible thread that shapes our life, as our life meets the world. Every single choice we make, no matter how small, is the ground where *who we are* meets *what is in the world*. And the fruits of that essential relationship – the intimate, fertile conversation between our own heart's wisdom and the way the world has emerged before us – becomes a lifelong practice of deep and sacred listening for the next right thing we are required to do. We make the only choice that feels authentic and honest,

necessary and true in that moment. Like our stream, our life, when we look back, carves its own course, our own river, curved and shaped by love and loss, joy and sorrow, gratitude and grace. In the end, we join our stream with the streams of so many others, as our lives spill into some unimaginably limitless ocean of enough, the easy contentment and sufficiency of a life well lived.

We cannot hope to create enough of anything in an instant. A life that becomes spacious and full is a life made of moments chosen carefully, decisions that each, one by one, lean into an abiding trust in the power of life, the fecundity of love, and the wholeness of our own heart's wisdom. Each choice that feels like the only and perfectly next right thing plants a tiny seed of ease and well-being in our day...

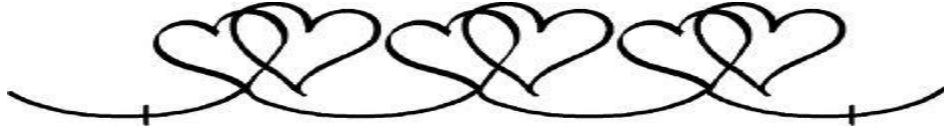
The magnificent Irish poet John O'Donohue, rascal, wizard, and friend, recently passed away. He left us, among so many precious, impossibly beautiful moments, these words:

FLUENT

I would love to live  
Like a river flows,  
Carried by the surprise  
Of its own unfolding.

**What is the next right thing for me to do *in this moment*?**





# Thought

From *Prayers for Healing: 365 Blessings, Poems and Meditations from Around the World*

By The Buddha, Edited by Maggie Oman

The thought manifests as the word;  
The word manifests as the deed;  
The deed develops into habit;  
And habit hardens into character.

So watch the thought and its ways with care,  
And let it spring from love  
Born out of concern for all beings.

