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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be an “awakened woman”?

To me, it means living the “truth” of who we are. That truth is: We are radiant creatures, sourced in the Spirit. Our essence is spiritual and, in that, all the qualities we attribute to the Divine are innately ours. Qualities such as: peace, joy, lovingkindness, graciousness, gratitude, confidence, and courage.

Until today, many of us have believed that these virtues were to be sought outside of ourselves, then, incorporated into our lives as best we can. Nothing could be further from the truth. All these wondrous qualities are latent within us. We simply need to acknowledge their presence and foster their growth. We do this by expanding our perceptions; opening our minds to see the possibilities available to us. We heal old wounds, release outmoded ways of being, and open our hearts to ourselves and others. If I could describe in just a few words what characterizes an “awakened woman,” it would be this: *a clear, open mind; a wise, loving heart; living peaceably and gently with herself and others.*

My hope in creating this book is that you will awaken to your true nature—a woman of Spirit— then make new choices to live in a bold, new way. Within these pages are practical guidelines for doing just that; a compendium of thirty-five articles I have authored, published in various women’s magazines over the years. The words you’ll find here can support you in your journey of awakening—then staying awake! As you will read in the Table of Contents, they flow with the seasons of your life, invite you to live as your truest self, care for yourself—body, mind, and spirit, and live in an enlightened new way.

These articles, some authored as early as 1998, remind us of the timeless nature of our spiritual journeys, that some things never change, unless, of course, we do. Opening each chapter are snippets of wisdom taken from another one of my books, *Awakening the Spirit Within*, a small tome of meditations to keep us faithful and attendant to our inner lives.

My prayer is that these words, soulfully placed upon the page, will open your mind and heart so you can live as the glorious woman you are meant to be.

Blessings,
Janice Lynne Lundy

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CHAPTER 1

The Seasons of a Woman's Life

*Each one of us awakens
and grows into our spiritual nature
at our own rate.*

*This is not a journey that can be rushed, judged, or compared.
Trust in the well-timed beauty of your own growth.*

Going with the Flow of the Seasons

As a woman who deeply loves nature, I am easily drawn into its rhythms cycles. I find myself savoring each season, whether it be one of blooming, harvest, or hibernation. And, as a woman whose passion is growth (and nurturing it in others), I'm convinced of the similarities between nature's growth cycles and our own.

Did you know, for example, that you can experience a personal, inner season of Spring? In fact, you might be experiencing one right now. At Spring's first greenings, you may feel as if you naturally want to explore new things. Long to do things differently, make a new beginning. Perhaps you have an urge to launch a new enterprise. Some of us may find ourselves drawn to cleaning out closets and drawers, organizing the basement, or having a garage sale. Each of these actions mirrors the sublime qualities of Spring—new beginnings and creativity.

As wise women of the Earth it is a very good thing to follow these inner urgings and go with their flow. Honoring your inner seasons will energize you and produce positive results because we will be in harmony with the rhythm of the natural world which surrounds and support us. Resist them, and we may feel dissatisfied, unsettled, or off course.

As the year unfolds, notice how you may drawn into each of the seasons, guiding you toward an inner Summer, Fall, Winter or Spring. Because we are creatures of nature, as the seasons change in hue and temperature, we are called to incorporate these external changes into our inner lives.

For ease of understanding, let me share a palette of the seasons with you so you may better recognize when one of them pays your psyche a visit. That way when one knocks upon your soul's door, you won't be perplexed by its invitation. Honor it and you'll be honoring yourself and your growth journey as a woman.

SUMMER

The chores are done (garden planted, attic cleaned out) and its time to play. We

find ourselves eager to live in the magic of the moment; to savor the colorful blooms that abound, and celebrate brighter, longer days. We desire to get out in nature—swim, bike, hike and use our bodies in invigorating ways. We're emerging from our solitary winter caves, eager to gather with friends and family for outings and reunions. We're excited to do all of the things we couldn't do in the cooler, darker months, so our energy is high. Everything looks, tastes and feels better. We desire to make the most of our days. We feel truly alive! We want to laugh, sing, dance, and play. Celebration is the invitation of Summer.

FALL

Things quiet down. The kids go back to school and we find ourselves subtly drawn back into home and work settings. A routine returns and we find ourselves immersed in a schedule once again. The rhythm has changed as we begin to plan for darker, colder, less fruitful days. We trim back the garden, gather the produce, and shore up the larder. It is a time of harvest, of plenty and fullness; of gratitude for the bounty of summer and life in general, so we gather together with family to share our blessings. A sense of wonder and appreciation creeps in as we watch the leaves on the trees blaze in glory, then fade. We feel things slowing down. A time of going inward begins.

WINTER

Hibernation. Mornings and evenings are dominated by dark and we find ourselves becoming more still. Silence dominates both our outer and our inner landscape. The external world may look bleak and dull, the previous season's bright hues relegated to memory. It is a time of rest, of staying inside our respective caves. We hole up in front of the hearth with a warm blanket and a cup of tea, read books, journal, knit, and honor the quiet spaces within. We find ourselves going deeper, exploring our thoughts and feelings. We may discover strange, new vistas there, some of which make us uncomfortable, but somehow we know that spending time there is a natural part of this season of noticing and reflection. Profound growth is happening beneath the surface just as new life is germinating beneath the frozen surfaces out-of-doors. We are well-served by attending to what is germinating within.

SPRING

Warm breezes blow and the ground begins to soften. We are invited out of our caves to participate once again in all that life has to offer. Nature comes alive and we do too. As the days get brighter, we feel a lightness move through our bodies and minds; we shed layers of clothing and psyche to feel the warmth of the sun once again. Everything looks and feels new, fresh, cleansed. We follow suit by cleaning out dust and clutter, ridding ourselves of old, unwanted items. We are full of ideas and energy to do things in new ways. We redecorate, makeover, build, create, set exciting goals for ourselves. Opportunities abound and we feel we can do anything we put our mind to. Mother Earth beckons and we long to plunge our hands into her rich soil to create blooms and beauty, to grow fruits and vegetables. The metaphor of the garden rings loud and true, and we know deep within our souls that what we plant now, we will reap later. Spring is the season of bright possibilities through effort.

*May you know the true blessing of each season
and honor the soul growth that is calling you!*

Waking Up to Life

The story of Rip Van Winkle has always intrigued me. It is the story of a man who fell asleep for many years and awakened to strange goings on, unfamiliar sights and sounds. As I speak with women today, I witness them reporting a similar circumstance. They feel like they are “waking up.” What does this mean?

Like Rip Van Winkle, they have a sudden realization that their life is not what they think it is, or going where they believe it should. It is as if they have been given a new set of eyeglasses through which to view the circumstances of their life, or, as in the fairy tale, been awakened from a deep slumber of unconsciously lived days and nights. Life crisis often does this for us—boldly shakes us, wakes us up. Personal tragedy, the loss of a relationship, loved one, or job, a health crisis knocks upon our door. Any one of these can jolt us from our metaphorical life sleep, and we find ourselves, like Rip, bewilderingly looking about us asking—‘What happened? What now?’

Once we have been awakened, we naturally wonder how it is we being asked to live. The landscape has changed and new rules seem to apply. Establishing some self-evident Truths might be helpful here—truisms of “How Life Works.” Buoyed by their innate wisdom, we can find comfort and courage for the journey ahead—the journey to live in a more conscious and awake manner.

Truth #1: We are each responsible for our own lives.

This truth brings with it a flurry of emotions. If I awake to realize that it is me, and me alone, who is responsible for my life—both the highs and the lows of it—then fear and worry may predominate. We may become caught up in paralyzing thoughts like: ‘What if I make the wrong choices?’ ‘What if I make mistakes?’ From this perspective, self-responsibility may feel too difficult to fully accept. It is a Truth, quite honestly, that many of us do refuse to acknowledge because it is much easier to live our lives blaming others; more simple to assign responsibility elsewhere, especially our pain and sorrow, or the consequences of poor choice-making.

On the other hand, this Truth can also bring relief and newfound freedom. I rather like the quote, "If it's to be, it's up to me!" There is tremendous power in knowing that we can actually choose how we think, feel, and behave. We can choose how to earn our living, who to associate with, and so much more. When I am in charge and take full responsibility for my life, the world is mine. I have life by the tail and can I create my own reality.

Truth #2: There are no mistakes and no wrong roads to take.

Every decision we make brings us into a greater experience of our truest selves. Every choice that is painstakingly or haphazardly made invites us to take a deeper look at who we really are. Through our choices we discover our values, the timbre of our character, where our strengths and weaknesses lie. We uncover our gifts and talents. Viewed in this light, there is no such thing as a right or wrong road to take. Every road can lead us to a more complete version of ourselves.

Think about it for a moment. Ask yourself, "What is one of the biggest mistakes I ever made?" Then ask yourself what you learned from that experience. How are you a better person from having walked through it? As long as we continue to reflect upon experiences such as these, paying close attention to what they have to teach us, we will continue to grow in confidence and character. Mistakes are for learning.

Truth #3: There is a bigger picture, a higher order at work in our lives.

I love the saying, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." We may not always know why we are being asked to experience certain challenges or changes, but the fact remains, we are. If we can flow with what we are given, the lemonade we create from the stock of our lives can be wonderful. On the other hand, we can continue to squeeze hard, hoping to get orange juice out of all those lemons, and block our own growth. Truly, we have been given the lemons for a reason. It is advisable to work with what we have been given.

As human beings we may not have the capacity to see into the future. We may not be able to look down from on high, experiencing a bird's eye view of our lives so that we can actually observe where each twist and turn could take us. Trust is in order here. Trust that where we are being led is perfect for our growth. Trust that we will be cared for by earthly and heavenly supporters. Trust that we will move through this phase of our life into more bountiful, peaceful days. Most important, let us trust with all our might that a Higher Power is at work in our lives and that it is guiding us at all times.

Embracing Truths such as these can indeed take us to the next grandest version of ourselves. "Waking up" is a tremendous gift provided by an ever-loving universe that wants each one of us to be happy and live from a place of great joy. The choice is ours whether to slumber on at the base of the tree like Rip Van Winkle, or open our eyes and greet the dawn of a new reality with a spirit of willingness and hope.

Heeding the Call of Spring: Fly Confidently in the Direction of Your Dreams!

As a writer, I have been trying to give birth to a book which has been gestating for quite a while now. It has been a delightful process to feel this creativity growing within me. The problem is that the labor pains never seem to start. I feel interminably pregnant with ideas and newfound awarenesses that are in need of being recorded, but I can't seem to find the perfect time to put pen to paper to write them down. The book has a catchy title, an outline, even an Introduction, but the text has eluded me for nearly four years now.

Each one of us has projects, dreams, which may be perpetually put on hold. The time is never right, the resources aren't available, or some life crisis pulls us away to more pressing matters. These dreams or projects may get packed away like family mementos in a dust-filled attic. A self-made promise of, "Someday I'll get to that," prevails. But if our passion is real, our desire strong, "someday" isn't good enough and we'll begin to feel the effects of having put our dream on the back burner: a constant pall of grumpiness or dissatisfaction with what is. I believe this is the voice of our spirit calling us to wake up, pay attention, and begin creating the life of our dreams.

Springtime, to me, always shouts new beginnings—the perfect time to move from old, outworn ways of living toward exciting new ways of living being. If we pay attention to the workings of nature in Spring, we can witness this happening all around us. Animals are having babies, birds are building sturdy nests in which to lay their eggs, colorful buds are bursting forth from dormant trees. Nature is vibrantly alive and recreating herself! And because we truly are creatures of nature, we can too.

So, what is it you'd like to give birth to this Spring? Maybe it's to:

Learn a new skill or hobby • Get yourself organized • Take a wonderful trip.
Start a new business • Reclaim your health • Move to a new neighborhood.
Make a new friend • Enhance a loving relationship.

The list of possibilities is endless. Growth is our natural state, so we shouldn't be surprised when we begin to notice that just as the last vestiges of cold weather disappear and the world around us begins to green, our inherent desire to grow ourselves bursts forth as well.

Moving toward the next grander version of ourselves can be both exciting and daunting. Personally, I love to dream of what can be, but putting the gumption behind it to make it a reality is another matter altogether. I do not believe, however, that lack of ambition is what ultimately stops us dead in our tracks, hindering us from embarking on a new phase of life. I do believe that fear of failure looms large in many of us.

Many years ago, I took a seminar from self-help guru Tony Robbins. It was just as I was beginning to birth a new dream for myself—launching a speaking career. Tony was the epitome of confidence and savvy. I could not imagine being as bold and self-assured as he. At the break, I wandered over to the sales table where I perused his many books and tapes. However, what captured my attention was a small lapel pin that stated quite simply, “What would you do if you **KNEW** you could not fail?” Brief scenes of success flashed before my eyes—little snippets of life as I'd dreamed it—and it felt incredible. I got in touch with the magnitude of what my life could be if I lived from a place of confidence instead of fear. The world could truly be, as the saying goes—“my oyster.”

Today, as early signs of Spring appear outside my window, I see that the creatures of nature live their lives in just this way. The world is there, ready to be conquered. It is Spring, time for birth and new beginnings. Do the tiny birds perching on the edge of the nest ready to fly off to new horizons engage in doubtful self-talk, certain that they can't fly? Do the buds peeking out from sturdy stems whine, “I can't go out there?” I doubt that they do. Instead, I imagine that they heed the strong urgings of their instincts to fly, to grow, into the next most wonderful stage of their lives. We would do well to follow their example.

Spring invites all of us to listen to the compass of our hearts and advance in the direction of our dreams. We are no different from any of Mother Nature's other children in this way. It is in our very nature to stretch and grow, to be vibrantly alive. It is only our humanity, characterized by self-doubt, insecurity, or fear that holds us back from being all that we can be.

So, I pose the questions of Spring to you once again: What do you wish to give birth to? What would you do if you *knew* you could not fail? My hope and prayer in this season of new life is that you will heed the voice of your spirit, step to the edge of your own nest, arms open wide, and confidently fly in the direction of your dreams.

Listening to the Wisdom of Summer

Summer speaks to us with such lovely voices. On any given day, if we listen attentively, we can hear the soothing sounds of waves lapping upon the shore, birds chirping gaily in the trees, a gentle summer breeze rustling our curtains. Summer calls to us more than any other season: "Slow down, pay attention." It beckons us to sit and rest awhile, to curl up in its comforting lap and surrender to the sweetness of warm days and balmy nights. It invites us to listen.

I know many women who use the summer to cram everything on their wish list into an all-too-short season. They fill their weekends overflowing with house guests and get-togethers, day trips, boating or kayaking, hiking or beach going. Don't get me wrong. I am all for enjoying summer to the hilt. But, what I am noticing is by scheduling our days to be full and varied, we can lose sight of the greater purpose of this season: to savor the moment at hand and listen to the gentle wisdom it offers.

Summertime speaks with a unique voice all its own. The abundance of nature, bridled with the opportunity to enjoy it, entreats us to heighten our awareness so that we can truly experience the richness of its gifts. Summer encourages us in the midst of our busyness (even if it is "fun" busyness) to be fully present, appreciating the moment at hand. The voice of summer gently whispers in our ears, "Walk more slowly," "Listen to the birds singing," "Bend down and smell the flowers," or "Feel the cool water upon your skin." Whenever we are engaged in one of these activities, summer's desire for us can be heard if we tune our senses up to high and root ourselves more firmly in the present moment.

Not just in summer, but each and every day of our lives, we have the opportunity to welcome the wisdom of summer into our lives. An example from my personal archives attests to this. Last June, my youngest daughter enrolled in art classes at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, about 40 minutes from where we lived. Each day for one week, I had to drive her back and forth to school, so I chose to wait for her while the class was in session. Many parents chose to hang out in the art center, some left in cars to shop or run errands. The voice of summer beckoned me, however, to stay put, to take pleasure in the beauty of the campus. So each day I packed a

blanket, a carafe of coffee, and planted myself on a grassy knoll not far from the art building. Journal and pen in hand, I sat in the sun, felt the wind's tender breath upon my face, and listened to what summer had to say to me. In those sweet, hushed moments I sank into the beauty of the day and lost (or should I say *found*) myself in the peacefulness of the present moment. It was only an hour each day, but for a time, I was able to connect more deeply with Mother Earth and hear what she had to say to me. I sat in the silence and simply listened. Appreciation for the beauty of the day came through loud and clear. Words of wisdom manifested and I jotted them down in my journal. In the solitude and bounty of nature I was able to reconnect with my truest self, a woman who is both peaceful and creative, as well as with the glorious world around me.

This summer I invite you to do the same. Give yourself the gift of time and engage your senses; fully experience what the season of summer has to offer. It might be desirable to take a few moments each day (morning is especially nice for this) to experience the sights and sounds of summer. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Δ Listen to the wind and feel it ruffle your hair.
- Δ Feel the rain on your face.
- Δ Sit in the grass, feel it, smell it.
- Δ Wander through a garden, touching and smelling all the flowers.
- Δ Lay in the sun and feel its warmth upon your skin.
- Δ Stroll through a farmer's market and savor the colorful sights and sweet smells of fresh produce.
- Δ Hearken to the morning songbirds trilling their tunes.
- Δ Walk through a field, feeling the tall grasses rub against your legs.
- Δ Drive with the windows down smelling the fresh, green fields.
- Δ Watch the clouds as they drift through the sky.

Nighttime in the summer has its own special allure. As the sun fades and temperatures cool down, a stroll in nature can open us to its magic and mystery:

- Δ Follow the path of the moon through the night sky.
- Δ Savor the colors of dusk.
- Δ Revel in the quiet that comes with darkness.
- Δ Lay on a blanket and scan the sky for shooting stars.
- Δ Seek the enchantment found in the woods, especially lightening bugs.
- Δ Bask in the luminescence of a moon garden.

The gifts of summer are many if we consciously slow down, heighten our sensory awareness, and gather them up in our arms to be gently embraced. With overactivity the usual mode of our days, summer gives us a unique opportunity to connect more deeply with ourselves and others in settings of delightful beauty; it can provide a healing balm for our work-weary souls. Peace and serenity can be ours if we allow summer to weave her fanciful web around us.

Let go of your busyness. Sit. Enjoy. And, most importantly, listen.

Surrendering to the Winds of Change

It was hanging on for dear life, afraid to let go and move on to new surroundings. At least that was my perception of this withered, brown maple leaf, the sole survivor of a blustery winter along the lakeshore. The tree it clung to was completely bare, all of its previous tenants having moved on to better terrain, except for this one anxious resident. Just watching it twist and turn with the wind, made me grin at its tenacity to not let go.

I think this is what I love most about Fall—watching the leaves and how long they'll cling. I find myself attributing human qualities to them, pondering their current condition of acceptance or angst; what their level of fear or courage might be as they are asked by Mother Nature to let go and move on to the next stage of their lives. It may sound silly, but I find great inspiration for my life journey by watching the leaves.

Leaves, I contend, are a lot like people. We come into the world inexperienced and green. We grow into our fullness from being buffeted around by the gusts of life. We depart when the time is right; when we've learned all we needed to learn. I refer not only to the human life cycle of birth and death, but to a series of small deaths and rebirths each of us is asked to experience again and again, as life's challenges come our way. Watching the leaves reminds me that we are continually asked to flow with the rhythm of life, to surrender, let go, and move on. We are called to change, to relinquish what we know as sure and safe to experience an unknown future.

Most leaves seem to do this quite easily, for it is simply part of what it means to be a leaf. It is also part of what it means to be a human being. But most of us don't "go with the flow" as the leaves do, trusting that by letting go we will be taken to the next best place in our lives. Most of us act like this little survivor leaf I'm watching through my living room window today—we hang on with all our might and refuse to surrender to the winds of change.

Why is this so? Because change is uncomfortable. Change is risky. And, if we are honest, we just don't like it. It's much more comfortable and desirable to stay the same. Interesting notion though, how we seem to want others to change all the time. In fact, we think we know what is best for them, confident we know what they need to let

go of or move towards, and we don't hesitate telling them so. Why can't we see such things for ourselves as clearly as we do for others? It may be because our vision for others is clear, not so fraught with emotion. Our vision for ourselves is often murky because it is overshadowed with fear. And fear, as we know, is the greatest obstacle to personal change.

In her book, *You Have the Power: Choosing Courage in a Culture of Fear*, activist Frances Moore Lappé aptly describes the mighty role fear plays in our lives. It can stop us before we even get started. It paralyzes us. It keeps us small, scared, ineffectual. Buying into fear, she maintains (along with co-author Jeffrey Perkins) is what we are doing in our society, more and more each day. The media abounds with stories which make us feel paranoid about other people and our world. We are consumed with thoughts of what terrible thing could happen next; what danger might be lurking just around the corner. We live not only in worry, but immersed in a sense of lack—there is not enough—so we must do all that we can to hang on to what we do have. In the end, it is our fear that keeps us from experiencing true happiness, peace of mind, from living out our greatest potential.

Frances and Jeffrey wisely invite us to reframe our beliefs around fear. “We ask you to entertain the surprising notion that fear—that oldest of bogeymen—may be a precious resource we can use to create the lives we want and the world we want.” They encourage us to consider that fear does not mean stop; fear can mean go. 1

In other words, when we feel fearful, notice that this particular specter has come to call, and reconstruct our thinking about it. Its presence may be telling us something positive. It could be saying, ‘Get ready, you are in for a great adventure. A new life awaits you.’ A gut wrenching experience of fear may not mean backing away at all; it could mean moving forward into the unknown to be all that we can be. If we choose to move toward our fear, we will discover not only our personal treasure trove of courage, but a caché of new experiences with which to build a meaningful life.

Which brings us back to the leaves ... I imagine that when a leaf receives the call from Mother Nature that it's time to let go, it ponders a bit, but it does not become paralyzed in fear, as a human might. It may ask: ‘Do I let go now or later? Do I let go with ease and flow with the winds of change? When I do, what will I become?’ In truth, within its graced life cycle, each leaf will be reborn into a new version of itself. Some will become a forest floor or fodder for birds' nests; others, compost for a garden. Each outcome is laden with its own profound purpose. The leaf does not die; it simply changes form. And somehow it knows this, except, maybe, this one small maple leaf who did not want to let go. Perhaps it had no faith...

As Fall beckons and the leaves in your neck of the woods come ablaze with color, observe the well-timed beauty of their letting go, and think about your own. As they submit to the winds of change, knowing not where they will land, witness the trust they show in surrendering to their ultimate destiny, and ponder yours. May the leaves, and the dignity with which they embrace transformation, provide a model of courage to emulate as life calls you to change, wherever that may lead.

1 Lappé, Frances Moore and Perkins, Jeffrey. *You Have the Power: Choosing Courage in a Culture of Fear*. Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, New York, 2004.

Uncovering the Recurring Themes in Your Life

I'm not big on New Year's resolutions. I guess I've made too many that have failed, despite all of my good intentions. They seem to be short-lived, lackluster in passion.

What I am big on, however, is personal transformation—lasting change that moves our lives in powerful new directions. The advent of a new year truly is the perfect time to begin again, to let go of patterns of behavior that no longer serve our truest selves, and to move toward what does.

So, how do any of us begin to transform our lives? This may sound simplistic, but we begin by *stopping*, then going within. In practical terms, this means: Shooing everyone out the door, turn off the telephone, and putting on our detective's cap to take an honest look at our life. Sound ominous? It doesn't have to be. In fact, if you've followed my column over the years, you know that I advocate "baby steps"—small increments of time, taken on a regular basis, to do what you need to do for YOU. Sitting down to be alone with yourself is one of them.

Being a New Year's sleuth requires that we take notice of what's been happening in our life so we can uncover any patterns that repeat themselves over and over again. The truth of the matter is, you cannot see yourself and your life with clarity if you're moving so fast everything is a blur. And, if you never take the time to reflect upon what has been (your past), and what is (your present), you can't possibly get to what can be (your future)! Make sense?

So sit down with yourself on a regular basis. Take time each day to get quiet so your Inner Voice can be heard. This wise Inner Voice will be your sleuthing companion and together you will begin to uncover your true desires, along with what may be preventing you from achieving them. You'll be led to any number of great personal discoveries, including the recurring themes in your life.

Of late, these are some of the recurring themes I've heard women admit to once they've sat down in a comfy chair with a cup of tea and their Inner Voice.

- I keep choosing relationships that are bad for me.
- I let people walk all over me.
- I'm afraid to speak up because I might make people angry.
- I don't have time to relax or do what I want to do.
- I don't like my job but I have to do it.

Do any of these sound like a recurring theme in *your* life? If you're not sure exactly what your recurring themes are, take a piece of paper and for the next five minutes write down all of your mental chatter. Don't edit anything; just write down what comes. Next, read back through it. What do you notice? What jumps out at you in a repeated fashion? If you're honest with yourself, you'll notice some recurring themes. These recurring themes hide underneath all of your conscious thinking; they are the unconscious, guiding forces behind the decisions you make for yourself. It's important for your own growth that they be brought to the surface and revealed.

I'd like to illustrate how this process works by sharing one of my own recurring patterns—excessive busyness. I'd begun to wake in the middle of the night with racing thoughts. I had also been experiencing a nagging, low-level of irritation throughout the day. Something in me felt like I always had to keep moving. This was not surprising to me, as I am a woman who is very busy. I play many roles, wear many hats, during any given day. I am someone who has a very long "To Do" list and I never seem to get to the bottom of it. There are so many things I should be doing. There is too much to do everyday. **ARRRGH!**

Can you hear my mental chatter? Do you witness me blathering on about all my busyness? This was what was going on inside my head and I discovered it only after I sat down and put pen to paper. This, I've learned, is one of the recurring themes in my life—the importance of "doing" and being productive—and it can literally run me if I am not supremely aware of it. I know this tension between "doing" and "being" can easily creep into my days, slowly building momentum, ultimately causing me stress and imbalance. It also keeps me from the inner peace I so passionately desire.

So what do I do, what does anyone do, once a recurring theme has been uncovered? First, you give yourself a great big congratulatory hug for being such a good detective! Next, you decide to make some new choices for yourself. In my case, I gave myself permission to spend less time each day at the computer and more time in nature, always a soothing balm for an overly busy mind. That, and some other minor tweaks regarding the pace of my day, have helped me to come back to center.

The poet, Mary Oliver, speaks prolifically of this process in her book, *Thirst*:

*“Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.”*

I concur with Ms. Oliver. The key to transforming our lives is stopping, listening, noticing, then creating new possibilities for ourselves. And when we do, we shouldn't be too astonished if, in time, we find ourselves face to face with our truest, most glorious selves. Ah, what a sensational New Year's celebration *that* will be!

Creating a Beautiful Garden from the Compost of Your Life

As the last vestiges of winter let go of their hold on fields and gardens, my imagination wanders to the vibrant blooms of spring that offer so much delight. I love a good garden, one which overflows with riotous color or savory vegetables that will grace my table. What intrigues me the most about "natural" or organic gardening is how compost—that mixture of stinky, decayed foodstuffs—can contribute to creations of such beauty. How can that icky, messy mixture that no one wants be so good for a garden?

Aren't our lives a lot like that? For most of us, it seems our primary goal in life is to be happy. We desire loving relationships, meaningful work, and personal success. The garden of our life can be a beautiful thing. However, the radiance with which it shines doesn't necessarily come from the conscious things we might do, or even how hard we work at it. It becomes vibrant and full because of the compost that nourished it.

The compost of our daily lives consists of all the bad luck, heartbreak, loss, and disappointment that we have experienced. Despite the fact that we do not invite these things into our lives (in fact, we do everything possible to avoid them), they do appear, and without our awareness, change the course of our days—forever. Challenging times, loss, even tragedies become the fertilizer which fosters the growth of our truest selves; they are the compost from which our lives blossom and flourish, whether we like it or not.

When I think back upon my own life, my personal compost heap is pretty sizable. If I were to make a list, naming each ingredient, each life event that caused suffering, hardship, or pain, I would not have wished any of them upon myself. If I could have saved myself the trouble of experiencing them, honestly, I would have. But that was not to be. Each one of us is given events and circumstances that we would most certainly reject, if we were given the choice. Life does not ask permission of us ahead of time if we'd like to go through a particular crisis; instead it visits itself upon us, disguised as difficulty, knowing full well it will serve us later in life as

compost—rich, fertile soil for growth.

What is the compost of your life? What experiences were difficult for you to deal with but you did, and as a result, you were shaped into a better person? A stronger person? A person of compassion or faith? Take a few moments and list them on paper.

Now, on the opposite side of the paper, reflect for a moment (longer if necessary), and get in touch with how that event/challenge changed you for the better. Write down how you have evolved physically, emotionally, or spiritually because of that experience. In gardening terms, what blossoms were birthed in you because of the fertilizer that life handed you?

I'll offer a few samples from my own compost pile:

- Years of stress-related illness resulted in a newfound appreciation for good health and a strong desire to create that for myself (through eating organic foods, proper rest and a regular yoga or walking routine).
- Incessant worry (which culminated in anxiety) developed into a daily focus on relaxation and use of breathing exercises to maintain a sense of inner peace.

And, like you, there are many, many more, most of a very personal nature, rooted in loss and grief, which resulted in a deepening of faith in a Higher Power, and in life itself.

As I was in the midst of experiencing these things, I often felt like I wanted to run away from my own life. It felt terrible to be in my shoes, given the circumstances I was being asked to walk through. At the time, it certainly didn't feel like I was growing the garden of my life; it felt like I was waist deep in compost, hating every minute of it. When we find ourselves wallowing in the muck of our lives, what needs to occur is a shift in perception; a remembering that nothing stays the same, everything changes, and that there will be an end to all of this. There is a higher purpose for what is happening to us; we will blossom and grow as a result.

Author, Melody Beattie offers wonderful wisdom for this leg of our life journey in her book, *The Language of Letting Go*. It is when we hold on so tightly to life, life as we think it should be, that we can receive guidance through affirmations such as those she provides:

"Today, I will not run from myself, my circumstances, or my feelings. I will be open to myself, others, my Higher Power, and life. I will trust that by facing today to the best of my ability, I will acquire the skills I need to face tomorrow."

In other words, tending the gardens of our lives, compost and all, will result in a brighter tomorrow and a brighter version of each of us. The challenge, daunting as it may seem, is to forge ahead, despite the adversity, and remained focused on the bigger picture.

I also know that personal growth takes time. It takes time for wounds to heal and a greater perspective of any experience to be gained. The best gardeners know that it days and months are required to grow all those glorious flowers and delectable vegetables. A bounteous crop does not happen overnight. American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us of this, and offers wise counsel we would do well to heed: "Adopt the pace of nature, her secret is patience."

I am confident that with patience and trust in the process of our own unfolding, we will begin to see our compost piles for what they *really* are—the stuff of which life is made—our lives. And beautiful lives is what they can be!

Finding Peace Amid the Chaos

Don't you just love it when life throws you a curve? Just when you think you can rest on your laurels, or take a break from life's intensity, you are dealt another "something" to deal with. Today, more and more people are being asked to face what may seem like insurmountable challenges: a diagnosis of a serious illness, job loss, or a divorce, not to mention children who find themselves drowning in troublesome seas. Add any one of those to the fast pace of our lives, multitasking a myriad of roles and responsibilities, and we have a recipe for stress levels that can soar, taking us into the stratosphere of chaos.

Like many of you, I am fairly adept at the circus act we call life: juggling more balls than we can feasibly handle, all the while hoping that we are doing a decent job of it. It's when one more ball is thrown into our finely tuned balancing act, and we are asked to maintain the same rhythm and performance as before, that trouble sets in. For me, this manifested a few years back when I was feeling a bit under the weather, so I decided to pay my internist a visit. He gave me the surprising diagnosis of high blood pressure. This juggler had too many balls in the air and she was teetering, the balls were beginning to tumble to the ground all around her. What was I to do? Medication was a probable solution to my situation, but that would be addressing only the symptomatic part of the problem. This diagnosis felt to me like a wake-up call; a signal to find a sense of balance in my life so that I could return to a place of peace within me that had somehow disappeared.

How can we find peace amid the chaos? I believe in order to relieve our own stress, and make the changes necessary to have a life characterized by inner peace, we must, first and foremost, have a passion for creating it. We must want it, crave it, desire it so intensely that we are unwilling to settle for anything less. For most of us this desire comes only after we have hit rock bottom, like receiving an unwanted health diagnosis as I did, and we have nowhere else to go but up. The choice to have more peace in our lives is just that—a personal choice. Since my diagnosis of high blood pressure, I am choosing peace. How about you? Could you be hearing that call as well?

Allow me to offer my personal findings on creating inner peace amid personal

chaos: Five important practices, which, if engaged regularly, can bring greater peace, no matter how out-of-control our lives may seem.

1. Take time for solitude.

Solitude, spending time alone, brings precious gifts. When we can slow down, even stop, and take time for ourselves without interruption, our thoughts can become clear. We are better able to tap into our personal reservoir of insight—“knowings”—that can emerge only in blessed silence. When our mind is overly busy with trying to figure out solutions to our problems, the innate wisdom we possess may have a difficult time breaking through. In solitude, clarity can come, along with the answers we seek, all without exhausting mental struggle. Solitude also provides much needed moments of sacred rest; enabling our mind and body to be replenished for the hours and days ahead.

2. Breathe.

A sense of personal peace can be found by paying attention to our breath. Sit, take a few minutes to focus on your breathing. Slowly count your inhales and your exhales. Breathe deeply with positive *intention* and you will discover that your *attention* shifts and slows. A sense of relaxed peacefulness may begin to wash over you. Because we can focus on only one thought at a time (and if that one thought is fixated on our breath), our thoughts cannot wander elsewhere into stressful nooks and crannies. A recommended pattern of breathing for relaxation is 8 inhales to every 10 exhales. Relaxation actually comes with the out-breath, so more of those are desirable.

3. Get up and move.

Exercise, movement in any form, allows the body to release pent-up emotion and tension. Robert Gerzon shares in his book, *Finding Serenity in the Age of Anxiety*, how stress stores itself in our cells and how movement can release it. When we are feeling overwhelmed, the most helpful thing might not be to sit still, trying to relax, but to get up and move instead. Our body’s wisdom may guide us toward mobility to free itself of anxiousness; physical exertion does help restore equanimity. Movement brings not only newfound energy, but serves as a wonderful release valve for an overtaxed body/mind.

4. Express yourself.

Many of us handle stress by holding it all inside. This can create an energetic circuit of obsessive thoughts, over-worry, even emotional paralysis. It is important for us to

release what ails us. Find a good friend to talk to. If no one is available to take your call for support, then give yourself support by writing your thoughts down on paper. Writing, for me, has been a powerful release tool. In a world that moves too quickly to listen, writing allows me to speak my truth. As ink flows, the paper accepts my words and absorbs them. I have been heard. Artistic expression is another way to set our emotions and worries free. My friend, Pegg, uses a large roll of newsprint and markers, and when she feels the need for relief, she draws (scribbles) her heart out on long lengths of paper. She assures me it works wonders!

5. Engage in diversions.

Who says stress must be a full-time occupation? Diversion is a wonderful way to remove yourself from the intensity of any situation and grant yourself moments of peace. Even when things might seem intense, engaging in another, non-related activity can re-center us and nourish our spirit. I recall when my father was in the hospital for high-risk heart surgery a few years ago. It would have been easy to become overwrought by the duress of the moment with many hours spent by his bedside. It was amazing how restorative a quick walk or a lovely meal in a nearby restaurant could be. Getting out enabled me to "get up" again, and operate from a more balanced and peaceful frame of mind.

Each of the above suggestions, once implemented, can bring us to a place of greater peace within ourselves, even when outside circumstances may not seem to support doing so. *Inner peace is a choice.* It is not a gift bestowed upon us from above. Inner peace is a state of mind, body, and heart in a world that will always throw us curves—especially when we least expect them. It is up to us to be prepared for their inevitable arrival. Mary Manin Morrissey writes in *Life Keys*, "We can rest in the exquisite knowledge that the place of peace, the center of the hurricane, is available to us in every moment." Yes, inner peace is a matter of intention and choice, and I, for one, vow to make it more prominent in my life. Would you care to join me?

CHAPTER 2

Living as Your Truest Self

There comes a time when we must follow our own inner compass.

*By listening to your heart
and following its gentle wisdom,
your inner compass will guide you
in the direction of your dreams.*

Do You Know Yourself?

I was searching for the perfect beach read. Perusing the shelves of my local bookstore for over an hour resulted in futility. Nothing caught my interest. I finally asked Ellie, the sales clerk, if she had any recommendations. "Jan," she said, "knowing you and what you write about, I think I have just the thing." She pointed to a book resting on a bottom shelf just beyond her reach, *A Year by the Sea*, by Joan Anderson.

As I read the synopsis on the back, sure enough, the author's message spoke to my heart. The story is Joan's own: a woman in the throes of midlife who took one year away from it all, including her marriage, "to find herself." Through sweet reflection and poetic prose, Anderson tells of her personal awakening, a realization that she was an "unfinished woman." Children having left the nest, a husband who wished to move cross-country, and personal goals perpetually put on hold, Joan elected to move to a family cottage at Cape Cod where she could sort out her life. Once there, she strolled shell-strewn beaches, spent countless hours reflecting and journaling, relying upon nature's bounty to speak to her, to soothe her weary soul. Much to her surprise, this gifted author of many children's books found herself laboring—digging for clams for quick cash in order to pay for a broken hot water heater and working the counter of a local fish market to make ends meet. The lessons she learns in her year away from society are wide and varied. Yet, the common thread throughout is this: Take time to find out who you really are.

What exactly is an unfinished woman? An unfinished woman is someone who may have dedicated her life to the care and concern of others, or one who may have lived her life according to the standards and expectations of others. It is a woman who may have very little knowledge of her own needs, passions or purpose because she has been caught up in the busyness of life. As a result, she may feel disconnected, incomplete, or unsatisfied with her life. With these feelings comes awareness. Awareness that it is time to look beneath the surface of one's life and discover what lies within.

Anderson writes, "We are as unfinished as the shoreline upon this beach ... Isn't that exciting? Up until now we've done what everyone else wanted us to do, now

it's our turn. I hope to continue to transcend myself as long as I live." Realizing that we are unfinished presents the opportunity to discover who we truly are. We might find ourselves asking, "What does my heart long for? What parts of me need to be reclaimed as my own?"

As women, we are born nurturers. We love taking care of others. But sometimes within the intensity of this experience, we may lose touch with our own needs and desires. We often self-sacrifice, putting ourselves on the back burner, so that others might have the lives of their dreams. Such measures are heroic indeed, but over time they can deplete us, leaving us weak in body, mind, or spirit.

This was Anderson's experience, as well as my own. For me, this awakening came in 1994, when I realized how much of my adult life had been spent caring for others at the expense of my own self-care. Like Joan, I dedicated one entire year to my own well-being. I walked the beach, read books, meditated, communed with nature, and prayed for insights to come. I scribbled my thoughts on long, yellow legal pads, and with time, uncovered a version of myself I did not know. It was a year of healing and recovery, a year of filling the well of my own existence so a new me could emerge.

Over the years, I have spoken with thousands of women who have experienced the same sensations, though most did not take a year by the sea for self-discovery. A personal sabbatical may not be a viable answer for everyone. Fortunately, the task of reclaiming ourselves can be done in increments, baby steps taken every moment of every waking day. Any woman can take these initial steps of self-exploration by doing the following:

1. Ask yourself the big questions. Am I happy? Am I healthy? Am I where I want to be in my life? I always suggest to women that they write down the answers to questions such as these, not just play them over and over again in their minds. Putting it down on paper allows us to take a concrete and honest look at the quality of our lives. Recording our truth on paper makes it real. In doing so, we are forced to face the reality of our lives and, then, *do* something about it.

2. Begin to get in touch with your own needs. As nurturers, we can easily get in tune with the needs of others. We anticipate effortlessly what makes another happy or sad, when someone needs to cry or be comforted. But what about you? What makes you feel happy? Peaceful? Productive? Make a list of those things that bring you the most joy and contentment. Now, go back over your list and ascertain when was the last time you did those things. Has it been weeks or years? Or never?

3. Take the time you need to explore the possibilities. When Anderson's husband announced he was taking a new job that required a move, she listened to her internal whisperings. She knew deep inside herself that she could not make such a move. She honored the feelings that surfaced. Risky business? Of course! The road to personal transformation is never an easy one. But if we are to become the highest versions of ourselves that we can be, the time may come when we must choose to chart a new course. Being the captain of our own ship can be a weighty, yet empowering new role. Arriving on the shores of our own self-awareness can be even more exciting.

With thousands of wonderful, self-help books in the marketplace, it is not often I choose one to recommend so strongly to others. *A Year By the Sea* is a must read for any woman who wants to address the unfinished woman within. It is a perfect beacon to guide us on the journey home to ourselves. The author also offers the reader a delicious surprise ending to her saga making it well worth the read.

Like Anderson, I am enthused about the prospect of being an unfinished woman for the remainder of my days. She writes, "Standing on this island, I feel the perpetual motion of things - the tides, birds, seals, fish, shoreline, even myself. It seems to me that the task of the unfinished woman is to acknowledge her life as a work in progress, allowing each passage, evolution, experience to offer wisdom for her soul." Being unfinished means we will never be done with the task of polishing the many facets of our being to a glorious sheen. And that is truly a thing to celebrate!

Letting Go of Perfection

Have you struggled with ideals of personal perfection as I have? For as long as I can remember, I've been bombarded with messages and images that ensured me if I just tried a little harder, I could be and have it all—the gorgeous figure, well behaved and talented children, the house beautiful, the storybook marriage, the charmed professional life. Embarrassingly, I admit, there was a time in my life when I believed those messages and did my darndest to live up to them. I really thought I should and could be perfect.

In hindsight, I realize that doing so just about killed me. Alright, perhaps that's a bit of an exaggeration, but my struggles with perfectionism did take their toll on my physical and emotional health over the years. I remember the day that I woke up to my own *dis-order*. I was reading *Simple Abundance* by Sarah Ban Breathnach, a delightful daily book which is nothing short of transformative in its ability to help us look at ourselves, determine how “authentically” we are living our lives, and make new choices to live more simply, more gently. The author began each day's reading with a quote by a well-known someone. On this particular day, it was Ann Wilson Schaef, author of *Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much*. The words leapt off the page at me and landed smack dab in the middle of my chest. “*Perfectionism is self-abuse of the highest order.*”

Perfectionism? Self-abuse? I wondered, how could that be? Certainly, setting very high standards for myself and doing all that I could to live up to them was not self-abuse, or was it? Why in the world would I want to do that to myself anyway? The questions rolled through my mind and I didn't particularly like the answers that came forth. I realized that was exactly what I was doing, and so were most of the women around me. We were all pushing ourselves far too hard, striving to be perfect wives, mothers, or career women. Whatever our reasons—be it low self-esteem, a desire for approval or recognition, or patterns passed down from mother to daughter—any of us can take the necessary steps to unhook ourselves from such self-destructive patterns.

Through counseling, honest self-assessment, or deep listening to our inner

voice of well-being, we can harness our innate desire to live more gently with ourselves. Our journey to letting go of perfectionistic tendencies will begin when we can take small steps toward a more self-loving lifestyle, including these:

Delegate

One of the self-abusive practices women engage in is to foolishly believe that no one can do something quite as well as they can. As a result, perfectionist women have a tendency to do everything for themselves, disallowing others to play their part. Whether it be cleaning the house, organizing the church rummage sale, or taking care of a business client, perfectionists are certain that if they don't do it, the results will be less than worthy, even flawed. We can change this by beginning to allow other people to help us out. Divvy up responsibilities, for one. This not only takes the pressure off of us, but empowers others to be more responsible. A win-win situation for everyone if you think about it.

Lower Your Standards

The hallmark of perfectionism is holding unrealistically high standards for oneself and others. Is it possible to let go of those and live with less than 100% of something? Whether it be laundry piles, desk piles, or not getting to the bottom of our "To Do" list each day? Take baby steps toward letting things slide a bit, cut yourself some slack, and others too. I find it helpful to keep a thought by Sarah Ban Breathnach taped to my refrigerator to help me stay relaxed about this very issue. "Progress, not perfection," she said. Her words remind me that, yes, learning to live with a little more mess or disorganization than I am comfortable with was OK. In fact, I can get used to it.

Mute the Message

As you're waiting in line at the grocery store, do you peruse the covers of all those women's magazines? The vast majority of them feature women on their covers who look absolutely perfect. No flaws or flab on these gorgeous, airbrushed women! The lead-in stories are usually about losing weight, spicing up your love life, creating a stunning home, or cooking marvelous food. Their messages of 'Try Harder, Be More' lure is into perfectionism. Did you ever notice how those magazines might actually make you feel? A few years back, I stopped buying them because every time I looked at them I felt disappointed in myself. Not purchasing them felt like an act of reclaiming myself, the *real* me, not the one that the media (supported by our culture, of course) said I should be. I've learned to live with my few extra pounds, my basic culinary skills,

and my average house, and I'm doing quite well, thank you. You may want to consider doing the same.

Our cultural images and expectations of perfection are not healthy, nor are they realistic. With record numbers of young women experiencing eating disorders alone, we would serve ourselves and our daughters well by turning away from these messages and, instead, creating, new self-empowering ones—messages rooted in wholeness, balance, and self-love for ourselves and for all the generations of women yet to come. We *can* overcome perfectionism, one hopeful step at a time. It simply takes the willingness and courage to do so.

Getting Rid of Those Nasty Shoulds!

Summer is here. Hooray! Finally, time to play a bit more, perhaps even take that long-awaited vacation. Time to gather with family and friends at backyard barbecues, block parties, and family reunions. The kids are out of school and opportunities abound for fun and exploration. There are so many things we can do with more free time, longer days, and cooperative weather. If you're like me, you might find yourself pondering not only what might be enjoyable to do, but preoccupied with thoughts of what I *should* do.

Sitting at a kitchen table, recently, with a handful of soulful women reminded me of this habitual way of thinking. We were taking turns sharing a bit about our lives. We had gotten about halfway around the table when someone (I forget who) jumped in to say, "Wow! I'm hearing a lot of "*shoulds*" here. *You know, you really shouldn't should all over yourself!*"

We all dissolved into gales of laughter. Most of us had never heard that saying before, but it sure struck home. In that humorous moment, each one of us became glaringly aware of how we'd been viewing our days—as a series of *shoulds*.

I don't know about you, but shoulding all over myself seems to happen quite often in the summer. I think it's because the season is so short here in Michigan and I want to make the most of it. I see this happening in two main ways:

Organizing and Planning for Fun

When we think of summer, we think of getting the family together. Connecting with friends we haven't seen in a while. Cooking out-of-doors. Having picnics while the weather holds. Taking day trips to interesting places. Attending seasonal festivals. Getting out in nature. Frequenting outdoor cultural events, especially concerts.

In most of our minds, all of these things require planning, so time and energy are invested in organizing the fun, especially so everything flows smoothly.

Unfortunately, doing so can also feel like pressure. Where is the room for spontaneous enjoyment when we're so caught up in creating the perfect plan?

Completing Chores and Projects

After having been holed up all winter (in Michigan, that is), once warm weather hits we are eager to get out and do things to make our surroundings sparkle with new life. Work in the garden, landscape the yard, paint (inside or out), wash windows, rearrange furniture or redecorate, clean out the garage and have a big sale, organize closets, and more. How wonderful that will all feel when it's done! Riiiggghhhttt...

Within a short period of time, these creative thoughts to make the most of warm summer days have turned into a very large "To Do" list, and the feeling inside us has changed from light to heavy. Soon it may even feel like we don't want to do *any* of these things, but we have to. "*I should*" becomes the predominate thought we wake up to and the one that visits us repeatedly throughout the day. What's a gal to do?!

How about *letting go* of expectations and notions of "I have to"? If we can honestly peer beneath the surface of our shoulds, we might discover what's really lurking there. We can begin by asking ourselves:

- Do I expect a lot of myself?
- Do I have something to prove?
- Do I worry about what other people will think?
- I am trying to show people how good I am at something?
- Do I have difficulty delegating responsibility?
- Am I addicted to busyness?
- Do I believe that if I work hard I will be rewarded?

Beneath of all of these, however, may lie one deeper reason for shoulding all over ourselves: *We don't believe we are enough*. We believe we must do and be more to be considered a good and productive person; that we must strive, work hard, meet societal expectations, and be like everyone else to be accepted and liked by them.

It seems to come down to what people might think of us if we do or we don't—especially if we don't buy into the shoulds and make another choice for ourself: *to live as our truest self*. And what if that truest self likes to languish in the summer, savor rather than labor? Wants to relax, in any given moment, not strive? Can we give ourselves permission to do so?

This is why, I believe, so many of us feel conflicted, not just in the summer, but

any time of year. We know what truly satisfies our soul, what brings us inner peace, but we don't give ourselves wholehearted permission to engage in it. Or, if we do grant permission, it's done with the should tape playing loudly inside our head! Whispers of guilt and selfishness prevail, never allowing us to fully relax and just *be*. This disharmony within ourselves, in time, can lead to stress. And stress can lead to illness, as more and more of us are learning.

The very best thing we can do for ourselves this summer—any time, for that matter—is to recognize those nasty shoulds when they come to call. Notice them, thank them for paying us a visit, then release them by making a new, more nurturing choice for ourselves; a choice that truly satisfies, allowing us to enjoy the gentle rhythm of the season. This is not always an easy task, but with patience and persistence, we can begin to release ourselves from the stranglehold of the disempowering shoulds.

Perhaps famed golfer, Walter Hagen, said it best:

*“Remember, you’re only here on a short visit. Don’t hurry, don’t worry.
and don’t forget to smell the flowers.”*

I just bet if Walter were alive today he would add, “And don’t *should* all over yourself!”

Becoming Acquainted with Your Inner Wise Woman

Have you contacted your inner wise woman lately? You know who she is, don't you? Her slight whisper is the one you hear when there is a choice to be made. Her subtle urging says, "Go this way or that." Her wrenching grip on your stomach stops you dead in your tracks at the perfect moment, just when something or someone is headed for peril. Even though you may not access her on a regular basis, she is ever-present. Your wise woman is the voice of inner knowing which resides deep within you.

There have been times in my own life when my wise woman and I were deeply acquainted. I listened well to her when it came to things like managing my obligations. Through her wise counsel, I heeded her advice to say "No, thank you," when requested to head up yet one more committee or school project. I also listened to her pretty well when it came to matters of the heart, instinctively knowing when one of my children was moving toward a disastrous life choice.

And then there were other times when I did not heed my wise woman's call at all, and her urgings fell upon deaf ears. Times when I pushed myself too hard and exhaustion set in. Times when I didn't honor my body's needs and did not give it exercise or good nutrition because I was too busy to hear her soft voice.

Today, as I enter into what many call the wise woman years (50 and beyond), her voice seems a bit more recognizable. She is much harder to ignore. It seems that from mid-life on, due to our vast life experience (and bearing witness to the lives of others), we unknowingly combine our worldly learnings with our inner, instinctual knowing. This brings our wise woman closer to the surface and she is able to companion us through our everyday experiences. She can become the best friend who walks with us daily, who speaks her advice to us when we most need it—and even when we think we don't.

How do we cultivate this relationship with our inner wise woman? First and foremost, we must accept her as a very important part of who we are. She is crucial and profound, not to be dismissed by ourselves (or others) as silly or frivolous. She is wise counsel, a gift from our spirit, to help us along the way. She has our best interests at

heart and desires only for us to be truly happy and whole.

Because she beseeches us to live in balance, it may mean that for the first time in our lives we must begin to take good care of ourselves. Any woman who faces the daily challenge of self-care in the midst of a busy life knows that passion for self is key; we must prioritize and find the time and space to care for ourselves—whether it be through exercising, relaxing, or self-nurturing. Despite their love for us and ours for them, sometimes our families and their ever-present needs deter us from doing so. The result is finding ourselves once again on the back burner of our own lives headed for depletion.

Wise woman may speak to us through pain or illness, through stress or depression to say, “Stop! Take good care of *you*. It’s time.” In listening to her beckon call and honoring what she tells us, we may find ourselves on the road to wellness, grateful for her companionship. Sometimes we just have to slow down enough to listen.

A second way to get in touch with our inner wise woman is to cultivate her presence through journaling. By putting pen to paper, simply writing to ourselves, our wise woman can emerge to reveal all kinds of amazing things. In my own life, when I unearthed the courage to write out my thoughts, she emerged from the ink to tell me what I was angry about, what I was holding onto, what needed to be let go. In short, ways that I was stuck in many areas of my life—relationships, career, parenting, and more. Through honest self-revelation, wise woman was there to help me, bringing healing and wholeness into my life. She was a loyal companion to my tears and the shedding of an old self that had been laying dormant, ready to be resurrected and brought into the light of day. Writing, today, still remains therapeutic for me. It seems that whenever I begin the task of writing, I can see wise woman languishing on the top of my computer, a knowing grin on her face, eager to journey with me one more time.

Dreams can also be a forum where wise woman speaks. By paying attention to our dreams, we can begin to address areas within us that are ripe for healing. Keeping a dream journal is helpful here. Simply take a notebook and record your dreams upon waking. Doing this over an extended period of time can reveal themes and patterns. This is particularly helpful in times of duress and life transition. Wise woman can show us where we are struggling, what we are worried about, or patterns of behavior that are not helpful to us. One book which I have found to be very beneficial in working with dreams (and inner wisdom in general) is *The Intuitive Healer: Accessing Your Inner Physician* by Marcia Emery, Ph.D. Within its pages are dozens of exercises to explore our dreams, as well as guided meditations that can assist us in tapping into our inner wisdom, the wisdom that can move us toward total well-being.

My hope is that you will not wait until the dawning of your wise woman years to develop a meaningful relationship with this source of inner wisdom. Wise woman is here for you now and can serve as a trusted helpmate for your life journey. May you trust in her wisdom, *your* wisdom, and discover the inner wellspring of insight and healing which is there waiting—just for you.

Making a Lasting Change

“Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans; the the moment ne definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.”

-Goethe

This morning I drove six miles for a cup of coffee. I do this because I am trying to give up coffee. If this doesn't make sense to you, let me explain my logic. You see, I want to let go of this coffee drinking habit which I know is not too healthy for me, so I do not stock coffee in my kitchen cupboards. That way I won't drink it. But when the urge gets so strong to have a cup, and tea no longer satisfies, I find myself rearranging my morning schedule to drive by Cuppa Joe, the purveyor of the finest coffee in Traverse City to indulge once more.

Do you think I have a problem, maybe even an addiction, to coffee? I know I do. So this morning I am mindful, once again, of what it takes to make an important shift in one's life. What is required of me, or anyone for that matter, to create a lasting or permanent change? It seems to me there are four very important elements that are required for significant (and hopefully, long-lasting) change to occur.

Readiness

Timing is everything, and when it comes to change, this is the launching off point in all new beginnings. We must be ready. We must be at a point in our lives where we know deep within our being that it is time to let go; time to let go of anything that is no longer working or acceptable to us. This can be a dysfunctional relationship, unfulfilling job, health condition (being overweight, for example) or any habit or addiction which has us in a stranglehold.

For many of us, we must be in a place of pain or great discomfort to acknowledge that it is time to disconnect from the source of our agony. Those of us who are extremely tough cookies may need to be face down in the mud before we hear the universe's live in a new way. A recent rereading of *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron reminded me of the importance of readiness. In this bold and inspirational book on recovery and reclaiming wholeness through creative expression, the author openly shares her former addiction to alcohol. It seems that as a Hollywood screenwriter and journalist, alcohol provided her with the courage she needed to write. She tells us, "If I could have continued writing the old, painful way, I would certainly still be doing it. The week I got sober, I had two national magazine pieces out, a newly minted feature script, and an alcohol problem I could not handle any longer." For her, timing was everything. Readiness was crucial. And so it is with us; we must be absolutely ready to give up the old to usher in the new. Like Ms. Cameron, many of us have to be face to face with the pain we see reflected in the mirror in order to make real and lasting change.

Passion

Once we are committed to making the changes which beckon, a burning desire is required to fuel our efforts. A namby-pamby, apathetic, carefree approach to anything does not result in great change. We must want something so strongly we can feel it, taste it, touch it. Only then is it truly within our grasp. Ask any woman who has lost a great deal of weight. She will tell you that her final drop in weight came when the picture of her thinner, healthier self was so strong in her mind that no other image was acceptable. Oprah Winfrey is a grand example of this. With single mindedness of purpose, she chose to recreate her physical self despite overwhelming odds and a self-proclaimed food addiction. (Read her candid account of this in her book, *Make the Connection*.) Any one of us can do the same if we fall in love with a new ideal of ourselves and zealously pursue it.

Perseverance

Despite perfect timing and abundant passion, there comes a time in our changeover when the temptation to return to old ways inevitably rears its head. No one said change was easy. Long term change does not happen overnight; it takes time. As human beings, we get discouraged when the going gets tough, when the cravings kick in, when the pounds don't peel off easily, or when stress undermines our efforts and

causes us to weaken. Perseverance is required to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably come our way. Perseverance to conquer the tendency to give up when the journey loses its luster. The only source of perseverance is deep within ourselves. It may be necessary to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and try—just one more time.

Support

We all need cheerleaders, supportive others who can run the race toward change with us. No one should make significant life changes alone, and yet, many of us think we do. This is my problem, my addiction, we think, and I will handle it just fine. If we can come to the awareness that it's okay to share our weaknesses with others (knowing none of us is without such weaknesses), we can open ourselves to others, gaining sturdy companionship for the journey.]. Alcoholics Anonymous provides a perfect model for lasting change. This life-enhancing program has helped millions of people with drug and alcohol addictions by providing them with a sponsor, someone who has walked the long, hard road to recovery themselves. Do you have someone who can be your life-change sponsor? Someone who can support you through the ups and downs of change? As success stories reveal, the odds of us reaching our goal are much greater if we have a buddy or two who will travel with us.

With the dawning of a new year, our thoughts will naturally turn to all of those things we wish to let go or move toward in our lives. What are yours? My hope for you is that your change will be timely, passionate, persistent, and supported so that a new you can burst forth onto the horizon. It's a new day, a new year, a new life. Your new self, your truest self, calls!

How Well Do You Speak Your Truth?

As little girls, we are often told to be quiet, to whisper, to walk softly, to be ladylike, not make a fuss. These messages run deep within our psyches, making it difficult for many women to transcend their childhood programming that quiet and unobtrusive behavior is the most desirable form of behavior. That is why I believe it is so important for women to "speak their truth."

What does it mean to speak one's truth? It means to give voice to what one deeply feels. Our personal truth is whatever we know to be right, valid, and good for us personally. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Then why is it so difficult for women to speak their truth to their loved ones, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and employers? Is it simply a matter of childhood programming as I've stated, or is it more complex than that?

Each one of us may have our own unique reason why we are reluctant to honestly speak what we think or feel. Only through deep soul searching and, for many of us, work with a counselor or therapist may light be ultimately shed on why we have a difficult time speaking up. I do believe that much of our struggle with truth speaking is sourced in our nurturing nature—our innate desire to be peacemakers. Because of this dynamic, we may put our own truth and personal need to express it on hold.

Speaking our truth is a matter of self-esteem. If we are prone to thinking that other people's feelings and opinions are more important than our own, then personal silence may prevail, and our self-esteem remains low. When we are able to arrive at a place in our own development where we know our truth to be worth expressing, then we can do so without hesitation or guilt, then our self-esteem soars.

A few years ago I saw Oprah on stage in Detroit at her "Personal Growth Summit" for women. A common theme throughout the evening was what Oprah called the "disease to please." In a forthright and honest manner, she spoke about her recent realization of her own desire to please everyone. It was inspirational to see a woman of her stature and power publicly acknowledge to an auditorium filled with thousands of women that she had a terrible time saying no to people. She touched our hearts with

many examples of how this was currently playing itself out in her life.

What steps can we take to make sure that we honor ourselves and speak our truth to others? I offer the following steps and guidelines.

1. Know beyond a doubt, that what you think, believe, and feel matters.

Your opinion is just as important as anyone else's. You have a right to express yourself. After all, freedom of speech is guaranteed in the Constitution!

2. When expressing your truth to others, it works well, and is often better received, when offered within a feeling framework.

Begin your statement with "I feel ...". When we use "I Feel" statements, it makes clear to the listener that this is about us, is important to us, is a unique expression of us. "You" statements make others defensive; they put the listener on guard, possibly even inviting combat. Remember, in expressing yourself, the idea is to say what *you feel* and not to criticize others.

3. Be aware that others may not be receptive to or even eager to hear your point of view.

As we become empowered, better able to express what it is we need or feel, it can cause fear and worry in those around us. This is a natural reaction. If we have previously put everyone else first or left our needs unexpressed, others don't quite know what to do when we step up, speak out, and claim our place. They fear being left out, neglected, or unheard themselves. Remember, as we grow and change it forces our loved ones to do the same.

An illustration of this important most point. I recall a time when a dear friend sought marriage counseling with her husband. After the first two sessions, her husband announced that he would not continue. He felt the therapist was "against him" and could not possibly see his point of view. Devastated, my friend returned to the therapist alone for the third session. With great insight, the therapist encouraged her to continue in counseling for her own growth and healing, albeit alone. "If you continue to change and work on yourself," she said, "your family will find themselves changing as well." Granted, the therapist could not predict whether the marriage could be saved, but in this case, my friend's emotional well-being was at stake, and despite the marriage's outcome, she needed to move forward in the direction of her own best self.

4. Stand strong in your convictions and don't cave in.

If we are met with resistance when expressing ourselves, the pressure can build, and we may feel compelled to give in rather than persevere. As placaters, we often prefer blessed peace than conflict. If we can hold firm to what we believe is right and true for us, however, it teaches others to respect us in a new way. As Dr. Phil McGraw writes in his book, *Relationship Rescue*, we teach others how to treat us. If we hold fast in our attempts to self-express, it demonstrates our burgeoning strength. In time, others will come to see us in this light also. Passivity or submission does not build personal fortitude or courage. It only continues to perpetuate an unhealthy relationship with oneself and others.

5. Do consider the feelings of the listener.

At first when we begin to speak our truth to others (because this is a new approach for us), we may have a tendency to blurt it out, forcefully, angrily. For many of us, this may be the best initial step in speaking up for ourselves, especially if we have been silent for a long time. This is a natural reaction in the beginning. Over time, as we become more confident of our feelings and our ability to express them, it behooves us to consider the listener, as well. This does not mean walking on eggshells or tiptoeing around the listener. It means holding that person in the light of compassion, knowing full well that this message might be hard for them to hear. It means finding a balanced approach to communication where both the giver and the receiver are heard, acknowledged, and validated. It means delivering our message with love and concern.

Learning to speak our truth is an ongoing process. It may take a lifetime to accomplish, but the rewards are great. Newfound confidence and strength are the sumptuous benefits. As we continue to give voice publicly to who we are and what we deem important, our self-esteem will take an upward turn, soaring to new heights—as will we.

CHAPTER 3

Nurturing Your Body and Mind

Everyone needs an oasis in the desert of life.
Your personal oasis is waiting for you.
When you find it, drink deeply of its cooling waters.
Relax in the shade of its sheltering palms.
Be satisfied.
Be well.

Inner Beauty

Recently, I had the opportunity to experience the joy of a woman's inner beauty. For the past few months, I have been working with a manuscript consultant for a new book I'm writing. She lives in Arizona, so we have never officially met, nor have we spoken on the telephone. All our connection has been through e-mail. I have come to know Claire as a truly lovely soul, yet, I know very little about the details of her life—what she looks like or how old she is. I don't know if she is single or married, has children or pets. (Though I did discover she loves dark chocolate!) Our conversations are “professional,” yet her authentic self, the expression of her inner beauty, always shines through.

If we were to poll 100 women to ask them what their definition of inner beauty is, I imagine they would say: A woman with inner beauty is self-aware. She is a self-assured woman; a woman who knows who she is, and knows where she's going. She is openhearted, generous, courageous, and passionate. In truth, a woman of inner beauty has a confident presence, one which invites us to take a closer look, then encourages us to cultivate our own. I know many women who are like this. I'm sure you do as well. By living as their truest selves, they inspire us to become the brightest versions of ourselves that we can be.

How, then, do we cultivate our inner beauty? One way to begin is by observing “beautiful” women and listening listening to the life wisdom they offer us. Here are a few of my personal favorites. May their inspiring words support your journey to living as the beautiful woman *you* naturally are!

~ ~ ~

“Beauty means vitality, imagination, energy - personality traits that have more to do with an individual's character than his or her age or some idealized arrangement of physical features.”

-Anita Roddick

Anita Roddick was the founder of the The Body Shop, a chain of 1,700 stores in 47 countries which specialize in earth- and animal-friendly beauty complements. I find it fascinating that a woman who earned her living in the beauty industry emphasized the importance of inner beauty over anything we might do to make ourselves more physically attractive. In her book, *Take It Personally: How to Make Conscious Choices to Change the World*, Ms. Roddick encouraged us to move beyond our self-absorbed ways of thinking and dedicate ourselves to human rights and the environment, to take our social responsibilities more seriously. Now, this was a woman who knew what she believed, a woman who dedicated her life to making a positive difference in the world. Now that's living from your inner beauty with courage!

~ ~ ~ ~

“Self love is the only weight loss aid that really works in the long run.”

Jenny Craig

These words of wisdom come from a woman who owns 600 commercial diet centers worldwide. Another interesting perspective, don't you think, from someone in the business of weight loss? Ms. Craig knows that not even the most foolproof diet can help us maintain a healthy body weight if we do not authentically love ourselves. In her book, *The Jenny Craig Story: How One Woman Changes Millions of Lives*, she writes, "I truly believe 'it's never too late' – for anything one wants to do, whether it is to lose weight, create a healthy lifestyle, find true love, or start a business." She also understands how important it is for us to connect with our true essence in order to be happy, and to live the life of our dreams. This, from a woman who did not open her first weight loss center until she was 50-years-old. Now, that's living your inner beauty with self-confidence!

~ ~ ~ ~

“It's in the fire in my eyes and the flash of my teeth, the swing of my waist and the joy in my feet, I'm a woman phenomenally.

Phenomenal Woman, that's me.”

Maya Angelou

This multitalented woman is a poet, educator, actress, playwright, civil-rights activist, producer, and so much more. Even if you have never seen her in person, or watched her on television, you sense her strong sense of self through her words and writings. She is passionate about life and our interconnectedness as human beings. Ms. Angelou has written over a dozen books, spiritual autobiographies and inspirational tomes, which demonstrate, by her example, how anyone can rise above dire circumstances to become the grandest version of themselves that they can be. Because she is so supremely self-assured, she does not allow us to whimper and wander about in our own self-doubt for long. The words above, taken from her small book, *Phenomenal Woman*, by their sheer power, invite us into our own. She directs us to live from our fullness with joy and to celebrate life. Now, that's living your inner beauty with passion!

May you remember your inner beauty!

Breathing For Well-Being

For years, I have been talking to women about self-care. And, as you may know from reading anything I've written, I advocate large doses of self-nurturing, done faithfully on a daily basis. I believe that generously caring for ourselves allows us to generously care for others. When our personal wells of well-being are full, when we are rested, healthy and happy, everyone around us benefits. In fact, they actually receive more from us (time and attention) because we have more energy to give!

There are many, many ways you can lovingly care for yourself—from choosing healthful, nutritious foods to eat, to daily exercise, periods of relaxation, and outright pampering. My very favorite way to self-nurture and care for myself body, mind, and spirit, believe it or not, is to breathe.

Yes, you heard me right. *Breathe*. It's the perfect and most natural way to restore your body, relax your mind, and soothe your spirit. Most of us are not aware of how important breathing is to our total well-being. In fact, most of us don't consciously think about breathing at all. We are so busy rushing here and there, that we don't even take a decent breath! We breathe shallowly, gulp down ragged breaths, or hold our breath altogether as we respond to what is happening around us.

When you breathe like this, tension builds and sits smack dab in the middle of your chest, or wraps itself around your head, neck, and shoulders. I'm sure you've felt the difference in yourself when you become aware of that tension; how your body positively responds when you take a deep breath in, then let it out. Breathing in, deeply and evenly, and exhaling just as deeply and evenly, releases tension. It releases not only bodily tension, but mental and emotional tension as well. When you become intentional about your breathing, your whole self will benefit in these important ways:

Physically:

When you breathe deeply, your body receives very specific health benefits. Your blood is oxygenated, which provides new, healthy blood flow to your brain, enabling you to

think more clearly. It flows to your organs to allow new cell reproduction. It flows to your muscles and ligaments, allowing them to strengthen and increase in flexibility. Deep breathing permits your pulse, heart, and metabolic rates to slow down. By harnessing the power of your breath, your body can access its own innate healing energy.

Mentally/Emotionally:

Focusing on your breathing allows your mind to let go of distracting chatter and to slow its racing thoughts. It can help you focus when you're feeling scattered; feel more creative when you are blocked. Negative thoughts and feelings that cause wear and tear on both your emotional state and your body can be released through deep breathing. Don't forget, negative emotions can manifest themselves in bodily tension, which can, in time, cause significant health problems and dis-ease.

Spiritually:

Deep breathing allows you to be quiet, to get in touch with the center of stillness within you that can bring greater peace of mind. It also provides the perfect opportunity to get back in touch with the present moment; to remember the importance of harmonious relationships and meaningful work; to connect with beauty and nature.

In other words, deep breathing can enhance the quality of life of your *whole* self: body, mind, and spirit. Here's a simple exercise to get you started on a new path to well-being through breathing:

Begin by breathing in through your nose, filling your lungs with air from the bottom up. Continue breathing until your abdomen puffs out and feels full. Try to do this to a slow count of 5. Hold your breath for a brief second. then exhale slowly through your mouth, gradually emptying the lungs, then the abdomen (in reverse order), to another count of 5. You may want to push out a final puff of air at the end to completely clear your lungs. Repeat this a number of times to feel a wonderful relaxation response. With practice, you may want to extend your inhales to a count of 8; exhales to a count of 10.

I believe that my own sense of personal well-being is due, in large part, to making time daily to just breathe. The method that works best for me is to do engage breathing while soaking in the bathtub. Combined with the nurturing effects of warm

water, I count my breaths and release any tension that has its hold upon me, ushering in a sense of inner calm. You can also do this at night while lying in bed, or in the morning upon waking before you begin your day. You can access the healing power of breath while you are doing simple, ordinary things like washing dishes, driving in the car, or waiting in line.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk and the author of *Peace is Every Step*, offers a wonderful breathing exercise that I have found to be very helpful. You might enjoy it too. I can only imagine how peaceful we would all be—in our inner world and in the world at large—if we took a few minutes daily to breathe deeply, and say these few, simple words to ourselves:

*“Breathing in, I calm my body.
Breathing out, I smile.
Dwelling in the present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment.”*

Nurturing ourselves with the miraculous gift of our breath is simple and amazingly effective. It is the very best way to care for our whole selves—body, mind, and spirit. It just takes remembering daily to do so.

Reference:

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Loving the Body You Were Born With

It's swimsuit time. That dreaded time of year when women grudgingly go through the motions of trying to find the perfect bathing suit for our less-than-perfect bodies. Standing in a tiny dressing room, fluorescent light glaring, illuminating, exaggerating every body flaw possible, we struggle to fit our mid-life bodies into teenage-sized bathing suits. I carry in twenty suits to try on, hoping to find one that will flatter or camouflage me in some way. I loathe this process.

I went through this whole scenario with my 11-year-old daughter not too long ago. We were headed to Arizona for spring break and were in desperate need of a new suit for her. Over the winter, my little one has grown by leaps and bounds, barely able to fit a leg into last year's clothing. She selected one bathing suit, the only one that she could find that fit her requirements. Two-piece. Splashy colors. Cool looking. Knowing what I know about female bodies and the swimsuit connection, I knew one suit would just not do it. She would have to try on at least a half dozen. Reluctantly, she agreed and we descended on a fitting room, bathing suits in tow.

As she tried on one suit after another, her frustration grew, along with critical comments about her body. When the tops or bottoms didn't fit just right, instead of realizing it just might be the cut or design of the suit, she personalized it, criticizing her too round tummy or her straight waistline. I was stunned to hear this rhetoric of self-criticism. At eleven, of normal height and weight, she actually believed she was too fat.

Where in the world did she acquire such a vision of herself at her age? Had I contributed, in some subtle way, to her belief that she was overweight? Or was it symptomatic of what most of us seem to feel about our bodies due to societal expectations, media madness, and supermodel obsession? That our bodies are tragically flawed, less than beautiful compared to others, and in desperate need of reconfiguration?

Recently, I ran across some research which confirmed my greatest fears. Young

girls today are mirroring, in an even more exaggerated fashion, the insecurity we, as women, feel about our bodies. Allow me to share these statistics with you:

- The majority of 10-year-old girls in the U.S. are already on diets, or they think they are the ugliest girls in their class.
- 25% of college-aged women are bulimic.
- On any given day, 48 million girls and women are on diets.
- \$33 billion dollars is spent annually on diet products.

Do these statistics shock you? They did me and, yet, in some ways they did not. I know how insecure we are about our bodies. All you have to do is stand in any supermarket aisle and peruse the headlines of the women's magazines displayed there; they all feature weight loss and diet promotion. The covers of other magazines tout thin and perfectly coifed women, most celebrities whom we admire. What is the message here? Be thin. Be beautiful. Work hard on your body, on your appearance, and happiness will undoubtedly come your way.

If we can see that our daughters have exaggerated misconceptions about their bodies, what about "grown-up" women? Here are some further statistics for us to consider:

- 75% of women think they are too fat
- Less than 5% of women say they like their body the way it is.

What will it take for us to turn off these highly damaging expectations of ourselves and learn to love the bodies we were born with? Women's bodies are meant to be soft and pliable. They need to be able to grow and expand through pregnancy and nursing. As menopause arrives, our bodies naturally add inches to protect us from injury and bone weakness. Maybe our new mantra should be, "Real women have real bodies."

Perhaps it is time for each of us to look at how we view our bodies. Take a few minutes to reflect upon these questions about yourself and your body image?

1. What is your current feeling about your body?

2. What parts of your body are you critical of? Why?
3. What parts of your body do you love? Why?
4. Do you worry about your weight or body size? Why do you think that is?
5. Do you love your body and honor it by putting nutritious food into it and giving it exercise? Why or why not?

It seems to me that a monumental shift in perception is in order here. I'd like to suggest that we take a giant leap here and begin to see our bodies as wonderful vehicles that carry us faithfully through life instead of something to be adorned. If we could, we would be much less concerned with weight, size, and appearance, and, instead, focus on how to treat our bodies in loving ways. Instead of trying to lose weight, we would choose to give our body engines the good fuel they need to be strong and resilient. We would exercise our bodies so that they serve us well into old age so we have freedom of mobility and, good health. Is it possible to come to a place of acceptance, knowing that even with nutritious eating and dedicated movement, our bodies will all look different, fit different molds, and be just fine the way they are?

As swimsuit season looms large, I challenge each one of us (myself included) to leave any self-imposed pressures or societal expectations behind as we search (or choose not to search) for the perfect suit. Let us strive to see an image of a vibrant, healthy woman in the dressing room mirror, rather than one with bumps and bulges. Better yet, let's learn to love those bumps and bulges, knowing that they are a part of who we are. Let us strive to love the bodies that we were born with. And furthermore, let's share this message and our newfound body acceptance with our daughters and granddaughters. By our example, they can make peace with their bodies, coming home to a place of self-love and confidence, as well.

Mind Fitness: A Workout for a Healthy Mind

How fit is your mind? Have you given any consideration to how healthy or unhealthy it might be? We live in a culture preoccupied with the body, especially its appearance. We are bombarded daily with images and messages that keep us concerned about how we look, what we eat, and our physical well-being.

But what about our mind? Doesn't it deserve the same level of attention as our body? In fact, if we look more deeply into the relationship between the two, we'd discover that they cannot be separated. We are a body/mind organism. What our mind thinks about shows up in our body. Our emotions rule our thoughts and our thoughts send messages to our body causing it to react one way or another. It seems to me that if we truly want bodies that are healthy, we must become more aware of the thinking that goes into them.

As a new year dawns, I challenge you to rethink your thinking! Make a commitment today to pay as much attention to your mind and its fitness as you do your body. Mental fitness is important too! Here are some suggestions for a workout program for a healthy mind.

The 30-Minute Wake Up Call

The first one-half hour of our day is crucial to our well-being. How we experience these initial 30 minutes will set the tone for our day, how relaxed or stressed we are, how positive or negative our attitude will be. This is because upon waking from sleep, we are the most receptive and vulnerable, and easily influenced. It's important to spend this time in ways that help shape a positive, productive, and healthy day for ourself.

Make the decision to change any early morning routine that does not launch you into the world with optimism and energy. For many years, I would drag myself out of bed at the last minute to get as much sleep as possible, but then I'd race through my

morning feeling way too behind before I even got started! That led to a slow and steady escalation of stress throughout the day. Or, if I did get up early, I'd find myself downing one cup of coffee after another, watching the morning news shows. It was no surprise that with all the negative information I was feeding my mind first thing in the morning, I felt lousy and depressed from that point on. A book entitled, *As a Man Thinketh*, by James Allen changed all that.

What I learned from Mr. Allen, a turn-of-the-century British writer, was that what I thought about became my reality. He said, "A woman is literally what she thinks—her character being the complete sum of all her thoughts."* I realized that what I was thinking about was making me who I was, and I was becoming a very stressed, anxious, and irritated woman. I certainly did not want to remain that way, so I made some conscious choices to begin my day differently.

Today my morning routine looks like this. If I have to get up early, I set my alarm for 15-30 minutes earlier. This way, I can awake in a more leisurely fashion. I wake up and lay quietly. I might meditate, pray or reflect, watch the trees through my bedroom window, formulate affirming thoughts about my day, or snuggle up to my husband. Upon rising, I gently move through my morning, even walking through the house slowly, intentionally, to keep my morning pace rooted in serenity.

I also try to set aside time each morning to just sit and "be." That might mean observing the beauty of the day through my picture window, or a few minutes of inspirational reading. Noise is kept to a minimum. No television for sure; soft music, if anything, might be played. This 30-minute wake up routine has become vital to my day and helps me keep my mind fit, relaxed, and filled with positive thoughts.

Each of us can make similar choices for ourselves. We all have the capability to do so, despite any schedule or dutiful obligations. It simply requires a burning desire for things to be different. It requires you asking of yourself, 'How good do I really want to feel today?' and making the choices that support your answer.

The 30-Minute Detox

Our evening routine is equally important. The 30 minutes before sleep is vital to our health and well-being, and sets the tone for our rest and dreaming patterns. Researchers have shown that the stimuli we experience right before sleep can be repeated five to seven times per night in our dreams. If we seek restful sleep, we should choose pre-bedtime activities that do not over-stimulate or create tension within us.

I would suggest a 30-minute detox routine. For 30 minutes before bed (60 is even better), begin a "winding down" process. Slow your physical pace, bathe or

shower. Listen to music or read something relaxing or inspirational. In short, try to end your day as peaceful as you begin it.

Activities to avoid before bed would be watching the news, reading the newspaper, or watching a violent or agitating movie or television show. These can cause your mind to switch into “active” mode, creating sleep disturbances and less-than-restful sleep. Instead, choose activities that enable your mind to move into “relax” mode. My personal favorite is taking a bath. Give me a tub filled with steaming, scented water and no interruptions, and I am one happy woman, well on her way to dreamland.

As busy women, our pre-bedtime routine is often spent in busyness, scrambling to get last minute things done. We are still doing laundry, packing lunches, picking up the house, or paying bills late into the night. We jump into bed, our mind racing with thoughts of unfinished tasks. Sleep doesn't come easily and we may feel exhausted upon waking. No surprise, as we have not given our mind the opportunity it needs to slow down and “detox,” to let go of the day. 30 minutes in the evening can give your body and mind what it needs to feel balanced and relaxed. And that means greater overall health in the long run.

Even though we may have busy schedules ahead of us, or children to attend to morning and evening, I believe we can still make choices to begin and end our day in a more peaceful manner—one which moves us toward mind fitness. You are the only one who can set priorities and reclaim your time as your own. If you want to have a healthy mind, you will have to choose the thoughts and experiences that make it so. The old adage you've heard bandied about really is true. “Change your mind and you can change your life.”

Here's to healthy choices for that beautiful mind of yours!

*Changed to reflect the feminine for this writing purpose.

Baby Steps to A Balanced Life

“Coming into wholeness as a woman isn’t so much about discovering who you are, but about taking back the parts of yourself you gave away.”

Barbara DeAngelis, Ph.D.

My life issue is balance. In fact, when I first began writing for this publication over five years ago, my column was initially titled, “And Now For Her Famous Balancing Act.” I discovered that phrase on a greeting card illustrated with a woman in a pink tutu, delicately tiptoeing on a tightrope. It resonated with me, that as a woman of the 21st century, I was constantly struggling with how to “do it all” and still have time for myself. How to take good care of my family, be actively involved in community, school or church, and have a meaningful career. And that’s just for starters. What about the myriad of responsibilities we carry and the many colorful hats we wear for the numerous roles we play? Yikes! It can all stack up to a teetering house of cards, ready to tumble with the slightest wind gust when there is so much to do and be.

I believe that we are creatures of body, mind, and spirit. I maintain that the only way to achieve any sense of balance in life is to make sure that, day in and day out, we take good care of ourselves in each of these three areas. The foundation on which any life is built is a sense of wholeness, caring deeply for ourselves—body, mind and spirit. When we are whole, we are happy and healthy. In my own life, it seemed balance was never achieved. I would care for one part of myself and not another. For example, if I was getting a good amount of rest and relaxation, I wasn’t exercising, thus gaining weight. Or, if I was engaged in mind-fulfilling activities, like reading or researching, I found myself on mental overload, not taking adequate time for quiet and reflection.

Somewhere along the way, I began to notice that I literally felt better when I had done something every day for each part of me: body, mind, spirit. Because I was a very busy woman with three children and a career, I didn’t have large blocks of time to engage in exercise, mind expansion, or spiritual reflection. But I did have five minutes

here and five minutes there. So that is where I began...with “Baby Steps,” as I have come to call them. When I began to find shorter times daily for body, mind, spirit-based activities, I noticed that I felt less stressed, more peaceful and, overall, complete. I found it very comforting to know that I had taken care of my whole self each day.

Where can you begin, what ‘Baby Steps’ can you take, to move towards greater balance in your life? You can start by:

Nurturing Your Body

- “Take Five”—five minutes a day to move! Full blown exercise is great, but for slow starters like me, just moving in some creative way can seem a lot more fun—and motivating. Try dance, walking, yoga, T’ai Chi, or water aerobics. When my kids were little and there was no real time to go to a gym or class, we put on silly music and jogged around the room in circles. They loved it and I got my much needed exercise.

- Eat for Longevity—Honestly assess your current eating patterns and how they impact your total health. Food, for most people is an emotional issue. Get clear about how you eat and why. I recommend, *Constant Craving: What Your Food Cravings Mean and How to Overcome Them*, by Doreen Virtue, Ph.D. who maintains that, “Your entire body, including your appetite, reflects the level of peace of mind in your life.” Commit to engage in healthier eating habits, one Baby Step at a time: reduce portion size, eliminate one unhealthy food item per week, introduce one new, healthier choice along with it.

- Love Your Body—Send messages that say, “I love you,” to your body through pampering and self-care. Engage in hot tub soaks, massage, or aromatherapy. Pleasure yourself with oils and rubs. Create a ‘Just For Me’ space in your house that feels good to relax in. Indulge yourself with a nap. I prefer to call it ‘Sacred Rest.’ Gift yourself with Jennifer Louden’s, *The Woman’s Comfort Book: A Self-Nurturing Guide for Restoring Balance in Your Life* and have fun! Begin to treat your body like a temple and it will be one. You’ll like living there a whole lot more than in a neighborhood tenement.

Feeding Your Mind

- Fill Your Mind with Good Stuff—Become aware that you have choices everyday of what to fill your mind with: positive thoughts, experiences and people, or ones that

drag you down into the negative bowels of mind. Choose to fill your mind daily with enlightening literature, stimulating conversation and meaningful activity. Spend time with uplifting folks and discern those who are too toxic for you to be around. Take a class; learn a new hobby or skill. Read, listen to music, visit a museum or gallery. Turn the television off and curl up with James Allen's classic, *As a Man Thinketh**, and discover that you really do have the power to choose your thoughts and create the life of your dreams.

- **Flush Your Mind**—Take time each day to empty your mind of its busyness and the 70,000 thoughts a day which occupy it. If we continually fill our mind, with no time allotted for flushing, we are destined to live lives of stress and overwhelm. Give yourself a break from mental activity and bask in the quiet. Meditate (if you don't know how, I recommend the book and CD by Diana Lang called *Opening to Meditation*), reflect, journal, just sit quietly in a comfortable spot and do absolutely nothing. Just "Be." Breathe.

Enriching Your Spirit

- **Slow Down**—In a world that is picking up pace as we speak, make the choice to get out of the fast lane and live life on your own terms. Constantly "doing" can cause us to feel disconnected from ourself and others. Take steps to eliminate any unnecessary activities in your day to find time to just "Be." Drive slower. Walk instead of ride. Breathe while waiting in line. Speak this mantra as your day begins: "I want to live my life fully, instead of my life living me," and take one Baby Step today to do exactly that.

- **Connect with Nature**—Notice how much better you feel when you are out-of-doors. Isn't it amazing how a beautiful sunset, bird watching, or breathing in fresh woodsy smells nurture us? Allow the healing power of nature to work its magic. Spend at least five minutes each day with your face to the sunshine, your ear to Mother Nature's sweet refrains, and connect with the awe and majesty of creation. Time spent in nature is truly restorative.

- **Engage in Spiritual Practice**—Explore your relationship with the Divine. What does that concept mean to you? How do you connect with a Higher Power? Prayer, solitude, song, worship, study of spiritual literature, meditation, or sacred dance, engaged in regularly can bring us into the heart of who we are. Ponder the reason you are here and what your purpose in life might be. Spend time in retreat (alone or with a group)

and feel your spiritual energy soar.

I believe wholeness is our birthright. We are not destined to live lives of fragmentation and stress. Peace and inner joy can be ours with a few tweaks and adjustments, renewing our commitment to our self daily, five minutes here, five minutes there, each component moving us toward total well-being. As the new year dawns, my hope is that you will embark on a deeper journey to knowing who you are and how you can best live. Trust that greater balance can be yours. It's just a Baby Step away.

*There is a wonderful version of this book for women called *As A Woman Thinketh* by Dorothy Hulst.

Inner Warmth: Creating Comfort in Everyday Life

My newest companion is a coffee table book titled, *Spaces for Silence*. If I'm feeling a bit edgy or overwhelmed, I open it up and allow the comfort it conveys to wash over me. From one page to the next are lovely images of relaxing spaces people have created for themselves. Some are inside their homes, providing sacred space to unwind. Others are outside—garden, yard, or rooftop spaces—that allow nature to soothe and restore. By placing myself mentally in these settings, I give myself an experience of inner warmth and comfort.

As women, we are physically and emotionally attuned to the needs of others. We innately know when and how to provide care and comfort when they need it most. Unfortunately, when we ourselves need comfort, we're prone to keep going, not stopping long enough to give ourselves what we may need in that moment to be physically, emotionally, or spiritually nourished. Excuses prevail, most of which are sourced in the belief that we don't have time. Underneath that belief may be another more pervasive one: We might not be worthy or deserving of our own attention. And, if we accommodate ourselves in this way, we could be perceived by others as selfish, or self-absorbed.

In reality, self-indulgence, pampering, nurturing, may be exactly what we need. Some self-directed TLC (tender loving care) can go a long way in restoring inner harmony and well-being. One of the great joys of mid-life for me has been reclaiming my ability to self-comfort. To stoke my inner fires in a way that truly nourishes so inner peace can prevail. If you, too, are at a place in your life where you could use "cups of comfort"—moments of respite to soothe an agitated body or restless mind, here are some guidelines to help you do so on a regular basis.

Slow Down Enough to Notice

When we move so quickly through responsibility-laden days, it's difficult to

notice what simple things could bring us comfort. Set aside a “comfort morning” (afternoon or evening will do, as well) and allow yourself to sit and be still. Notice any desires that emerge when you think about what would make you more comfortable. Is it a cup of steaming tea, a bubble bath, a good book, writing a letter to a friend, a nature stroll? What is it, that the simple thought of it, warms you through and through? Make a list of all the things that provide a sense of comfort. Spend some time actually trying some of these and notice how they make you feel.

Next, observe which activities have the most powerful effect on you, bringing you quickly to a place of inner well-being. Mark these with a star. These could be designated as “Comfort 911,” practices you can go to when in dire need of inner calm. For me, these are a hot bath, soft music, or lying down under a special comforter reading a book. Need ideas for yourself? Jennifer Louden’s, *The Woman’s Comfort Book*, offers plenty.

Make Room for Silence

Having a special space within your home or yard where you can go for comfort, I believe, is crucial for any woman’s well-being. Author Virginia Woolf agreed, saying that every woman needed her own room. A place to be alone, in the quiet, at home with herself. If it’s impossible to commandeer an entire room of your own, a cozy corner will do. Select furniture and decor that soothe your senses. Immerse and surround yourself with things that calm your thoughts and warm your heart. An outdoor space works nicely, too. A rocker on a porch; a bench in a garden; statuary and flowers that inspire. How soothing it can be for us to simply “be” in this sacred space we’ve created for ourselves.

Caro Ness, co-author of *Spaces for Silence*, writes of our desperate need for quiet places such as these. “Noise is now viewed as one of the most pervasive pollutants. Excessive exposure to noise affects health and well-being. It can contribute to the development of problems such as ... high blood pressure, coronary disease, ulcers, colitis, migraine headaches...” and so much more. To provide ourselves with comfort, we may need to quiet our environment; allow ourselves more time to be spent in silence, a healing balm for the body, mind, and spirit.

Respite in the Workplace

Once we discover what nourishes and comforts us, we can vow to incorporate these elements into our lives on a daily basis. Taking comfort breaks throughout the

day allow us to navigate our work and home lives more easily.

A comfort routine may be most easily accessed at home, but you can create one for your workplace as well. For example, a lunch break, intentionally taken, offers many opportunities for comfort: perusing a bookstore or gallery; sitting on a park bench can help you connect with inner quiet. Consider, too, who you spend your lunch hour with. Eating alone, in a tranquil setting, may be more nourishing than being with someone else. If you do take breaks, notice if it's time spent with people who agitate or support, and choose your company wisely.

Consider the condition of your immediate workspace and how you might arrange it to be more comforting. Just like your home, you can introduce images and objects you love, especially photos of loved ones and favorite places. Notice how the noise level or surrounding conversations affect you, too, and make choices to screen those out. Wearing headphones, even listening to music may be an option.

If your computer is your constant companion, take regular breaks from it. Do a bit of "office yoga," turn off your mind, and reconnect with your body. (*Office Yoga: Simple Stretches for Busy People* by Darren Zeer is perfect for this.) Go outside whenever you can to absorb the calming effects of nature. Use your breath to still you, whether indoors or out. It's amazing how just five minutes of focused breathing with eyes closed can revitalize. Use your computer as a comfort resource. There are many internet websites that offer visual meditations for relaxation you can do right at your desk. Even at work, you can make simple choices that to shift from feeling stressed to serene.

A comfort routine takes time to establish, along with some emotional reprogramming and physical restructuring of our day. Psychologists tell us that it takes twenty-one days to consistently think or act in a new way. It takes three months to create a habit. After that, established habits can become lifestyle.

Easing into comfort is simple. Making comfort a way of life, like anything, takes time and commitment. The key to creating inner warmth—peace of body, mind, and soul—is to give ourselves permission to do so. Then simply begin, one comforting act at a time.

CHAPTER 4

Connecting with Your Spirit

Give yourself the gift of “unplugging.”
You cannot imagine the riches that may come to you or
what magic may be woven into the fabric of your days
until you take the time
to slow down, stop, and surrender to life.

Creating Sanctuary

Light a scented candle, arrange fresh flowers from the market in a vase, put a mellow CD on the changer. I take a moment and breathe in the ambiance. A shift has occurred and my racing thoughts slow to a crawl. I feel like I can breathe again. Within seconds, through a few simple gestures, the sanctuary I have come to cherish has been created.

This intention to create sanctuary is a powerful act. To know after a busy day filled to the brim with business and personal chores, errands with kids, or appointments, we can come home to a soothing environment of our own creation is nothing short of wonderful. We all have the power of choice and the freedom to determine the timbre of our surroundings. It is something, however, that most of us do not engage in for one reason or another.

Perhaps we share our space with others and arrive home from work to the television blaring or rock music vibrating the walls. Not to mention a horde of needy others descending on us to pay attention to them, cook for, or help with homework before we even get a chance to take a relaxing breath. Perhaps we don't think we have the right to speak up and announce that a particular scenario on the home front is just not working for us. Or, it could be that we live alone and have never broken free of the habits we've acquired over the years. Whatever your personal situation might be, it is up to you to become aware of what soothes your jangled nerves, then incorporate more of it into your surroundings.

Why is creating sanctuary for ourselves so important? Because the pace of our lives continues to accelerate at breakneck speed and our stress level is increasing right along with it. Doctors report that well over 80% of the patients they see on a daily basis suffer from stress-related problems. And, as Dr. David Kundtz notes in his life-changing book, *Stopping: How to Be Still When You Have to Keep Going*, "Negative stress energy does not go away by itself; it accumulates and, if not balanced by a time of relaxation, continues to do you harm." As busy women today, it is crucial that we

become our own time keepers and not allow the rhythm of the world to hold our health hostage. Creating sanctuary is a matter of body, mind, spirit well-being.

An Oasis for the Senses

Because we are body/mind beings, we cannot just tell our mind to relax. We understand relaxation through what our senses tell us. Our five senses are the gateway through which our body unwinds and experiences feelings of peace. Take my personal “creating sanctuary” ritual, for example. I have learned from experience what works for me—music, flowers, scented candles. Engaging with these things as soon as I walk in the door sets the stage for a descent into inner peace. Surrounding ourselves with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches that satisfy our soul is the first step in creating sanctuary. Take a moment and think about what yours might be. What soothes your psyche and spirit? And does your home reflect that? If not, what can you do to create a more peaceful environment for yourself?

You can begin by fantasizing. Imagine that your home is an oasis, a warm, welcoming refuge. What colors greet your eyes? What do you smell? What is the noise level and what sounds are present? What objects are on tables; what pictures on walls? Notice how you feel as you stand in your sacred space. Once visualized, you can now proceed to create it.

If you share your space with others who, like my family, seem to have a lot of “stuff” scattered here and there, I would suggest beginning with some guidelines for the rooms you use communally. For starters, everybody’s personal possessions go back to their bedrooms. That includes toys, shoes, magazines, etc. Because you’re the mom, wife or partner, the fact is you can be in charge of common space. It took a while for my family to cooperate with me about this until they understood that I was trying to create a lovely, peace-filled space for *everyone* to enjoy.

Next, object by object, place back in the room things which bring a sense of pleasure or provide good memories. It is important to eliminate clutter and remove items with negative associations. Admit it. That lamp with the dangling crystals you despise—the one Aunt Harriet gave you for your wedding—will not bring you peace of mind when you read by it.

It is also important for you to decide how common spaces are to be used. Is it necessary for the television to be there? Can it be relocated so this area is dedicated to conversation, music, or reading? If television is vital to some family members and not others, negotiate the hours of watching and, if need be, the type of programs watched.

Pockets of Peace

If you share your space with others and cannot arrive at a peaceful solution, you might have to withdraw and spend time in a private sanctuary—one designed just for you. (oh, darn!) This can be a bedroom, den, spare room, or screened in porch; any place you can carve out a pocket of peace. For many years, my only pocket of peace was the master bathroom. It was the one place I could relish the quiet, smell nice smells (ah, nothing like a bubble bath by candlelight), sip a glass of wine, or read a good book without interruption. Being the mother of three children, at times I literally had to put someone else in charge and lock myself in to reclaim my sanity. I kept remembering what writer Virginia Woolf said: Every woman needs two things —her own money and her own room. I had the money thing figured out. It just so happened my “own room” had a toilet in it.

Over the years, as my need for peace and a relaxing environment became more than a prescription for what ailed me (more like a daily vitamin essential to health), I found myself creating pockets of peace all over the place. Soon there was a cozy reading corner in the bedroom, then one in the living room. In time, my “spiritual redecorating” was noticed by my entire family. They remarked how good my space felt and they each wanted one for themselves, even my teenage son. Miracle of miracles!

Joseph Campbell may have described best why we need sanctuary. He said, “You must have a room or a certain hour of the day or so where you do not know what was in the morning paper ... a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are, and what you might be.”* By creating sanctuary and immersing ourselves in it, this is exactly what we do. We remember who we are. Women of significance. Women of inner peace.

* As referenced in *Simple Abundance* by Sarah Ban Breathnach. Warner Books, 1995.

Create an Oasis of Calm—Outdoors!

Want to relax? Go outside, at least that's what the experts tell us. If peace of mind and body is your desire, step out into Mother Nature and notice how much better you feel. It's true, psychological studies reveal that our relaxation response comes 50% faster when we are out-of-doors rather than in. And, more good news: our contact with nature has a lasting effect, enabling us to be more focused and calm throughout the day.

Knowing this, it seems logical that we might want to consider creating spaces of comfort for ourselves, oasis' of calm, right outside our door. We spend a great deal of time creating lovely indoor spaces, and yet, how much actual relaxation do these spaces provide? I don't know about you, but even as appealing as my quaint little house on the Bay is, often when I look around me, I am reminded of all that needs to be done. On the other hand, it seems that when I step through the sliding glass door into my backyard and garden, all thoughts of "doing" disappear. My only thought is to sit and savor the glory of what awaits me there: green grass, pale pink, climbing roses, waving purple iris', nuthatches and chickadees flitting to and fro, nesting in the cedars that line the yard.

Noting this positive response, I decided to invest some time and energy into creating a special place just for me—a place where I could sit comfortably and enjoy this little slice of paradise. I decided to start small and keep it simple, an important noticing for me considering my tendency to tackle too much or strive for perfection. Scanning the space, I chose to focus on a small porch and make it into an intimate and sacred space to simply "be."

My first step was to clear the space of everything, just as an artist begins her endeavors with a clean canvas. Next, I pulled up a chair and sat there in silence for a while. I allowed myself the luxury of "feeling" the space to discern what items might be necessary and what items would feel pleasurable to have around me. I settled on a Zen-like approach, less being more: a wicker rocker with comfortable cushion, a small round side table, a delicate-sounding wind chime, a gentle flowing fountain, a pillar

candle in a wrought iron stand for evening porch sits.

Words fail when I try to describe the profound sense of peace that prevails while sitting in my sacred space. From my perch, I can view the garden and all the birds who come to visit, the chipmunks who scurry along the fieldstone wall, the solitary fox who, on occasion, sneaks through the field beyond the cedar trees. I am in heaven on earth in this place.

Any one of us can create something similar. In fact, it just may be one of the most important things we can do for ourselves and our well-being. “The impulse to carve out a zone ... for reflection has its roots in ancient cultures,” writes Ruth La Ferla in *Spaces for Silence*, “yet it flourishes today with a new vitality ... An oasis of calm amid the myriad distractions of contemporary life is important ... More than that, it may serve as a refuge, a place to come to terms with the pressures and anxieties of an uncertain world.”* My garden-view porch has become that for me: a doorway into the peaceful places I know lie just below the surface of my ever-busy mind.

We can begin to create a sacred space for ourselves by assessing the landscape and sizing up what’s available for use. For city dwellers, it may not be a yard, but a rooftop escape or porch. Any place will do as long as it is somewhere you can be alone for a bit to connect with nature’s quiet. A corner of a yard or garden is ideal.

Next, select a bench, chair, or cushion upon which you can sit comfortably. Choose decorative items to place within the area, items that enhance the beauty of the place—or not. Leaving it natural and unencumbered is just fine. The important thing is to bring into this space only that which nourishes you, relaxes you, delivering you quickly to inner vistas of peace and harmony.

There are many books and resources available on how to actually create sacred space out-of-doors. There are consultants, many of whom are trained in the nuances of Feng-Shui—arrangement of the environment for balanced energy and harmony. Not to discount the value of any of these, I do believe that by trusting the guidance of our inner wisdom, we can come to many of those wise decisions on our own. The key to our success is giving ourselves permission to “be” in this place and “feel” what is right and true for us. Then, follow that inner guidance to create the space that is ours and ours alone—body, mind, heart, and soul.

Inner watchfulness is important, too, as we set about creating a sacred space. Become observant, as I have, about any tendencies you might have to make a project too large, perfectly manicured, or suited to someone else’s liking. How often it is—even in a soulful endeavor such as this—that we become caught up in the “shoulds” of how something should be! Of what the neighbors might think. Of standards of beauty. Falling prey to inner dialogue of this nature can sabotage even the best of

intentions.

One day last summer, I was given confirmation that my peaceful porch was, indeed, working its magic. As I sat there, reading and journaling, quiet prevailed—both inner and outer. Out of the corner of my eye, I spied a slight flicker of color and feather. A white-breasted nuthatch had come to call, resting its tiny body upon the fountain less than six inches from my hand. He sipped from its flowing waters and sat, just as I was, taking everything in. Minutes passed and together we savored the morning, two contented souls at peace with ourselves, one another, and the world.

* *Spaces for Silence*, Alen Macweeney and Caro Ness (Boston, MA: Tuttle Publishing: 2002)

Is Your Cup Half-Empty or Half-Full? Developing a Personal Practice of Gratitude

For as long as I can remember, I've believed that the thoughts we think shape our reality. This is especially true of gratitude. Have you ever noticed that the people who are grateful seem to be the most happy? It doesn't seem to matter what they have or have not—especially possessions or achievements—they appear to be just plain happy about life.

I recall when my friend Ginny returned from a trip to South Africa. She related to me her life-changing experience of spending time with villagers who (from our American vantage point) had absolutely nothing. Despite their apparent poverty, there was not poverty of the spirit. Ginny was immediately struck by all the bright smiles she saw. She witnessed children happily playing, running, engaged in games, and singing. It appeared that despite their apparent lack of “things,” they were thriving and happy.

Perhaps this is because true happiness of body, mind, heart, and soul arise when one can see life with “sacred vision.” This means that we are born with or have developed the ability to view people and circumstances as good—our cup of life as full. We might call its opposite seeing the world with “scarred vision.” From this perspective, life appears (and feels) disappointing or lacking—our cup of life is half empty.

How we view our lives, as full or lacking, I believe, hinges upon our ability to *focus on* what we have, or what we don't. I surmise that the South Africans Ginny met had been enculturated in gratitude by their community. It is safe to say that we, in America, are not a particularly grateful people, for we have not been raised, for the most part, to be so. Instead, we have been enculturated to seek and acquire more, continually striving for the new, the better, convinced we deserve the best.

Gratitude for what *is*, for what we *have*, can be cultivated through personal practice. We can shift our perspective from life as half-empty to half-full, and, in time, as full-to-overflowing! It simply requires growing in gratitude, a little bit at a time. This

Thanksgiving, if you desire to harvest an attitude of gratitude, might I suggest the

following practice. It's powerful and life-changing!

Waking Up with Gratitude

Before your feet touch the floor in the morning, lay in bed for a few minutes and mentally list your gratitudes. Begin with exactly where you are. Feel your body upon the mattress and give thanks for that. Allow your mind to focus on the next closest thing. Give thanks for blankets. For warmth. For a good night's sleep. For the comfort you feel. Give thanks for the person lying next to you (if there is one.) For your children in the next room.

Now make your circle of gratitude a little wider. Expand it outwards. Give thanks for your house or apartment that protects you from the elements. For the food in your refrigerator that you will eat this morning. For the hot water you'll shower in as you begin your day.

Continue to expand your scope of gratitude. Offer thanks for your friends and family. Name them by name. For your neighborhood or church community. Your job or co-workers. Your city, state, country. Gratitude for the earth itself that overflows with natural beauty and provides resources that make our lives more comfortable. For health, for love, for the Spirit that encompasses us all. For breath, for the gift of being alive. And on you go, naming all the things in your world for which you are grateful.

Then, notice how you feel. If you've done this practice slowly, gently, and with sincerity, I can guarantee you will feel a whole lot lighter, even after only a few minutes. Don't be surprised if the hue of your entire day shifts to be brighter, more hope-filled.

This morning practice of gratitude has truly transformed my life and it can do the same for yours. I began to use it faithfully this past winter when I noticed some Seasonal Affective Disorder creeping in—that “down” feeling many of us in northern climes get when gray, wintry days prevail. Taking just five minutes first thing in the morning to mentally run through my gratitudes was the very best thing I could do for myself. It energized me for my morning routine of writing, softened my interactions, and, generally, just made me feel warm and fuzzy all over. With gratitude, I breezed through five drab months with ease!

The most remarkable thing I've come to know about a personal practice of gratitude is, unlike a diet or exercise program, its effects can be immediately felt. A daily practice of gratitude can shift our inner world, bringing us to places of inner peace and joy. Before we know it, life itself looks and feels different. Sacred vision is now ours. Life is good, no matter what. And for that, we can be eternally grateful.

Women Retreat!

When was the last time you took a day off to “fill your well?” A “well” is your personal reservoir of physical, emotional, and spiritual energy. It is the source of your well-being, determining how you feel. How you respond to daily life depends on the condition of that well.

Actual wells found in the ground, as we know, can run dry from overuse, especially if there is not an adequate source of replenishment. As women, we run the same risk. If we do not refill our wells with time away or self-nurturing activities, we can dry up, not to mention become downright ornery, perhaps even ill.

Taking a personal retreat day is the perfect way to refill our wells—body, mind and spirit. Because we are busy women, rejuvenating ourselves must be scheduled in, put at the top of our personal priority list if we wish to remain emotionally balanced and in good health. Seizing the day to retreat is a wonderful gift we can give to ourselves, and it’s fun! So what are you waiting for? Start today to plan a day or two away just for YOU!

Designing a Personal Retreat

Begin by asking yourself where you’d like to spend your day. At home or someplace else? What is your time frame and budget? If you’d like to get away for 24 hours, consider these options:

- A Bed and Breakfast inn or lodge
 - A hotel
 - A lakefront cottage
- ^aA friend’s home, apartment, or condo (with the friend gone, of course!)

Select a setting that is quiet, comfortable, with amenities you will enjoy. A lovely

natural setting, comfy places to lounge, a Jacuzzi, and pre-prepared or catered meals, might be just what you're looking for. The idea is to do as little work as possible, only engaging in activities that soothe and restore.

If you elect to take your day away at home because of time or budget constraints, you'll need to set some ground rules to ensure genuine R & R. No laundry or housework is allowed. Turn on the answering machine and turn off your cell phone. Have your meals planned ahead of time. Most importantly, ignore the pull to do what you "should" or feel you need to catch up on just because you're home.

What to Do on Your Day Away

No matter where you decide to retreat, the key to a successful getaway lies in what you choose to do with your time off. There is no specific, written-in-stone way to fashion your personal retreat. It will depend on what you're hoping to receive from this experience. Do you want rest or much needed sleep? Do you desire creative inspiration? Do you long for a totally self-indulgent day?

Then choose pastimes that support your spirit. You may want to consider these self-nurturing activities: take a nature walk; get a massage; give yourself a spa experience, including a facial or pedicure; journal your thoughts and feelings; listen to music; dance; partake in a favorite hobby; read or meditate.

Of course, tightly scheduling your day is not the idea either. The focus of a personal retreat day should be to do exactly what YOU want, to give yourself what you need in that moment, and to feel completely relaxed and at peace doing so. It's a day to take good care of YOU in a most delicious way; you choose the flavor, texture, and richness as the object of your desire. And most importantly, do it guilt free!

Create the Perfect Atmosphere

The props you use in your retreat setting will enhance the quality of your day away. When I retreat, I love to bring special objects with me to make my immediate surroundings cozy and enjoyable, thereby creating a sacred space for myself. This might include:

Favorite music (including a portable CD or tape player)
Candles or incense
Pictures
Familiar objects or mementos

A journal to write in
An art project
A good book or magazine
Aromatherapy bath or body products
A special hobby
Comfort food or drink
Your own pillow or blanket
Lounging clothes

Put all of these elements together and “voila!”, you’ve created the perfect day away. Now, it will be up to you to make it really happen. Your total well-being is truly worth the time and price of a retreat experience. Plan for it. Save for it. No matter what form of personal retreat you choose, my hope is that you will discover an oasis of peace and serenity in your very busy world, even for 24 hours.

Perhaps when you do, you will hear the voice of Anne Morrow Lindbergh, author of *Gifts from the Sea*, urging you on. In this inspiring book for women penned on *her* annual, private retreat at the shore, she wrote “. . . I must try to be alone for part of each year—even a week or a few days, in order to keep my core, my center, my island quality.”

Anne was a wise woman indeed. As the wife of aviator Charles Lindbergh (and a pilot herself), the mother of six children, and the author of eleven books, she knew firsthand the importance of getting away, even for a short time, to fill her own well so she could be her best self.

Do yourself a favor and take Anne’s sage advice. Gift yourself with the soul-satisfying opportunity of a day away. I guarantee you’ll love every minute of it and wind up wanting more.

Give Yourself the Gift of Time

Today, I gave myself a gift. Actually, three gifts, a few of my favorite things: a new book, an afternoon at the beach, and permission to do nothing at all. Hearing this, some might say I'm spoiled. True, I am good to myself. But only because over the years I've learned the importance of giving myself permission to take the time to do what will rejuvenate me; to be healthy, calm, at peace with myself and my world.

Why is it important for us, as busy women today, to "unplug" from the hurried pace of our lives? And, how do we do it, especially when it seems as if there is no time to do so?! Much of what I've learned about "unplugging" has come from personal experience, from learning life lessons the hard way. It's also come because I've spent so much time with other women who are increasingly frustrated and overwhelmed with their lives; experiencing ill health, stress, anxiety and more. Our common dilemma is this: We know we should slow down—better yet, stop—and take the time to do for ourselves what we need to be well—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Despite the fact that we know what the outcome will be if we don't (burnout, exhaustion, resentment), most of us do not listen to our inner wisdom that says, "Give it a rest, already!"

If we are to live in an awakened manner, it's very important that we understand the importance of "unplugging"—letting go, letting down, to take time to just "BE."

It is healthy to slow down; to give ourselves well deserved "R & R."

Author Robert Gerzon explains in his book, *Finding Serenity in the Age of Anxiety*, that our bodies are not intended, nor constructed, for such fast-paced living. As passengers on the train of life, we often move at breakneck speeds. This speediness is felt in our minds as racing thoughts (and, subsequently, stress and anxiety). It is also felt in our bodies as stress-related disorders (heart arrhythmia's, headaches, sleep disorders, and so on). When we slow down or stop this breakneck pace, we immediately feel better—our bodies and minds tell us so. If we just listened more

intently these our body/mind signals, we would instinctively know what to do, or not to do, to be well. But we must slow down in order for this to happen.

“Unplugging” builds our self-esteem and self-empowerment skills.

When we wrestle moments from the hands of the daily time clock, we bring our attention and energy back to ourselves. As we dedicate time to *us*, we know *we* are worth our own time. If we choose to spend precious time on ourselves, we must be very worthwhile. Do you follow the logic here? Engaging in this unplugging can empower us and build our self-esteem. We learn to become the engineer of our own train (rather than being a passenger), and we gain a sense of our personal power. We realize do we have control over the ride. We truly can pull the stop chord and disembark at any time. It takes only the desire and courage to do so.

Slowing down, taking time off, resting, and rejuvenating ourselves helps us see things more clearly.

I have a dear friend who is struggling with this issue right now. She has a strong desire to leave her job of fifteen years. As she describes it, she is not only burned out, but “well done.” However, because of the pace of her life, with no real time to sit down and think, she has no clear indication of what she wants to do next. She admitted to me that she needed time off between jobs to figure it all out. I suggested she take a few weeks off. Her response, a wise one at that, was that she needed at least three months off to work through the process. Fortunately, she has saved her money well and can afford to do it.

With such busyness ruling our days, it often feels like we are living in a fog. When we make the decision to rest, we feel our mental fog dissipate. The veil lifts and we can see ourselves and our lives more clearly. When our lives seem to be racing out of control, body and mind struggling to keep up, there is no way we can think clearly.

In *Stopping: How to Be Still When You Have to Keep Going*, Dr. David Kundtz explains that “slowing down” itself is not enough. In fact, he believes it really doesn’t work at all. In order to improve the quality of our day-to-day lives, we must actually experience periods of stopping. He describes “stopping” as “doing nothing as much as possible for a definite period of time (one second to one month) for the purpose of becoming more fully aware and remembering who you are.” This has been the way I have chosen to live my own life for the past several years. I stop—often. I breathe. I

surrender to life and do "nothing". And in doing so, my life has been enriched, blessed a thousand fold, and moved in the direction of its higher purpose.

This has also been the case with many notable individuals. Singer/songwriter Eric Clapton "dropped out" and moved to the island of Antigua after rock and roll stardom took its toll. He did "nothing" for three years but play his guitar. He emerged from his hiatus in peak form, his new, inspired music a testimonial to the power of stopping. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, the wife of American aviator, Charles Lindbergh, took one week every summer to experience a week of solitude at the Florida seashore. There, she did "nothing" but whatever suited her: sleeping late or rising early, walking the beach searching for sea shells, writing in her journals. Her inspirational book, *Gift from the Sea*, came as a result of stopping.

Give yourself the gift of "unplugging." You cannot imagine the riches that may come to you or what magic may be found in the fabric of your days until you take the time to slow down, stop, and "be." Remember, each one of us is unique and the amount of "unplugging" or "stopping" we need for our well-being may vary. You may need only a few moments to savor a sunset to feel revitalized. Or, if you are of a different nature, a week in bed with the covers pulled over your head might be the prescription you need for personal restoration.

Everyone needs an oasis in the desert of life. Your personal oasis is waiting for you. When you find it, drink deeply from its cooling waters. Relax in the shade of its sheltering palms. Be satisfied. Be well.

Moment to Moment Living

One year ago, I sat in this exact spot on a sunny deck overlooking the sparkling blue waters of Lake Michigan and penned my first column for *Women's Edition*. I called it "Savoring the Final Days of Summer." It seemed when I wrote it that summer was moving much too quickly, so I attempted to outline how we could hold on to these fleeting, but magical, moments of summer. I wrote about slowing down, drinking in the wonders of nature, creating and capturing memories, and learning to live in the moment.

Today, it seems appropriate to revisit this subject and see how we have progressed in one year. Are we better at savoring and more cognizant of the beauty of the present moment? Have we learned to appreciate the many gifts bestowed upon us by a bountiful universe? Do we live each day as if it were our last? If you are truthful in your answering these questions, I might hear a long pause, followed by an even longer explanation.

"Well ... you see ..."

No need to make excuses here. I understand. Life happens. Busyness overtakes us. Crises occur. It is easy to make well-intentioned promises to live in the present moment, but challenging to make it a reality.

It is difficult for most of us to live in the present moment. True, our physical bodies are in the here and now, but our minds are elsewhere. We are either thinking about the past or thinking about the future. The 60,000 thoughts we think each day are centered on what we could have done, just did, or will be doing. As we work the assembly line, drive the car, mow the lawn or prepare a meal, how often are we truly experiencing this unique moment in time? Chances are, we are replaying an old tape of a conversation in our mind: mentally reliving a past event (and how we should have done it differently), or rehearsing a worry about the future. We are rarely fully present with what we are doing in the moment.

An example from my personal archives illustrates this tendency to not be rooted

in the present. My son was 8-years-old and not keen on competitive sports. I gave in to pressure from other parents, forcing him to play softball as they assured me, "It will be good for him," and "It will build character." He hated every minute of it and so did I. To sit on the bleachers for two hours when I had so much to do seemed like a waste of time. The innings were interminable (you know how few hits there are in pee-wee softball!), and my thoughts continually wandered to the laundry pile at home, scores of business calls to return, and the huge "To Do" list I carried in my head at all times. Finally, one day, I was jolted to awareness only to see the ball rapidly rolling toward the outfield and a little boy standing on first base. I realized that boy was my son. Due to my preoccupied thoughts, I never saw my son's only hit in softball. Later, as he ran up to the stands where I was sitting, my heart sank as he shouted, "Mom! did you see my hit?" "Of course!" I lied. "It was great!" But I didn't see it. I was not present. Have you experienced times like this when important moments in life slipped past you because "no one was home"?

I believe it is vitally important for us as women on the "path to awakening" to spend as much time as we can in the present moment. Doing so has multiple benefits. We can be fully present to our loved ones and their needs. We don't miss the important moments of life. We also enhance our personal well-being by being present, because when we are living in this way, our bodies and minds are not rushing, not racing. We are calm and at peace. Stress is nonexistent. We may even experience a deeper connection to life and all of its events, both its joys and its sorrows. In the present moment, we feel fully and vibrantly alive!

What steps can we take to experience more moment to moment living? Try this simple technique. At any any given moment in time, stop yourself, and determine where your attention is placed. Are you reworking yesterday's conversations or fretting over tomorrow's activities? Concentrate. Draw your attention back to right *now*, to this very moment.

Another technique is to engage in present-centered awareness. This means when you are engaged in a mundane or repetitive task, totally immerse yourself in its sensations. Washing dishes? Consciously feel the warm, soapy water moving between your fingers. Mowing the lawn? Smell the sweet fragrance of grass clippings. Visually enjoy the patterns you are making in the grass as you mow. Heighten your senses and appreciate the activity you are engaged in.

Focusing on your breath offers another avenue for coming back into the present moment. You may want to consider using a technique offered by Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, author of *Peace is Every Step* (a book I highly recommend to anyone who wants to live more peaceably in life). He suggests

taking a few minutes each day to become aware of your breathing by saying to yourself:

*“Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile.
Dwelling in the present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment.”*

Living in the present takes full effort and concentration. Each of these three steps can lead us to greater awareness of how to fully enjoy our day-to-day lives. Each moment of the day is special. The past cannot hold us. The future need not concern us. We are “home” whenever we are fully present.

For many of us, this awareness of the present moment becomes important only when we are faced with a crisis of some sort. I have spoken in my book, *Coming Home to Ourselves*, of my own health challenges, and how they opened my eyes to a new way of being. If you have ever suffered a dramatic loss or death, or are dealing with a life-threatening illness, the importance of living in the present makes itself known. We learn very quickly that the past is over and done with; that there is no reason to dwell on the past except to learn and go on. We understand more fully that there are no guarantees of tomorrow. We realize that we, or the people we love, may not even be here one hour from now, so we learn to stay present, to savor, and appreciate the moment at hand.

;Barbara DeAngelis, Ph.D. says in her book, *Real Moments*:

*“Yesterday is history
Tomorrow is a mystery
Today is a gift
That is why we call it the “present.”*

The present moment is truly a gift—a gift we can leave unopened and unenjoyed, or one we can joyously unwrap to savor its beauty and meaning. The choice is ours.

As we learn to take one day at a time, to revel in its sweetness and, yes, to fully experience its sorrows as well, we move to place of balance and wholeness in our lives. As we heighten our awareness of the uniqueness of each moment, we slow the pace of our life. Golden moments become golden hours. Golden hours become golden days ... And the moments last and last ...

Choose Nature and Let Your Spirit Soar

After spending many months indoors, sheltered from winter's harsh elements, our beloved summer in Michigan has finally arrived. Images of long, hot days, temperate nights, and gorgeous sunsets come to mind. This season is a true balm to the soul.

It seems that in summer our tensions naturally abate. The beauty of nature has the power to calm us. In the summer, we feel more, fully alive. The world is full of abundant life—birds singing, flowers in glorious array, the vibrant greens of trees and lawns. The awe-inspiring bounty of Mother Nature gives us cause for reflection and soothes us with her gentle beauty.

Because human beings are members of the animal kingdom, the out-of-doors is our natural home. Yet, in the spirit of progress, we have increasingly cut ourselves off from nature. Many of us feel more "apart from" than "a part of" nature. We live and work indoors, away from our natural environment. We are surrounded by artificial light, noise and structures. Joan Arnold, writing for *New Woman* magazine (May 1995), says, "As our daily surroundings become more synthetic, we rush to work in cars or trains to spend our days in sealed climate-controlled boxes. With our senses numbed by a daily barrage of noises and images, few of us deem it crucial to watch the shape of a cloud or finger a leaf." Because of this sort of daily regimen, we often feel disconnected from nature. If we pay attention, however, we will notice we feel at home in the natural world. We actually feel better when we are outside, breathing fresh air instead of processed air, soaking in the sights and sounds of the earth.

A study presented by Bernadette Cimprich, Ph.D. demonstrated that exposure to nature has a profound influence on our health, attitude, and general well-being. She found that "women recovering from breast cancer surgery fared better when they were closer to nature." In her study, patients were divided into two groups. "Those involved in a nature activity three times per week for ninety days complained much less of

mental fatigue or inability to cope. Compared with the control group, their cognitive acuity was measurably sharper, they were more likely to return to work full time and were more game for new endeavors, like losing weight or learning to play an instrument."

By reconnecting with nature, we can reap a multitude of rewards for all aspects of our being. This summer, might I suggest the following steps to deepen your relationship with nature:

Set aside time each day for simply enjoying nature.

Mother Earth beckons us each moment to come savor her delights, but do we heed her call? Richard LeGallienne wrote, "I meant to do my work today, but a brown bird sang in the apple tree and a butterfly flitted across the fields and all the leaves were calling me." Spending time in nature allows us to slow the pace of our life and be more aware of the joys found in the present moment. Time seems to lose importance. We can leave behind the stresses and strains of daily life and just BE.

Given the choice, choose an outdoor vs. an indoor activity.

Like to read? Take your book outdoors. Like to nap? Lounge in a hammock. Need peace and quiet? Let the birds, wind, and waves calm your turbulent mind. Want to be left alone? Go for a restorative walk in the woods or on the beach. Studies show that our relaxation response comes 50% faster if we move outdoors. So go outside. Pay attention. Begin noticing, paying attention on purpose to what is going on around you. How often have we been shocked to suddenly notice the beauty of a blue, cloud-filled sky, or the deep green currents of a mountain stream? Fine tune each of your senses, turn them up to "high volume" and fully experience the delightful sights, sounds, and smells that nature offers you.

Give thanks.

As you find yourself enjoying and reconnecting with nature, give thanks for its beauty. Allow your spirit to soar as you witness its everyday miracles. Whether you notice a seagull soaring high overhead, or the velvety soft petals of a blossoming rose, allow yourself to be nurtured, fed, and enriched by our first and forever Mother—the Earth.

I concur with Ada Louise Huxtable who said, "Summer is the time when one sheds one's tensions with one's clothes, and the right kind of day is jeweled balm for the battered spirit."

This summer, let us indulge ourselves—body, mind, and soul—in nature's generous gifts. Given the choice, choose nature!

END THOUGHTS ...

Being Kind

It never fails. As a new year rolls around, my thoughts naturally turn toward resolutions—goals to set, bold changes to make. In fact, for eleven years, I’ve penned a column on exactly that. This year I’m doing something different; I’m not going to set a lofty, new goal for myself. Instead, I’m going to recommit to a vow I took many years ago. It’s a self-made promise to live more gently with myself; to be as kind to myself as I try to be to others; to befriend myself, once and for all.

In her wonderfully supportive book, *The Courage to Be Yourself*, my dear friend and mentor, Sue Patton Thoele, writes of “befriending” in this way. “I believe it is essential,” she says, “that you become a loving and tolerant friend to yourself. Do you act as a sheltering tree in your own life? Take a moment to think about how you treat your friends. Do you express the same kindness and consideration toward yourself? Many of us hold a deep-rooted belief that we don’t deserve to be loved. “They” deserve friendship, but for some unfathomable reason, we don’t. This is a false belief. We are worthy of love. We do deserve our own support and friendship.”

I admit, for most of my adult life, I have been generally unkind to myself. I’ve pushed myself beyond healthful limits to be the perfect wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, neighbor, employee, volunteer, community leader, and more. All roles I thought I should play in life to be a “good person,” to be liked and accepted by others, especially by my family, peers, and coworkers; to be perceived as successful, of service to others, and a contributor to the greater good of humanity. It appears that the majority of women get trapped in this pattern of behavior, too.

When I think about befriending myself more and pushing myself less, it brings peace to my heart. Just the word itself—befriend—calms and soothes! What would it be like to befriend ourselves? It could mean that we get to experience life as we did when we were young girls, before the responsibilities of life swooped in; before there were so many choices to make, things to be done, and needs to be met. We wouldn't work quite so hard, we'd play and laugh more, even take naps when we felt like it. Life lived in this way would certainly feel different than it does now.

We can begin to be more kind to ourselves by making a decision to start befriending ourselves. Let's make a vow, together, to be more gentle with ourselves. Let's commit to treat ourselves as lovingly as we would our own best friend.

I've created a "Be Kind to Yourself" list of practices that can be hung on your refrigerator, the bathroom mirror, or your computer screen to remind you to treat yourself more lovingly, more gently, every single day. They're practices that can nurture and balance you—body, mind, and spirit.

Honor your inner rhythm: Work when you feel like it, play or rest when you don't.

Get out in nature: Allow its beauty and naturally calming effect to soothe you.

Nurture your body: Pamper it with massage, leisurely baths, aromatherapy, loving touch.

Eat healthfully: Consume as low on the food chain as possibly, especially fresh fruits and vegetables.

Move: Stretch, walk, exercise, dance, hike, do anything that rids your body of tension.

Soothe your mind: Turn off the TV, meditate, read inspirational literature, listen to music, engage in a hobby.

Laugh: Mingle with friends who inspire, relax, or rejuvenate you.

Breathe: Take time alone spent in quiet, breathe deeply and regularly, allowing your body's inner reservoirs to be filled with calm.

Rest: A nap can be a sacred time, nourishing body, mind, and spirit simultaneously.

Connect: Plug in to the Divine as you understand it through meaningful spiritual practices of your own creation.

In the new year, I don't want to be perfect; I just want to be nice to myself. I hope you do, too, and that you'll join me in renewed commitment to acts of personal lovingkindness. When we do, we'll undoubtedly find ourselves being kinder to others, for self-compassion naturally breeds compassion for others. Self-love spawns love for our fellow human beings. Being kind to ourselves may just be the most loving thing we can do for everyone ...

About the Author

Janice Lynne Lundy

Described by her readers, audiences, and colleagues as “practical and poetic, possessing deep and gentle wisdom,” Janice Lynne Lundy serves as an interfaith spiritual guide to tens of thousands of women throughout the United States through her nationally syndicated magazine column in *Women’s LifeStyle*, and as a professional speaker and retreat facilitator. She has been recognized for her sensitive and compelling interviews as well as for her gift for connecting with soul-searching women. Jan is an adjunct staff member at the Institute of Spirituality at the Dominican Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

She is the author of three personal and spiritual growth books: *Coming Home to Ourselves: A Woman’s Journey to Wholeness*; *Awakening the Spirit Within*; and *Your Truest Self: Embracing the Woman You Are Meant to Be*. With her husband, Brad Lundy, she co-authored *Perfect Love: How to Find Yours and Make It Last Forever*.

The mother of three, stepmother of four, and grandmother of three more, Jan resides on the peaceful shoreline of Grand Traverse Bay in northern Michigan with her husband, Brad, her creative partner and soul’s companion.

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