

A misty forest scene with tall trees and a sunlit path. The image shows a dense forest with tall, slender trees and a path leading through the woods. The ground is covered in green grass and yellow wildflowers. The atmosphere is soft and ethereal, with sunlight filtering through the trees.

INTO THE WILDERNESS

With Sara Sharpe

A 12 MONTH WILDERNESS GUIDE
TO INNER (AND OUTER)
TRANSFORMATION

12 Month Wilderness Guide



Colorado, Summer 2013

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PROLOGUE

"I went into the figurative Wilderness and rebuilt my life from the inside out. I didn't know that my inner transformation would lead to an outer one (even though I had heard for years that that's how it worked). But it did. In every conceivable way it did..."



Moab, Utah Winter 2013



Recently a friend asked me how it was that I managed to spend a certain amount of time each week observing silence. "Silence makes me crazy," she declared. "But I love the silence! The silence is sexy," I blurted. In thinking about my instinctive answer, I've decided that sexy is as good a description as any—in addition to boundless, limitless, transformative.

Through silence, we enter the Wilderness. In the Wilderness, we are silent long enough to discern and address those parts of ourselves that are "shrouded in darkness," as Sarah Parsons would say (*A Clearing Season*). We "pay attention to the parts of ourselves that do not flourish," and then we "clear and cultivate a part of that wilderness, to create an open space in it," transforming our lives in the process.

Ever since my foray into the Wilderness (which, incidentally, constituted much more than a daily meditation practice) I have been turned inside out and upside down. Every aspect of my life has undergone a radical transformation for the better. It was in the rich and profound silence of the Wilderness that I discovered it is indeed possible to live a deeply passionate and fully realized life. It is also possible to live with a deep and abiding sense of peace, even (perhaps especially?) if you've experienced your share of trauma. It is possible to live joyfully and abundantly—to discern your life's work and to do that work in a way that thrills and sustains you *without exhausting yourself in the process*. We are called to a life that is deep, rich, juicy... and what's not sexy about that

And yet.

And yet, even while we are well aware of the purported benefits of contemplative prayer or a meditation practice, most of us have instead become increasingly adept at distracting ourselves from any sort of deep introspection. Silence “makes us crazy” because when we set aside our distractions/addictions, we are invited to sit with and forced to deal with our "wild selves," which represent those parts of ourselves over which we have little or no control and which take the form of unwelcome thoughts, disturbing emotions, incessant worry, long-held resentment, physical discomfort, stress, confusion, lack, and the nagging sense that something—though we’re not exactly sure what—is missing in our lives. WHO WANTS TO SIT WITH ALL THAT?! It's uncomfortable stuff. So to keep the discomfort at bay we find countless ways of distracting ourselves. **We shop. We binge on Netflix and smart phones. We drink too much, eat too much, work too much. At the extreme end of distraction we develop drug, alcohol and/or sexual addictions.**

The bad news is that these negative voices—your wild selves—have much more influence in your life than you might imagine. The good news is that you can deal with them. In the Wilderness, we sit with our wild selves and we listen—long enough to calm and, finally, to tame them.

Friend, hear me. You no longer have to distract yourself from your own life—from your deepest self. It isn't necessary to struggle incessantly; to work yourself to the bone while still coming up short. And yes, I am aware that stepping out into the Wilderness, where the silence can be deafening if not downright terrifying, isn't something that most of us do willingly, even with the promise that life is radically different on the other side of such an experience. I went kicking and screaming, but I went, and now I want you to come with me. The Wilderness experience is the portal through which we find Peace. Joy. Answers. Depth. Passion. Atonement. Abundance. Forgiveness. And God, if you're looking for God.

Specifically, in the two years since I entered the Wilderness, every aspect of my life has turned right-side up. Two years ago, I was shattered emotionally, and so sick and tired that I could hardly function. Some days (let's be honest—a lot of days) I couldn't get out of bed. I don't need to tell you that it's hard to financially support oneself from one's bed. My brilliant projects were languishing because I didn't have the personal power to move them forward. And, perhaps worst of all, I had just been through a major life change and had absolutely no idea what it was I wanted to do with my life from that point forward. I was forced into the desert and, while there, I chose to go into the Wilderness (there is a difference). But the truth is, I really only went because I was too broken to do anything else. (To read about my first few weeks in the Wilderness click [HERE](#).)

Fast forward to now. Today, I am healthier than I have been in decades, I am crystal clear about what I'm doing and why, my work is rich and fulfilling and, for what it's worth, I just did my taxes and discovered that I *quadrupled* my income last year. And best of all, I feel happy, peaceful, and powerful beyond measure.

There are no magic bullets or instant fixes in the Wilderness, and my life isn't perfect. I still have plenty to work on. But the difference between then and now is so extraordinary that I'm officially a zealot when it comes to embracing the Wilderness experience.

To be clear, my life didn't change this quickly and this profoundly because I employed some sophisticated strategy and worked myself to the bone. It changed for the better, in every respect, precisely because I *didn't* do those things. Instead, I got still. I listened. I surrendered. I went deep into myself and I sat in the shadows until the Light broke through. I prayed (because I happen to be a person who prays) for peace, and healing and clarity. Eventually, I got all that and more.

When there are bills to be paid and decisions to be made, it is counter-intuitive to walk away from it all, even if you only walk away from it all for an hour (or less) a day to "sit in the Wilderness." To the outer world it can look a lot like doing nothing. When one is under great pressure to figure it all out, to make money, to find answers, doing nothing seems irresponsible. It is not. (And, of course, in the Wilderness you're hardly doing nothing.)

It is true what they say: Life doesn't have to be as hard as we make it. It is true that you can relax and let go and that when you do, things eventually start falling into place in wonderful ways which you might never have imagined. I have tested the theory am ready to declare it sound.

There are myriad workshops and online seminars currently available to teach you about everything from starting a business to attracting your ideal clients. They are invaluable. Sign up. Do the work. Learn and move forward. But always, ALWAYS balance Time for Doing with Time for Being. You'll save yourself countless hours and loads of stress. Go out into the world, yes, but not without also going regularly into the Wilderness.

You don't have to want to go, you just have to go. In so doing, you will receive guidance *and* discover a deep undercurrent of joy no matter your present circumstances, your past history, or your uncertain future.

Be brave. Allow yourself to let go, just a little. Set aside your distractions slowly, gently. Step out into the Wilderness, which has always called you and always will.

I'll come with.

Sara

INTRODUCTION

Welcome, friend! You're in for the very best kind of adventure.

What do we mean by the Wilderness? We can think of the Wilderness as the place in which we find all of the obstructions between ourselves and lives that are joyous, peaceful, and fully realized. More importantly, we can think of the Wilderness as the place where the Light breaks through. We go into the Wilderness, then, to clear and cultivate it—to identify the unhelpful habits and patterns that keep us from moving forward, and to bring those habits and patterns out of the shadows and into the Light where they will be transformed. A Wilderness practice means making a little time each day, or as often as possible, to set aside your distractions and to engage in a period of deep introspection.

It's important to remember that in the Wilderness we are concerned with inner transformation, which is sometimes hard but always rewarding work. One such reward has to do with the fact that a byproduct of inner transformation is radical, outward transformation.

This process involves much more than a daily meditation, though going into the Wilderness does indeed require some form of regular, mindful silence. But stepping into the Wilderness, as I see and teach it, constitutes a gentle and profound lifestyle change; one that involves both letting go of the tendency we all have to over-strategize (working ourselves to the bone, with frustratingly slow results), and consciously becoming aware of our addictions and distractions and weaning ourselves from them—not by sheer force of will, but by getting to the heart of the very things we're distracting ourselves from: fear, guilt, insecurity, rage, unhelpful holding patterns etc. This guide will offer exercises designed to help you confront and work through those debilitating (and often heavily encrypted) fears and patterns that keep you from moving forward.

The good thing about the Wilderness is that you're never presented with more than you can handle. In the Wilderness, your path unfolds gently—right on time and with a precision and perfection that seems, at times, to border on the miraculous; which is not to say the path is always easy—rest assured, it's not. Letting go of the tendency to over-strategize and to protect ourselves with endless distractions can be extraordinarily difficult. But in the Wilderness, we learn to do just that.

In the Wilderness there is no preconceived strategy. There are no hard core To Do lists. Instead, we go there to connect to our deepest intelligence. We let go of our intense striving and instead we set broad, brilliant intentions. As Deepak Chopra recommends, "Intend that

everything will work out as it should, then let go and see if clues come your way. Your deepest intelligence knows much more about what is good for you than you do.” If that doesn’t make sense to you now, trust that it will once you’ve spent some time in the Wilderness.

It can be desperately hard for all of us to cease striving, especially when we feel pressured to heal, find a job, make money, make amends, and/or figure out what to do with our lives. I don’t know that I could have done it myself had I not been forced to.

A few years ago, I received news that reduced me to ashes. Immediately after that blow I found myself single, less than high-functioning (to put it mildly) and debt-ridden. I immediately set about exhausting myself trying to make ends meet in the midst of intense personal turmoil. Eventually I became too sick to work, and I was sure that I would lose everything. One decision, however, made all the difference: Instead of throwing in the towel, I went into the Wilderness. I rebuilt my life from the inside out. I didn’t know that my inner transformation would lead to an outer one (though I had heard for years that that’s how it worked), but it did. In every conceivable way it did. (You’ll find an account of my first foray into the Wilderness in the Appendix of this guide.)

Not everyone enters the Wilderness out of desperation. We all come for different reasons. Some of you will come because you seek clarity. Some of you come to take an honest assessment of where you are and to compare that assessment with where you’d like to be, and then you come back again, seeking the most expedient route to that ideal place. Others of you will come because you are sick and sad and have run out of options, or because you feel happy as opposed to joyous (happiness being a fleeting emotion, joy being a state of being that is in no way dependent on externals). Still others of you enter the Wilderness because you have committed a crime of some sort and wonder if there is a place in the world for you to be free of guilt and shame. Whatever your reason for coming, the promise of the Wilderness is that it holds the answers you seek and that, with enough patience, you will get what you came for (if not always in the ways you might expect).

While the rewards of entering the Wilderness are great, discipline is required in the beginning. Also, it’s helpful to know what you’ll need before you go in, and what you’ll encounter when you get there. I can’t tell you exactly, but I can give you a good, general idea. This guide is intended to serve as a road map of sorts. To that end, here are a few suggestions to get you started:

Be ready and willing to observe a period of silence every day, or at least several times a week

There is only one way into the Wilderness and that is through silence. The silence can be

disorienting at first, but this guide will help you. Trust that you will orient yourself quickly and that there is no faster way to move forward—out of old patterns that keep you stuck, and into a life that is meaningful, joyous, successful, and deeply aligned with your values and mission (which you can also find in the Wilderness, if you're not yet clear about what your mission is).

Find and claim your sacred space

Not only is it important to carve out time enough to enter the Wilderness, it's important to carve out some physical space. If at all possible, I recommend finding a place in the great outdoors, even if you can only get there weekly or monthly. If that were the case, your practice would be at home during the week and in the real, tangible wilderness as often as possible.

Be prepared to meet your Wild Selves

In the Wilderness you will encounter your wild selves, which are much like wild beasts, and which represent those parts of yourself over which you presently have little or no control. Your wild selves take the form of thoughts and emotions; negative and/or repetitive thoughts about yourself and others, and negative emotions like anger, grief, guilt, boredom, and fear (of abandonment, failure etc.). Our wild selves have much more power over us than we realize, and they talk to us incessantly. They often torment us, in fact, and so to drown out the noise they make we busy ourselves at best, engage in addictive behavior at worst. (That is in no way a judgment, by the way. I'm a veritable expert on addictive behavior as a way of fending off my own wild selves.) The good and bad news is this: We can only run from our wild selves for so long before our forward momentum comes to a grinding halt, or we fall ill, exhaust ourselves utterly and completely, lose something dear to us, or end up in legal trouble (depending on the nature of your beasts). In the Wilderness we learn that, in fact, our wild selves mean to protect us. In the Wilderness, we listen to them, which calms them down instantly. Eventually, we tame them.

Identify and set aside your distractions

Immediately upon entering the Wilderness, we are called to pay attention to the million and one ways we distract ourselves. Maybe you watch too much TV or spend too much time on your computer. Maybe you shop too much, or eat too much, or drink too much. Perhaps you spend way (waaaaay) too much time on your smart phone, or are involved in ill advised relationships in hopes that someone else might convince you of your own worth and beauty. Slowly, gently, bring some awareness to your own brand of addictive behavior and gently challenge yourself to turn the TV off or to forego tonight's after dinner drink. (And for the love of God, set your smart phone down and look up at the sky now and again.) But mostly, go into the Wilderness and do the exercises laid out in this guide. The more time you spend there—getting comfortable with increasing amounts of stillness and confronting your own wild

selves—the less time you’ll have to spend drowning out negative, repetitive thoughts and unpleasant emotions.

Look for your companions

Not only will you encounter your wild selves in the Wilderness, you’ll also meet your companions. Be on the lookout for them. Not long after I’d ventured into the Wilderness, a dear friend gave me a collection of poems by Hafiz (*The Gift*, translations by Daniel Ladinsky). I am never without it/him.

Accept now that you will always live with some degree of uncertainty, and that clarity comes when it comes—and not a moment before

Don’t make the mistake of going into the Wilderness expecting immediate answers to all of your questions and a clearly defined life plan with bona fide guarantees. The Wilderness contains certain qualities; spend enough time there and you come to embody those qualities, which include patience and acceptance. In the Wilderness, *acceptance is key*. In my experience, things start falling into place the minute one enters the Wilderness—but that is different than clarity. Clarity comes, but not often immediately. In the Wilderness, we learn to sit with the unknowing.

Accept also that entering the Wilderness requires sitting in the midst of (sometimes acute) discomfort, especially in the beginning

You’ll be surprised by how quickly you move through this initial discomfort, but you’ll also be surprised at how difficult it is to sit with, initially. You *must* come to understand this now. I have a friend who just ended a relationship. It was the right thing to do, but she still feels the familiar “burning” sensation that comes with such loss. (Depending on the degree of dependency, the burning sensation that comes with walking away from certain relationships can, at times, feel like flesh-eating acid.) When one experiences this degree of pain, one has two choices; sit with or run from it. I can’t emphasize enough the great value in refusing to numb such pain and discomfort, as often as you reasonably can. In refusing to numb your pain you instead bring it fully into your awareness—you bring your pain out of the shadows and into the Light and it is, *you are*, transformed.”)

Most importantly, know that the Light comes

The prospect of turning toward the shadows and confronting your wild selves and/or your pain is, in the beginning, scary if not terrifying. But it is also indescribably powerful. In the Wilderness we are, in effect, entering the shadows and letting in the Light, and the transmutation is very tangible and absolutely life altering. Enter the Wilderness, with the intention of casting Light in dark corners, and watch what happens. As you do the work, you

become infused with Light, and that changes everything. *Everything*. The experience isn't subtle and feels, at times, a lot like overwhelming bliss; bliss that isn't dependant on anything or anyone outside of you and your inner experience, though it affects your outer experience in every conceivable way.

The 12 MONTH WILDERNESS GUIDE is entirely flexible. There are 12 sections, and you can do them one at a time, over 12 months, or you can do several at once in more or less time (in any order you choose). Some sections seem a bit arduous; others are a lot of fun; some of them have two Wilderness Exercises; some of them have one. All of them are as short as possible. My aim is to gently point you in the right direction, not to overload you with instructions. One way or another, look through the table of contents and see what calls to you. That will be the place to start. Everyone's experience is different, and in the Wilderness there is only one hard and fast rule: GET THERE. You must be disciplined enough to get to the Wilderness regularly. Once there, you must be open and flexible and spontaneous enough to go where you feel led. (One caveat: It is important to start with "A month of ORIENTING YOURSELF IN THE WILDERNESS.")

Try hard not to go into the Wilderness with a hard-and-fast agenda. Your main task, which will get easier with time, is to listen and to pay attention to what surfaces. The very things that need healing and/or clearing will surface effortlessly, if you let them; in the perfect order, at the perfect time, and in the perfect way. Welcome what surfaces.

Say, for instance, that you settle in for your Wilderness practice and immediately start obsessing about your ex. Great! Instead of feeling frustrated about your obsessive thoughts, get curious about them. Recognize that they reveal something important. This guide offers several techniques with which to acknowledge and move through such things so that they no longer role around endlessly in your psychic space, affecting everything from your mood to the choices you make on any given day.

All of the Wilderness work I suggest is designed to help you become a curious and compassionate observer of your own life. It is my firmly held belief that our life experiences are designed to help us in every way, at every turn. Every "good" experience serves your growth, as does every "bad" experience, which sheds Light on, and brings to the surface, those parts of you that still need to be brought lovingly and gently into the Light.

Your watch words in the Wilderness are *Awareness*, *Acceptance*, and *Love*. Always, Love.

And so we begin.

A month of ORIENTING YOURSELF IN THE WILDERNESS



Red Mountain Pass, Colorado/Summer 2013

You can move through the following twelve sections in whatever order you choose, with the exception of this one. It's important to begin here. First you'll find a meaningful place in which to practice, and then you'll learn some foundational exercises to help you on your way.

Find and Claim your Sacred Space

Though I'm speaking metaphorically when I talk about going into the Wilderness, it is necessary to find a place or space in which to establish your practice. Obviously your practice isn't dependant on a singular place, and eventually the work you do in the Wilderness will become so deeply ingrained that *where* you practice won't matter nearly so much as it does in the beginning.

But for now, it's very helpful to have a place that you return to again and again, even if it's a corner of your living room. Whatever place you choose becomes your portal to the Wilderness. You'll need a place in which you won't be disturbed, and where you can safely and comfortably sit with your eyes closed. This place could be anywhere, though I strongly suggest getting out into the great outdoors when you can. There is something to be said about being surrounded by the wild beauty, profound quietude, and massive strength of nature, all of which you will inevitably absorb if you spend time in the literal wilderness.

My own practice started (and continues) at Montgomery Bell State Park near my home in Tennessee. In addition to lovely trails and streams, there is a little stone chapel in the park, in which I have spent countless hours these past few years.

If you don't live within driving distance of a state park or some such, perhaps there's a park near your home, or a body of water, or a corner of your yard. If going outside isn't possible for whatever reason, you might consider building a small and personal altar in your bedroom, on which you place things that make you feel alive, hopeful, comforted, connected. Look for, or create, a place that feels as if it holds some sort of magic for you.

Find your place (or let it find you) and make it your own. It's not mandatory, but it can be very helpful to choose somewhere you can revisit again and again, as your relationship with this place will deepen over time.

Silence

Ah, silence.

I won't be teaching you to practice a traditional form of meditation, per se, even though you'll look like you're meditating when doing the Wilderness exercises. Instead, I'll be teaching you techniques that are a prelude to silent meditation (for which there is no substitute, incidentally). While I urge you to incorporate meditation into your practice as soon as you can, it may be that you have to practice the Wilderness Exercises for a few weeks before you're able to even contemplate a silent meditation, in which your goal will be to quiet the mind. In my experience, the exercises very naturally turn into a purer form of meditation.

Note: Read in the appendix about the benefits of meditation, and learn a simple breathing technique.

In the early days of my Wilderness experience, I often engaged in both a silent meditation (or centering prayer) and the exercises. I generally had the little stone chapel at Montgomery Bell State Park to myself and, for my traditional meditation practice, I sat on one side of the chapel. When I switched over to the Wilderness exercises, I moved to the other side of the chapel. This worked for me, and you'll find what works for you.

WILDERNESS EXERCISES

These two exercises are foundational. The first exercise allows you to check in with yourself in a deep way—something we don't do often enough. The second exercise introduces you to your wild selves. Be not afraid, and remember that you don't have to change or fix them; you just have to listen to them and hear what they have to say. Remember also your watch words: *Awareness, Acceptance, Love.*

Wilderness Exercise #1: Scanning the Physical, Emotional, and Mental Bodies

Sit quietly and close your eyes. Do a quick body scan. Pay attention to your body, from your toes to the top of your head. Are you hurting anywhere? Tense? Tingling with energy? Take time to check in with yourself. If you find pockets of physical pain or tension, breathe into those places and consciously try to relax them. In the beginning, you might find that your body is really, really tired. Even though we're quite good at outrunning our exhaustion (for a while), it's never, ever a good idea to do so. If you can't stay awake long enough to make it through the exercises, carve out time in your busy schedule for rest and relaxation, and give your body the rest it needs. Then come back to the exercises *as soon as you can*. If you're this tired, recognize the fact that you're pushing too hard, there is a health issue you need to see to, or there are people or situations in your life that are draining you. It is vitally important to identify and modify/eliminate your energy drains.

Next, scan your emotional body. (This is when things start to get interesting.) Name your emotional state(s). You might find that you feel sad. Or excited. Or angry, ashamed, frightened, excited, nervous. Don't rush—in the beginning especially, it can be difficult to pinpoint the exact emotion(s) you're feeling. Set the intention and wait, listen. Always, in the Wilderness, the less you think the better. Ask, and practice emptying your mind. You might be surprised by what emerges. At this point, you don't have to understand why you feel the way you do, you just have to identify the feelings. Be patient. In no time at all, this part of your practice becomes second nature.

Finally, check in with your mental body. For every emotional state you experience, there is a thought looping in your mind. So, for every emotional state you identify, it's important to identify its corresponding thought pattern. For instance, if you get quiet and discover that you feel a sense of shame, listen closely for the thought you're having that animates that emotion. "I made a fool of myself when I spoke up at today's meeting," for instance.

After you've completed this initial exercise, it's time to introduce yourself to your wild selves.

Wilderness Exercise #2: Meet and Tame Your Wild Selves

Long before I went into the Wilderness, I used to joke about my alter ego, whom I called "Fea." I blamed Fea for all of my irrational, fear based behavior. When I went into the Wilderness, it became very apparent that Fea was much more real than I had imagined, in that she represented a very real, and completely out of control aspect of myself—one who had immense influence in my life. I was shocked by how destructive and, most of all, how utterly terrified she was. Recently, I wrote this about my initial few weeks in the Wilderness:

In the beginning I did my work this way: I would close my eyes and imagine the different aspects of myself sitting across from me at a table: I would talk to Fea who, in the beginning, was usually curled up in the fetal position sobbing. I also would talk to my dependent, child-like self, who was afraid to strike out on her own, convinced, as she was, that she needed other people on whom to depend in order to be safe in the world. I would ask them questions and hear what they had to say. Sometimes the work was a part of a silent meditation, and sometimes I wrote down questions and answers. After a few weeks of that, they all calmed down. Mostly, they needed to be heard, and I needed to be aware of how powerfully they influenced my everyday life so that I could mitigate their influence. Now when I close my eyes, they are all quiet, healthy and relaxed. They used to be in control, but now I am—not because I whipped them into submission, but because I listened, deeply, and brought all that fear to the Light. This might sound whacky, but it is this sustained practice that has changed everything for me. And, I promise I'm not schizophrenic! I just think in terms of archetypes.

This, then, is what I urge you to do: Close your eyes and imagine sitting at a round table, surrounded by these various aspects of yourself (many of whom might be very agitated in the beginning). If you're struggling with something in particular, ask to be introduced to the self that has the most influence in that area of your life.

Let's say that in doing the first Wilderness exercise (scanning the emotional body) you discover deep pockets of shame around something that happened recently at work. Sitting at the table you've conjured up in your mind's eye, ask to speak to the part of yourself that is obsessing about the experience. When she appears, look closely at her body language. Is she slumped over? Tearful? You can tell a lot by how she presents. In other words, you can quickly get a sense of how much shame you're carrying around by noticing how weighted or defeated or even paralyzed this aspect of yourself appears. Ask her how she's feeling and what she's afraid of, and then listen. This might seem clunky and unnatural at first, but try it anyway, and then try it again. You'll be surprised by what you learn, and by how much power these parts of you wield. They can shut you down, rile you up, or paralyze you, depending.

Now let's say you did a quick scan and uncovered some anger. Close your eyes, take a seat at your round table, and look across at the aspect of your self that needs your attention. Perhaps this wild self is far too agitated to sit down (because sometimes they are.) Perhaps he's angry that you've ignored him for so long. Perhaps he's still carrying around inordinate amounts of rage concerning a past injustice. Perhaps it becomes clear that he's not going to leave you alone until you deal with him. Maybe he needs to scream and rage and cry. He might even smash

your table to bits. Let him. Listen to him, cry for him, give him a voice. Once you're sure he's said all he needs to say, you can speak to him reassuringly, but not before.

What all of these various aspects of yourself need most is to be heard. Every time you take the time to listen to them and, eventually, to reassure them, you let more Light in. As you do, they release their stranglehold on you.

The "wild selves" exercise is extraordinarily useful in terms of identifying the negative and/or repetitive thoughts that run like looping tapes in your mind. It's also useful for identifying the disempowering emotions (anger, grief, guilt, boredom, fear etc.) that create your feeling tone minute-by-minute, day-by-day. Remember, your thoughts create your general feeling tone, which determines the quality of your life. Pay attention, listen, let in the Light.

Work with these exercises all month, or move on to whatever section calls to you next. Wherever you go from here, take these exercises with you.

A month of SETTING ASIDE YOUR DISTRACTIONS & ADDICTIONS



dis·trac·tion

noun \di-'strak-shən\
: something that amuses or entertains you so that you do not think about problems, work, etc.

ad·dic·tion

noun \ə-'dik-shən, a-\
: a strong and harmful need to regularly have something (such as a drug) or do something (such as shop)

I keep talking about setting aside your distractions and addictions as if it's an easy thing to do. Of course it's not. But it is absolutely necessary, as you go into the Wilderness, to be aware of them and to do whatever it takes to mitigate the hold they have on you. (Incidentally, recovering from a serious addiction goes beyond the scope of this guide; if you're struggling with such, I trust that you have gotten or will get the help you need.)

Human beings are hardwired to seek pleasure and to avoid pain, which is where your addictions and distractions come into play. You employ them to protect yourself, on some level, from your wild selves; from your fear, self-doubt, anger and pain.

Just last night I was watching an episode of *The West Wing* when my computer froze. Based on my immediate reaction, you would have thought someone had cut off my food supply. When my TV went off, I felt immediately uncomfortable and agitated, and it took me a second to realize that I was using the TV to distract myself from my discomfort. But realize it I did, and instead of turning the TV back on right away, I sat down, closed my eyes, and checked in with my wild selves—a few of whom wasted no time in hurling all manner of doubt and fear my way. I listened. As soon as I acknowledged them they quieted down. I heard them out, and only then did I turn the T.V back on. I finished watching the episode, and then went peacefully to bed.

This is what we learn to do in the Wilderness. Instead of perpetually ignoring our discomfort, we acknowledge and move through it. That said, it can take a while to recognize the pattern and to then interrupt it. If you've relied on your distractions and addictions for a long time, setting them aside can be much, much harder than you think, even with the best of intentions. If you're not sure that this is true, try refusing to pick up your smart phone all day, unless you need to make a telephone call. We have grown so unused to sitting with our own thoughts that even this small adjustment can be radically uncomfortable. As part of your Wilderness practice, instead of grabbing your phone to relieve the discomfort, you might choose instead to explore it. Take a minute to hear what thoughts are looping in your mind. These are the very thoughts you're distracting yourself from.

Wilderness Exercise #1: Become aware of your distractions/addictions and set them aside when possible

This month, become aware of the very many ways in which you distract yourself—with the news, a favorite T.V. show, your best friend's drama, etc. As well, be aware of your addictions—to your computer, your cell phone, online shopping, whatever. When you can, set them aside for as long as you can and pay attention to what happens. What thoughts surface? What emotions arise? How do you feel physically? Bring awareness to what surfaces and be willing to sit with whatever you find. Often, simply acknowledging your thoughts and feelings is all it takes to clear them.

Wilderness Exercise #2: Set aside one distraction/addiction for the entire month

Choose one distraction/addiction and set it aside, totally, for the month. Maybe it's the nightly news or the TV. Maybe it's sugar, or alcohol or shopping. It may help to find a friend who will agree to do this exercise with you.

Whether you do the first or second exercise—whether you set aside your distractions and addictions slowly and incrementally, or take the plunge and set aside one major distraction/addiction for the entire month—know that these exercises will inevitably shake things up in your life. Take what surfaces to the Wilderness. Look through the various sections in this guide to see if any of them speak to your condition. It may be that you have forgiveness work to do, or that you have a particularly disempowering inner narrative. If so, work through the appropriate sections (“A month of FORGIVING YOURSELF & FORGIVING OTHERS” pg. 43 or “A month of WHAT'S YOUR STORY?” pg. 33). As always, be sure to dialogue with your wild selves. People spend lifetimes running from the repetitive, negative thoughts in their heads, but you don't have to do that anymore. Acknowledge and clear them using the exercise in this guide. You deserve to be comforted as opposed to tormented by what goes on in your head all day, every day.

Recommended Reading:

The Distraction Addiction: Getting the Information You Need and the Communication You Want, Without Enraging Your Family, Annoying Your Colleagues, and Destroying Your Soul by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang <http://www.distractionaddiction.com/>

A month of ENTERING THE WILDERNESS WHEN YOU'RE IN PAIN



Ladder Canyon Ranch, Colorado/Spring 2013

Entering the Wilderness is always daunting in the beginning. But if you're in a great deal of emotional pain—if you carry around considerable amounts of fear, grief, guilt or shame, for instance—it can be downright terrifying; because in the Wilderness, there are no distractions. There is nothing, in other words, to numb the pain. In the Wilderness you will come face to face with every aspect of yourself, and you will finally feel the deep pain that you have been seeking to avoid for all of these years.

But here's the good news, friend: You've been working so hard to keep the pain at bay that you have also managed, very effectively, to keep the Light at bay as well. So while you will indeed come face to face with your pain, you will also come face to face with the Light—and it's the Light we're after. When you enter the Wilderness, you bravely and willingly set aside your distractions and bring awareness to your pain, which is tantamount to shining a Light on it. This may not make much sense to you now; I ask you to trust me. You have been suffering as a result of your deep seated pain for a long time now. Take it to the Wilderness and work through the exercises in this guide. You've nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Note: I will say this at least one other time in this guide—the Wilderness is in no way a substitute for therapy. If you need professional help to work through your pain, please don't hesitate to get it.

If you think in traditional, religious terms, the Light I keep referring to is God. If you don't, that's perfectly fine. If it helps, think in terms of the Light as being synonymous with healing, or increased awareness. One way or another, I think you'll find that the Light one experiences in the Wilderness is more than an intellectual construct. Beyond that, I've no interest, personally, in defining it.

In the Wilderness, the depth of your pain eventually becomes the depth and breadth of your transformation. This transformation is what the Wilderness is all about. You need not be afraid of your pain there, where there is no judgment, and where there is an inexhaustible supply of patience and compassion and love. Always, *Love*.

I'm going out of my way to convince you to step out into the Wilderness, pain notwithstanding. Be brave. You can do it. You can.

Which is not to say that it will be easy.

In the beginning, facing my pain with no distractions was so painful for me that it sometimes felt as if my skin was on fire. But the experience burns for a reason; it's like going through the refiner's fire while fully conscious. Relief is not always instantaneous. This is when you must dig deeper. This is when you get quiet and sit in the midst of the pain, because your days of trying to outrun it are over. It is brutally hard at first, and lonely. And still you wait. And still you dig deeper. And you listen and you *Love* and you bring your fear or guilt or shame or sadness into the Light, slowly but surely. The darker your fear and pain, the more Light comes streaming through, and the more Light you will eventually bring into the world.

We all, at our core, have an innate desire to shine, to *thrive*—to get and stay on the fast track to success. When we close our eyes, we imagine our best selves: whole, joyous, safe, liberated, fully awake, deeply engaged, glowing with energy and enthusiasm, and experiencing the freedom and abundance to do, be, and have, everything we envision. We long to succeed, and we are right to.

The problem is that we too narrowly define success. In our limited view, success doesn't allow for trauma or illness or loss or grave mistakes. If we experience such—if we are victimized; if we lose someone dear to us; if we are diagnosed with a serious illness, we see ourselves as suddenly off track. Life was good, but now it's not. Life had promise, but now it doesn't.

I submit, however, that successful, fully actualized lives include and celebrate the full range of the human experience.

So if you're starting with this section—if you're entering the Wilderness in great pain, don't feel as if it's a handicap. If anything, you have an advantage, for reasons that will become clearer as you work through the program. Within this program, you have all the tools you need to gently and lovingly bring your fear, guilt, shame, or sadness into the Light so that you can move through and release it. Be patient with yourself, and take all the time you need here.

This is important—imagining that you can force yourself to “get over it” is an illusion. You can’t get over it (whatever “it” is) but you can get through it—but only by actually *going through it*. This can take time.

In the Wilderness, you’re not going to wallow in pain, you’re just going to give it space. I recognize that distracting yourself, in a way that’s healthy, is good and necessary some of the time. But the more often you allow yourself to feel what pains you, fully and deeply, the more quickly you can move through it. This is not easy, and unhealthy distractions abound.

Once, in the midst of an acutely painful time, I received an invitation to meet up with an ex. It would have been a terrible idea, but it was tempting because the coming together would have brought me some temporary relief—and I was desperate for relief. Somehow, however, for the first time in my life, I had the good sense to refuse the quick fix. I remember turning down the invitation and literally clutching the arms of my chair as if to hold something solid in order to keep my center. It was hard at the time, but it was also one of the most important moments of my life. I was still in excruciating emotional pain, but in refusing to numb it, I signaled to myself that I was strong enough to handle it. I was strong enough. I was strong. I was *enough*. There is gold in such a discovery.

The exercises this month have to do with sitting with your pain as opposed to running or distracting yourself from it. (Sound familiar?)

Wilderness Exercise # 1: Go right to the heart of your pain

Living with acute emotional pain is heavy, exhausting, and torturous. The tendency is to run from it. In this exercise, we do the opposite; instead of running from our pain; we go right to the heart of it.

Sit with your eyes closed. Use descriptive words to describe the physical manifestation of your emotional pain. *Burning. Heavy. Nauseating.* Where do you feel it most acutely? In your back, shoulders, or neck? What emotions are you feeling? Anger? Betrayal? Regret? Some small amount of relief? Don’t judge or minimize your feelings. Just identify and sit with them.

Wilderness Exercise #2 Refuse to numb your pain with unhealthy distractions

At least one time this month, refuse to numb your pain in a way that is even mildly destructive. Turn down the destructive temptation, even in the midst of your misery. You will survive, friend—you will. And you will grow exponentially stronger every time you make such an empowered choice.

Recommended Reading:

Freedom from Pain

By Peter A. Levine and Maggie Phillips

Chronic pain relief—a complete program that targets emotional and physical trauma.

The Language of Emotions: What Your Feelings Are Trying to Tell You

by Karla McLaren

A month of ACCEPTANCE

Photo credit: Elizabeth Jackson



Without realizing it, most of us meet every, single day with staggering amounts of resistance. Until I stumbled into the Wilderness and set up camp there, I didn't realize how much resistance I brought to nearly every aspect of my life. I resisted my living situation, the state of my health, my financial reality, my thoughts and feelings, etc. Every day was an internal battle, and I was losing in no uncertain terms.

I threw up heaps of resistance because I thought I was supposed to, on the one hand. I was tired, poor, hopelessly co-dependent, and utterly confused about what I was supposed to be doing and why. All of those things were unacceptable to me, and so I fought back. (In retrospect, I'm not sure who I thought I was fighting.) I thought that in refusing to accept my current reality, I was standing up for myself—holding myself to a higher standard and demanding something better. The reality was that I fought myself until I was bloodied and bruised and broken. Not surprisingly, things got worse instead of better.

In the Wilderness, resistance melted away. I had no idea that this would happen, and it took me completely by surprise. It happened partially as a result of my extreme brokenness that, frankly, I have come to see as a huge advantage. I didn't have the strength to keep fighting and so finally surrendered, utterly and completely. For the record, I had tried to surrender before, on several occasions. I can't tell you how many times I prayed thus: "God, I surrender. My will is mine to make it Thine." But still I kept fighting—believing, as I did, that to fight for my life was to hold up my end of the bargain.

To co-create the lives we envision calls for action born of surrender. This is possible when we balance Time for Doing (TFD) with Time for Being (TFB). We strike this balance by going into the Wilderness regularly.

Many of us want to surrender but don't know how. The first step is to practice acceptance on all fronts. To be clear, acceptance doesn't mean that you resign yourself to anything less than the life you envision. Acceptance means recognizing that it's okay to be where you are right now, and that fighting against your current reality keeps you mired in it.

For instance, by the time I went into the Wilderness, I was suffering from chronic fatigue to such a degree that I could hardly function. I was terrified of this condition, and fought it with every fiber of my being. I read everything I could get my hands on, took every recommended supplement, and practiced myriad health modalities in an effort to get better. I meditated, prayed, I ate a clean diet. Nothing seemed to work.

Stepping into the Wilderness (even as I worked through my initial pain and fear) was something akin to breathing a huge, cosmic sigh of relief. I was finally too tired to do anything other than accept my condition, and so I did. I didn't say, "I am too sick to function and I accept this as my fate." Instead I said, "I accept the fact that I am too sick to function, and so I'm going to take three naps a day, if necessary." I just stopped fighting. I didn't think that I would suffer chronic fatigue for the rest of my life, but I accepted the fact that I didn't know for sure. And mostly, if I was tired, I rested.

The Wilderness is a place of profound love and acceptance. If you spend enough time there, that same loving acceptance, along with a total lack of judgment, begins to permeate every aspect of your life. Before long, instead of beating myself up for needing a nap, I chose to relish the experience. I spoiled myself rotten. I began to view my daily naps (plural) as well deserved luxuries as opposed to evidences of failure.

Keep in mind that while this was going on, I was too broke to pay attention, as they say. I had no idea where my next pay check was coming from. Had I not gone into the Wilderness, I would have been far, far too stressed out to luxuriate in those unavoidable naps when there was work to scramble for. In the Wilderness, one stops scrambling.

In the end? Lo and behold, work came, even though I was no longer scrambling for it. This was a revelation for me. I paid my bills (just barely, but I paid them), I kept my home, and finally—slowly but surely—I regained my strength. Since that time, things have gotten steadily better and better.

This month, practice acceptance. Again, and again, and again.

Wilderness Exercise: Practice Acceptance

This month, practice saying, "...I accept that" as often and in as many different situations as you can. "I am tired and I accept that." "I feel angry and I accept that." "My mother is complaining incessantly and I accept that." "It's possible that I will run out of money and lose my house and I accept that." (Yes. Even that.)

Acceptance, of course, doesn't mean that you don't take action—perhaps you need to take a nap, express your anger, set boundaries where your mother is concerned or look for additional work. But accepting people and situations as they are frees up a tremendous amount of psychic and emotional space from which to take effective action.

Recommended Reading:

Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha

By Tara Brach

5. Creativity/Play



Ladder Canyon Ranch, Colorado/Spring 2010

And now, let us play!

I have written a lot about the very many ways in which we distract ourselves from all that makes us uncomfortable. The problem with this ploy is that when we numb ourselves to the uncomfortable stuff, we numb ourselves to the good stuff too. One of the very best things about doing your Wilderness work is that it renders your defenses unnecessary. This means that it becomes safe to feel deeply again.

The Wilderness is sensual, alive and, yes, sexy. To go is to rediscover what it is to live a sensuous and deeply felt life. In the Wilderness we thaw out, reengage, play. We wake up. We sing the flesh back onto our bones, as it were.

This month, we channel the newly tamed but still gloriously wild energy of our wild selves. No matter how calm they become as a result of your work with them, remember that they exist to help you—to draw you to the Light. In the same way that they will never allow you to ignore the issues in your life that most need attention, neither will they allow you to become overly domesticated. If you cease to honor your own wildness, you become spiritually, creatively and emotionally cramped.

Wilderness Exercise: Play! Create!

You may experience a great deal of resistance if it's been a long time since you really played. Push through it! Get your hands and feet in the dirt. Run outside. Build things. Plant flowers and vegetables. Open your windows, put on great music, light candles, cook, bake, set beautiful tables. Buy sweet smelling, handmade soap and take luxurious baths. Cover yourself in delicious essential oils. Paint. Sew. Dance! Sing! Visit museums and see great movies and reread your favorite childhood books. Pick blueberries, go horseback riding, visit a pig farm, do

whatever it is that makes you come alive—not for a day, not for a week, but for the entire month (and then some)! You can see photos of my idea of play below.

Recommended Reading:

Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul
by Stuart Brown

Inspiration Sandwich: Stories to Inspire Our Creative Freedom
by Sark



Picnics, indoors and out



Blueberry picking and operating heavy machinery!



Making ornaments and books

A month of SURVIVING THE DESERT



Abiquiu, NM Spring/2014

“Surrender,” Carolyn Myss reminds us, “is a mystical, archetypal ritual of transformation. The desert is the prelude to surrender, a physical breakdown before a mystical breakthrough.”

Identifying the Desert experience as a “mystical, archetypal ritual of transformation” is certainly admirable. I confess, however, that until recently I was capable only of describing it as “brutal, shockingly barren, and very nearly unbearable.” Any time spent in the desert is demanding (to say the least). Brave souls choose to venture into the Wilderness. I know of no one, however, who has willingly chosen a Desert experience.

For our purposes, the distinction between the Desert and the Wilderness is as follows: The Wilderness can feel terrifying at first, in that one necessarily goes in alone, stripped of the usual distractions. That said, the Wilderness is full of promise. It is lush, comforting. The Desert, on the other hand, is dry, isolating. Both are Divine gifts.

I used to think that the Desert experience was epic in nature. I have now come to believe that the desert experience can be short (forty days, say) or long (years). One way or another, to be in the Desert is to feel alone, abandoned. You are in the desert if your prayers are consistently met with silence; If the answer, again, and again, is NO. (Paradoxically, the sooner one comes to accept this fact, the more the universe seems to say YES in myriad ways. More on that in a minute.) In any case, if you’re getting a lot of “NO’s” just now, you might as well dig out your sand shoes. If the Desert description resonates with you, read on. If not, feel free to skip this section.

Long before I read Carolyn Myss’ description of the Desert, I was using similar (though less sophisticated) language to describe my own experience. I can’t count the number of times, during my decade in the Desert (apparently I am a slow learner), that I shook my head

despairingly and said, “I’m in the desert. That’s all I know. This is my time in the Desert.” I uttered those words, it must be said, with a frightful lack of awareness. I was far too obtuse and disconnected, spiritually, to recognize that I was living an archetypal story.

By the time I went into the Wilderness, I was as sick and tired of struggling financially as I was of being physically sick and tired. I was also sick and tired of praying for opportunities that never came, and of working hard on projects that seemed to amount to nothing. This was especially difficult for me (and my ego) because I had a history of making big things happen. For several years, however, I couldn’t make *anything* happen. I was constantly worried about losing my home as a result of my precarious financial situation, and I was discouraged beyond measure by my inability to either attract meaningful opportunities or to create them. And this was long before my own Wilderness experience. Before I went into the Wilderness, acceptance was not anything that I practiced regularly, and I fought my time in the Desert tooth and nail.

Gradually, however, I became aware of what was being asked of me. The things I was praying for, most of which would have amounted to some form of worldly success, would have distracted me from the work that I really needed to be doing. I languished in the desert until I finally surrendered, at which point I went into the Wilderness and did my work. Very quickly then, things started moving in my life.

We are inundated, in these times, with the idea that we have dominion over lives and that we can be successful on every level with a clear enough image of what we want, the right mental attitude, and sufficient positive affirmations (i.e. the Law of Attraction.) But no amount of positive thinking can alter the Desert experience, which is characterized by despair, doubt, confusion, painful and repeated “failure” and/or disappointment. To be in the Desert is to feel abandoned and alone. The success principals alone can never bring you far enough to cross the Desert. Only surrender can do that.

The Law of Attraction, is, I believe, a real and mighty law. But it is not the only operative force in our universe. All that to say, don’t get discouraged if you have been praying, visualizing, working steadily and with purpose for weeks or months or years, and repeating your positive affirmations with little outward success. You are right to set your sights on a glorious life; just understand that sometimes the learning curve is steeper than we imagine, and that sometimes things don’t turn out the way we hope they will for reasons that are good and important. The truth is that the Desert experience is one of the most valuable experiences you will have. It strips you bare and leaves you exposed; free of distractions and primed and ready for a mystical breakthrough. Stop fighting it. The Desert is not a punishment; it’s an invitation—to the Wilderness—and to your version of Arete (which you’ll read more about on page 47.)

You won't be in the Desert forever. Arete is a Greek concept having to do with living up to one's full potential and the "fulfillment of purpose or function." (Wikipedia) As I write in the Arete section itself, "A person living her or his version of Arete has, at some point, gone into the Wilderness to do the hard work of forgiveness and the deep work of uncovering and correcting the (often heavily encrypted) programs and patterns that keep us from reaching our highest potential."

This is precisely the work you're doing with this program which means, I believe, that your time in the Desert has seen the beginning of the end.

While no one in their right mind would go out of their way to choose a Desert experience, we can learn to recognize that we're having one, and then—even though the decision will feel something akin to chewing glass—we can accept it. We can, and we must. (And remember: the sooner one comes to accept the experience, the sooner one can move through it.)

Wilderness Exercise: Finding value in the desert experience

With journal and pen in hand, close your eyes. Think about your time in the desert. In what ways have you felt alone? Abandoned? What have you been denied? Write your answers in your journal.

Now ask yourself the following questions: How has the desert experience served you? What has it called forth in you? What personal qualities have you had to develop to endure? Is it possible that the desert experience has cleared time and space in your life so that something else—some talent, some experience, some form of personal growth—could emerge? Write the answers in your journal. If you don't know the answers, write what you would write if you did know.

Recommended Reading:

According to my Amazon search, there are innumerable books about the desert experience available, most of which have a religious orientation. I've not read any of them. If you feel so led, go to Amazon and type in "Surviving the Desert" to see if there is a particular book that calls to you.

A month of AUTHENTICITY & SPEAKING YOUR OWN TRUTH

“Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It’s about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.”

Brene Brown



Authenticity

I spent so many years “people-pleasing” that for a long time I wasn’t sure which of my attitudes were authentically mine. I am now infinitely capable of holding my own—but I had to spend a good, long time in the Wilderness to get to this point.

I spent most of my adult life performing “tiny but continuous acts of self-crucifixion,” shaping myself to who I believed I was required to be. (Emmanuel, *Emmanuel’s Book*.) More specifically, so profound was my fear of abandonment, that I spent years trying to be whoever my intimate loved ones wanted me to be so that I wouldn’t be left high and dry.

I first had to become aware of the fact that I was behaving in such a way. Luckily, one can only give away one’s power for so long before one crashes and burns. This is what happened in my case, and it was one of the hardest/best things that ever happened to me. Once I crashed and burned, I realized that I was completely drained because I’d given away my power for so long. The good news was that I had given it away, which meant that I could take it back.

I then had to find the strength to do just that. I also had to get comfortable with the idea that being true to myself—being authentic—wasn’t an act of selfishness, but an act of self-preservation. Finally, I had to make a commitment to myself. I chose to concretize that commitment with a private, formal ceremony (which I wrote about in the book *A Dress, A Ring, Promises to Self; an unconventional wedding planner for one*). Here’s the introduction:

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2001, I married my self. In the beautiful town of Balsam, North Carolina, I bought a long white dress, a huge bundle of flowers, and a ring that I

wear to this day. I stayed up all night writing a list of promises to my self, building a temporary altar at which to perform the sacred event, and decorating my cheerful, purple room at the Balsam Mountain Inn. The following night I donned my dress and, with a home-made wreath of flowers in my hair, tearfully made a commitment to honor my self, first and foremost, henceforth.

As one who had spent years performing “daily acts of self crucifixion,” in the words of Emmanuel (see page 9), which usually took the form of refusing to listen to my gut and putting everyone else’s needs before my own – this was a radically important paradigm shift. Additionally, it was, and is, a commitment that I take very seriously, and one that I believe to be an absolute prerequisite to marriage in the traditional sense.

I wish this sort of ceremony for every woman (and man for that matter) regardless of age, sexual orientation or marital status. Few would argue with the notion that it is hard, if not impossible, to love, honor and care for another if one does not first love, honor and care for one’s self. Some things deserve to be elevated to ritual status, and making the sort of commitment described herein is, in my humble opinion, just such a thing.

I encourage you to use this book as a guide. Think of it as an unconventional wedding planner. Take two days, two months or two years to plan your ceremony, but plan it. Construct your altar in an exotic location, or your own backyard; make it a private affair, or send out invitations... It’s your day, your journey – and the ritual can be as simple or as elaborate as you wish. The only rule is that every aspect of your ceremony be an accurate reflection of you. This is the time to be utterly self-indulgent.

Most importantly, a commitment ceremony such as this one provides a tangible opportunity to begin (or continue) to heal the past, imagine the future, and to construct – first on paper and then in your relationships – boundaries that will keep you safe, rituals that will keep you connected to the Divine, and language that will enable you to communicate your deepest desires.

I “married myself” because I wanted and needed to make a commitment to be who I was as opposed to who I thought I was supposed to be.

Speaking Your Truth

Speaking my truth was, for me, a learned skill; one that was only possible to employ once I made a commitment to live and move through the world in a genuinely authentic way.

Learning to say what I actually felt was incredibly liberating for me. This month, dedicate your time in the Wilderness to rediscovering what is true for you. Make a commitment to honor your authentic self, and then practice speaking your truth out in the world.

Wilderness Exercise #1: Fierce Conversations

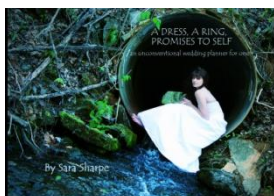
(Note: This exercise is taken directly from Susan’s book, *Fierce Conversations*, which I heartily recommend.)

Fierce Conversations, pg 11-12: “Begin listening to yourself as you’ve never listened before. Begin to overhear yourself avoiding the topic, changing the subject, holding back, telling little lies (and big ones), being imprecise in your language, being uninteresting even to yourself. And at least once today, when something inside you says, “This is an opportunity to be fierce,” stop for a moment, take a deep breath, then come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real. Say something that is true for you... When you come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real, whatever happens from there will happen. It could go well or it could be a little bumpy, but at least you will have taken the plunge. You will have said at least one real thing today, one thing that was real for you. And something will have been set in motion, and you will have grown from that moment.”

Wilderness Exercise #2: Plan your own commitment ceremony—formalize the commitment to love, honor, and care for your authentic self

If this idea appeals to you, take a notebook and pen into the Wilderness and write your promises to yourself. For help, refer to the PDF version of *A Dress, A Ring, Promises to Self: an unconventional wedding planner for one*, which you received when you purchased this program. (For more information please go to www.dressringpromises.com)

Recommended Reading:



You can buy a soft cover copy of my book, *A Dress, A Ring, Promises to Self: an unconventional planner for one* [HERE](http://www.dressringpromises.com), if you’d like.

Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life One Conversation at a Time
by Susan Scott

The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are
by Brene Brown

A month of WHAT'S YOUR STORY?



Abiquiu, NM/Spring 2014, Amy Harwell

We all have a story. This month, we take our stories into the Wilderness.

The stories we tell *about* ourselves *to* ourselves profoundly affect our emotional state, the quality of our interpersonal relationships, our health and our future. Many of our stories are in desperate need of a rewrite; because more than actual events in your life, it's the interpretation of those events—*your story*—that matters. You have the power to reinterpret your story at any time.

Personally and collectively, telling your New Story involves a willingness to let go of the old one. This can be harder than it sounds, as many of us are overly-identified with the familiar story, even if it's a dis-empowering one. But stepping out into the Wilderness signifies that you are indeed ready to move through the exciting (and sometimes discomfiting) process of letting go of that which no longer serves you. You are NOT a victim. You ARE smart enough. Your project MUST see the Light of day. YOU are the hero/heroine in your personal story and in our collective one.

In the same way that we become curious observers of our wild selves, we're going to become curious observers of our own personal narratives. For a workshop I led once, I created a series of story cards. Cards included "The Wounded Child Story," "The Health Challenge Story," "The Addiction/Co-Dependence Story," "The Contentment Story," etc. (Examples of the "Call to Evolve and/or Refusal of the Call" Story card and the "Stripped Identity" Story card are below.) I had the participants choose cards and set them out sequentially. Setting them out in a sort of story board form gave them a chance to make certain observations. Choosing and then lining up the story cards in a way that made autobiographical sense gave them an opportunity to distance themselves from their personal narratives and to see them objectively.

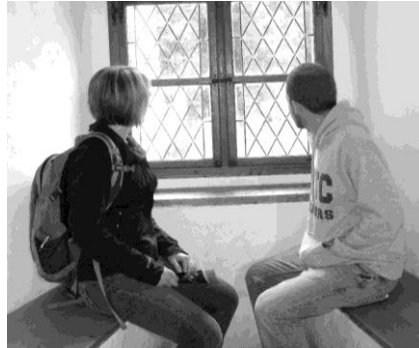
Becoming a curious and compassionate observer enables you to determine whether or not a particular story line is holding you back in any way. If it is, you might consider looking for an alternative narrative. "I'm a victim and I am wounded" might become, "I was victimized and I survived." The difference between "I'm a victim" and "I was victimized" is subtle but profound. Identifying as a victim can diminish your sense of self. Identifying as someone who has had a particular experience, and grown stronger in the face of it, increases your personal power and enables you to pass that strength along to others who might have been victimized in a similar

way. Suddenly, your story has much less power over you; you control your narrative, not the other way around. When you rewrite the story of your past, the facts don't change, but everything else does. Reinterpreting the past isn't about putting a positive spin on a painful history; it's about taking back your power.

Things really begin to shift when you understand that you are the author of the story of your life. When you go into the Wilderness this month, take your stories with you. Ask that the most truthful and empowering interpretation be revealed to you, and then wait. Listen.

Examples of Story Cards:

The "Call to Evolve and/or Refusal of the Call" Story



"You live your lives within the models you were given, until a moment arises when you realize that for all your goodwill and excellent behavior, you are empty. You touch a longing that nothing in your world can answer. You hear a voice calling you to something totally unfamiliar, "Be who you are."

~Emmanuel

**DEEP LONGING, DISSATISFACTION, BOREDOM, DEPRESSION,
RESTLESSNESS, LONGING FOR & FEAR OF CHANGE,
FEAR OF HURTING THOSE YOU LOVE AND WHO DEPEND ON YOU,
FANTASIZING**

**Ignoring the impulse to evolve takes a great deal of energy,
while honoring it can feel like a terrifying proposition:
especially when heeding a call means CHANGE on some level ~
taking up a new vocation, leaving familiar surroundings, or
upsetting the family dynamic and those you love, for
instance.**

The STRIPPED IDENTITY Story



**"Life will give you whatever experience is most helpful for
the evolution of your consciousness.**

**How do you know this is the experience you need?
Because this is the experience you are having at the
moment."**

Eckhart Tolle

**JOB LOSS, FINANCIAL LOSS, HOME FORECLOSURE, LIFE ALTERING
INJURY OR ILLNESS, PROJECT FAILURE
DEPRESSION, FEAR, SHAME, GRIEF, HUMILIATION, CONFUSION,
THE REFINERS FIRE, HOPEFULNESS,
RISING FROM THE ASHES**

**The idea that evolving consciousness is behind the painful
experience of losing everything with which one identifies
scarcely makes the experience easier.**

***Breathe deep this enveloping darkness as fog rolls in.
Know that soon orange and red of dawn will come.***

For now, be.

Wilderness Exercise #1: What story do you tell yourself about yourself?

Tomorrow morning, pay immediate attention to the story you start telling yourself from the minute you wake up. Do you immediately berate yourself for being behind? Are you thinking more about the things that you haven't and won't get done than about your accomplishments? Do you wake up feeling inadequate somehow? Put words to your worries and to your first morning thoughts, and then pretend that instead of saying these things to yourself, you are saying them to a small child in your care. We would never be as cruel and as harsh with others as we are with ourselves (I hope). Pay attention to the story you tell yourself about yourself.

If you wake up feeling joyous and full of love and enthusiasm, and if you are able to sustain that feeling throughout the day, chances are you're consistently telling yourself an empowering story. If, however, you wake up feeling worried or defeated or tired before the day starts, or if you end up feeling that way before the day ends, your narrative needs a rewrite.

You'll need your journal for the following exercise.

Wilderness Exercise #2: Rewrite your story

(From *The Power of Story*, by Jim Loehr)

WRITE YOUR CURRENT STORY (OR TRY TO)

Step 1: Identify the important areas of your life where the stories you tell yourself or others are clearly not working. They simply do not take you where you ultimately want to go—for example with personal relationships, work, financial health, physical health; with your boss, your daughter, your morning routine. Ask yourself: in what areas is it clear I can't get to where I want to go with the story I've got?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Keep going, if you have more.

Step 2: Articulate as clearly as possible the story you currently have that isn't working. Put it down on paper. Eventually we'll refer to this as your Old Story.

Really bring it to life. Express your logic, your rationale, your thinking process about why you've been living the way you have. In getting it down on paper, you can see it, study it, break it down, judge how it flows (or stumbles) as a story. Write in the voice you typically use privately

with yourself. Don't hold back. If it's a rationalizing, scapegoating voice, then use that. If it's bitter or prideful, use it. This story is for your eyes so don't write your story scared; no need to be diplomatic or politically correct. Go through several rewrites if you need to. You can only really write your New Story—eventually—if you've isolated what it is about your Old Story that's faulty. How do you do that?

Step 3: Identify the faulty elements of your old story by asking yourself three questions, about both the old total story and each of the individual points it makes:

1. Will this story take me where I want to go in life while at the same time remaining true to my deepest values and beliefs?
2. Does the story reflect the truth as much as possible?
3. Does this story stimulate me to take action?

WRITE YOUR NEW STORY

Crafting a New Story is liberating. Also challenging, scary, and painful. It *should* be painful. After all, it will be more clear-eyed than your Old Story was in defining what you really want from life; it hacks away at the excuses and rationalizations that appeared in your Old Story; and it demands real change, something your Old Story was probably not that interested in. In short, it is more purposeful, truer, and more action oriented than your Old Story.

Your New Story is your blueprint for the future. It exists for you to chart new pathways for energy to flow in all those areas of your life you want to change. Your New Story is a map of how you will change the dynamics of the energy you give to things. In this way, your New Story helps to chart your destiny.

Begin your story with these three words:

The truth is...

Here's an example: *The truth is, my Old Story is causing me to hurt those I care about most. I present myself as an open, honest, caring person but this is only partly true. I can show more compassion and caring to those I don't care that much about than those I care most about. My relationships with my family, friends, and coworkers are dying because I'm either choking them or starving them. I'm hurting them and I'm hurting me. From now on, I'm going to trust my coworkers with my feelings. I'm committed to spending more of my time with my wife and daughters. I will stop cutting them off, cutting them down, holding them at arms length. I will protect and honor them and their feelings. I will use my best energy to engage more on an emotional level...*

[In your journal] write your New Story. When you're done, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does it take me where I want to go?
2. Is it grounded in reality?

3. Does it lead to action that stimulates genuine hope?

Recommended Reading:

The Power of Story: Change Your Story, Change Your Destiny in Business and in Life

by Jim Loehr

A month of TRANSFORMING TRAUMA



View from Red Rocks Colorado/Summer 2013

*There is no event in your life
You in some way
Did not drive a hard bargain for.*

Hafiz

The Wilderness is the perfect place to sit with and work through the residual effects of your trauma; the very trauma that has left you cracked and broken open. What we discover in the Wilderness is that the cracks are where the Light breaks through. The more cracks, the more Light.

I subscribe to Carolyn Myss' idea of Sacred Contracts. I believe wholeheartedly that our life experiences are not random; that they serve us; that every experience is designed for our personal and spiritual evolution—even those that threaten to shatter us. Clearly, such an approach is not for everyone. If this section doesn't speak to you, either lean into the ideas and exercises slowly (there may be some benefit for you in trying this theory on for size even if you don't happen to subscribe to it) or skip it altogether.

When it comes to trauma, I have experienced my share, I suppose. More than some, far less than many others—but enough, I dare say, to speak about it with at least some authority. At great risk of sounding overly dramatic, I will say that I have had an experience that left me broken open. I now know (as do many of you) what it is to feel so fragile that it isn't possible to do more than sit silently in a dark room, for days on end, neither moving or talking any more than is necessary. There are times when shock and grief bring about an altered state of consciousness, characterized by a stillness that defies description. It's as if body and soul need absolute, cosmic quietude in which to reorganize everything from cellular structure to personal philosophy in light of a new and seemingly unbearable reality.

As it happens, I have made mistakes that were dire; mistakes that had *severe* consequences for me and, far more devastatingly, for the people I loved. As a result, I lost very nearly everything, or so it seemed. I finally recognized that I *had* to be stripped of everything, and that I had to forego any and all distractions so that I could face the dark and fearful places in my psyche that had rendered me wholly incapable of making healthy and empowered decisions. This work was, for me, essential; because while tragedy was visited upon my family (another story for another day), I was a contributor to the degree that, in addition to having a broken heart, I could easily have been crippled by guilt and shame. Because of my work in the Wilderness, I am not. Quite the opposite, in fact.

I am whole and happy because I want to be a bearer of Light, to be sure, and because I consider happiness a spiritual discipline to which I am wholly committed. Getting to this point (which, initially, was not my goal—survival was) required several years of deep and often painful inner work, along with a serious and sustained spiritual discipline. Consequently, I spent many, many transformative days in the Wilderness—transformative because what I discovered along the way (I’ll say it again) was that the depth of my despair eventually became the height and the breadth of my spiritual awakening—so much so that I have come to feel that my deep pain has given me an unfair advantage. My trauma exposed in me that which desperately needed to be brought into the Light, and finally (finally!) instead of avoiding my time in the Wilderness at all costs, I waded in and did the work—with the understanding that the two things that mattered most were absolute accountability and love.

Always, *Love*.

Wilderness Exercise: Run your trauma through the “How did it serve me?” filter.

For the purposes of this exercise, we pretend that every single thing that you’ve experienced in your life, good and bad, was exquisitely designed to serve your highest good. We engage in this exercise partially so that you can take back your power, totally and completely. In this exercise, you are neither victim nor villain.

Hearken back to a traumatic experience. Choose the words that describe the residual aftereffects—the words, in other words, that describe your feeling state as a result of your experience: unworthy, vulnerable, abandoned, unsafe, betrayed, hateful, etc. Trust that these words are major spiritual clues and that they serve to expose the parts of you that need still to be brought into the Light. Take your feeling that the world is an unsafe place, for instance, into the Wilderness. Take your hatred, your confusion. As always, don’t work to change your feelings—all you have to do is take them into the Wilderness, where you stop running from

your pain and sit in the midst of it. And don't worry—you won't be left to wallow in your pain for long. In shining a spotlight on your brokenness you let the Light in, which is a powerful and powerfully felt experience.

If you're up for it, ask yourself some additional questions as well. What lessons did the experience offer you? What did it expose in you? Has your traumatic experience left you with gifts that you might use to help others in a similar situation? Did the experience leave you broken? If so, where are your particular fault lines?

Your fault lines are the cracks through which the Light breaks through.

Recommended Reading:

Healing Trauma: A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body

By Peter A. Levine

A concise book-and-CD course with guided somatic practices to free yourself from trauma.

A month of FORGIVING YOURSELF & FORGIVING OTHERS

“Your soul is in inherently forgiving. We struggle with forgiveness because we want to forgive. It is an effort to be bitter and unforgiving. Such negativity does not come naturally; it has to be fueled and the source of that fuel is your mind. You must continually give yourself reasons to remain angry. You have to relive memories and traumas in order to keep the fires of rage burning. Granted, some traumas are so deep that they pursue you and require special healing; but even these enormous wounds need to be released... It is for you to examine each situation and decide for yourself whether you are prepared to withdraw your soul from the battlefield and enter into the healing mystery of forgiveness.”

Carolyn Myss, *Entering the Castle*

I have thought a great deal about forgiveness in my lifetime. I have hurt others and been hurt, and so have been in the position of both asking for and offering forgiveness. As well, I have spent years working with the prison population, and have also worked alongside murder victims family members. In my line of work, then, I have come face to face with heinous and atrocious behavior on the one hand, and unfathomable grief on the other. I have also witnessed, up close and personally, the miraculous power of forgiveness and reconciliation.

These things are important to know about my approach to forgiveness:

1. The murder victims family members I have worked with are part of a group called Journey of Hope...From Violence to Healing. These are folks who have lost loved ones to particularly egregious violent crimes. The individuals who murdered their loved ones all received death sentences, and have either been put to death already or are scheduled for execution. The remarkable thing about my friends at JOH is that they oppose the death penalty, and have somehow managed to come down on the side of forgiveness. They have taught me that forgiving even the worst offenders is both possible and transformative.
2. If you or someone you love has been a victim of a violent crime or some form of abuse, hear me: I will not pressure you, now or ever, to forgive the person who hurt you or your loved one if you are not yet inclined to do so. I will, however, encourage you to take your hatred and rage into the Wilderness and, consequently, into the Light—not for the sake of the offender, but for your sake.

3. If you are an offender, hear me: You cannot and must not wait for others to forgive you; they may or may not. Your job is to forgive yourself and to take 100 percent responsibility for the crime(s) you have committed. It is not necessary or helpful to wallow in guilt and shame, but it is necessary to spend the rest of your life making amends. If you're not sure how to do that, trust that the way will open in the Wilderness. Also, it is true that "hurt people hurt people;" which means that you likely have a lot of forgiveness work of your own to do when it comes to other people in your life.

Heavy stuff, admittedly. Most of us don't have forgiveness work that is quite as weighty as all of that, but some of us do. Whatever your story: whether you need to forgive yourself or others, for big or small things, take that need into the Wilderness and see what opens up for you.

I promised not to pressure you to forgive anyone you're not ready to forgive, and I won't. That said, I will lean on you harder in this section than in any other. I do that because the rewards of forgiveness are so great that it is difficult to describe them. If you are fortunate enough to have an experience in which your heart is broken open; in which the inky, black energy of hatred is transformed by the Light, you know what I'm talking about. Carolyn Myss again:

"Contemplate what it means to be called to love in a place you would rather not go. Whom can you not love? How would you recognize if your heart opened and you were directed to embrace someone whom you had previously banished from your heart?"

When I was 21 years old, I was a happy, adventurous college student. I was a very talented theatre major, and spent my days rehearsing, singing and planning my delicious future. Before I was 22, however, I ended up getting involved in a cult of sorts.

To make a long story short, I spent several years in the cult and got out only after I'd been thoroughly abused. By the time I got out, I was nearly too sick to function. I was chronically tired, chronically in pain, and the very night that I confessed to friends what it was that I'd been subjected to, my head started to shake. I've suffered from an essential tremor ever since (which eventually killed my life-long dream of being a professional actor). When I went in I was a powerful, adventurous, joyous, optimistic 21 year old. When I got out, at 27, I was shattered, devoid of any and all self-esteem, depressed, and very ill. My brokenness set me up for several other disempowering experiences and relationships later in my life and, believe it or not, things got decidedly worse before they got better.

Am I bitter? Nope. Am I sad? Nope. Do I have anything nice to say about this man who, arguably, “ruined my life?” Nope. Would I have anything to do with him if he was still living? No way. Not unless he had spent a good deal of time in the Wilderness himself (and even then I’m not sure why I would ever want to have anything to do with him).

Most importantly, have I forgiven him? Yes.

I will never have good things to say or feel about this man; he was very sick, and for years I suffered profoundly as a result of his sickness. That said, I have come to believe that he showed up in my life right on time. The lessons I learned from my experience far outweighed the benefit I would have received had my life-long dreams come true.

So. Here we ask some of the same questions we ask in the section on transforming trauma:

1. *What lessons did the experience offer me?* I didn’t know better and now I do.
2. *What did it expose in me?* Deep-seated insecurities, willful naiveté, and a tendency to hand over my power far too readily.
3. *Did my traumatic experience leave me with gifts that I can use to help others in a similar situation?* YES.

Engaging in forgiveness work makes you an alchemical work in progress. “A much greater and profoundly cosmic love lies within us, but we must break through the forceful power of our injured egos to discover this love.” (Carolyn Myss, *Entering the Castle*). Indeed, there is no other path to such love. Your shattered heart and the injustice that befell you was not a punishment. It was an invitation.

Carolyn Myss (*Entering the Castle*) again:

“Do you have to make an effort to fuel old anger or bitterness? Your heart may begin to crack open. Do you discuss old hurts and traumas again and again, out of habit? You may be consciously preventing your heart from opening. Being judgmental of others and holding on to negative thoughts blocks the emergence of mystical love. You cannot be bitter or unforgiving and be a conduit for love and grace. Heal your heart. Allow it to give up old wounds. A much greater and profoundly cosmic love lies within us, but we must break through the forceful power of our injured egos to discover this love...”

Wilderness Exercise #1: Write a letter to the offender

Write a letter to any and everyone you have struggled to forgive. Write everything you have always wanted to say. This letter is for you alone, so don't hold back. Your letter can and should be as raw and as angry as you feel.

Wilderness Exercise #2: The Forgiveness Prayer (or mantra)

Once you've written your letter(s), regularly offer up this Carolyn Myss prayer. If you're not religious, make the necessary changes to turn the prayer into a non-religious mantra:

"I desire to forgive more than I am capable of forgiving, but not to forgive is even more difficult. Help me break through the walls of my ego and let me experience even a drop of the love that transforms resentments into compassion."

Pray or repeat your mantra as often as you can this month, while putting no pressure on yourself to forgive the offender(s) in your life. Write in your journal about feelings and changes that occur.

Recommended Reading:

Radical Forgiveness: A Revolutionary Five-Stage Process to Heal Relationships, Let Go of Anger and Blame, and Find Peace in Any Situation

By Colin Tipping

Sacred Contracts: Awakening Your Divine Potential

by Caroline Myss

Entering the Castle: Finding the Inner Path to God and Your Soul's Purpose

by Caroline Myss

A month of ARETE: THE ACT OF LIVING UP TO ONE'S FULL POTENTIAL

Arete (*/ˈæɹatiː/*; *Ancient Greek*: ἀρετή), in its basic sense, means excellence of any kind.^[1] In its earliest appearance in *Greek*, this notion of excellence was ultimately bound up with the notion of the fulfillment of purpose or function: the act of living up to one's full potential. (Wikipedia)

Close your eyes. Dream. In your mind's eye, see an idealized version of yourself, your life. How do you feel? How do you appear? What are you doing, and who are you doing it with? Imagine yourself glowing with good health, energy, and enthusiasm—brimming over with power and LIGHT, immersed in work that you love and surrounded by like-minded people who share your vision and creativity. To this—to your version of Arete—I say, yes!

YES.

Every day, at every moment, you are invited to step into your own power—the very power necessary to live a fully realized life. Most of us have forgotten how powerful we are. In the Wilderness, we remember.

In the Wilderness you have worked, gently and systematically, to clear away the debris that stands between you and your power, and it's time now to intentionally tap into that power. When you do, Arete is yours for the asking.

I tend to think of Arete this way: There are things in this lifetime that we can control and things that we cannot. Arete marks a high level of excellence within the realm of things we can control: physical conditioning; overall health and wellness; the acquisition of knowledge; a sustained, contemplative spiritual discipline (whether one believes in “God” in the traditional sense or not); project completion; finding a vocation that honors our core values, calls upon our personal skill set, and is so aligned with our spiritual marching orders that it doesn't feel like “work,” etc.

Now that you have spent a good deal of time in the Wilderness, systematically addressing those things that have kept you stuck—acknowledging them, bringing them into the Light, and clearing away one obstacle after another—you will start to feel more and more excited about the fact that you can indeed become the very best version of yourself. As always, in the Wilderness, *we don't force change, we allow it*. We set our intention, take time to imagine that which is coming, and then let go. When you've cleared enough psychic space (and once you've done the visualization exercise at the end of this chapter often enough), the time will come in

which you *want* to do the very things that will propel you forward. Begin preparing for that time now; buy new running shoes, scope out the gym you'll join, find a public speaking course in your area, hire a life coach (me or someone else). Identify the places and people and things you'll need to become your version of Arete. As soon as you feel ready, move. You might still have to push yourself to get started, even after you've done a fair amount of Wilderness work. It will be worth it.

A quick note about vocation: If, like many people in this day and age, you have a job but are dissatisfied with it, and long to do something different, more meaningful, and sufficiently lucrative, but don't have any idea what that looks like yet, don't despair. You're doing exactly the right thing by going into the Wilderness. Every time you go, take with you your intention to "find a vocation that honors your core values, calls upon your personal skill set, and is so aligned with your spiritual marching orders that it doesn't feel like work," as I wrote above. Also, be sure to do the Wilderness exercise at the end of this chapter as often as you can, and know that "way will open," as the Quakers say. It will. Maybe not as quickly as you wish it would, but the way will open eventually. I'm a firm believer that going into the Wilderness speeds up the process from here to there.

Incidentally, in the Wilderness, the space between here and there ("here" being your current reality, "there" being your ideal, imagined life) becomes infinitely easier to inhabit. The more time you spend in the Wilderness, the more joy, peace and satisfaction spring from within. As time goes on, your emotional state is less and less affected by external events. You begin to tap into a deep and inexhaustible reservoir of joy that transcends the human experience.

The beauty of it is this: as you dip into that inexhaustible reservoir, the joy and unfathomable power you find there begin to animate every aspect of your experience, and your inner and outer lives eventually bear the same witness.

As a holistic life coach, it is my job to help clients reach a place of personal excellence, whatever that means to them. I take the work seriously. People who are glowing with good health, loving their work, enjoying great abundance and brimming with energy and enthusiasm are fully capable of changing the world; theirs and everyone else's. That's vitally important to me. But when it comes to personal excellence, I take a Wilderness approach as opposed to one that is first based on goal setting, discipline and accountability. Don't get me wrong—goal setting, discipline and accountability are all exceedingly important—but my fervent belief is that before you employ any sort of goal setting strategy, you need to build your own personal liberation front. Because when you throw off your self-imposed shackles and tap into the power at your core, everything begins to fall into place.

This isn't magic, it's physics. When you are this fully alive and tapped into your power, you increase the operating voltage that powers the sustained, disciplined effort required to meet your goals.

Above and beyond your Wilderness practice, the prescription for maintaining the connection to your power is simply this: you must continue to allow yourself to embrace the things that bring you to life! Revisit "A month of CREATIVITY & PLAY". Listen to music that moves you and read poems that reduce you to tears. Risk feeling, living and loving deeply.

Wilderness Exercise #1: The "Ideal Day" exercise

I could never in a million years come up with a better exercise than Martha Beck's "Ideal Day" exercise, which can be found (and listened to, free of charge) at: www.withinsight.com (a "Sounds True" website) under the "Life Purpose" section. I have done the exercise no fewer than 200 times over the years. Incidentally, I bought Martha's entire program and love it. Go do the "Ideal Day" exercise as soon as you can. I predict you'll feel tingly and alive at the end.

You'll also have a good, overarching idea of what you are here to do. You can take that vision, (along with your tingly, alive feeling) into the Wilderness where you can bask in it. Once there, don't make the mistake of strategizing, to the point of stress, on behalf of your vision. For now, just bask in the feeling. Set a broad intention to live out your ideal life, and allow the journey from here to there to unfold.

Wilderness Exercise #1: Living up to your full potential—creating the blueprint

Take time to imagine yourself as you would be if you were living up to your full potential in every way. Then, make a list of what you would need to do to reach that life—your version of Arete. Do you need to exercise? Will you need to hire a personal trainer? Will it be necessary to read more? Eat well? Meditate and get to the wilderness regularly? Are there boundaries you need to set? Classes you need to take? Etc.

When you're ready, take action, but let that action spring from your work in the Wilderness, and don't move until you feel too excited to sit still. And when it comes to taking action, here's a clue. In fact, this might be THE clue: *Whatever you're doing—if it makes you feel energized and alive, you're on the right track. If it makes you feel heavy and oppressed, you're on the wrong track.* Trust your internal compass.

Recommended Audio:

Follow Your North Star: Chart a Rewarding Path to Realize Your True Life's Calling

Martha Beck

An audio workshop for realizing—and staying on—the path to your soul's fulfillment.

www.soundstrue.com

Note: There are countless numbers of self-help books in the world, many of which have to do with reaching one's highest potential in any number of areas. I trust that you have several of them and that, if you don't, you can easily find them. There are some great books out there. But be sure to do your Wilderness work first, or any changes you make will likely be temporary. Once you've completed this program, get your self-help books out and try again. Remember: outer transformation is precipitated by inner transformation, which happens in the Wilderness.

A month of GIVING BACK



Ladder Canyon Ranch Colorado/Winter 2013

One of the most important reasons for going into the Wilderness is that the world needs you. Not some watered down version of you, but a healthy, whole, fully expressed and passionately alive you.

As I wrote in *A Dress, A Ring, Promises to Self*, “At the risk of getting unnecessarily (but only briefly) heavy handed, I would argue that the world needs you for the following reason: Every day we are made more aware of unsustainable stress points on our planet. Around the globe, one child dies every five seconds due to malnutrition, ninety percent of war casualties are civilians (almost half are children), and over 50 countries currently recruit children under 18 into their armed forces. In this country, 16.7 million children live in food insecure households, the immigration debate rages, and political parties are increasingly polarized and unwilling to engage in civil debate. The list goes on and on.”

To spend time in the Wilderness is to become infused with Light. As time goes on and as you grow stronger, I urge you to look for ways to share that Light. Perhaps there is a social justice or human rights issue that matters a great deal to you. Do some research on the internet or make a call and offer to volunteer for an organization you’ve been interested in. (As with anything else, follow your passion.) If you don’t have any idea what to do to give back at this point, set your intention and trust that way will open. When it does, get involved. (If you’re an artist, I urge you to look into [FESTIVE EVOLUTION: Art and Change-Making in the 21st Century](#). We would welcome your involvement.)

Last bit of advice: Putting yourself out in the world, especially if you volunteer to work with folks that are struggling mightily in some way, can be draining if you’re not careful. If the work drains you, STOP. I recently did an [interview](#) with *B. Real Magazine*, in which I spoke to this very thing:

BR: Under the Festive Evolution umbrella, you have produced a docudrama/documentary, started a group called ARTemis: Women, Art and Change-Making, written a book about “marrying yourself,” worked with lawyers

as a communications coach, and you've recently become a certified holistic life coach. Is there any one thing that ties all of these different ventures together?

SS: Yes. More and more, all aspects of my life bear the same witness, as the Quakers say. The world needs healthy, energetic, fully realized citizens to tackle the many challenges we now face as a country and world. My book, along with the work I do as a holistic life coach, address the healthy, energetic, fully realized part of the equation; all of the work I do as an artist and activist seeks to address those challenges in specific ways.

But, to be clear, of the things you mention, only ARTemis and the FAIRVIEW project come under the Fest Ev umbrella. Festive Evolution is an organization that supports and encourages artists who are socially and politically engaged, on some level. All Fest Ev initiatives meet at the intersection of art and activism, with an eye on making the world a better place - Planetary transformation, if you will. And then the book, as well as my work as a coach, are more about personal transformation – because, of course, we evolve collectively only to the degree to which we evolve personally. I didn't get that for a long time, but I get it now.

BR: Can you explain that?

SS: As a young person, I was very interested in saving the world. To that end, I devoted myself to social justice at the expense, often, of my health and family. I just had it all backwards. I learned the hard way that we have to, ourselves, evolve before we can evolve the planet. It's common, I think, to get the steps out of order. Because ultimately, the outer work that goes into changing the world is easier than the deep, inner work of personal transformation.

BR: You think?

SS: I do. We're all so outer directed. I think most people will admit that it's easier to DO than to BE. Changing the world requires DOING. Personal transformation requires BEING. Most of us find countless ways of distracting ourselves, all day, with pursuits that are noble or ignoble in varying degrees. But even the noble work of making the world a better place becomes a distraction if it keeps you from the sort of deep, inner work that is primary. I have friends and loved ones who know this and have always known this instinctively, but I had to learn the hard way.

BR: Meaning?

SS: Meaning that I have made mistakes that were dire; mistakes that had severe consequences for me and for the people I love; mistakes that were exceedingly painful, but which taught me a lot—because instead of crumbling beneath the

weight of them, I got tenacious about deconstructing the dark and fearful places in my psyche that rendered me incapable of making healthy and empowered decisions. So that newfound determination, along with the gift of ill health, forced me into a place of quietude for several years. For a long time I was deeply focused on my inner work, because I needed to be. But of course it's important not to get stuck there.

BR: So now, in your personal and professional life, you're trying to balance the two—doing and being; changing your life, changing the world.

SS: Exactly.

So, remember that you're seeking a balance. You'll know you're implementing a balanced approach if the work you do in the outer world energizes you. When you feel drained, get to the Wilderness ASAP, and check in with yourself. Figure out what, precisely, is draining you, and make adjustments.

Wilderness Exercise: This month, GIVE BACK!!

See the article in the appendix (page 68) for ideas about how.

Recommended Reading:

The American Way to Change: How National Service and Volunteers Are Transforming America
by Shirley Sagawa

After 12 months, friend, you will know as much (and more) about the Wilderness as I do. Let's take the Light we find there out into the world as soon and as often as we can.

Wild hope,

Sara

APPENDIX

MY FIRST DAYS IN THE WILDERNESS

I went into the Wilderness only when I was too broken to do anything else. I was so sick and sad (and tired and lost) that I could hardly function. I didn't know what to do when I got there, but I was desperate enough to go anyway, and willful enough not to leave until I found some relief.

At that point in my life, the thoughts in my head were so toxic and heavy that I was crumbling beneath the weight of them. I was crippled by huge amounts of guilt and shame. Additionally, I was poor and lonely, and I had a series of projects that hadn't gone anywhere. I had heaps and heaps of empirical PROOF that I was failing in every conceivable way. I was also profoundly heartbroken. As time went on, I got sicker and sicker. There were days—a lot of days—when I couldn't get out of bed.

And then one day I dragged my ass to the little stone chapel at Montgomery Bell State Park in middle Tennessee, very near where I live. (I still have no memory of how I ended up there in the first place.) I sat there for hours. I sat there, in all my brokenness, until I felt a shift within. When I walked into the chapel I don't think I noticed anything around me. It's doubtful that I heard a single bird sing. But when I left that day, I looked up and I saw the sky and the trees and the immense beauty around me for the first time in a long time. I can't begin to tell you how relieved I was to see and feel such beauty again, though I hadn't been aware I'd been missing it. Predictably, I suppose, by the time I went to bed that night I felt dark and miserable again.

So I went back the next day. And the next. I brought the books that spoke to me and I prayed. I talked to my broken, wild selves, strange as that sounds. Sometimes so much pain surfaced that I cried and cried. Sometimes—often, in the beginning—I was too sick and tired to sit up, so I slept in the church pews. Sometimes I allowed myself to imagine a better life, and sometimes I just sat and enjoyed the profound quietude. One way or another, I sat there every day, tenaciously, until I felt a shift within. I refused to leave that little chapel until “it” happened—until the Light broke through, and it almost always did eventually. When it did, it wasn't subtle. It was sudden, palpable, and always a tremendous relief. It did indeed feel like Light piercing my heart, and once it happened, the world looked like a very, very different place; I experienced everything so differently.

In those early days the internal change lasted for only a few hours at best. I couldn't sustain it. So sometimes I went to the little chapel twice a day. (Some days, though not many, I couldn't get to a better place no matter how hard I tried, and I surrendered to feeling terrible all day. This still happens occasionally, of course—but it didn't and doesn't happen very often.)

Like anything else, my practice got easier. Each day I would enter the chapel, sit in my spot (third pew back, right side, close to the aisle) and let whatever pain I was feeling bubble to the surface. I went to the heart of whatever darkness I was feeling and I learned to let the Light in. I

developed a practice that worked for me. In addition to silent meditation, I developed ways of dealing, systematically, with my wild selves. After a few months, my internal state seemed to change automatically, as soon as I got to the chapel. I often felt such a surge of joy and gratitude when I walked through the doors that I burst into ecstatic tears the minute I walked through them. And I can tell you this: that sort of deep, deep joy? Nothing—no worldly experience—can compare. (It was around this time that a dear friend introduced me to Hafiz, which meant that I had company in that exalted place!)

And now? The shift in me seems quite permanent, which is not to say that I feel great every day or that I don't still struggle—I do. But not, very often, in a way that threatens to throw me seriously off course. And if I do feel particularly funky, I get to the chapel immediately. Or I turn off my phone, turn off my computer, and do the work here in my living room; Harder, because of potential distractions, but absolutely possible.

When I say that perhaps there are no accidents, that perhaps the entire universe is conspiring to help you (and has been since the day you were born)—I say that not because it's an intellectual idea or spiritual precept that I have adopted for the sake of convenience. I say it because that is the unalienable (so far as I am concerned) Truth that I found in the Wilderness. That is the message that the Light brings, along with the message that we are never alone. But that's neither here nor there, as yet.

For now, you just have to find your way in. And you will, when you want to experience profound change at an accelerated pace, or when you are tired enough of feeling badly, or when you no longer have a choice. When that time comes—when you decide that you are tired of feeling hopeless, here's what you can do:

- Make time.
- Find your “chapel” which, of course, doesn't have to be an actual chapel. Find any space that feels somehow sacred to you. Ask to be led there, and you will be.
- Be tenacious. Don't leave your sacred space each day until you feel an internal shift. It will take you a while to figure out how to bring about (or allow?) such a shift, but you will. It will get easier with time.
- Entertain the idea that my rather audacious proclamation—the one that says, “Ask to be led there and you will be”—might not be crazy after all. In other words, be at least willing to consider the possibility that there is some magic in this world.
- Take in the books and poems that pierce your heart. (They will again—be patient!)
- Take, also, Absolute Accountability and
- Love.

Always, *Love*.

Don't worry if those last two prescripts don't make sense to you now. They will in time.

That's it. You don't have to figure out what to do with your life or how to walk away from any one person, for instance. When you're ready, when you are tired enough of the darkness, you will step into the Wilderness and make time to let the Light in. Everything else will then fall into place, eventually.

And later..

**Five Days of Silent Meditation or
QUEEN SPAZZY FREE-FOR-ALL TAKES TO THE WOODS**

by Sara Sharpe

Sincere spiritual exploration is, and always has been, an endeavor of methodical discipline. Looking for Truth is not some kind of spazzy free-for-all, not even during this, the great age of the spazzy free-for-all.

Elizabeth Gilbert

Sunday, August 12

I tried this once before, this silent retreat thing, just over a decade ago—and the results were disastrous. My monkey mind had its way with me back then, and I came out of the experience thinking that I would rather endure all manner of physical torture than the mental torture that silence and absolute solitude wrought. At that point in my life, I was way less than ready to come face to face with the shame, fear and confusion that drove my inner narrative, and I bailed after a day. After several hours of driving aimlessly along the Blue Ridge Parkway (there are worse things, ultimately) I pulled off on the side of the road and called my then partner, who listened to me cry and who said, memorably, “Baby, I don’t know how to help you.” And really—how could he have known how to help me? So there on the side of the road, I pulled out my journal and scribbled furiously: “I need a rebirth, a reclamation, a commitment to myself first and foremost. I need a dress, a ring, and Promises...” and the rest is history.

www.dressringpromises.com

In any case, a decade and lifetimes of experience later, I am infinitely more prepared this time. I think. I have, for a long time now, had a sustained contemplative practice. Furthermore, this summer will go down in my personal history as the one in which I was the unofficial bride of the little stone chapel at Montgomery Bell State Park. For the past two months, in that sweet spot, I have logged in countless hours of meditation and centering prayer. I didn’t set out to devote this summer to a radical and transformative spiritual practice, but for whatever reason (likely a temporary bout with ill health that brought me to my knees, as it were) I suddenly this summer craved quietude in the way I have craved chocolate in the past. I have sensed untold amounts of Divine Grace in the silence. And now I want more.

I feel determined. Not only do I feel determined, I feel ready: I have a schedule mapped out (which I plan to adhere to rigorously), my bag packed, my food prepared. And yet ... I’m putting off bed time because I’m scared. I keep saying to my son, Jacob, “I’m nervous,” to which he finally replies, “Dear God. By this point I am too!” As usual, he keeps me laughing all night.

Monday August 13

I arrive at the park promptly at 9:00am, and it’s raining hard which is perfectly fine, I think, assuming it doesn’t rain all week. The chapel is first on the schedule-to-which-I’ll-be-adhering-

rigorously, and it is lovely as always. I plan to observe a sitting meditation for about three hours a day—if not zazen (kekka-fuza escapes me), at least silently. The rest of the day is for quiet contemplation, prayer, and swimming. Oh, and eating. I will, of course, be eating food from my strict and spare meal plan – to which, yes, I will also be adhering rigorously. (Incidentally, the word “rigorous” will grow less important as the week progresses.)

I love this tiny, sacred space. As much as I love it—and as totally as I have claimed it as my own this summer I have refused to get proprietary about it. I refuse, for instance, to ever call it, “My chapel.” As often as I start to say, “My chapel” and catch myself, it is and will always be, “The chapel;” The sandstone chapel that commemorates the birth of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1810, to be exact.

There are visitors in and out all morning, that I’ll have to deal with eventually. I’ve been dealing with this all summer and am used to the distractions, which generally I have decided are good for me. In fact, I have made it a practice to personally welcome any and everyone who crosses the threshold of my—I mean the—Chapel. But if I’m to observe a strict meditation schedule this week, I’ll have to ignore the folks that come and go. But I haven’t figured out how to do that yet. (It’s *day one*, people.) The upside is I’ve had some lovely conversations this morning, as usual, and in between visitors I meditate until my schedule tells me it’s snack/swim time—at which point, I head to the lake.

There will be no swimming today. It’s raining even harder by the time I get to the water, so instead of swimming, I wrap myself in towels and surround myself with my favorite books. This place is beautiful, as is the rain, and I feel warm and cozy and delighted by the storm, and I can’t believe that I was ever, ever nervous about this week! I eat to my heart’s delight, rhapsodize in my journal about the sound of the rain (or something) and feel, for all the world, like I’m on vacation.

Somewhere in these initial, self-congratulatory hours I am dimly aware of the fact that vacation isn’t really the point, but for now this awareness is keeping a polite distance while I turn the page of my journal and commence making a cheerful list of my favorite Hafiz poems ... Right up until I come across this one (with which I’m very familiar and which partially spurred this idea in the first place):

FOR THREE DAYS

Not many teachers in this world

Can give you as much enlightenment

In one year

As sitting all alone, for three days,

In your closet

Would

Do.

This means not leaving.

Better get a friend to help with

A few sandwiches

And

The chamber

Pot.

And no reading in there or writing poems,

That would be cheating;

Aim high—for a 360 degree

Detox.

This sitting alone, though, is

Not recommended

If you are normally

Sedated

Or have ever been under doctors

Surveillance because of your

Brain.

Dear one,

Don't let Hafiz fool you—

A ruby is buried

Here.

Oh. Right. No books for the rest of the week, then. This means that whether or not I am officially meditating, I will have nine hours a day here by myself, with very few distractions.

I put away my books and practice another seated meditation, because there isn't much else to do what with the rain and the moratorium on reading. But my tremor is a distraction, as is the relentless pain in my tail bone. In addition to that, the mosquitoes are out and my feet are cold and I can't remember whether or not I set my alarm to alert me when "snack/swim time" is over and ...

Yes. This is more to the point, and this ain't no vacation. The thought makes me smile. And so we begin.

During my afternoon meditation in the chapel my goal is to (politely?) ignore anyone that enters. This is harder than I thought it would be. First of all, it makes me a bit nervous. The very many cautionary tales I've received from my friends and loved ones (who know of my plan to spend the week in a state park alone) have had an effect, meaning that everyone who approaches me (especially when my back is turned and my eyes are closed) is momentarily suspect. Even harder is dealing with the fact that I feel rude. I realize that I have come to love my role as the one woman welcome committee, and it is hard not to acknowledge the presence of all who enter. But I want—I need—to "go deeper" (whatever that means) and so today I do manage to ignore the few people who wander in. Interestingly, when I remain silent, everyone who enters does so quietly and respectfully. I hear people come in, but sometimes I don't notice when they leave.

I have carried into the park with me a story of such tragic proportions that it will have to be dealt with sooner or later, and I decide to spend some time praying about it this afternoon. I have dear friends who know and work with a family who has, just this past week, experienced trauma of the highest order. The kind of human tragedy that is hard to wrap one's heart and mind around.

I am somewhat accustomed to this line of contemplation. I have been an anti-death penalty activist for much of my life. Within this line of work it is necessary, early on, to find a place within one's spiritual understanding for heinous and atrocious human behavior on the one hand, and unfathomable grief and loss on the other. And yet this story, which is unmercifully splattered on the pages of our local newspaper, is especially heartbreaking.

I think again of Hafiz, as I so often do, who writes gently:

There is no event in your life

You in some way

Did not drive a hard bargain for.

This chapel has become the place in which I actively wrestle with proclamations such as these, both as they relate to my own life and to the lives of the people around me. I realize, once again, that I gently, tenderly—apologetically, even—accept this as Truth. Across the vast expanse of lifetimes, in which the soul's purpose is to evolve and to keep on evolving, it makes sense to me that we are, at times, broken (sometimes completely shattered, in fact) because we ask and need to be, on some level; because such brokenness serves us in some way. This is what I have come to believe, in any case.

That said, my pain for this family is overwhelming and I pray for relief for them; for some semblance of safe passage through this lifetime, in which nothing will ever be the same. I weep for them, as well as for my friends who know them and who have had to bear witness to their pain. Here in the chapel, I give this time to them. It is the least I can do.

Tuesday, August 14

I am, as it turns out, infinitely more ready for a week of intense meditation than I might have guessed.

That said, it's not always easy. On this particular morning lots of anger is surfacing, which is relatively rare for me. I feel loads of anxiety and confusion bubbling to the surface as well, which is not as rare. I sit with it all. This is one of the most useful things about a contemplative practice, I'm finding: the increased ability to sit with pain and sadness very intentionally. Instead of running from the discomfort (and worse) – instead of distracting myself at all costs, I move right to the center of it. This practice, I think, has quite a lot to do with the fact that I feel a much greater sense of contentment than I ever have before. The persistent feeling that something *isn't quite right* – the sort of low level, dissonant, background noise in the back of my mind is, slowly but surely, shifting to its opposite. This in and of itself is revolutionary for me.

Let's be clear: I am here for my children, Tenna and Jacob. It's the very, very least I can do.

It's swim time, according to my schedule, and today there's not a cloud in the sky when I get to the lake. As I peel off my sweat pants and head for the water, I can't help celebrating the fact that the kids are back in school and the vacationers have all gone home, meaning that I am alone in this beautiful place; wondrously, blissfully alone. As I step into the lake, however, it strikes me that perhaps this is not such a good thing because who other than me will scare

away the fish? But I swim happily enough until I've had my fill, at which point I decide to spend the rest of snack/swim time meditating on the tiny, sandy "beach."

So far, the biggest challenge I'm facing in my meditation is this: Each time I close my eyes, my mind presents me with reams and reams of blank paper on which to write, and write I do—fingers flying across a mental keyboard, thoughts and paragraphs and bits of monologues coming so quickly that I can scarcely keep up with them. By week's end I will come to understand that this is a gift, I haven't generated this much creative output in years. Still, it's distracting. It's easy to overly identify with the material that I'm receiving, all of which appears effortlessly, unsolicited and fully formed. It's tempting to think that I am very, very clever, all of a sudden. By the time Friday rolls around I will have learned, quite successfully, I think, to manage this phenomena. As well, I will have learned a great deal about the creative process in general (or at least about my own). The process really is wondrously co-creative. Ideally, I think, one creates huge amounts of space in which to listen and receive. Then, if anything is to come of such gifts, one must show up and suit up for the sweat equity part of the bargain.

Before this week, I probably could have intellectualized all of this, and even described it to some degree. But never before have I witnessed it in such stark terms.

Wednesday, August 15

No swimming this morning. The water is stagnant and, well, yucky. My sweet little swimming hole today more closely resembles a sewage treatment plant for ducks. Perhaps this is what happens when the kids are back in school and the vacationers have gone home.

I have found a new place to meditate, as there are just too many people in and out of the chapel. Also, I'm not adhering to my schedule quite as rigorously as I was in the beginning. I'm meditating, or at least sitting silently, for more hours than I had originally scheduled. I'm now spending most of my time at the spillway, which is absolutely gorgeous and which offers the added bonus of the sound of falling water.

I am here at the spillway when it happens, when I get a brief and exquisite taste of the ineffable. (I can't say I wasn't hopeful.) I have been meditating for an hour or so when I tip over into a state that transcends my ability to describe it. I don't get to stay long; it's a tiny taste—a teaser. But it's enough. It's so much more than enough. It releases my head and pierces my heart, and when I open my eyes everything around me is so beautiful that it takes my breath away. I literally gasp out loud and have to resist the urge to leap out of my chair. I want to move, suddenly. I want to take this glimpse of Divinity and run out into the world with it. It takes no small amount of discipline to stay in my seat, but stay in my seat I do, and it's not long before I settle in and bask in this feeling. I could (and do) sit here for hours.

A hawk circles above me, sliding along the sky. I think about how for El Gavilan, as for the rest of us, it's not possible to take flight until one is able to rise above guilt and shame. I watch the hawk for a long time.

Thursday, August 16

This morning I deviate from the schedule in a big way. I decide to spend some time, while in this calm and centered place, getting a handle on the year ahead. I get out my calendar and my budget and lay it all out on paper, with dates and numbers. It's a fun exercise, all in all, though in the end my document more closely resembles abstract art (emphasis on abstract) than an actual budget. Numbers are not my area of expertise, to put it mildly. But still, I like where this is going. Through an odd combination of unceasing willfulness (not to mention a dearth of alternatives), I have crafted a life that, for the most part, reflects my passions and interests all across the board. All of my work meets at the intersection of Art and Change-making, with particular emphasis on what can accurately be described as a new, worldwide women's movement – as in, Gather the Women, Save the World, and Not a Moment Too Soon. And happily, I'm traveling a lot this fall: to the beach with my sister in August; to Colorado to perform a beloved piece and to see beloved friends in September; and to Santa Fe, New Mexico at the end of October, for another silent retreat at the Monastery at Christ in the Desert. All in all, it's shaping up to be a lovely year as years go. But I get so caught up in doing mode that it is hard to switch to being mode. After an hour or so, when I put away my notebooks and turn inward, I have a hard time settling in. Truth be told, I've probably been stalling a bit. Yesterday was so lovely that on some level I have convinced myself that today won't be. Not surprisingly then, it's not.

Satori, the Zen Buddhists call it. I wonder if those who have been meditating for years experience Satori somewhat regularly—or if it is always purely an act of Grace. I'm not sure that what I experienced yesterday would qualify as such; I have experienced Satori once before in no uncertain terms, and yesterday's experience (whatever it was) was so brief (seconds) that I'm not sure. I don't know enough about such things.

I spend most of the morning fantasizing. Not the lurid variety, just to be clear. (My daughter hates when I use this word. What she doesn't understand is that by this point, in my mid forties, my fantasies are as often inhabited by the well appointed kitchen as by the well appointed man.) That said, I do spend a fair amount of time, in general, daydreaming about some lovely man I haven't met yet, and this morning is no exception. In any case, eventually I decide to move to another part of the park to see if a change of location will help. I find a pretty place I haven't been before, haul my chair down to the water's edge, and try to remember everything I know about meditation: relax, focus on breathing, don't fight the thoughts—just let them float innocently by etc.

But mostly I'm just hot. The mosquitoes are even worse here, the fish are jumping in a way that's distracting, and I'm sure I'm getting sunburned. I move again, back to the spillway, and when I park my chair in the usual spot I decide that I am here to stay for the rest of the day; that I will sit in silent meditation come hell or high water, transcendent experience or not. Despite my firm decision and the idyllic surroundings, however, and despite the fact that I do indeed sit here for the rest of the day, I never settle in.

Today the monkey mind (whom we might call Koko) is in complete control. She is behaving like three-year-old, very smart triplets in an attempt to entice me into doing something infinitely more fun than letting my thoughts "float innocently by." The more Koko tries to distract me the more stubbornly I try to shush her, and soon we are engaged in a full on battle of wills. I'm trying desperately to ignore her, and she responds by amping it up a few notches—presenting me, for instance, with a game she finds both fun and entertaining and which she dubs: Potentially Pithy facebook Posts (my favorite being "It's no fun ovulating when you're single"). I don't have to mention that this is exhausting. All in all, I want to go home.

Thursday, it seems, is a wash.

Friday

Except that Thursday wasn't a wash. It was a necessary and important part of my experience as a whole. It's all good, as they say.

And here is Friday already. I'm leaving early, I've decided. I have put my life on hold for a week and decide that I have to come out at noon to chop wood and carry water, as it were. There are things I simply shouldn't put off until next week. I settle on this decision firmly as I turn into the park.

Interestingly, all mental chatter ceases as I turn in, and it feels as if I'm entering a sacred space. I feel alert and present to a degree that is surprising and unexpected. That said, I think I somehow knew, even before I went into the Wilderness, that it would all come together in the end.

I'll be in the chapel this morning. The dear, dear little chapel.

Here I have my best meditation of the week, by far. I settle in immediately. Thoughts come and go, but I'm not attached to any of them. People come and go, but I'm not attached to them either. The coming and going barely ruffles the edges of my consciousness, and the hours slide by quickly.

At noon, I drive out of the park. It's raining again, which is perfectly fine.

Benefits of Meditation

(from Chopra.com and how-to-meditate.org)

During most of our waking life our minds are engaged in a continuous internal dialogue in which the meaning and emotional associations of one thought trigger the next. All day long our mind spins stories about our work, our health, our finances, our family, or that funny look the store clerk gave us. Often we're not even conscious of the internal soundtrack unspooling in our mind and yet it is the greatest source of stress in our lives.

Meditation is one of the best tools we have to counter the brain's negativity bias, release accumulated stress, foster positive experiences and intentions, and enjoy the peace of present moment awareness. Beyond the substantial benefits meditation creates for the mind-body physiology (decreased blood pressure and hypertension, improved immune function and decreased anxiety, depression, and insomnia) the greatest gift of meditation is the sense of calm and inner peace it brings into your daily life. When you meditate, you go beyond the mind's noisy chatter into an entirely different place: the silence of a mind that is not imprisoned by the past or the future. This is important because silence is the birthplace of happiness. Silence is where we get our bursts of inspiration, our tender feelings of compassion and empathy, and our sense of love. These are all delicate emotions, and the chaotic roar of the internal dialogue easily drowns them out. But when you discover the silence in your mind, you no longer have to pay undue attention to all the random images that trigger worry, anger, and pain. When you meditate on a regular basis, all of your thoughts, actions, and reactions are infused with a little more love and mindful attention. The result is a deeper appreciation and a profound awareness of the divine quality of existence.

- See the entire article at: <http://www.chopra.com/ccl/why-meditate>

How to do a simple Breathing Meditation

Breathing Meditations

<http://www.how-to-meditate.org/>

Generally, the purpose of breathing meditation is to calm the mind and develop inner peace. We can use breathing meditations alone or as a preliminary practice to reduce our distractions before engaging in a [Lamrim meditation](#)

A Simple Breathing Meditation

The first stage of meditation is to stop distractions and make our mind clearer and more lucid. This can be accomplished by practising a simple breathing meditation. We choose a quiet place to meditate and sit in a comfortable position. We can sit in the traditional cross-legged posture

or in any other position that is comfortable. If we wish, we can sit in a chair. The most important thing is to keep our back straight to prevent our mind from becoming sluggish or sleepy.

The first stage of meditation is to stop distractions and make our mind clearer and more lucid.

We sit with our eyes partially closed and turn our attention to our breathing. We breathe naturally, preferably through the nostrils, without attempting to control our breath, and we try to become aware of the sensation of the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. This sensation is our object of meditation. We should try to concentrate on it to the exclusion of everything else.

At first, our mind will be very busy, and we might even feel that the meditation is making our mind busier; but in reality we are just becoming more aware of how busy our mind actually is. There will be a great temptation to follow the different thoughts as they arise, but we should resist this and remain focused single-pointedly on the sensation of the breath. If we discover that our mind has wandered and is following our thoughts, we should immediately return it to the breath. We should repeat this as many times as necessary until the mind settles on the breath.

Benefits of Meditation

If we practise patiently in this way, gradually our distracting thoughts will subside and we will experience a sense of inner peace and relaxation. Our mind will feel lucid and spacious and we will feel refreshed. When the sea is rough, sediment is churned up and the water becomes murky, but when the wind dies down the mud gradually settles and the water becomes clear. In a similar way, when the otherwise incessant flow of our distracting thoughts is calmed through concentrating on the breath, our mind becomes unusually lucid and clear. We should stay with this state of mental calm for a while.

Even though breathing meditation is only a preliminary stage of meditation, it can be quite powerful. We can see from this practice that it is possible to experience inner peace and contentment just by controlling the mind, without having to depend at all upon external conditions.

So much of the stress and tension we normally experience comes from our mind

When the turbulence of distracting thoughts subsides and our mind becomes still, a deep happiness and contentment naturally arises from within. This feeling of contentment and well-being helps us to cope with the busyness and difficulties of daily life. So much of the stress and tension we normally experience comes from our mind, and many of the problems we experience, including ill health, are caused or aggravated by this stress. Just by doing breathing meditation for ten or fifteen minutes each day, we will be able to reduce this stress. We will experience a calm, spacious feeling in the mind, and many of our usual problems will fall away.

Difficult situations will become easier to deal with, we will naturally feel warm and well disposed towards other people, and our relationships with others will gradually improve.

Simple Ways to Give Back and Help Others Starting Today

by David J. Singer

“We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” ~Winston Churchill

Thirty-plus years ago, when I was applying to college, one of my friends used to say regularly, “We’ve gotta get involved with more extra-currics.”

He was talking about extracurricular activities. His (and our) interest was to build our “resumes” to enhance our attractiveness to college admissions officers.

Today, kids are building their resumes at younger and younger ages, and that’s a good thing. Even if their parents have an eye on enhanced college applications, there is a huge benefit to involving young people in community service. For those kids, adult involvement in community service will come naturally.

For me, community service came later in life.

When I was starting my career, I remember hoping to one day be wealthy so that I could donate huge amounts to charitable organizations. Fortunately, rather than waiting for “someday” to come, I learned how much of a difference I could make by donating time and energy to good causes and people in need.

I’ve gotten involved in many activities in my community, and it has been an extremely enjoyable and fulfilling experience.

There are many benefits that come from giving of yourself.

One of my daughters, just before she graduated from high school, was asked to answer an essay question: “What advice you give to an incoming high school freshman?”

Among other things, she suggested that they get involved in clubs, teams, and community service activities, and among the benefits she listed was the opportunity to meet and interact with people who you would otherwise not get to know.

The same thing applies to volunteering. You can also use volunteering time to spend more time with your family and friends if you arrange to volunteer together.

Volunteering is proven to be good for your health and your happiness. Studies have shown that people who volunteer live longer.

Volunteering is also a great tool in the fight against depression because it's easier to temporarily forget about your own problems when you shift your focus to helping others.

After a recent speaking engagement, a woman came to me and said, "I'm recently widowed, I'm retiring soon, and I hope to implement some of your ideas to be happier. My big challenge is what I'm going to do with my time."

I told her to commit some time to volunteering—that it would get her out with other people, which would help her well-being, and that she'd enjoy the gratification that comes from helping others. She walked away excited about my suggestion.

Following your passion is key.

You've probably read about families who've been impacted by certain diseases and created a charity to help cure those diseases. Those families are passionate about finding a cure. They want something good to come out of their tragic loss, in memory of their beloved family member.

Are there particular causes that are important to you? You need to be happy with what you're doing and to work in an area where you have ability.

If you are passionate about children, for example, find an organization that helps them. If you want to work directly with children, make sure to do that. If you'd rather work behind the scenes, and your skills go in that direction, follow that instinct.

If you are not happy, don't be reluctant to make a change. It's not selfish to change. You will be of greatest service to the world if you spend time doing things you enjoy, that you are good at.

Like every other change you want to make in your life, start slow.

Don't do too much, too fast. It's easy to get caught up and soon find yourself in over your head in terms of the type of work you are doing or the time commitment. If you volunteer for too many things, or give too much time too soon, the endeavor will have backfired for you and the organizations you're helping.

Those organizations are always looking for help and it's up to you to tell them where you need to draw the line. Remember: you can always add more time as you get used to making time for these activities in your schedule.

At the same time, it's good to jump in with a "just do it" spirit.

Making a commitment may be the best way to make volunteering a part of your busy schedule. Otherwise, you're likely to say, "I would love to, but I'm too busy."

For example, this spring I committed to a program to play baseball every Saturday morning with kids with special needs. Because I made the commitment, I made it work in my schedule.

We're all busy with the things that we decide are priorities for us. If you make a commitment, then it instantly becomes a priority, and that is probably the best way to get started.

It's easier than ever to find ways to be of service.

- If you are a member of a church, synagogue, or other religious organization, ask there.
- Ask your friends what they do.
- If you practice yoga, ask your yoga instructor. At the risk of stereotyping (though a positive stereotype,) every yoga instructor I've met has been involved in service activities.
- And so much more—just start Googling!

There are many ways to get involved. You could:

- Donate clothing, furniture, and other possessions to those in need. (Side benefit: You will declutter your house/apartment.)
- Set up a collection program at your office for money and non-perishables. (Make sure you thank everyone each time you write a check from the program to charity, or deliver the filled bucket to the local pantry.)
- Ride in bike-a-thons, run or walk in 5Ks, or if you're an ambitious athlete, participate in marathons and triathlons.
- Volunteer to help with bike-a-thons, 5Ks, etc. They always need volunteers the day of the event at registrations tables and more.
- Volunteer at a soup kitchen/homeless shelter.
- Teach English as a second language as a literacy volunteer, or as a first language to kids or grown-ups who need help.
- Tutor kids in math or any other subject.
- And so much more—once again, check Google!