# Table of Contents

At Our Best: We Are A Work In Progress ................................................. 4
Creating Bright Spots ............................................................................. 5
Born Free — The Polar Bear Next Door .................................................. 10
How Do We Know When We Know ........................................................ 12
The Truth of Happiness ......................................................................... 15
Part I: Identifying the Mood Within ....................................................... 17
Part II: Saying Goodbye to Resignation .................................................. 19
The Courage of a Lion ............................................................................. 21
Life on the Highway .............................................................................. 23
A Banquet Called Yummy ........................................................................ 27
A Prescription for Avoiding Pain .............................................................. 30
Shifting Sands ....................................................................................... 32
Good Friends .......................................................................................... 34
A Flash of Anger .................................................................................... 36
The Eyes Of Spring ............................................................................... 39
Deep Roots ............................................................................................ 42
Busted Pipes .......................................................................................... 45
A Perfect Storm ...................................................................................... 48
Behold Deep Beauty ............................................................................... 52
Creating Bright Spots .......................................................................... 56
Giving Up The Struggle ......................................................................... 60
Kicking Butt! .......................................................................................... 63
Powerful Moments .................................................................................. 66
Balancing Life — Again! ......................................................................... 69
A Natural Pause ....................................................................................... 72
Collecting Life’s Nectar .......................................................................... 73
Heavy Packing ....................................................................................... 76
Progress Along The Path ......................................................................... 79
Lessons From The Heart ......................................................................... 82
Puppy Love ............................................................................................ 85
Dog Days Of Summer ............................................................................ 88
Christmas In August ............................................................................... 91
Dancing In The Rain ........................................................................................................94
Stuck In A Rut .................................................................................................................97
Barely Breathing .............................................................................................................100
Behind The Wheel ..........................................................................................................103
Corridor of Uncertainty .................................................................................................106
My Season Of Change .....................................................................................................109
Warmed By The Sun .........................................................................................................112
Exploring True Love .........................................................................................................114
Buying Beauty ..................................................................................................................117
My Own Brand Of Success ............................................................................................120
Sharing The Gift Of Hope ...............................................................................................124
Mending The Fine China Cup ..........................................................................................127
The Green-Eyed Dragon .................................................................................................131
Creating My Life ..............................................................................................................133
Dead Batteries And Behaviors .......................................................................................136
Super-highway To Creativity ..........................................................................................139
Finding My Space ............................................................................................................143
The Gift Of Healthy Anger .............................................................................................145
The Healing Power Of Compassion................................................................................149
Beauty Of Forgiveness ....................................................................................................153
Who Am I? .....................................................................................................................157
Leaving The Comfortable ...............................................................................................161
The Heart Of The Matter ..................................................................................................165
Riding Rain Clouds ..........................................................................................................169
Warning: Danger? ............................................................................................................171
Finding My Path To Acceptance .....................................................................................174
Coming Home To Myself .................................................................................................178
In Thanksgiving ...............................................................................................................182
My Hopeful Heart ............................................................................................................186
Darkness Before The Light .............................................................................................189
Unfolding The Gift Of Anxiety .......................................................................................192
The Gift Of My Beloved .................................................................................................195
Applying Fresh Paint ......................................................................................................198
Balancing My Wholeness: Masculine And Feminine .....................................................202
Giddy and Focused: Simultaneous Magic .................................................................206
At Our Best: We Are A Work In Progress

As a young woman I never thought about progress or possibilities. My dreams were small – of being a hair stylist or stewardess. My journey has been defined by what I didn’t want rather then what I wanted. At 18 I knew I didn’t want to be married; I didn’t want to have babies any time soon. I lived in reaction to life. I matured into adulthood, graduated from school, began my career and married. I was happy.

Within the first six months of my 39th year, my husband died of brain cancer and my father had a fatal heart attack. True to my past, I had fashioned my life in reaction to others; I was my husband’s wife and my father’s daughter. And when they were both gone, I found I didn’t know who I was. Who was the person who embodied those roles?

So began the mid-life journey of discovering who I am and what new and wildly exciting things might be possible for the new and progressed version of myself.

I still take on the role of my husband’s wife but I am no longer just the roles I play. I am someone who is insightful, honest, ethical and truthful. I’m compassionate, thoughtful, a good listener. I’m very reflective and very strong of spirit. I’m a decent writer and when I speak, people listen. I’m becoming aware of my strong presence and my ability to lead. I’m aware of the prevalence of self-doubt and the fear I’ve felt over the years. Best of all, I’ve learned that I am a work in progress and, once aware of the negative self-talk, I’ve fired the internal critic that denies my worth and learned to treat myself gently.
It’s been a week since I read about it, but like a song that has captivated your mind, the concept of ‘bright spots’ keeps circling back into my consciousness. I’ve learned over the years that when my mind, like a dog with a bone, holds fast on an idea or a concept, there is something there for me to learn. I was turned on to the new book *Switch*, by Chip & Dan Heath, by my husband and two friends. With the third invitation, I knew I had to read it but I had no idea how captivating it would be for me. Like a lone voice calling out in the wilderness of life, I’m so glad that I heard it and responded to the call.

The book is about how to create change. It is not a Pollyanna practice of only ‘being happy’. Heavens knows that if we could just do that, we would all do it! Its for those who realize that change is inevitable, but growth is optional. According to the Heaths, you reeve-up the engine of change by identifying someone who has already successfully implemented the change you want; then identify one or two critical behaviors, or ‘bright spots,’ that made the change possible, and implement those behaviors into your life. The process has you move beyond analysis or paralysis by focusing on the behaviors responsible for the success.

The ‘bright spot’ concept was used by a school psychologist to help Bobby, a ninth grader who was referred to him for his bad behavior: he was late, rarely did his work, was disruptive and sometimes made loud threats. By exploring with Bobby where he was when he didn’t get into trouble as much, the psychologist was able to identify the one teacher whose behavior naturally encouraged Bobby. When Bobby came into that teacher’s room, she always greeted him, gave him work he could do and checked with him to make sure he understood the instructions. By having other teachers implement the behavioral “bright spots” of Bobby’s day, the number of times that he was sent to the office declined by 80%. I wonder, “If finding and implementing ‘bright spots’ worked for Bobby, could it help me reeve up my ability to live life fully with lightness and enjoyment!” Certainly it is a question worth pondering!

I’m naturally serious, and I’m seriously not happy about that! I’ve made progress over the years; I’m no longer the terminally serious person I was in my forties. But still, no one would call me light and my tendency is to falter on the side of being overly solemn and cautious. I’m like a doe in the wild with her ears fully cocked listening, tensed and ready to bolt. There is no levity in survival of the fittest! It’s served me well over the years, but my definition of success has changed. I’m concerned now with *how I live my life* rather than what I might have achieved along the way. Like a meadow of blue bonnets, over time the field that is my life has been overgrown with my own vigilance. It’s not like I haven’t been working on lightening up. I’ve taken improv classes and studied to be a clown; and there were moments of lightness along the way, but I can’t learn lightness by *taking a class*. On the journey of life, as far as lightness is concerned, I’m the tortoise, plodding along. What I do know is that more of the same will get me more of the same and I’m just not interested in the status quo. If there is a game out there that will have me laughing more, or swimming with the current rather than struggling against it, then sign me up.
When I look for people who have a natural lightness and who are predisposed to enjoy life, my mother Velma and my granddaughters Cassandra and Stella come instantly to mind. With my granddaughters it’s their natural exuberance and playfulness that attracts me. There is no concern for image or what others think. Life is a mystery that is unfolding in front of their eyes and they experience it with mirth and wonder. With them I’m relearning to find fun in the ordinary; to run in the rain and splash around in puddles, to wear wings and colorful outrageous things. When I’m with them, I naturally move into lightness.

My mother reared ten children and lived her life fully. On her 75\textsuperscript{th} birthday party she surprised us all by greeting her family and guests dressed from head to toe as Broom Hilda, the black witch of the west; with her broom stick in one hand, and a glass of white zinfandel in the other. It is how she lived every day that most inspires me. I recall my parent’s playfulness and teasing around dinnertime most nights. There would be jokes and banter regarding the twenty-five cents that they bet on their nightly cribbage game. Val would playfully hit my father with a kitchen towel if he was slow to ante up; or chase him around the kitchen table until the quarter was deposited in her hand. Her sense of humor and her natural ability to see life as a glass as half full is the behaviors that was foundational to my learning to lessen the grip of the handle bars of the sturdy bike of life as I learned to ride. Because I had the blessing of experiencing the world from half full eyes, I quickly learned to ride the bike of life with two hands resting lightly on the handle bars and with years of conscious work, sometimes able to let go with
one hand and that, my dear friends, is real progress. My goal is to live life fully; to ride with two hands up in the air, with a grin as wide as Texas, joyfully sending flying kisses to all passerby’s.

Under the most trying situations, my mother was at her best. She never panicked or played out negative scenarios or looked for villains to blame. Instead she highlighted what was working, and stayed focused on that. A seminal crisis in our life was when my father lost his job at Westinghouse when he was 54 years old, because the plant was moving to Ohio. He had joined that corporation right out of high school and was there when they finally shut the door and turned out the lights for good. During the months of working odd jobs and having his world turned upside down; my father’s naturally cheerful mood was heavily weighted down by doubt and uncertainty. It was a traumatic time in his life, and it could have been a very difficult time for each of us as well, but it wasn’t. Up-beat as ever her response was “we don’t have debt; we own our house and car so we only need money for food right now.” There was no crying or gnashing of teeth. There was no belittling of my father or berating of his ability to provide for his family of twelve. She kept things light and focused on what was working.

My plan is to focus my energies on expanding on the areas of lightness and increased enjoyment. I only need to identify one or two new behaviors that I can do every day to transform that scrawny, emaciated little muscle of lightness into a bulked and toned lean beach body machine. Because change only happens with daily practice, I’ll start and end each day by counting my blessings; ten items two times a day will have me seeing the world as half full. My second behavioral change will be increase my awareness of the color yellow by seeking out the myriads of yellow that is in front of me as I drive or go for a walk. With each sighting, I’ll take a deep breath, relax back into myself, and smile. I’ll let the warmth of the color yellow warm and melt my natural clutching hands that want to hold on tightly to life. Besides, yellow is a happy color!

Since my granddaughters live in New York, and I don’t have the luxury of spending lots of time with them, I’ll have to find other ways to ratchet up my playful side. Fortunately I still have the two second graders that I mentor each year to help me reconnect with the exuberance of childhood, but school is out for the summer and so I need to find something now. My husband suggested that I learn to tell a joke and that is so out of my comfort zone that it feels like it would be easier to climb Mt. Everest. Experimenting with what I can do differently to learn to let go of the reins of life, after Tae Kwon Do class today, I attempted to do a cartwheel. It wasn’t pretty, but I’ve decided that I will relearn how to do that again. The first attempt was bad, but like Casey at the bat, I’ll swing at it again. The result was not funny or light, but there was a freedom I experienced that will suffice for now in doing something that I would otherwise back away from doing for fear of looking silly and there is enjoyment in that!

Shifting my attention from what could go wrong to what is right and light, changes what I see and informs and happily colors my attitude toward life. The land of my dreams is in my sight and getting there is worth any new effort.
I expend along the way. When I falter, and being human I will, I will laugh at my human condition, celebrate the recognition and return to my daily practice of seeing and celebrating the color yellow and learning a cartwheel. Like a lighthouse on the rocky shores of a distant but light land, the practice of continually refocusing on the ‘bright spots’ of seeing my glass half full and finding lightness in the here and now, will illuminate my way and make the journey more enjoyable. Now that is a ‘bright spot’ worth lighting up about.

Like other spiritual pilgrims, I’ve been blessed with fabulous spiritual guides and teachers who have helped me make sense of many aspects of my life’s journey. I’ve invested thousands of hours in reflection and the richness of this contemplation has positively played out in shifting my own negative patterns, like self doubt and pleasing others, to a more generative and authentic response to life in general.

Grounded in who I am, I’m exploring new possibilities. Over the years I’ve practiced yoga, meditated and journaled; all of which advanced my personal and professional exploration. A year ago I took on the practice of Tao Kwon Do to experience the physical power of my body. This December, at 63, I was the first blue belt ever chosen to present in the end of year Black Belt demonstration.

Now I am exploring the world of writing and blogging. Where it will lead, I don’t know; but it’s exciting time full of possibilities. Today I am willing to take risks; to step out into the unknown. Now I’m ready to step up my game again; to move out of my cerebral playground and venture out in to the community of bloggers and into more interactive conversations with a larger community. Today I’m ready to be authentically who I am; to own my personal gifts in ways that might benefit others while paradoxically enriching my own life.

The Power to Act: Reflections on the Journey blog is my way of stepping out of the comfortable but narrow confines of my thinking to public conversation about what it means to take new action in the world. Power as I define it is the ability to take effective action with ease. To do that requires possibility and practice! And with that comes — Progress!
About 5 years ago, I was awakened in the middle of the night by a dream I can only describe as startling, puzzling, and life changing. There was a polar bear that lived in a lean-to beside my home. As strange as that was in itself, the thing that really troubled me was that this bear wore a muzzle. The image tormented me; I couldn’t get it out of my mind’s eye. Why was the bear wearing a muzzle and what was it doing living beside my home? Why wasn’t it living in the wild? Just thinking about it brought me to tears and made my stomach clench tightly.

Whenever I have a physical reaction to a dream, I pay attention because I know I’ve struck a vein of pure gold. With the help of a Jungian analyst, I came to understand that the polar bear represented my powerful instinctual energies and the thing that was muzzled was my voice. How it played out was that I did not trust myself to speak my truths, or to speak out in large groups. I was tentative in expressing my creative side and denied my own needs and importance in relationships that mattered. I unnaturally deferred to people around me. I was disconnected from my instinctual drive; I was domesticated. But I longed to live in the wild free of the muzzle that I wore.

Over the years I’ve continued to explore polar bears; I’ve read, drawn, collected and adopted them. They embellish my office bookshelves. I’ve taken singing lessons to free my vocal cords and attended drum circles to get in touch with my instinctual rhythms. And I’ve continued to write. Holding the haunting image of my polar bear close to my heart, I’ve trusted that, just like a polar bear emerges from winter hibernation, a clear idea would emerge from the recesses of my soul and I would know how to express my developing voice.

I knew blogging was right the second my husband suggested it. Something awakened within me—I got energized. Writing has always been an important part of my spiritual journey. Over the years I’ve been told that I should write a book, but it seemed too daunting. A blog would allow me to marry the two things that have nourished me over the years—writing and my spiritual journey. When I write, I lose time. I love the process of putting ideas on paper, which allows all of my chaotic thoughts to become a
visual masterpiece. I’ve filled dozens of journals over the years trying to make sense of my life. It is a perfect marriage of voice and venue!!

To the brave or embolden, writing a blog may seem like nothing. The creation of the blog itself was not the issue; it’s what the blog represented that made it so daunting. I compare it to how I would feel doing a tandem jump out of a plane for the first time; frightening as hell. Truth be known, jumping out of a plane seemed easier because then I would have a professional parachutist by my side, prying my fingers from the side of the plane’s door. These past three months, the tight grasp I had on the airplane door has released, and I’ve made the metaphorical jump. The view from the plane was not nearly as frightening as I feared; truly it was intoxicating beautiful. From the vantage place of someone who has taken the jump, I wonder what took me so long. It is such an exciting experience, and best of all, today my polar bear energies no longer wears a muzzle and she is free to explore her natural habitat. This new part of me was born to be free!
How Do We Know When We Know

At 27 I asked my mother if she thought I would ever meet the man of my dreams and marry. Her sage response: “When you meet the right person, you won’t be asking me, you will be telling me.” The area of love and marriage has always been a ‘mind field’ for me. For others it might be strategizing for the next great career move, or planning for their first child. In the arena of sustaining a significant relationship, I was hopeless.

The first time that I knew something with certainty was when I met the man I eventually married. I was 29 years old when we met. I was opening the first secretarial school to teach Iranians how to provide secretarial support for both Iranian and American personnel at the air base in Tehran, Iran. Gene was the general counsel and contract manager for Lockheed Martin, and was responsible for overseeing our contract. It was love at first sight; at least for me. Our eyes locked and I knew without a doubt that I was going to marry that man. Within a few months I told my mother that I had met the man. Her response: “Okay, I’m sooooo happy for you.” Before you write me off as a hopeless romantic, let me assure you I am anything but that.

I am the ‘model’ of a rational woman. I live in the land of ideas and thoughts; and it is not always a appealing community to live in. Residing in my head could be best described as being a participant of an ongoing tennis match. The dreamer might serve, but the doubter might return the volley, I never knew who was on the court. All responses seemed possible. Making important decisions about my life has been difficult at best. When I finally understood that I ‘met the enemy, and the enemy was my thinking,’ there was great freedom, and, as God would have it, another way of knowing emerged.
Gene was the perfect man for me for the eight years we were together. I loved him mightily. He died of brain cancer at the age of 49 leaving me crushed. And I wouldn’t change a day of our life together. In retrospect I realized that I was attracted to Gene's worldliness and personal power; two characteristics that I had yet to understand were mine.

My second experience of ‘knowing’ came after breaking up with the man who would later be my second spouse, Bruce. We had dated for about a year when I broke up with him because he was getting too close, and I was immersed in my historical ‘stinking thinking.’ Previously I promised him that I would bring him to an Enneagram workshop that my best friend was presenting. A few weeks after the breakup, (we remained friends) I fulfilled that promise. During an unguarded moment during the class, I glimpsed him sitting beside me and I knew instantly that he was next man for me—I was right.

With Gene it was a tremendous lusty love at first sight energy that was determined and focused. I was a person on a mission—Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead! With Bruce there was a sense of deep peace and happiness that radiated out into the universe and connected us. I trusted both knowing totally. How can I describe it. It was something new that arose from within and by-passed my rational mind. There was no question, no debate; with that one glance, uncertainty vanished.

In my forties I found that my body had its own way of knowing. When others said certain things, I’d feel a chill, followed by spine tingling goose bumps. As a coach I ascribed the feeling as evidence that what the other said was true for them. I had a built in ‘truth detector’ that, on its own volition, manifested through my nervous system. It took a long time before I realized that the messages that my body was giving me were not for others, but for me! Truth existed outside of my rational mind. My body is a source of information that can override the insanity that sometimes exists in my thinking.

Knowing never comes totally from the outer world. When people speak their truths, I must bring it back, not to the rational mind, but to the body itself. Unless my body’s reaction brings me peace or lightness of being, I know not to trust it. Since it comes from within it can be nurtured by creating quiet times to reflect, meditate or journal. The more I come back to myself, the more I can know what I know!
To develop the muscle of ‘Knowing What I Know’ I have to remember that I am still a beginner, flex the muscle of curiosity and then listen to my body; in that moment the “Knower Knows.”
The Truth of Happiness

The clock next to me read 3:23 am when I awoke this morning with a strong urgency to write. I had recently heard a speaker say that she was blogging about happiness because there are so many people who claim that they are unhappy. What is happiness anyway? How do I cultivate it? Am I happy? These questions were percolating deep within me at that very moment, and I had to find an answer.

What is happiness? Webster defines it as: characterized by luck or good fortune; prosperous or having or demonstrating pleasure or satisfaction; gratified. No wonder there are so many people who are unhappy—the definition itself is dissatisfying. What does luck or good fortune have to do with happiness? Luck, good fortune, and/or prosperity have to do with things that happen to you; not who you are! I know people who experienced all of those states and I truly don't think they are any more disposed to happiness than people who have lived through tough times and/or weathered financial hardship.

Of all of Webster’s words, the words that resonate most are gratification and/or demonstrating pleasure. Happiness is a state of being; it is a verb and, as such expresses existence, action, or occurrence. It is something that can only happen in the moment. It can arise from something external, like a new purchase or an accomplishment; but that type of happiness recedes as fast as it comes. The happiness that I am seeking is a state of mind; a way of being in the world that is not hooked into external situations, but resides quietly at my core.

Why are people unhappy? I know that there are many reasons why people may be unhappy; I’m not saying that there is only one way. A major reason for me is that I’ve been too busy to ‘stop and smell the roses’. Instead I’ve focused my energies externally on all the people and things that seem to demand my attention. The result—I’m left depleted of my inner resources. When my tank is nearing empty, it's hard to find happiness!

How do I cultivate happiness? The happiness that I’m talking about is a state of being. I cultivate it by creating the practice of gratitude or thankfulness which is the action of demonstrating pleasure. When I take time to think about the things I am grateful for, something happens deep within me. There is a shift from the heaviness of ambivalence to lightness of being—that is what I call happiness. When practicing gratitude my focus of attention creates a bridge between what is exterior to me, to what is going on in me—in my heart of hearts. My focus of attention shifts from what I need to do, to things that I otherwise take for granted or what is right in my world, right now. It is a practice that connects the head to the warmth of my heart.

Am I happy? While writing this I became aware that I have been practicing gratitude on and off for the past few years. Three years ago, without thinking, I changed my telephone message to “Have a grateful day.” Last month my Qi-Gong master suggested that we take on the practice for a week of continually being grateful for whatever is in front of us; the car, the wheel of the car, the seat I’m sitting in, the road I’m driving on, the person who cuts me off, etc. Well you get the idea. And, the dutiful
student that I am, I took on the practice and I've felt the transformative effect it has on my soul. Gratitude does work!

I'd like to say that I continue the 'gratitude exercise' through the day, but I don't. What I do, however, is to begin my day, while still cocooned in blankets, being grateful for the comfortable bed I sleep in, for the man who shares my life, for my family, work, and my clients. For the blessing of being able to walk, dance and do Tae Kwon Do; for a body that supports me and the breath that sustains me, and for the blessing of life itself. And in that practice there is a shift from the worries I might wake up with to a place of lightness and— I start my day happy. I mean in the moments of gratitude, I'm downright happy with all I have, and all I do, and all the many things that work in my life. In those moments I'm very, very happy – dare I say, I'm giddy!
Part I: Identifying the Mood Within

Often the word winter paints an image in some minds of clean white snow, children excitedly building snowmen, and couples skating hand in hand on a perfectly frozen blanket of ice. Growing up in the North East, however, caused me to have a different view point. When I think of winter, I only seem to remember the hardest part of it – the dog days of winter. Even thinking about it brings me angst, with the endless months of unbearable cold and the gray color of snow after it had been mixed with dirt and stripped it of its beauty. It dragged on, and on, and on. As a child winter was simply a fact of life. I moved through the dog days of winter neither loving it nor hating it, but simply tolerating its grayness while impatiently waiting for spring. That is how I’m feeling right now and I wonder what causes this Texan to feel this way. Why so gloomy and overcast? Where is the spring I long for and with it the return of a sunnier disposition?

One of the many gifts I received while attending the Newfield Network, an Ontological Coaching School in Boulder, CO, was that I got to work with Julio Olalla in the area of moods and emotions. Like most who attended, I thought I knew moods and emotions because I’ve lived them. What I found out was that I knew nothing about the moods that were running me; especially the mood of resignation. Moods, if I thought about them at all, were accepted as the way things were: I’m down, I’m happy, I’m sad, I’m confused. All were experienced as facts. With Julio and Newfield I began to understand them as a place to explore and when needed to shift them to a more productive mood. They were not static states, but things that I could consciously shift. Julio was like an astronomer telling us about the night sky; he focused his telescope on the area of moods and emotions and the night sky became alive with new possibility.

How do I know that the mood of resignation is at play? It sucks the sunshine out of the sky and replaces it with hours, days or months of grayness. There is no happiness, no spark, and certainly no brilliance of snow. I experience resignation as the dredges of winter wearing me down. When it’s at play I feel like there is no hope or possibility for things to ever get better. I feel flat and gray; anything but a powerful place!

At the Newfield Network I learned that wherever resignation resides there is no possibility. It was easy to see resignation in hindsight; I was resigned to the limits of being a child, of low expectations for me and of winters that went on forever. It seemed impossible however, to identify things that I was resigned to in my life today. I was happily married, had a good leadership coaching practice, had the security of money; and yet there was something out of sort with me. I had moments of happiness, but no one ever described me as sunny.

When I shifted the question to “What do I believe is impossible for me?” the flood gates opened. I was resigned to small expectations, never speaking a second language, painting a masterpiece or being a national figure; to name a few. But were those assessments really true? I knew I couldn’t be the President of the United States, but that never was something I truly wanted. I had to admit that there
really wasn’t any real reason that I couldn’t do or be any of those things I secretly wanted. I had the requisite intelligence and inherent talents.

By denying the possibility of achieving these things, I realized for the first time that I was unnecessarily narrowing my world and living a much smaller version of myself that was possible. I didn’t have to choose to put my time or talents in achieving these things, but if I did choose to focus my treasure I could. With that awareness the world as I knew it expanded. Something exploded within me; I felt more powerful, more expansive.

I’ve learned over the years to celebrate the catching of the fish called awareness; in this case what I’m on lookout for is the mood of resignation. When I’m aware of its presence, I can bring it into the light of day to explore and validate the story that I’m telling myself so I can make a conscious choice. It’s in the light of day that the gray skies can part and the balmy days of spring can emerge. Yet awareness is just the beginning.

In Part II we will learn how I said goodbye to resignation; at least in one part of my life!
Part II: Saying Goodbye to Resignation

I was 26 when I went to see a dermatologist because there was crustiness on my checks that I couldn’t get rid of. I’ll never forget his looking at me, pulling a medical book off his shelf and passing it over to me. “You’re allergic to cold rain, snow and sleet” he said. It was a typical cold, sleety February and I was feeling gray. With that news something came alive in me. I had to do something; the status quo just would not work anymore. If I’m allergic to winter, then I’d better figure out a way to get myself to a warmer climate. In that moment of clarity I found something I can only describe as ambition. I didn’t know how I would do it, but I did know that I would find a way to release myself from the doldrums and damage of winter for good. With that decision energy flowed through my veins. I had a goal worth achieving, and that was a better salve than the Vaseline the doctor told me to put on my face to avoid skin damage from the elements. At the time I didn’t realize that I was living life resigned to winter and it took years for me to understand the shift that happened; a shift from resignation to ambition.

My journey to a warmer climate began with a phone call by Ken Millet, the creator of an automated media approach for teaching typing that I piloted for him at East Boston High School. He sold the program to Random House, and they needed someone to implement the system. As a gung-ho young teacher, I loved the system because it allowed students to progress at their own pace. I also taught other teachers how to implement the system. With myself and another friend from East Boston on board, Random House sold the program to a contractor who was to provide secretarial services to the Iranian Air force personnel and their Lockheed Martin counterparts. I was hired to oversee and implement the system and to create and run the first secretarial school in Iran. With that opportunity I got my ‘get out of jail free’ card.

Temperatures in Tehran could hit 115 degrees in the summer months, but winters were moderate by comparision. Snow, when it did fall, illuminated the night sky and reflected off of the Alborz Mountain Range. It was breathtakingly beautiful. Best of all, I didn’t have to worry about sleet, cold rain, or months of gray skies undermining my moods or damaging my cheeks. Better yet, I found love there. I met my first husband Gene in Tehran, Iran; he was the lawyer for our contract and a personal gift from the Gods for taking such a big risk. Eighteen months after our arrival, our three year contract was canceled when Reza Shaw Pahlavi was overthrown. I went back to Boston and Gene followed. We married a year later and our migration to a warmer climate began again when we took a position that transferred us to Houston. And the rest, as they say, is history. Gene died of cancer six years after we arrived, so I had to make a decision to either stay put in Houston or return to the embrace of my loving family. The only problem was that my family all lived in New England. Going back to winter never really was an option.

As I write, it is becoming clearer to me that there is a connection between the resignation of my years of enduring winter and the point in my life where I am right now. When I experience multiple consecutive days of grayness I slip back into the resignation of my youth without ever thinking about it. It just happens. It’s not that there is a conscious thought that I can refute; instead my history and the mood of resignation that was birthed and nurtured there seeps up from below my emotional surface. I wake up enveloped in it and go to bed at night heavy from its weight. How do I know this? Well, I’ve learned over the years that when I move into mindless business, avoiding mediation, journaling and most importantly
writing, then I know that there is something amiss within. One would think it would be easy to see the signs, but it’s like an old pair of comfy jeans; I slip into them without thinking about it.

When I spoke with a client today the subject of resignation came up, and with it, something clicked inside for me. As we explored her inability to take effective action I realized that we were in the same drifting boat. As we visited I observed her low energy and sense of hopelessness. It was not so much in the words she used, but it was apparent enough in her posture, energy and the overall tone of her language. In that moment I became aware that the gray overcast weather had seeped in and I was transported back to the gray, sleetin winters of my youth.

Now, equipped with the antidote at hand, I shifted our conversation to places in my client’s life where she did feel energized: where she saw possibility, where sunshine and blue skies existed. As we talked we walked because when your body is in motion it’s easier to open up to see other possible actions. In short, the antidote for resignation is to find something that you are already passionate about (find your ambition), to get into action and transfer that passionate energy into the parts of your life where resignation is blocking your forward action.

When I returned home, aware of and able to identify the subtle mood of resignation that was at work within me, I went directly to my chair. I longed to meditate once again. Low and behold, with meditation came the desire to move to my desk to write again. I’d like to say that it was a rational plan, but it wasn’t; life is not always rational.

What I do know is that by becoming aware of the mood that had grabbed me, naming it, getting in action (if only to walk), validating its usefulness, and then choosing to take the time to properly take care of myself and nourish my soul; resignation shifted to ambition. I’m in healthy productive action once again. The dark skies of winter have parted and the sun has begun to shine. Resignation has been replaced with possibility—and with that I say “Goodbye to Resignation!”
The Courage of a Lion

“I want to be courageous. That’s what I want out of my coaching!” What a powerful declaration about who my client intends to be in the world. The conversation took me back to my time at the Strozzi Institute, Leadership in Action Program in Petaluma, CA when I made a similar declaration and it changed my life forever!

I used to live with the misconception that courage is a state of not fearing; that self-possession, resolution, bravery or valor happens only when fear is absent. So I was always surprised when people used the word courageous when describing me. I certainly didn’t experience myself as courageous. In these instances, there was an “if they really knew what I was feeling they wouldn’t call me courageous” inner dialogue. Today I believe that fear is linked to courage. I wonder why it is that sometimes I courageously address my fears, and other times stay safely in my comfort zone?

It helps me to think of courage in two specific areas of threat; from without or within. When danger comes from the outer world, my responses are reactive. When a ball is comes at me, I’ll duck or catch it. If I’m personally challenged or someone I love is being threatened, my reaction will be quick and fierce. I get that kind of courage; it’s instinctive and primal. There is no thought involved. It’s the courage of a lion protecting his kill.

What is less obvious is the kind of courage that is called for each day to confront the obscure internal threats to change and grow? How do I, or my client, go from an intention to be courageous to taking courageous actions? My biggest challenges do not come from external sources; they show up in my internal dialogues, the perceived security of my past behaviors, or old beliefs that can keep me stuck. When I meet the enemy and the enemy is within my ‘mind and heart,’ how can I muster the courage to act? How do I engage my mind and empower my heart? That is the type of courage that my client is being asked to access right now and it’s one of the life lessons I learned at the Strozzi Institute.

I engaged the mind by creating the what. What is it that I want to achieve (and/or) accomplish. What will success look like. That’s was the easiest part of the mind heart equation. I engage the heart by truly finding the why? Why am I doing this? Really! Why will this matter ten years from now? Why should I keep moving forward when all my internal demons are rearing their ugly heads?

I stood in front of my classmates and declared publicly that I was committed to “bringing the Power to Act Series out into the world both nationally and internationally.” With the what clearly in my mind, the next crucial action was to address the question why I should step up to the plate to face my fears and take action even when every part of me wanted to stay safe.
Why? “Professionally the Power to Act Series provides information needed to help us grow personally. Our world is at a critical juncture and it imperative for us to consciously evolve. What’s at stake? Our existence as human beings and the continuation of our plant as we know it. Personally I believe that we are all connected and that every time one of us grow personally or stand and step out of their comfort zone to face their fears, we all benefit. My prayer is that with my taking new actions my granddaughters, nieces and nephews will be freed up to face their own fears and evolve into their higher selves.”

In that declaration, I realized that my role is to be a model of courage for the generations that follow. How did I know that I had found my why. Because when I spoke my passion was palpable. Those who experienced my declaration gave me a standing ovation. They volunteered to help me with the program. They were moved because I was moved!

That powerful declaration shifted life as I knew it, I realized that it was not enough to make a declaration like “I want to be courageous”. When it’s just about me I knew that I could rationalize not advancing my commitment. Because those who I care about benefit from my courageous actions it is an important enough why to provide me the courage to face my fears and take action anyway. In the end it is the heart that empowers the will to accomplish. Without engaging the passion of the heart, a good intention often withers and dies on the vine.

It’s the heart of the ‘lion’ that is the source of courage and provides us with the will to keep going when external or internal obstacles appear. With our mind engaged and our heart empowered we can access the fierce energy and the willpower of the ‘courageous lion’ that is within us all!
Today on my way to Tae Kwon Do I found myself putting on my blinker ready to accelerate past the cars in front of me driving the speed limit. When I come across a car that is going slow the thoughts that race across my mind are not fit for print. It’s like they got up today with the sole intention to be an obstacle in the road of life. I know its crazy thinking but anxiety arises and I find myself tensing up. I feel cramped and blocked. Noticing the tension I asked myself “Why am I speeding?” I say that I want to live life at a slower pace so why am I rushing ahead? I like the feeling of being at peace within and I know this is another opportunity to align my actions with my intentions. So I passed on passing and relaxed back into my driving.

In thinking about my unconscious need to speed up two things came to mind. First, there was an incident over the weekend when it took all I had inside of me not to shout at my husband to ‘speed it up.’ We were going to our friend’s home for dinner and I was obsessing on the possibility of our being five minutes late. I was really getting energized about it! Fortunately I’ve learned not to tell my husband how to drive – or at least I know that I shouldn’t. What I haven’t mastered is quelling the angst that I feel when every cell of my body wants to yell at him to “get a move on it.” Second, there was the realization that these two incidents are related. In both instances the need to rush ahead is in conflict with my competing desire to slow down and enjoy the view along the road. Go figure!

My inner dialogue urges me to get to places well before I need to. I always arrive at Tae Kwon Do 15 minutes before anyone else. Just in case I want to believe that it is a good thing, I’ve had others suggest that I not arrive so early for meetings. You might think that it is commendable but now I realize that it is more of a compulsion to avoid any possible recrimination for being late. Why is it such a big deal if I arrive a few moments late? No one else seems to be quite so tensed up by such a little thing. Why indeed?

I’m not happy to report that the core of all this compulsive action to speed up has everything to do with an unconscious fear of displeasing you know who? – My parents. That childhood message to be on time or else has everything to do with my not wanting to do anything to displease them. Long after they had departed this life, their voices and the message to be on time is still loud and clear and unconsciously shaping how I operate (drive) today. Unaware of the original reason for speeding up I put myself under stress that is not only unnecessary but is counter to my desire to live my life in a less stressful manner; a life in the slow lanes. And why is that important?

Driving is a metaphor for how I do life in general. Or at least it is how unconsciously do life. I know that one of my challenges over the years has been to learn to slow down and really enjoy life around me. On good days I do it well but old patterns change slowly and will, when I’m least aware, reemerge.

I know I’m in the fast lane when I’m rushing from one commitment to another without moments of enjoyment. When I find myself at a destination and don’t remember what the journey was like, I’m in overdrive. I’m lost in thought either revisiting the past or thinking about the future; anyplace but here in my body and living in the moment. What can I do about it? One practice I’ve used over the years is to identify a color like red and, as I move through the day, look for it. That little practice has me looking at my surroundings. Another practice is to feel the seat below me and my hands on the steering wheel. When I pay attention to my senses it grounds me and keeps me in the present. It’s when my mind is racing down the road far in front of my car that I’m furthest from my own desires.
Once aware of this pattern I am at choice. I can continue to live with my foot on the accelerator speeding up or put myself into cruise control and take time to slow down and enjoy the view. At least I'm in the driver's seat and present to the choices I am making. Well, at least for this trip I did relax in and slowed down—and that for me is making progress toward my eventual destination of living life in the slow lane.
Two days ago my 92 year old Aunt Ruth fell while moving from the table. Now, if this were to happen to any other 92 year old woman, it may have been tragic, but not my Aunt Ruth because she still has an indomitable spirit and physical resiliency. She got up, dusted herself off and went out to breakfast with a girl friend. Her concession was to return home after breakfast to rest. She felt a little unstable and unsettled from the fall and wanted the comfort of her cane for awhile and the safety of her familiar surroundings. Her complaint was that she realized that she needed to stop and get her bearings before she moved around, while my complaint was that she was my aunt by marriage, so I couldn’t inherit her genes. At ninety, after years of constant excruciating pain, she had knee replacement and wondered why she waited so long. She is like the energizer bunny – she just keeps going.

If my Aunt Ruth is a study of movement in action, then my Mother was a study of the importance of taking care of herself. As a young mother and wife she used every ounce of her energy to make a home and rear her growing family. In her early years things like neatness and order drove her, but in her mid thirties it took a bout with rheumatic fever and rheumatoid arthritis for her to learn to slow down and take care of herself. After seven children her body couldn’t sustain that level of activity; she had to regroup and figure how to make her life work. From that illness she found and perfected the art of the afternoon nap. It didn’t matter what the rest of the world needed or wanted, nor did it matter whether the beds were made or there was dust on the counter. When my mother was tired she rested.

Over the years my own behavior seemed to be modeled after these two strong and wise female role models. During younger years I rejected the wisdom of my mother and modeled my life on my Aunt Ruth. I took on challenges and focused my energies on achieving. I taught high school in Boston, journeyed to Iran to set up the first secretarial school and transitioned to the business world, joined United Technologies and then General Electric. Life was a banquet and I wanted to partake of everything. Rest was for the faint of heart. There was a big beautiful world to conquer and I connected it with the force and velocity of my actions. Obstacles were to be surmounted and strategies laid for achieving. It’s only with age that I understood that dancing fast does not mean you’ll dance well. Achievement has its own paradox; more can get you less and ease trumps force every time! It’s one thing to know it, it’s another thing to relax our old ways of behaving and take on new ones.

After seven years as the Executive Director of the Escape Family Resource Center (ESCAPE), which was a child abuse prevention agency, I was tired of being tired. I felt physically abused! I was good at what I did, but when the weekend came I was depleted and needed the entire weekend to replenish. As in my youth I threw myself into work with the zest of a twenty year old. The problem was that I was now in my mid forties. Truthfully it was one of the ways I avoided grieving the loss of my first husband. Nine years after his death, I realized I was ready to move back out into the social world as a single woman again. It was time for me to let another man enter my life. Emotionally I was ready but the physical activity of my work week did not provide me with the energy needed for a social life. Where my Aunt Ruth never seemed to tire I was seriously depleted. Something was wrong!

The definition of insanity is ‘continuing to do the same things and expect a different outcome.’ With that wisdom in hand, I emulated my mother’s behavior and learned how to take care of myself by metaphorically ‘learning to take naps’ although I called it meditation. I slowed down to read and explored my inner world. I traded daily treadmill excursions with walks in my neighborhood. After years of not wanting to emulate my mother’s life style, I saw the wisdom of her choices and began to steer the ship called Judith to calmer ports of call where I could regroup and find a rhythm that better served me. Instead of pushing forward like my aunt to find my next position, I slowed down and learned to become more reflective; to figure out what I needed to learn from my present situation at ESCAPE in order to...
free myself up to have the next position come to me. It was on a sunny day while lying in a hammock reading Julia Cameron’s book, The Artists Way, that the realization burst out from within. I was not responsible for everybody and everyone. Why did I know I found pay dirt? Tears flowed freely. Salty tears of grief for the little girl within me who took on the enormous role of being the responsible one. My frenetic actions were not noble at all. They were the actions of a child who felt very responsible for people and situations around her. With that knowledge, life as I knew it was about to change.

When financial crisis came to ESCAPE, I responded to it differently. Instead of reacting out of the fear of feeling totally responsible for the organization’s success, I brought my team together and we created our plan. With the plan in hand I went to the Board of Directors and shared our plan and then asked them to create their own plan. The by-product of my letting others share the responsibility of the organization’s success was that we made more money than ever. Within a month of realizing this life lesson, I got a call from an ex-board member who told me about a woman he was working with. She was doing something that he thought I did naturally. He called it coaching. With that call I found my next career as a leadership coach and it provided me the opportunity to slow down and prepare myself for letting another man into my life. Within four months of giving my notice of resignation, I met Bruce at the first coaching conference held in Houston.

Now in my 60’s I see that at best our actions are tempered by our life’s circumstances. My aunt and my mother collapsed their behavior with who they were. Change in behavior only came with crisis. I was blessed to have grown up at a time when we learned to divide a child’s behavior from the child. That lesson has served me well over the years. At the Newfield Network I learned that unconscious behavior comes out of our past experiences. Today I have an ongoing practice of checking my behaviors to make sure it is in alignment with the life I want to live. True north is not determined by how I behaved in the past but on the behavior that will support how I intend my life to be in the future. Toward that end I’ve retired the ‘energizer bunny’ and added time each day to ‘nap’ or meditate! That behavior better supports the life I intend to live!
A Banquet Called Yummy

Yummy, that's what the instructor said that experiences could be. His words hit me with the force of a well placed Tae Kwon Do kick. I was stunned. I've never connected life’s experiences with the word yummy! I’m still not sure what to make of it. What I do know is that his words keep coming back to me when I least expect it. Like an uninvited guest that demands attention, his words erupt into my psyche. Over the years I've learned to pay attention to what my mind relentlessly puts in front of me.

It was at a training last weekend and we were studying the Pearl; an essential essence that is at the core of all human beings. It is part of who we are when we come into the world, but we lose connection with it as we traverse the mountain called childhood. Things such as joy, trust, lightness and a sense of adventure or an assuredness of being okay in the world, are unconsciously give up for security and parental approval. Pearly essence is foundational to our personal presence and is connected with how we were nurtured as a child. When I heard that we were going to work with the Pearl, I knew I was in the right place because I grew up feeling that I was not enough. Is there a connection between how I was nurtured and how I experience life today?

When I think of my sixty plus years and all of the experiences I’ve had over the decades, I can honestly say that I never, not ever, equated life’s experiences as an opportunity to nourish myself let alone be yummy. I experience life as something to move through, to accomplish, to understand and, on my best days, to enjoy. Life has been a serious business. Sure there have been nurturing experiences such as being in nature, sunrises and sunsets or being at the ocean watching the waves lap the shore. I plan a trip to the ocean and while there I find that my metaphorical batteries have been recharge; the sea and the sand and the rhythm of the ocean provides sustenance. Like the sunny days I seek, I’m warming up to the idea. I see the connection between my desire to jettison the heavy winter coat of seriousness and replace it with a gauzy sun dress of lightness. Yes the warmth of the sun on my bare shoulders can be a yummy experience, but what I heard was that all experiences can be both nourishing and yummy. That boggles my mind. How could that be?

When I think of life’s experiences as nourishing and yummy, an image of a lavish banquet laid out in front of me appears and then his words begin to make sense. As I hold the image of my gourmet banquet in my mind’s eye, I start to salivate. Isn’t that the natural response to yummy? I can see myself choosing food (experiences) that are good for my body like apples, almonds and grilled fish or running right over to get a big Mac quarter pounder with fries and a chocolate milk shake. I never choose to eat at fast food establishments but I do have a sweet tooth that satiates my need for yummy but does not provide nourishment. I’ll choose a love story over a horror movie or walk the stairs rather than taking an escalator, but what about the times when I experience things that I didn’t choose; things that could never be considered as nurturing or ‘yummy?’
What about the eighteen months of hell that I experienced when my first husband and father died within four months of each other, I had back surgery and lost my job. Or the years I spent learning to live as a single person again. Let me assure you that I did not experience it as nourishing or yummy. Devastating and gruesome would better describe those first years of transition. Or were there experiences of nourishment in the midst of the devastation? It was in that wasteland of grief and anger that I reached back to reconnect with the God of my youth and found cool clear water to nourish my parched soul. There were also family, friends and co-workers whose open hearts and reassuring words were like manna in the desert, they nourished me. Like Moses leading the Israelites out of the desert to the promise land, I felt lead toward sanity, health and most importantly, to hope again. But would I call these experiences yummy?

So what are the common denominators between the very different types of experiences? The common denominator is me and the choices that I make. Not just in the experiences that I choose, but in how I choose to live the experiences that I’m given. What if all experiences could provide nourishment and I could find the Pearl of ‘yummy’ within each of them?

A dear friend of mine died from brain cancer at fifty-five years young. Once she knew that her time was short and she grieved her eminent death, she accepted the reality and went on to live life as a banquet. From her wheel chair with her beret jauntily sitting on her bald head, we went to great restaurants where she drank her wine from a straw and we ordered rich lavish deserts as the first course of our meal. Lou learned to truly experience the banquet of life as ‘yummy.’ She greedily took in every experience from a place of choice. She spent time with her loved ones and choose only things that delighted and nourished her. With others she choose not to invest her limited resources. What a sweet gift to recall her life and how the memory of her choosing life is nourishing me right now. In her life, and more importantly in how she dealt with death, I understand what my teacher was saying.

When difficult experiences come my way, I can choose ‘yummy’ by using the lemons in front of me to make lemonade. I can learn to enjoy the nourishment that is available in all of life’s experiences by realizing that nourishment can come in the form of broccoli and Brussels sprouts or from the Cod fish I detest. When I equate yummy with only things that delight my palate and rejects nourishment from the unsavory, then am I starving myself? I cannot choose all of my life’s situations but I can choose how to experience them. It’s in the choice that nourishment and ‘yummy’ resides. I’m not saying that the
choosing will be easy, but when I understand that I do have a choice in how I respond, then and only then, will I find nourishment in any experience and that level of personal power is truly ‘yummy.’
A Prescription for Avoiding Pain

Life has both highs and lows; no one gets to live their life without pain, and yet we live our life as if we could. Chances are that if you breathe you’ve experienced something difficult in your life. It may be the death or serious illness of a loved one or perhaps a messy divorce. It could be a major disappointment like being passed over for a promotion that you just knew was yours for the having. In any event, there is no way of avoiding paying the pied piper as far as pain goes. With that being said I must ask myself; if pain is a given, then why do I still rail against it or move for a quick fix?

When I take on the possibility that I am avoiding pain myself, I realize that there are many ways that I still move away from the uncomfortable and painful feelings in my life. My avoidance technique of choice has been to exit stage door right. I may do this by physically moving away from a painful argument, or by doing retail therapy. I can entertain myself and avoid addressing uncomfortable feelings that are seeping up by walking through racks of pretty clothes. It was an unconscious pattern to keep the reaper of pain away from my door. As a matter of fact, when I jump up and am compelled to get in my car to go – anywhere else – then I know that pain is trying to get my attention. On good days I can return to a comfy chair to let the pain have its say; to let the pain pass through me.

There is an old saying that says ‘what we resist persists’. It’s a truism that I did not embrace easily, but today I experience it to be true. While bolting for my keys I am only avoiding the inevitable. It is like shaking a can of coke and then capping it. The pain does not go away; it just goes flat. The price of stuffing my feelings over the years has been a ‘flat life’; a life without joy where I’ve felt safe but contained, capped. Truth is that over the years the containment itself brought on pain and I’ve longed to live my life ‘uncorked’! That’s where I am today. I have a great cork skew and have been working to uncork the bottle that is me. Some days I do it better than others, but one thing for sure – there is fizz in my coke and I’ll never let it become flat again.

As a spiritual director I know the importance of letting others have their own painful experiences. As a coach I understand the importance of personal inquiry to help others find their own solutions and directions out of their own painful situations. When used appropriately, inquiry empowers others to find their way in life and muster their own resources. Why is it that even when I know that each of us has our own spiritual path, I can still cross over the line from inquiry to prescription with a ready fix?

I realized that I run to prescription when I see my life’s pain being expressed in someone else’s patterns. I’m always surprised by how quickly I can move into strategies to alleviate or rectify the ‘perceived problem’ even when I know that if I give myself a moment to think it through; my own painful struggles have resulted in my becoming stronger and more resilient as an adult and leader. They have tempered and positively defined me in ways that my happier days haven’t; and yet my reaction is to ‘save’ another from having to experience what I have experienced. Or is it? Am I metaphorically trying to put lipstick on a pig? Am I deluding myself? Is the truth more that I’m rushing for the door with keys in hand still uncomfortable with my pain, and avoid it by rushing to ‘my’ solution? That is not a pretty revelation and my body tells me that it is true.
When I think about the path from caterpillar to chrysalis to a butterfly, I’m reminded of the importance of the struggle during the chrysalis stage and the resulting development of wings that are strong enough so that the butterfly can take flight. As a human being I do want everyone to be able to fly; to live their own life and to be able to express all of their own potential.

I also realize that if I truly believe in others potential, I have to strengthen my own ability to encounter and struggle with the uncomfortable feelings that are inevitable in life. I need to make friends with, or at least learn to tolerate uncomfortable feelings. Then just maybe I’ll be better equipped to help others live their best lives by being able to stay in inquiry rather than rushing ahead with a quick prescription!
Shifting Sands

The times they are a changing! There is something new afoot welling up inside of me. For over a year now I’ve physically felt tides pulling the sands out from under my feet, leaving me unsteady and off balance in conversations. There were clues along the way that things were changing. I would leave meetings with friends feeling depleted and hollow, rather than nourished and up-lifted. It would convenient to say that it has everything to do with the people I’ve been in conversation with, but that is not the case. There is nothing wrong with them at all; they are brilliant and caring! It has everything to do with me and how I’ve historically shown up in relationships. What I do know is that what worked in the past is no longer working for me! How do I know? The emptiness I feel in my body and a mood of resentment that has started to creep into my consciousness.

I recall a similar shift that happened when I was in my forties. Being newly widowed, I realized that every time I went to dinner with my girlfriends the conversation of laundry detergent or some similar household product would come up. Once I realized it was not going away, I got annoyed. Was this a new conversation or was I just recognizing it for the first time. If we’ve always talked about it, why hadn’t I noticed it before? Was there a relationship between the change in my marital status and the type of conversations I could tolerate? Had the level of conversation settled on the safe and mundane or was I more critical? After a few months of it I asked that the subject be declared out of bounds; they were surprised. When the same type of conversation persisted, I realized that those relationships had run their course. Growth was to ask for what I needed and then, when I knew it was beyond them, to let those relationships die an honorable death. But what I am experiencing today is something altogether different. It isn’t that my life situation has changed; it is that I am changing.

How do I know that things are changing? Over the past year, I’ve become increasingly aware that I’ve walked away from some conversations realizing that the person I was in conversation with never asked about me. Lately I’ve moved from annoyance to agitation. Once aware, I would sit there to see if they would ask questions about my life that was deeper than a meaningless ‘how are you doing?’ That type of inquiry leaves me feeling starved for connection, since the only appropriate response is a monosyllabic ‘fine!’

I’m not talking about prying questions, although on good days, I’m open to them also. A simple question like “What’s going on in your life?” is a good place to start. At least I can’t answer it with a yes or no. “What makes you happy (sad, glad, mad)?” They allow me to share some part of me. Questions such as “Where is fear in your life? What your deepest desire?” may be too intimate to share at a cocktail party, but have their place in important intimate conversations. I want to walk away from a conversation knowing that the other person cares enough to get to know me. Is that too much to ask for? Or is it? Is it their problem or is it mine?

Before you think of me as being unskilled in conversations, let me assure you that my skills are part of my challenge. I’m good at inquiry and adept at keeping others talking. I never realized how good I was at it until I finally met someone who was a lot like me. She grilled me! Okay, it really wasn’t that bad, but I felt exposed; I couldn’t get myself off the hook. Every time I tried to shift the conversation back to her, she rejected the parry and returned the ball with a well placed inquiry. I felt both frightened to be on
center stage, yet energized by the exposure. What was I afraid of? Why the unconscious drive to deflect the attention from myself?

There are two different reasons to ask questions. One is that I am really curious about what is going on. When I ask questions with that intention, I sit forward and listen intently. I’m engrossed in what is being said and what is not being said. I pay attention to the others body, language, moods and emotions. Like a tall glass of clean clear water, I take it all in and we are both refreshed in the process.

The second less obvious reason for my asking questions is defensive in nature; I get to control the conversation and hide out. As a child and as an introvert, I’ve often felt inadequate verbally. I grew up with lots of extroverted siblings who knew what they wanted and needed and they were a lot more vocally adept than me. I learned to pull back and circle the proverbial wagons to protect my tender underbelly. Over the years, I’ve found my voice and learned to readily use it. Still there are times in conversations when, unaware, I revert to the comfort of my childhood defense mechanism; when I used inquiry as a way of hiding out and being safe. But is that response appropriate for me today?

When I’m in the defensive mode the questions I ask may be just as good, but my personal presence is lacking. There is part of me that is emotionally unavailable; that is pulled back and protected. It is like I’ve listened with one ear and my eyes saw no evil. Physically I may be pulling back or at least defended with my arms crossed over my belly. I can’t imagine that it is a good experience for the person in front of me. How can that type of inquiry be nourishing when only scraps are being served!

I’m no longer interested in pulling back from conversations with people I truly care about or hiding behind my questions. I’m delighted to share my skills of inquiry with friends, but not without reciprocal care. Today I intend to show up fully suited and ready to play a team sport; to be fully present to anyone who is in front of me or beg out of the game all together. The challenge is that I will need to be proactive in laying out the new ground rules. I can’t expect people I’ve trained to talk to me, by asking so many probing questions; know now to ask about me. That’s not fair. I’ll need to be more forthright in communicating my needs, or better yet, I’ll simply tell them what I’m up to!

As I write I feel the tide lifting me up and I’m energized. The shifting sands of healthy communications have found a balance point between asking and sharing. I feel secure in my footing and solid in my presence—a new part of me is emerging from the shadow and stepping into the light and it feels so very authentic!
Friends, what does that word really mean? I’ve use that word to describe people who are little more
than acquaintances as well as with people who are very important in my life. In short practically
everyone who does not fall into the category of enemy gets described as a friend. But are they all truly
friends? If the mantle of friendship is given to everyone, does the term become meaningless?

I spent last weekend visiting with friends from high school. It was an intimate gathering of four. We came
in from Denver, Houston and Palm Desert to meet in San Diego. For some this type of gathering might
mean little, but for women who have been friends since the mid 60’s, it was a coming home; a place to
reconnect, refuel and recharge. If a component of friendship is the time we’ve known each other, then
we certainly meet that criteria. The length of our friendship takes my breath away; it’s too shocking for
me to get my arms around. Instead I’d prefer to continue to think of us as young, when it’s more likely
at best that we are young at heart! But does time alone make an enduring friendship?

As a group of high school students, we called ourselves ‘the sexy seven’ which gives you the visual of
us as young and beautiful, and there was some truth in that. But beauty and a healthy ego alone do not
make for enduring friendship. When I think of the times that we shared, I understand that the quality and
vitality of our experiences did more than our youthful bravado to cement our friendship. Oh we were all
good students, but it was in our extracurricular activities that lifelong bonding happened.

We grew up during a time when parents were not frightened to death of the consequences of their
child’s actions. They had made it through years of depression and war. They reveled in our
comparatively carefree life. They allowed us trips to the shore and chaperoned our events. We danced
with abandon. We rented beach houses and reveled with others at parties. We had a blast. And with it
all we managed to live our lives with one foot safe at home and the other foot crossing the proverbial
line.

We shared a history that is more precious than any amount of time apart can erase. Over the years
we’ve moved around and are presently living across the United States. None the less we’ve been there
for each other during the marriages, divorces, the birth of our children and the many losses that we’ve
experienced over the years. We’ve spoken the unspoken and lived. Even when the complications of our
lives made it impossible to connect, someone would chronicle their events and share it with the missing
comrades. When it was more important for me to spend all my free time and financial resources to be
with my ailing mother and a very extended family, my friends did not write me off. They understood and
supported me in any way they could. They visited with me at my Mother’s, sent cards, or picked up the
phone to call and let me know they cared. But life and times are different now. Only one of my
childhood friends still lives in our hometown.

During my transient years I lived in Boston, Tehran and Houston and today I’m in my seventh
professional reincarnation. Without the benefit of years of shared history, new bonds were formed and
I’ve made new friend. Other characteristics of friendship became important. I’ve been touched deeply by
people’s openness, caring and the depth of their sharing. I think of Lois, Marla or Susan; friends that I
can sit with for hours lost in a conversation over a latte. We are connected spiritually and emotionally in
a very deep way. We listen to each other and feel each other’s pain. There is a little fixing, but mostly
caring. There is a total acceptance that the other is brilliant in her own right.
Over time some friends have been closer than others. Proximity can be an issue. Some friendships have been based on something meaningful like my faith, or a random critical event. There is Patty and Delrena who I met through church and whose friendship blossomed into the ‘Sweet Tomatoes’ as they spent many hours sharing their time and tremendous talents to decorate my home. There was Leila who I knew her for three years, and even though our paths no longer cross, I will always hold her as a dear friend. She was my boss at General Electric and she stepped in when my world as I knew it was falling apart. She circled the proverbial wagons around me and created a safety net that allowed me to exist when I felt like my world would crumble beneath me. So why is it that some friendships endure and others fail to make it to the finish line?

In the end it’s the mutuality of ‘trust’ and its four components that are the most critical element of building an enduring friendship. Do we truly care about each other? Can we rely on each other? Are we competent; do we know how to be friends? And lastly are we truly sincere in our words and in our deeds.

How do I know when I’ve found a trusted friend? It’s in the behaviors! I can speak my hard truths and still be heard, fall apart, fail or look like hell and still know that I will be held in high esteem. When I am most fragile, I can trust that my friends will be there for me—to support and build up; never to tear down! It doesn’t matter if we’ve shared five months together or fifty years, some people just have it in them to be caring, reliable, competent and sincere in their relationships. They are durable, flexible, resilient people and it is wonderful to have them at my side.

In the end all friends are not equal! I guess I will need to find a better word for those who fill the bill as trusted friend. Whether I call them the sexy seven, sweet tomatoes, lifelong friends, or struggle to find the appropriate term of endearment, good friends make life worth living. Finding a trusted friend is like walking along a deserted beach, picking up a clam shell washed upon the shore and opening it find a beautiful pearl inside. Its beauty takes my breath away! I am always surprised and blessed by the gift of friendship I’ve found!
A Flash of Anger

We lucked out! We had a glorious day to attend Houston’s Bayou Arts Festival held in beautiful Memorial Park. Our plan was to arrive early to beat the crowds. The weather god was smiling down on us that day, with sunny skies, temperatures in the low 70’s and a brisk cool wind. It was warm in the sun and cool beneath the ample live oaks that shaded our path. It should have been the best of days but by the end of the day, the cold wind that was blowing was from within me and biting cold words were warmed by my scolding hot temperament. Not the day I had imagined.

How do I begin? There were five of us well equipped for a lovely day of browsing the fabulous art festival. We had our sun screen, sun glasses, hats, some disposable currency and cell phones. Well most of us were equipped. One person arrived without his cell phone; a vital piece of equipment needed when traversing the intriguing booths and swarming crowds. With a little annoyance we adjusted our plans to identify a place where we could meet up if he got cut off from the group. With the advent and popularity of cell phones, this historical problem has almost been extinguished from our lives. There is little need for lost and found booths with blaring public intercoms announcing lost children, and certainly no need for any adult with a cell phone to be lost at all. Well almost no need!

We met for a hearty early breakfast and arrived around 10:30 ready to take in the paintings, glass work, ceramics, ironworks, and apparel. Within only one hour our friend Jill was already retracing her path to see if she could find her husband. By 12:30 Jill was seething and had already found a place to sit in wait for him. After the next two hours her seething anger was mixed with concern for his well being and we were all being scattered in different directions to see if we could find our lost friend. Like a parent with a lost child, she was frantically living the worst of scenarios vacillating from anger to fear. After another hour of intense searching the park police and the festival director were now concerned enough to get involved in the search. The one thing we knew for sure was that Bill, a well known architect, author and sailor, would not leave the park without his wife. He would not get on the bus and go back to their car since we had already made contingency plans in case he got separated. And you know what they say about ‘the best laid plans’?

Personally I was swept up in Jill” anxiety; who wouldn’t be? By the time the park police were involved we all were frightened and concerned. We had peered into every booth and even started checking portalets to make sure he had not fainted while in one. I consciously stayed calm and as light as I could since I’m aware of my own propensity to run out into the future cloaked in the worst case scenario. Five hours had passed when I looked up to see Bill approaching with a smile as big as the state of Texas on his face. For an instant I felt a wave of relief come over my body and just as quickly it was replaced by a tidal wave of furry. As Jill embraced her husband, I stiffened and pulled away. When he began to tell us that he had taken the bus to their car, I lost it! I went from cold, contained anger to attack in a nanosecond. “Where within our plans was there ever a mention of returning to the car! What was wrong with the area under the blue flags that we had declared as the place to reconnect?” As I spat those words out I realized that my tone was biting. What was that all about? Bill was safe and that was the most important thing. I should have been celebrating with them, but I couldn’t. The demon anger and righteousness were holding me captive. Who was this person capable of spitting nails? Where did she come from?
I don't read daily horoscopes or know much about astrological signs, but I have learned over the years that although I was born a Sagittarius, all of my moons (not sure what that means) are in Scorpio. At moments of biting anger I understand the deadly bite of the scorpion. The tone of my words was venomous and landed with deadly precision. As a high school teacher I could silence a room of thirty sixteen year olds with razor sharp words delivered in a tone that stopped them dead in their tracks. But my supreme weapon was a stone icy stare that stopped them dead in their tracks. It was a brilliant survival strategy for a 22 year old teacher working at an inner city high school in Boston. But like an old favorite childhood toy that I've out grown, it is time to put that toy away. That behavior is no longer appropriate for the gentle loving person that I aspire to today? Was this a suitable reaction to Bills' behavior? Hell no! Am I proud of it? Not at all!

There is always the opportunity to be righteous and create a case for Bill being wrong. That is what I did. As I write about it I can feel in my body the heaviness and density of my righteousness and I don't want to carry that weight around anymore! There is a grain of truth in everything; and my reactions are not 'the truth.' A practice that I've worked with over the years is to pay attention to when my energy goes up so that I can explore it like a prospector sifting for gold in the rivers of the old west. When reviewing the events of the day, and my reactions to them, I see that there are other truths that I just couldn't see while I was busy reacting. Another truth is that Bill did what he thought was right in the moment. Maybe he made a judgment call that we didn't plan for, but isn't that part of being human? His behavior was not malicious or intentional so why did I get so hooked! What button inside of was inadvertently pushed?

With distance and a daily practice of reflecting on situations where my energy goes up, I begin to see another version of what happened. In the instant of my reaction, what I reacted to was not what Bill said or what he did, but his smile. If he had arrived with a worried or anxious look I probably wouldn't have reacted at all. When I saw that grin on his face, a very primitive part of me was ignited because I saw my own smiling face of my fear and it was just too close for me not to push away from it. I use my smile to 'warm and disarm' others or situations when I am frightened. This behavior is so embedded in me that I'm not even aware I'm doing it but it is how I defend and protect myself. What is the consequence of my defensive reaction?

The by-product is that I get to be righteous. As I write I can feel the weight of the cloak of righteousness on my shoulders. I was so enveloped in it that I didn’t even recognize that I was wearing it. Righteousness had me in its deadly grip; I was captive. With righteousness and its ensuing justification, I lost the opportunity to learn, to grow and to change! I won the battle but lost the war! Yes in the reaction I got to be right, but at what an enormous cost. So I celebrate the awareness that comes with this reflection; I bless Bill for the gift his smile evoked in me and I recommit to the practice of paying
attention to when my energy goes up! The real ‘truth’ is that the all things can be used for good and a flash of anger can provide a portal to new awareness!
The Eyes Of Spring

While walking in our neighborhood on a bright sunny morning, the sounds, sights and smells of spring delighted my senses. Our Azaleas were laden with buds on the verge of bursting open. There was the sweet fragrance of the dogwoods and crape myrtles in bloom. Birds were singing and the cool breeze was mixed with the warm rays of the sun. It was a glorious day to be alive and outside! While taking it all in, I looked over to see my husband, eyes looking down, obviously deep in thought and I wonder why am I taking in the delights of this spring morning while Bruce is looking down, amerced in his inner world? How many times have I been like Bruce, lost in thought missing the opportunity to revel in the beauty around me? If 'beauty is in the eyes of the beholder' then how did I learn to develop eyes that looked out to see the beauty around me? When was it that I grasped that possibility?

Personally I have made an art of making Bruce wrong over the years. He should be looking here or anticipating that. It's a testament to his love for me that he continues to tolerate my continuous directions about how he should or should not live his life. On good days I know that it's not really about Bruce at all. Bruce does Bruce magnificently; he just can't seem to do Judith too well! Spiritually I know that when I focus on Bruce, I miss my own moments of revelation and growth. I've learned over the years that when I find myself obsessing on what Bruce should or should not be doing, to take a deep breath, send love back to him and bring the focus of attention back to myself? When I feel irritated or annoyed with him, I know that his behavior is really a reflection of my own denied behavior. When I caught myself in the story about where Bruce should be looking, I became aware of the many times that I miss the possibilities blossoming around me while I've been lost in thought? That thought screams of a truth that my ego would like not to own!

I recall the day at the Strozzi Institute, an ontologically based leadership coaching program in Petaluma California, when we spent a day at a nearby horse farm. Horses are totally instinctive and intuitive beings; they always know what is true around them. You can’t approach a horse without aligning your words with your physical reality. While in the corral I had to make a declaration about the future work I intended on creating to see if the horse would align with me. The declaration was about creating The Power to Act, a group coaching program that I intended to take international. Well the horse just simply
ignored me and continued munching on the grass below. Undeterred, I kept trying to get his attention. I
was so focused on the task at hand, at the pavement in front of me, that I totally missed that two other
horses had come in from the field and stuck their faces over the corral fence. The teachers question
resonates with me still “where in life do you focus your attention so intently that you miss all the other
possibility around you?” Truth be known, this behavior has served me well over the years, but like my
old cell phone, it’s time to up-grade to an phone that meets my needs today.

Seven years ago I realized that I had a fascination with the word possibility. When I came across the
Zander’s book entitled ‘The Art of Possibility’ I had to buy it and have read it on and off over the years. I
still have three copies in my bookshelf and have gifted friends, family and clients with their own copies. I
was surprised and dismayed when I found out that Bruce wasn’t as enamored with the word as I was.
He considers the word overused. But then Bruce grew up in sunny San Jose with the lushness of
possibility all around him. From a young age he knew possibility; he could be a doctor like his father or
an Indian chief, anything was possible for him.

While I grew up with all four seasons, I’ve always felt that, spring and summer went by all too quick and
that my life reflects more the beauty of fall and the stillness of winter. Like our rose bushes caught in a
late frost, the promise of my flowering in spring was lost to the whim of Mother Nature. Both of my
parents graduated high school. They believed in education; that is at least for their sons. While they
made plans for my brothers to attend college, they never held that possibility out for me. I was expected
to marry and have children. That didn’t take a college degree! It took one week at Mass Mutual Life
Insurance Company for me to realize that while others young girls were busy filling their ‘hope chest’
with linens and household goods, planning for the day they would marry; my only ‘hope’ was that I not
marry any time soon! That simple but profound decision provided the bud of possibility that there would
be a spring in my future. It provided a springboard from the limits of life as I experienced it, to the lush
green pastures of college. That fall I took classes at our local community college and was accepted the
following fall to a four year BS degree program. Spring had sprung!

I’ve heard a million times over 15 years of coaching that you can’t change people. And if they are saying
I can’t change another person, then I agree. What I do know for certain is that I can change; at a cellular
level I am changing all the time. To quote a coaching axiom: change is inevitable, growth is optional! The
bigger question has always been, ‘is there a compelling reason to grow?’ I found my reason to grow in
the face of life’s crisis. When I went through the death of my first husband and father at 39 years of age,
life as I knew it would never be the same; I had to change to live again. One step at a time, one foot in
front of the other, I focused on the sidewalk in front of me. With each new experience, I learned to
believe again, to hope for a new day filled with possibilities.
I can’t share twenty years of exploration in a paragraph, but what I can say is that it took hard work to learn to relax the hold of fear that had me reaching out to control every person and thing around me. The journey itself has been like eating an elephant; ‘one bite at a time and over many, many years.’ Like the yellow brick road, there have been many times that I lost faith and faltered. I’ve embodied the cowardly lion, the tin man and the scare crow and, in the end, found the wizard within. There have been hour upon hour of reflection and moments of courageous action. I’ve identified old behaviors that I let go of, and identified new behaviors to cultivate. I had to let go of the belief that I was only my father’s daughter and my husband’s wife. I had to find out who I was and what was truly possible for me; to the me beyond my roles, to the fullness of my soul! Every time I set an intention to grow, take the time to let my eyes bask in the lushness of its possibility, or create a daily practice to embed a new behavior into my life, things begin to change because I am changing.

At 63 years young I feel I am in the spring time of my life. Really that is why I can now let Bruce walk lost in thought and focused intently on the sidewalk in front of him. Why not? I’ve walked the same sidewalk and I know in my heart of hearts that if he continues to walk his walk, not mine, he will experience his own special springtime. By letting go of the facade of control, my eyes are free to take in the beauty of spring and all of its possibility that is around me. Today I know the beauty of the ‘eyes of spring.’
February 10th was the first anniversary of my brother, Patrick’s death at 55 years young. I’ve experienced loss in the past; buried my first husband and father when I was 39, best friend at 45 and my mother at 60. But the loss of my younger brother is as surreal to me today as the day I got the call telling me that he died! It was sudden, a heart attack. He was home alone. We were all stunned. How could someone so vital leave us so abruptly? In hind sight we went through the rituals of death in shock. This was the first death of someone dear to us in our generation, in our family. Naturally his wife and children took the biggest hit. Life for them will never be the same; will always be colored by his absence. But within the circle of siblings it was my brothers who still live in our hometown, who lost not only their brother but their best friend, where the river of grief ran deepest. It was from my younger brothers that I would learn the next great lessons on life, loss and love.

First let me tell you a little about my brother. We called him the gentle bear. He was 6’1”s and about 240 pounds. He worked as a corrections officer at the Ludlow Prison and was grappling with when he should retire. He had a smile that could light up the sky and a nature that was both loving and easy going. His number one love was spending time with his family. He had a loving wife and two fabulous children who adored him. I remember the first time I saw Patrick at his daughter’s track meet and his son playing football; he beamed his 100 watt grin, his chest puffed up like a peacock. He was a rabid Celtics and Patriots fan. He was a man of few words, but when he spoke, you paid attention. He built bridges and kept the peace. He loved his martinis and a few brews. He would do anything for anyone and frequently did. He was comfortable in his skin and he enjoyed life’s simple pleasures; working in his yard, cultivating plants, walking in the woods or his trade mark Hawaiian shirts.
It was while driving past St Patrick’s Cemetery, where three generations of O’Connor’s have been put to rest, that my bother Dan began to question the meaning of life. Is that all there is? Do you do your best and then die and life just goes on without you? He thought how do I make sure that Patrick’s memory has life and vitality; that his wife and children know how important he was to us? That he knows while watching down on us, that we still care about him? With a heavy heart still draped in loss and grappling with the demon of death, came his answer. He’d organize a fundraiser and race in Pat’s memory and piggy backed it on the St. Patrick’s Day Road Race.

It was just over a month out from the event that I got the call from Dan with his idea of the race. He was giving me plenty of notice so that I would have time to orchestrate my attending. Like Paul Reveres ride he was spreading the word, not of imminent danger, but of an impromptu celebration of our brother’s life. I am so glad that I heeded the call to action, bought my airlineticket, arranged for a car and attended. I knew that all of my siblings would attend but was blown away by the sheer numbers of nieces, nephews, cousins, friends and extended family that showed up at the organized tailgate parties prior to and after the race and the dinner after. You might think of this as a small accomplishment, but when I found out that we would circle up in the middle of 5000 other racers, I began to understand the enormity of the orchestration.

They had come the night before the race and staked out a corner lot right beside the park that was the heart of the event. Imagine, you could drive right up to the area and one of my brothers would move the road barrier so that you could drive in and park. How did he do that? It was the attention to details like that that made the tailgating parties seamless. Trucks arrived with coolers and warming plates. Friends and family brought food enough to feed the masses. And just as planned, the crowds came wearing their kelly green tee shirts with a leprechaun smoking a cigar in the middle; a testament to Pat’s importance to us all. There were times when I had to walk away from the people to cry and feel in private the pain of his absence. An others times I mingled happily with my family, friends and well wishers and raised a drink to toast him in public. And yes some got themselves in shape to run the 10K race while others, like me, cheered them on from the sidelines. No matter how people chose to remember Patrick, what was very evident was that they all did!
Like all great ideas that come from an altruistic heart, this fundraiser took on a life of its own. First 50 t-shirts sold in a week, the second 50 in a few days and the last 50 went within a few hours. A local bar not only underwrote and sold the personally designed tee shirts, underwrote the event, set up a corn beef diner and got a permit to be able to serve food and beverages outside. Family, friends and the community we grew up in, circled their wagons around the idea of celebrating Patrick’s memory. What made this such a memorable event? What surprises came out of it?

This event was much bigger than celebrating Pat’s memory or of letting his wife and children know that he mattered. The unintended consequence and blessings were many. Because he died so quickly, it provided many of us a wonderful venue to feel his living presence and to grieve our loss. Good ideas come from everyone everywhere; I can relinquish the crown of older sister and relax into being simply a loving sister. It also provided a concrete demonstration for the younger generation of what family is really about and that out of our mighty grief, goodness and love can emerge.

Even as I write, I tear up. Not tears of loss, though I’ve cried those tears over the year, but because I’ve been blessed to live in a family where the generational value of family still delights and surprises me. In this all too frenzied life, living apart from my family, I am reminded that in the end it is family that will be there for me. That the constant in life is not the weather or the markets, but the love of those who care about each other! Like many of my generation I’ve built a life far away from the sturdy Oak tree that was my family. But unlike others, my deep family roots provide nourishment to me wherever I am. I was born into a family whose parents believed, modeled and demanded that first and foremost we were family and that family mattered. No matter how far away I live, my family is always close at heart.

Today I have another family; a husband, step-son, daughter-in-law and two beautiful granddaughters. The love that I experienced and was modeled in my family of origin moves through me and into this, my family of choice. As I live my life now, I know that there is no real difference between my families. As I continue to remember those like Patrick who predeceased me, I know that they are always close to me and that I am richer for their presence. Patrick’s life continues through me and through others, not only in our words, but in our actions and our good deeds. I am forever altered because he lived, laughed, loved and his memory will forever linger. Even when I seem to forget, there is a part of him that is deeply rooted in my psyche. His goodness provides the texture and richness that forever informs my actions. Out of Pat’s death new sprouts of goodness are emerging and will continue to grow throughout the generations. He would be very happy with that as part of his legacy!
Busted Pipes

Lying in bed before turning off the lights for the night, we frequently preview the next day’s schedule. To our delight Sunday was wide open! It was like finding a forgotten air line ticket to an exotic destination. We could create the day of our dreams! It had been a very busy month and we were both tired. While we always schedule something fun to do each weekend, most of our weekends are consumed with cutting the grass, weeding the flower beds, or just catching up on the work from last week. As we celebrated our good fortune, we also decided to make the best use of our open schedule by not filling the time with more to do’s, but to let the day flow naturally. Like two kids waiting for Christmas morning we went off to bed with thoughts, not of sugar plums, but of hours lost in the Sunday paper with steaming coffee and warm bagels and a leisurely walk along Hershey Park. But none of those things ever happened.

It was around 7 AM and my husband was standing over me. As I began to stir, long before I intended for my eyes to open, I could hear Bruce’s voice. It came as a muffled distraction. “Remember its only money. Don’t get excited, remember to stay calm, there is something I need to tell you, so please wake up.” Why was Bruce speaking to me? What could be so important that he would be attempting to wake me up so early? Then his words took hold in me; like the tendrils of an octopus, they wrapped around the synapses in my mind. Startled I bolted into an upright position in the bed. “It’s only money, Judith,” Bruce insisted once again, “no one has died, but there has been a little situation. I need for you to be calm.” What!

If you knew me at all you would know that while there are things that I can be calm about, walking unaware into a crisis has generally resulted in a hysterical call from me to my husband. A year ago on a cold wintry March night when I couldn’t sleep, I wrapped myself in a warm bathrobe, slipped on my slippers and headed for the kitchen for some ‘sleepy time tea’. As I walked out of the bedroom I heard torrents of rain coming down and instantly knew the rain I heard was not outside, but was coming down in the middle of my living room. With a throw of the light switch my worst nightmare was confirmed. I saw the water streaming down from the ceiling through our newly laid roof and repainted vaulted ceilings. No one has ever described me as calm in those instances. With a blood curtailing scream that had Bruce bounding out of the bedroom, I pointed in terror to the water soaked hassock that had both muffled the sound of the rain and absorbed some of the water. But I digress!
Like the previous debacle, Bruce was heading to the kitchen for his morning rounds, which begins by
making coffee. As he was walking through the living room on the way to the kitchen, he heard a foreign
sound. Before he could identify its source, he was distracted by the realization that he was standing in
about a quarter inch of warm water. His first reaction was to enjoy the comforting feeling of his feet in
water, and then he realized that he was standing in the living room—this was not good. Water should
not be in the living room. Unlike me he quietly waded through the water till he rounded the corner to the
kitchen. He found the source of both the mysterious sound and the oncoming warm water; a water pipe
that fed hot water to our kitchen faucet ruptured and water was everywhere. It was pouring out from the
cabinet below the sink; there was more like an inch and a half of water in the kitchen. He quickly closed
the water valve below the sink. Shutting the water off was the easy task, waking me was the more
ominous task.

After living in Houston for over twenty years you would think that I would get used to water issues. The
city itself is almost situated below sea level. I’ve lived through three hurricanes and experienced flooding
of epic proportions. With hurricane Ike, I was as calm as a cucumber when we lost electricity for six
days. I knew we were blessed in many ways considering others had trees in their homes and went
without electricity for uppers of four weeks. I’ve learned to drive through standing water so that it doesn’t
back up in my car and knew enough to buy a home that was a foot higher from the sewage drains. But
these things always happened out side of my home. Why can I be so calm in a big crisis and yet react
so wildly when relatively small things happen to me in my home?
What I can say is that I’m in awe of watching Bruce respond to crisis. He stays calm and moved ahead on a logical course of action while I am more scattered and less resilient. When crisis comes, be it a broken water pipe or a roofer who makes a mistake with the chimney flashings, I react as if someone was trying to personally attack me. I move into a defensive stance. My reacting does not advance the resolution of the crisis so much as muster people around me to take flight. When there was a problem with the chimney flashing that resulted in water coming into the living room, I sent a blunt, harsh email to my contractor demanding that he be here to fix it immediately; it was four o’clock in the morning. By seven o’clock I was on the phone to him. When I think about my reactions I understand that I have an unexamined belief that when I’m in my home, I will be safe and secure and when things happen to remind me that there is no such thing as safety or security, I’m startled, frightened and I react. It’s as a pattern that no longer serves me.

We orchestrated the claim and were moving ahead when, a week later, after visiting earlier that day with our new contractor that we hired to repair the water damage; I looked up from my desk to see a large, yellow water mark looming over me. There is an old adage that bad things happen in threes! I sure do hope that this is the case and that we are finally done with our ‘busted pipes.’ Armed with previous reflections on my reactions and with Bruce’s gentle but effective response to a perceived crisis, I responded differently. Instead of reacting wildly, I calmly brought Bruce down stairs to look at the latest situation. We called our contractor to have him come back to examine it and with his exploration we did find that another busted warm water pipe lodged between the floors. Within an hour we had a new plumber here to replace the damage connection and we are back in business. The damage was minimal this time and we already had contractors on hand to re-plaster and paint. Things were looking up!

In the light of a new day, I realize that there is no big conspiracy out to get me! The roofing contractor didn’t consciously tell his workers to skimp on the chimney flashing. The pipes just broke after 25 years of accumulated wear and tear. My reaction is mine to change. It is not the truth, but born out of an unconscious belief about my need for safety and security. With the third busted pipe incident happening so close to the last one, I was able to let Bruce’s words take hold within me. In doing so, I took a deep breath, relaxed my tensed body and responded calmly to the situation that was in front of me. When I look at it from that angle, I’m reminded of what Bruce so eloquently said to me “It’s only money, Judith, no one has died, but there has been a little situation. I need you to be calm.” And the truth is, in being calm I was much better able to respond appropriately and more importantly still, out of my ‘busted pipes’ peace now flowed.
A Perfect Storm

Yesterday I went to dinner with two women friends, Marla and Kym. We had plans to do dinner at the Chelsea Café in the Museum District, and then attend an art show at the Jung Center. The chatter of women friends, a great table outside on the patio, sumptuous food served up with a cool night breeze provided all the fixings of a gourmet experience. During the meal, however, I felt my energies crashed. A torrent of exhaustion washed over me that was not congruent with the relaxing day that I had created for myself. It was such a beautiful day, that earlier I shelved my plans to do anything that could deem constructive inside the house and instead sat quietly out on my patio, reading and doing absolutely nothing! I was ready for our night of merriment—happily unaware that I was experiencing the quiet before the storm.

One moment I was up and flitting about and chatting away; and the next moment I looked like a folding chair ready for storage. It took energy to sit up in the chair. At dinner, perceptive as Marla is, she saw the change in my physicality and deflated energies and asked if I was okay. “I’m just tired I guess,” was all I knew to say. Like the trooper I’ve conditioned myself to be over the years, it never dawned on me to beg off from the rest of the evening’s plans, and instead moved ahead as if all was well. The denial of my exhaustion was indicative of the night’s emotional storm that I was unwittingly trying to keep at arm’s length.

From dinner we went to see the Bart Long Art Exhibit that was held at the Jung Center. Bart’s work was in reaction to a journal that the father of Depth psychology, psychiatrist and philosopher, Carl Jung, wrote entitled “RED”. It was not published until after his death. He kept it during a particularly dark period in his life, and it included some extraordinary visual images. Bart’s art is contemporary and like Jung’s work, is filled with symbolism. While my friends socialized, I broke away and quietly took in the art perspective. The weighty white pine boards that Long used to frame his art resonated with the heaviness I felt. I’m not drawn to contemporary art, but the piece entitled Madness, which included mirror fragments, shredded a fine thread of resistance that was keeping me together.
When I finally escaped from the event, my raw jagged emotions were rumbling just below the surface. Like the shock waves prior to an earthquake, I realized that an eruption was eminent. Driving home, a deep sadness that I had been keeping at bay with levies of activity began to overflow its physical banks. Hot salty tears could no longer be contained. But what was I suppose to do with them? Driving is never a good time or place to process an emotion. Since I am not equipped with personal window wipers, I did my best to breathe and hold myself together until I could get safely home. Adept as I've been over the years in avoiding my deep feelings, I knew that my old ways of avoiding my pain were useless. The piper showed up demanding his due; there was no turning my back to him this time even though every fiber of my being wanted to turn and run away.

I used bargaining and rewards as a way to trick myself to face the piper. “If I sit in my chair for only 30 minutes then I can treat myself to my dessert of choice; lemon pudding with cranberries, almond slivers and cool whip.” I can experience any feeling for that long; can’t I? In the moments of committing to sit in the chair, to feel the pent up feelings, it felt like if I let go and felt the pain, I would be like Jonah swimming around in the belly of the whale, with no guarantee that the whale would eventually spit me out. Eighty minutes later, I emerged with six pages of personal exploration, a box of Kleenex strewn around me, exhausted, empty but feeling much lighter. Writing has always been the way I discover my own truths. To ask myself a question and to respond without thought, editing or censorship, I let my body tell me the ‘Truth’ of what I am experiencing. And Truth is what I got!

There was plenty of evidence that I was moving toward an emotional breakdown as well as breakthrough long before the final eruption, but hindsight, as the saying goes, is 20 – 20. There was an incident about a friend’s illness where I uncharacteristically tensed up and viscerally pulled away; when empathy and support were nowhere in sight. And yet another time, during testing for my 2nd level brown belt in Tae Kwon Do, I doubted and berated my own physical ability. After breaking the third board with my knuckles, and watching them instantly swell and turn black and blue, I felt anything but powerful and strong. I felt small, vulnerable and very fragile and had to stifle my tears. What was I trying to prove to myself? For the first time in my life, I felt old and vulnerable.
The first anniversary of my brother’s death at 55 (see Deep Roots), reflecting on my reaction to my friends’ illness, as well as the Tae Kwon Do testing, was the ‘perfect storm’ that brought up the archetypal issues of aging and mortality. If you asked me two weeks ago if I was afraid to die, I would have responded with an equivocal NO. That’s because I never looked down the double barrels of aging and my own mortality. It is terrifying! Yes, I cognitively knew it was going to happen, but there is a long winding road from my head to my heart; I’d happily taken as many detours as I could on the road to reality. I was too frightened to sit in the same house with the idea, never mind cozying up at night wrapped up with the possibility. There is nothing pretty about the vulnerability and sureness of mortality and all its ugly details. Without consciously realizing, I did my best to secure myself from the grim reaper breaking down my own front door. I installed tamper proof padlocks and door bolts. But the stealth opponent that he is, he avoided the front door and came at me from behind. I was captured!

No wonder I felt fragile and tired. It takes herculean energy to keep the demons of aging and mortality at bay: to keep my guard up, to be brave, strong, and resilient and, by the way, be 63 years old. I’d like to believe that my eighty minute excavation is all that I will need to do to make friends with the aging and mortality, but I’m not that naive. There will be more conversations, more tears, and even some well placed anger before I come to grips with the inevitable. What I have learned is that mortality is something that I will need to continue to court. It’s a persistent and powerful opponent. Previously I’ve wrestled with others deaths, failed dreams or a perceived untenable situations; this time there isn’t any distance between the ‘it’ and the ‘me.’ The truth is, I can run but I can never hide. The question is not when, but how I will move into those stages of life and loss.
'The cat is out of the bag' now so the question is where will she live? I want to make a place for her in my life. I’m not ready to welcome her in with open arms, but at least I can create a place in a back room with a window sill where she can stretch out and enjoy the heat of the day. And when I walk down the hall and pass her room, I’ll be reminded that she is in there waiting for me. On good days, maybe I’ll be ready to sit with her and visit; but not now. Today the feelings are just too raw. My hope for the future is that, over time, the distance between us will continue to lessen and that like good friends we will be able to sit down and play together, share some milk and peacefully plan for the inescapable.
I love the morning; I love those moments between waking and getting out of bed when I feel warm and cocooned. Today as I opened my eyes, the first rays of morning sun filtered through the opened shutters and I was greeted by the expanse of the morning light filtered through the long, laden branches of old oaks that circle our backyard. A magical morning was unfolding. Fortunately there was no dire reason for me to jump out of bed, so I took a few more relaxing moments to let the beauty of nature nourish me. I was mesmerized by the interplay of sun light with the stately oaks set to the rhythm of a gentle breezes; the dance was graceful, playful and mesmerizing. As I watched I could feel my body come alive and a gentle smile made its way across my face. Bushy tailed gray squirrels were scampering from branch to branch with no real reason other than they could. The birds where chirping and cooing, involved in their own morning musical rituals. In front of me was a painter's palate overflowing with shades of lush greens, yellows, and sky blues with sunlight twinkling through. As I took in the beauty around me I thought: Why is it that I can see beauty all around me and never have a thought about my own personal beauty? Why is it that I have eyes that can see beauty in others and yet never turn those same constructive and loving eyes upon myself? And what is deep beauty anyway?

I hear you all; she has a big head. It’s not healthy to be so self absorbed. But I know that I really don’t have to worry about that? Maybe there are people who fill that bill, but there is little likelihood that I could ever over tilt in that direction. My issue has been that I don’t take time to celebrate my own self, my own accomplishments, my own virtues, or my own inner or external beauty. Now if I were to write about my vices and my doubts, I’d easily be able to fill a notebook. When I sit and try to identify what it is in me that allows me to be able to see beauty in others or in the glories of nature but cringes at the thought of having to identify my own personal beautiful qualities; I’m totally at a loss. I might as well be the blue eyed bond I was in my youth trying to pass as a person of Middle Easterner decent. Truly that would be easier. Why is that?
I was born into a large Irish / French family whose focus was on the good of group not the celebration of the individual. It was the family that mattered most and there was nothing extrinsically wrong or bad with that. There certainly was a benefit to know the needs and desires of those within the family. It was from my Irish heritage that the axiom ‘don’t have a big head’ took generational root. It was foundational to how my paternal lineage raised their five sons. My father had two conflicting paradigms at play regarding his children. He was incredibly proud of each one of us and was totally unable to verbally affirm who we were as children. Over the years I came to understand that my Irish grandparents believed that it was important to toughen their children up so that they could make it in a world of famine and deprivation. But we didn’t live in the same world; we never went without food and our basic needs, including love, were taken care of. The consequence of focusing on the good of the family rather than the individual and the ‘toughening us up’ parenting model, was that none of us ever really understood our own personal brilliance. The generational and cultural scales of justice were heavily weighted on the side of precaution and preparation at the sake of individual possibility and personal promise! How did it play out? And what did it have to do with deep beauty?

All seven of my brothers excelled in sports, but the game that dominated their school years was football. I recall like yesterday, my brother being named as the MVP (most valued player) in a high school game, and my father greeted him, not with a hug or with a high five for a game well played, but by asking him what happened in the 3rd quarter, 5th play when he missed an important block. In that moment I saw the broad cocky smile of a seventeen year old whose eyes twinkled with pride and animated his face, be shattered and replaced by anger and angst. What would it take to get a compliment out of him? It wasn’t like my father wasn’t proud of each of us; he was. You need only see a photo of him, with his children all around him, his chest puffed out and a smile as big as Texas on his face, to see how deeply he loved us.

My father came from a generation that never questioned ‘the way things were’ or gave thought about unattended adverse consequences of how he was parented. For us girls, it played out less dramatically with little expectation to go beyond marriage and motherhood. I understood early on that my parents didn’t see much of future for me, so I reflected their expectations. Being a female in a patriarchal culture, the bar, both educationally and physically has already been set so low that there was little need to ‘toughen us up’ because some husband would protect and provide for us in the world! As if that were a given!
I understand that my inability to take in my beauty has to do with how I was reared and not because there is something intrinsically wrong with me. Seeing that the scales were weighed against my being able to celebrate the positive or the beautiful, I’ve turned a big corner in shifting that luxury liner called Judith toward a new day. Since I learned that behavior as a child, I can replace the overused pattern of denying my worth or my beauty by practicing 100% positive self regard. Rather than berating myself, as my Irish heritage would have me do, today I choose to take on eyes that celebrate what I historically moved beyond without acknowledgment; my courage, fortitude, love of family, faithfulness and today a little more lightness of being.

Fortunately my mother’s family was Canadian French and did not share the same cultural paradigms regarding parenting. Once I found the courage to declare that I was going to college, my mother jumped in and soothed my father’s concern that I was wasting my time. In that unconscious decision to fashion a future of my choosing, I planted the seed of my own deep beauty. Deep beauty is a sureness of being in the world; of knowing that in your own special way, you matter. It’s a peaceful center that is anchored in who you are and desire to be. It shows up in feeling comfortable in your skin and allows the space to let others shine on their own merit. People who have found their own voice and learned to stand up for the values they chose; they emanate deep beauty. Deep beauty is everyone’s birth right but not everyone’s destiny. It is can be ours just because we are here on this earth, because we breathe, because we are part of God’s great creation, because we have a heart that cares and the courage to claim our destinies. It is grounded in deep peace and well earned wisdom. That is true deep beauty.
As I write, I let my tears flow. Tears from the child who never had her worth or her beauty reflected back to her. Tears from the child who internalized her own parent's low expectations so that she would be loved, and in doing so, clung to patterns of behavior that kept her from manifesting her brilliance. And there are tears of celebration and gratefulness for the revelation that the scales of justice have been shifting without my ever realizing it. Every time I make the time to watch the sun rise or sun set, or watch in amusement as a squirrel scurry around his personal jungle gym; it's my own nature that is looking back at me. Truth be known, there is only one nature and we are forever linked. What I see outside of myself is a reflection of what is inside. I cannot appreciate that which does not already exist deep with me. It is in my celebrating the beauty of nature that I can be reminded that the 'apple I am does not fall far from its tree of life.' Today I hold the scales of generational justice. The sights and sounds of nature are a reflection of my own deep nature. Now how deep and beautiful is that!
Creating Bright Spots

It’s been a week since I read about it, but like a song that has captivated your mind, the concept of ‘bright spots’ keeps circling back into my consciousness. I’ve learned over the years that when my mind, like a dog with a bone, holds fast on an idea or a concept, there is something there for me to learn. I was turned on to the new book *Switch*, by Chip & Dan Heath, by my husband and two friends. With the third invitation, I knew I had to read it but I had no idea how captivating it would be for me. Like a lone voice calling out in the wilderness of life, I’m so glad that I heard it and responded to the call.

The book is about how to create change. It is not a Pollyanna practice of only ‘being happy’. Heavens knows that if we could just do that, we would all do it! Its for those who realize that change is inevitable, but growth is optional. According to the Heaths, you reeve-up the engine of change by identifying someone who has already successfully implemented the change you want; then identify one or two critical behaviors, or ‘bright spots,’ that made the change possible, and implement those behaviors into your life. The process has you move beyond analysis or paralysis by focusing on the behaviors responsible for the success.

The ‘bright spot’ concept was used by a school psychologist to help Bobby, a ninth grader who was referred to him for his bad behavior: he was late, rarely did his work, was disruptive and sometimes made loud threats? By exploring with Bobby where he was when he didn’t get into trouble as much, the psychologist was able to identify the one teacher whose behavior naturally encouraged Bobby. When Bobby came into that teacher’s room, she always greeted him, gave him work he could do and checked with him to make sure he understood the instructions. By having other teachers implement the behavioral “bright spots” of Bobby’s day, the number of times that he was sent to the office declined by 80%. I wonder, “If finding and implementing ‘bright spots’ worked for Bobby, could it help me reeve up my ability to live life fully with lightness and enjoyment!” Certainly it is a question worth pondering!

I’m naturally serious, and I’m seriously not happy about that! I’ve made progress over the years; I’m no longer the terminally serious person I was in my forties. But still, no one would call me light and my tendency is to falter on the side of being overly solemn and cautious. I’m like a doe in the wild with her ears fully cocked listening, tensed and ready to bolt. There is no levity in survival of the fittest! It’s served me well over the years, but my definition of success has changed. I’m concerned now with how I live my life rather than what I might have achieved along the way. Like a meadow of blue bonnets, over time the field that is my life has been overgrown with my own vigilance. It’s not like I haven’t been working on lightening up. I’ve taken improv classes and studied to be a clown; and there were moments of lightness along the way, but I can’t learn lightness by taking a class. On the journey of life, as far as lightness is concerned, I’m the tortoise, plodding along. What I do know is that more of the same will get me more of the same and I’m just not interested in the status quo. If there is a game out there that will have me laughing more, or swimming with the current rather than struggling against it, then sign me up.
When I look for people who have a natural lightness and who are predisposed to enjoy life, my mother Velma and my granddaughters Cassandra and Stella come instantly to mind. With my granddaughters it’s their natural exuberance and playfulness that attracts me. There is no concern for image or what others think. Life is a mystery that is unfolding in front of their eyes and they experience it with mirth and wonder. With them I’m relearning to find fun in the ordinary; to run in the rain and splash around in puddles, to wear wings and colorful outrageous things. When I’m with them, I naturally move into lightness.

My mother reared ten children and lived her life fully. On her 75th birthday party she surprised us all by greeting her family and guests dressed from head to toe as Broom Hilda, the black witch of the west; with her broom stick in one hand, and a glass of white zinfandel in the other. It is how she lived every day that most inspires me. I recall my parent’s playfulness and teasing around dinnertime most nights. There would be joking and banter regarding the twenty-five cents that they bet on their nightly cribbage game. Val would playfully hit my father with a kitchen towel if he was slow to ante up; or chase him around the kitchen table until the quarter was deposited in her hand. Her sense of humor and her natural ability to see life as a glass as half full is the behaviors that was foundational to my learning to lessen the grip of the handle bars of the sturdy bike of life as I learned to ride. Because I had the blessing of experiencing the world from half full eyes, I quickly learned to ride the bike of life with two hands resting lightly on the handle bars and with years of conscious work, sometimes able to let go with...
one hand and that, my dear friends, is real progress. My goal is to live life fully; to ride with two hands up in the air, with a grin as wide as Texas, joyfully sending flying kisses to all passerby’s.

Under the most trying situations, my mother was at her best. She never panicked or played out negative scenarios or looked for villains to blame. Instead she highlighted what was working, and stayed focused on that. A seminal crisis in our life was when my father lost his job at Westinghouse when he was 54 years old, because the plant was moving to Ohio. He had joined that corporation right out of high school and was there when they finally shut the door and turned out the lights for good. During the months of working odd jobs and having his world turned upside down; my father’s naturally cheerful mood was heavily weighted down by doubt and uncertainty. It was a traumatic time in his life, and it could have been a very difficult time for each of us as well, but it wasn’t. Up-beat as ever her response was “we don’t have debt; we own our house and car so we only need money for food right now.” There was no crying or gnashing of teeth. There was no belittling of my father or berating of his ability to provide for his family of twelve. She kept things light and focused on what was working.

My plan is to focus my energies on expanding on the areas of lightness and increased enjoyment. I only need to identify one or two new behaviors that I can do every day to transform that scrawny, emaciated little muscle of lightness into a bulked and toned lean beach body machine. Because change only happens with daily practice, I’ll start and end each day by counting my blessings; ten items two times a day will have me seeing the world as half full. My second behavioral change will be increase my awareness of the color yellow by seeking out the myriads of yellow that is in front of me as I drive or go for a walk. With each sighting, I’ll take a deep breath, relax back into myself, and smile. I’ll let the warmth of the color yellow warm and melt my natural clutching hands that want to hold on tightly to life.Besides, yellow is a happy color!

Since my granddaughters live in New York, and I don’t have the luxury of spending lots of time with them, I’ll have to find other ways to ratchet up my playful side. Fortunately I still have the two second graders that I mentor each year to help me reconnect with the exuberance of childhood, but school is out for the summer and so I need to find something now. My husband suggested that I learn to tell a joke and that is so out of my comfort zone that it feels like it would be easier to climb Mt. Everest. Experimenting with what I can do differently to learn to let go of the reins of life, after Tae Kwon Do class today, I attempted to do a cartwheel. It wasn’t pretty, but I’ve decided that I will relearn how to do that again. The first attempt was bad, but like Casey at the bat, I’ll swing at it again. The result was not funny or light, but there was a freedom I experienced that will suffice for now in doing something that I would otherwise back away from doing for fear of looking silly and there is enjoyment in that!
Shifting my attention from what could go wrong to what *is right and light*, changes what I see and informs and happily colors my attitude toward life. The land of my dreams is in my sight and getting there is worth any new effort I expend along the way. When I falter, and being human I will, I will laugh at my human condition, celebrate the recognition and return to my daily practice of seeing and celebrating the color yellow and learning a cartwheel. Like a lighthouse on the rocky shores of a distant but light land, the practice of continually refocusing on the 'bright spots;' of seeing my glass half full and finding lightness in the here and now, will illuminate my way and make the journey more enjoyable. Now that is a 'bright spot' worth lighting up about.
Giving Up The Struggle

Writing the ‘Bright Spot’ blog was both difficult and illuminating. Like other moments of growth, growth came when I finally realized that, once again, I was struggling. You would think that it would be easy to see, name and claim the moments of struggle, but that’s not my experience. Working hard and pushing through to the goal are bred into our Western strive/drive culture of achievement; struggle has become synonymous with breathing and life. Besides, struggle is counterproductive; it provides the illusion of progress but is a waste of my energies. More importantly, I began to understand the internal struggle between my head and my heart for dominance in my writing. Rather than my head, a salmon swimming upstream to spawn and die, I choose to live the life of my heart, on an inner tube being carried by life down the Brazos River. The life of my heart does have currents, and learning to identify them and ride them is part of creating a centered and powerful life.

The word struggle is code for the fact that my heart has been overpowered by my thinking mind. When I was in my 40s, I began counting the times in a day I used the word ‘struggle’; I couldn’t go for 20 minutes without hearing that horrid word spill out of my mouth or echo in the caverns of my mind. By my mid-50s, I learned to cultivate the ability of self observation, and used it to catch myself in the process of ‘struggling.’ Like a Tae Kwon Do Master catching a fly in mid-air, I heard the words before they came out
of my mouth, and replaced the word with one less onerous. Now that word rarely comes to mind, and when it does, I’m amused at its resilience and persistence. When I do use the word ‘struggle,’ it’s because it is the only word I can use; it’s the right word for the situation. While the word itself does not rear its ugly head, now another layer of the onion of struggle has made its way to the light of day, and I’m glad for the rays of light and illumination.

The last time I caught myself in the act of struggling was when I was ‘trying’ to create “The Power to Act” group coaching program. After six months of developing the programs, amassing the databases, doing marketing and delivering the product, I was stuck in first gear. Progress was negligible. Students who took it liked it and some looked forward to the next class, but it was a daily grind. Sunday morning, with coffee in hand, I settled into a comfy chair to read the Sunday New York Times when I saw an article about Louise Hay and her life. She wrote Heal Your Body, which created the link between the emotional and physical symptoms of illness. She talked about how surprised she was by her popularity and success. How one step led to another, to another, and to another; there was no struggle, no pushing and forcing! In a moment of recognition, my tears flowed, and I realized I was in a struggle once again. That day I closed the program and took down the web site. I felt immediate relief. I had no idea how I would use all the information that I’ve learned over the years, but I did know that when it was to be, it would flow.

Creating the ‘Bright Spots’ blog was another of those learning experiences; and it was different. Today’s struggle is more subtle; the pig is wearing hot pink lipstick, but it’s still a pig. The swine appears to rob me of my new found heart when I write. In January when I wrote, ‘How do you know when you know?’ I experienced the same internal tension that I felt while writing “Bright Spots,” but I couldn’t connect the dots. My dear husband gently pointed out that he thought I was getting a little cerebral; he was right. Versions one and two had the dubious distinction of being both heady and heavy. How do you write about “bright spots” without being bright or light? Now that had my attention! Where does bright and light live? Certainly not in the recesses of my mind! When I went back to re-read the draft for the third time, I was surprised at how my mind and my writing focused on the heavy times in my life: my father losing his job, my own inability to see the world as half full. The ‘pearl beyond price’ was when I realized that I was recounting my life as it was in my 20s, not how it is today. With my heart now engaged, I can re-look at what is true in the moment, and I can see the lightness of my mother and her impact on my life.

While creating the “Bright Spots” blog, like the dawn of a new day, my head naturally struggles and my heart opens up the possibility of lightness and flow. The struggle that emerged was not with what I was to do out in the world but between my head and my heart. When I write, I relax my thinking mind. Like the blood that the heart pumps, I let my words and thoughts flow through me; what am I experiencing, what is life serving me and what does my heart feel about it all? When I attempt to share something I’ve read or a concept I’ve learned, I lose sight of my heart, and my thinking silently takes over the driver’s seat. And the struggle begins. This would be fine if I could recognize that I’ve shifted drivers, but therein lies the problem. I think everything is okay if I just work a little harder at it; then I’ll be able to say it in a way that you can relate to it! I push ahead as if my heart were driving when in reality my head has me working hard trying to plane the edges of a square peg so that I can slip it into a round hole.

How do I know that I’m struggling when I’m writing? My struggle shows up in writing that reflects the cramped and lofty library of my mind, with musty books and manuscripts scattered all around me. It’s not a place for the light or the lovers of life; its better suited for the lovelorn and locked in. When my
body is tense and I’m anxious, when I awake long before dawn and sleep eludes me, when I’m wrestling and my usual good nature gets snappy and I feel out of sorts. I know that it is not something that I can tackle because when my soul wants to be heard, there is no turning a deaf ear to her. She is relentless. When my old thinking has squeezed joy and happiness out of my life, she fights hard to get my attention. Like a person drowning, she kicks and yells for help, and it's my job to respond to her calls.

I’m not naïve enough to say that the struggle is over, but I do want to celebrate that I've discovered a new way that struggling masquerades in my life. Now it's a lot easier to recognize when the struggle between my head and my heart emerges. The face of struggle in my writing wears a seductive red lip stick of explanation and scarlet nail polish of worldly ideas and concepts. Her four-inch-high scarlet heels reach for perfection and are cloaked in a heavy woven shawl of importance. That is the image of my “struggle,” and I’m adding her to my top ten most dangerous fugitives. For your benefit, I'll post her picture in every post office across the land. If you see struggle, approach with caution; she is armed and should be considered tedious, exhausting and uninspiring!
Kicking Butt!

Why did this 62-year-old woman decide to do Tae Kwon Do? I can’t tell you the number of people who, when they hear I am a second-level brown belt, look at me wryly and ask, “Why?” It’s no little decision, not something I did on a whim or because others were doing it. I didn’t do it to learn to defend myself, although that is a great reason to do it. I wanted to know what it felt like to feel powerful all the time, and to create a container that would protect my nascent voice. I did it because I was sick of feeling contained and small, and forgetting that I had power. It was the natural next step of my personal and spiritual development. And, like most major change, it was preceded by a hard life lesson.

Two years ago, I was hired to coach a VP of Exploration whose team was in revolt to turn his working environment around. To clear the air, we were to hold an off-site meeting where the team members had an opportunity to tell Dave what they wanted and why they were unhappy. It was expected to be contentious. My contract was expanded to facilitate this meeting. Because the team was large with about 15 Type A personalities, I brought in my partner to assist with the day-long facilitation. It was a great opportunity to forge new inroads into this corporation at a very senior level. I was excited by the opportunity that was laid at my feet. It should have been a big win, but instead I won the battle and lost the war!

I failed that day because I turned over my power to my partner. Let’s be clear; he did not ask me to do it; I did it because I got scared and lacked confidence in my ability to facilitate the group process. Was there any evidence to back up my fear? No! A struggle happened between my right and left ears, in the dangerous battlefield that is my thinking. Doubt, that insidious villain, advanced upon me in the form of a rational plan. One hour before the meeting, I asked Bruce to lead the facilitation so that I could focus on my VP to ensure that he got the best coaching possible.

In case you think it was a reasonable plan, let me assure you that is what a good justification is—a little truth, but not the ‘Truth.’ A skilled saboteur can take the absurd and make it plausible; she can take cow paddies and make them a must-have for every clothes-conscious consumer. The day ended well. The VP was brilliantly coached in how to show up in the meeting, and the team members seemed to be receptive to the process so that I could focus on my VP to ensure that he got the best coaching possible.

In case you think it was a reasonable plan, let me assure you that is what a good justification is—a little truth, but not the ‘Truth.’ A skilled saboteur can take the absurd and make it plausible; she can take cow paddies and make them a must-have for every clothes-conscious consumer. The day ended well. The VP was brilliantly coached in how to show up in the meeting, and the team members seemed to be receptive to the process that we orchestrate. And no blood was shed. At the end of the day, we shook hands and celebrated the day’s success—on the way home, we celebrated our brilliance at Starbucks. That happiness lasted for a fleeting 48 hours.
While the VP was out of town on vacation, his team circled back to the Regional VP and complained that my partner, not me, facilitated the day. I received a call to come to his office to discuss the situation. With that call, I knew that this was going to be one of those very expensive life lessons. Because of the dollars that were at stake, I understood immediately that the lesson was going to be about my turning over my power to Bruce. My actions had undermined the team’s confidence in me. I went to the meeting with my head held high and with a sense of calm that was surprising even for me. The milk was already spilled, and there was no way that I was going to be able to put it back into the bottle. I explained my thinking and had the opportunity to finish the process with the team on my own. It went well, which only cemented my realization that I could have conducted the process myself from the beginning. The lesson I learned was so big that I could no longer deny the elephant in the room. I had to find a way to consistently own my own power!

When I think back over the years, the evidence was strewn like litter along most highways. I was really good at letting others shine while I sat back safely in the shadows. I keep a picture of me sitting on the front stairs of our home: my twin brother sits on the first step while I sit demurely on the step behind him. Even at birth, I arrived after my twin, Jim who got fed first, while I waited quietly for needed nourishment. You could say that I was situationally predisposed to turn my power over to important people in my life; but that would make me a victim, and I’m not that.

Rather than an expose on the many ways I’ve denied my own power or my clumsy efforts to find my voice, I choose to focus on the most constructive things I’ve done to learn to own my power. People frequently ask me, “Why do you practice martial arts?” They are always surprised by my response. I practice Tae Kwon Do because I realized that I wasn’t consistent in how I owned my power and my voice. On good days, I was solid and sure of myself, and on other days, I moved back into my historical stance of being small and voiceless. What I knew was that more of the same would give me more of the same; and I was very tired of that! In the quiet recesses of my heart and soul, I knew that I mattered and that I had a lot of things to share and do. I had to take the tiger by her tail and wrestle her to the ground and that would take strength, not of will but of body. I needed to build a body that has an experience of her power.
In the practice hall, I am a natural teacher because I know the subtle ways that my body has shaped itself to be small and contained, because I’ve lived them. In each practice, I’m building a body that will not move silently into justifications that, although rational, still held me up at knife point and robbed me of my power. I practice Tae Kwon Do so that every muscle, bone and piece of connective tissue in my body knows, at a cellular level, that I will not give my power away willingly. That this beautiful chaise of a body, that contains my spirit and soul, is being re-engineered for performance. I stand tall in my body and solid in my spirit; I will fight, not just perpetrators from outside but also the insidious demons of doubt and fear that were locked into the fiber of my old body. Now when I look into a mirror, the person who smiles back at me knows in a body-felt way that she is magnificent and can kick butt!
Powerful Moments

It is June 3rd, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and its 75 degrees outside with very low humidity. No, I don't live in Anchorage, Alaska; I live in Houston, Texas. Like the tumbleweed in west Texas, when June rolls across the parched prairie, visits from family and friends dry up and blow away. Who is silly enough to come to Houston in the summer heat and humidity? For the past 20-odd days, temperatures have been in the mid-90s with humidity running above 90%. That's pretty much a natural experience. Yet, in the 20 years that I've lived here, I've never experienced mid-day temperatures of 75 degree during the summer months. I won't go into a conversation about global warming. Instead I'd rather ponder this change in temperatures as an example of one of those moments in life when things change on a dime. One moment, things are quietly the same and the next instant, life delivers an opportunity for a new life lesson. That is, if you are open to looking for it!

I grew up understanding God as a deity in the sky that both watched over and judged me, depending on my actions. He was fashioned from my Catholic and parochial school years, and my personal experience of my father. I didn't experience a shaming or a punishing God, but still he was male and distant. Over the years, I've fashioned another experience of God, one that is more inclusive and life giving, a benevolent God who is not up in the sky but is living in 'creation,' amongst and through us all. I call my God, Creator God, because I am, like the earth that I inhabit, always in movement, in the process of expanding or contracting. I live in creation, and I am a creation; these powerful moments that I experience are part of the interplay between the Creator and me as a creation and they bring opportunities for personal and spiritual growth.
I can’t recall an instant when this life view came into being. Like creation itself, my life view has evolved over time. I’ve had moments that, like a tornado traveling across the plains, have flattened the landscape of my life and left me devastated. When I learned that Gene, my first husband, had advanced lung cancer and it had metastasized to his brain, or when I was incorrectly diagnosed with the early onset of Alzheimer’s. Those lessons were hard to miss; they were as big as life, up front and very personal. Those experiences caught me up in the cyclone, lifted me up into the atmosphere and left me spinning round and round. When the winds stopped, the landscape of my life had irrevocably been changed. Like an overgrown forest, new growth was possible after the destruction. When such life-altering events happen, even those who never give a second thought to why they are here, or life itself, often take time to reflect on their new life conditions. The reason I know that is because I was one of those people. With time and distance, the lessons began to emerge; that I was more than the roles I was playing, that I was not really alone as long as I kept close to God, that the seeds of strength and possibility that I ascribed to the men in my life were already growing within me all along.

Life’s situations, big and small, are the dinner plates upon which life’s messages, like healthful food, is served. For life to provide nourishment I can’t just look at it; it must be eaten and digested. Life’s situations bring messages that must be ingested and chewed thoroughly in order for the fragrant aroma of a lesson to emerge and provide for spiritual or personal growth. They can be as subtle as a change of weather or as earth shattering as a tornado that destroys homes as well as dreams. I no longer wait for the cataclysmic to look for meaning in life, and so the lessons that come to me now are more like a gentle rain upon the land; they are peaceful and bring nourishment. Everyday interactions between the Creator and the creation bring new opportunities to learn and grow.

Sometimes the messages are subtle, like the third time someone tells me that I must read this book or see a movie, or a question answered unintentionally by a stranger in passing, or a sermon that I know was crafted just for my benefit, or moments when I’m driving, and out of the blue, I realize that my desires and my actions are not in alignment; I’m speeding up when I want to slow down. And they can be calamitous; when I parked my car out on the street because the roofers were parked in our driveway and it was totaled because of flash flooding. Certainly it can look like a random act of nature, and there is always some truth in that, but is it the only truth? Like creation itself, life and my experiences of it do not fit into an either/or box. Believing in the randomness of life leaves me powerless or victimized! It denies my interconnectedness with the Creator and it strips me of my own part of the creation.

When I look at those life situations as a message, to be brought back into my heart, and read as a loving gesture from a benevolent Creator, I can use any situation as an opportunity to grow. The seemingly random act of my car being totaled provided a new lesson to chew on; what was I suppose to learn from it? My lesson was one of non-attachment, to hold lightly to things and people around me. I loved my Lexus and felt a sense of pride when I drove it; as if the driver and the car were one—an emblem of status! After the initial fight to get the car to the dealership in the middle of a flood, I eventually had to laugh at the irony of it all; and I have a different relationship today with my Acura. There is a new division between the car and who I am; my ego is no longer enmeshed with the car I drive. My car is fun, a reliable mode of transportation and acceleration!
When reading life's situations as messages, I feel empowered and engaged; I'm on the dance floor of life, learning to let go of control and learning to listen to the rhythms of the song that I'm experiencing. By living my life as an integral part of creation, I am never alone. There is the dancer and the dance. It is a very intimate relationship that always brings life and growth to me even when material things, like the current in a raging river, move quickly downstream. In my relationship with the Creator God, I've found that there is always gold at the end of the rainbow and that the rainbow is visible only after the storm. I've found that it is my job to seek out rainbows and to glory in the exploration and the pieces of gold I discover in each life lesson that I discover along the way.

When I take the time to chew on the unseasonably cool temperatures that I'm experiencing, I'm reminded that it is appropriate and necessary to chill out when things around me are heating up. To take advantage of life's reprieves; to celebrate them rather than damn them for getting in the way of my personal plans. To understand that the only thing I really do have control over is my reaction to life's moments. That life is not scripted and I am always better off going with it rather than pushing up against what is. In the larger picture of life, I am after all, the creation, not the Creator; and the two are not divided but one!
I’m in such a lovely place today. Life is peachy; I’m centered, grounded, focused and extremely happy. My heart is filled with joy. I know deep within the recesses of my being that all is well in my world. During balanced times I’m grounded in the richness of the moment and at the same time, moving forward in the world with equanimity. There is no push or pull; I’m in the middle of a calm but moving river, finding comfort in the buoyancy of my body and the inner tube that supports me as I move down the river of life. It’s a terrific way to start the week, and it’s a raging river’s expanse from where I was last Friday.

Friday’s are usually a privately productive day. I don’t see clients. I use my time to start a new blog post and to wrap-up unfinished projects, so that I can go into the weekend organized and refreshed. I was half way through the day before I realized that I just couldn’t get engaged in anything productive. What was going on?

It took less than 30 minutes of journaling to realize that my circuits (physical, emotional and spiritual) were in overload. The Pink Energizer Bunny that I am had exhausted the juice in my Duracell batteries. There are things that I need to do to keep my batteries, and my circuits, healthy and strong; things that I hadn’t been doing. Like anything in life, I get out of it what I put into it. And I hadn’t been putting into my life the things that bring me energy, keep me nourished, centered, grounded, and happy. I was out of balance and so, out of sorts.

Since I’ve always had only 24 hours in each day, where have I been spending my time? Am I putting too much time at the computer, sacrificing other more life giving pursuits? Writing and publishing my blog weekly is both my passion and my problem. When I write, edit an article, or look for the perfect pictures,
I can sit at my computer for hours upon end and never think to come up for air. That focused energy is not sustainable; overtime it drains me. It feels appropriate at the time, but the fiddler always demands his due; and I’ve forgotten that.

What does it mean to live a balanced life? It is one of those illusive things that seem to change with time. As a child, all I needed was positive attention and a smile from my parents, scheduled food and sleep, and a few close friends with whom to play. In my 20’s, I was okay with an occasional enjoyable night sleep, two meals a day eaten on the run, and an enjoyable social life including libation, music to dance to, and the laughter of friends. In my 30’s and 40’s to feel balanced, I needed a partner, a decent social life, a few quiet nights alone, and an active gym membership. What I need today is much more complicated. I need the staples of sound sleep and wholesome food, and a lot of quiet time to meditate, journal, read, and create. I still need exercise, but with emphasis on stretching and strengthening and an increased allocation of time spent in nature. I need family and friends in moderation and time away from technology, including television.

It’s not as if I’m totally living my life out of whack; I’m not. While I may be doing 75% of the things I need to balance the scales of my life, the other 25% that I’ve lost sight of, have been draining my batteries. On most nights I benefit from a decent night sleep, eat healthy, meditate, have a rigorous exercise program with Tae Kwon Do and stretching, and I meet my relational needs. Those five things alone, while foundational, do not keep me healthy and effective in the world. I need to add to the mix two additional things that sustain me; nature and journaling. When any of my vital needs are accidentally cut out of the mix, I suffer. Unfortunately it is not something that happens quickly, but accumulates over time like leaving my interior lights on overnight in my car; I wake up to find my car battery dead. How do I know when my batteries are drained of juice or misfiring? I become physically sick; a cold, a runny nose, fatigued. Or, as in my present situation, I felt a physical disconnect between my spirit and my life; like two hands that can’t connect, the circuit never closes.

With the heat and humidity of Houston’s summer, the only time to be out and about in nature is in the wee early hours of the morning. Now I used to be an early riser, but when sleep eludes me, there is no way I’m able to get up at 6 or 7 to commune with nature. That will need to change; I must make time in the schedule to be in nature. Without it I starve myself from the nourishment that nature provides. Thirty minutes, twice a week cutting my roses and watering my plants or a walk around my neighborhood, brings richness and nourishment to my parched spirit.

The other thing that I’m starving for is my journaling. There is nothing as delicious as sitting quietly with pen and paper in hand, dialoguing with Creator God, or using journaling to make sense of the chaotic thoughts that reverberate through the cavern that is my mind. What keeps me from this source of nourishment is when I use my time unwisely; time pushing ahead, rather than relaxing in nature or journaling. These pursuits ensure that time I do spend is both productive and pleasurable. Why is that?

When I spend too much precious time on things that may amuse, but not nourish, like sitting in front of the television, or browsing the Internet for the perfect picture to accompany my next blog, then I’ve invested my time unwisely. When I overdo in one area, even if it feels right at the moment, some other essential needs get denied. I pay a price by either becoming ill, or moving through the day disjointed and disconnected.
What I've realized is that I have a need for order, and nature and journaling are how I order my thoughts and nurture my spirit. I've circled back to my needs as a child who benefited from a structured life; a time for bathing, food, and sleep. I remember my mother's wise words: "What a baby needs is to live an ordered life; for them to be able to count on the constancy of their schedule and our interaction. Interrupting the schedule creates uncertainty and adds turmoil to the child's existence." This is true for me today. When I forget to bring nature and journaling into my week, I end up feeling uncertain, unfocused and confused how to best move ahead; the Energizer Bunny that I am, stalls out, sputters and then dies! When I bring order by journaling and spending time in nature, then, and only then, am I able to find a balance between the chaos of life and creating!
A Natural Pause

Spending time in nature enriches and renews me! When I spend time away from the business and the busyness of life, I come home to my own natural rhythms. This vacation I’ll be richly fed by the green mountains of Vermont, and the tranquility of the Berkshires in Massachusetts. Bruce and I will spend time alone and held in the loving embraced of our families. So consider me leisurely meandering through the verdant mountains, babbling brooks, clear cold water lakes, and quaint rural town villages of New England for the next two weeks. I’ll be back refreshed and renewed and with a new blog post the third week in July. Till then.....
Collecting Life’s Nectar

I found a bumblebee in my bathroom this morning. She was working hard attempting to pollinate the milky white fluted glass light fixture over the sink. As I watched her, I was mesmerized by the repetitive action of her tongue reaching again and again to the inanimate, non-existent source of nectar in front of her. I was drawn into the futility of her actions, and knew that there was honey for me if I delved deeper into the flower. Curiosity stirred. Since we are all connected, I wondered – How was the bumblebee’s pointless mission relevant to me? How were her instinctual yet ineffective attempts to extract nectar from the light fixture mirrored in my life? How many activities do I mindlessly do with the same hopelessly unproductive results? These questions made me shudder.

The electricity produced from the exploration of the questions began to light up the bulb of my thinking with a host of fruitless patterns: playing solitaire, reading People magazine, self-doubt, procrastination, shame, ridged determination, resignation, and worst case scenario building; to name a few. The list could go on and on, but to what avail? Was creating the list itself another example of ineffectual action – to get lost in a catalog of things that are not my strengths? There certainly isn’t any flower worth pollinating in that garden of weeds. Or is there? The first two patterns, though mindless, are not instinctual so are not relevant at this time. The next question is – What pointless habitual, instinctive pattern is currently blocking me from doing what I say I want to do?
Finding, accessing, and utilizing my own personal voice is my life’s work. The fact that I used the word work, instead of avocation or calling, is telling to me. It is when I doubt myself or my abilities that writing becomes work and I begin to procrastinate by filling my time with mindless tasks. When I’m operating out of my gifts, away from the negative inner dialogue, my writing becomes pure golden honey; straight from the honeycomb of my heart. When I write from the place of no-doubt, my pen dips into the sweetest of flowers and I buzz from one word to the next, unconsciously caught up in the rhythm of the flight of the bumblebee and the industry of pollinating and gathering nectar.

When I left for vacation three weeks ago, I was caught up in the work of producing a weekly blog post, and was stressed; the flower of blogging had lost its bloom. I felt obliged to produce one blog per week. Sensing that I felt pressure my husband asked – Why don’t you take a vacation from the blog? Why not indeed! I’m the person who set the goal of producing 52 blogs this year, and I would be the person to adjust the goal so that I may achieve the more important outcome of ‘enjoying the process of writing again.’ I gave myself a two week vacation, with the promise that I would resume writing as soon as I returned. I felt renewed and refreshed when I returned, but busied myself with a myriad of inconsequential things to do; none of which were as important as coming back to my writing. Then I met my bumblebee and I’m reminded that being busy like a bee can be futile and frequently a clue that I’ve been caught in the silent fog of self-doubt.

Doubt has been the bane of my existence for as long as I have memory. I no longer try to locate its roots. It’s enough to know that this plant is toxic, and when found needs to be extracted and burned. Unfortunately, doubt is not an easy weed to see. Does a fish know it’s in water if water is the only thing she’s ever experienced? Doubt masquerades as wisdom, rational thought, a fact, something obviously true: ‘you can’t write, others laugh at your efforts; they take pity on you and humor you with their compliments!’ My challenge is to be able to recognize when doubt has me in its grip! The water that I swim in (my thinking) is so much a part of me that it’s difficult to recognize healthy from self-destructive thoughts. It all sounds true or at least possible; I’ve thought it for so long. Since I’m not skilled at ferreting out the weeds of faulty thinking, I’ve devised other means to flushing it out.

How do I know that doubt is lurking in the dark moist shadows of the garden of my psyche? Ineffectual action is the major clue. Because action occurs in the external world, I’m better able to recognize it. When I hear the buzzing of self-doubt; that I can’t write, can’t spell, not good at punctuation, that my vocabulary is limited and that my words don’t flow, the drone of this internal dialogue quietly lulls me to sleep and I move into an inactive, mindless state. I’m transported back to the fish in her water, unable to divide my thinking from real possibility or historical story.
Watching the futility of the bumblebee, frenetically extending her tong hopelessly trying to extract nectar from the milky white glass fluted light fixture in my bathroom, was the clue that I needed to recognize my own senseless ineffectual action. Once the poisonous weed was spotted, I could dig it out.

Before the bumblebee tiered, I captured and released her back into my backyard garden to continue its life work. As she flew away, I silently thanked the benevolent universe that brought her into my bathroom and provided me with a glimpse into my instinctual pattern of filling my time with inconsequential futile activities, when doubt arise. With gratitude, I faced named and discarded the poisonous weed and move again into constructive action. Just like the bumblebee will continue her work of collecting life’s nectar; I am free to dip my pen into the flowers of life’s situations and use it to pollinate my writing!
Heavy Packing

I love vacations. Who doesn’t? It’s the days prior to departing that stress me out. I’m a college graduate with a master’s degree, and I still haven’t figured out the art of packing light. I was going on vacation for two weeks and, since you can only take one bag free, I chose the largest one. We were at the airport checking in our luggage when the Continental representative declared that my bag was four pounds over-weight. A correlation of Parkinson’s Law was inexplicably proven——my paraphernalia expanded to fill my suitcase.

They say that you can’t teach old dogs new tricks, but this old dog is fed-up carrying this old bone; it’s heavy, tasteless and I’m ready to bury it once and for all. I want to master the art of lightening-up; both figuratively and literally. This is the first time that I’ve arrived at the ticket counter to be told by a pleasant enough reservationist, with a flat tone and a wry smile, that my bag was overweight. Really? It’s like the few extra pounds I’ve put on over the year shows up, not only on my frame, but in my luggage. Now I have to literally carry double the increased poundage when I travel. Where did this maddening habit of over packing come from?

While I was transferring my laptop to my backpack, and sundry books to Bruce’s suitcase, I thought——my mother would turn over in her grave if she saw my fifty-four pound bag! She didn’t pack much more than that for her family of twelve when we went on vacation for two weeks! When it comes to making the easiest of decisions about what to pack, I get stuck in the quick sand of indecision. After a lot of futile action and struggle, I give up! Why struggle? Why not take it all? And the cycle continues! What is that all about?

My mother was a wizard when it came to packing. She didn’t do it with a swish of a wand and magic words. She did it by seeing a world where ‘less is better.’ As long as I can remember, she always used a small green hard shell suitcase and it didn’t matter if she was going for a week or a month; she only took with her what fit comfortably within its confines. Going to the beach, she would pack for herself and my father, night clothing, two pair of shorts with two tops, a few changes of underwear, bathing suits, beach towels, and their toothbrushes with toothpaste. They’d travel in clothing that would also be used for going to church Sunday. For the youngest children, she’d pack plenty of diapers and the minimal
amount of clothing needed to be protected from the sun, kept warm when it was cold, and a portable stroller. Every few days there would be an excursion, not to the board walk, but to the Laundromats, and then we were set again for the next few days.

At nine years old, my mother declared that I was ready to pack my own belongings, and handed me a brown paper bag with my name on it, with directions to—Pack light! The first few years she’d check the contents to ensure that what I packed was both reasonable and practical. It was a rite of passage; and with the turning over of the baton, came the responsibility for taking with me what I needed. Some of us did better than others! In the excitement of departing one year my brother Patrick forgot his bag of clothes, so he spent the entire week in the clothes he arrived in. Each night my mother would wash his clothes out and he would put them on again the next day. Did he care? Not at all! What mattered was that he was at the beach and there was a whole world of fun to be had. He was like that his entire life; able to pack lightly, happy to be where he was and to do with what he had. He had inherited the packing light gene from my parents—I didn’t get it.

Absence that gene, my fun has been predicated on having the appropriate clothes. Although we came from the same dye lot, I was cut from a different bolt of cloth. Even as a child I spent hours thinking about what to pack; the problem has exacerbated by the sheer number of possibilities that I have today. Packing is a grueling 48 hour event. I check the internet for the extended weather forecast and then begin to fret about what exactly to bring; what coordinates, what shoes and clothes I may need, and if rain gear will be a necessity. Even knowing that if I forget something, I have the means to purchase it on the trip, doesn’t lessen the panic I feel when I begin to pack. It’s an irrational response; not to be confused with any kind of logic. It feels like the pressure of the universe is weighing me down; like these are life and death decisions. As a child I didn’t sleep the night before we departed because of the excitement; now I don’t sleep the night before but it has to do with anxiety. Is there a connection with the weight of my luggage and the weight of my inner dialogue as I pack my suitcase? I wonder?

The moment I wrote the words ‘lightening-up, both figuratively and literally’ the juices in my gut began to churn and I wondered what the connection was between the weight of my luggage and the stress I feel when packing. Is there a correlation between the self-imposed heaviness of my indecisive self-talk and the number of things that I stuff into my suitcase? You think! Now I see the dots connect. I understand now that the weightness of my packing process increases the number of things I pack and, exponentially, the weight of my suitcase. If I held the process of packing lightly, I can see that I would pack less? What a simple, but profound, realization! If I could cloak myself in my mother’s self-talk, (Less is better!) then there is a good possibility that I could bring lightness to the whole experience of packing again; and the night before departing I could anticipate the excitement of the trip rather than the anxiety of the pack!
One positive thing that remains constant from my youth is that once I am on the road, my whole body relaxes and the stress of packing dissolves like bath salts in bath water as I settles into ‘vacation mode.’ When I’m in the car and I’m humming down the road, I experience a whole body exhale that lasts until I return home. Even when I’m rolling my fifty-four pounds of belongings from town to town, I can laugh at the little girl that is still concerned about matching pieces and appropriate clothing, and cut her some slack. Next trip I’ll experiment by pretending that my mother, smiling down from above, has worked her magic once again and given me her packing gene, and I’ll finally let go of my heavy thinking and practice the art of packing light!
Progress Along The Path

There are times when you least expect it, that you find out that all of the work that you've been doing is starting to pay off. I had one of those experiences on the last full day of our Berkshire vacation. We spent a fun week with our children and grand children, filled with outdoor activities circled around the pool and under umbrellas; that is until my step son came in from an early morning walk with a glint of mischief in his eyes, a discovery, and a challenge. He found the 'Adventure Rope's Obstacle Course,' and it changed forever how I hold myself.

This is the second year that we've vacationed at Bentley Brook, nestled at the base of Jiminy Peak ski resort; that is redefining itself into a summer adventure destination. They've installed two mountain toboggan slides with deep vertical slopes and sharp banks to excite the roller-coaster set, and a group swing that makes a 360 degree circle. Last year I stood in line with a bunch of intrepid teenagers to experience their latest addition, a giant swing structure with tension cords hooked to a harness set over a trampoline. My goal was to go high enough so that I could do three flips; and with sheer determination and colossal effort, I did it. My flips looked like dense dark molasses slowly making its way around a spoon. I was given points for good form, but major deductions for the lack of vibrancy. Five minutes into the experience, I declared 'uncle' and forfeited the remaining five minutes allotted for the experience. I was proud of having tackled the monster; two years prior I would not get on a dance floor unless there were four other couples on it! There was progress. As I walked away happy with my chin high, my body felt like pink Jell-O quivering in the sun light. The tension and the physical exertion created a vortex that drained my energy like a whole in the radiator. Little did I know then how far I would go in one more year?

This year Barry, my step-son, spied a new attraction—the 'Adventure Rope's Obstacle Course.' Since it is always more fun to share an experience, he came through the door looking for a recruit. His wife gave him a look that defied any verbalization and unequivocally slammed that door closed. Bruce, my husband, instead of declining the challenge, parried with a deft deflection, suggesting an alternative participant—me. I do have a neat step-son and there are not a lot of opportunities for us to have one-on-one time, so I agreed. I did the trampoline and slides last year and lived. How hard could it really be? I changed into exercise clothing, donning my Adidas sneakers, baseball cap, sunglasses, sun screen, a bottle of water, and we departed our air conditioned condo for the base of the mountain which was the center of all summer activities.
The ‘Adventure Rope’s Obstacle Course’ is a series of four elevated rope paths constructed below a canopy of trees on the lower of the ski slopes. Height junkies progress the rope challenges from easiest to hardest, which range from 12 feet in the air at level one to 35 feet for level four. Each level was comprised of five different obstacles. There is a complex series of obstacles – ladders, ropes bridges, zip lines, cargo nets, stairs and bridges made of hanging lumber that I confronted along the way. All of the courses are self-guided. To prevent falls, an intricate set of harness, safety lanyard and belay lines secure each person. A rescue team is also trained to retrieve anyone who gets stuck or slips off and becomes suspended in their safety harness. The difficulty of each challenge increases as you moved from level one to level four; which was fortunately not open yet.

We bought our tickets and settled on a 3:00 PM start time. After signing a standard document waiving our right to sue the organization, we were fitted into my new friends, a belay harness and heavy canvas gloves; both of which became an intimate part of my survival equipment. The man who fitted me for my harness (Bill) was the only person of the AARP generation around. All the other employees were in their early or mid twenties. His startled expression moved to a warm smile as he laboriously hooked and then re-adjusted every belt and line of my harness. The sureness of his actions and the geniality of his words worked their magic; a perfect tonic to squelch any last moment jitters.

As Barry and I ascended the stairs to our first elevated rope path, I looked out at the varying heights and obstacles laid out all around me, and remembered that the only thing that could get hurt was my pride. None the less, my old acquaintances doubt and fear joined me on the platform; but only fleetingly. To create time to calm myself, I asked Barry to go first so that I could watch his technique and take some deep slow breaths. Barry nimbly glided his 250 lb frame across the high wire inspiring me. If he could do it, certainly I could. Taking a few more slow deep breaths, I tentatively began to slide out onto, and then across, the 12 foot high wire; holding tightly to the cable above me, I scooted across with ease. I was hooked! This was great fun and I thought ‘let the games begin!’
I was half way through the second level when the question of the day arose – Who is this woman calmly making her way across this hanging lumber bridge? I don’t think I’ve ever experienced her? I was serene and centered, poised and thoughtful, steady on my feet and unafraid of the twenty foot heights. Paradoxically I was both exhilarated and I was totally grounded in the air. By level three the difficulty of the obstacles and the height of the playing field had more than doubled. On the first obstacle I had to retrace my steps across a trapeze line because my lanyard lines were threaded under the lines I had to cross over. Fun changed to challenge; and I kept on moving. Halfway through level three, I knew that I was in over my head. I completed the first two obstacles. The third obstacle required that I walk across the ravine on a series of u shaped ropes hanging from parallel lines high above me and then haul myself up onto a perch six feet above me. Even if I had the strength to cross the bridge, there was no way that I had enough upper body strength to haul myself up to a perch above me. With the grace of God and my belay line, I traversed across the distance and hauled my tired butt up onto the perch; and I had hit the proverbial wall. Instead of pushing ahead, I assessed my options and opted to take the zip line down to the safety of the ground where I cheered Barry on as he finished the race.

I would have loved to finish level three; but there is always next year! With age comes wisdom of knowing when the challenge in front of me is more than my body can handle. I’m totally happy with that. I walked away delighted with all I had experienced and accomplished; I had runners high without the run. The years of martial arts is working its’ magic; my body is changing. And where I focus my attention is changing; I see progress rather than obstacles. That is miraculous! Housed within its old shell is a powerful, peace filled, indomitable spirit. And in the end knew when to peacefully and gracefully take a zip line down to the ground while happily looking up into a bright powerful future.
Lessons From The Heart

I was in conversation with a dear friend of mine who was sharing his personal journey since suffering a heart attack ten years ago. He had just had his ninth stint implanted into his arteries, had 40% blockage in his aorta, and was experiencing heart pain. He was depressed; his voice was low and sad while he sat slumped down in his chair, ridged and pulling away from his heart. Sitting across from him, a thought kept revolving in and out of consciousness: What would it look like if he related compassionately with his own heart? Is hardening of the heart medical or metaphorical; or can it be both?

I asked Dave if he could relate with warmth and loving compassion to his heart. Another friend asked if he could use the moments of pain to thank his heart for all the hard work it did in the past, present and all it would do in the future. His perplexed expression softened as the request settled into his body; he would try. Even as he spoke I knew that there was more for me to mine in this shaft. It was as if there was a golden ring just out of reach. No matter how I tried, I couldn’t catch it; so I let go of trying. In the morning I woke with the realization standing on the shore of my consciousness waiting for me to arrive. Like Dave I needed to build a loving relationship with my heart and myself; to develop my heart so that I naturally respond with warmth and empathy and relax my overtaxed mind. Maybe his journey and mine were not that different!

On the spectrum of health we are polar opposites. Dave, though he eats well, exercises and takes appropriate medications, has not been able to alter the march of advanced heart disease. My vascular issues have responded well to medications, diet and exercise. I understand that there are other factors like genetics at play here. Both are related to the heart; the life force and blood that travel through our bodies and the journey from head to heart. Both of us default to our thinking instead of relating from the heart; and I wonder if the old axiom ‘Use it or lose it’ is not at play here. Is there a connection between my need to stretch my body in order to maintain maximum flexibility and the need to exercise the heart; and what would that look like?
It is said that the ‘longest distance is from the head to the heart,’ and I believe it. It’s not that I don’t use my heart; I do. Speak to me about my husband, granddaughters, family and close friends, and my heart naturally engages. My focus of attention slides right down from its lofty perch on high and into my heart center. The objectivity of my thinking is transformed into a sweet liquid gold of my heart. When I’m operating out of my heart, I’m passionately engaged; I’m caring, warm, compassionate, and witty. The challenge is one of imbalance. When I’m constructively functioning from my head, I’m on task, direct, goal orientated, and a rational, analytical, problem solver—and there is a place for that behavior in life. When I misuse my head, I’m paranoid, controlling, judgmental, defensive, rigid, doubtful, and fearful—this is where I need to take the advice that I gave Dave, and learn to be compassionate with myself first, and then I will be able to be compassionate with others. Why do I know that this is true?

There are three different center’s of knowing in each of us; head, heart and body. I know medically that if I can’t exercise the use of a limb that the muscles will entropy and I’ll lose use of them. Is there a correlation between the hardening of the heart, and its usage? If I neglect the emotional functioning of the heart, will the organ itself wither on the vein? I wonder? There is no doubt that in my default way of knowing is the head; others default to their heart or body? The question as I see it now is ‘how can I learn to find an optimal balance between my head and my heart?’ How can I learn to let the head relax its need for control, and pass the baton on to my heart?

When a compliment is served, I deflect it from landing in my own heart and move the compliment back to the realm of my head where my skeptic resides, and doubt either the validity of the words, or the honesty of the person speaking. No matter how much evidence is piled high in front of me about my worth, my default has been to deny it—but the tide is shifting in that ocean. While David spoke, I was aware of how compassionately I held him and I know that if I can do it for a friend, I can learn to hold myself just as lovingly with daily, hourly and moment by moment practice.

The distance is not traveled in a day, but in a lifetime, one exercise at a time. To continue to increase my heart’s prominence, I need to increase the frequency by which I call it into action; not just for the dear and the dearly departed, but for no other reason than I’m worth it. To that end I’ll continue to journal each day to connect with the musings of my heart and I’ll recommit to my doorway practice where every time I go through a door, I shift the attention from my thoughts to what I am feeling and let that magic work on my physiology.
It’s not like I’m surprised that the lesson at hand is to develop my heart’s capacity; it’s showed up before, but with less flair. It took the reflection of Dave’s journey for me to remind myself that the person I need to exercise compassion for is intimately connected at the core of my life. And as such, all I need to do is to tap into and cultivate the undiscovered territories of my own vast heart.
I spent five fabulous nights with my oldest brother Tom and his family in New York City. I was there for a joint birthday party of my two granddaughters, and a celebration of all three of their grandmothers; of which I am blessed to be included. My brother and his wife Terrie had just signed a one year lease and moved into a two bedroom apartment on Columbus Circle, which is one block from Central Park, and I stayed with them. You would think that as I returned home that any of those three major events would be foremost on my mind, but they weren’t. The surprise of the weekend was that I made a new friend and he had four paws and a long snout; an eight month old Dachshund named Buddy, who instantly captured my heart. Now what was that all about?

I’d never been an animal person. Fifteen years ago, in a moment of weakness, I was talked into adopting my first two adult cats when some friends of mine were being transferred to Aubi Daubi. The transition into my life was seamless. Pepe, a ten year old Siamese, and Nelson an eight year old one-eyed calico, lived till they were 16 and 18 years old respectively. With their addition to my life, I became an avid cat person. I understood why my girlfriend Cheryl would say, “If there is such a thing as reincarnation, then I want to come back as a cat to a single woman over forty.” I lavished love on both of them. I loved coming home to the warm greetings of my friendly feline friends; tails high in the air and purring as they circled around my legs. They curled up with me on the coach and slept in my bedroom at night. Those cats were the center of my universe when I needed something or someone to fill the vacancy that I felt after the death of my first husband, Gene.

When I married Bruce, I was blessed with a wonderful step-son, Barry and my third cat Dee Dee. Two years into our marriage I was ready to replace the first two cats that died of age related illnesses, and so I visited our local HSPCA. I went in looking for an older cat (it worked before) and found an eighteen month old Main Coon cat I called Foxy. Five hundred dollars later, he was healed from kennel sickness and the revelation from the vet that he was only a baby; large yes, but only nine weeks old. “See those teeth, those are baby teeth,” the vet declared. I selected an older cat because I didn’t want to have to deal with training him. You know what they say ‘the best laid plans;’ no plan is fool-proof and no one can be completely prepared for the future. I was lucky; my nine pound kitten brought hours of entertainment I hadn’t planned on.
Cats are incredible animals; majestic and independent. That was part of their initial attraction. That is until I brought them into my home. Once a part of the family, I created dependencies that are not part of the animal kingdom and I now know that while I am the alpha, there are times when the lines get blurred. Today I function more as a maid servant to the entitled and with little in reciprocity. When things are good, and Dee Dee forced out of need for food visits us, she might acquiesce to ten minutes a night to climb up on the bed to be patted. Other than that, we hardly see her. Foxy on the other hand is never too far from his food dish, or someone who can fill his food dish. Enter stage door right my newest arrival on the scene; Tom and Terrie’s eight month old Dachshund named Buddy. My first foray with a dog!

He is a puppy with child-like exuberance. He flew around the room and played with their other dog, a thirteen year old Maltese, named Oliver who, dripping wet, could only way eight pounds. Buddy and I hit it off in a way that surprised everyone around us; especially me. Upon arrival on Thursday, he welcomed me with wet licks and a torrent of jumps until I acquiesced and picked him up. Friday and Saturday nights when I returned from a very busy day in the West Village, we continued to bond. He would happily curl up on my lap and follow me around as long as my sister-in-law was in sight. Saturday night I met Tom, Terrie, Oliver and Buddy in Central Park and happily volunteered to take over Buddy’s leash. Sunday morning we ventured alone for a walk to Central Park so that he could take care of his business. On the way home I was stunned by how well he behaved. With others around us, he would pull me ahead; nose to the ground lost in the myriad of scents that assailed him while pulling to be ahead of Oliver, ensuring his alpha status. Alone he walked slowly beside me; enjoying quiet moments to explore the incredible new land he was in while I relaxed and took in the beauty of the day. When after brunch and another walk, I stretched out on the sofa to take a Sunday afternoon nap; Buddy was tucked into the curve of my left elbow, snout draped over my arm as we dozed. When we drove from NYC Sunday evening to Tom and Terrie’s home in Upper Saddle River, NJ, Buddy sat with me in the backseat, snout nuzzled neatly on my lap. No one of the myriad of guests they had had since Buddy’s arrival had ever captivated his attention as I did, and I wonder why?
The thing that surprised me most about the building of this new relationship was how easily I was drawn into it; there was never a decision or thought that we would bond, we just did. Sometime during the five days we spent together I began to understand why there are dog lovers in this world. There is something special about the unrequited love between owner and a dog. Yes, I enjoyed Buddy’s adoration. It’s a new experience for me and I’m not sure what to make of it yet. I wonder if I’m ready now for the next level of animal commitment; from cat to small dog. What differences are there? Both animals need to be fed, groomed and taken to the vet for needed shots. Both provide an opportunity to stop during the day to take care of someone else’s needs; moments of laughter and chaos. Cats are more independent and, though I may not want to, I can leave them alone for a few days to care for themselves. Dogs require walking and monitoring their food intake. Dogs love you no matter what you do; cats love you only if you do for them. Is the real difference between little dogs and cats in the animal’s nature, or in my own nature? What’s my part in creating the relationship?

While on vacation, I sat still and spent time with Buddy, and when I’m at home I seldom make that one on one time. When I’ve been too preoccupied, my cat Foxy jumps up onto my desk, splays out in front of my computer screen, and demands my attention. With Buddy I learned that pets can provide adoration and know instinctively if you like them and are accepting in nature. Letting Buddy into my heart was a wonderful sign that I’m learning to operate out of my heart rather than my head; that my energy is open and non-threatening. When I look down from the 34th story of my apartment in New York City to the situation down below on the street, I understand that the puppy love I experienced is a reflection of what is possible for me in the world when I operate lovingly. In the end it doesn’t matter if it’s raining cats and dogs outside; both activate my heart center. It is how I interact with them that makes my world a sunnier place!
It's mid-August and we are in the middle of the 'Dog Days of Summer' where temperatures fluctuate from sizzling to just damn hot. Traffic is historically light because anyone who can get themselves out of the heat has done so. The mountains of Colorado are the destination of choice by my friends; though magnificently beautiful and cool, it's not where I long to be. I'm sitting in the extreme heat wondering why I'm still here. It's a question that rises with the searing heat each August. So why do I live here? Why am I drawn to the warmth?

I live in Houston because I love the fact that sunny skies are the given. Nine months out of the year the temperatures range between 60 to 90 degrees—warm and balmy. The other three months the average temperature is 93 degrees; I did say average! All year long, there is myriad of foliage and some fragrant flower or tree blooming. With the additions of a few warmer sweaters or jackets and closed toed shoes, I’m ready for the three weeks where temperatures hover around 39 degrees. Every ten years, whether others want it or not, it snows. By the time the snow falls, we are overjoyed by the phenomenon and life stops, if only for a few hours. People move out into the weather to experience the feeling of snow melting on their bodies or if you’re still a child at heart, their tongue. Afterwards, I light the fireplace and sip a hot chocolate while gazing out upon winter wonderland outside. Last year I had the additional pleasure of being able to decorate my Christmas tree. In those few precious hours, I’ve experienced all the winter I want. By nature I’m a warm weather creature; I walk out of my air conditioned house, or store and I let the heat and humidity work its magic on me. Like a tall glass of mulled cider in winter, I sip the warmth into my body and feel invigorated and restored!

Speaking of weather, humidity gets a bad rap. I’m always asked “How can you stand the humidity?” Truth is that after the first few years, I don’t think much about the humidity but that hasn’t always been the case. In my mid-twenties, traveling across country one summer, I arrived in New Orleans at four in the afternoon. When I stepped out of the air conditioned car I gasped as the heat and humidity burned its way down my esophagus. It seemed an oxymoron to go swimming when the entire experience of walking felt like a slow breaststroke in dense salt water. The humidity clung to my body like a heavy wet blanket. Today I’m grateful for the free skin treatment that is lavishly applied after my morning moisturizer; once outside the humidity moistens my skin and works its magic keeping my skin nourished and young looking. I’m so accustomed to the humidity that I can feel my skin drying out as I fly to New England; a survival kit for travel is an eight oz bottle of body lotion lavishly applied three times a day without fail. Today the absence of moisture is the problem, not humidity itself. But it’s not the long temperate weather and humidity that keeps me in Houston.
I'm here because my life is here, my amour is here and I love this city. I adore its diversity; no matter where you are, be it Barnes & Noble, Starbucks, HEB or Randall's you will hear Spanish, French, Arabic, Farsi, Korean and Chinese being spoken. I mentor second graders in Spring Branch and there are 32 languages spoken within that school district. I'm delighted that the woman who's working the register at Whole Foods may wear an Islamic head scarf, arms and legs covered. Our interchanges are always warm; we're both part of the tapestry that is the cultural mass called Houston. Years ago my brother John and his wife Johanna visited and they were surprised by the variety of Houston's inhabitants; we resemble an expensive box of mouth watering chocolates ranging from the darkest to the whitest of chocolates; filled with a mixture of nuts, berries and pure in nature. When we entered a local gathering, the fragrance of appreciation, friendship and good cheer hung in the air. My friends don't sort by differences but by the commonality of our humanity; that is life in Houston.

As a couple nearing retirement age we have on-going conversations about where we want to live when we're really old. My desire is to be able to intertwine my Texas and New England roots, where our families live, Ideally I'll spend summer and fall in New England and winter and spring in Texas. There is no version of my future that has me experiencing winter for any extended period time. Being forced to choose between the two, however, I will always take warmth over cold, sunny skies over snow clouds and sandals over winter boots; but why not focus on having it all! What keeps me here? Could it be that the hot temperatures have helped more than my skin; that the sun and warm temperatures helped to soften the defensive structure of my protected heart and thawed out my prickly disposition to reveal a warmer heart and brighter character? There is something about the heat that demands I slow down and to move more thoughtfully in the world. But like everything in life there are extremes and on those ridiculously hot days where temperatures hover around 100 degrees the heat that warms my heart moves to a bubbling cauldron of misery and the questions begin.
During the ‘Dog Days of Summer’ it helps to remember that there is no perfect place to live; that life is filled with choices and for now the heat of summer still serves me. It must, since I’m still here. And when the time is right, I can make a new choice. I came to Houston because my first husband was transferred here; I chose Houston six years later when he died. I knew then in my belly that it was the right choice for me. Houston’s diversity and openness has provided me an exquisite opportunity to heal my spirit and come to grips with my past; it provided a safe container to explore my spirituality and delve deeply into the question ‘Who am I, and what is my destiny?’ This summer I had the opportunity to meet and listen to Dr. John Dimartini speak about his latest book Inspirational Destiny; that opportunity itself was the perfect reason for me to be here. If the biggest challenge I have is enduring the ‘Dog Days of Summer,’ then life is good indeed. When it’s time for me to create a different living situation, I will listen to the still quiet voice of my soul and there won’t be the question anymore; I’ll move only to fulfill my soul’s destiny. Until then I’m cool since I’ve shifted my mood of resignation to gratitude for the gift of the ‘Dog Days of Summer.’
I headed to my neighborhood Barnes & Noble today to write. I had an hour and fifteen minutes between one meeting and the next, so I planned to begin a blog. Oddly enough I love to write when there is activity all around me; it helps me go deeper and I seem to be more creative than when I write in the silence of my office. When I got out of my car I was relaxed and open to the possibilities that would certainly flow when I found a table, opened up my laptop and poised myself in front of a blank page. As I walked from the car I was relaxed and happily anticipating the joy of beginning a new blog. Every time I do it, it's like Christmas morning; I'm in awe of the process and always delighted with the present I open. Today, however, Christmas came early.

Departing my Acura and heading for the front door, I saw a series of stepping stones cutting across the shaded tree lined meridian that I had walked around dozens of times before. As I rambled across on the newly found path, I looked deeply at the stones; they were not newly laid, the grass had grown up around them and they were worn from usage. Why did I find this path today? And more importantly, what does it say about my ability to be open to the myriad of possibilities during any given day? Seeing this little short cut to the store could have been just blind luck; and I don't buy that product! I believe that Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.

For those who know me well, they'd say that my personality is both loving and of a driver; intense and tightly wound. Even when there is no reason at all for me to be in overdrive, my natural propensity has been to push ahead, drive through. It has served me well over the years; that drive and focus got me to and through college, to live and work in Iran, get my Masters, work for General Electric and United Technologies and then to shift gears and become the director of a child abuse prevention center. Yes, there has been a high side to focusing and pushing and there are definitely hidden costs. All that exerting, pushing, pulling, had me living a stressful existence; and stress plays out in the body and restricts what is possible for me?
When I'm in the driver mode, I'm like Don Quixote charging windmills. I have my agenda; the focus of my attention moves away from my body to my head that naturally leans forward towards my intent. The center of gravity in my body moves away from my belly where real centeredness and power lies, my head and chin move ahead of my body with my knees are locked to support my off balanced body. With my mind busy with achieving my goal, my eyes narrow as I focus in on my target and I charge ahead. While I'm focused on my windmill, I'm unable to see other possibility around me.

Possibility is not only a concept of the mind, but resides in the body itself. To build a body that is naturally open to possibility I need to be relaxed and receptive in body and mind. I need to stands erect; my head over my shoulders over my body, legs under my hips with supple knees. Center of gravity is in my belly. My eyes are soft and so I'm able to access my peripheral vision. With a body stance like that, I'm open to readily see and move toward whatever possibility there is around me. That is 360 degrees different from the pushing ahead stance of the driver. Even knowing this, what keeps me returning back to the stance of the driver? It's the unconscious dynamics that are with me all of the time.

Learning the Enneagram, a spiritual personality typology, provided the basis of understanding that we all have unconscious patterns that we oversubscribe to; some are constructive, others when overdone can be destructive or undermine our ability to create the life we want. The body is formed to support the unconscious thoughts of our youth. When I found my type, I learned that 'trust' or lack of 'trust' was the genesis of my 'damn the torpedoes—full speed ahead' mentality and physicality—especially when I felt responsible for an outcome. I remember like yesterday the moment of revelation when I realized that I was unconsciously operating out of the 'responsible child' pattern of my youth. I was 48 years old, the head of a non-profit and I felt totally responsible for the organizations success. Never mind that I had a staff of fifteen and thirty members of the board of directors. I was spending the weekend at a friend's home in Brenham recouping from the stress of the business, reading and working Julia Cameron's book *The Artist Way* when in response to a question I was answering, tears began to flow. I was no longer the child, but an adult still operating out of this childish unconscious belief that I alone was responsible for this non-profits success! In that instant, I got the message; I had to relax the hold of that pattern and find a new, more trusting way to respond to life. But awareness alone does not create change; it's just the beginning.
Even with awareness that I had to learn to trust, not only the universe and those around me, but my-self, it took years and lots of work to replace the old pattern with a new behavior that better serves me. Over the years I’ve found that life is so much easier when I hold it in an open receiving stance instead of the clenched fist of the responsible child of my youth. I’ve found through trial and error that I can trust myself and I’m learning now to trust that Creator God and the Universe are there for me, even when I’m looking elsewhere. My work lately has been to trust that what I need is always being provided; I may not like it at times, and it is always moving me toward my highest purpose of authentic contribution. The more I learned to trust, the more my body and mind have learned to open up to receive the gifts that Creator God provides. Today, when I stepped out of my car happy, peaceful and open to the possibilities inherent in beginning a new blog, my body, mind and my eyes were soaking up the beauty of my surroundings because I trusted my writing process. And the surprise Christmas present that was there for me to open was not wrapped in red holiday paper with a big green bow or neatly placed under a stately Douglas fir tree, but appeared in the presence of a worn stoned path that my new receptive way of being in the world could see, celebrate and effortlessly walk down.
While sitting at a stop light today, I was admiring the beauty of the sky. There was a series of billowing white puffy cumulus clouds with one errant heavily laden storm cloud traveling shoulder to shoulder in a brilliant azure blue sky. It looked like one black sheep in a herd of white ones wandering across the celestial meadow. The weatherman said there was a 25% chance of rain. I wonder where in the vastness of our fair city, the rain will fall. I learned a long time ago that the probability of showers in Houston means only that there is a 25% possibility of rain to fall somewhere in a 50 mile radius; not much a chance of it raining on my parade today I thought, but I was wrong.

I have a complicated relationship with water; I both love it and hate it. It started in my youth when I saw my older brothers being thrown off a dock so they could learn to swim. Fear is a powerful motivator so I mastered the dog paddle to stave off any such fate and progressed to have a decent crawl, breast stroke and side stroke. I found out that I was a good swimmer, along with all of my brothers and sisters, and were much better swimmers than our friends. Swimming was something that my father enjoyed and did well and so we spent many a Saturday or summer evening swimming at Havelond Pond. We were as comfortable as ducks in the water.

I’ve read that as children we take on the repressed parts of our parents. I can’t speak for any of my brothers or sisters, but I can say that I’d taken on the repressed princess for the entire family; their term for it was—high strung. How it played out was that I grew up caring about what others thought and reacted when I believed that I would look silly or be perceived as less than. By the time I was in high school, I was interested more in getting a tan than getting wet. I only went into the water under the duress of my father for some horrid family race. Over the years I’ve built up a quiet disdain for being in the water. Lakes have fish that bite, mountain streams are cold as ice, oceans have salt and swimming pools have chlorine—where is the draw there? And then there is the issue of getting wet! Unlike Bo Derek in the classic movie ‘Ten’, no one I know looks good when they’re wet!
I've learned that we unconsciously select our mates to work out unresolved childhood issues with our parents. Like my father, Bruce did not have the gene that is concerned with how things look. On our first surprise date, I was instructed to dress casual. I showed up city casual; with nice white shorts and a crisp linen blouse, lacy summer sandals, fingers manicured, toes pedicured, a floppy broad straw hat sitting jauntily on my blond curls to protect my hair and skin from the ultraviolet rays of the sun, with Ray Bans protecting my eyes. What Bruce had in mind was quite different. The surprise date was a canoeing trip down Bayou Bend, a city estuary. We met up with nine other hearty souls appropriately dressed; wearing clothes from Main's top retailer, Lands End or by Columbia; sun screen and mosquito repellent tucked into their water repellent bags. We were to carry our canoe down an embankment (I passed on that adventure) and then meander with our guide down to the banks of our City's inner water-way. Let's say that it was a testament to how much I cared about Bruce that I took off my sandals, waded into the muddy water and climbed into the canoe.

Over the years there has been an ongoing joke about my hating to get wet. Still, after fifteen years together, if it's raining, to mitigate exposure I expect Bruce to drop me off near the door. One time I climbed into the passenger seat of Bruce's Lexus only to sit in a puddle of water. You would think that he had shot me. The cry that came out of my mouth had nothing on Paul Revere and his call that roused sleeping settlers. I looked like cold water hitting a hot frying pan; I was propelled back away from the heat. I was livid; no sense of humor at all. It's not like he spilled the water on the seat to upset me; it was an accident, but I had no sense of humor about my getting wet. Today I’d like to say that I would respond differently; a little less reactive. And the reality has been that although I love to curl up inside with a book on a rainy day, I've always avoided like an incurable disease, the possibility of being outside in the rain. What's that all about?

I'm ashamed and amused to say that the genesis of that aversion has not been that I've a fear of water; I don't. I prided myself on my ability to swim, dive, canoe, even run a size seven rapid with the proper gear and a knowledgeable guide. Truth is, if I'm appropriately garbed, then I do well; but I never wanted to look like a dog, shaking out her wet mated fur. You would think that a New England girl would be comfortable with the outdoor elements, but I never was. From as young as I could remember, I've always been more the 'Princess and the Pea' type of girl; and it now feels limiting and tiresome.

Last year when I was out biking, I got caught in a spring down pour and, low and behold, unlike the witch in the Wizard of Oz, I didn’t melt. Surprisingly I found it refreshing and damn well intoxicating. I did have a baseball cap to keep rain from streaming down my face and a wind jacket with a hood in the pack I keep on my bike. None the less, I realized that I had been missing one of life’s little joys; playing in the rain. Since then I’ve had the delight of walking with my granddaughters as they leap frog from puddle to puddle. With them I’ve learned to splash in standing water and delight, for the first time, in the wonder of the world’s most important resources—water. I think about how rain clears the sky of its pollution and brings nourishment to every living thing; including me. How people travel miles upon miles to bring this precious scarce resource to their families. Some believe that the scarcity of water will be the biggest issue that my grandchildren’s generation will face. How insane it is to care about how I look when there are children around the world dieing each day for the lack of clean water!
Five minutes later, as I was mailing a package at my local UPS store, celestial cymbals clashed and the god Thor slammed his base drum to announce the coming of the afternoon rain. Within less than a minute, the sunny skies had been eclipsed by the sole heavy laden black sheep of a storm cloud that settled over us as the bottom fell out of it. On cue the six people in the store swirled around in unison to watch as torrents of water pelt the pavement around us. My initial thought was that I should hold up here until the storm abated. Then like sun breaking through the storm clouds, a new thought emerged; I could get a little wet. Today I took the plunge and decided to celebrate the rain by skipping happily through it to my car. So what that my feet got wet; they would dry in a few minutes! I felt so liberated ‘dancing in the rain.’ The image that I want to live going forward is not the up-tight city dweller who cares about how she looks, but of a person who is in awe of, and blessed to know now how blessed she is to have plenty of rain and water in her life.
Stuck In A Rut

I was in between the worlds of sleep and awake, when Bruce came close and whispered, ‘Are you awake?’ With that gentle coaxing, I moved into the morning with the warmth of sleep clinging to me. ‘Do you want to go for a bike ride this morning? It’s sunny outside and there is a hint of fall in the air.’ It was an intriguing proposition; we hadn’t biked during the summer so I knew that it had to be beautiful outside for Bruce to consider taking our bikes out of storage. So I agreed. Like the change in the color of the leaves, readying our bikes for riding is a fall ritual. With cheerful hearts we checked the pressure in our bike’s tires, tested their breaks and gears, then put on our helmets and headed out for a lovely morning bike ride. Little did I know that my excitement would soon shift to trauma!

I just returned from a five day silent retreat at the Cenacle Retreat House off of Kirkwood between Briar Forest and Memorial Drive. The Cenacle has been my spiritual home since 1987. I heard of it’s existence during a Sunday service when the priest announced that our community was to have their yearly spiritual retreat there and all members were invited. I was new to the community and had never experienced a retreat, but I was in spiritual turmoil so decided to take the bait and sign up. Twenty-three years later, I still make time to return to the Cenacle when I need to reconnect with the movement of the Holy Spirit in my life. I tell you this so that you will understand that I came into the weekend feeling loved by God and connected with the rhythms of my life. How quickly life can intervene to shake me up and challenge my tranquility.

As we headed out that morning, I felt nurtured by the beauty of our neighborhood. Our lush green manicured lawns, pink Crepe Myrtles in bloom, and stately oak and pine trees reaching up toward the sky filtering the early morning light. Bruce had a forty-five minute path set out so I settled back, relaxed and let him blaze the path. We departed Briar Grove Park subdivision and headed east on Briar Forest toward our neighboring subdivision. We were traveling on the bike lane so I cut up onto the parallel sidewalk; giving me a little more distance from the roads traffic. As I angled up onto a driveway, the front wheel of my red recumbent bike got caught in a rut between the sidewalk and the driveway and the bike took a sharp left along the rut while my body was propelled forward off of the bike. I looked like a stately pine that was cleaved down in a forest. With a splat I made a four point landing and skidded across the sidewalk below. I don’t remember what part of my body met the cement first but my right foot was
pinned under the bike, my right thigh and forearm exchanged skin for cement, and my head (helmeted, thank God) bounced upon impact; fortunately nothing was broken except for my pride. The only thing missing was the logger calling ‘timber.’ I howled like a cougar caught in a trap and Bruce dropped his bike and came running. A quick check found that all bones were intact, and I had major skin abrasions, was badly bruised and stunned. We up-righted and turned my bike around and I gingerly headed home; this trip abruptly ended, but a new trip was about to begin.

I don’t believe that things are black or white or that my accident was solely a silly mistake. I also don’t accept luck or victim-hood. I believe in the interrelatedness between people and their circumstances; that everything in life is connected. The spiritual journey is like an airplane traveling from Boston to San Francisco, from birth to death, while in flight (or on my spiritual journey) there are continuous corrections I need to make to keep me heading toward my final destination? I am not on this journey alone but have the blessing of an omnipotent co-pilot who is Creator God, and the instrument panel for making corrections includes the Universe. It is the interplay between my choices and my Soul’s contract that the tension resides. When I deny the connection between my choices and my outcomes, I miss the opportunity to right the plane that I am. I’d like to say that I connected the dots quickly, but I’m only human; it took me some time to recoup from my fall and to begin to delve into the deeper meaning of the calamity. And once again it was the universe that brought me back to the exploration.

I was on the phone today, five days afterward, and telling my friends about the retreat and the following accident. As I related the experience and used the same description of my bike getting caught in a rut, my friends in unison shouted out ‘Rut?’ As their words echoed in my soul, my stomach churned, I was a beagle that caught the scent of its prey; without thought, and I hurriedly scratched the word boldly on the sheet in front of me and underlined it: RUT. A new understanding of what had happened was emerging. I didn’t know where it would take me but I recognized the rich dark fertile soil that I was sitting in. Like neon signs flashing relentlessly in the night sky beckoning travelers to their establishments, I entered into the metaphorical world of ruts. Where in my life am I stuck, like my bike in a rut on the driveway of life, between the road and the sidewalk?

I could start with minor ruts; say eating patterns, but these behaviors are not connected with my soul’s journey; rather they are the snacks I serve in flight. Personal, professional and spiritual development has to do with who I am being; or behavioral ruts. While on my three day silent retreat I knew within twelve hours that I needed a longer stay. My original thought was that Bruce would miss me and he would be upset if I was away from home longer. I felt guilty about changing my plans. When I called Bruce to tell him that I ‘wanted’ to stay for an additional two days, his response was: “Good for you for taking care of yourself.” Talk about ruts! First I created a story about how Bruce would negatively respond to my staying for two additional days. Then I asked Bruce’s permission by telling him what I ‘wanted’ rather than telling him what I ‘needed.’ Lastly I didn’t think to make me, or my soul ‘needs’ a priority. As I write, my stomach churns and my tear ducts fill up and overflow. The little hairs on my arms are standing at attention! I’ve hit pay dirt! What kind of a stinking rut is that? What will it take for me to make me and my souls journey my number one priority? How does it play out in life?
The irony is that I was moving off the roadway of life and attempting, once again, to move back to the safety of the sidewalk. Instead of owning the road of life, I get fearful, tentative and move to the safety of the known; and I’m sick and tired of it. I don’t know how it will change, and know that it is changing because I see it. I’m totally committed to live my God given, authentic life; to live the power of my soul’s possibility. To do it I need to listen to the needs and directives of my soul and act on them. I cannot do it by continuing along the same behavioral ruts that keep me small and subservient; and identifying when I do it is part of the process of change. As the blue, purple and red of my bruises heal they are a continuous reminder to ask myself every day which behaviors will have me flowing with the traffic on the highway of life? With a heart filled with gratitude, I thank Creator God for the blessing of my aborted bike ride; it has opened my eyes to the rut that I’ve been living and pointed the way to the wide open road that stretches out in front of me.
I was reading an article on breathing tonight and I heard the baleful cry of a neighborhood cat in
distress. As a servant to two cats, I’ve learned to distinguish types of bellowing. When I hear any
person or animal suffer, my heart aches and I have to respond. I opened the door and twenty feet in
front of me stood an emaciated, matted gray haired cat looking forlornly up at me through her fearful
green speckled eyes. Her cry was woeful. What can a woman do? She was obviously hungry and in
need of food; so I fed her. Later, with pen in hand I recalled another cat that came to me in pain and
deprivation and how I, and a neighbor friend, eventually took her on as a joint project. We fed her for
two months before the abandoned cat got comfortable enough for Jean (my neighbor) to pick her up.
Once in our hands we brought to the SPCA for adoption since there was no place for her in either of our
‘Inn’s’. Why is it that abandoned neighborhood cats show up on my doorstep? Is there a correlation
between these cats and me? It seemed far-fetched, but I was right on!

Abandoned cats are afraid and they’re hungry. While I don’t connect with the being abandoned, I do
realize that in the end of life, we’re all alone when our soul or spirit abandons our body. Now fear, fear I
can relate to. While I’ve found a modicum of peace and tranquility as I matured; as a child I was
naturally fearful. Everyone has moments of fear; the world can be dangerous. The fear I’m talking about
is a more pervasive fear at my core that ‘I am not, nor ever will be enough.’ That type of fear had me
physically hanging back or shying away in life; it kept me at a safe distance between me and people or
situations where my preconceived inadequacies would be found out. I understand the correlation
between me and my new friend, the green eyed gray frightened cat. Now nourishment, that is another
question all together. Blessed to born in the land of plenty where I have an abundance of healthy
mouthwatering foods to eat and the resources needed to grow or purchase them, I’ve never
experienced starvation let alone want. It must be another form of food that I’d be crying out for. Is food
the only source of nourishment? And with that exploration, a gusher explodessending rich lush crude oil
up into the vast Texas skis of my awareness. Sustenance is not only from the food I eat, but the air I
breathe. No air in my lungs; no life. No breath in my belly; no powerful action. With the word ‘breathe’
the pieces of my multicolored Rubik Cube fell into place.

I was at the Strozzi Institute, a body coaching program, when I first understood the magnitude of my
challenge with breathing. I had to sit in the hot seat and tell five others participants my life story while
two coaches observed. I’m talking about a thirty minute monologue of the high and low lights of my life.
No superficial stories were allowed here. The goal was to be truly authentic. As I moved through my
story, I laughed cried and, in the end, felt great relief that the exercise was over. The input that still
hangs in the rafters of my mind’s attic was: “Your belly never moved. Are you aware of it?” That was like
asking me if I was proficient in quantum physics or was aware that there was sustainable life on Mars.
When I present to groups of people the last, I mean that the very last thing I focus on is how I’m
breathing. I’ve moved through those challenge as quickly as possible, trying hard not to embarrass
myself. When I’m anxious (a nice word for fear) I’m like a deer caught in a car’s headlights, I freeze and
and ‘barely breathe’ then rush ahead. Was I frightened? I was unaware of it, and my body told a very
different story.
I’ve meditated for the past fifteen years where I sit cross legged, close my eyes, and follow my breath. I love meditation; it quiets my chattering mind. After that Strozzi class I returned to yoga to consciously learn to link my breath with movement and engage my belly in the process of movement; there was progress there. I worked with Master Gladys Wesley-Kennedy and her Meditative Fitness program to learn how to breathe deeply from my belly. In that program I mastered three of the four levels of breathing exercises before exiting the program. I found that I was quite proficient at breathing while sitting or laying down doing breath practices. These practices, although they increased my awareness of my breath, have not translated to my being able to breathe deeply when in stress, fear or in movement.

It’s in Tae Kwon Do that I’m attempting to marry my breath with action. It’s like physically redirecting an ocean liner with one little old tiered red tug boat chugging along. At times I feel so discouraged and then there is a moment of brilliance when breath and action unite. We test every two months so I have plenty of opportunities to experience how I function under stress. During the last test, when I got up in front of the class to break the three boards, I thought I was calm and totally prepared to achieve my objective. I practiced the kicks hundreds of times during the year. When I moved into action, my foot bounced off the board rather than broke it. I did the same thing with the second board! By the time I got to the third board I was so mad that I shattered it. It took anger for me to connect with the furnace in my belly. Was I upset? You bet! At the end of the class rotation, Grand Master Cho called me up to break the board again. Maureen, a 3rd level black belt who I’ve worked with for the past eighteen months, looked me straight in my eyes and said ‘Slow down, breath and center.’ Sure enough, I was unaware that the black demon fear had gripped me; how like a feral cat, fear and scarcity were my motivators. With that loving reminder, I slowed way down, took three deep breaths and on the exhale did what I had done hundreds of time before—I released the breath from my belly and sent that energy down the meridian of my right leg and I shattered those two boards. After reviewing what had happened, I was able to see how my old patterns of fear and its partner, shallow breathing, kept me unable to access and direct my breath or access my power.
Knowing this is good, but thought alone does not change behavior. It'll take conscious effort and hours upon hours of practice to do what others do naturally; to breathe deeply and exhale on exertion. My practice, while I’m in the Do Jo doing Tae Kwon Do, at the gym practicing yoga or lifting weights, is to learn to slow down and take the time I need to connect my breath with my actions; to provide this old cat nourishing deep breath. There has been progress along the way; I became aware of what I was previously unaware of and I have a path to follow through the wilderness of creating a new behavior. At times like today the challenge seems too daunting, the distance too far; but since I’ve already learned to belly breathe from the floor and a chair, like the frightened green eyed cat that is no longer hungry, I’ll continue to learn how to provide my body the nourishment of deep belly breathing that is needed for me to take powerful action in the world.
Behind The Wheel

Sitting at Barnes & Noble today I asked myself, “Where am I?” You would think it would be an easy thing to answer, but it’s not. Lately it seems that I live in a state of low grade perpetual turmoil; pulling here and then pushing there, high one hour, then physically depleted the next? In my prayers over the past year, I’ve asked to feel fully, and it seems that now I’m making up for the decades of more consistent, if not boring, contained evenness. Well that certainly has changed.

After a full week of being physically low, like the sun peaking through the clouds after a day of storms, I could feel my energy creeping up the barometric scale towards normalcy. My energy was so low that during my second Tae Kwon Do class last week, I broke formation, made my way to the side of the class, sat cross legged on the floor with my head in my hands and wept in despair. What was going on with my body? I came to class feeling good, but within fifteen minutes of class drills, I felt like I was about to fall flat on my face. I was light headed, dizzy and totally depleted. Even with plenty of sleep, a nourishing breakfast and plenty of water, my energetic bank account was overdrawn and I was running in the red. Then after a week of this, there was my Good Friday resurrection where, just as quietly as my energy had receded, it returned. It was palpable; sitting at my desk, I could feel the tide rising within me.

It could be that I had some virus working its way through my body; it’s plausible and even possible, but is it the only thing that is going on? I know differently.

After a wonderful weekend of movie, dinner, visiting with a friends and a dessert of yummy Berry Pop yogurt; I went home happy and relaxed. Bruce was on retreat so I had the entire weekend to do whatever I wanted to do. As a strong introvert, I long for those days of quiet with external demands; but not this time. By two o’clock Sunday I was back into a sea of blah, blah, blah. I was an honoree two year old who only knew the word ‘No.’ Do I want to go for a bike ride? No. Do I want to go shopping? No. Do I want to sit and sulk? No, No, No! And yet I couldn’t shake the feeling of being totally out of sorts; I was like a can of soda that had been violently shaken, I was ready to explode. I couldn’t sit still and I couldn’t get comfortable; I moved from room to room looking for respite but it was not to be found. It took a long conversation with my sister, and my husband coming home from his weekend retreat for the veil of self imposed misery to dissipate. Although those two happenstances temporarily helped me mask my sullen mood; like the waning moon, the tide of my energies were back tugging at my psyche.
Last night I woke at 4:11 with a dream that laid out the drama that I am living and answered the question: 'Why am I so unsettled?' In the dream I was to go to see a woman who was about to depart for a monastery (true in real life). I had a very short window of opportunity to visit with her prior to her moving to her cloistered community, so I was anxious to get there. In the dream, the man who is driving the car refused to ask anyone for directions, use Google maps or use his GPS to get clarity on how best to get there. When I asked him about using any of those tools, he put me off saying that 'I'll get us there.' When I awoke I know immediately that I've slid back into an old pattern of giving my power away. Or to say it in its new iteration, 'I'm not driving my own life.' It's not like I've consciously turned my power again, it's more like I'm sitting in the passenger seat—passively looking to someone else (a technically proficient yet reticent person) to get me to my destination without asking for directions or using a GPS to guide me. I believe its best described as 'magical thinking.'

The reason that my moods and energy levels keep fluctuating is that my body has been a battlefield for two opposing forces; my psyche (ego) and my soul (spirit). My ego has been sitting in the driver’s seat unable to seek the direction I need to achieve, to keep the status quo, to plod ahead without clear direction; while my soul is screaming at me to get out of the passenger seat and get behind the wheel and drive myself to my spiritual destination. When I translate it into my day to day life it's a message to get directions, create a plan or road map, and then put the pedal to the metal and drive. The unsettled feelings are because I don’t have a clear enough plan on how to arrive at my destination because I’m not driving my own car. I’m being too passive. I don’t know what type of road is ahead of me, but I do know that I am ultimately responsible for driving my life and that without a clear plan my body will
continue to be the battleground between my soul and my ego and, I for one, can’t take that drive any more. So I’m stopping my car, getting out of the passenger seat and sliding into the drivers seat and taking control of the wheel of my life once again!
I’m back behind the wheel of the car of my life, now how will I start my engine and get my car out of park? If it was just an issue of ‘doing it’ heaven knows that I would already be doing it. Problem is that there are a swarm of nasty black flies that flit around in my consciousness that continue to bite away at my psyche, leaving me anxious and uncertain. It’s not that I’m a stranger to boldness; at twenty-seven I moved from Boston to Tehran, Iran and opened up the first secretarial school in that nation. I’ve jumped off of a 50 foot telephone pole, walked without damage on a 30 foot bed of hot coals and am on target to get my black belt before I turn 65. Yet I become a deer frozen in the headlights in oncoming traffic when a piece of new technology or software application appears in front of me. The corridor of uncertainty regarding twenty-first century inventions paralyzes me, leaving me stunned and unable to take fearless action. Is my fear and uncertainty biological or cultural? How will I learn to cross that damn divide!

Five years ago I could make a case for it being biological but, since I’ve been practicing Tae Kwon Do, I know that my body has released levels of the fear that had me physically contained and tight. No, my challenge today is cultural; it was formed through the conversations and experiences of growing up. My mother was hopeless with technology. After my father’s death we gave her a cell phone since she frequently drove alone around New England and we feared that her car would break down; she looked at it, put it in her purse and a month later we found it in the trunk of her car, battery dead. She bought a Bose radio (she did love her music) and then had me set all the channels on it to one station. If there were two or three options she would cringe and throw her hands in the air. After all, one of the advantages of having so many children was that she didn’t have to face or embrace the technical revolution without an emissary setting up the TV remote, creating tapes of her favorite music or programming the radio? It was all too complicated! She never did find peace with the cell phone, radio or the TV remote; never mind the computer or the internet. Here I am two decades later and I’m skittish with technology and may have heard my mother’s words fluttering out of my mouth as my arms flail hopelessly in desperation. Ugh!
My father was the go to person at the Westinghouse when a new piece of machinery was to be installed. He was a whiz with math and reading blueprints. There was never a problem he couldn’t solve; that is at work! I don’t have any memory of my father embracing anything new outside of work except gardening. At home if he was forced to answer a telephone there would be a quick lateral pass to my mother; it was a ‘hot potato’ to be released instinctively. While the rest of the world embraced technological revolution, he spent his free time coaching little league and cultivating his garden. It was his cadre of friends and brother in-laws that took care of the car, repaired the plumbing or rewired our old home. While there wasn’t any blatant protests regarding technology his response was to glaze over, with a quizzical expression that said it all: ‘why would I want to know about that!’

I know that glazed over look because it appears on my face when Bruce (my techie spouse) gives me ‘just do it’ directions. Truly, if I could do it, I would; he just doesn’t get how traumatic it is to step out, without hands on training, into the abyss of new technology. Now I wonder if my father wasn’t also plagued by uncertainty regarding the new—since he certainly had the internal wiring to be successful at it.

Unlike my parents’ blatant dislike for technology, I realize that I don’t necessary love it, but I appreciate its capabilities as a means to an end; a way to share my thoughts with a wider audience and to sat in touch with friends and family. I understand that my reaction to the immensity of the possibilities that the Internet provided has to do with the messages that I heard during my informative years. That technology was an intrusion into their organized life, another thing to learn, another obstacle to overcome when orchestrating the day-to-day living of a family of twelve brought challenges enough. Because I was inculcated with negative messages regarding technology, and never had a model for how much fun it could be, I can, without thought, drift back to that old conversation and take on a stunned look.

The truth is that the Universe is changing and it is presenting me with the opportunity to change with it. I can no longer move technology on like my father’s ‘hot potato.’ Learning to access and use it is part of my own personal, professional and spiritual development. Uncertainty or not, I will plod along until rays knowledge appear and old doubts are replaced with certainty.
I watch young adults make their way through the maze of technology and I’m in awe of their comfort with it. They’re like little ducklings in their element; water. They frolic with technology, while I feel I’m drowning. With time and a little distance, I can make my way back to the site where my train got derailed and begin to put my toes into the water again. Because my mother was a Luddite and my father, though highly proficient in the realm of big machinery, never modeled a love for learning how technologies worked; then my fear and related uncertainty is situational. Since its a learned response, then I can unlearn it. While my reactions are rooted in my past, it’s what I do with it today that really matters. So I’m on the hunt for a good teacher; one that can help me demystify and become proficient with twenty-first century realm of information technology so that my words and thoughts can flow freely on the super highway of the Internet. With that plan I can put my car into gear and move ahead knowing that I will find my teacher and I will learn whatever I need to learn to pursue my dream of scattering my works across the fertile ground of cyberspace while deconstructing my technological corridor of uncertainty.
My Season Of Change

It was the ideal ending to a perfect picture week. The weatherman predicted a glorious Houston day with the temperatures settling in the mid-eighties and low humidity. Bruce and I arrived at Brazos State Park early Sunday morning while the sun was gently making its way toward the mid-day sky and before the heat of the day would have me scurrying for shade. With a picnic lunch, Sunday paper, writing journal and coffee lattes in hand, we headed for an opening on the sloping bank of Hale Lake and settled in for the duration. The lake is off the beaten path situated in the south corner of the park’s 5000 acres range of natural beauty teaming with wildlife.

Bruce and I are regulars at the park; our oasis of tranquility only forty miles outside of Houston. We come here to saunter along the worn, wooded paths away from the jangle of cell phones; a mini retreat from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. But today the experience is different. Today, instead of showing up as a needy relative, I have brought two new friends, peace and tranquility; like two white spotted doe’s lapping cold, crisp water from a gently flowing mountain stream.

As I prepared at the beginning of the week, I noticed that life, as I experienced it, was changing. As I gazed at my calendar the old feeling of being overwhelmed, along with its partner anxiety, were conspicuously but happily absent. The week was filled with coaching engagements, as well as a day-long facilitation and two one-hour workshops – and yet I was looking forward to each and every one of my commitments. As a strong introvert, I can limp away exhausted and drained from large group endeavors where it’s all too easy for me to be the main meal for extroverts around me. They walk away feeling satiated after feasting on my energy, while the constant chatter of conversations and subliminal interactions deplete me. I come into the group a feisty, energetic colt ready to run and depart a haggard war horse ready to be led out to pasture.

At the end of that same work week, I prepared to work at my desk and to regroup, but instead of feeling run down, I was still energized and happy. What a stark difference from the exhaustion I have historically felt after either one of those occurrences, never mind a week of them.
Two years ago I felt I had abdicated my personal power when I asked Bruce to lead the same strategic planning process that I successfully facilitated earlier that same week. Prior to asking Bruce to lead, I was eaten by self-doubt and fear that I was not up to the assignment, that I was not capable enough a facilitator. The consequences of denying my own personal abilities were immeasurable. I lost a substantial client's business because I lost their trust. (How could they believe in me if I didn't believe in myself?)

The immensity of this lesson was life changing. It was the reason that I began the self-defense practice of Tae Kwon Do. My opponent was not an unknown assailant; it was the fear filled part of me that could not accept that I had within me the ability to be powerful. Fear and uncertainty were also reasons that I panicked when I had the opportunity to speak publicly, and it played out in my over-preparation. When presenting "Leadership for the 21st Century: the Feminine Advantage," the one hour workshop took me forty to fifty hours of preparation. Was the presentation good? Yes. Was it worth the investment of my time? No. By comparison, a recent one-hour workshops titled "The Three Stepping Stones for Personal Effectiveness" was a resounding success and it took me less than five hours to prepare for it because through the practice of Tae Kwon Do I'm leaning from how to get out of my own way and to trust myself. To use a quote by Goethe from my workshop, "Things do not change, people change."

Like the yearly shifts of external seasons, my internal season is changing. I see it reflected back to me in the naturalness of the park's surroundings. As I settle into my green canvas traveling chair and breathe in the cool morning dew, my eyes feast on the beauty that surrounds me and I'm overwhelmed with a feeling of gratitude for the peace and power that I experience, both inside and around me. As I move into the quiet fall season, appropriate to consideration of life's patterns, I see leaves of doubt and fear dropping from the live oak trees surrounding me. I feel the trees' roots anchoring me solidly to the earth I walk on. I see myself in the mischievousness of the squirrels playing their own version of hide and seek; I am the hawk effortlessly soaring high in the sky above me carried by the currents of life; I am a Roseate Spoon bird joyously chirping to her mate. And I embody the two strong, wide, deep brown eyes of the American alligator looking back at me as she emerges from the marsh lands to bask in the warmth of the mid-day sun. Instead of fear, I understand that this old dame holds within her the flexibility and fortitude to move forward through life boldly.

As I sit and take in the beauty and resilience of the habitats of Brazos Bend Park, I realize that all of the work that I've been doing and continue doing to understand and integrate my own God-given giftedness has quietly been working itself into the recesses of my body and is rooted in the knowledge that 'all is well in my world.' Whatever the Universe brings to me, whatever nature provides, I will be fine; better than fine, I will grow and prosper from it. This thought silently floats up out of the water of my unconscious buoyed up by the power of its potency and is playing out in me right now. From the acorn of that thought and prayer, the season of the powerful live oak tree called "Judith" is at hand.
Warmed By The Sun

Feeling grateful for the opportunity that awaited like a wrapped Christmas present under the ornament-laden tree, I walked from my car to the client's new learning center located on the Dairy Ashford Campus. In less than an hour, I was to present at a day-long leadership conference. I drank in my surroundings: the awakening morning light, the vastness of the campus, the lush green manicured lawn that butted the sidewalk and meandered toward a state-of-the-art building. Nascent oak trees had been strategically planted to provide future shade. They were circled by clusters of marigolds and peonies to create a warm, welcoming facade. I thought that the new and hospitable structure bode well for the day in front of me, but that was just the beginning.

Halfway to the front door, my gaze fell upon the rising sun. Like a four year old child stunned by the bounty of Christmas presents under the tree, I stood in wonder at the sight of the brilliant orange ball bursting over the horizon. The rest of the campus faded into nothingness. I put down my briefcase and stood transfixed in amazement—the immensity and brilliance of the morning sun reached up into the sky and was transforming the early morning gray-blue skies into the promise of a bright sunlit day.

As I stood in my two-inch heels tilting toward the horizon, a question emerged from the shadow of my consciousness. How am I like the morning sun? Something inside of me relaxed; a body-felt sense of knowing accompanied the awareness of our connectedness, and I knew without doubt that I would perform brilliantly today. With a smile spreading across my face, mirroring the breath of the earth’s horizon, I moved on toward my day’s responsibility.

Experiencing the sun’s rising and setting feeds me spiritually. When reflecting at day’s end on the gift of the rising sun, I often begin the winding path down memory lane and the sun evokes a voice, a face, a time and place. As far back as I can remember my mother had a love affair with the magical minutes when the sun disappears out of view and the night’s sky moves into darkness. From the sacredness of her kitchen window’s western exposure, she would be stopped in her tracks while fulfilling the myriad of her nightly rituals: making my father’s lunch, washing or folding clothes, bringing order to the kitchen and pantry. Then, out of the corner of her eye she would be caught by the beauty of the twilight sky—a
painter’s pallet of hues in blues, pinks, purple and violet apparent through the shadows of the stately elm trees dotting our back yard. Watching the kaleidoscope night changing, she would call out to anyone within earshot “Come, come quickly. You must see tonight’s sky!”

Long before I had language of my own, I responded to her beckoning and ran to her, not because I understood or appreciated the wonder that was unfolding in front of her but because something in my mother’s voice compelled me to seek out the source that brought her such excitement. Perhaps as a child, long before I could see over the window sill, she would pick me up and I would settle into the warmth of her able arms and use the setting sun as a lesson in naming colors. Maybe, together we stood quietly looking into the panorama of the dusk’s display. As a mid-teen, I recall finding her standing to the side of the window gazing out. Like a curator sharing a new work of art, she would describe in detail the miracle unfolding in front of us. On other nights, she would stand silently, perhaps unable to put into language the awe she felt. Somewhere along the path of my life, my mother’s obsession became mine own and I added to it the miracle of a sunrise.

It was along the shore line at Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, in the pre-dawn hours walking with my grandmother, that I first truly experienced the morning sun peaking out above the vastness of the ocean where we walked along the crystalline white beach, avoiding the freezing lapping waves. I don’t recall my grandmother ever stopping to take in the beauty that was unfolding. She was a simple woman intent on making it to the barrier reef in order to gather fresh muscles for the stew she would serve for supper. Nonetheless, I would stop and drink in the magnificence in front of me. It was because I wanted to spend time with my grandmother that I learned to become an early morning riser; I found I was fed by the silent moments when the day began in earnest. Watching the day unfold that way centered me even then. Watching the sun make its way above the horizon, I was able to re-connect with the universe and found solace in understanding that in some little way I was a part of it.

When I came upon the enormous flaming ball of sun en route to my workshop, I was transported to another dimension of reality. I was back again with my mother and grandmother greeting the day or watching it slip below the horizon. In those magnificent moments of awe, I’m reminded that the creation and the Creator are one and that I am part of the Universe’s grand design. And I thought, like the rays of the sun rising from within me: this immense ball of sun represents where I am in life right now; two-thirds visible to the naked eye with still more beauty and magnificence lurking below the horizon.

That is just how I feel these days, like I’m bursting out from below the horizon, burning up the night’s sky and destined to emerge fully to light the day—just like the Phoenix rising, I’m drawn toward the magnificence and warmth of the sun.
Like the fool I can be, let me tell you that I’m in love again; the stars, the giddy stomach, the invincibility of it all. At sixty-four years old, I’m still taken aback by its mystery and physical impact. You would think that by now I wouldn’t be surprised when, out of the blue, my heart ignites like fireworks filling the night sky on the fourth of July. Experiencing love is like eating a ripe Bing cherry hidden beneath a cover of dark bitter-sweet chocolate; my mouth salivates, taste buds tingle with its juicy sweetness and every cell in my body calls out for more. That is the power and potency of the love I experienced last week.

At the ripe ‘old’ age of nineteen, I was given the assignment to write a term paper for a literature class on a contemporary subject. With the arrogance of teen years, I chose the subject love and wrote about its varying stages. Looking back from the lofty perch of the wise old owl I am today, I’m first embarrassed and then delighted by the brashness of that teenager, who took on such a grand exploration. (It worked; I got an A on the paper.) I wrote from my own experiences between children and parents, the puppy love of youth, the teen years of back-seat-of-the-car love experienced and of course, true love. It would be decades before I realized that, simultaneously, I had been constructing a fortress of brick and mortar around my heart to keep anyone from violating it again.

With the perspective of time, I see that I was partially on target in that paper; but what did a nineteen year old know about true love? Nothing! It would be another nine years before I experienced it. Like a thief in the night, love struck when I least expected it. I was the unlikely head of the first secretarial school in Iran, when I met Gene, the legal representative for the American company for which I was to provide secretarial support personnel. We met in a cold white austere boardroom that was located off of the General’s second floor office. Gene, a tall, dark-haired, man’s man, with languid brown eyes, owned the room as he entered. When he introduced himself, a bolt of lightning, (or was it Cupid’s arrow?) pierced my armored heart; I was electrified. Uncharacteristically, my eyes locked on him and the coldness of the environment, the arrogance of the military generals, and the formidable task that was in front of us, faded back into the background. I knew that I was not going to leave that meeting until Gene asked me out. In hindsight, it was the only way that I could have opened the window to let the light of love in.
Eight years after meeting Gene and six years after marrying him, Gene died of lung cancer. There were only three months from diagnosis and death. With his physical loss weighing on me like buckets of concrete, I set about to re-fortify the walls that his love had deconstructed. Yet things could never be the same because I had experienced the sweet taste of the power and purpose of true love. It took nine years to fully grieve Gene’s death, years of personal reflection and spiritual growth, to be ready to love again, and another four years to once more to vow ‘till death do we part.’

Just as lightning is said not to hit the same place twice, the mathematical probability of my experiencing ‘love at first sight’ again was—nil. When I met Bruce, I recognized the electrifying feeling that flowed through my body. Bruce was tall and blond, a gentle man with a quick and nimble mind and a voice that was made for radio; it drew me in. But without the blessing of ‘love-at-first-sight’ the demon of self-doubt emerged: is he the right man, can I trust him, will he be there when the ‘worse’ part of the wedding vows inevitably occurs? An old tune echoed in my mind, and ‘when in doubt – move him out’ advanced quickly to my top ten internally played thoughts; I broke up with him. Bruce was not deterred; if I wanted friendship then he would be my friend. He was prepared to be there for the long haul, and in a moment of no thought, when glancing at him from across a crowded room, knowing struck again; he was the love I was looking for. I’ve never looked back. We’ve been married now for going on thirteen years and if there was ever a gift for a fight well fought over self-doubt, then our relationship is the pot of gold at the end of my rainbow.

If I had been blessed to have children of my own, I would have experienced true love sooner. With a child of my own, I would have had the opportunity to experience my own ability to love unconditionally; the wonder of child birth, the daily feedings, the smell of my baby’s freshly washed hair and the fragility and surprising strength of her fingers clinging tightly to mine. The baby’s first smile, her rolling over, sitting up, cooing and crying; a life-time of firsts would have melted my reluctant heart. Nevertheless, a baby just wasn’t to be. Being an aunt has brought its own rewards, but in the end, nieces and nephews have their own mothers and fathers and, as much as I would have loved to treat them as mine, they’re not.

The love that I am afire with today comes with age; out of both my own joyful experiences and painful losses. I just spent an extended weekend with my step-son, his wife and my two beautiful, boisterous and brilliant grand-daughters in Cancun, Mexico. The weather was in the high 70’s with nary a cloud in the sky; not that I cared. The suns that I revolved around were my two grand-daughters. When I am with them, their presence radiates and warms me; I experience my own personal global warming. When they run to me, arms wide yelling my name, I’m butter melting on their personal tiny red and white box of popcorn. With them on my lap, reading, running, coloring, or exploring, the joy I experience is the pearl beyond price. Life takes on a new level of vibrancy and previous adult concerns about how things look,
or what I do, are pulled out with the retracting tide—all that matters is held in this moment, all I care about is their lifelong well-being.

In hindsight, the nineteen year old was on to something. She did have a sound foundational experience of love that, in spite of her fears and doubts, I’ve slowly continued to build upon. I can’t gaze into a crystal ball and see the future, but what I do know is that at any age, I’ve been blessed to have experienced true love from two magnificent men and two glorious grand-daughters. Through them I’ve learned that it is giving and receiving love without condition that enriches, surprises and delights me. That true love is beyond thought or reason; though thought and reason may support it. It wells up like rich black crude oil gushing up from its reservoir deep below the surface of the earth. The love that I’ve experienced is a cornucopia of highs and lows where neither extreme deters its unconditional flow!
Buying Beauty

Standing at the door to my closet, I feel a sinking sensation; I’m drowning in a sea of things-- Cole Hann shoes, cotton sweaters, slacks, sweatshirts. With such clutter, it’s hard to get enough air into my lungs. This is not a new occurrence. Unaware of the totality of the consequences of shopping, I continued adding “one” new piece of clothing after another, while the waist band of my closet kept getting tighter and tighter. Then one day--like today--I walk into the closet and am overwhelmed, once again, by sheer volume of things I have amassed since my last purging.

It was five years ago during a Leadership Houston class that I connected the dots between shopping and my need to feel good about myself. As a group we were divided by where we tested along the continuum of “feelers” to “thinkers.” I was at a table with nine others; we rated as the highest “feelers” in the room. When the facilitator asked us what we did when we felt down, in unison we nine responded “go shopping.” Like low-hanging fruit in an orchard, the realization was there for the picking, “I use shopping like I used alcohol, as a way to avoid feeling bad.” It wasn’t a pretty realization; nothing I’m proud about.

I’ve been in this situation before; a different face, a different place, but the same behavior. During a dark period of my life, when my husband and father died within four months of each other, there were days when my entire body ached like a mouthful of abscessed molars. To alleviate the excruciating pain, I turned to alcohol. While alcohol consumption is no longer an issue, it’s the ‘stinking thinking’ of my addictive personality that provides a quick, rational reason for why I must buy my fourth black winter jacket. The story I tell myself is so compelling that I find myself carving out thirty minutes here or twenty minutes there to go to DSW, Macy’s, TJ Maxx, Marshall’s or Nordstrom’s just to see if they have what I now must have in order to feel complete.

In traveling back in time, it is not easy for me to understand the genesis of my need to shop. I grew up comfortably unaware of what I didn’t have. My mother, a woman who lived, laughed and loved through the deepest of depressions, had a way of stretching my father’s blue collar pay check to take care of all of life’s necessities. She could wring water out of a stone. She was the family bookkeeper; my father the bread winner. Even though my father never made over $25,000 a year, and I had ten siblings, I don’t ever recall my mother complaining about the size of my father’s pay check. She even found a few dollars to give my father for pocket money each week. They bought everything with cash; from the daily bread on our table to the secondhand Chevy we drove, the family home, and summer vacations we had at Hampton Beach, NH. Credit card debt was considered an abomination.
Excess entered my life with my first college roommate, Susan. She was a small, brown-eyed, dynamo who had grown up in a Jewish community on the outskirts of Boston, where life was measured by the size of your condo, the labels on your clothes and your ability to play Mahjong. Even today I can see her walking into our small, white, cramped dorm room, toting a large brown carton that could have easily carried all that I brought to school. Out of the carton came thirty smaller boxes of shoes; more shoes than I had owned in my entire eighteen years of life. It never dawned on me that anyone could live with such abundance. It took me many years to match her, but in my heyday, I had more than fifty clear plastic shoe boxes neatly stacked in my overflowing closets.

When I moved to Boston after college and began to make, and gleefully spend, my own money, I began my love affair with all things beautiful: designer labels, Dooney Burke bags, and bamboo pajamas. By twenty-eight, I had amassed about $10,000 in credit charge debt and larger closet space; nothing by today’s standards. While debt was mounting, I consoled myself that I was only shopping in discount stores; Felines’ Basement was my drug of choice. When I asked my Mother if she thought my shopping was out of control, her response: “You’re not taking bread out of anyone’s mouth!” Affirmed in my compulsive behavior, I continued to shop. Prior to marrying my husband Gene, who shared my father’s abhorrence for credit card debt, he made a condition that I eliminate all my outstanding debt. He would pay for our housing, and I would use the money that I would have paid for rent to bring all credit card balances to zero. With Gene’s help it was easy to cut back on shopping and to learn to curb my enthusiasm for shopping – he was the source of my happiness.

After experiencing the devastation of Gene’s early death, my obsessions with solid brown Dewar’s bottles and anything Chardonnay were used to manage my physical and emotional pain. Over time I was forced to my knees and accepted that I had an addictive personality. In hindsight I can see that my addiction didn’t go away, it just changed its wardrobe to large white boxed department stores dressed up in neon lights. Without thinking, the enjoyment of shopping turned into a need to shop and my purchases increased ten-fold. Shopping became a quick way to feel good again, if only for thirty minutes. When my mood plummeated and I felt like I would be swallowed by the black abyss, I would find myself at the door to the garage, keys in hand, Then, I’d head to a store. It really didn’t matter what store I was in; seeing the beauty of the new clothes, shoes, purses numbed my pain. I’d come home with a few bags of beautiful bargains nicely wrapped by white tissue paper with round red embossed store monograms, and my spirit lightened. It wasn’t until I had to move from one home to another, and I had to look again at the clothes bursting out of my closets that I realized that I was out of control once again.
In a society that is based on consumption, it's a challenge to see the absurdity of amassing the volume of things I own and buy. I know people, who have mastered the art of buying appropriately, whose closets balance spaciousness with quantity. There are people who don't deny themselves a quality purchase but are more thoughtful and conscious in their choosing. That is my aspiration regarding consuming, to replace quantity with a few quality pieces that comfortably fit into one well-organized, middle-sized closet.

Today standing at the doorway of my closet--after donating three large boxes of miscellaneous apparel--I feel a new feeling. Spaciousness. I can breathe again. What I've learned while de-cluttering is that there is nothing inherently wrong with shopping, like food it can be fun and enjoyable. But like food, its use can mask painful emotions.

My challenge today is not the shopping or the buying, but understanding why I shop. As a woman that others see as striking or beautiful, I've never been able to hold that truth for more than a brief moment; certainly, not take it in. I've been seeking beauty in the department stores rather than understanding that true beauty resides within me. As I continue to learn to love and appreciate the magnificence of who God created me to be, my constant need to buy so many new things or to dress to impress will diminish while I learn to let my beauty shine. Or, is it that since I am learning to let my internal light shine that I long for spaciousness and have a need to de-clutter? Now that is a thought worth buying!
My Own Brand Of Success

What is success? And why is this a question that continues to plague me? I've done a lot of astonishing things in my life: set up the first secretarial school in Iran, built a non-profit that increased the number of families we served by twenty-fold, and have been ranked in the top 10% of certified coaches worldwide. Then why don't I feel successful? Like a little girl standing tall, balancing on her toes, short arms and little fingers reaching for a desired doll that sits just out of reach, the feeling of being successful eludes me. What will it take for me to feel the happiness of achievement?

It wasn't always that way. As a twelve year old, success was collecting enough shiny nickels, dimes and quarters to save $15 for vacation. My glee was spending my treasure on peanut butter salt water taffy, skit-ball and arcade games. In high school, triumph was being a co-captain of our varsity cheer-leading squad and chosen as the most popular girl in my class. Contentment was walking the halls every day knowing that I was right where I wanted to be. These were the golden years of youth where triumphs were sweet and external demands to achieve were non-existent.

After graduation from college, I felt the pressure to make use of my undergraduate degree. The joy of signing my first professional contract as a high school teacher for the City of Boston was dampened by the awareness that the freedom of my college years was now behind me. As a first year teacher there was no time for training wheels. I had to learn to drive that bike straight and hard out of the gate. Walking down the hall to my freshman business theory class repeating the mantra, “I will be calm. Judith, you will be calm. Judith, she will be calm.” I would prepare myself to enter a class of thirty freshmen students whose average age was seventeen. A day was a victory if fights were held in the halls instead of in my classroom. I felt daily pleasure when students constructively responded to what they were learning. It was arduous work, and it was worth it to me. I would arrive home totally spent. I never made it past the over-stuffed, yellow flowered, living room chair before I collapsed into exhaustion, blue and gold book bag strewn on the floor, my coat still on. Contentedness came from working with inner city students and playing with a small close cadre of new friends that were in the same first-year-teacher-boat.
During those seven years, I was able to balance success with happiness; I felt complete. There were seasonal vacations to recharge my batteries from the stress of work. For three wondrous summers, two women friends and I wandered like nomads across the United States. Long before we found Rick Steve’s book on traveling on the cheap, we lived the life. After the first disastrous night of trying to pitch a tent by the yellow illumination of our car’s headlights, we ditched the tent and headed to cities where we had friends or friends of friends to put us up for a night or two. In New Orleans, I experienced humidity that clung heavy on my body like a wool winter coat in the middle of summer, and I melted into the rowdy crowds on Bourbon Street. At Pat O’Brien’s, we drank our first Hurricanes and let the smoldering blues filling the air work its way through our bodies. In Albuquerque, I set my taste buds on fire with a small little bowl of salsa with a little green jalapeño pepper and learned to use bread and salt to extinguish the fire. I saw the night sky ablaze with blinking neon signs welcoming us to the City of Sin, Las Vegas. And that was only in the first few weeks. After seven weeks of exploration, I returned to the classroom, my cheerfulness fueled by the freedom of the open road, friendships, new and old, and the adventure of exploring and experiencing new lands.

In retrospect, Iran was a place of professional transition where I had the opportunity to take my skills out of the classroom and display them on a foreign stage. As the head of the Farah Secretarial school, I oversaw the construction of the school, and was responsible for educating a workforce of over a hundred secretarial support personnel whose only idea of what a secretary did came from a Bruce Lee film where the “secretary” (naturally) perched on the corner of her desk, long legs strategically crossed, painting her fingernails blood red. Oh, there were clashes in cultural norms and linguistic roadblocks that could fill a book, but not now. At work we employed a game of charades showing workers how high a desk should be, where outlets needed to be secured and the type of lighting that would replace the single light bulb dangling from above. Every new day brought me a real appreciation for the things that I had always taken for granted; how far we, as a country, had grown in a meager two hundred years. Professionally, I lost the richness of summer vacations. Recharging, while in compressed periods of time, was compensated by the richness of culture while exploring this small foreign land. I worked hard and I guess I was happy. We built the school, then graduated and placed over sixty support personnel. Life was good, until it wasn’t. After the declaration of “martial law” and the closing of the Air Force base, it was time for me to depart the foreign land where war was imminent.
Arriving in Houston, I decided that it was time to move on—to use my business skills in the for-profit world. I was hired by United Technology, and then General Electric to run their Houston offices. As in every circumstance, there were highs and lows. It was important to me, to skip the experience of being the lowest teacher on the totem pole again, but I was not prepared for the expanded demands on my time. I’m not sure exactly when or where the pendulum began moving in the direction of success and achievement over happiness, but it did. What I do know is that with a forty (fifty, and sometimes sixty) hour work weeks, and two (then three, then four) paltry weeks of vacation a year, there was little time for rejuvenation. Travel time was compressed and had agendas of its own—whether taking time with my large and loving family, or taking in all I could see and experience while in Colorado, California or Canada. In retrospect they were both types of stress. The pace of my professional work life was overlaid on my time away from work; and the conversation about what brought me happiness was lost like a packed bag brought to the airport, but never arriving at its destination. The new clothes I bought to replace the lost items were more fashionable and worn by everyone else I knew—they were “strive and drive.” For thirty years, I’ve had a love-hate relationship with them, but like a comfy pair of worn, grey sweat pants, I also kept wearing them.

As a member of the first wave of baby boomers, I am at the point in life where I now have a modicum of control over my work demands; I’m self-employed and I love it. But shifting gears in life is not as easy as shifting gears on the sleek, red Schwinn bicycle of my youth. At sixty-four, I seek balance between accomplishment and contribution, and above all, I seek happiness. And old patterns persist. I still seek tangible achievements like writing my blog and getting my black belt in Tae Kwon Do to keep me grounded and in the present, but then, out of the blue, strive-drive shows up and I wonder if I should be “doing even more.” On other days, or moments of the same day, I realized that the more distance I get between externally imposed “should” goals, the happier I am.
The success and happiness that I seek today is not found in reaching or striving; it is a state of being that resides in the here and now, that moves with the flow. When I’m peddling fast and furiously, I lose connection with the present. I can only see the lush green mountains far in the distance and miss the beauty of the red Knockout Roses that are blooming in my own front yard. So, it requires that I learn to down shift the gears of the bike that I am. Success is not good or bad; it’s the continuous striving and driving that robs me of the state of happiness I seek. When I hold the activities of my life, like the doll of my childhood, close to me, my body physically relaxes, I feel my cares and concerns about achieving melting away, and I trust that in this precious moment, success and happiness are bound tenderly together where my heart is ignited.
Sharing The Gift Of Hope

As if tucked warmly between the sheets, I’m luxuriating in the week between Christmas and New Year’s. This year’s activities have slowed to a crawl, and there is plenty of time to sit still and reflect. With my feet up on the chair beside me, the computer open in front of me, and the rhythmic sound of “The Little Drummer Boy” playing in the background, I close my eyes and ask the question, what am I feeling. Long before a word arises in my consciousness, I’m aware of a strange feeling that is both bright and promising—the sweet, exquisite tingle I’m feeling warms my stomach, and radiates out to my lips that curl up with a smile. What I feel in this moment is the delicious feeling of hope, a hope that is filled with lightness and love and transforms me into a star radiant with possibility.

Part of my feeling can be traced to the season. As a child, Christmas was the biggest holiday of the year, where hope was fostered and celebrated. Each year my father chose and trimmed our tree to fit into its five-legged red stand and placed it in its seat of honor in our living room. That done, my mother delighted in strategically hanging each ornament and fastidiously laying strand after strand of shiny silver tinsel over each branch. The tree was garnished, not with a dash of nutmeg, like the eggnog she might be sipping, but with a five-pointed star representing the star that led the three wise men to a stable where the child Jesus was laying in a manger. The trimming of the tree and displaying the Nativity set on top of the phonograph console meant that Christmas was here. Everything about this holiday season, the white candles glowing in each window, the evergreen wreath with its big red bow hung on the front door, Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas,” and “Oh Holy Night” filling the airwaves, created anticipation of the imminent arrival of Jolly Saint Nick, and the birth of Our Savior.

The merriment that surrounds my family’s love of Christmas was partially born out of the tragedy in my father’s own childhood. When he was no more than twelve, my Grandfather abolished Christmas
forever because his youngest son, Patrick, had been hit by a car outside of his home that year. When my father met my mother, he finally found a family where the spirit of Christmas was alive and well. During the holiday season, my mother would find her future husband lying on the floor mesmerized by the twinkling lights in the tree. His love was shared by my mother who understood both the loss of a loved one, and the healing balm of the sights, sounds, and smells of a holiday celebrated with the ones you love. After my Grandfather’s death, Christmas was reinstated and the Christmas Eve celebration included the grownups exchange of gifts at my Grandmother’s after sharing an old Irish tradition of eating boiled pig’s feet (despicable to see or eat) and mouth-watering homemade mutton pies. The hope that for years had been repressed by my Grandfather’s pain came back like a flock of birds taking flight and filling the air with their white-winged majesty; the season of anticipation was filled with the joys of the lights, tastes, and sounds and held in reverence by our generation.

Long before I was declared old enough to attend Christmas Eve mass or the party at my Grandmother’s home, we younger kids had our own little celebration. We took our baths early, ate cookies, and drank cocoa and eggnog, gathering around the TV to watch The Christmas Carol and The Grinch that Stole Christmas. When it was time to go to bed, we scurried like hungry mice for the stairs. This was the one night of the year that no one had to be told a second time; Santa was coming and, like millions of children across the world, visions, not of sugar plums, but of dolls or bikes or games that would be waiting when we woke up, danced in our heads. As a child of six, my hope was for a two-foot tall doll that could walk and talk. A blond, blue-eyed twinkly beauty with clear pink skin dressed in a crisp lavender and pink party dress wearing white ankle socks and shiny, black patent leather party shoes. I knew that in her I would find unconditional acceptance and perfect beauty.

It was that same year when my twin brother, Jim, and I decided to sneak out of our beds and curl up together like cats on the gold shag carpet on the landing at the top of the stairs to get a glimpse of Santa at work. At one thirty that night, with eye lids heavy with sleep, we heard the sound of the front door spring open. In our excitement, we climbed over each other, our eyes now wide with anticipation. As we peered down the stairs, unable to speak or breathe, in walked my mother and father laughing and whispering, laden with packages to place under the tree. Oh, we had heard our older brothers say that believing in Santa Clause was for children; now we knew it. With one finger strategically placed across my lips, I suggested that we be silent; with a nod of his head, the deal was made. Not wanting to upset our “good girl and good boy” status, we silently crept back to our own beds and burrowed under the covers again. My momentary disappointment was replaced with the reassuring knowledge that my older brothers still got gifts even from a Santa that didn’t exist. With the first gray rays of light peaking into my bedroom window, I bounded out from under the warmth of my bed, yelling to the walls and anyone else who might still be sleeping that it was Christmas. Santa had come!

By the time I was a young teen, with no delusions of Santa, my ability to believe was replaced by the warmth that no matter what, my parents would find something special to give each and every one of us children. If I could remember what I truly wanted, it would surely have been a new baby blue cotton sweater with a white Peter Pan collar, a gray flannel A-line skirt, and new penny loafers. My “hoping” had already been replaced by the reality of learning to be happy with whatever I got. Now able to attend midnight mass, the wonder and delight of the season was fed by my families’ faith. I loved the holiday music—waves of “Oh Holy Night” and “Adeste Fideles” would reverberate within the bell tower of my body and would bring me to tears of happiness. Hope, then, was in the birth of the Christ Child and the belief that all would be well because I was loved by Christ.

Since the carefree and joyous holiday times of my youth, I’ve lived through Christmas seasons when I was shoulder deep in our culture of consumerism and the only thing I hoped for was a new cashmere dress, a diamond ring, Bose speakers, or a trip to Hawaii. There were holiday mornings where I felt like Ebenezer Scrooge shackled with the chains of his past, before the appearance of the third ghost of Christmas. During the years when my husband was dealing with advanced lung cancer and when the
faith of my youth no longer made sense or alleviated my pain, the hope of the season was weighted
down by resentment and anger that for others, life moved on.

Not like the festive family Christmases of my youth, the Ebenezer of my past, or the joy and happiness
I’ve fleeting felt during the past decade, today I’m feeling something different. As I listen to the beat and
the lyrics of “The Little Drummer Boy,” I experience a palpable feeling of hope as the music reverberates
through me. I realized for the first time in my life that the hope that I feel is not connected solely to the
season, but to the lyrics and message of the song that captured my attention. Unlike the lowly drummer
boy I don’t play a drum, but every time I put pen to paper, or lovingly let my fingers compose on the
keyboard, like the little drummer boy, I bring my personal treasure; I play my best. It is in doing what I
love, by writing, that I bring the best of the spirit of the Christmas season to life each day, and my own
personal star quality radiates brightly as I share the gift of hope in the world.
Mending The Fine China Cup

When I awoke this morning, I had no idea that I when I went back to bed at day's end, I'd be wrapped in a white down comforter, warmed by the experience that the Universe is working for me. With the confluence of three diverse life situations, a veil of life parted and I was transported back to a painful childhood experience where I understood, for the first time, how it colors my actions today. In the midst of the business of living, I had forgotten that the Universe only brings me experiences designed to bring me closer to the gift that God created me to be. Like a neon sign flashing in the darkness, the joining together of these distinct experiences, pointed, not to a place to rest my head at night, but to a place deep within me that is crying to be healed.

Two days ago was the twenty-fifth anniversary of my first husband's death. It's been years since I spent any time reminiscing about that pivotal point of my life. If you've ever read my blog, you understand that Gene's death (and my father's death four months later) forever changed my life's trajectory. Within seven short months, everything that I constructed my life upon was ripped out from beneath me. I was no longer my father's daughter or my husband's wife; any delusion of control over life crumbled as the earth ruptured below my feet. In the rubble of my life, I felt excruciating emotional pain. I didn't understand it then, but there is truth in the old saying what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.

From the ashes of my previous life came a rich, black, pungent compost that provided the nourishment I needed to make the desert of my life bloom again. Looking back upon the past twenty-five years, I see a multitude of beautiful fragrant flowers that have blossomed: courage, perseverance, a strong body that is rooted in the world, and a robust personal voice. I see a person unafraid of the journey, who trusts in God's goodness. Yesterday's reverie wasn't a walk on the dark side, but a celebration of the totality of the many gifts that have emerged from what I felt was travesty. Even when it feels like there couldn't be another gift to come from those years, or any more grief that could be wrought out of my body, my loving husband, Bruce opens his mouth and speaks words that might hint of his own illness, and I feel a seismic aftershock; a torrent of fear erupts and my calm is shattered.
At breakfast yesterday, in passing, Bruce made an innocent comment saying, “My hip is hurting.” A normal wife would have consoled him, asked what he was going to do about it and if there was anything that she could do to support him, or, at least, ignored him. Not me. Whenever the dear man tells me anything, and I mean any little thing that I might construe as a negative about his health, I feel my body tense, and I watch myself reenacting the ritual of preparing for a level seven hurricane alert: shutting and locking the doors and windows of my heart, running for shelter, gathering resources to survive the storm. I know that it’s not rational; no reaction is rational. They are either functional or nonfunctional, and this reaction doesn’t serve me; it’s not who I want to be. It’s as if I have my own personal Jekyll and Hyde scenario going on. The rational, kind, loving person disappears, and I get sharp and defensive. I’ve tried in vain to be rational—to listen, to breathe deeply, to remind myself that Bruce is not Gene, but as much as I try, I’m helpless to the feeling that comes over me. With his few words of physical vulnerability, the weather in the room shifts from a beautiful sunny day to gale force winds. Yesterday was no exception. I’d like to say that it is a new response, but I have a history of reacting to the mere mention of my husband’s health challenges that way.

Last April we were in Boston for a conference and out to dinner with a group at a funky restaurant in Harvard Square. (I love Cambridge, bought my first condo on Broadway, and walked the tree-lined streets every day for two years.) A friend of mine sat to my left and Bruce to my right. We were enjoying the festivities, laughing and sharing stories about our lives, when Bruce leaned into me and said, “Don’t get upset, but I may need to go to the hospital.” Rationally, I know Bruce is doing all the right things. He pays attention to his body. When in doubt, he checks it out. Let me be clear that this is something, with a little distance, I appreciate about him. My first husband died of lung cancer because he ignored all the signs that something was wrong. I don’t want to ever go through that pain again. As he spoke, I watched myself reenact this mysterious thirteen year old pattern; my body tenses and I hear the sound of a prison door slamming shut. I physically turn toward my friend and away from the man I love. I tell myself that he is overreacting, that he is a hypochondriac; anything that will make it about him, rather than address the fear that those combustible words ignite within me.
While writing at Barnes & Nobel that afternoon, one my best friend called and asked if she could come meet me for coffee. I’m always happy to spend time with her. She is one of my life’s blessings; she’s insightful, empathetic and frequently knows what is happening within me before I do. After catching up on her trip to Chicago and the daily gyrations of life, I told her about my walk down memory lane on the twenty-fifth anniversary of my personal Tsunami, and how angry I got when Bruce “complained” (my word) again about his health. With a quizzical glance, she asked if I thought there was a connection between the two events. I said no. Through my hours of writing, I had never cried a tear. Yet, as I spoke, tears started to form and I knew that there was some reoccurring terror that I might have to experience that same loss and pain again. Eyes full of love and compassion, she asked, “How old are you now?” With the precision of a neurosurgeon, she had guided me to another area of my brain, and an image appeared. As large droplets of bitter-tasting tears began to run down my contorted face, a constrained child’s voice squeaked out – I’m nine years old.

I was nine when my Mother got sick, really sick. I don’t have a child’s memory of her ever being in bed; she rose before us and went to bed after we did. How does a mother of five children, seven, and then ten, have time to stay in bed? If anyone was sick in our home, she would call our family physician and he would come over and give her a shot. The image that arouse when Lois asked me that question, was of me walking into our home for lunch one day to find my dynamo mother sitting in her chair in front of the stove, her arms hanging by her side, with her head lying on the table. I recall stopping in mid-stride. What’s up, Mom? What’s wrong? When my mother finally picked up her head from the table, she was crying. I’d never seen her cry. Now, I’m sure that was the moment when my fear of illness was ignited.

When I returned from school (oh, you never missed school), our family physician was there. Mom was in bed, and they were waiting for my Father to come home. The atmosphere in the house had changed; there was hardly enough air for me to breathe. I sat silently at the kitchen table waiting for the next shoe to fall. Years later, I understood that she had rheumatoid arthritis that caused inflammation of every cell of her body and even the growth of a follicle of hair on her head was excruciatingly painful. What she needed was bed rest. It took less than a week for the doctors and my Father to understand that my Mother could never get the rest she needed while she was home. Arrangements were quickly made to put my Mother in a sanatorium, so that she could heal. With her departure, there was a void at the center of our universe, and our world began to wobble widely on its axis.
My Father, with the help of our grandmothers, extended family, and a close nucleus of family friends, spent the next two months keeping our family together with elastic bands and electrical tape until school got out in June. Once out for the summer we were sent, some in twos, not to Noah’s Ark to ride out the storm, but to five special people who volunteered to take us in until my Mother got well. My grandmothers took care of my two year old brother, Patrick. My four year old sister, Eileen, and I taken in by close family friends. Growing up in the fifties, there were no family meetings called to discuss our future. Any discussion, and I don’t believe there ever was much of it to begin with, was held in my parents’ bedroom behind closed doors. I don’t ever recalling anyone telling us what was going on with my Mother; and if per chance anyone did, there was no space in our lives for expressing the feelings of fear and loss that are still playing out in my life today.

In retrospect, this awareness was like finding the lost piece of a bone china cup that was tragically dropped. With the missing shard in hand, now I have the challenge of taking the time to mend the delicate, robin blue, tea cup back together. I understand, for the first time, why my reaction to Gene’s death was so extreme: it opened up a reservoir of fear that had been festering below the surface for over thirty years. It took nine years to declare that I was ready to open myself to love again. And when Bruce says anything about his health, I realize now that my reaction is not from Gene’s death, but from my nine year old little girl inside me that panics when there is a whiff of loss in the air about the health of someone she loves. It is only when she has full expression of her grief that the fine of china cup that I am will be restored to its original pristine luster and I’ll be able to be the loving partner I have every intention of being.
The Green-Eyed Dragon

I was recently visiting with a dear friend. As she spoke about her week, an uncomfortable feeling started rising, like yeast, from my toes, insidiously working its way into my psyche. Before I realized what it might be called, it was already fermenting.

She, however, was bubbling over with excitement. She had had an inspiration a week ago and within two days had been invited to a large luncheon when she spotted the head of a well-regarded, Houston based non-profit that could benefit from her revelation. Being bold, and a master net worker, she stepped right up to this man, stuck out her hand, quickly introduced herself, and fearlessly shared her vision. Was he aghast by the brashness of the move? Oh, no. With the same spirited energy, he responded, “Where have you been my entire life?” He extended his arms to encircle his new-found comrade and extended an invitation for her to sit on his non-profit board. By anyone’s measure, this was a fortuitous turn of events. It was one of those serendipitous moments when gears meshed; when two fast flowing tributaries met, merged, and a mighty new river was formed. Why is it that at the time I should be celebrating my friend’s good fortune, my baby-blue eyes had transmuted and were now a bright shade of green? Had the dragon envy taken up residence?
I’m not someone who cuddles up at night with envy—just the opposite. I can’t remember the last time the stench from its odious vapors polluted my world. In fact, my upbringing didn’t encourage such travesty. In our small blue-collar community and in our middle class family, keeping up with the Jones was never an issue. Even if I had had a proclivity for envy, which I didn’t, there just wasn’t that much of a difference between the haves and have nots. I could have longed for finer clothes, shoes, or a nicer house, but my friends lived the same plain vanilla existence, and we were happy enough. The one thing that I did long for was unattainable—to be a boy. I just wanted to be absolved of the daily tasks that my brothers didn’t have to do simply by being male: taking care of younger siblings and mundane chores such as making beds, helping clean the house or washing and drying dishes. I longed to run free.

Looking back I would say that envy only entered our family circle masked in the cloak of friendly small talk with outsiders from different parts of the world where image, and the color of their grass, mattered. Exchanges about where father and uncles worked, their home countries, and the people who participated in their parent’s circle were as foreign as their alien lands. I recall like yesterday sitting around our large, oval maple kitchen table, with my mother quietly listening to a woman go on about her prestige family for about thirty minutes. Then, with the finesse and precision of an archeologist painstakingly brushing the earth from around a ten thousand year old piece of pottery, she exposed the issue. “And, is your uncle the doctor happy? Which wife is he married to now?” With those two deft questions, the object lay exposed on the ground for all around to see. She was not impressed with what she perceived as a game of one-upmanship. Two Mom-isms that have served me well are: Everyone puts their pants on the same way—one leg at a time; There will always be people who have more than you, and just as many who have less than you, the trick is to enjoy what you do have.

Over the years, at different stages in my life, I’ve drifted away from my egalitarianism roots and dabbled with jealousy. It was easy not to covet what others had when I lived in a homogeneous community. Today I live with cultural and financial extremes, and I’m not proud to report that I’ve lusted over others’ beautiful homes, expensive clothes, and their perceived ability to travel abroad whenever they wanted. But those are fleeting moments; more like a nasty little black fly that buzzes around me and is quickly smashed. More troubling were the vast expanses of my life when I begrudged what others had: babies and a happy marriage. It was an entirely different experience when those special relationships seemed forever out of reach. It was then that my naturally pale and peach skin tones have taken on an unflattering green pallor.

The jealousy I feel today is not a reaction to bragging, things that could be purchased, or about the loss of physical relationships. Today’s face of resentment is pure greed. I want what she has: an easy breakthrough. I can hear my little girl within: What about me? How come I always seem to have to work so hard? It’s just not fair! There is petulance in the tone of her words. But it is the whine in her voice that is the clue that it comes from a young part of me. I got hooked, not by my friend’s perceived success, but with how easily it seemed to flow. Like all envy, it is rooted in the unholy marriage of magical thinking and a world-view of scarcity. The enchanted child within me believes that there will be a white knight that will arrive on a magnificent white stallion and will swoop me up into the safety of his strong, outstretched arms and deliver me to the castle in the sky to live happily ever after, with little effort on my part. The fearful part of me believes that there is only so much good fortune to go around. And I just missed out on it again!

Contrary to my magical thinking, I do believe that success comes when hard work and preparation intersect with opportunity, and that the Universe is always working for my greater good. That said, whenever my energies rise, in this case, with envy, I know there is treasure to be found if I sift through the sands of the encounter. The rewards that I retrieved were two-fold. I can celebrate that I was able to watch my energies rise without acting out in resentment and was able to hold my little girl’s fears of never having her turn, with compassion. With this skirmish over, and the green-eyed dragon defeated, I come closer to my goal of never ceding an iota of my life’s energies to his control again.
Creating My Life

Over the years I’ve brought in the New Year with toasts and celebrations, and usually with a new set of goals that meet with varying degrees of success during the year. Through many years the constant is that by June, the best of good intentions have made their way into a brightly colored folder, neatly titled and appropriately filed within the wasteland of my lateral file. However, all that changed three years ago when I came across the practice of choosing a word that would guide me through the hot teaming jungle of obstacles that have derailed me in the past. What I’ve found is that words have power; they provide me the focus to stay the course, and the energy to forge ahead to create a new reality. When spoken from my heart, they catalyze. Since I embraced that practice, how things have changed.

With the idea of selecting a word to encapsulate who I intend to be at the end of the year, I began the inquiry. I knew that I was finished with focusing on lofty, material goals that were weighted down by implied ‘should.’ The intentions were heavy weights pinning me to the spot. Try as I could, I made little meaningful progress. What I did know is that I didn’t want to do more of the same—creating another new professional program to put out into the world, or making more money. I was tantalized by the simplicity of focusing on a single word. With the question asked, it took less than ten minutes for the answer to arrive, not in a large brown box placed on my front door, but from a small, but persistent voice that reverberated within me. The only reason it took that long was that it was not a word but a phrase. The words chose me; they fired my imagination and took hold of my soul. The little cluster of words described fully what I needed to do that year: standing up and stepping out. How did I know that it was perfect for me? Well, when I spoke it out loud, I was, in equal parts, both enthralled with excitement and scared to death.

As long as I can remember, I’ve described myself as feeling too contained. It was as if my psyche was encased in a body that was two sizes too small. And, try as I might, I just couldn’t figure out how to break out. It was as if I was forever standing on the sidelines of the dance floor of life, longing to dance, but too paralyzed to enter onto it. Spontaneity was a word that I understood in theory, but found it hard to enact. I lived in the world as if there were dire consequences for making a wrong choice or drawing attention to myself; and so, like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, I frequently stood frozen in my tracks.
With my nascent phrase percolating below the surface of daily life, I began to take new actions. First, there were baby steps: I made powerful declarations about who I was in the world, I spoke up instead of deferring to others and said yes to business that I would have previously doubted my ability to deliver. I’d like to say that like an experienced mountain climber, the ascent was smooth and constant, it wasn’t. There were mudslides and insurmountable boulders that had me backtracking. In September of that year, while delivering on a contractual promise, I reverted to the old pattern of doubting myself and instead of standing up and stepping out, I tumbled ungraciously head over heels down to the bottom of the mountain. What happened? During a critical period, I passed the center stage in a facilitation process to my business partner. From the moment I got the call from my client’s boss, I knew exactly how it would play out. My action undermined their confidence in me and my contract was not extended. A great example of how the Universe brought me just what I needed; not what I wanted. I understood that I had failed to stand up and step out, and in doing so, failed myself. Instead of wasting time being embarrassed, I graciously admitted the mistake and channeled that energy to embrace drastic change.

In November 2009, I began my first Tae Kwon Do class. I knew that I had to build a body that could stand up for myself and not give way. The shifts that occurred from incorporating that practice into my life are both subtle and profound. For a person who always led with her intellect, I’ve found my feet and learned how to plant them solidly on the ground. I’ve also learned to take actions without over-thinking each choice. When 2010 came around, I stayed with the same cluster of words for another year; there was still rich wine to be stomped out of those ripe red grapes. That year, I stood up and stepped out with my own blog, “The Power to Act: Reflections on the Journey.” This year, my blog is flourishing, and in April I’m on target to test for my ‘black belt’ recommended level. That achievement, though mighty for any one in their sixties, is an example of the magical transformation possible by embracing of the power of a word (or group of words). And this year, I was ready for my next catalytic word.

After a few days of holding the intention to locate the next word, the word arose like bubbling crystal clear water from a natural spring. The world was, ‘create.’ I realized that I’ve done a decent job of
reacting to what comes to me, but now it's time to stand up and be more proactive in how I live each day. When I told my husband about my word, his response was, "You've been creating all last year." There is truth in that; I've been learning how to be creative with language and I'll continue to grow as a writer. The creativity that I'm embracing this year is different; I intend to create how I live in the world. I have thrown open the shutters of my soul, and am embracing each day as a large, blank white canvas that the Universe has already primed just for me. I start each morning gazing at the canvas of my life until I decide what kind of day I wish to create. Do I want to be productive, light, experience mystery, or do I want to be peaceful? I let that choice create my day. Like any painter, during the day, I stand back and gaze upon my creation. Do I need more lightness here, or productivity there? With each moment I'll apply the perfect blend of colors needed to create the reality I want to experience.

When the canvas is finished next December, I want to have created a life that has me consciously living, loving, laughing and producing with a very light touch and bold colors. I want to be able to gaze into the canvas of my life and see reflected, a less serious person who is moving through life with the enthusiasm of a two-year-old splashing in puddles. To quote Oscar Wilde, "Life is too important to take seriously."

Today, I have moments, and hours, and days, when I feel more the creator of my world; and fewer and fewer experiences where I turn my response to life over to outside forces. By year end, I see myself forever shedding the heavy wet blanket of seriousness, and living my life as if I am perpetually in spring.

It's only two months into this year, and already I see changes. For a person who has described herself as 'terminally serious;' the doctors have moved me out of ICU, and I'm recovering nicely. Like Linus of Peanuts fame, I haven't jettisoned my heavy green wool blanket, but there are days that I don't carry it with me at all. That's progress. I can see that the power of my word, create, is working its magic. I wake up each day asking myself, what do I want to create today, and with that question, the artistic juices start flowing. I want to write, I want to laugh, and I want to love powerfully; I want to see the world as full and nurturing. I want to be able to dance with whatever the Universe brings my way. With my choice embedded in my heart, I continue to create my new life.
Dead Batteries And Behaviors

Last Saturday morning, I ate a light breakfast, dressed in my Gee and happily headed out the door to my Tae Kwon Do class. With plenty of time to spare, I turned the key of my car's ignition only to hear silence. My car would not start. My priorities clear, I called a friend who saved the morning by picking me up on her way to the class. Two hours later, the class completed, a quick call, and my friendly AAA repair truck driver was at my home before I was. He ran three tests and presented me with a long electronic printout of his findings: the alternator was fine, the starter, fine, but the battery was operating at 15% capacity—for all functional purposes, it was dead.

With a new battery installed, I headed out again to meet another friend. When I returned home, try as I might, the garage door opener would not open the overhead door. Yes, you guessed it; my garage door opener had given up the ghost. With another new battery installed and a reset of the door opener itself, I was up and on the way again, but with the morning's events marching out in front of me demanding my attention.

I may not be the brightest bulb in the pack, but there was plenty of light for illumination in the grouping of these events. And when things happen in multiples, I pay attention. I don't believe in the randomness of life but rather in the connection between all things. So my exploration began. What do batteries mean to me? They provide a source of energy to propel all things electronic. And then, there is the car itself. What is a car a symbol of? It is a symbol of the physical body. (Isn't it interesting that we take our cars to "body" shops?) How are cars and bodies alike? They both have electrical systems. What function does a car provide? It, like my physical body, allows me to navigate in the world. And the garage door opener is the key for my car, and my, activity out in the world. So when I look at the occurrences of the morning in total, and consider their implications, I see that my own personal batteries are being drained and my ability to move freely out in the world is impacted. The questions are: Which personal behaviors and their related motivations are draining my batteries? Which need to be replaced? Which indeed?

I understood almost immediately that the exhausting behavior has to do with me playing computer Solitaire. I first experienced the depletion more than a year ago during a specific episode when I got lost in front of the computer playing that game; my stomach tightened and I felt physically depleted. I know this, and yet I'm like a migratory bird instinctively drawn to its habitat to die. I keep playing the game over and over. The challenge is that the depletion is increasing and I've not been able to deal with the way the game captures and devours my energies.
Up until last night, I was powerless over being drawn into the game. Like the invisible pull of two powerful magnets, I’ve felt my body being drawn to my office and to my computer, then watch my hand on my mouse — select Solitaire. ‘Just three games and I’ll go back to bed. When I win at Spider, then I’ll go back to bed.’ And, if I could do that, then there would be no problem. The problem is that three games can multiply to more games, and then two hours later I’m still sitting in front of the computer, feeling drained, and deluding myself that I am in control of this process.

Still holding my questions about my car, the batteries and the garage door, and preparing for my next meeting, I opened up the computer yesterday to check my emails and never made it to the in-box. My detour, you guessed it, was a quick game of Solitaire in the middle of the day—not a good plan, but again, the rationalization began. ‘It’s only fifteen minutes, and I’ll move on.’ This time, however, I felt physically sick to my stomach instantly. It’s as if all of the healthy energy got sucked out of the translucent, but strong, Ziploc bag that I am. While such a bag might be good for storing perishables, or for freezing poultry or fish, it doesn’t allow vital oxygen inside to let me flourish. I’d like to say that it was the first time it has happened, but it wasn’t. It did, however, seal the deal. There was no doubt; that behavior had to change. And now, I had to understand why I continued the migration into the swampy fields to diminish and (figuratively) die.

I grew up watching my parents, aunts, uncles and grandmother playing cards; it was as much a part of my heritage as corn beef and cabbage. My Nana always carried a deck of cards with her in her old worn roomy black purse, just in case the opportunity arose for a game of Pitch. My parents had a nightly ritual of playing Cribbage at the kitchen table while dinner was cooking on the stove: ‘Fifteen one, fifteen two and a double straight for twelve.’ The rhythm of the counting of the cards comforted me and the friendly banter across the game was a constant source of amusement. It was a generational rite of passage to be included in a family game of Pitch. Whenever a group of family members come together, there is always a time when the cards are brought out and the game begins. Today my nieces and nephews are steeped in the nuances of all things cards. Right up until a few months before my Mother’s death, she could be found on sleepless nights sitting at the kitchen table, illuminated by the overhead multicolored kitchen table light suspended a perfect eighteen inches above the table, with a deck of cards spread out in front of her playing Solitaire.

There was a time when I thought that my nightly ritual of playing cards was a way that I kept my relationship with my Mother alive, and there is probably some truth in that. And it is not the whole truth. I’ll never really understand my Mother’s motivation for playing Solitaire, but it was likely that she needed something inane on which to focus her attention quiet her troubled mind and pass the time. Like most mothers, she worried about the well being of her children and their children, and then there was the difficult issue of her own declining health.
The reason for me playing cards is different. I don’t stay awake worrying about those I love or life in general. I also no longer believe that it has anything to do with keeping alive a relationship with my mother’s memory. I do believe that it has to do with my heritage. And the solution is to understand the impetus of the draining behavior and then to create a “pattern-interrupt.”

Last night, like hundreds of nights before, I lay in bed waiting for the Sandman to arrive; he was a no-show again. After an hour of tossing and turning, I decided that tonight was the night. Tonight I would face the compulsive dragon. With my Sleepy Time tea in hand and an alarm clock set for one hour, I sat in the dim yellow glow of our outside lights, curled up like my cat Foxy, in my favorite stuffed chair in my living room and gazed at the doorway to my office and my computer. This time, instead of giving into the rationalizations that ‘I could just play one game,’ I noted my thoughts, released them like a black balloon to float effortlessly up to the night sky, and I returned my focus to my body. What I felt was major discomfort. Really, every cell in my body wanted to explode from my chair in a sprint to my computer, and I sat anxiously letting the feeling have its way with me, yet not giving into it. I’d like to say it was easy; it wasn’t. It was excruciating, like Jonah and the whale, I felt swallowed and finally spit out. When the alarm went off, exhausted from the inner war, I dragged myself to my bed, pulled the covers over my head, and slept like a gladiator exhausted from a month-long war, happy knowing that I had faced the enemy and came home alive.

Let me be clear, I don’t think there is anything wrong with playing cards; it has provided a way for our family to come together in a competitive but playful way. The challenge is my compulsive use of the game to keep me stuck in my office rather than driving powerfully out in the world. In the end, I believe that this entire situation was about my behavior being out of alignment with the game I say I want to play in life, to share my own giftedness and to manifest powerful in the world, and my present actions. The unconscious message that I internalized from my families of origin that supported the wasted hours I spent in front of the computer playing Solitaire, was to ‘play small and safe.’ And, oh my God, there is the whole question of the name of the game being Solitaire! Now, a new unraveling begins.
I grew up believing that artistic creations came fully formed. Like Benjamin Button, born an old man who lived his life backwards, they arrived intact, finished, and perfect. I have no idea of the genesis of that belief, but looking back, I can see the wreckage that it brought in its wake. When it came to writing, I felt inadequate — others had the magic key and I didn’t. Furthermore, that prose flowed from the spigot of their genius; while I stumbled blindly without confidence or direction through a dangerous mine field. I don’t have a moment’s memory of ever thinking that I could write, never mind be any type of artist. The creative process itself looked like an obscure tribal language at its best, or at its worst, a forced march to the top of Mt. McKinley weighted down by a heavy knapsack amidst cold sleet and rain. Insurmountable.

How could I write, if as a child I couldn’t spell and struggled to conjugating verbs or diagram a sentence? Even worse, I didn’t have anything to say; I had no voice. When asked what I wanted, my natural response was to defer, saying, “Oh, it doesn’t matter to me; whatever you want.” And when I was compelled in grammar school to write, I felt it was an insidious trap set to catch dangling participles or incomplete thoughts or sentence fragments. In fact, I don’t recall ever hearing a comment about any of the thoughts I endeavored to express in my writing. I would hold my breath whenever a paper was returned, and blush in shame by the bright, bold red pencil marks decorating the page. There wasn’t any safe ground for engagement and exploration, never mind encouragement. Whenever anyone suggested that I engage in anything creative, like a fluffy white haired rabbit, nose twitching in fear, caught in the cross hairs of a hunter’s menacing double-barreled shot gun, I bolted as fast and as far as I could for a safe hide-out.

When I think back on my grammar school years, I see both the gifts and the challenges. While I was never an A student, I had brothers and friends that were, and I languished in the shadow of their brilliance. I felt as dull as a flattened copper penny that had been run over by an eighteen wheeler and discarded as worthless by the side of the road. That is, until I met my seventh grade teacher, Sister Rita James. The warmth of her big brown smiling eyes provided extended periods of warmth needed for me to emerge as an emerald green spindly sprout of a plant. As a master gardener of youth’s possibilities, she tilled the earth around me with praise and sheltered me from dangerous criticism which endangered my tender existence. During the two years of her loving tutelage, she believed that I was worth time and effort; that I was precious beyond compare and that I could create. If I could recall her words perfectly, they would be, “You'll grow beyond all of this; you'll be happy; you're brilliance will someday be apparent to you and others who have eyes that can see.”
In her presence, I felt my worth and saw the possibility of bright yellow streaks of daylight at the end of the black dark tunnel called grammar school. It would take seven years before I ever wrote anything of importance, and another ten before I understood that I could write, if not create. But the child who moved into high school had grown into a sturdy plant with a robust root system that anchored her fledgling strength and worth, if not, brilliance. Because of her loving tutelage, I entered high school able to find other mentors to assist me in navigating this new territory. I also found relief that my English teachers, while still vigilant arbiters of the written word, were also concerned with the construction of a cogent thought. With that small opening, I inched ahead with my scholastic endeavors. While never considered a great student, I thrived as a person.

Today when I write, I benefit from the advances that have been made with computers, spelling and grammar checks, and, a gem for the verbally impaired, a thesaurus. The diagramming of sentences fortunately died an honorable death and was buried in a large white mausoleum while I was otherwise engaged in life. It was in my junior year of college that my literature teacher assigned a term paper on a contemporary subject. I wrote about “Different Stages of Love” and, to my surprise, I got an A. Now, blessed with the gift of hindsight, I see that with this assignment I wrote my first blog essay. It’s just that the Internet and its technology were decades from inception, and I hadn’t yet opened up to the possibility that I could really write. From my narrow perspective, it was because of the relevance of the topic that my paper did so well. It had little to do with my skills or what was possible for me. I was on-track to be a high school business teacher. It would be two professional re-creations where, at General Electric, I discovered out of necessity that I could write a decent justification for support. That competency also served me well when I moved into the non-profit world. By then, I was aware that the Sisters of St. Joseph, who taught at my five-room, parochial elementary school of eight grades in Massachusetts, prepared me well for life and for writing.

Today, life is distinctly different. When I sit down to write, time stands still and I lose myself in the process. It’s like I’m having coffee with one of my dearest friends. I stumbled upon her years ago during a bleak period of my life when I was thrashing about attempting to figure out who I was. I was finding that when I sat down with my journal and its blank page in front of me, a pen in hand, and wildly blurted out things that troubled me, an unknown part of me responded. The answers circumvented my thinking and went straight to the heart of the matter. One moment I’d be knee-deep mired in pain and confusion, and by the end of the interchange, I’d feel moments of spaciousness and hope. Later, I’d sit there gazing down at pages upon pages of writing, in awe of the product and the process. It was as close to a mystical experience as when I sat by the shore watching the multi-colored kaleidoscopic vista in front of me as a flaming ball of sun descended below the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean. I’d sit with tears streaming down my face in awe, wondering what I had tapped into or where the responses come from.
Long before I thought to name her, I continued to cultivate the connections with that wise creature inside of me in the daily practice of journaling. During the early years, our relationship was a life line for creating sanity, and, as it matured, provided the basis for writing my blogs. With my life happily reconstructed and on track, there was never a thought to dissolve either our friendship or the practice. An unintended constructive consequence of our daily meetings was that a solid foundation of respect and trust allowed for the construction of a wide-open super-highway where feelings and thoughts flowed freely. Eventually, out of respect for her loving and precious presence in my life, I named her my soul-self.

Today, when I write, it is a co-creative practice. I come to the process empty of preconceived ideas and am open to what is going on in my life and what my soul-self is feeling. Together, the barren desert of my mind bursts forth with new blossoms of ideas and concepts and before long, the garden is flowering. When I come to the process without opening up the super-highway between us, I wander alone in the barren wasteland of my thinking, devoid of creativity. Like a lost traveler, I am exhausted and unsure of where to go. When I return to my partner, it's as if we're entwined in a lovers' embrace. I dip my pen into a vast moving river below the river that is where my soul-self resides, and come back with diamonds that are caked from the silt of the river bed and rough to the touch, yet precious beyond price. Then the time of intensive work begins, of tenderly picking up the diamond, dusting off all loose particles of silt, and hand buffing the diamond until its promised brilliance begins to shine through. Maybe it's because I no longer feel the responsibility to produce, but rather to be present to and trust my soul-self that I'm able to return to the river bed and experience the joy of standing in the flow and fluidity of the writing process. With that achieved, there was only one major stumbling block for me to feel competent as a writer.

Last month, with the assistance of my writing coach, I've been able to pick up and put aside another bulky massive jagged grey bolder of a childhood belief blocking me from holding myself as "creative". That belief was that to be considered a good writer, words, phrases and thoughts should come together fully formed and without effort. Even into adulthood, I had previously struggled in the endeavor of
writing. Granted, the creative process does take effort, but I no longer struggle under the weight that it should be any other way. Writing is both a practice and a process. To be good at any worthwhile endeavor, it takes time, talent, and oodles of focused industry. A diamond embedded deep in the earth, loses its luster; it requires a lot of elbow grease and refinement for its brilliance to see the light of day.

With the super-highway free of my childhood obstacles, my soul-self happily sitting beside me, we let the V8 engine of creativity steadily builds in momentum until we are roaring down the open road of creativity. Windows wide open, fresh air tousling our tresses and flooding our senses, only heightens our free flowing conversation. In moments like these, we’re grateful beyond words to be fully alive and joyfully engaged in the creative endeavor called writing.
Finding My Space

Throughout my childhood, the most precious of all commodities was time and space to be alone. Long before I understood its importance to my own well-being, I sought out moments and places of solitude. Growing up in a family of twelve and in a tight knit community engulfed by an extended family and friends, I frequently experienced my life as if I was in a large aquarium with hundreds of multicolored fish circling the tank looking for food. In retrospect, even the air I breathed as a child felt recycled and, what's worse, rationed.

From conception, and I do mean from the time I was conceived, I was not alone. I shared my mother's womb with my twin brother. I remember sitting at the kitchen table as a child and asking my mother, Who is older, Jim or me? Jim came first, she responded. I was crestfallen to find out that I was the younger twin. Today I realize that those ten minutes between Jim's birth and mine were the only ten minutes that I was alone for the next seven years. By the time I thought to inquire, Jim and I had four siblings and there were six children in the house.

My childhood home was adequate in size—it wasn't spacious—but because my mother had the knack for making the best use of the space that we had. She was a magician. The determination for the size of our home was not based on the mouths that needed to be fed, or the bodies that needed to lay their heads down at night, but by my father's personal imperative to live a debt-free life. A large oval solid maple kitchen table with matching chairs was the center of daily life; where meals were consumed, homework completed, shoes shined, family card games played, and laundry folded. Upstairs there were three bedrooms and one bathroom joined by a hallway lined with a doublewide bureau and tall white medicine cabinet.

The boys' room was spread across the front of the house. In that room, as many as six of my brothers shared double sets of bunk beds and a baby's crib. Due to the blessing of good timing, my oldest brother was already in college when my youngest brother arrived. During school holidays there was a jockeying for beds with the oldest brothers physically doubling-up the youngest ones to make the best use of precious bed space. To the right of the bunk beds, in an alcove seemingly made perfect for it, a large sturdy oak desk and stuffed swivel chair nestled.
The three of us girls shared the other smaller bedroom. Our room was initially set up with a double bed that my sister Fran and I shared for years. When Eileen came along, a crib was brought into the L-shaped space for her. When I was seven, she was ready to move out of the crib, so my two younger sisters shared the double bed, and a twin bed was brought in for me. It was a momentous time in my life; I had my own bed! I was like a child tasting the sweetness of honey for the first time—it was a delicious, mouthwatering experience. At night, when I pulled the covers over my head, I was transported into the sweet secluded world of darkness where I was physically alone at last, luxuriating in privacy.

In my mid-forties, just as I was moving from the for-profit to the nonprofit world, I stumbled upon the Carl G. Jung Center and the Myers-Briggs personality test. When the results were interpreted, another part of the puzzle of my life fell into place. To my astonishment I ranked a ‘high Introvert.’ But I wasn’t at all convinced. How could I be an introvert when I was so social? As a high school senior, I was ‘Harriet High School.’ I was elected ‘Most Popular.’ Often acknowledged for my knack in building friendships, I was a co-captain of the varsity cheerleaders. My group of girlfriends spanned three schools. We were the ‘in’ crowd. Yet, contrary to what I had believed, the ability to be social did not have anything to do with being an extrovert or introvert. How could that be true?

Another phenomenon that forced me to continue pondering the Myers-Briggs findings was that by definition, extroverts and introverts acquire their energy in different ways. Extroverts get their energy by being with other people; preferably in groups. Introverts, on the other hand, get their energy by being alone. Now that resonated! I had spent my entire life feeling like a fish out of water because I wasn’t comfortable in any large groups; except for my family. The fact was that I religiously avoided them. If I had to be in a large group, then I departed when socially acceptable. I felt it was a natural reaction to growing up in a crowd of siblings. Was my own imperative to seek out solitude, indeed, a life imperative to energize?

It was after my first social-register fundraiser of three hundred prospective donors, where the last shreds of doubt of my being an introvert was served up to me, like the steak and shrimp that had been consumed at the event. When I got up the following morning I was flying high, still jazzed from the success of the event. As the clock struck twelve noon, my fund raising team came together around two large, deep-dish pizzas to debrief. It was to be a festive meeting; we had a lot to celebrate. Ten minutes into it, a tsunami of nausea passed through my body, and I all but collapsed. I staggered to my couch. I was physically useless. I felt like a piece of raw red meat that one of the Japanese sou-chefs had flipped into the air, caught it in mid-flight and with flair tossed it back onto the red-hot grill; only to dice and chop it up into smithereens. Oh yes, the results of the Myers-Briggs test were correct, I was sick because for six hours, at two different sittings of guests, I greeted and socialized with everyone, and now I was paying a physical price. It took me three days of seclusion to feel even remotely energized again.

During the following seven years, I learned to manage my reserves of energy; to bank excess energies prior to events, and pay attention when my body told me to seek out a quiet place to regroup. Whenever I failed to prepare, there would be a physical consequence. I may be slow, but I am not stupid. Through time I learned. It worked well until it didn’t. That is, until it was time for me to let another type of passion enter into my life. As much as I loved my work at the child abuse prevention center, I was ready to open up to love another man again. I had made it through the nine years since my first spouse died of cancer and my heart yearned to connect in that special way with a man.

The chain holding me back was that in my present work, there wasn’t any iota of extra space or energy for anyone else. I had to choose; love or work. I chose love. With the choice made, I spent the next year, not out there shaking the bushes to find another position, like most extroverts, but reflecting about what I needed to learn in my present position to have the next position appear. One glorious
weekend in June, while stretched out in a hammock between two old oak trees at a friend’s Brenham farm, working the exercises from Julia Cameron’s book, *The Artist’s Way*, the answer appeared. I bolted straight up; feet planted back on to the ground. As an executive director of a nonprofit, I was continuing a childhood pattern of energetically being responsible for everybody and everything; the quintessential responsible child. As the oldest daughter; I fit the bill. With the awareness, bittersweet tears of grief and happiness flowed down my face.

With that revelation another link in the chain that bound me melted in the heat of the June sun. I understood that I had to change how I worked. I let my staff and the members of the board of directors share the responsibility of our organization’s success. With the new behavior in place, it took less than a month for me to get a call from an ex-board chairperson who told me that he was working with someone who was doing what I did naturally. She was a coach. Within a month of meeting her, I gave my board chair a three-month notice of resignation.

It’s been over fifteen years since I departed the nonprofit world and I’ve never looked back. Being a coach is perfect for me. It allows me to work with people one-on-one, to work out of my home, to manage my physical energy. Nine months after my date of resignation, I met my future spouse at the first coaching conference held at the Doubletree Post Oak here in Houston. Today, my work and life is reconstructed to provide for the space that this introvert requires to live an energetic and purposeful life.

The Gift Of Healthy Anger

I grew up a good child, someone who spoke when spoken to and who did what was expected. I was respectful toward adults. Above all, I avoided disappointing my parents. In fact, I lived my childhood anticipating their needs and desires, then orchestrating my actions to make sure they weren’t mad at me. Emotions, especially the wild abandonment of anger was as foreign to me as the dark side of the moon. What I wouldn’t discern until decades later was the physical, emotional, and spiritual toll it took on me to repress feelings of anger.

My first experience of searing anger came when I was thirty-nine years old and my husband of six years died of cancer. Even then, I did everything I could to keep my wrath at bay. I used vats of Chardonnay to
anesthetize myself. But like a can of coke that has been shaken and then unsealed, once opened and fizzing, the anger spilled over. No one, including God, was exempt. I took it out on restaurant servers and grocery store clerks—nothing they could do was ever right. Finally, a dear friend said to me, "You've got a problem. You're angry and you need to learn how to deal with it." With her words, I could see that I was taking out my denied and repressed pain and hurt on people around me. I did have a problem—I was venomously upset, and this good girl didn't have the first clue about what to do with it. My husband's death, my father's death four months later, the loss of a job, back surgery, all ignited and stoked the red-hot furnace raging below my surface. I was emotionally, physically, and spiritually shattered.

Years of anger, group, and dream therapy, as well as years of working with a gifted spiritual director, helped me name, express and work through layers of grief and anger. Fortunately, with this deep work and with circles of loving support, I was able to own my right and need to get in touch with and then vent my anger. Each therapeutic modality provided its own lifeline to sanity during a time when my boat was being tossed by gale force winds all over the ocean of life.

From my first therapist, I learned to yell and scream while slamming brown paper bags twist tight at the open end against my blue kitchen counter top until they shredded. Later, I advanced to shredding bright red, plastic whiffle bats on a two-hundred-pound black punching bag hanging in a secluded area of a gym. With the volcanoes' eruption, the rage began to dissipate. With that physical anger work, my boat of life righted itself and I was able to step back onto the solid ground of living again. It took years to finally declare that I was healed and ready to move on. And move on I did.

Nine years later a new personal cognizance quietly emerged. Unlike the past's violent reaction to life-changing external events, this was a slow growing awareness that something new was going on within my body. I felt unsettled. Preparing to teach an Enneagram class, I came across (or it came to me) a picture of a muscle-bound man chained in a box struggling to free himself. When I saw the image, I froze. It perfectly depicted what I felt—bound in a box of behaviors, my chains, the deferential patterned responses I had perfected as a child. I realized then that below my placating behavior there was a shockingly powerful person lurking, fighting to burst free. Physically, there was an internal fight going on for dominion over my spirit and the battle ground was my body. My mind cautioned me to stay safe, but a force within me was battling to be born. I knew I needed to change, but how? It's not easy to change old patterns.

While studying the ontological model at The Newfield Network in Colorado, I learned that powerful action came out of a confluence of language, moods, emotions and the body. The idea rocked my boat. I went into the training knowing the impact of language and came out of it understanding the relevance of emotions and moods on the ability to be open to or shut down the possibility of change. The new idea, that powerful action needed a powerful body was life-altering and needed further exploration.

From there, I went to The Strozzi Institute in California to study somatic (body) coaching and was introduced to the martial art of Akido as a practice for creating a powerful container. By then, I knew I couldn't think myself into changing how I comported myself in the world. Heaven knows, try as I had, I made little progress that way. I needed a body practice that would re-educate my physical body to be able to take powerful action. I still hadn't made the connection between my repressed anger and the ability to take powerful action.
Earlier that month, I had been at a Diamond Heart training when the anger I denied erupted. This time, I had the dubious honor of watching it render those around me speechless. No one was more surprised by the quick vitriolic reaction than me. One moment I was calm and centered, the next I opened my mouth, and with the precision of a rattle snake, or a black belt, I verbally dropped a man to the ground. Oh, the old anger reaction was rearing its head again demanding to be addressed. This time I wouldn't deny or repress it.

Two weeks prior to my Black Belt testing, I went to lunch with an old friend. We had arranged to meet so that he could tell me how he dealt with his anger. At the end, I asked him to tell me what he saw in me. He said, “A deep core of anger that erupts upon occasion but is always there.” “Wow! You mean that you can see my anger?” I was stunned speechless. What else could we say? So, the anger that I denied still ran in front of me for all the world to see and I lived each day ignoring its existence. A chilling thought.

Now that my Black Belt testing is behind me, and my new Black Belt Do Bok (uniform) is being altered to fit, I celebrate the personal achievement and the many healthy by-products of years of physical practice. It's given me self-control and perseverance, and I am connected to my own indomitable spirit. When asked by a friend what the importance of breaking boards in Tae Kwon Do was, I surprised myself with my response, “The breaking of the board is a metaphor for breaking through old patterns.” In that moment, I realize that the old pattern that I was breaking through was the denial and repression of my anger. Now I have the personal container and power needed to let that anger emerge.

But why was I surprised? For months now I had been feeling increased internal agitation raising as the voice my anger gained ground over the “good girl.” While I knew that there is nothing wrong with anger itself, there certainly is something wrong with a reaction that destroys. But then, I have to learn to crawl before I can walk upright. Learning new behaviors is messy. I have to cut myself some slack while I learn how to fully express myself verbally without slicing and dicing people around me. Like every part of the journey of life, I'll figure this out.
The challenge in front of me now is to continue to hold myself with compassion while finding safe venues to explore and release lifetimes of pent-up rage. As in the past, the perfect practice will emerge because I am actively looking for it. What I do know is that physically, emotionally, and spiritually my behaviors are light years away from the child who took care of everyone so that she would be loved. I went into Tae Kwon Do to learn to own my power. The gift that I received from doing the work is that I’ve found the source of my power—my pent up rage. Today I love the color of my life and who I am becoming; the powerful person that God created to inhabit this body. And I look forward to the day when I am at peace with the gift of healthy, passionate anger.
The Healing Power Of Compassion

For the past two weeks I’d been planning to go back to Housman Elementary to bring my seven year old mentee, Jose, an end-of-the-year packet containing a summary of his math and reading work and a book for summer reading. I had decided I would deliver the material in person so that I could say an appropriate good-bye but somehow procrastination had kept me away. After six years of volunteering, I had already decided that this year would be my last. It was time to move on—I needed more time to read, write, and work on coaching projects. Yet, today I changed my mind.

When I walked in, Jose broke out into his million dollar smile. He jumped up and threw his arms around me. “I didn’t know you were coming,” he said, beaming. All his friends also jumped into the fray with their own welcomes. Engulfed in this warm circle of little people, I wondered why I hadn’t come sooner. Out of the corner of my eye I spied a small boy who sat at the end of the table, head nesting on his crossed arms like he was sleeping. “What is wrong with him?” I asked. “He’s sad because a girl in our class said he was poor,” Jose responded. I looked back at this child dressed in blue jeans with a striped polo shirt; he looked like every other boy around me. Then I noticed that his little body was heaving—he was crying. “But why did she say that he was ‘poor’?” I persisted. Then collectively the story poured out. “See, he has the poor person’s lunch, that’s why she teased him.” With those words, my heart plummeted to below ground level. “What is his name?” I asked. “He’s Miguel Hernandez,” said another classmate. Turning toward him, I called his name, slowly he picked his head up and we made eye contact, and I asked him if he would sit with me.

While wiping tears from his face with the sleeve of his shirt he came to me, but his diminutive face was contorted with pain, tiny shoulders slumped so deeply forward that they covered his shattered heart, his face streaked from the tears that continued to stream out of his red-rimmed eyes. Without looking up at me again, he sat beside me, his eyes focused down on the table in front of us. I reached out and hugged him closer to me. “What are you crying about?” I whispered into his ear. With a look of pure loathing he pointed to the bane of his existence—the dreaded pauper’s lunch. “She said I was poor” was all he could sputter through the gasps and tears. “What does she know” I asked. “You’re a handsome smart young boy, does she know that?” “I hate that food,” he continued. Really, how do you console a seven-year-old who is in the middle of public humiliation? How do you help a child when you know he feels embarrassment?
But now the tears had subsided and we were in a conversation. I knew that the problem was not the food that he was given to eat—it was fresh and wholesome. It was different from his friends’ food—that was the problem. “I’ll fix this for you,” I told him, and I knew that I would. Like a mother bear protecting her cub, I was operating in instinctive defensive mode. This child would not have another day like this, not if I had an ounce of air in my body. I was a woman with a mission.

Lunch over, I hugged Jose for the last time, smiled and waved to Miguel and headed out to find Miss Juarez, his teacher, and Mr. Ramirez, the administrator who is the link between my volunteer program and the school. I told them what had expired at lunch. I found out that Miguel was new to the school and that his parents had not returned a form that might eventually make him eligible for assistance. To date, they owed $19.05 on his lunch bill. The school policy is to extend credit up—until a point. Then, they have to provide the simpler but nourishing lunch. Fair enough, I thought. With Mr. Ramirez’s assistance, I removed the financial barrier that separated him from his peers—so he could sit at the lunch table with his friends for the rest of the year and not fear anyone pointing at his lunch and calling him ‘poor.’ No more walking head down feeling disgrace through the lunch room.

Maybe the child’s family is poor, but when and when did being ‘poor’ become an offense. And why is it that the sins of the father have to be revisited upon the son. Who amongst us hasn’t felt poor? Or been poor? Poverty can be so much bigger than financial worth.

I don’t have to have children of my own to know that children can be very hurtful. I recall being with my younger brother Kevin when he was under six at Hampton Beach. He had a large cold sore on his lip. Other kids would point and laugh and I’d go ballistic. “What’s wrong with you?” I’d yell at them. I believe that Kevin dealt with it better than I did. I want to believe that children don’t understand the hurt they perpetuate, but I can’t help but wonder where they picked up that unconscionable disease. Is it another example of ‘the sins of the father?’ Do they learn this behavior at home or in our institutions? Really it’s like a case of childhood lice; it’s ubiquitous, spreading easily and invisibly. A case of shame, however, is not likely to be combed out of the hair, caught in the disinfectant shampoo and washed down the drain. It doesn’t itch but buries into a child’s psyche and does its silent but insidious work below the light of day. How do I know shame? I’ve been there.
I remember like yesterday the first time my spiritual director asked me if I thought I needed to do shame work. I was stunned. I didn’t understand the question never mind the word. It took another few years of spiritual work before I had enough space in my psyche to further the inquiry. In retrospect, I understand that it was impossible to grow up a female in a French Irish Catholic family in the fifties without soaking in how that decade, cultures and institution “valued” women—barefoot and pregnant and a source of sin. At best, second-rate. It was not so much what was said, but what wasn’t said. That my brothers would go to college and I’d go to work. I recall times when my mother worked with me to learn my dreaded spelling words. We were in the living room. My mother in the winged back floral chair, my spelling book in her hands, me standing in front of her waiting for that awful inquisition called a “spelling bee” to begin. As she fired the words at me I’d frequently freeze—from doubt and fear of failing. I’d hear my twin brother Jim spelling the words I couldn’t spell. It would be decades before I understood that what propelled me up the stairs to my bed to collapse in a puddle of tears was the feeling of shame—I felt terribly deficient. Hopelessly, flawed.

Driving away from Houseman that day, I couldn’t go on with my plan for the morning. Instead I went home to my husband to talk about what had just happened. I was agitated and upset, obsessing on Miguel’s plight. While recounting the events, my own tears began to fall. “Why is it that I get so upset? Is there something wrong with me that I can’t divide myself from the reality of life?” I asked. “Maybe, Judith, you’re just a compassionate person,” was his response. Isn’t it interesting that even now, half way through my sixth decade, I’m still looking for the ways I’m deficient.

So, maybe it wasn’t procrastination at play when I arrived two weeks after I thought I would, but divine inspiration that lead me back to the school that day. While there I didn’t just get to say good-bye to the effervescent child that I had the pleasure to work with all year, but meet a new child deadened by shame to the joys of childhood. Through them both I reconnected to the true reason I volunteer with these little souls. It was Bruce, my husband, who said it, “It’s your heart that connects you to these children; remember that.” He is right.

In the end, it is the opening of my heart to embrace compassion that is the biggest gift I get from working with the children at Housman Elementary. And it’s also because I believe that my loving them
does make a difference in their lives. That's why I work with them; that is why I will continue to work with them. Then, I can contribute to those precious moments of connection where both the student and the volunteer get to feel special and feelings of shameful deficiency are replaced, extinguished, healed.
Beauty Of Forgiveness

Being human, I have experienced pain and frustration by people and situations over the years. In some cases, I’ve ruminated about what happened and found the grace to forgive. In others, unbeknownst to me, I’ve folded up the hurt into the smallest of balls and stuffed it into the deep, dark recesses of my body. I’ve been dragging the weight of the denial around with me as a mass of sadness, masked by the smile I’m usually wearing. Like a monkey unobtrusively sitting just above my head, my sadness has been visible to others, while I’ve been oblivious of its existence. That is, until six months ago when I asked a colleague to describe me and, to my surprise, he responded that he saw a core of sadness below my cheery disposition. I was stunned. Was that what I was feeling?

Since then I’ve been on a mission to ferret out the source of my sadness and heal it. With the light of consciousness focusing on the black balloon of despair that I’ve masterfully stuffed below the surface, that despair can no longer be held back from my daily awareness. Three days ago, it took only the simplest of questions, “What are you feeling?” from a dear friend, for me to realize that the balloon was no longer submerged. The happiness of the morning drained out leaving me nauseous. I felt like I had the flu; my body ached from head to toe. My burden sat like a jagged lump of black coal in the hollow of my belly; its massive weight constricting my heart. I was miserable.

For decades I had been unaware that the monkey of sadness had sat on my head. But it had climbed down from its perch above my head and hung heavy on my back; its weight no longer to be denied. Living in the light of day, aware of its constant drag on my happiness, the time of my choice was here. I could continue to repress and carry the sadness, or I could muster the resolve to begin the inquiry into what was making me sad and then heal it. Given a choice, I choose life. But what was it that needed to be healed?

Now physically aware of its existence, I sat with my spiritual director and other gifted journeyers to explore the source of my pain. I never lost sight of the fact that my path was linked to my quest to “be the person God created me to be—a person comfortable with her own personal power.” Without entering a confessional with a litany of sins, like the good Catholic girl that I was raised to be, I’ll say that the healing that I sought was foundational. It began in the dominate culture of my youth and the leadership of its cornerstone religious institution. And, it was entwined with a younger me that had made a momentous choice to collude with both these childhood cultures so that I could survive.
As I explored the terrain of my youth, two cultural barriers to my freedom arose. It was apparent that they both were patriarchal; my Irish heritage and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. There was the source of my desolation. Yet, even armed with this painful knowledge, I was able look at the patriarchy as a precious gift that inadvertently had provided me the opportunity to move beyond the accommodation of my youth and to exercise the internal “muscle” that I had denied. This realization came as a gift while reading Colin Tipping’s “Radical Forgiveness.” I saw that I had projected my own disowned power onto the patriarchies and then, when I didn't feel valued by them, I felt angry and victimized.

A simplified premise of Tipping's life-changing book is that “at the soul level, everything happens to move us toward our higher self, but we must exercise our free will to choose growth.” When I began to look at the patriarchal challenges as gifts, I could see the strength that it took for me to extricate myself from the toxicity of their extremes. I was, for the first time in my long life, able to celebrate their existence as sources of healing within the backdrop of my own intricate personal evolution. With those historical situations re-framed, all of the putrid, hot air accumulated within me dissipated. Yes, I absolved them—one and all. With the simple but profound act of forgiveness, the story that I was harmed by them was transfigured by grace into the buoyant radiance of being. I felt so light, free, and blissful. With the weight of the old story lifted, I was ready to take on the bigger challenge—learning to forgive myself.

I don’t know at what age I made the choice to disown the part of me that was formidable, but I know that I did. I believe that I came into the world with the possibility of being powerful, but for some reason, I decided during my formative years that it wasn’t in my best interests. I need only to look back at a picture of me with my twin brother, Jim, going off to the first day of kindergarten. The black and white photo was taken on the stairs in front of our home. Jim is sitting on the first step with a cagy, crooked smile. I sit behind him (for protection?) leaning toward him with a look of terror in my eyes. In retrospect, that same picture could have been taken for the rest of my grammar school years. The protective posturing and frightened look would have been the same. That is, until I learned to use my smile to disarm any possible threats, but that's another story.
It could have been that there wasn’t an opening for anyone in our home except my parents to express power. It might be that the power that I saw around me scared me. Maybe, it was that the culture I grew up in as a woman valued accommodation instead of personal strength. Or, maybe, I simply came into the world fearful and afraid of wielding my power. The genesis of the abdication doesn’t really interest me anymore. Like Marco Polo, I’ve probed each of those continents and mined them of all of the information I need. The result of my exploration is that I don’t want to hold myself as a victim anymore—not of the situation, or the story I constructed about it. There is some truth in every possibility, but no scenario is 100% true. What I’m committed to now is to figure out what I have to do to re-frame my youthful choice in a way that physically frees me up to forgive myself and move on.

Oh, I know that I can rationalize my choice, that I did what I needed to do to feel accepted and loved, that there was no other choice given my life situation, that my personality is naturally one of accommodation. The list could go on for pages. But as long as I’m in one of those stories, then I’m still operating out of a victim mentality, and there is no potency in that. There are those who have told me that all I need to do is declare that the past is the past, and hold the intention that I will be powerful, and that the declaration and the intention will create the future I intend. I wish that life was that simple. It’s not. It denies the reality and intelligence of the body as an important ingredient of change.

My reality was that I had to feel the feelings that I had repressed until the pain could dissipate. To quote a coaching adage, ‘What resists, persists.’ It is, however, a lot easier to say than to do. When I first began sitting with uncomfortable feelings, say of sadness, then my mother’s words, “Stop crying or I’ll give you something to be sad about,” had me jump out of the chair to go do something else—anything else. It took fortitude and practice to sit myself through the pain and the internalized parental recrimination, to get to the core of my ache. But in this case, the discomfort I felt was so deep that I needed another strategy. To that end, for the past few months, I’ve been working with a prana breath and body worker to help me connect with and express my deeply repressed emotions. My first few meetings helped me connect with my anger, but later I was able to access my sadness. Like Mary Magdalene outside of Jesus’s tomb, I wailed. Even so, I’ve found that dissipating the hurt is still not the same as finding the gift in the pain, eliminating the old story, and forgiving the transgressors.
When I look back again to my childhood resolution to abdicate my power and see that assessment through the lens of “Radical Forgiveness,” I see that my childhood choice set up a major life-long lesson about wielding power. I also see that the patriarchal power I grew up with and eventually railed against, was an unhealthy power—one that denies and divides. The power that is my birthright is healthy power—one that is generative and life-giving. With that perspective there is nothing to forgive, because that power has always resided within me and been operational—I never abdicated healthy power. So, the beauty of working through to forgiveness is that the victim is replaced by the victorious. A victory where everyone wins—all those who gifted me with life lessons so that I could grow, those I work with and those I love, including the more expansive “me” that I am becoming.
Who Am I?

Who am I is a question that has been the cornerstone of my journey for more than twenty years. First introduced when I was thirty-nine years old by an eighteen-month period when my idyllic existence collided with life, it began when my forty-nine year old spouse was diagnosed with lung cancer that had already metastasized to his brain. He died fourth months later. Four months after that my father had a major coronary at sixty-nine and died dancing with my mother to “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling.” That September I had ruptured my L-5 disc and had back surgery to remove the shards. By spring, General Electric Medical Business Group reorganized and my position was relocated to Atlanta. The final straw was that I had to petition to get my husband's ashes returned from Baylor Medical School, where he had donated his body for research, so that I could finally lay his ashes to rest. That period of my life, replete with searing personal loss and heartache, left me wrestling one of life’s most pressing questions, “Who am I?”

Until then, my life’s travel had been along winding, bucolic New England back roads, spotted with small rustic towns, situated in a fragrant moist sea of mature oak and pine trees, with clapboard white church spires reaching up toward the heavens. I had been through mill towns situated along robust rivers where the water was dammed and used to run the looms that wove the fabrics they sold. Through the hustle and bustle of the chrome and glass of city thoroughfares and jet travel, I find myself today nestled into suburbia, with its manicured lawns, subdivision club house and its crystal clear Olympic-sized pools and clay tennis courts. And, where I’ve gone and what I’ve done cannot hold a candle to the development of my own spiritual journey home.

I grew up the oldest girl in an Irish-French, Catholic family of twelve in New England in the 40s, 50s and 60s. My childhood dream was to be a hairdresser. My parents were naturally gifted intellectually, but because of life’s situations and personal choices, they only graduated from high school. That said, they held a strong belief in the importance of education. For their sons, that is. My father believed that a woman’s role was to bear children. While my three older brothers were groomed for college, I was left on my own to find my path out of the minimalist, cultural vision held for me. It was from those unpretentious roots that I was defined and defined myself.

After I graduated from high school, I marched with white gloves, starched, shirt-wasted, flowered dress and high heel pumps, up the marble steps of Mass Mutual Insurance Company. It took less than a few weeks for me to understand that I was a duck out of water. (It’s only now that I can see that I was a splendid white swan swimming with normal black-feathered ducks.) Why would I think that? Because my female peers had one goal in life and it was not for career promotion or personal contribution, but to get married. To that end, they filled their rectangular, hope chests, strategically positioned at the foot of their beds, with crisp white linens sheets, table cloths, and napkins intended for their married lives. While they were busy filling their conversations and their cedar lined chests, my only desire was to lose those white gloves and break loose from this constraining cultural fate. By the following September, I was accepted at Holyoke Community College and on my way to a new destiny. Education was my escape route.
What I didn’t know then was that I could run, but I couldn’t hide. Wherever I traveled, whatever I did, I took my low expectations and cultural limitations with me, tightly bound within the wiring of my thinking mind. It is now, only in hindsight, that I can see that I also brought with me an indomitable spirit that would continue to build on each new experience and keep me stretching for other unexplored boulevards of possibility.

Right out of college, as a first-year teacher at East Boston High School, my small town illusions were shattered like bottles against a graffiti-ridden, gray brick wall that abutted the neighborhood. My conception of what should be important for my students, to do their homework on time, was replaced with a respect for the mountains of obstacles they had to move through in order to make it through the day, e.g. the death of their friends in gang warfare, a father that, in front of me, backhanded his daughter into a nearby locker for acting out, or parents who never found the time to attended parent-teacher conferences. When I departed East Boston for Tehran, Iran seven years later, I was already a savvy third world traveler, but still naïve about my value and worth in the world. Even when I returned eighteen months later from Iran (Civil War had been declared) with my brown-eyed, bearded, Oregon-bred, all-American football player lawyer in tow, I saw him, not me, as worldly.

It wasn’t until my eighteen month mid-life crisis that I was stripped bare of all that had previously defined me that I realized that I didn’t have a clue in the entire world, of who I was. The question “Who am I?” reverberated night and day through my psyche and propelled me forward.

During the next twenty plus years, like an archeologist waist deep in dirt with a brush and a little pick, I’ve been excavating the ruin that was Judith and bringing to the light of day the truth of who I am. I’ve found, and then rejected again, the faith of my fathers. I’ve worked with a grief counselor and gifted spiritual directors. I’ve anesthetized myself from the pain of loss, then joined Alcoholics Anonymous and felt the pain I had been denying and moved on from that, finding that life without alcohol was so much better than with it. Thirteen years after my first spouse’s death I remarried a tall, brilliant, handsome, hazel-eyed Californian, who was on a similar journey of discovery. This year we celebrate our crystal wedding anniversary. Unlike the young, dewy-eyed woman who first married and defined herself as her husband’s spouse, today I have a partnership based on mutual respect and love. In fact, he is my greatest cheerleader and the man who suggested that I write my blog.

Last week I was visiting with a professional about what writers for generations have called a dry spell or a writer’s block. I had been struggling with writing ever since my last writing class where I received
recognition from other professionals that I had a strong writing voice. That there were moments of creativity and brilliance—things I should be able to take in and savor like the sweet aroma of freshly baked bread. Oh, but not me. I’ve perfected the art of self-sabotage and denial. Instead of celebrating the mini-accomplishments along the path, the childhood voice of the insecure “doubter” rambles on, leaving me dispirited. “You’re nothing.” “You don’t have anything new to say.” “You’re a hoax, an impostor.” You get the idea. It’s not personable and it’s not productive. In moments of brilliant accomplishment over the years, she has showed up and I’ve bought her hackneyed evaluations. But no more. I’m done with letting her write my life’s script. She has provided assistance over the years, but like all guests that have overstayed their welcome, it was time for her to pack up and shut down shop. To say it more graphically—to shut-up and move on.

Sure, the time that she is front and center in my life has decreased over the years. (Her 60 hour work weeks when I was a child have been reduced to 40 during my forties, and lately she’s been working only an average of 20 hours a week.) The challenge is, however, that in the past few weeks she has worked back-to-back hours and is asking for overtime. That was my clue that it is time to re-negotiate her contract. I’m not silly enough to think that she doesn’t have a place in my life, but my life has changed and the gift that she originally brought, to keep me safe, has become a burden that my higher self is no longer willing to carry—her fearfulness is weighing me down.

That said, if not for learning to pay attention to her quarrelsome criticism, I wouldn’t have noticed that I was straying from my purpose. It was by listening to my own internal negative self-talk that I became aware that there was a problem, and with that, also possibility—the gift. So what is the “doubter” part of me trying to protect me from? What was the unconscious tape (conversation) that had the doubter working overtime? Was it that it wasn’t safe for me to live above the radar of life? Was it that I was unworthy? That I was not enough and would never be enough? What I do know was that the doubter’s role is to protect me from harm and that her concerns come not from the reality of today, but from my formative years and really have little to do with today, unless I let her time worn script override today’s reality.

On the other hand, when I explore the fact that she is trying to protect me from something, then I can use that information to find out what lesson is to be learned. Her cries are a fire alarm waking me up from a deep sleep.Instead of running away for safety, I need to pick up a fire extinguisher, point it at the fire of criticism and then douse it. What I do know is that the alarm that she is ringing comes from the river below the doubter that is filled with free-flowing fear. Fear of what? What would have her so frightened?

Like other explorations in life, the paths to understanding fears are not always linear. Rather than going down the road that has already been excavated, I realized that there was another seemingly unrelated incident that also happened a few weeks ago that was worth exploring. I was visiting with a spiritual guide who suggested “maybe I was going down the wrong road.” With his words, another bell went off in my mind, it was one of recognition. In that instant, I got that my journey was not about taking powerful action in the world, though this may be a byproduct of it, but that I had to learn who I was. It sounds so mundane, but it shook me to my core. A shiver made its way from the ground of my being up into my heart and exploded into red, blue, orange, and yellow sparks all around me. A new circuit had been wired, and I was reconnected to my initial question: “Who am I?” That question had been the genesis and cornerstone of my spiritual exploration. Now I was back revisiting it, but from a very different place in my life. Back then, I was driven to find out who I was if I wasn’t my husband’s spouse. Who was I if I wasn’t my father’s daughter? Who was I if what I did for work no longer defined me? Who was I if I wasn’t somebody’s anything?

Today the questions cannot be asked without the supposition that I’m no longer defined by the doubter. And once that crucial assumption rests in place, then I can ask: “Who am I if I matter in the world? Who am I if what I do matters in the world?” Wow, what questions to ponder! (They are not questions that my
39 year-old self could even have begun to hold.) Yet, even as the answers bubble up from inside, my heart is already racing and I can feel my body tingle with excitement. Before I know, before the words form within me, if feel downright giddy. What erupts is not a spiritual euphemism or another spiritual role, but clarity about who I authentically am in the world: “I am a creative new voice in the spiritual evolution genre. I provide a fresh perspective of how a (my) life’s journey is unfolding.”

It seems so guileless and clear, and it is profound and life-changing. With those few words, I am changing forever the personal and professional landscape from sparse to lush. I am jettisoning my old fear of living life below the radar. I am declaring that I matter, that what I say and do matters. That I have worth. I’ve evolved from the little girl whose first dream was to be a hairdresser to a woman who has shape-shifted one more time to wear the mantel of writer, teacher and philosopher. Prior to today, I could say that I wrote, but not that I am a writer, that I taught, but not that I am a teacher. That how I see the world, (my philosophy) is the gift I bring to humanity. Who I am is an indomitable spirit on a spiritual journey. Who I am is a fragrant lotus flower shimmering on the water of life, unfolding.
Leaving The Comfortable

Like wiggling into a deliciously well-worn, tattered pair of jeans that somehow have become too small, bind at my hips and are two inches too short, I’m struggling with how to let go of the old and embrace the new me. It is so comforting to reach for the hackneyed and well worn, the tried and the true, not just in clothes, but in life. Even when the evidence of my growth is obvious to those around me and I’ve experienced profound moments of profound immensity, I find myself walking to the closet, flipping the overhead light switch, and without thought, as if in darkness, reaching for my old unproductive behaviors. As if those old jeans still fit. Even when the waistband is cutting into my stomach, and the discomfort is enough to get my attention, there is a sense of comfort and security in the known. Even on good days, when I consciously reach pass by the old and select the new slacks, tentatively slip them on, even when I can see how great they look on my body, I still long for the comfort of the familiar. The question is, how do I shift from the old to the new—from the constricting to the expansive—when it’s my own view of myself that has to change?

I grew up believing that the world was dangerous and that I needed to be on-guard. I felt cut off from support. In the end, it was always up to me—I was the responsible child. It left me tentative and overly conscious, frightened and small. And paradoxically, like the mother who fears for her child’s life and finds the will and power to pick up a car, I had situational moments of faux strength. Yet, like the jeans of my youth, these old behaviors are now too constrictive and bind my spirit. The world that I live in today is supportive and generative. I experience a sense of ‘we’—that I am never alone—I’m always in a dance with the Universe and ‘what is.’ In my new world, I am immense, grounded and strong of spirit. There is no doubt that the place I’ve landed is a much better fit for who I intend to be in the world.

There is an old coaching adage that says: “Begin with the end in mind.” As a coach, I understand that without a clear destination, there is no likelihood that I can arrive. Like the pilot of a passenger plane in the middle of an electrical storm with its navigation panels shorted, I’ll continue to fly in circles waiting for directions from the air flight controllers on where to land. My destination, where I intend to land, is feeling a sense of comfort with my new world order! In my future state, “I will find comfort with my expansiveness. I’ll embrace it as the truth of who I am and wear it well.”
This is so delicious a declaration that it excites my taste buds as I drink in its sweetness. Even as I enjoy the long sip, the committee in my head moves into overdrive: “Who are you to make such a declaration?” “You’re too big for your britches, little girl.” “What if you fail? What will others think of you?” Even now, as I sit with my expansiveness, I feel my body beginning to contract, like a flower closing for the night. But no! To the committee in my head, I say, “Back off.” If I can’t declare what are my new truths, then I undermine my true self—and I won’t collude with that thinking anymore. I’ve forced myself to wear those tight jeans for years, and my true self is psychically bursting out of them.

Today I live in a state of suspended animation—frozen in mid-stride—straddling the past and the future worlds that seem light-years apart. Moments of strength follow moments of trepidation. What will it take for me to fully embody the more expansive person that I’ve been quietly becoming and to hold my past as a history, not a reality? The answer is in bringing into, and holding, in the light of day the truth of who has emerged in the world so that it can overshadow my past.

Who am I right now? What is true for me? First, I define truth as something that I know at the core of my being. I was thirty-nine years old when I made my first declaration of truth, lamenting as I said, “I don’t know who I am.” Loving family members disagreed, argued that I knew myself—I must! “You’ve graduated from college, taught at East Boston High School, got a master’s degree, set up the first secretarial school in Iran, married and moved to Houston. You must know who you are?” But all of their loving concern and arguments to the contrary, nothing changed my reality—I was adrift in the world and everything that defined me either had died or was irrelevant to me then. Knowing that I didn’t know, however, was the portal for growth. It worked before, why not now?

Less than a month ago, I found my second truth—I have an indomitable spirit. When I excitedly shared my discovery with my family and friends, this time there was no arguing. Like an excited child proudly demonstrating to her parents her latest accomplishment (a perfect cartwheel, an A on a spelling test), they smiled warmly as they said, “We knew that.” My spirit may have been apparent to others, but it was a surprise to me. Now, I hold it with the same level of certitude. When I reviewed my life, there was a clear trail of bread crumbs to follow: making my own decision to go to college, moving to Iran to oversee the building and running of its first secretarial school, standing up to my father and marrying a divorced man out of my faith, and shifting careers from education to United Technology and General Electric. In addition, when that no longer served me, I became the director of the Escape Family Resource Center for seven years. Finally, I quit the non-profit world and began my own coaching business. As my brother John once noted, “I’ve never seen anyone who re-defined herself so well.”
With each change, there were naysayers: “You can’t go from here to there; you can’t go from teaching to business, from business to running a non-profit and from there to creating your own coaching business.” But there is something provocative about someone telling me that I can’t. When I was about to test for my Black Belt Recommended, a sixth level instructor asked me, “Are you surprised that you’ve gone this far?” My response: “I’d be surprised if I didn’t.” Moreover, internal fortitude and fighting spirit has not been enough to find solid ground again.

Since this leg of journey began, I’ve discovered other truths that I hold with the same amount of surety that help to flesh out who I am today. I am a peace-filled, centered presence in the world. I am a spiritual pilgrim living the Universal Will. I am curious and courageous. I am faithful and loyal. I am intelligent and wise. I am a catalyst for others’ spiritual growth. I am a healer and teacher of wounded children—young and old.

The growth that I’m experiencing today has a new twist. Yes, there is the stepping out in a new way, but there is not anything or anyone external to push back against. The challenge now is to re-define myself from within. With a clear crisp picture and a felt sense of who I am, I’m less likely to revert back to the all-too-small paradigm. I’ve lived a Jekyll and Hyde existence for the past few years. The Hyde part of me was timid and fearful. She shunned the limelight and doubted her worth. She was the creation, not of Dr. Jekyll, but of my childhood perspective. (Note, I’ve defined Hyde as past—because that is how I now see her—as a part of my history.) The Dr. Jekyll side is bold, will take risks, is solid in body and mind, secure in the knowledge that an indomitable spirit fuels her.
Moreover, inside my spiritual journey, I return to my closet, flip the light switch, and stand in stillness before hangers carrying all my slacks. Quietly, but with the light of conscious awareness flooding the room with its golden glow, I reach for the my old jeans, slip them off of the hanger and carry them out of the closet, through the bedroom and living room and out onto the back deck. There a bonfire is ablaze in my barbeque pit. I reach for scissors that I brought just for this occasion. Piece by piece, I dismantle those barren worn jeans and cast them on the fire. As the flames consume them, I know that my history will always be an integral part of who I am, but I release into the atmosphere for healing, the threads that have bound me to such a small life.

With my ritual complete, I return to my closet with a new lightness of being, and reach now for my new pair of jeans. Tentatively, one leg at a time, I pull them up, zip them up and snap them closed. Now they fit perfectly—comfort is found in my new, tantalizing sky-blue denim jeans that reflect the spaciousness that I feel now in my life.
We were in the last day of a ten-day training in beautiful Maui, Hawaii. The focus of our work was to understand and advance a Crystal Heart—a heart from which all our essential qualities, like strength and compassion, flow naturally out into the Universe, unimpeded by thoughts of self. To access this heart, we focused on the largest barriers—attachment to things, ideas, beliefs, concepts—so that we could relax their grip on our hearts. It had been an emotionally and spiritually challenging exploration, but the schedule was set so that we had most mornings off to do whatever nourished us.

Most mornings, I awoke around 7:00 AM, threw on shorts and a tee shirt, packed my bathing suit, wide-brimmed hat, sunscreen, beach chair and jumped into my rental car, then headed to the beach. En route, I’d go to my favorite eatery, the Green Banana, eat a breakfast of organic oatmeal, almonds, cranberries, Acai berries and low-fat yogurt and top it off with my “drug” of choice, a sugar-free green tea latte. Some mornings I’d fire up my lap-top and Skype to visit with my husband or check in with a client. Fortified, and with the business of the day behind me, I’d drive another five minutes to the parking lot for Baldwin Beach where I walked the white sands and swam in the crystal-clear, aquamarine surf of the Pacific Ocean before sitting by the shore letting the crashing waves nourish me. At that time in the morning, the temperatures were always in the mid-70s, and there was a strong coastal breeze. Strengthened by my morning ritual, I moved easily into the afternoon and evening workshop sessions. It was a piece of heaven.

On the last day, the session met at 10:00 AM and was to end by 1:00 PM. Anticipating the winding down of the workshop, I sat body in chair, notebook open, but I was mentally checked-out. In my mind’s eye, I was already driving down route 311 to explore the southwestern shore beaches, a necklace of white pearls strung between the towns of Kihei and The Grand of Wailea. On the way, I’d find a sweet place to have lunch overlooking the Pacific. For some odd reason, I was sure that the final conversation would be light in nature, recapping all those dialogues we had already covered. I was wrong. My mental vacation ended abruptly when the discussion moved to an exploration about selfishness and selflessness. My goodness, what were they thinking? I felt like I was thrown off my surf board and dumped abruptly into the middle of a tumultuous wave.

I watched my mood, like the beach sands that I walked each morning, shift below me from excitement to dread. I was caught up in the undertow and pulled back into reality. My stomach churned; my mind moved quickly to survival mode, and I saw black storm clouds forming inside. Selfish? Yes, let me count the ways.

But, no! Not this time. I refused to go into those turbulent waters of self-accusation first. Over the years, I’ve noticed that I’m all too quick to let myself be swallowed up by the negative. Instead, in a stroke of healthy self-care, I decided to focus first on moments of selflessness, when I was not concerned with my own well-being, my own agenda, my own beliefs, but instead, was open to how the Spirit worked through me.
Two examples made their way to the shore of my awareness. When I coach, I come to the sessions without a plan, with my heart open to what will best serve my client. I open my heart, not only to what is being verbally and visually said, but also to what is avoided or is missing, and, importantly, to what is emerging. I open myself to a larger source of knowing. During those sessions, there is no “me.” No itinerary. No strategy. There is what comes up and what wants to manifest. Another example of my selflessness in action is when I am with my granddaughters, and I’m lost in their unique preciousness. My purpose for being is to love them in their unfolding and reflect back their brilliance to them. These periods of selflessness are moments of spaciousness and grace.

It would be nice if I could exist in that state of generosity forever, but personal growth is a process of personal unfolding. There is time to learn to relax the hold—the grasping—of my ego to the multitude of attachments of how things should be that continue bind my heart. There are virgin beaches to explore, yet to be enjoyed with a freed heart. But when I stop to look back, I see mile upon mile of beachfront I’ve already explored. I’m thankful that I’m not the same heavily weighted storm cloud that I was twenty-five years ago, two years ago, or for that matter a week ago. With a less bound heart, I then compassionately shifted that day’s conversation to my selfishness.

You need only ask my husband, and he will, not so laughingly, say that everything in our life is either “mine” or “ours.” There is a grain of truth in his protestations. Okay, maybe more than a grain. Now that I look for it, the evidence of my selfishness is strewn along the shores of my life. When I am honest, I can see that my default, especially around food, is to make sure that I have my share. I keep a private stash of chocolate-almond-raisin Zone bars and hate to share popcorn in a movie. Even when I know that I’ve had enough, I keep reaching for more. And that is the easiest part of the exploration. Truthfully, there is an unconscious part of me that acts like I am still a little girl who deserves to be taken care of rather than an adult who can take care of herself. When I look deeply into the waters of my behavior, I see reflected back to me a young child’s soul that demands her due. Her lower lip protruding, hands on her hips, stamping her size-nine feet, she demands that he, my husband, provide for me, his damsel in distress. Like a dead fish left on the shore decomposing in the heat of the mid-day sun, the behavior has turned rancid and I’ve ignored its odor. I understand that as a child in a family of ten children, I didn’t have enough—love, compassion, warmth, or tenderness. But that was then and this is now. Today I do!

A more difficult area to address is whether I have been stingy about my time and space. At sixty-four, I do make sure I have plenty of free time to do what I want. I keep a small client load so I can write and exercise, but is that my true motivation? My real fear is that I will be overwhelmed. It’s based on a hackneyed belief that I have only a finite set of resources, and it disregards the bounty that surrounds me. And in part, the behavior comes from the same childhood entitlement belief that has me grasping for more and expecting to be taken care of. Paradoxically, it is rooted in the belief that I’m not enough. It’s not a pretty beach shell of a thought to hold on to, but it is a treasure, nevertheless. With an understanding of the current of my behavior, I can let go of the surliness of my child-self and free my heart to function out of the fullness that I am today—of being and having enough. I can be open to what the Universal Will provides for me, and respond graciously rather than grasp out of my childhood deficiencies. But is selfishness all bad?
I grew up learning to accommodate. You want me to be quiet? "Okay." You want me to speak only when spoken to? "No problem." I was a boat without an anchor thrown around by others' desires and needs. The past fifteen years I have been building, one link at a time, a sturdy anchor that holds me safely moored to what is best for me. There have been painful major life lessons where, unaware that I was doing it, I gave my power over to others. I've attacked the change aggressively by taking on the practice of Tae Kwon Do, and took many baby-steps to learn to develop the muscle of personal choice. I asked my husband not to tell me what movie he wants to watch, so I could learn to figure out what I wanted. I've learned to tell friends that "I'll have to get back to you" about possible plans so I could create the time I needed to reconnect with myself and find out what I truly needed or wanted. Given my natural proclivity not to have an opinion or preference, a little bit of selfishness is healthy for me.

What's not healthy is internally "clutching" about how things "should be." How do I know I'm doing this? My resources are depleted, I've reverted to the victim role, or, when I'm feeling depressed or sad, for no apparent reason. These are clues that I've inadvertently picked up my anchor and am drifting out into the familiar murky tide pools of my youthful attachments or accommodations.

The choices aren't always clear cut; not either/or, not good/bad, not right/wrong, they just are. Even when I find myself being selfish, it can be a gift washed up upon the shore. When I see it, I can gather-up the conch shell of the experience with my long, capable fingers and deliberately bring it up to my ear as I listen for the echoes of the childhood belief that is calling out for understanding and healing. "Let go of beliefs that bind and constrict," the message reverberates. The truth of the matter is that when I release the constrictions, my Crystal Heart is free to selflessly work its magic out in the world.

When I left Maui the following day, a more peaceful trusting presence inside me made her way through the airport. No one was incompetent, rude or surly. Even United Airline's policy of not providing specified seats until they took care of the full-price fares, didn't bother me. I knew that I had a seat—that I mattered. When a baby in the seat behind me wailed, instead of taking the intrusion as a personal affront, I sent the infant and her parent's serenity and love and went on with my reading. Gone was the grasping of selfishness about how travel "should be" or if my needs would be taken care of. My heart was open to the perfection of the moment. That was the gift of my Maui experience; I met selflessness—a precious pearl beyond price.
As I reflect back on the heart of the matter, I understand that when my actions are based on unhealthy selfishness, I’m grasping onto old beliefs that need to be gathered up, examined for their functionality, and if found that they no longer support selflessness, then compassionately released back to the sea. Those old behaviors bind my heart; they squeeze love, compassion, joy and life out of my existence. Like discarded sea shells finely ground over time by the relentlessness of waves upon the shore, these old beliefs will be transformed too—not into white beaches, but in creating a selfless, spacious, unbound heart.
Riding Rain Clouds

I don’t know when I made the decision that rain was my enemy, but I did. Growing up, I headed for cover every time storm clouds gathered overhead. I hated even the idea of my hair getting wet, rain running down my face and dripping off my nose, or cold, soggy clothes clinging to my body. When I had to go out, I’d don protection—rubber boots, rain coat and hat, and/or an umbrella to fend off the prospect of getting wet. When I had time, my first response was to wait out the downpour inside. To sit at the kitchen table, gazing out into the inclement weather, willing the storm to move on. How things have changed.

Driving home yesterday, I was stopped at a red light on the corner of Beltway 8 and Briar Forest Avenue. Sitting in the stalled traffic, I became mesmerized by the movement of the black storm clouds gathering in the distant early evening sky. Startled, I realized that I was willing those clouds to move unabated to my neighborhood. Like a sports fan praying to God that her team would win—and others lose—I was cajoling the weather gods to have the rain to fall on my yard. The other neighborhoods be dammed. Not a loving thought.

But here in Houston, Texas, we’re in the middle of a fifteen year drought. This year alone 95% of Texas is recording “exceptionally low” levels of rain. The consequences are ubiquitous—small farmers are losing their crops, produce prices are raising, we city dwellers are being asked to pay attention to when we water our gardens. Water has not been rationed yet, but the price of water has us discussing the possibility of replacing our ornamental boxwoods, and azaleas with drought-resistant native plants. It the middle of my reverie imagining rain over my neighborhood, I began to laugh out loud. What had happened to that part of me who avoided rain as if it was a deadly contagious illness?

Before I could answer that question, I thought back to my younger self who had grown up influenced by the satirical comic strip persona of Joe Btfsplk in cartoonist Al Capp’s comic strip Li’l Abner. Joe was depicted with a small, dark rain cloud perpetually hovering over his head, a symbol of his bad luck and penchant for being at the center of disaster. The storm cloud signified only negatives—trouble, heartache, pain, to name a few. Today, however, I was like the legendary character, Pecos Bill, who was said to lasso rain clouds and ride them. Wasn’t I metaphorically lusting over the prospect of riding the black laden rain clouds over my house so we could get immediate relief from the drought?

I recall like yesterday, the day four years ago, when I turned a corner with my relationship with rain. I was biking by myself in the Briar Grove Park neighborhoods. The weather was threatening rain, but I decided to ride anyway. It couldn’t kill me. Could it? In Texas, it would be a warm afternoon shower. Just in case, I tucked a slicker in my bike’s pack. Dressed in jeans, tee shirt and with my bike helmet securely fastened, I was ready for the possibility. Forty minutes into the ride, I was peddling on Rivercrest Avenue, when I heard rumbling and thunder in the distance and looked up. Within minutes, the skies above me turned black and the clouds opened—it was a heavy, toad-strangler rain, as we say in Texas when the rain comes down almost horizontally and the storm sewers back up, unable to contain the torrential flow.
Laughing, because I knew that this was a personal test, I stopped and slid my jacket out of my backpack and put it on. I pulled the brim of my helmet down to meet my sunglasses and moved ahead. That day I did experience playing in the rain, not running through puddles like my grand-daughters, but with an appreciation for the freedom of not caring what I looked like. I arrived home drenched from head to toe. After peeling off every piece of clothing and throwing it all into the washer, I headed for the shower before I realized that I was in a giddy, buoyant mood. Contrary to the story that I had been telling myself since I was young, I didn’t die from the rain. Instead, it felt nourishing and life-giving. I had fun.

Last week, as I was walking down Baldwin Beach one morning in Maui, I felt droplets of water splashing my back. When I turned around, I saw that dark storm clouds had gathered behind me and were overcoming my path. My first reaction was to take shelter under the trees that lined the beach. Really! Those old patterns are ingrained. Instead I pulled my hot pink, floppy-brimmed hat down to meet my sunglasses and continued my walk. In retrospect, I realize that I was still protecting my face from getting wet. How insane is it that! I would run from a rain shower, but dive into the surf. I cover my face so that it won’t get wet, but was it two times a day. Wet is wet, isn’t it?

There is an old adage that says that “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” I’ve thought about that before in the area of relationships with people, but never in the area of experiences. Yes, there are experiences that I don’t miss—yelling, anger, fire, flood, pestilence—you get the idea. But there are experiences, like a gentle soaking rain, that have, in their absence, brought up a whole new appreciation for their importance in my life. Now when I see black clouds gathering, they no longer connote dread, deprivation, crisis or loss. I think of the possibility of new life, nourishment, growth, refreshment.

In the middle of August, with watering systems working overtime just to keep plants alive, my plants may experience thirst, but I won’t. While my landscaping may wither, I have all the water that my body wants and needs. As my mind flows to continents where children and adults have never experienced clean, running water, I’ve been taken to my knees in appreciation for the life-giving qualities of water, our liquid gold. And, it is with a supple and nourished heart that I celebrate rain and the clouds that bring it into my life. I may not be able to ride rain clouds, but I will never again look at them without being grateful. That is, until the next hurricane hits Houston.
Warning: Danger?

It was a Hawaiian summer day with temperatures in the high 70s with bright sun and strong coastal winds—another day in paradise. If there was humidity, I didn’t feel it. Returning home from a morning trip to the beach along the Hana Highway, a sign caught my eye for the Hookipa Bay. Impulsively, I turned into that parking lot and parked my car, emerging with my I-phone camera ready. I was not disappointed. Standing on a vantage point overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the North Shore mountain range jetted up out of the navy blue waters. It looked like a pistachio-chocolate swirl ice-cream sundae with whipped cream clouds piled high on top. The only thing missing was the ruby red maraschino cherry. The view itself was a gastronomic delight. Closer to me, the Pacific, set off by cloudless blue skies, was a variegated swirl of aqua blue and emerald green waters set in movement as the white caps rolled in to lap the shore. The entire package was pure confection to my Houston-based, vista-starved eyes. Oh, but that was just the beginning.

As I stood leaning up against the rusted green metal fence, a golden-tanned young man sauntered by on the other side of the fence, dressed in the Island’s ubiquitous garb of flip-flops and knee-length floral bathing suit. My gaze telescoped back in from the distant mountain range to follow him until he unobtrusively slipped below the edge of the cliffs in front of me—surf board in hand. Just above him was a sign that threatened, “Danger Keep Off the Rocks.” I was stunned. Not because he was walking on the other side of the fence, or that he obviously had climbed down the cliff below me, but because it never dawned on me that I could do the same. Instead, I stood safely on the right side of the law letting others demarcate what was a safe viewing spot and where danger lay. How had it become my default to live by the rules, negatively impacting my ability to live a vital life?

Energized by the realization that I too could climb between the bars of the fence and move closer to the edge of the cliff, I bent over, slid through. Freedom! Emboldened, I continued to walk along the forbidden turf until the fence took a sharp right angle away from the distant mountain range. As I turned the corner, I saw a young couple in their late twenties, sitting on a green and blue plaid picnic blanket draped on the edge of the cliff, their bodies leaning toward each other, heads all but touching, glasses of red wine in their hands and chatting quietly. Beyond them there was a stream of vacationers making their way down a weather-worn path through the rocks. There was a whole new community playing and exploring at the base of the cliff oblivious to the posted warning signs. They were not observing life from a distance, but fully engaged in the here and now.
Like water bugs skirting across a pond, people were being propelled by the currents of nature: water and wind. Young men and women, splayed across their surf boards, paddled out to catch the perfect wave, jump up to steer their boards back toward the shore, only to be dumped head-first into the ocean and repeat the same process over and over again. Others were wind-sailing, thrust forward by a stiff breeze flowing across the bay. From my perch looking down, it looked both choreographed and exhilarating. What fun—what an adventure. Oh, to be young enough to catch and be propelled by a wave or wind current. Then again, why not? What adventures are available to me now if I only step beyond the posted warning signs in life? And along with this question came others.

How had I learned to live life as a spectator rather than riding the waves? When did I begin to pull back and be cautious? Yes, as a child, I was taught to color between the lines. I was a good girl; I did what my parents told me. There is a sense of security that comes from that type of life. And there is a price. It's a life that elevates security over spontaneity; containment and restraint over spaciousness and vitality. Yet, what calls me is living a life where joie de vivre is my default. To live that life, I can't let others, or posted signs, make the determination of what is right for me.

I'm not saying that I never tested the limits of life. I did. There were the years after high school when, with my cadre of girlfriends, I rented a "girls pad" in a near-by town so that we could all congregate before a dance to dress and share wine or a beer before we headed out to boogie. There were trips with friends to Lake George, New York for weekends where you only needed to be eighteen to enter a club. Oh, there were risks, but then I was thoroughly and utterly up for the game.

On some level, my move from being a risk-taker to being risk-adverse was more like a glacier. It happened slowly until I no longer could recognize myself. As a young adult I lived and taught in Boston, a large and unfamiliar city to me, and then moved to Tehran, Iran to work. As a professional in my late twenties, I felt invincible. Yet, looking back, I see that there were specific instances that forever changed how and where I walked in life.

After eighteen magical months of living and working in Tehran, Iran, martial law was declared and I found out the hard way what it meant to live under its dictates. On the way to a friend's home, I took a
photograph of a solitary soldier and was arrested at gun point, thrust against a wall and then driven to the police station to be questioned. My film was confiscated, and I was released with a stern reprimand in time to get home before curfew. It was the first time that I ever felt truly threatened, and it wasn’t the last.

It took love at first sight for me to abandon myself to risk marriage the first time at age thirty-two. Six years later a level nine hurricane hit the lush green paradise that I lived on and demolished my island. It arrived, not with a woman’s clever name, but in the form of lung cancer that had metastasized to my husband’s brain. Within three months of the diagnosis, my life, as I knew it, was razed to the ground. I had risked and lost. It took me nine years to be open to love again and another three years to step through the fence beyond any posted danger signs to re-marry.

Out of the rubble of death and the happiness of a new marriage emerged new growth—an inquisitiveness that seeks to understand who I am and how this thing called life works. What I do know is that my life—like the Hana Highway—is a journey not a destination. Even in my questioning why I have stood safely behind the fence, I understand that my process of growth is like the waves I watch—they move forward and then pull back in the perfection of nature. My challenge is no longer that I inadvertently let posted danger signs delineate what is the best action for me, but that I continue to think that there is something wrong with me when unconsciously I do so. It’s what I do when I am aware that defines me.

That said, when I take time to ponder the earlier question; “What adventures are available to me now if I only step beyond the posted warning signs in life?” one big answer crashes to the shore of my consciousness. The area where I’ve been playing it safe—wading in the waters of life, clinging to the shore—is with my writing. If I want to live life fully, then I need to bring my writing to higher level of craft and risk bringing it to a larger audience: I need to risk writing a book. Even as I type these words, my heart is fluttering around my throat and my stomach is tightening up into a knot. It’s the balance of fear and excitement that means it’s the right thing to do.

Over the years I’ve taken major steps forward: I’ve quit jobs that no longer utilized my higher power, I’ve learned to ask for what I want and to let others make their own choices. Today I’m learning to relax and go where the tides of life are calling me. Like a nascent surfer, who, once thrown off her surfboard, paddles back to the protection of the beach; in the past, I’ve given up on my big dreams. But today, when I become aware that I’ve floated back to safety, I know to jump back on that board and paddle back out to catch the next wave. This little “warning” sign is really a reminder that the real “danger” is when I give up on myself. And that both danger signs and breathtaking vistas are always just beyond the next bend along the road to Hana.
Finding My Path To Acceptance

Things happen—I know they do, but yesterday I got the news that my oldest brother Tom, less than a month after radiation treatment for prostate cancer was scheduled for open heart surgery on his mitral valve due to a bacterial infection. He had already been in the hospital for ten days fighting the infection. The news was just too much to bear. I could no longer contain my anxieties. They burst me open shattering my equilibrium. I lost any resemblance to a calm and centered person, and broke down in tears.

This came after a month filled with bad news about my family members: cancer, radiation, autoimmune and genetic diseases, and even ruptured ligaments. I could easily have slid down into the muddy waters of lamentation, moaning “Why us?” But, fortunately, my mind was pulled back to two other times when people dear to me fought their own battles with mortality; my mother Velma’s two-year journey after a stroke, and my best friend Lou’s battle with brain cancer. Like Tom, these women lived vital lives. They loved deeply and often laughed mightily—they were fighters. In the end, they both departed this world very differently. One woman was angry, the other at peace; one relaxing into what was, the other taking her fight into the afterlife. Each bequeathed me incredible lessons.

After recovering from the shock of her stroke, my mother spent the next two years feverishly working to regain the use of the right side of her body. She threw herself into rehabilitation, like she did life—with wit and gusto. She regained ninety-percent of her lost capacities. When she found that she would never again have the use of her right arm and hand, she railed against the injustice and began a long slide into bitterness and depression.

Days before she died, I was with her at the nursing home when her parish priest arrived to hear her confession. He did not meet a penitent parishioner. Oh no! When he arrived, she shooed all of us out of her room. From the hallway we could hear her bitter questions, “Why me, what is this all about?” “Why didn’t God answer my prayers — why didn’t He heal me?” “I held up my part of the bargain; I went to Church every week, I raised my children Catholic. I lived a good Christian life, and this is what I get!” Gone was the clicking of the fingers of her left hand as she worked her way in prayer around the worn rose crystal rosary beads that my father had given her years before. No more wasted prayers asking that she be healed. When asked if she wanted me to read to her from the bible, she responded, “Where is God when I need Him most?”
I loved my mother as much as life itself. Maybe it was because I was her oldest daughter, or the fact that we both shared widowhood. Val was the person that I reached out to when I was sick, needed a reality check about life, or thought I would die from a broken heart. Her even keel and constructive disposition, plus constant love were my life lines to sanity and survival when I struggled to regain my equilibrium when I experienced one of the Universe’s curve balls. She was my rock. “Don’t let anyone compare us,” she said to me one night as we walked the board walk at Ocean Grove, New Jersey only months after my father died. “I had forty-nine wonderful years with your father; you only had six. In time, you will love again. I want that for you; although I won’t.” And, she didn’t.

Even when she was faced by the sudden death of her life partner, she lived life as a glass half-full. Not that she didn’t grieve, she did. She did it while visiting others in greater need. When that didn’t work, she put her pent-up angst into scrubbing and then painting the cellar floor. She found comfort in a good laugh. That is why it was so painful for me to experience this new person she became. It was as if the stroke itself had robbed me of the mother that I grew up with and relied upon. It would take me time and exploration with a Jungian analyst to understand that this was my mother’s journey—her choices—and for me to stop railing against her choices, and to let her be where she was. To accept. It wasn’t the illness that had robbed us. Living life joyously was always an option open to her, but she chose another way. In the end, she died in a nursing home, clasping on to my arm for life itself, as if to hold back the inevitable.

Like my mother, my friend Lou fought valiantly against dying from brain cancer. Like my mother, she was a devoted Catholic and had a strong relationship with prayer. After her second unsuccessful surgery, she threw in the towel. “I’m not going to chance dying on the operating table or risk the possibility of living my last month’s unable to see my beautiful daughters and grand-babies, or hear the sound of birds chirping outside her bedroom door.” She was done fighting against the inevitable. She would use her last few months to enjoy every delicious moment that she had left. “And, she did!”

One Friday night I picked her up to go out to dinner—one of our weekly rituals. We went to her favorite restaurant. She was dressed impeccably in a Jones of New York chambray cranberry outfit with shiny brass buttons, laced ankle-high black leather boots and a complimentary colored barrette sitting jauntily, so as to almost cover her hairless head. When situated, she ordered a glass of chardonnay and drank it out of a straw since she no longer trusted herself to pick up the glass. We ordered diner and desserts to arrive at the same time and when they did, we first ate the white chocolate bread pudding with dark chocolate drizzled over the top. “Why not?” she chuckled. “I don’t have to worry about my weight anymore.” She all but licked the plate clean. Satiated, she asked the waitress to box up our dinners to eat the next day.

Once she had made her decision to accept the inevitability of death, she was giddy as a school girl with a crush. “What do you think the afterlife will be like?” she’d ask with a twinkle in her eye and excitement in her voice. When it was time for her to greet her Maker, she was at home, encircled by her family and a few close friends. She died with a smile on her face, her family praying the rosary for her and the entire house filled with music.
When I finally dried my tears after receiving the latest news about Tom, and pulled down the covers of my bed to slip between the cool white sheets, I was emotionally spent. Physically, I knew sleep would elude me until I found distance from the pain I was feeling, so I turned the care and concern I felt for Tom and his family over to the source of life itself—God. To my surprise, I slept soundly that night. No fretful thrashing about in my bed, I woke immersed in peace and serenity. In that instant, my direction was as clear as a bubbling brook babbling along in verdant mountain fields.

My worrying and or fretting did not serve me, anyone else, or a higher purpose. My operating out of fear couldn’t help Tom’s heart heal. I did have, at my disposal, the ability to help, I could tap into the power of prayer. I could muster an army of spiritual pilgrims whose charism was prayerful intervention. With that, my universe aligned and a brilliant celestial globe of hope took center stage. I would send healing light to those who were in need. I recognized that there are only certain things in life that I have control over: my actions, beliefs, input, and where I spend time. These things would be the tools of my involvement. But what, specifically, should I pray for?

First, I took action. I sent cards to let my family know I cared. I sent emails to my friends and asked their prayers for my loved ones. I asked that they send their healing light and love to my family members from a stance of hope. I saw that my second, and possibly my most important decision would be to ask that my friends pray, not that Tom be healed physically—although that would be great—but that they pray that Tom and his family find peace in the midst of their tribulations and that the 'greatest healing and good' come out of their pain.

Over the decades of walking the spiritual journey, I’ve found that I really do not know what is best for the greatest good. I’ve know what I wanted; what I desired, but not what was best. I’ve discovered that moments of overwhelming desolation have provided me the genesis for great healing and growth. I’ve also learned that emotional pain comes from resisting with the realities of life. And I’ve seen it played out in the lives of others as well.

Out of my best friend’s brain cancer, or my mother’s stroke, the healing that emerged was not what I had fervently prayed for — that their bodies become healed from the ravages of illness — and yet, there was great emotional and spiritual healing. My healing came from experiencing how these two precious people dealt with life’s inevitable realities – the loss of personal control – and their own mortality. The difference between how each of these women lived, and eventually died, had to do with how they responded when confronted with rejecting or accepting what could not be changed. Knowing this, I could not pray solely that Tom be physically healed, although I certainly hoped beyond hope that he would, but that the greatest good come from Tom’s situation.
Today, facing the possibility of loss again, I’m reminded that illness and death are both parts of this wonderful mystery called life. There is a Creative Source that I call God that guides and moves through each and every one of us every day. And in the end, I do have choice; not about what arises in my life, but what I do with what does arise. Today I chose not to rail about the unfairness of Tom’s compromised physical condition, or to waste precious time caught up in worry about a future that is yet to be played out. Instead, I chose to accept that life and death are not within my power. Accepting that there is a Higher Force at work through everything that does happen, I can and do pray that, in the end the greatest good and healing will emerge.
On Friday afternoon, we packed our car and joined the hundreds of other vehicles clogging Interstate 290 traveling northwest out of Houston. As is our mode of operation, we filled our Starbucks cups with our drug of choice, cranked up the music, and shifted into vacation mode for the quiet weekend my husband had suggested. Turning off the highway and following the winding back roads of this rural community, we glimpsed spread after spread, each attractive farmhouse unique. Driving up our hosts’ road, I spotted their white-planked fence in the distance. When we turned our car onto their property, I recognized the same buttercup yellow farm house sitting sixty feet from the road nestled in a grove of spindly hundred year-old white oak trees.

The sound of the wheels of our car as it crossed the cattle guard must have been magical, like the Pied Piper playing his flute, because the Holsteins came a running – that is, as fast a cow can run. The small herd bellowed to make their presence known, as if anyone could ever miss either their mooing or the immensity of their size. There were about ten of them with two calves trailing behind their mothers. What they wanted, I later learned, was to be fed. Since our delight in their presence did not satiate their need, within a few moments, they rambled back to their pasture. As I took in the expanse in front of me, I wondered, why has it taken me so long to return here? I’d forgotten the physical relief I felt entering into this little piece of heaven.

It had been fifteen years since I visited, and I noticed two new additions – a new corrugated aluminum barn (a man-cave) and a wrap-around porch that overlooked the vista behind the house. After a quick unpacking of our travel cooler and the locating of a perfect place for our small travel bag, I headed to one of the two rockers on the new back porch. Without an agenda, except to relax, or any idea of how long I would be on the porch, I spent the next three hours curled up rocking in a picture-perfect, picket-fence-slated, white rocking chair with floral tufted cushions.
As the shadow from the tree beside the house danced its way across the porch, and the daylight melted into dusk, my body began to relax. I drank in the vista – three of the Holsteins curled under the three live oaks that demarcated their backyard. The expansive sky was spotted with cotton candy clouds that reflected the lemon yellow to an apple red hues as dusk approached and then disappeared into the darkness of the night as the moon made its arrival. Watching the spectacle unfold, I experienced a sense of quiet that settled deep into the caverns of my body and sank into my bones. The silence spoke louder to me than the constant ambient noise that I’m immersed in 24/7, living in a neighborhood on the west side of Houston.

The bucolic panorama that I now longed to be a part of was in stark contrast to the dull ache that I felt in my body. Surprised, I asked myself: Where does that physical discomfort come from? The longer I sat, the heavier my body became – it was as if I was collapsing into myself. I felt like a slug at the bottom of a dried-up watering hole; the thought of getting out of the chair seemed insurmountable. I had arrived at the farm unaware of just how much my body needed this break, and my body doesn’t lie. It always knows the truth, if I will but slow down enough to stop and listen. The truth was that my body was parched as the arid lands that surrounded me after a year of drought. I had been in the midst of my own drought and didn’t know it. As I sat, I lapped in everything, trying to absorb each moment; the cool breeze across my arms and legs, the fragrance of Knock-out roses that surrounded the porch, the cows and their droppings, the wide-open sky, the fluttering of the leaves, the setting sun and the rising moon. It all tantalized my senses and fed my soul.

What did I do that weekend? I slept the sleep of a dead man. I watered the trees. I lay under the shade of a near-by tree on a chaise lounge and took a nap. I got up early and took in the early morning view with a hot cup of tea and watched the sun burn through the morning mist. I took long runs along secluded country roads and meandered through the barren parched fields. I took a nap in the shade on the porch swing and let its gentle creaking be music to my soul. I ate when I was hungry and was back in my rocking chair on the porch to watch the next night’s evening spectacle. I shared time and the magnificence around me with the other inhabitants of the farm: the Holsteins, one cat, an armadillo, three dogs, and a fox. We lived together as country folk do – with respect for the contributions each made in our communal ecosystem. Yet it seemed that my own personal system had been out of whack, and I wondered why?
A week after we returned to our home in Houston, the magnitude of the shift in my energies was still at work within me. I’d wake up thinking about it, or watching a cloud floating by, I’d be transported back to the farm, and the peace I felt there. So I began to ponder my weekend experience in earnest. What I knew for sure was that I had arrived at the farm feeling a tad bit cranky, but feeling okay physically. Once I parked my car, every cell of my body began to ache, both physically and psychically. Something important had happened within me – but what?

When I think back over the years to when I experienced my body aching, one of two things were happening: I was affected either by stress or by pent up emotions. However, at present, I don’t live life in constant worry about financial, marriage or work-related external demands. My husband is both supportive and encouraging. And, I don’t feel repressed emotions about to bubble up either. No, this was something different. Was it situational? What did being in the country have to do with the shift of my physical energies? Did it have to do with spending time in the serenity and harmony of nature? And, with those questions, a new day dawned in the form of an answer. It hadn’t been exhaustion that I was experiencing, but a deep settling down and in. That bucolic piece of heaven that I was immersed in was a reflection of what my soul was longing for – it was a coming home – a call to live a life of equanimity and congruence with everyone around me as a manifestation of my belief that there is a spiritual Nature always at work in my and everyone’s life.

There is an old adage that says that when one finger points to another (or something outside of yourself), there are three fingers pointing back at you. There is more truth to that then I want to accept. In this instant, the finger that I pointed out was not in condemnation, as it usually is: “If only he would,” “She’s doing this,” or “He needs to do that.” This time my finger was pointing the way to where health resides. The reality is that it is me who is being called to do and be different—to extract myself from the cacophony that resides in my mind, to eliminate the noise of control. Does the bird tell the tree how to grow? Does the cow complain if a fly circles around her? Does it matter if a farmer tells a flower to grow or a calf to be born? Life happens without his opinions. And, it is the same in all life. Nature unfolds – it just does. Who am I to play god? What is in it for me to act as the arbiter of what is good or right for others, no matter how nicely I justify my behavior.

When I think about it from a peaceful place, a bucolic place, away from the hubbub of life, then it’s clear to see that when I insert my unsolicited judgments and opinions, unconsciously I’ve devalued their own journey – as if they don’t know what is right for themselves. What a pungent thought. And, while I am interfering in others’ lives, I get to avoid the three fingers pointing back at me, and I miss the opportunity to learn what Nature would have me learn. But, not this time—this time I get it.
I've learned that it is possible for me to carry within me the tranquility and equanimity that I felt while at the farm into my day-to-day life. Like a barn cat finding peace with the field mice, I want to be less reactive and more curious. To treat everyone with the same gracious respect that I would any of the creatures I interacted with while away. To tend my own fields and let my neighbors till their own farmlands. My belief is that when I become a good neighbor rather than a melding one, then the contentment I felt in the country will pervade every interaction—and I will truly be home—with myself, where it counts the most.
I’m a “Thanksgiving baby,” born during one of the last seven days of November. Actually, my twin brother and I were born on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving Day, but we have always celebrated our birth on the auspicious national holiday. This year the two important celebrations coincide. I will celebrate this year with my dear husband in the West Village in New York City surrounded by my son and daughter-in-law and our granddaughters seated around an oval maple table laden with my favorite comfort foods. I love everything about Thanksgiving – and, my cup flows over with the multitudes of my blessings.

In anticipation, I’m transported to the many images from my youth that flood this season. The brilliant fall colors and rustling leaves, the brisk morning walks, and dried corn stalks, the football games and high school rivalries — to name a few. But the most vivid of images and memories came from my grandmother’s tables (yes, there were two) neatly covered with ivory lace Irish linen table cloths and napkins. The aroma of a thirty-pound stuffed turkey would assail my senses as we entered through the warmth of her back porch into the kitchen. When the masterpiece was hefted out of the oven, its golden brown skin bursting with juices, my father would deftly carve it, then platters of the moist meat and drumsticks would be carried to the table. My grandmother, and later my mother, stood over the stove magically transforming the turkey’s remnants into rich brown giblet gravy that would be poured over the scoops of whipped mashed potatoes and corn-bread stuffing. Sweet green peas boiled creamed baby onions, dollops of cranberries, pickles, and rolls hot from the oven completed the main course. Either piping hot or chilled apple cider with cinnamon sticks was served to all. And when all the dishes were cleared, and the digestive juices still flowing, we would begin desert.

That evening, after the dishes were washed and dried and everything put away, and the football games and long walks in the crisp air had helped digest the culinary delights from the day, we circled again around the kitchen table to celebrate birthday. Our parents, brothers and sisters, cousins and aunts and uncles, and our grandmother would sing happy birthday to us while our bodies, taut in anticipation were pitched forward, poised over the cake. In unison, we blew out the candles and waited for the first two servings of cake and ice cream.
Today I understand that each delicacy was prepared and served with love. (The mere memories still set my taste buds salivating.) But is not just the loving comfort of the savory fare for which I am thankful, it’s the sweetness of the recollections of holidays past, present, and God allowing, future that causes my lips to turn up and my baby blue eyes to twinkle brightly. It’s the ability to gather with loved ones, recent and from years past, to break bread and raise our glasses in appreciation for all we have and all we are and all that we can become that warms my spirit. And also for the memory of those who are no longer able to hold hands in prayer, and for the new family members who bring new life to our families, I give thanks.

I’m grateful also for the richness of my life, for my family of origin, for my generous and loving husband and his beautiful and loving family, and for friends new and old. I’m delighted that I’ve made it through the year with good health and a sense of well-being. I’m appreciative of all the opportunities that I’ve have been given, and all of the obstacles I’ve overcome. Maybe it’s age — why not? — that gives me the perspective to see the bounty that has come out of what I originally identified as adversity, like the white hydrangeas that have blossomed in the wake of my dear ones passing and professional and personal challenges that have strengthened me. With that in mind, I realize that what I’m most indebted for this year is not simply my life, but the richness of my spiritual journey.

Some would say that my spiritual journey began at birth, and there is some truth in that. Who I am is colored by my original family and our community. But today I believe that I had a second birthday. It happened during a defining moment when I realized that I didn’t know who I was. Like most teachable moments and birth itself, I didn’t recognize it at that time. It would be decades before I understood that the challenges that brought me to the moment of not knowing were the price of a new birth. It was an excruciating painful, messy delivery, but I came through it. With that simple declaration, “I need to know,” my eyes beheld a new world where I knew unequivocally that God was an active force in life and that I mattered.
How would I describe the genesis of my new life? Like the nine months of my mother’s pregnancy, I spent fifteen months encapsulated in my grief, consumed with the grief from losing my first husband and, four months later, my father, then my back surgery and the loss of my job. During the depths of despair, I returned to the Catholic faith of my youth and reconnected with the spiritual umbilical cord that provided the sustenance I needed to survive. On the day that I was to place my husband’s ashes at the Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Houston, Texas, my rendered heart and physical pain brought me to my knees and I yelled out to God, “If you are there, I need to know it!” It took me to experience that degree of anguish to begin to relinquish the illusion of control and separateness upon which I had constructed my life. In that moment, my heart was ripped open and God’s care and compassion flowed through me. One moment my body ached like an abscessed tooth, and in the next moment, the pain was gone.

That was the moment of my second birth. The journey has changed over the years, but in some ways it has always been the same. It has been about learning to let go of the illusions of control and separateness. As they say in the Twelve Step Program, “Let go and let God.” It sounds so easy. Just ‘let go.’ But the reality is that it takes more than the knowledge that there is another way to live life. Old patterns are hard to change and that has been the landscape of my life ever since.

Like the pilgrims that landed in this New World, it took courage to put one foot in front of the other while exploring this virgin land I longed to embrace. It has taken a willingness to fail and to get up and start again while embracing new behaviors and ways of living in the world. It has meant challenging my fears of not being enough or of being rejected for who I am today. I’ve had to deal with false pride, grief, apathy, guilt and shame, and I learned the healing balm of righteous anger and claiming my voice. This journey is not for the faint of heart or the weak of spirit. But, the payback has been richer than a million Thanksgiving celebrations.

As I stand at the doorway of my sixty-fifth birthday, I’m not sure what others see. I know that I’ve changed, and I’m not talking about the new wrinkles that gather around my eyes or the grey hair that has replaced the honeyed-blonde of my youth. I’m talking about internal changes about who I am and
how I behave in the world. Because I’ve plodded on, today I’m less reactive to people and situations that arise. Am I perfect? – oh no! – I’m a work-in-progress who is more peace-filled and happy, more able to go with the flow while staying true to my path. Yes, today when I hold hands to give thanksgiving for the abundance that surrounds us, I will lower my head, not only to blow out the dozens of candles that will be blazing on my birthday cupcakes, but in thanksgiving for the voice that sings to the inner depths of my being and for the mystery of the journey that is beyond my power of seeing!
My Hopeful Heart

There is something new going on within me. I’m feeling strong and happy. Not a giddy hyper-happiness that has me flitting from one thing to another, bubbling over with joy. I’ve felt those feelings before, and this is different. This happiness has me greeting each day with a warm, contented smile that is still with me when I climb back into my bed at night, pull the down comforter over my body and drift into sleep. It is not an emotion contingent on what is going on around me, or the attainment of a desired object. Rather, it is a mood that took root about a week ago and has been steadily growing ever since.

It is more of a feeling or a state of being. It resides within my body and emanates out of me into the world. It feels spacious—as if the boundary of my body is opening up to the Universe. I feel that if I were to stick my finger into a socket, I’d illuminate the room—I feel that electric. In Tae Kwon Do, my patterns are sharper, and there is a sense of energy exploding out of me. Each movement through the day has a new sense of grace and flow with it. What is its source?

One probable cause is that, about three months ago, I began working with a Chinese doctor to open up the energy meridians within my body. It is a gift that I gave myself for attaining the dubious distinction of joining the Medicare generation. She prescribed, along with energy treatment, a morning regimen of running. “You know that I had back surgery fifteen years ago,” I whined in the hope that she would prescribe something less strenuous. “You do what you can do; walk, run, but you do it – okay? And, no gyms— absolutely no gym,” she continued. “You go out in the morning when the sun is rising and you drink in the morning energy.” Reluctantly I began, and that daily practice has jump started this old body with high octane fuel.

I had forgotten how much I loved the morning. As a child I often woke up early to greet the day, but as a young adult, I replaced sunrises for the comfort and warmth of sleeping in. Now, as I close the door behind me, and move out into the morning air, I’m rewarded by the fresh coolness caressing my cheeks and filling my lungs. The early morning quiet, interspersed with the rhythmic sound of my feet meeting the pavement, propels me forward. My eyes are fed by the lacework of light through the trees, and I’m amazed by what my body has learned to do in such a short period of time.
I’m reminded of the precise moment when I knew that this would be a good experience. As my gentle gate slowed down to a slog, I remembered that if I thought of my body as heavy and plodding then my experience would be arduous. If, on the other hand, I’d let myself be a beginner and celebrate each new step, then this would be a good practice, and it was. It was not by pushing my body, but shifting my thinking, that set me up to enjoy this new morning ritual. Lightness and weightiness can both be states of mind, and every day since then, I remind myself to choose lightness. I choose the viewpoint that learning to run is about learning to tap into the energy of the Universe, while creating health and enjoyment. As powerful as this new practice is, however, it is only one part of the synchronicity that brought me to this period of new found equanimity.

About a month ago I read the book “Power & Force” by David Hawkins, M.D., Ph.D. that provided another missing piece to establish the mood of hopefulness. In the book, he declares that it is the context behind an action that determines the quality of the outcome. While preparing a presentation about the distinction between power and force for a large group in the “Pearls of Wisdom Series” at a client’s location, I realized that I needed to set my own context for my keynote speech. I chose willingness and non-attachment and, as Hawkins suggested, it became a guiding light for how I showed up and performed.

When technical issues arose, instead of getting anxious, I was non-pulsed. I would use the video if they could make it work, and skip it if their technicians couldn’t fix it. I was at peace with whatever happened. From this context, I was willing to go with the flow of how things unfolded. Like an untethered balloon being carried by the currents of the wind, I was unattached to any specific process or shift in direction. I knew my materials and I would deliver a cogent presentation no matter what. The by-product was that I felt a peaceful power operating through me. There was anticipation, not that anything specific would happen, but that it was already happening—I need only relax into it.

Now, I’ll admit my natural proclivity has always been toward heaviness, intensity, and a history of doing things “right”—whatever that is. But, in the week after the speech, as old patterns of thinking arose, I
kept moving back to my intention of willingness and non-attachment. My body began to uncoil and I felt safely at home within my body, as if for the first time. And to my surprise, a new context arrived naturally—the pungent red-rose fragrance of hopefulness wafted through the air and filled my nostrils and tantalized me. I was a sweet, delicious state of being which enlivened all my senses—my body tingled, my eyes twinkled. My singing heart burst open and happiness flooded the world around me. I was seized—body, mind and soul—with the prospect of living forever within its embrace.

For some this may be a constant state, but not for me. I have never thought myself as an optimist or a pessimist but rather a realist; someone who would rather be safe than sorry. And to achieve safety, I became a master of hyper-vigilance. Tell me I've done a good job, and you might experience two squinting baby-blue eyes peering back at you with a quizzical look upon my face. I may not say it, but the question behind the stare might be, “What’s in it for you?” “What do you want?” It was as if any compliment was a subterfuge. Over the years I've learned to stop and allow compliments to open the door of my heart; I'll welcome them in for a short visit. What I’ve learned by allowing a compliment in, if only for a few moments, is that it’s impossible to be both on guard and happy. So, more and more these days, I choose to relax my guard.

The hopefulness that I’m talking about did not arrive out of beseeching or have an object of attention, like a child’s wanting their own blue-eyed, short curly blond haired American doll, or a teenager pining for a souped-up red convertible Mustang, or an adult’s yearning for financial freedom. The hopefulness that I’m talking about is a feeling that erupted when I decided to live my life out of a context that brought both power and life. It was fed by the realization that God only asks of me the things that I have the capacity to achieve—whether it is to run three miles, shift my thinking or set context or to deliver a keynote or provide value when I coach.

The thing that is so incredible is now that I’ve experienced hopefulness; it is part of my life and will always be a part of my repertoire of responses. There may be times when I forget, but when the thought emerges again, and it will, then I can recall within my body the deep peace that hopefulness exudes and let its magic light me up again. That is a source of hope!

These truths have always been available to me, but I’ve been walking this journey looking down, focusing on the details of being safe, while watching my feet to make sure that I don’t stumble along the path. Yet, hopefulness has been running around me, wildly waving her hands, jumping up and down, yelling, “Choose me.” She arrived at my door, threw it wide open, and pranced in. Her embrace surprised me; and she whispered into my ear, you are never alone. You are always supported. You have within you all that you need to make a difference in this world. You, my dear lady, are enough. And in her embrace, my heart bursts forth and everything is possible— there is hope for eternal life and spiritual connectedness right here on this very earth.
Darkness Before The Light

It’s early January with the festive glow of Christmas and New Year’s fading into the background of my daily life. The sun is warming our day, and with its bright presence, redefining winter. Today the temperature will break sixty degrees, yet there is crispness in the air. Is winter over? I sure hope not. Instead, I’ll think of today’s mildness as a wonderful fluke of nature. It is one of those rare days where all of the random meteorological conditions responsible for weather align into crystal-like perfection. It is a picture-perfect day to stop and soak in its beauty and muse about the advent of this New Year, and that is just what I am doing.

Sitting outside of a local café house teeming with activity, I’ve found a seat away from the umbrellas that will be needed soon enough to provide shade from summer’s blazing sun. Right now, my iced Chai latte in hand, I sit back with my face turned up to receive the sun’s filtered warmth. The weather today is a flawless reflection of my outlook for the coming year. All is perfection, in this moment, but it hasn’t always been that way.

Previously, I would let my outlook on life be determined by what I heard from the media—newspapers, television, radio. Today I sum up my relationship with mass media with the phrase: “Garbage in, garbage out.” Like most of the world, I had let the media, saturated with gloom and doom, take hold on my psyche and shape how I felt about life’s possibilities. What I saw was a Dachau image of a rail thin woman with a haggard expression on her pasty grey face, and two empty hallowed out eyes gazing back at me. Her diet contained absolutely nothing uplifting, inspiring, or gentle. And nothing really has changed in the media. There seems to be perpetual darkness.

Feed on today’s media diet, it would be easy to move into fear and depression, with the uncertainty of the world’s financial markets, the end of the Mayan calendar around the corner, the next presidential election fueled by Super Pacs and corporate donations, and the unrest of the 99%, to name a few things that are happening in my own back yard. But I won’t. I have trained myself to handle these types of situations differently.
About six years ago, in an attempt to take control of my own life, I eliminated watching the nightly news. The result? I found I slept more peacefully. Since then I’ve put a moratorium on gratuitous and explicit violence. Last week I went with my husband to see War Horse and declared that I would never see another movie about war. It is not a Pollyanna move to surround myself only by the lighter side of life. I don’t know if that is even possible in our instant message, gruesome image culture. Instead I look at it as a required defensive practice to safeguard my sanity and preserve a vestige of tranquility.

Toward that end, I’ve learned to be selective about what I read and watch; I chose to listen and read the news that better serves my goal to be well informed without being saturated by what the press believes sells—crisis and calamity and sound bites that inflame and ignite. If the media was a country, it would be the Congo with its inhabitants fleeing for their lives from the ravages of war and rape. If the daily news reflected our weather, there would be perpetual stormy skies with black clouds ripped open and torrents of sleeting rain continuously devastating the nascent crops hope and optimism. Is that all there is in life? I don’t think so.

An old saying tells us that “the sky is darkest before the dawn.” I believe that. When I look at our tumultuous times that we live in from that vantage point, I can celebrate the unrest because I can see rays of sunlight peeking through the blackened skies. I see a new generation that has not bought into the belief that one needs only do more of the same to be successful, or that it’s impossible to change the status quo. And I wonder, in part, if it is because they seek out their news from broader sources and don’t feed their own psyches with TV news of the day.

When I see the next generation’s vitality and tenacity, I feel the weighty grey clouds of resignation lifting off of my own shoulders. When I see organizations like “No Labels” finding their voices and working to focus our political agenda’s on issues more substantive than the division of our political parties, I experience hope. Like a proud parent who is energized by her child’s enthusiasm, a smile breaks across my face and my slate blue eyes twinkle with fervor and I think, “If others are doing these things, then what is possible here for me?” It wasn’t always that way, and I’m so glad that it is now.

In taking time to stop today, to fill my lungs with cool crisp air, and let the sun’s warmth permeate the cells of my body, daily concerns melted away and I’m was returned to the dazzling possibility that is right here, right now. During these spectacular moments, it’s impossible to be morose. With my chin tilted to gaze up into the clear bright sky, I see a bigger picture emerging. Like the weather, all things change. That is the Universality of all nature. When I shift my focus to the larger picture, its generative nature enlivens me, and my heart rises up and takes wings. I do believe that all will be well, in the end. And thanks to my spiritual path, I’ve come to understand that each of us has the power to stop and reflect and access his/her own creative spirit, which, by its very nature is overwhelmingly constructive.
By taking a few moments, to stop and reflect on the wonder of the brilliance of nature in front of me, I can’t help but ponder the nature of man, and my own nature and I’m reassured. Holding the sun’s warmth deep within me, I’m nourished and energized. And, it’s easy to envision completion of my New Year’s intentions—to complete my first book and be certified in Tae Kwon Do. Even the flashes of darkens that I slip into when I stay too long gripped by the state of politics, are followed by the dawning of the light of a new day of possibilities. Those precious minutes re-connects me with my passion again, not for politics, but for humanity, its people and our potentialities. It is in this arena that I will do my little part to bring lightness to our world. And I’m reassured that this year will be a brilliant one filled with a brisk brightness, dark storm clouds, and the advancement of potentialities—for that is nature itself, and out of my darkness, I find shards of lightness in that awareness.
Unfolding The Gift Of Anxiety

I was three days into a seven-day vacation in sunny Cozumel, Mexico with my sister Fran before I realized that I felt jittery and unsettled. I felt like a coin that kept perpetually spinning on its side, refusing to come to a stop. I couldn’t relax. What was that all about? Heaven knows that relaxing on vacation is not something that has historically challenged me.

When employed, I’d leave my concerns about work, like my cats, back at home in the competent hands of others. To go on vacation meant that I worked harder prior to departing. And when I returned, unresolved issues would be waiting for me. It was a price that I was delighted to pay for periods of carefree time.

When my husband joined me to build our coaching business, we shifted into an easy rhythm of work and vacation time together. There is a unified exhalation of relief when our garage door closes and we are backing out of our driveway. By the time we are on the highway, three minutes from our home, we look at each other, laugh, and declare ourselves ‘on vacation.’ And, as we drive away, I feel the day-to-day stresses of life and work disappear behind me.

Each morning on this recent trip to Cozumel, after exercising and enjoying the first repast of the day, Fran and I would change into our bathing suits and saunter down to the crystalline, white beach in front of our hotel. We looked like any of the many sun-birds seeking the perfect perch from which to soak in the mid-morning sunshine. After strategically choosing an ideal chaise lounge, from which to enjoy the sun, sea and surf, I began to empty my beach bag of the necessary accoutrements: sun block, sun hat, a Kindle filled with light reading. And, after straightening out my beach towel, and lathering my lily-white skin with maximum sun-block, I kicked back ready to relax. But relaxation eluded me.

I jumped up and pulled my chaise into the shade of a faux coconut hut, and I stretched out again. Maybe I need shade I thought. Within three minutes I was up again, pacing the beach. What’s going on here, I wondered. By lunch, I was ready to pick-up my towel, change into shorts, tee shirt and sandals and head out to the shops. Now shopping was an activity where I would feel no anxiety. The second day played out like the first, but by lunch on the third day, I had a break-through.
These are the thoughts that flashed into my awareness: You should be writing. You should be reading the white paper that you brought about e-books. It was that “stinking thinking” that was eating at me making me edgy. The source of my low-grade anxiety was all my thoughts that began with “You should…”

Aware that I was “should-ing on myself,” I fought back: What I should be doing is relaxing and basking in the beauty that surrounds me now. What I should be doing is enjoying where I am right now.” I came here to relax, and relax I will. With that last internal declaration, my disquiet melted away. With that awareness and declaration, I was back on solid ground—I was in vacation mode!

After four and a half days of total relaxation, I returned home refreshed. Within a few days, however, a low-grade angst began to emerge again. I felt jittery and my mood slipped into resentment. What in heaven was going on here? It took only a few moments to reconnect with the nervousness that had plagued me on vacation, so I returned to the scene of the crime—the ‘should-ing.” Was there something else that I neatly folded and packed in my suitcase as a should, then inadvertently carried back with me from Cozumel?

I thought that I had totally washed away that negative thinking, like salt from the ocean and watched it swirl down my shower drain, but here it was again. Or, was there a good reason that my mind couldn’t find peace? What if the unease and the “stinking thinking” were symptoms of a more substantial issue? What if there was something chewing inside of me prior to the trip and the time apart made visible what my busyness was keeping at bay? Now, I had an internal excursion worth taking.

What this pause in life may have provided was the perfect environment to let the day-to-day demands of ‘life as usual’ be pulled away. It provided a place to just “be.” And, what I saw at the bottom of the sea of thoughts were not luminescent tropical fish, but the source of my anxiety. Should I be writing? Was writing still a source of nourishment for me? And, importantly, should I write a book?
To be a good writer, or for that matter, an okay writer, I need to work at it. I need to write every day. It doesn’t need to be a lot, and it doesn’t need to be brilliant, I just need to prime the pump so that words, rather than water, flow easily. It is essential. It’s how I process life. In fact, I’ve been journaling for over thirty years. It’s as important to my well-being as physical exercise, eating healthy foods and experiencing the quiet of nature.

When I write, I’m happy and time does fly. That’s a good thing because I am not one of those natural writers who sits down and produces masterpieces. I write, re-write, let it settle for a while, and then re-write again. I have others read it for flow, context, and proper syntax. Not for content—that is mine. And then there is the publication of it. It can take me another day just to find the appropriate photos to convey the tone of the piece. When it is done, it may have taken a week of work. And the truth is, I still love the creative process. So it is not writing or publishing the blog that is dragging on me. What’s left?

Lately the question of publishing a book has surfaced. People say to me: “Use your blogs and published them as an e-book,” or “I can’t wait until you write a book.” But, I’ve also sat with a publisher who told me that once something has been published on the web, it is not book material. I’m thinking that the anxiety that underlies my inability to relax has to do with the idea of publishing that type of book. Even as I write this, I feel a knot in my stomach form and tighten. I’m getting close!

Because of this revelation, I knew that publishing a book is not right for me now. But I was still not clear as to why. A few days after the realization, I had the pleasure of sitting down with my best friend and spiritual director. During our visit, the conversation turned to where I was emotionally, and I was surprised by the level of frustration in my response. When asked what exactly I was frustrated about, the answer came crashing to the shore like a storm wave. “I just need to know what God is calling me to do.” Even as I blurted it out, another question arose to greet it. “What is God calling you to be?”

Maybe this is not about doing, but about being.

Who I have been is someone who takes on others’ suggestions as if they are mine. Instead of continuing that habit, I see that I am being called to be someone who trusts her own personal process; someone who understands that it is my precious process, and I’m just where I need to be—in the unknowing. Who I ought to be is curious about what my heart is calling me to do and courageous enough not to take on others’ hopes and desires for me.

Who I intend to be is someone who continues to feel my feelings and sensations and explores their relevance in my spiritual evolution. I will be patient and loving; I will be someone who holds my self and my process gently. The gift of experiencing and exploring anxiety is that there is always a life changing lesson to be learned from unfolding it!
The Gift Of My Beloved

Each February my husband and I celebrate not only Valentine’s Day, but his birthday just five days later. What to get the man who has everything? I thought this year. Then I realized that the one thing more precious than a gold watch, or an even larger flat screen television, would be to fully share the words that are always close to my heart, but are infrequently brought into the light of day. In this month, set aside for lovers, I celebrate Bruce in a new way.

I’m not writing this because I’m a romantic—no one who knows me would ever call me that. I’m writing this because I’m not. I grew up with a father whose term of endearment for his faithful and loving wife was “Butch.” Seriously! When we kids heard that term, we knew that passion was in the air. Growing up, I never heard my parents utter the words I love you, and we were more likely to find a needle in a haystack than to get acknowledged for a job well done. Since then, I’ve mastered those three special words, but I’m a neophyte in the area of properly acknowledging others. So this is what I plan to do this year. To acknowledge what Bruce means to me.

I met Bruce at the first coaching conference in Houston. There was an undeniable attraction and what I remember that day was Bruce standing with other people at the back of the conference room. When I saw him, he was looking directly at me. Why is that important? Because it was his smile and the directness of his gaze that engaged me. His look was bold, holding my eyes, inviting more connection. I was intrigued. Quietly, even artfully, we worked our way toward each other—as if to savor the dance. It was as if time moved into slow motion. We’ve been dancing together for about 16 years and will have been married 14 years this July.

What did I see that fateful day? I saw a tall handsome man with sparkling hazel eyes. I saw a smile that was broad and inviting. I saw a raw intelligence that still radiates from him. And over the years, these qualities have only ripened like the best bottle of vintage wine from his native California vineyards. With time and daily use, these qualities, for some people, show their wear and tear. Not so with Bruce.
You might ask what has kept me loving him. If I had to identify what qualities have ripened best over time, at the top of the list is his constancy. In all these years, I've never doubted Bruce's steadfast love. Not just of me, though that is very important, but for anyone who has had the blessing of being treasured by Bruce. Certainly, his parents Frances and Lee, his Aunt Dee Dee, his sister Gail, twin brother Gordon and his sons, Barry and Brian, were among the cherished (and today he would add his daughter-in-law Mary, grand-daughters Cassandra and Stella, my sizable family and his many friends.)

Under penalty of death, I can't come up with anything negative Bruce has ever said about any of them. There are times when I've accused him of living in denial or being a Pollyanna. But the more I think about it, I can grasp the gold that the gift of seeing the high side of others has brought into our lives.

I also treasure the depth and tenaciousness of his unconditional love. And it wasn’t easy. Over the years I’ve doubted, tested him, and physically pulled away. I can also be a demanding person—I recognize that now—but Bruce has always been steadfast, standing in front of me, gently there, arms wide open ready to enfold me and to work things out. Could there be any bigger gift than that?

Another quality that Bruce brings is his curiousity and probing mind, his rich intellect. There is no resting on the intellectual laurels of his past. No, Bruce is interestedly inquiring why things are one way or another. Quantum Theory, Ken Wilber’s Four Qual Model, Don Beck’s Spiral Dynamics, to name a few, enrich my life because Bruce encouraged their exploration. Now, I am no slouch in the area of journeying, but my focus has always been narrower in perspective. I will probe in depth anything that sheds light on my own esoteric investigation of Who am I? Not Bruce. His examination seeks global understanding. With his encouragement, I have broadened my understanding of how science works in theory, even as I continue to prod him to relax his “rational mind” to explore the more subtle movements of the Soul.

The area, however, he has helped me to grow the most is in the area of technology. In that garden, he is a well-tended mature maple tree, and I am a lowly wall of weeds. If Bruce is an early adaptor, then I was dragged into the field kicking and screaming well after the launch. I’m not a Luddite, but I could have been. With his tutelage he has thrust me into the twenty-first century. I can’t begin to think where I would be without his love for technology. Well, that’s not totally the case. I’d be a Mac person without a television. I’d have turned over our four remotes to someone who had the facility of dealing with the complexity of it all. Fortunately, I didn’t need to do that!

Another enduring aspect of Bruce’s personality is his honesty. I can always count on him telling me what he thinks and his discernment to wait until I ask for his opinion—or the graciousness to button it up, if I’m not in a place to hear. Truth be said, I’m still learning that from Bruce. With his clear but loving criticism, I’m learning to accept that I can be unconsciously righteous and brutal with my opinions, especially about how he should be or what he should do. It’s not easy comparing our hearts—mine is stingy, his is generous. Because of him, I’m loosening the ties that bind that most mysterious of organs.

And not to overlook the obvious, there is Bruce’s stately good looks and exuberant laughter. Upon meeting him, everyone thinks him much younger. His youthful face and open smile contrast with his white hair and re-define what seventy looks like. His boyish demeanor is the by-product of exploring the world with childhood wonder. But it is his raucous belly laughter that, like sparks from a fire, ignites the embers in my heart into a raging bonfire of joy.

Lastly, I love that Bruce’s world is not contracting, but continues to expand. It is not just in the new things he does, but who he is. You can see it in his physical bearing. It is not rigid but more like a stately pine
whose branches reach out to embrace the new and exciting. His physicality is simultaneously solid and soft. Solid, in that he is deeply rooted in who he is. Soft, in that his heart is open to anyone who comes knocking at his door. In short, when I see him, his physicality is still able to incite my heart, and I am forever thankful for that.

So I hope that when Bruce reads these words, they settle into his body. That he will also let them fall like a gentle, soaking rain into his psyche. And, if and when he might ever feel less than the incredible husband, father, grandfather, friend that he is, that he will revisit this missive and take in all of the wonderful things that his wife, lover, friend and truth-teller says about him with the greatest possible love and deepest appreciation.

Ours is an expansive love. I love Bruce more today than the day we met and look forward to many more years of sharing our lives and deepening our love. Truly he is my soul-mate, my Beloved, and I thank God daily for allowing me to share my life with such a wise elder and full-out wonderful man. What a gift!
Applying Fresh Paint

I spent the week overseeing workers at my home—and I loved every moment of it. I’ve been tolerating the look of my back bedroom for ever since I moved into this house twelve years ago, and the relief I felt in beginning the project was palpable.

When I first saw this house, I was drawn to the open space, vaulted living room ceilings and the bay of windows that extended across the back of house bringing the lush greenery of our backyard into what would become our home. Not that it was perfect, it wasn’t. But over the years, one project after another, I’ve transformed its sharp edges and ice cold colors, to a warm, peace-filled sanctuary. That is, all but one room—the back bedroom.

How do I know that the room was not up to my personal standards? Every time I walked by that room, my body would tense. I’d quickly close the door as if to protect myself from an unknown predator. Last week I was inspired, once again, to confront the beast. This time I came in with a white flag of peace preceding me. I came in not as a foe, but as a collaborator. With a cup of tea in hand, I entered the room, sat down and settled into an overstuffed chair, softened my eyes and let them lovingly take in my surroundings looking for inspiration. And, before I had time to finish my cup of tea, a light came on and with it the revelation I was looking for.

It’s not like I haven’t tried to bring that room into alignment with the rest of my home. I just never found the magic formula that would produce life and a sense of tranquility into that small, dim space. Over the past ten years, I’ve painted it four times and have amassed a mixture of old and new pieces of furniture and the precise-sized bed for the room’s dimensions, adorning it with crisp and inviting bed linens. I’ll say one thing for this room—it’s the best room in the house for sleeping. It’s like hibernating in a cave—no light or noise penetrates this chamber. The problem is, however, that I can see its jarring wall color during the light of day.

There were periods when, stumped by what else I might change, I’d declared it workable. But then, gradually over time, without conscious thought, my body would begin to contract again every time I walked by the room. There in front of me, like a defiant child, hands clenched, arms resting on her hips, lips curled and eyes glaring back at me, she would taunt me, there’s no comfort here. And she was right, a corner of my nest felt uninhabitable by comparison and the psychic discord would, once again, put me on edge. But this time it was different. This time I finally understood what I had for years overlooked. This errant space needed a paint color that would bring depth into the room.
What I was looking for was a hue that, while comforting and welcoming, held its own up against the white rug, crown molding and base boards that framed it. The color needed to be able to draw a caller into its recesses without enveloping them. The shade I chose was Lenox tan.

Now my husband, who has his own set of standards, saw this renovation differently. “What is wrong with the color we have?” he asked. “Didn’t we just paint it?” Fortunately, we’ve been married long enough for him to trust me when it comes to anything visual. The challenge, he knew, wasn’t the changing of the paint, but the reality that, like cosmetic surgery, once you start upgrading, it brings to light other areas that need work.

By the time the workmen arrived, we had a punch list that included re-painting the offensive bedroom, tearing off the bathroom wallpaper, texturing and painting its walls and woodwork. And true to form, by Thursday the list had expanded to include baseboards, crown moldings, and the doors. Like a busy beaver at work, the project had expanded to include the hall, the front door, and all of the woodwork in my own master bathroom.

By the time the workers departed, the back bedroom was pulled back together. I had padded the nest with new linen, a comforter, and an Oriental rug; I had softened the indirect lighting and added greenery. That night, I heard the joy in my husband’s voice when he walked into the room. “Wow, it looks great. Do you have a bed and breakfast in your future? You did a wonderful job here.” And his exuberance was nothing compared to my relief—something inside of me eased. I felt complete. But the relief I felt was way out of line with the tangible work that had been done. This is usually a clue that something more is at play.

I’ve heard it said that a person’s home is an external physical reflection of their inner life. As a coach, I often see the correlation. I’ve worked with clients to bring their external life in alignment with their aspirations. Personally, when there is chaos in my surroundings, I have a hard time focusing and getting clear. So I wonder, is there a connection between my attempt to bring my home into order, and my ability to get clean, crisp direction about my own life. It took less than a week for the answer to appear.

The following weekend I attended the next Diamond Approach training, and not to my surprise, the subject was “Impeccability.” Living an impeccable life does not mean to strive for perfection, but to live life up to one’s own personal standard’s and capabilities. A sub-set of that calling was to bring my back bedroom in alignment with how I expect my home to look. And the by-product of living life of impeccability is to bring the depth of Lenox tan into my life. But, how was I being called to live a deeper life?
I was challenged to live a life of increased consciousness and personal responsibility. To explore the many times where I allowed myself to settle for less than what was within my own capabilities or where I set my standards too low. I exposed the dullness of thinking like: “I’ve spent enough on paint now, Bruce will be upset with me,” or “I’ll just put up with it, for now. It’s good enough.” This kind of diminutive thinking supported an erroneous belief that what I want or what I’m capable of doesn’t really matter. Letting go of the childhood thinking, when faced with new choices, I ask myself, “What would a fully functioning adult, responsible for her life’s fulfillment, do in this situation?” and I strive to live up to my capabilities. By today’s standards, I won’t live with things that can be rectified easily—the back bedroom would have received the requisite paint years ago.

Now another might think it a stretch to connect the home renovation and the class on impeccability, but to me it is obvious. The teaching was present in my life prior to attending the class, and its relevance is deeper for it. This is how the Creative Source works—long before I had conscious awareness of the call for impeccability, the stage was already set for me to learn the lesson. The desire to apply fresh paint to the back bedroom was a perfect example of the call to upgrade how I live my entire life. And, just like the renovation punch list kept growing, look at the way that making that one little decision, to re-paint that room, has cascaded into an entire life shift.

Again, this is not about bringing my life into perfection—there is no such thing as that. It was about becoming more aware of the many ways that I can undermine the possibility of living my life fully by putting others’ needs or desires in front of my own, and in doing so, accepting less in my life. I am not advocating that I live my life narcissistically. During the complexity of living life, there are times and situations where others’ needs will supersede mine—and I’m good with that. It is about unconsciously relinquishing my personal accountability to live a vibrant life by accepting others’ standards, thoughts, or beliefs, rather than stepping up and applying my own fresh paint of responsibility to the situation.

Since the minor renovation and the workshop on Impeccability I’ve been applying that standard to my daily interactions. When I hear my internal thinking chugging down the track of, it’s okay to cut a corner here or allow good enough there, cutting me slack from playing full out, I remind myself that to live that way is to live an indulgent but less brilliant life. And I’m not okay with that.
Like applying the perfect color of the paint on the walls of my home, I want to live my life and my capabilities to the fullest. I don’t want to skimp or deny what is possible. When my life is spent, I want to be at peace with my selections. Today, when I apply the paint of impeccability with each new choice, I physically experience the crispness revitalizing the walls of my life; and millimeter by millimeter, I feel the luminous colors of my life deepening.
A dear friend recently proposed the following question to me: *What will it take for you to embrace the greatness inherent in being a woman?* The inquiry exploded within me. The arid land that is my intuitive, feminine nature became exposed to the glaring light of day, and I sat there frozen and speechless.

It’s not that I haven’t always known that I am a female, but I’ve accepted it as a piece of information, like having two breasts and a vagina. It was data. What I haven’t done is really moved that knowledge from the realm of my head and held it as a gift in my heart. Just thinking about it brings me to tears. My friend’s question had thrown open the doors of possibility, but not until I pulled back to recover.

When I am in my ‘achiever self”—what I’m calling the masculine side—my usual behavior is to run from uncomfortable feelings—to busy myself with activities. This time my body would have nothing to do with my tried and true avoidance tactics. Upon arriving at Intercontinental Airport to wait for the arrival of two of my nieces from New England, instead of filling my waiting time by opening a book, or my I-pad, I had to recline my seat and close my eyes. I was shell-shocked and exhausted; not from exertion, but from the rupture of my internal psyche.

I sat back, my body and my eyes so heavy that I just couldn’t keep them open, and emptied my mind. This was not time to delve deeper, but to attempt to gather the fragments back into a whole that would be functional enough to graciously welcome the two goddesses-in-training who were about to arrive. How could I help them know the merit of being a female if I had not ever truly honored that gift for myself?

Like these two wonderful creatures, we were all—male and female—born into a patriarchal society that values action and attainment and does not value the receptive and creative side of all of us. We grew up four decades apart, but the changes that have happened regarding the role of the masculine and feminine have been minuscule. Yes, my nieces played women’s soccer and ran track, but did they understand their own personal (feminine) contribution to the functioning of the world? I doubted they did. I certainly didn’t at their age. Even now I still don’t stand with arms open to embrace that side of myself. Some unknown thing keeps me from it.
I have spent sixty years perfecting my achieving side. Oh, I've filled my time with work, exercise, and family. Over the years, I've danced as fast as I could to keep everyone happy and to make sure that I looked good and kept the demon failure at bay. I've taught high school, run a secretarial school, worked for General Electric and United Technologies and built a non-profit. During the past thirteen years I've supported myself as an entrepreneur. By society's criteria, I've been successful. By my personal standards, I have a good life; and I'm grateful for it. Yet there has been a nagging sensation that things are not as they should be. There has been an internal discord that keeps me seeking. Could it really be that the thing that I have been seeking is already a part of me? That what I've longed to fully embrace is my own true feminine nature? My body has spoken: Go ahead and do it.

If only it were that easy.

During the past five years, however, I have been trying to learn to slow down, to take time to smell the roses and on beautiful days to tend them. Unaware of the why, I've spent time learning to gather my thoughts like beautiful bouquets of flowers and spent increasing amounts of my energies on spiritual exploration. Even with all of that, learning to slow down has been like learning to write with my left hand; it's an awkward endeavor at best. And now I understand why.

More times than not, I've spent hours and days turning what could have been reflective time into work and achievement. I've concerned myself creating stories about how my husband might react as I began to work less. And the reality is that he continues to be 100% supportive of my journey. The truth is that there is no external pressure on me to do anything but enjoy life. The pressure I've felt, in the end, has been self-imposed.

It is really me that has had a hard time understanding that I have the right, even the responsibility, to learn to cultivate my receptive feminine nature. Even in the area of home and relationships, both feminine in nature, where I've brought great beauty and depth to our home and our relationship, I've acted like one of the three blind mice, scurrying ahead, instead of taking a moment to value the benefit I bring into our lives.

Truth is that I am brilliant in creating and sustaining relationships that I value. I do not open myself to everyone, but once I allow another’s soul into my heart, he/she is cherished and honored. Until death do us part, is not only a conscious pledge that I’ve made in marriage, but an unconscious pledge that I make to those whom I love. When there are relational challenges, and there are always challenges because we are all different individuals, I open my heart and remind myself that everyone is always doing the best they can give considering where they are on their journey. That little space allows people around me to show up more authentically. And my role is to be genuinely true to myself as a woman. From this day forward, I will take time each day to connect compassionately with my heart while I appreciate the gifts my feminine nature has allowed me to bring into the day.
Another truth is that I’m brilliant at the art of possibilities. Where others see walls and barriers, I see doorways and portals. With my masculine nature’s focus on the goal line, I see the obstacles and am better at building a team of people to advance the ball. When others see what they can’t do, I see the brilliance of who they are. I need only look back into my own history to see the genesis of my love affair with possibility. When I was seventeen, my father saw marriage and babies for me; I saw college and freedom.

I see that over the years, I’ve forgotten my deep ability to know what is right for me and slipped back into looking to men for approval and validation. Not because they had a corner on the truth, but because I forgot that only I could know what is right for me. How deep-seated was my breeding to look to the masculine for direction and devalue my own feminine knowing. No longer. From this day on, I will cherish my ability to cultivate possibility for myself and for those around me while valuing what I do know.

When reflecting back over my life, I can see the trail of bread crumbs that is the many ways that I was visually and emotionally struck by the diminished role of the feminine in our society. In the Turkish Museum of Antiquity in Ankara I noticed that the goddess statues diminished in size as time moved from antiquity to the current century. The goddesses changed from standing five feet to only two inches in height. There in front of my eyes I experienced what I’ve known only in concept. Yes, I understood that there was a time when the female had a dominant place in the world and, over time, her relevance was replaced by the masculine, but then I didn’t understand the significance in my life.

Around twenty years ago, walking through an up-scale resale shop in River Oaks, I came across a four-foot-high gilt framed depiction of who I would later understand was Sybil, the Oracle at Delphi. I was so captivated by it that I bought it. That day I hung the picture over a mantel in my living room and for years the Sybil silently graced my life. When I remarried and we melded households, she was relegated to storage where she has been for the past thirteen years. I see now that it was another representation of my relegating my feminine nature to the dark recesses of my closet.

Today I took her out of the closet and put her, once again, over the mantel in our living room. I can now gaze into her eyes and reconnect physically with the honored status of the feminine, if not in society, then in my life. Every time I gaze upon her, I will physically re-connect with her elevated status as a “seer” and value my own ability to see and communicate fully about the world. Mine may not be an unfolding of the wise Sybil’s scroll, but the writing of a blog of reflections. The connection between her role in antiquity and my role are not lost on me. Whenever I think about her, I will remind myself that as a female, I have natural access to her ability to “see” what is true.
To make the journey from head to heart is the hardest of all sojourns. To value myself and my feminine nature is not achieved by thinking about it or doing things to achieve it. It is only found in the warm receptive recesses of my heart. My journey now is not to jettison my masculine skills of warrior and achiever, but to engage my heart, by learning to love my own powerful feminine nature. It is not in choosing one nature over the other, but celebrating and embracing both that fulfillment will be found.

So what does it mean to be able to reconnect with and value myself as a woman? It means compassionately holding a space to let the unfolding of the totality of who I am unfold. It means living with the messiness of being in process while celebrating the internal creative process that is mysteriously at work. It means reining in my masculine, achievement-oriented nature until it is in service of the whole of who I am, while celebrating its potency and potential. And, yes, it means that as a female, I matter in this world. And with that, my heart bursts open with grace as I glimpse the possibility of what it might look like when I emerge fully formed in the world.
Giddy and Focused: Simultaneous Magic

I got the news this week – I test for my First Degree Black Belt Certification in less than fourteen days. It’s got my Black Belt a year ago in April and I’ve known it would happen before year end, but I never expected it to happen so quickly, so now.

Usually, I show up for my Tuesday Tae Kwon Do class ready for our routine to begin. Once in the door of the Do-Jang (school), I wait for the Grandmaster to pop out of his office, I’d bow and formally greet him, and then I saunter to the dressing room to change into my Do-Bok (uniform) and begin to warm-up, practicing my patterns, kicks, and defensive and offensive strikes.

But today was anything but usual. When I entered, Grandmaster Cho was waiting for me. We exchanged formal greetings, but then he welcomed me into his office and pointed to a paper lying on the corner of his desk. His gnarly fingers, deformed from years of breaking cement blocks, tenderly held a pen for me to use. In contrast to his clipped words, “You fill this out,” was the warmth of his smile, as he spoke the words that I thought would come in July or August. There in front of my eyes, so close that I could touch it, was the application for the test that would have my status as a Black Belt recognized at any Do-Jang anywhere in the world. I was stunned speechless.

As I began to fill out the usual data (name, date of birth, etc.), I kept glancing around the paper looking to find the next crucial piece of information – the testing date. I located it in the top right-hand corner—May 12, 2012. Was this a typo? After I paid my fee, I mustered up the courage to point to the date. Looking up at him with eyes narrowed and brow furrowed, I asked, “It’s this month, on the twelfth of this month?” With his most mischievous grin, he nodded yes.

As I walked away, the enormoseness of it enveloped me and, without thought, I moved back into my own personal enemy—the doubting mind. How can I do it in less than two weeks? I’m not ready. I need more time the mind games began. Three steps further down the hall, in mid-stride, I remembered that this negative thinking was the reason I first took martial arts. It was the insanity of this invalidating thinking that kept me feeling inadequate and unsure in the world. And with that realization, I responded with a mental defensive move that brought my old thinking to the floor—I decided that I was ready.

When I walked into my class, a girlfriend was already at work. With one look at me, she knew. I was radiating with excitement. “Yes, he set the date, and it’s just around the corner.” We embraced with the delight and abandonment of young girls in a playground; jumping up and down, excitement radiating out of both of us. With each new person to join the class, a variation of the dance of celebration was enacted. And yet, as I moved through our practices, I was centered and focused. The importance of perfecting each pattern, each defensive reaction, and each offensive move was prominent in my mind, though my body remained centered and peaceful.
It wasn’t until three hours after the class ended, when I was happily ensconced in the quiet of my own home, that I realized that what I was experiencing was two separate frequencies of ideas and action simultaneously without losing sight of either of them—and the combination was galvanizing me. How is it, that giddiness and focus could co-exist so naturally and feel so invigorating? It was magical.

Now I don’t have to go far to find evidence of my being focused. I do it naturally, like breathing. If I’m not focused, then that is usually evidence that I am avoiding something. And, although not a default experience, I’ve had moments of my being flat-out giddy. Just put my granddaughters into the room and within minutes, I’m transported to the serious child I was, and I’m intoxicated with their exuberance and joie de vivre. When they exit the room, however, my lightheartedness trails along with them.

But the combination of the two paradoxical elements simultaneously joining has me happily revved up for days now—and I see no end in sight. It’s as if I am plugged into an electrical socket – there is a lively kinetic energy flowing through me. And it’s different from my usual low-key focused energy that can have me sitting for hours in front of my computer writing or editing a piece I’ve written. Or a frenetic and focused excitement that shows up as a burst of energy and quickly sputters out.

This is how I felt when walking down the hall in my home, as I watched myself spin around, arms in the air, saying, “I see a red demo team Do-Bok (outfit) in my future.” And when my husband Bruce came in and I shared the news, we broke into peals of laughter. It’s now four days after the initial announcement that I would test, and I’m still feeling like the ‘Little Red Engine That Could.’ It’s a light energy that keeps me happily chugging forward lightheartedly toward next Saturday’s test. It is an energy that says ‘I can and will,’ just as my wedding had me declaring, ‘I do.’

Now that I think about it, I was giddy and focused with excitement once before—when I married Bruce. I had been single for thirteen years, and nine years into it decided that I was ready to explore relationships once again. It took another two years of practice dating to be ready to meet Bruce and allow my guard to come down enough to let him into my heart. And, now fifteen years later, I still get a little giddy when, out of the blue, I see Bruce as if for the first time.
So what has achieving these two seemingly different milestone accomplishments in Tae Kwon Do and marrying Bruce have in common? Both came out of a declaration that I was ready for something new. Both required that I let go of the old stories about what is viable for me and show up differently in the world. Both required that I move out of my comfort zone and brave a whole new world of possibility. And, finally, both are examples of listening to the quiet, small voice inside of me, over the cacophony of fear, which encouraged me to say yes to life’s miracles. So I’m giddy with gratitude for this new challenge and focused now on what I need to do to show up powerfully and playfully when testing day arrives. And to think, that this is just the next of many new prospects that may arise before me on this journey called life.