

The Quest for Love and Friendship

My story begins in the late '60s, as a male in my junior year of college. I knew that school would soon be done and, with a degree in sociology, I hoped to find a job. I also hoped to find a mate while still in school. There seemed to be an unwritten law: first finish the institution of college, then proceed to the institution of marriage.

I signed up for an English class because I had heard great things about the teacher. Each term included an exercise in which small groups of students would collectively take on a writing project. I was attracted to a woman in my class, Jan, an English major who had gotten A's her whole life. I asked Jan and my high school buddy Bill to join forces. That first term we produced a book with pictures from *The Family of Man* and a tape recording of original prose and poetry, and presented it to the class. We spent many creative hours together and began to cement our friendship. Sometimes Bill, Jan and I would be mistaken for the popular folk singers Peter, Paul and Mary. We would sing a chorus and sign autographs for our fans. Jan and I enjoyed each other's company.

The next term, Jan, Bill and I teamed up again to present a play that I'd written. The production was based on my prediction that Bobby Kennedy would soon be assassinated as his brother had been. We invited the class to assemble in the student union, and the performance began when Jan and Bill began to chat. Gradually the audience realized that the play had begun.

One month later, Bobby Kennedy was shot.

Vietnam War protests began heating up on campus. Students at nearby Kent State University were shot by the National Guard troops. Eventually our university was closed down because school of-

ficials were afraid of potential violence. Our lives became increasingly swept up in the chaos of the times, but we were young and our interests remained centered on forming our lives through relationships.

Most of the dating I had done up to that point was motivated by not wanting to spend Saturday nights alone. With Jan everything was different, and we began to date exclusively. We shared many dreams in common. We both had the same MGB sports car and the same Catholic school background. We laughed when we found out that we had received our First Holy Communion together. I felt like my life was just beginning. After about a year of dating, I proposed marriage to her on the first snowfall of winter. I will never forget that December night in the park, asking her to marry me while the snowflakes fell. We believed our love could change the world.

We were both just beginning to discover who we were, and we thought we would have fun forever exploring life together. Virgins on our wedding night, we were a rare couple indeed. Our first year together was great. People were amazed by how in love we were.

Jan helped out with registration for a new yoga class at our Unitarian Church, and thus we earned free classes for the next 18 months. The first night of class, the room overflowed with eager students. Phyllis, the teacher, was a housewife who had been involved in yoga and meditation for the past twenty years. She was the most vibrant person I had ever met. I decided that I wanted to be like her, and I asked her if she could offer any insights. After a year of studying with Phyllis, she asked me if I would teach her class while she was on vacation with her grand-

children. I loved teaching! Meeting Jan had been one of the first steps on my quest. Learning from Phyllis was the next step on the path.

For our first anniversary, Jan and I decided to take a month off and travel to the West Coast. Enchanted by the beauty of the west, I wanted to move us out there right away. I figured that as two young people still in a process of self-discovery, why not try out this beautiful new place? But Jan had also begun an amazing period of blossoming and self-discovery, a process that, over time, included me less in her life. I began to feel rejected and hurt by her desire to do things without me. We began to drift apart and seek new directions and I saw the truth of the situation. Jan was not rejecting me, she was following her own path. This perspective gave me the freedom to know that I loved her regardless of the outcome. I was amazed at my happiness for Jan's doing what was best for her. Meanwhile, Jan was strong enough to see that she had to follow her own destiny, even if it was painful for both of us. In our wedding ceremony we had included the line, "let there be spaces in your togetherness," by Kahlil Gibran. Even then we had been aware of the possibility that we would not be married forever.

Though our friends were confused to see a couple, once so in love, now splitting up, Jan and I remained supportive of each other during the ordeal of ending our marriage. For a hundred dollars and a batch of cookies, we hired a lawyer to help make the separation legal. At the age of twenty-two, I called my parents to say that Jan and I were getting a divorce. I had to repeatedly assure myself that I was not a failure.

Being with Jan was a great gift! I had found love once and I believed that I could find it again. I gave notice at my job and quit graduate school. I sold everything I didn't need, packed my few belongings in a van and headed west, alone, looking for a new adventure.

Rainbow Guru

My yoga teacher had suggested I pay a visit to her teacher at the ashram as I traveled across Canada. I couldn't afford to take the two month teacher-training course that was being offered, but I thought I might at least stop for a couple of days and get a feel for the community.

Getting out of my van, I was quite clueless as to how this particular visit would affect my life. I had just driven hundreds of miles that day, so I de-

cidated to stretch my legs before checking in at the office. Following a trail lined with beautiful flowers, I stopped to inspect a place where they were being washed away. The spring that was the source of water for the center had become clogged and was overflowing. No one else was around to fix the problem, so I jumped in. I was muddy and happy by the time a staff person came by—he thanked me and showed me where I could clean up. I was invited to be a summer staff member. I accepted and was able to attend the long yoga course for free. Suddenly I was living in community for the first time in my life.

Early every morning, one hundred yoga teachers-in-training would assemble in the meditation hall to chant for a half hour, followed by group meditation. The swami, one of the early yoga teachers to come to America, would then give a lecture on an aspect of yoga. This was followed by an hour and a half of yoga postures, then a meal. This routine was repeated twice a day.

The early '70s brought many gurus from India. As the summer ended, the students were in a frenzy to find their spiritual master. Evening discussions were full of tales about amazing feats performed by great teachers. Most of us would be leaving soon and the question was: "Who do I follow?"

During the meditation sessions, I loved to sit by the window and gaze out at a green valley in the distance. The two mountains that formed the valley were exactly the same shape. One morning just for fun, I told myself that when I opened my eyes from meditation, I would know who I was to follow. I gasped as I looked toward my beloved valley. In the mist was a brilliant rainbow arching between the twin peaks. I was jolted back by the voice of the teacher who was upset that everyone had turned from him and had joined me in admiring the rainbow. The sounds of rustling bodies disturbed the swami and he sharply indicated that we should turn and face the front. I knew then that the head of the yoga ashram, though a good man, was not my guru.

The spectacular rainbow lasted for at least fifteen minutes. When it had faded, I got up and made plans for my departure. I decided that it was time to leave the ashram and follow the sun to the west. The light-bridge I had witnessed would be the symbol of my master. Nature would be my guru. The seven colors were a reminder to follow many teachers rather than just one. Everyone I would meet was represented by the light, each with a different color of the spectrum.

Rainbows have appeared to remind me of my path many times since then. Whenever I see one, I stop and take in the beauty until the colors disappear.

My New Life

I traveled in my van across Canada to the Pacific Northwest to make my dreams come true. I wanted to teach yoga, start a family and open a retreat center similar to Esalen, the famous personal growth center in California. Driving along the same route that Lewis and Clark had once taken, I entered the scenic Columbia Gorge from the top of the high desert of eastern Oregon. I passed through the Cascade mountain range with snow-capped Mount St. Helens on my right and Mount Hood on my left. The vegetation changed from brown grass to lush greenery. The highway followed the mighty Columbia River, and dozens of spectacular waterfalls cascaded into view.

Awed by the grandeur of nature, I had to pull into a rest stop because it was impossible to drive and take it all in. I got out to soak up the panoramic view. All of this beauty spilled into the rich farmlands of the Willamette Valley. I felt that I was coming home, that this was where I should be living.

Although I had heard great stories about Portland, Oregon from other travelers, I didn't know a soul when I got to town. I offered yoga and meditation classes in every section of the city and started meeting fantastic people. I offered a yoga retreat at Camp Westwind, on the rugged Oregon coast. During that weekend I became close with Linda, one of my students, who was in the process of ending her marriage. A few months later, Linda, her daughter Carmen and I found an apartment together. I became a stepfather.

I had set the goal of opening a retreat center on June 1st of the following year, though I didn't know how this was to be accomplished. One day, I received a call from a man in California who had heard of my interest. He owned a log cabin situated on 180 acres, next to a lake, in the coastal mountain range, 40 miles from Portland. To my surprise, he asked, "Can you open the center by June 1st?" Yes! The next part of my dream was about to come true!

The workload was staggering but after several months of effort by dozens of volunteers, the Cherry Grove Center was opened on schedule. We offered a wide variety of seminars on personal growth and eventually added programs for kids. One of the biggest attractions were the gourmet vegetarian meals prepared by Linda. The work was balanced by evening walks in the woods, finished with a swim in the lake.

On Thanksgiving, we discovered that Linda was pregnant and began planning a home birth. Over the next nine months, we studied everything available on conscious birthing. Linda began labor

at home, but after forty hours, a cesarean became necessary. One of the greatest moments of my life was my son's birth. We were able to go home the next day because our community was there to help. Since I lived and worked at the center, I was around my son all day. I loved watching him grow.

Adryan was an active baby day and night. After eighteen months of sleepless nights, stress was building. Our daughter Carmen was getting in trouble at school and began running away at night. Finally after one such night, I injured myself while working with a chain saw. Tension spilled over into my relationship with Linda. Being a new dad had stretched me beyond my limits. I felt helpless as I watched my family fall apart. I could never have imagined this much pain.

I had so many strong feelings at once that I became overwhelmed. I felt that I was a failure as a man and a mate. The relationship was not satisfying for either of us. Gradually, I accepted that no amount of work would save this relationship. The hardest decision I have ever made was to split up my family. Once again I had to make the call to my folks and tell them the sad news of an ending relationship.

My life was in chaos. In my attempt to create a place of peace and harmony for others, my dreams mutated into nightmares. I was losing both my personal center and the retreat center I had worked for five years to develop. I had begun feeling like a beautiful butterfly, but now my wings were being pulled off. I decided to let go of my family and become a single parent, and start a new life. This required moving into town and getting a regular job.

One day I woke up in pain, my heart was breaking! I realized a terrible truth: Most of the people in my life were not the kind of friends I wanted. I was feeling abandoned by those whom I had helped. Though I enjoy being generous, my giving was not reciprocated and I had nothing left in my reserves. My batteries were drained, and I felt stalled out on the side of the road of life like an abandoned car. I had to find a way to recharge myself.

How could I be responsible for this intense pain? The hurt turned to anger at myself for the poor choices I had made in selecting my mate and friends. I was living an illusion, not the real give-and-take of true love and friendship. I had made mistakes. A big step for me was to surrender to the truth about my choices. There were reasons for my loneliness that I would need to understand. I was determined not to repeat past mistakes, and to find love.

Loneliness is a choice.

The pain I suffered was a powerful force with destructive potential. I told myself that I alone was responsible for this pain and loneliness. I got myself into this mess, I had the ability to get out. I would need all my energy focused on healing and growth. I needed to learn to make better choices in relationships. I decided to use the pain as fuel to learn everything I could about love and friendship.

The way out of my pain was clearly by forming healthy relationships, friendships in which love was mutual. Slowly I began to understand that love is also a choice. Empowered, I directed my energy by developing a customized plan to find the conscious love that I believed I deserved. I knew I was in crisis, and sensed both danger and opportunity in it.

Bus Sage

Riding the bus into town one afternoon, the driver stopped for a woman waving frantically, not at a regular stop. She was barely able to lift her body up the three steps. She pleaded with the bus driver to give her a free ride to see her doctor. To get his bus back on schedule he agreed. She stood gripping the chrome railings to steady herself, surveying the bus for a seat to rest her weary body.

Her ankles were swollen and her nylons were rolled down beneath a dress as old as she was. Hanging over one arm was a collection of a dozen tattered shopping bags all stuffed into one. There was no hint of what treasures this classic bag lady felt compelled to lug around on a hot day. Her face was a museum of a life of misery: pink blotches and twisted, cracked teeth. Her stiff, gray and yellow hair stood out in disarray from her head.

The source of the smell of stale urine was obvious to everybody on the bus. We simultaneously realized that there was no completely open row of seats for her large frame. She was deciding whom she would park next to. I believe everyone on the bus said a silent prayer that they would be spared. My prayer went unanswered, as she struggled to position herself next to me. I could feel the relief of the other passengers as they pretended not to watch the drama unfold. I held my breath as she turned to face me directly.

With the voice of a sage she proclaimed, "Oh ... how my life would have been different, dearie ... if only I had found love."

I was instantly converted from revulsion to compassion for this poor woman. I doubled my efforts to find love.

Dating and Seeking a Partner

After being out of the dating game for several years, I had to master the art of dating. I practiced upgrading my skills every chance I got. I had changed, and so had the world of dating. Time to dust off my ability to flirt!

Flirting is an invitation to be involved. I would recognize my desire to flirt, and signal through words and gestures that I was interested. I would observe if the other person noticed my attention and if they responded in kind. I tend to be an eager person, and had to learn not to push.

I customized my flirting to the individual and the situation, asking: "What is the best way to engage this person?" My opening remarks frequently explored what we had in common. Did the other person want to flirt? Was I being encouraged? When I met a woman at a gathering, I indicated that I was interested in her. I practiced improving my ability to ask questions, to learn more about her. Frequently, the more interest I showed in her, the more interest she showed in me. It felt good to express my intentions, and it was wonderful when the other person poured on the charm in return. Every person I flirted with, even those who were not interested in me, provided valuable lessons to perfect my art.

*If you don't take risks,
you risk everything.*

Initially I would ask, "Would you like to go out Saturday night to a movie?" I soon realized that the woman sometimes declined simply because she was busy on that night, or hesitate because she was not sure if she was interested in the activity I had suggested. I changed my approach so that my language communicated that I was seeking friendship. The

phrase “friends first” kept flashing in my brain. The strategy that worked best was to say that I would enjoy spending more time together, to get to know each other. This was more an offer of friendship than of a date. Then, if the desire was mutual, we would pick a time and an activity. This initial visit would be held in a public place. Either of us could end the meeting at any time. It was not a “date” until we agreed to move forward.

Additionally, the invitation needed to be light-hearted. Many women I spoke with said they were too often pressured for dates.

Victoria’s Story

Victoria was a wonderful woman that I had known for several months, and there seemed to be a mutual interest in exploring a relationship. I asked her what she liked to do for fun. She said that she loved to cross country ski. I asked if she would teach me.

She rented a cabin at the base of Mount Bachelor. The next morning we were up before sunrise. At the trailhead, Victoria told me that we were not going on the smoothly groomed trail, but were literally traveling cross-country. The new snow was so deep that each time I fell, I had to struggle to dig my way back to the surface.

After several hours of skiing, I had no idea where we were. Victoria assured me that she knew how to get us back to the parking lot. I was exhausted from the workout, but the beauty of the full moon on the snow kept me energized. We survived and bonded. She gave me her extra pair of skis as a reminder of our adventure and growing friendship.

Victoria and I went camping together in a wind-storm that knocked down big trees all around us. We swam in icy mountain streams, then jumped into a hot tub and traded massages. Although we enjoyed each other’s company, we knew that we were not meant to be mates.

List of Qualities

I began the quest for my mate by developing a list of the top ten qualities I was seeking. I wanted love and intimacy, and was eager to make a mutual commitment. I wanted a family and someone who would be a parent to my son. My past relationships left me repeatedly disappointed because I was not clear about my needs. Now I knew that I was seeking someone who:

1. Possesses a high level of self-love.
2. Has worked to heal old wounds and values personal growth.
3. Loves to spend time exploring nature.
4. Has good friendship skills and invests in quality relationships.
5. Follows a spiritual path.
6. Is passionate in many areas of life.
7. Enjoys being physically active and is health-conscious.
8. Has a well-developed sense of humor and makes time to play.
9. Is committed to love and intimacy.
10. Has a spirit of adventure.

This list saved me lots of time and energy. At a party when talking to someone, I would mentally check if she had several items on my list. If so, I would ask her to spend more time with me. My list repeatedly provided a reality check that has kept me on my path. Now I could distinguish whether a person was a friend and lover, or a potential mate and co-parent. This time I was looking for a partner who would also be a good friend with the emotional maturity for lasting love. I gave copies of my list to friends and asked them to help me find my heart’s desire. The added bonus was that my list also reflected some of the qualities that I sought in my deep friendships.

Personal Profile

The next part of my strategy of finding a partner was to write a personal profile. I believed that if I was clear about who I was and who I was looking for, the probability of finding the person I was seeking would increase. I developed this personal profile as a specialized aid to help me better know myself. I wanted to know about the ways I matched and did not match the other person. I have found this profile to be very useful whether seeking deep friendship or a mate.

Creating this profile will clarify where you are now. When comparing your profile with another, it is also useful in discovering where you share common ground with someone, and how you are different.

Insights: What have you learned from your life experience?

Lifestyle: How do you live?

Loves: Who do you love and who has loved you?

Life Course: What do you want out of life? Where are you headed?

History: What is your background? What are the major events and rites of passage that have shaped you?

Life Seasons: At what stage are you with regard to age, career, family, etc.?

Goals: What do you want to accomplish?

Intimacy: What kind of intimacy are you seeking?

Passions: What excites you?

Sensual and Sexual: What do you need in these areas?

Compatibility: How would you describe your personality?

Awareness: What level of healing and personal growth have you achieved?

Communication Style: How do you express your thoughts and feelings?

Philosophy: What do you value?

Spirituality: What is the essence of your path?

Full of Love

I wanted love and intimacy and was eager to find a partner who could make a mutual commitment. I was seeking to rebuild a new family. Right away it became obvious that it would not be easy to find a partner who had all the characteristics on my top ten list and fit my profile. An added complication was that I was looking for a woman who would also help raise my five-year-old son. Sometimes it was frustrating to meet women who met all these conditions, only to realize that they, too, had a list.

For instance, I was not a potential mate for someone who wanted to have children; my vasectomy ruled me out.

I observed that people who were starving for love seemed to have a hard time getting dates. When I was famished for affection, I often made bad choices. I told myself to stop waiting for the phone to magically ring and save me from my loneliness. I gave myself pep talks. Do not leave love to chance! Be proactive, make a plan. Get out of the house and be involved. I approached the task with the same intensity that one would apply to a job search.

My goal was to be as full of love as possible while looking for love. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of creating meaningful, supportive friendships while seeking a mate.

One Year Plan

I previewed what people were looking for in the personal ads. Several ads had more than one reference to humor as a desirable attribute. Here are some samples of the qualities people listed: "fun-loving, good natured, witty, funny, laughs easily, high-spirited, easy-going, humor with intelligence, enjoys the simple things of life and likes to have fun." The good ads listed what kind of activities they would enjoy doing together. Both men and women who were seeking romance stated that they preferred someone with a good sense of humor. My sense of humor was okay, but it seemed that if I wanted to improve my chances of finding love, I might need to improve my humor skills.

I wanted to become more lighthearted, so I committed a year to focusing on my sense of humor. My plan was to hang out with funny people and study what made them fun to be with. When I met someone who had a well-developed playful side, I would ask them to teach me how they found humor in life. I would try on their style to see what parts I wanted to add to mine.

Any time I was in a group, I would seek out the person who seemed the happiest. When possible, I would spend time with them. The biggest insight was that funny people create a fun life for themselves. Whenever I met a new person, I would ask, "How do you like to play?"

Over time, I have developed my own ways to play and laugh. A good sense of humor provides benefits for partnering and parenting. Later in this book, I will devote a whole chapter to the virtue of play.

Single Parents

When I was a single parent, I was one of few males with primary care of a young child. To become a good dad, I realized that I would also need to learn what it meant to be a “good mom.” Finding and paying for someone to watch my son was financially draining, so I formed friendships with women who were also single parents. We took turns watching each other’s kids when one of us went out on a date.

Besides seeking a mate, I wanted to foster female friendships. Many men and women have told me that they never had a platonic friendship with someone of the opposite sex. To me, it doesn’t feel accurate to label women as the “opposite” sex. There certainly are differences between the genders, but we are not opposite. My new female friendships gave me many chances to practice being in relationship, and I am eternally grateful for the lessons I learned from them. Mara said, “A loving attitude is the best way to attract love.” An added bonus; as they got to know and trust me, they would fix me up with their female friends.

Some of my special women friends and I would have sleep-overs for the kids and adults. We communicated our intentions and boundaries clearly in advance. We would spend the night just cuddling with each other. We were clear that we were not going to be mates and did not want sex to confuse the issue. We honored our mutual needs for adult companionship while raising our children.

As a single person, it sometimes seemed like everybody else was part of a couple. I vowed never to forget what it was like to be single and have a child. If and when I was ever in a relationship again, I would remember to have single friends.

Matchmaking

I asked my friends to introduce me to women whose company they thought I would enjoy. A couple I knew loved to matchmake, so they asked Sherry if it was okay to give me her phone number. Sherry and I had a great time talking on the phone and planned to meet at a new restaurant. Before the meal was half over, we could feel the attraction. Sherry said, “I’ll show you my list if you show me yours.” I laughed. I was surprised that she could tell that I had a list. While eating dessert, we swapped lists of what we were seeking in a life partner. Several items matched up but three did not. Comparing what we were looking for helped us avoid the feeling of being rejected. We even decided it would be fun to go out again and get to know each other.

Sherry became quiet. She was looking at the couple being seated behind me. She said that the man was someone she had dated for three years, whom she had just broken up with last week. When I turned, I was shocked to see that his date was a woman I had just ended a relationship with. We visited their table on the way out and all shared a good laugh.

During the next two years, I took every chance I could to date. One week when my son was with his mom, I went out seven nights in a row. Some dates were disasters, and on occasion, I was even stood up. When attracted to a woman, I would review my top ten list and my personal profile to see if the relationship had potential. I had learned from experience how long it took to extract myself from a relationship. Then, it can take additional time to heal and be open to love again. Every experience helped me to learn more about myself and become clearer about what I wanted.

I really appreciated the women who asked me out on dates. They were sensitive to the difficulties of being the one taking the risk. I liked that they shared the responsibility of finding love. Some of the women I dated remain my friends to this day.

The Adventure

I formed a friendship with a woman named Carol who was also healing from a recent break up. We formed an alliance for fun and friendship. We both were aware early on that we were going to be friends and lovers, but not mates. Caring for each other eased the pain of our transitions. Our friendship provided a vital distraction from our troubles. We could safely share with each other any feelings we had. The energy felt comforting and warm, like coming home to a hot bath at the end of a long day walking in the cold rain. I especially liked the evenings at her cabin in the woods. We would cuddle by the stove and listen to Willie Nelson’s “Star Dust Memories” album.

One night, Carol and I played a card game. We joked around as the game got more and more competitive. “Let’s make the game more interesting. The loser of the next game plans an adventure for the winner,” she said. I thought that was a great idea, so we played hard and I won. Carol was a gracious loser and said that my treat would begin the following Saturday. She would completely plan a one-day river trip. Of course, she knew I had always dreamed of going river rafting.

The following Saturday, we drove to a nearby river. I expected to inflate one of those yellow rafts I had seen in the movies. Imagine my surprise when Carol handed me an air mattress! "This is what we will be shooting the rapids on," she said. I am sure my eyes were as big as dinner plates. I will always remember that wild ride on the river with Carol. We hitched a ride back to the car. We bonded in a way that only sharing an experience can achieve. I still enjoy recalling the memory of our adventure.

Plan a surprise for a friend with whom you want to deepen your relationship. Consider what activities he or she would enjoy. Tell them the date, time, what to wear, and when you will return. Adventures are fun to plan, exciting to do and increase our trust in each other. There are never enough good surprises.

Reaching Out

Research shows that ninety percent of the time, people find great jobs and great mates through people they already know. Only a small percentage of great potential partners are found through advertising in the paper, with a dating service or on the Internet. Your circle of friends will be the best place to find the "good ones."

In my own case, I carefully selected events with the highest likelihood of having great people attending who might meet the qualities on my list. I used parties, gatherings and seminars to practice my mingling and meeting skills.

Many couples I interviewed reported finding each other by being involved with groups that met regularly. These types of settings provide a shared common interest and the opportunity to get to know people over time.

To be successful in your quest, you must find an eligible partner. In doing what you love, you increase the possibility of finding love. To connect with those like yourself, ask "where do they gather?" You may need to join a group to learn new activities, or organize fun events as a way of bonding. Learn with your friends new things like skiing, singing or playing a musical instrument. What are some new ways you can learn to play?

My First Date

Now that I was dating again, I recalled the memories of my first date. The high school dance I attended was at an all-girls Catholic school. Boys from the neighboring schools were invited. None of us guys really knew how to dance. I will never forget the tension in the room as we entered the dance hall. There were protective circles of girls talking and giggling. The guys also gathered in groups for security. We were all surrounded by nuns. Music was playing but no one was dancing. The girls were strangers to us.

After three hours of this torture, I had to do something. It was ten o'clock and the dance would be over at eleven. In order to dance, I would have to walk up to a stranger, a female stranger, and ask her to dance with me. First, there was the vast distance to cross all alone, from our circle to one of theirs. I then would have to select a girl and ask her in front of her friends. The risks were great. What if she said no? What if her friends laughed at me? Then I would have to cross back over that infinite empty space to my group and be hassled about my failure.

"Too dangerous, don't do it," one voice in my head said. "Go for it!" said the other voice. Suddenly, (I have no idea how I got there!) I found myself, heart pounding, asking a tall, older girl to dance.

"Yes! I would love to dance with you," she said. She smiled at me and thanked me for asking her. As we danced the last couple of slow songs together, I made a promise to myself: I would always ask for what I wanted. The pain of knowing what I wanted and not asking for it was too great to bear. Once I had tasted success, rejection could be handled.

My new dance partner, Sharon, was a volunteer at a local hospital. She would call me when work was slow. The only phone was in the kitchen, so I would retreat to the cupboard for privacy. Sitting in the dark with the canned goods, we would talk for hours.

I was not old enough to drive, so my mother was recruited as our driver for our dates. On the way home, we would sit in the back seat of the car holding hands. Sharon lived at the entrance to a dead-end street. My mother was cool enough to drop us off in front of the house and drive slowly down to the end of the street and turn around. If she had pulled into the driveway, the car lights would have shone on us when we kissed each other good night. (Thanks, Mom.)

I overheard one of my fellow students refer to Sharon as homely. To me, she was the most beautiful girl in the world and she cared about me. She taught me about life, love and the meaning of true

friendship. We dated for almost two years. She was older than me and eventually left for college, so our lives sadly parted. Sharon was my first intimate friend. We genuinely cared for each other. I have many fond memories of our times together. Later, I would remind myself, when asking a woman to dance and being rejected, that it did not matter. Eventually I would find someone who wanted to dance. I promised myself to keep asking for what I wanted.

Barriers

How do I sabotage myself from having friends? As I began to develop new friends, I examined barriers I put in my own way. I soon realized that I had a lot of wounds to heal from my past relationships before I could move forward. The pain from my past had the potential to weigh me down and break a new relationship. I started spending regular time with my new friend Francine who gave me the best advice.

She said:

I know you are still in pain from your breakup. For the next five minutes, you can complain, rant and rave about how bad it was, and I will give you my full attention. Then stop whining and lets have fun for the rest of the evening.

It was amazing how much I could get off my chest in just a few minutes! This helped me avoid contaminating my new friendship with poison from my past.

I also removed old belief patterns about not deserving friends. I had developed a fear of making a commitment to someone and then having to take care of them. I falsely believed that good friends would somehow magically appear. Since then, I have learned that true friendships develop as a result of conscious decisions and actions.

Mutuality

What is a true friend? I spent a day writing down ideas about what I was looking for in relationships. I wanted relationships that encouraged my growth. I hoped that my new friends would be thrilled by my growth because they were growing too. Friends who have esteem for each other are not fearful of their own or others' successes. They are eager to learn from each other. Their presence gives comfort. I sought those with whom I felt connected even when physically separated. This simple definition of "kindred spirits" has provided the direction that I needed for many years:

Kindred Spirits are special friends who encourage our growth, enrich our self-esteem and by their presence give comfort.

Since I believe that I am responsible for my own happiness, a proactive approach makes sense. I vowed to better understand the nature of love and friendship. The quest for kindred spirits has been both challenging and exciting. The hunt for deep friendship needed to begin by taking a clear and honest look inside and developing a close relationship with myself. And if I chose to shine light in there, I had to be willing to accept what I saw. I felt that once I began to accept myself, I would naturally gravitate toward those who could meet my desire for intimacy.

Traditionally, the word "kin" refers to a group of people with common ancestry or people within the same gene pool. Kin is sometimes extended to those related by marriage. The word "kindred" means "of a similar nature." Spirit is the essence of life, the fire that inspires.

When the words "kindred" and "spirits" are combined, they create the concept of inspired, loving connections.

For 99 percent of human history, we have lived in tribal cultures. In order to survive and flourish we needed to belong to a kinship band. In modern times, we live in communities composed of extended families, nuclear families, single parents and single person households. To be found within this new social context are many kinds of friendships, ranging from casual to very close. Only friendships that have reached a certain level of intimacy would I term "kindred spirits." These are people between whom caring and love run deep.

Sometimes a friendship evolves into a deeper level of intimacy and commitment. One hopes that this kind of kindred spirit relationship will last for life. On other occasions, this connection happens in an instant. You meet a person, feel the spark and never see each other again. The moments spent together are precious and to be cherished. We know that we will be changed forever by meeting each other. Companionship makes the journey fun. Traveling together, you both will go farther. In each new friend we discover a new way of being.

We are all born without choice into a family, but we get to select our friends. They are people with whom we share a spiritual connection. A kindred spirit relationship is a deep friendship that combines elements of friendship, marriage and family. It is a whole relationship, connecting on the level of body, mind and spirit. Whole dimensions of our being need to be nurtured by whole beings.

*Kindred spirits are a blessing
we bestow upon ourselves.*

Kindred Spirit

I reserve the term “kindred spirits” for the highest standard of friendship. It feels like we are kin in our essential nature. Our spirits are related. The level of commitment and intimacy is deep with such people. We experience a kinship that touches our spirit. Noble expressions of genuine kindness flow between us. Kindred spirit relationships are where friendship and spirit meet.

I strongly recommend setting aside time to reflect on the meaning and value of friendship. Write down your definition of friendship and display it to focus your attention on what you want.

What would you be capable of, if you had several deep friendships?

The Art of Friendship

Twenty years of formal education had given me little information about being a good friend or how to find friendship. Back in 1978, there were no classes on the subject, so I decided to explore with others who had a similar interest. I motivated myself to learn quickly by scheduling a workshop that I would teach, called “The Art of Friendship.” I created a series of fun, interactive exercises to give people a chance to practice new friendship skills. The workshop attracted 50 people from just one ad! They were hungry to learn and they came to share.

I began to prepare for future seminars by selecting people who seemed to have great relationships and interviewing them about love and friendship. My professional training in sociology helped me pose the kinds of questions that would yield valuable information.

I found that if I signaled my interest and sincerity, people opened up to me. Their stories helped me envision what was possible. They reported that they seldom talked about their friendships and welcomed the opportunity to share their stories and insights. They were eager to show me photos of their

friends. Knowing how rare loving friends are, the expressions on their faces sparkled with energy. They realized how blessed they were to have such special friends in their lives.

It’s fun to practice your friendship skills on strangers. Start a conversation and see how deeply and how quickly they are willing to go. In my experience, they often respond that they had never opened up to a stranger so fast before. They were thankful to talk to someone about their special friendships. I found it a great honor to hear these stories.

The people I interviewed used a variety of terms to portray these quality relationships: sacred friends, deep friends, passionate friends, esteemed friends, committed friends, special friends, spiritual family and family of choice. They all liked the term “kindred spirits” and felt that it reflected the high quality of their friendships.

One of the most familiar uses of the phrase “kindred spirits” is in *Anne of Green Gables*, a book written by Lucy Maud Montgomery in 1905. The qualities of loyalty and love between friends are common themes. Anne, fresh from an orphanage, brings together the lives of the kindred spirits in her community.

One of the books I read was the classic *How to Make Friends and Influence People*, written by Dale Carnegie in 1936. Although it is mainly concerned with how to succeed in business relationships, it has relevance for all human interactions.

I began looking for articles and books about how to be a friend and give mutual support. My review of the literature on friendship at the library resulted in only a couple of index cards on the subject. There were volumes written about romantic love, depicting the illusion of falling in and out of love. Even personal discussions were dominated by references to finding a mate and marriage. I began to explore a parallel model in my quest for deep friendships, based on what I sought in a lover. I wanted my friendships to be as exciting as a new love.

Family of Choice

Melissa was the first person to introduce me to the concept of “family of choice.” She was a rather short woman who could look a tall man in the eye.

She told me:

Some people are born lucky. Their blood family and legal family are close. It was very painful when I realized that I didn't like my parents or sister and two younger brothers. They recognized it, too.

I was considered a black sheep by my relatives for marrying outside their religion. My husband and I moved to the West Coast and left them all on the other side of the Mississippi River. Now my only child is grown up and lives in Spain. I have lived alone for ten years since my husband died.

My spirit sought family. It was time to stop complaining about my isolation. My church started a program to help build community. Members could register to become part of newly-created family units. The idea arose because many of us had expressed a need for family and community, being without nearby family. Others had family who lived close by but with whom they were not close.

I yearned to be someone's grandma, so I was "adopted" by a family whose four children had no grandma. I loved baby-sitting the younger kids so that their parents could go out on a date. We helped each other through hard times, and we gathered to celebrate the good times. I especially enjoyed getting together with my growing family for holiday meals.

On my spiritual journey, there are times I must travel alone. There are parts of life that happen only with a close friend, partner or therapist. There are steps that require the collective energy and insight of a group. We need each other to reach maturity. I believe that our individual growth is advanced by our collective growth. I consider my new family to be my spiritual community. I was born with my parents and relatives, but thank heaven I can choose my new family!

*The quest to find yourself
and your kindred spirits
is the same quest.*

Several people I interviewed confessed that although their partner was a great mate, they didn't feel that they met the standard of being a kindred spirit. They told me that their partner was a good friend, provided for the family and fulfilled certain other needs. Many people confided that they have

one or more deep friends that they love dearly but could not live with. Very few people I talked with said their marriage partner was also a kindred spirit. These rare couples also said that they each had other close friends.

I began to formulate a model that I would strive for. Becoming a good friend to myself would be an ongoing process. I wanted to become the kind of friend I was seeking. At the same time, I sought others who placed a very high value on being a kindred spirit. Usually people only invest in this level of love when they are hoping to find a marriage partner. My quest was to find a mate who was also a kindred spirit. I also wanted a partner who was committed to creating a circle of close friends.

Sam introduced me to the idea that we need to treat friendships with high status:

I used to say, "oh, we're just friends," implying that the person was somehow less important than somebody I was romantically involved with ... but wait a minute! This person has stood by me through a messy divorce, sick kids, loaned me money and now I discount them? This person is a true friend who deserves a merit badge for being there for me during the hard times.

I think that our culture needs to value friendship more. It is not a sign of poor character if I am unmarried. I should not be categorized by being single, married, widowed or divorced. My marriage status has changed, but I will always belong to a community. I will continue to invest in a variety of high quality relationships.

Adryan and Benee

The first year I was a single parent, I focused on getting my life together and strengthening my relationship with my young son. I soon realized that I needed to take better care of my needs if I was going to be able to care for Adryan's needs.

I never wanted to be a single parent, but here I was. I was extremely busy and I needed a way to spend time with my son to heal and strengthen our relationship. I decided to chart the amount of quality time I spent with him each day until I reached the level I wished. My chart was an invaluable tool in showing me when I met my goal.

I also wanted to honor his need to be with his friends. His friends were always welcome to spend the night and join us on adventures. Sometimes it seemed that I had several sons!

One day, as a field trip, I took my young son to play with the seniors at a nursing home. We were quite the pair. I had long hair and a bushy beard and Adryan carried a bag of toys. Adryan was quickly off, tossing a beach ball to the folks sitting in wheelchairs. He could not understand why some of the residents did not catch the ball but let it bounce off their heads. Next he showed them how to blow on his pinwheel. The face of one man who seemed to be in a fog one moment came alive when Adryan made the pinwheel spin. I think he was remembering an experience from his childhood.

A woman approached me in the hall. Her back was bent but her alert eyes saw right into me. Benee was 99, the oldest person at the nursing home. "Hi! Who are you?" She extended her ancient hand to greet me, reaching across age and cultural barriers. Her hand was frail, bony and stiff but her life force was vital. She peered at me to see if I was frightened by the face of an old woman. Her spirit reached out and smiled. She was not sitting around feeling lonely, isolated and waiting to die like many of the others. She was alive and available for friendships.

She said to me:

All of my friends were once strangers! Don't wait until you are old to make time for friends! Some friends will always be leaving, moving on or dying. Live in the moment, be receptive to opportunities to meet people who present themselves. I like to maintain my current relationships while developing new ones. A stranger today could be a good friend tomorrow.

One of the nurses gave me a poster that read, "The best friends are old friends." She was right. Every time we drove past the center, Adryan wanted to go in and play.

Mutual

A high school teacher once told me that one of the greatest pains of human experience happens when love is not mutual. Having directly experienced that pain and wishing never to feel it again, I was determined to learn from my experience. More than words, a person's actions demonstrate their commitment. The concept of mutuality required examining what I was willing to do to manifest my dreams.

When I frankly looked at my past relationships, I saw that mutuality was lacking. Most of the people in my life could have been classified as social friends—cordial toward one another, but not necessarily deep friends.

I am an independent person, yet I recognized that I need others on the path. Mutuality therefore became a quality I wanted in all of my relationships. I wanted to find friendships that were deeper, closer and more nourishing. I went looking for peers, high-spirited fellow travelers who valued personal growth and were committed to such mutuality.

Friendship, by definition, is a two-way street. When one person takes but does not give energy, then the flow goes only one way. By contrast, kindred spirits exchange energy. Finding areas of mutuality guided me on my quest: "How do I get my needs met?" The answer lay in balancing my needs, the other person's needs and the needs of the relationship. We all bring different gifts to the friendship.

Mutual Time and Responsibility

I was eager to make the effort to create, maintain and nurture mutual friendships. I needed to be with others who were able to slow down, play and give love top priority. To become kindred spirits, we had to be willing to set aside blocks of time so we could get to know each other. Both of us would need to enjoy being together. All of us are busy, but scheduling quality time with friends is essential.

I was open to offering an invitation of friendship to all and seeing who would respond—but I could only be friends with those who were equally willing to take initiative in arranging time together. It was this tiny act that sent a clear signal that they valued our friendship.

Many people seemed just too stressed for friendship. They complained about having so little time, even for themselves. Other people I approached were devoting the vast majority of their energy to either finding a mate or maintaining a family. I would need to find people who had extra energy. Being a kindred spirit requires more of a commitment than being a casual friend.

*Friendships take time
to grow deep roots.*

Mutuality means being there equally for each other. Could I count on this person to help when it was inconvenient or difficult? I wondered if it was reasonable to expect a friend to be this reliable? The answer to that question lay in my own willingness to be that reliable for another. I was willing to be responsive to the needs of my close friends. I wanted the responsiveness to be mutual. I repeatedly heard how difficult it was to have this kind of relationship even with a marriage partner. People who live in the same house, sleep in the same bed and may even have kids together struggle with issues of mutual responsibility.

Mutual Attraction

I began to carefully observe the dynamics when I felt an attraction toward someone. Was my attraction romantic or purely platonic? When at a gathering, I would ask myself who was I most attracted to and express my feelings in some way. I was determined to show what was in my heart. To find out if the attraction was mutual, I was direct by letting the other person know of my interest. Sometimes the result would be an enjoyable conversation. Other times, long-term friendship ensued. If they were not attracted to me, I would still positively acknowledge that I had reached out truthfully.

I frequently sensed that there was an important lesson to be learned from this person. Often I had something of value to offer them. I believe one of the best ways to grow is through friendships. Though I like to read books, listen to tapes and attend seminars on developing my skills in the many areas of personal growth, I have found that each friend is a virtual library of information. I practice checking to see if my instincts are accurate or in need of improvement.

Not surprisingly, many people I met seemed guarded at first when I expressed my interest in getting to know them. They didn't let any of their energy out or my energy in. But with time and trust, often their resistance slowly decreased, allowing a friendship to flourish.

I devised a mock scientific device that I call the "mutual meter" to measure levels of mutuality. Since my body is in constant communication with every cell, I decided to use it as a sensory mechanism to gauge the degree of mutual attraction. I ask myself these questions and observe the response:

How does my body respond to this person?

Do I feel tense or relaxed when we are together?

Am I receptive to the tone of their voice?

What kind of attraction do I feel?

To what degree is this attraction mutual?

How does it feel to be open with this person?

I imagine seeing an oscilloscope screen that measures the energy levels between us. Through the middle of the screen is a line that registers an average amount of energy. My body tells me when the relationship was draining or when there was a surge of energy.

Once, while teaching a class, I looked around the room and noticed a woman whose energy I liked. Usually, I would initiate, but this time she walked up after class, sat down next to me and said, "Hello, my name is Karen and we are going to become friends." I beamed. Somehow we had signaled our intention and she had acted.

Each time I experience such a moment of mutuality, I tune into what I am feeling. The best way I can describe the sensation is as an energy that flows back and forth. We both extend our energy towards each other, and it is then welcomed in.

Seek mutually nurturing relationships.

The principle of mutuality helped me not to give in to my desire to feel needed, manufacturing relationships when I was being used. I was determined to have balanced, mutual, nurturing friendships. It is okay to have some relationships where I am in service to others, but I also need mutually serving relationships.

Would you like to have caring friendships? You are born with the desire to bond. Use your senses and your instincts to find your own kind. Feel your longing for love, intimacy, support, joy and belonging. Give these stirrings a chance to surface by listening to your inner voices. You deserve companionship. Be bold and ask, "Will you be my friend?" It is a challenge to find friends or a mate. The key to success is simple: Use your inner sight to look everywhere, then explore your natural attractions.

Mutual Happiness

Being a generally happy person, I want my inner world to match my outer world. Finding others to share my happiness is the best way I can think of to create harmony. Together we enhance our mutual happiness. However, once I embarked on this journey, I immediately noticed that some of my social friends did not have the interest or capacity to care about our mutual happiness. Undeterred, I held fast to my intention to foster mutually happy relationships.

I devoted myself to looking for people who believe they deserve to have an expansive circle of friends. When I make a new friend, they introduce me to their other good friends, who in turn are my potential friends.

On my quest for deep friendships, I have encountered a wide continuum of people, friendly and not so friendly. I study both. In problematic cases, people are attracted to me because they feel that I will take care of them in the ways that they are not able to take care of themselves. They are attracted to me because I take good care of myself. They are exhausted by the drama they create for themselves and hope that I will do the emotional clean-up. They seemed to be in constant struggle because they make decisions that result in negative consequences. When unable to act in their own self-interest, they are seldom capable of caring for others.

I learned that a friend is not a substitute for giving to yourself. Before you can care for another, you must first actively foster the ability to care for yourself. Self-destructive people are not good candidates for friendship. I've seen many professionals who attempt to be of service to others when they are less than successful in caring for themselves. They are good people who slowly burn out.

I discovered vastly different levels and kinds of mutuality in my new relationships. In some cases, my desire was high while theirs seemed at first to be nonexistent. I reminded myself how important it is to respect the comfort level of others when entering into a deeper, mutually caring relationship—other people move at different speeds than I, and that's okay.

I observed the relationships in which I gave more, and the ones in which the other person gave more. With certain people, there are moments of mutual magic where we both give and both receive. I enjoy giving and want to establish relationships with others who like giving. It is equally important that they are receptive to the gifts I offer.

I started treating others the way I hoped they would treat me. Sometimes I felt disappointed be-

cause it wasn't reciprocal. Upon closer examination, I realized that they were giving me other gifts. I have learned to be open to the fact that what others want to give may be very different from what I choose to give. Certain friendships are mutual in particular ways and not in others. I gradually became aware that I would need a pool of friends to meet my needs. There will always be some relationships where I am the primary giver. The point is to balance these with mutually nourishing friendships.

Finding mutual kindred spirits was a goal that would require a good degree of detachment. I needed to be open to be giving and not require a return. I also needed to teach people what I wanted. With certain people from the very start I enter into a mutually nourishing relationship. It feels wonderful and expansive when I am with such people. Even a moment of our time together where the energy felt mutual is great, and I try to expand it 1 percent at a time.

I like the expression "enlightened self-interest." I understand the value in creating relationships that are advantageous to both parties. The best way for me to care for myself is to be with others who equally care for themselves while contributing to the mutuality of relationship.

*Mutually caring relationships
are the result of enlightened
self-interest.*

When energy flows two ways, it feels wonderful and is transformative! We agree to use each other in a mutually beneficial ways. I will learn to care for myself in as many ways as possible, you do the same, then we will care for each other. I am willing to give to you and be of service. What do I have that you need? No one is entirely self-sufficient. Rather than two people struggling for control, each taking what they want, we should use each other in positive and supportive ways. We should not abuse any privileges or trust. Mutuality is a clean energy exchange in which both parties enjoy giving and receiving.

Mutual Friendship

I would like to share with you one of the early interviews I recorded on the topic of friendship. I choose Sara because she was one of the happiest and wisest people I have ever met—and she had one of the best collections of friends.

I asked Dad if he had any regrets in his life. His response was instant. He said, "I wish I had spent more time with you kids while you were growing up. Life will pass you by unless you make time for your friends and family." The quality of my life is reflected in the quality of the friendships I have created.

My friends and I keep our relationships healthy and enriching. We love to give and enjoy receiving. This is in sharp contrast to my past one-way relationships, where I gave and they took. Love between my friends and I is always mutual.

My friends are eager to help when I need them. When I was home sick for a month, they organized a schedule so that one of them was there each day to take care of me. The time and energy I allocated to developing these friendships kept me safe in my time of need.

These people are my peers. A sense of equality results from each of us having different strengths and areas of expertise. We grow by sharing our knowledge freely with each other. They are good at expressing themselves and interested in learning about me. So many other people only want to talk about themselves. We all feel a joy in finding each other. There is an appreciation for the depth of our relationship and the care it took to get there. We have a loyalty that goes beyond logic.

I believe being friends means having a willingness to spend time together. No time, or no energy, equals no friends. Being in a close friendship requires an investment in yourself. To maintain these fulfilling relationships, I must be willing to create more free space in my calendar. I simplified my life so that I could embrace additional caring relationships.

The power of Sara's insights still reverberates in me today. She gave me a compass for all my future travels. In every friendship since then, I look to see how the relationship is mutual. This has helped me to know when I am traveling in the right direction. When I regard mutuality as true north, I never get lost.

Rejection

Many years ago, I started to become friends with a man named Ray. I wanted us to spend more time together to deepen our relationship, and I made

my interest known. He responded that he already had so many good friends with whom he spent so little time that he was not willing to add any more. I felt a moment of awkwardness in being rejected. Rejecting and being rejected need to occur in order for us to find people with whom the attraction is mutual. I am determined to keep looking until I find others who are interested in me as well. I have a lot to lose by not asking, and I gain much pride in myself by being brave enough to initiate the connection.

Common Ground

A friend offered me a position working in the field of mental health. I wanted to put my friendship plan into action, so when I noticed a male co-worker about my age, I asked him if he'd like to join me for lunch. Elliot and I hit it off right away. I told him that since moving to a new town, I missed companionship. I simply asked him if he would like to become friends. His response was that he, too, would enjoy creating a friendship.

We began our friendship by telling each other stories from our past. Elliot said that he had gone to school in Cincinnati and had worked at the local psychiatric institution. So had I. We had many of the same friends and had hung out at the same nightclub, The Wise Owl, yet we had never met. I asked him who he had dated in Cincy. "Sue," he replied. So had I. I asked with anticipation, "When?" You guessed it: at the same time! We laughed so hard everyone in the restaurant looked over at us.

The next morning I received a call from Washington, DC, from Sue. I had not talked to her in over ten years! She said, "I was just thinking of you." I asked her to guess who I had lunch with the day before.

Elliot and I became housemates. We discovered that we had dated two of the same women in Portland, but not at the same time, thank goodness! It is amazing what two people can have in common. This whole adventure began only because we reached out. Elliot was very supportive of me during those difficult times. I had made the commitment to myself that while I was looking for a partner, I would also seek both male and female friendships.

Let's be friends!

Here's a great game I enjoy playing with a new friend. Spend several minutes exploring how many things you have in common. Go fast and dig deep for the most unusual things. Find out what you both love to do. It also works with long-time friends, sometimes with surprising insights.

Friend, Lover and Mate

I became discouraged at being unable to find a mate who fit my top ten list. One particular hot summer night, I arranged for my son to spend the night with one of his buddies so that I could go to a friend's birthday party. The sunshine was causing the sap to rise in the trees and my hormones to flow. When I arrived at the party, dozens of people were dancing. I jumped in and began to dance with an energetic woman named Maggie. We danced together for two hours nonstop: smiling, laughing and sweating. The music was too loud for conversation so our bodies spoke for us. I knew almost nothing about her, yet our dancing had a familiarity, as if we had been dancing together our whole lives.

A man approached us. I thought he was going to ask her to dance, but instead he introduced himself as her husband. I was shocked and disappointed. He said, "Thanks for dancing with my wife. You got me off the hook." He explained that he did not like to dance. He was glad that she had found a dance partner. The ride home gave me time to reflect on my feelings. I realized that I wanted a mate who loved to dance.

I cherished the simple times with my son playing games, cuddling and reading children's books. We ended the summer by going to the beach on the river at Sauvie Island. It would be our last adventure for a while. He was going to Seattle to live with his mother for the next year.

I was feeling sad and lonely. I prayed, "Oh Great Spirit, send me a friend." Just then, my son spattered mud on my back. We began running and yelling, covering each other from head to toe with mud. I looked up, and there was Maggie. She and a friend were leaving after a day in the sun. She said hello and asked me for my phone number.

Sometimes prayers are answered immediately. As I gave her my number, Maggie reminded me that we had first met years earlier when my son was a baby, at a weekend workshop sponsored by the Association for Humanistic Psychology held at my retreat center. We'd had a couple of brief encounters during that weekend. Since then, Maggie and I had

a series of "chance" meetings. We both participated in a workshop on friendship and saw each other at a wedding. This meeting at the beach was the last time we would meet by chance.

She called, and we arranged to go for a walk at Mt. Tabor Park, the nation's only within-city-limits volcano. We spiral-walked up to the top for a 360° view of the neighboring mountains and a vista of the city. She wanted to know if I had felt a sense of connection when we danced at the party. I felt that we had touched each other's spirits.

Near the bottom of the park I asked Maggie, "What do you want from me?" Her instant reply was, "I want you as my friend." I was thrilled by her response. She explained that she wanted to be friends with a man while she figured out the future of her marriage. She told me that she had lost in the river the silver ring her husband had made for her, the day she and I reconnected at the beach. We agreed to carve out time in our busy schedules to be together.

On Valentine's Day, Maggie attended my class on friendship at a neighborhood community center. During the dance that followed, Maggie approached me and asked, "Would you like a partner?" I wanted to hear: "Would you like a partner... a mate?" I misted up and said, "Yes, I would." What had burst to the surface was how much I wanted a friend, a lover, a mate all rolled into one.

During an early spring walk in front of my house, I explained my insight to Maggie. I said, "I am looking for a kindred spirit who has the qualities you have." She had recently become aware that her marriage was over. Maggie realized that she wanted me for her mate. The places where these insights occurred shine on in my mind.

While my friendship with Maggie was deepening, I continued dating other women. These women and I realized, upon comparing our lists, that we were friends and lovers but would never be mates. When it came time to go our separate ways, there were no hard feelings.

One year after our talk in the park, Maggie was divorced. She had spent several months living alone. Here was a woman who had all the qualities on my top ten wish list and more. We decided to live together.

Our love for each other deepened and we wanted to formalize our commitment by getting married. We wrote our own wedding ceremony. One hundred of our friends and family members joined us in celebrating our love. As I looked into the faces of all the joyous people gathered in our living room, I realized that the day was the beginning of my third partnership. We began as friends first, matured into

kindred spirits and eventually became mates. We will never leave our love to chance. We dance.

This book is possible for me to write only because of the love I have experienced with Maggie. Since day one, Maggie has been an outstanding model of how to be a good friend. She does an excellent job of taking care of herself and nurturing her friendships. Maggie is a great traveling companion on this journey.

Each of us grew up with parents who loved each other and have been together for over 50 years. Early on, Maggie and I had fun imagining ourselves on a porch swing, growing old together. Our friendship began as a simple gesture and has blossomed and continues to unfold. We still have a passionate marriage after 20 years. We are excited about ourselves, each other, our friends, our careers and our future together.

The special qualities we brought to the marriage were like a dowry. And, like all couples, we bring out the best and worst in each other. We have a growing respect for each other's individual spiritual path.

Our marriage is enriched by our friends. We understand that as we become more multifaceted, we have major areas where we overlap but there will always be areas which we need to explore with a friend. Our friends help us to celebrate the highs. We support each other through illness, injury and death. When Maggie or I die, we know the other will be surrounded by friends who will provide comfort. We love spending time with our friends as a group, and one on one. When one of us spends time with a friend, we bring love and energy home.

Almost half of our friends are looking for a primary relationship. We are frequently complimented by friends who say they want a marriage like ours. We enjoy being their love coaches while they are on their quests. We help them write personal ads to describe who they are and what they are looking for. Several weddings have been celebrated as a result of our matchmaking.

I wonder, what would my life have been like if I had not gone to the beach that day and reconnected with Maggie? This one event has totally altered my personal history and, in some cosmic way, the history of the world. I know that I would have missed a tremendous amount of love and adventure. Meeting Maggie motivated me to keep reaching out. Everybody I encounter alters the course of my life, just as I play a role in theirs.

Your Quest

A journey begins with uncertainty about where the path will lead. There are no rules, no experts, no right answers, no maps and no guarantees. You make it up as you go. The path is not a straight line. It curves, meanders and loops back on itself, covering the same ground many times. You pause at each step and enjoy the scenery. You see where you have been and where you are headed. A destination is merely a resting spot. Become an explorer, enthusiastic and curious, open to surprises.

You will come upon barriers to your progress. Go around them, climb over, tunnel under and knock them down. Turn around and go the other direction if you need to. Take risks, show up for the challenge, keep moving ahead. What will take great effort now will someday become second nature. Be willing to go where no path exists. Your sense of inner direction will become keener with each step. Look inside for the courage you need to love. You are not required to change anything on the outside, but you will need to change everything on the inside. Resources that you need will appear once you step forward.

Opening your heart can be risky. All of us have been hurt by someone we cared for. We also have experienced some of the best moments of our lives with a friend. We are tempted to shy away from the possible pain or from developing the skills necessary to improve the possibility of pleasure.

Sometimes you will travel alone, deciding at each junction which way to turn. You have the freedom to choose your way. Times of reflection allow you to hear what your inner voices are communicating. Search for your truth.

On other parts of your journey, you will have companionship. Greet your fellow travelers, look into their eyes and smile. Gather information from those who have traveled before you. Our friends help us stay on the path. Each friend is a wealth of new information. They have been somewhere you have never been, somewhere you did not know existed. Day and night, find others who are seekers. Illuminate all you encounter.

Ask your friends to teach you what they know about friendship. Learn from other travelers but remember that they have never been where you are going. Everyone's visions and destinations are different. We are all at different points on our quests. As you explore, leave a trail for others. Some people will follow. Others will not. Many will not understand why you quest. Deepening all of our relationships is the challenge.

Your quest will involve an inquiry into where you have been, where you are now and where you want to travel next. Know that you are on a never-ending journey, exploring your inner self and your relationship to the outer world.

Feel your longing for love, intimacy, support, joy and belonging. Given so many people on Earth, there simply is no shortage of potential friends. Connect with those like yourself, then link up with others who have facets of their personalities developed in ways different from you. By creating a community diverse in age and personality, you can help each other unfold and grow in many different ways. The quest to find ourselves and our kindred spirits is one and the same.

To embark on this journey, prepare yourself by reflecting on how a close friend has impacted your life. The next person you become friends with could change everything about your life forever!

What are you going to do to attract the kindred friends you want?

*To find a good friend,
be a good friend.*

We live in a mobile society that provides us with opportunities to meet many wonderful people. On the quest, we need skills to establish meaningful relationships with a full range of intimacy. Good friendships do not just happen, they are cultivated. Deep friendships are too important to be left to chance. Friendships are the result of conscious decisions and actions.

Personal Film Library

Our memories of time spent with friends are recorded like movies in our mental archives. These stories are cross-referenced by dates, names and locations. These chronicles are filed under titles like Adventure, Autobiography, Comedy, Drama, Family Entertainment, Love Stories, Mystery and Tragedy. We can enjoy watching reruns by scene or in full. Our address book is like a theater marquee,

announcing the friendships that are currently running. The new friendships we are developing are previews of coming attractions.

You write the scripts and do the editing. You are the star, and cast co-stars and supporting roles. You are also the director who calls the action, helps with character development and sets the tone. As conductor, you score the music. And in the end, you get to be the critic who comments on the characters you have cast and their roles.

Review your past relationships to prepare yourself for the quest. You may wish to write in names, when applicable. If you want to have more names to fill in for the future, start by being the kind of friend you are seeking.

What kind of movies do I want to produce and have in my personal library?

What parts do I want to play in other friends' movies?

Virtues A to Z

In my early seminars on friendship I asked the question: "What positive qualities do you want in your friendships?" I invited participants to give an example or tell a story to expand their answers. Here is one typical dialogue that came out of these sessions:

"I have a strong desire for kindness and loyalty. I expect to be able to totally trust my friend. If I can't trust them, the relationship is over."

I inquired, "Are you 100 percent trustworthy?"

"Not in every case. I guess I need to be a little more easy-going."

"Do you have the qualities you want your friends to have?" I asked.

"I have to admit that I sort of lack these qualities in myself."

Kindness. Loyalty. Trust. These are just a few of the positive qualities that people want in their relationships. Unsurprisingly, these same qualities are what people most need to develop for themselves, to bring to their relationships.

Special Qualities

I began to focus on seeing at least one special quality in every person I met or knew. It was fascinating to study how the same quality was expressed so uniquely in different people. My goal was to find people who excelled in different combinations of attributes, and to learn from them. Ultimately, I

wanted to work with people in relationships where it was a priority to mutually enhance such positive qualities.

After two years of working on this book, I was searching for a way to unify all the different positive qualities of friendship. All at once, the word "virtue" jumped out at me. Virtues had been present all the time, yet I was not consciously aware of the powerful effect they'd had on my life. Suddenly, I saw that virtues provide a language for understanding the essential ingredients of kindred spirits. I was especially surprised by the importance of virtues in explaining the complexity of relationships. In this unifying principle I had a means to begin exploring more deeply the mystery of love and friendship.

*Deep friendships need
deep virtues.*

The only reason that I am able to compose a book about love and friendship is because people have treated me in virtuous ways. My life has been blessed by parents, teachers and friends with well-developed virtues. These special qualities were expressed as many forms of love. My experiences of virtues in other people have instilled in me the ability to be virtuous in my own life. Writing has allowed time for further reflection on each of the virtues.

Virtuous behavior arises from a person's core attributes and establishes our level of personal integrity. Virtues are skills necessary for raising con-

sciousness. Such admirable qualities speak to the intrinsic nature of our personhood and are the source of our harmony, health and happiness. While physical beauty reaches a peak and then begins to fade, our virtues, or inner beauty, often improve with age. The personal assets of kindness, courage and love represent the best of our endearing characteristics.

Being virtuous is living according to one's principles. We may have good intentions, but virtues require actions grounded in those intentions. Our strength of character is demonstrated by our good deeds.

Each virtue is the result of many conscious decisions. The goal is to bring the highest level of awareness to all of our relationships. The consistent use of virtues is a sign of maturity. Virtues guide us forward in our relationships with self, parents, siblings, relatives, co-workers and community.

To reach a state of deep friendship we need to bring a broad range of virtues into play.

Virtues are guidelines for being kindred spirits.

The quest is to be a virtuous person. It is to seek friendships, to be a friend and to support a friend. Lasting friendships are based on lasting virtues. Virtues are vital to a loving relationship. At the broad level of society, the degree to which our virtues are commonly practiced and shared determines how well our culture and institutions function.

Since language was invented, humans have discussed what makes a good person. Early Greek philosophers vigorously debated whether virtues could be taught and learned, or if they were innate. Some concluded that virtues could only be truly taught by those who were already virtuous. Others contended that anyone could learn to be more virtuous. This second conclusion is crucial to our quest.

Learned Skills

We are born with the seeds of virtue. It is our destiny to sprout, bear fruit and spread these positive qualities. But these human skills need to be nurtured to grow. Even with years of formal education,

we seldom receive adequate instruction in how to develop virtues. Human interactions in relationships are the ideal place to sharpen one's skills. The quest for love and friendship is a quest for virtues.

Virtues and friendships take time to nurture and grow. Watching little children, you can see which skills are germinating and which virtues have yet to break ground. By the time we are teenagers, our skills become better defined. I have several friends in their twenties who have already begun to master a wide range of virtues. With each passing decade, more individuals possess the amount of virtues necessary to form kindred spirit relationships.

It is one thing to read about a virtue such as kindness, or to witness someone being kind to another. However, the best way to learn a virtue is to first receive and experience it directly. Once you've experienced kindness directly, you're better able to give kindness. And when you are kind to someone, you witness the positive effect your kindness has on the other person and you experience feeling good.

Our minds expand when special electrochemical energy is transmitted through them by thinking new thoughts. Similarly, when we consciously decide to engage our will to be good, we integrate the emotional right and the rational left cerebral hemispheres of our brains. Unexplored parts of the brain grow, links form, bridges and neuro-pathways develop as we aspire to be virtuous.

Virtues form the basis of our self-esteem and determine the quality of all of our intimate relationships. These life skills enrich the effectiveness of our professional associations as well. Being virtuous increases the possibility that we will experience the virtue of others.

Virtues exemplify our attraction to the creative force for good. We begin our quest by seeking the best in ourselves, then bring out the finest in others.

Fibers of Our Being

For years, I searched for a way to explain why being a kindred spirit requires so much personal work. The answer, in a metaphor, was under my feet the entire time. Maggie inherited a gorgeous Persian rug from her grandparents, who were importers. The rug was hand-made in the province of Tabriz, Iran, in the early 1900s. A Persian family raised the sheep, carded the wool into yarn, collected the natural ingredients for dyeing, created a design and wove the rug.

I once had the opportunity to card raw wool into parallel fibers, and using a spinning wheel, convert the fibers to thread. It was a demanding task, but gave me immense satisfaction in its accomplishment. This gave me a sense of the skill and dedication necessary to make a beautiful rug. It is a form of mastery.

Virtues are like a fine, hand-made carpet. The fibers represent the qualities of one's character. To form one virtue takes thousands of fibers (intentions and actions) twisted together. Each length of yarn is colored by one's personality and unique vibration. The texture is determined by the individual's growth and life experiences.

There is pleasure and art in the process of weaving our lives together; in and out, up and down, shuttling back and forth, give and take, push and pull ... all taking practice and patience. The threads that run crosswise represent one person, while the lengthwise threads symbolize the other partner in the relationship. There is a different design for each relationship we create. Some are simple weaves, others are more elaborate. The dynamic tension between them represents respect for our variations. The blending of two people from opposite directions necessitates great flexibility. As the multicolored strands interlace, a pattern forms. The character of the two people imparts a "feel" to the fabric. Deep levels of intimacy are possible when we have created the threads of virtues and woven them into an intricate friendship.

*Kindred spirits are the
artistic expression
of our love.*

The fabric of relationships needs to be treated with care. Even one thread missing can weaken the fabric, causing the relationship to unravel. Like all things over time, there will be natural wear and tear, so both people are responsible for maintaining the vitality of the friendship. Each friendship is a rare work of art that adds warmth, beauty and comfort to our lives.

Virtues and Love

The definition of love is elusive. While writing about virtues, I realized that they are the perfect way to understand the meaning of love. Each virtue represents a different kind of love. Virtues provide a practical way to examine how we love. Using virtues as a model has helped me to better identify the type of love I want, and which forms are inadequate or missing in me. Now I can name which attributes of love I am seeking.

Usually when people talk about love, they are making a reference to what love feels like. But love is more than a feeling; it requires expression. Virtues are that expression: they're what love looks and acts like. If virtues are acts of love, love is defined by our actions.

Virtues are love skills. If you want to learn how to be loving, practice being virtuous. As your capacity to be virtuous expands, so does your ability to love.

Virtues are expressions of love; for self, friends, family and indeed, the world.

*Our virtuous actions
define our love.*

I believe the source of our feelings of love originates from our attitudes and actions. And there is nothing like a good relationship to bring forth these attitudes and actions.

David and I have loved each other for almost twenty years. He lived with us while he was studying to be a lawyer. He and his family now live across the state. We make an effort to visit when we can, and stay in contact through phone calls. David is a good model for virtues like commitment, empathy, forgiveness, generosity, honesty, kindness, passion, respect and understanding.

When I see a picture of David and his family, I feel wonderful just thinking about how much I love them. When I act in a loving manner towards them, I feel love. They feel loved by how I choose to express it, and they show it to me in return. In the end I feel the original warmth that I sent in addition to the love they express back.

It is pleasurable to give and to receive virtues. The bonds of our relationship are strengthened each time we express our love. Without virtuous acts, we would not feel the love.

Blind Spots

Serious problems occur when our feelings of love are based in fantasy rather than fact. Actions speak the truth. We are all susceptible to being lured by the attraction of loving feelings that we desire. Studying how a person acts can help us make realistic decisions about them.

Understanding virtues as acts of love has helped me to better comprehend a problem I often witness in relationships: "My partner does not love me the way I want." One person values certain virtues, while their partner gives priority to a different set of virtues. For instance, one person enjoys the tenderness they feel when they are treated with kindness, while the other person likes the satisfaction they experience when they are respected. There is a tendency, when we are not getting the type of love we want, to react by refusing to give our partner what they want. Certainly both kindness and respect are signs of love. But difficulties arise when people have blinders on and do not see the ways in which the other person acts out love. The solution, of course, is to acknowledge and value all of their acts of love, different as they are. This is easier said than done, but is a rich source of virtue exploration on the quest.

I love you!

I like the rich emotional connection I feel when I tell someone I love them. "I love you," has many meanings, depending on the type of relationship and the virtues expressed. Review the times when you tell someone or they tell you, "I love you."

Many years ago, I began telling my parents that I loved them. Expressing love between family members is just one of the important places to do this. Sharing feelings of love between romantic lovers is another. I also make it a practice to tell my kindred spirits that I love them. I am grateful for the opportunity to express my feelings of affection for their presence in my life. Tell your friends regularly that you love them. We can never hear "I love you" too much. I am thrilled when someone tells me that they love me.

Mutual Virtues

The foundation of my quest is to find kindred spirits with whom the skill level is mutual. People who understand how the virtues work have a wonderful potential for reciprocal energy exchanges. I find that I am drawn to those who value these qualities. In my important relationships, virtuous acts flow both ways.

To find my kindred spirits, I must be willing and eager to be transformed by the virtues of my friends. I strive to create an environment for healthy friendships to flourish by providing an overflow of virtues to nourish them. The quality of my relationships sets the tone of my life. When I enjoy being virtuous, I find that I attract virtuous people.

*To find better friends,
become a better friend by
becoming a better person.*

Virtues are a blend of enlightened self-interest and concern for the good of others. Kindred spirits seek virtue-centered relationships. The better I know and express my own virtues, the more love and intimacy I can share with others.

In the next part of this chapter, we will examine a few of the virtues common to kindred spirits. The intention is to develop these qualities in yourself while practicing with family and friends. As you review each virtue, imagine a person in your life who exemplifies that virtue well.

The alphabetized virtues list gives you an idea of the scope of being a good friend. These familiar attributes can be seen as an opportunity to expand and integrate virtues into your life.

Notice which elicit a strong emotional response in you. You may wish to devote a day, a week, a month or a year to focus on developing just one virtue. The cultivation of virtuous friendships is our quest.

Virtues are skills that require the devotion of precious time as you actively engage in balancing and customizing your actions to the needs of your relationships. Each of these important attributes deserves its own book. Treat these pages on virtues as a primer for reflection. You may wish to write your own interpretation and stories about each virtue.

Abundance

Spelling is not one of my greatest strengths so I have invented ways to help me remember how to correctly spell certain words. For instance, I've always had trouble spelling the word "scarcity" so finally I broke it down and it became "scar city." By seeing scarcity as two words I was also able to tease out a new meaning. I did not want to live in "Scar City"!

Scarcity thinking is a false belief that there is not enough. This attitude creates an actual lack of the thing you desire. One of the symptoms of this type of thinking is spending most of your time on problems, rather than devoting energy to your interests and joys. As I mused about the meaning of this word I wondered, what was the opposite of scarcity?

Abundance is a way of seeing life as full of possibilities. Our attitudes and values, more than our material circumstances, determine if we are in scarcity or in abundance. Simply put, how a person perceives a situation defines it. Our outlook sets in motion powerful forces. Even the slightest shift in perspective can change the way events are seen. Creating inner abundance is simply a matter of realizing what is already there.

When I slowly sounded out the word, abundance it became "a bun dance!" This word play has helped to transform my life. Selecting abundance as my primary point of view has given me a powerful new direction. Like a bird in flight, I always have a choice to let gravity pull me down, or to spiral up on the thermals. The feeling of good fortune arises from an attitude that places a high value on inner wealth, beauty and blessings. I love to give. The best place from which to give is an overflow of love. I believe each of us deserves an abundance of love and laughter. I feel a profound commitment to creating abundance, and for me that means a lot of freedom, kindred spirits, time in nature, ways of expressing my creativity, dance and adventure. I devote time each day to creating a world around me that supports my dreams coming true.

We are surrounded by abundance. Our senses instantly deliver to us the flavor of a fresh peach, the sensation of massaging a baby, the colors of a sunrise, the first scents of spring, or the call of wild geese on the fly. Recognizing abundance is an act of connecting to the beauty of everyday life.

When my mind starts to move into scarcity thinking—"I am too busy today to spend time with my friends," or "I don't have enough money to do what I want"—I jump up and do the a bun dance! A great way to get into abundance consciousness is to dance. When I shake my buns and laugh, the scarcity thinking quickly vanishes. Maggie and I like to wiggle buns-to-buns as a reminder to stay light-hearted. Sounds crazy, but it keeps us sane.

We create 100% of our happiness.

Maggie and I go to a dance studio a couple of times every week. I had an embroidery company make a special purple T-shirt with the word "Abundance" in a gorgeous letter style. The "bun" is in bright red letters, while "a" and "dance" are in contrasting colors. It's fun to watch the other dancers suddenly realize that we are dancing our buns off in abundance. The dancers frequently comment that they will never be able to see the word "abundance" quite the same way again. The message was always there to see. A simple change of perspective can shift your reality. Abundance is a virtue by which you create a life full of joy!

Since ancient times, dance has been used to evoke trance for transformation, give expression to our deepest stirrings and as a ritual to celebrate life. Continuing this ancient tradition, I decided to offer a Friday night A Bun Dance class. I had never taught a dance class before and it was interesting to watch my scarcity issues come up: "You are not good enough to teach dance ... who do you think you are?" I had to shake those thoughts out with a little "a bun dance" before I could proceed with the project.

The class was a delightful blend of the movement arts, a free dance style in solo, duets and small groups. Dancers were invited to explore the sensation of abundance by using the principles of contact improvisational movement. "Contact improv" is like modern dance without choreography, and it involves touch. Focus on the point of physical contact with the other dancers. Being present, supportive and

careful with your partner is a perfect metaphor for how one needs to be in any relationship.

The response to the dance class was tremendous. A sense of community was created as we enjoyed playful loving contact. A spontaneous conversation unfolded as motion released emotion. By using the language of our entire bodies, we gave expression to feelings that were beyond words.

The notion of abundance became so important that I changed my company name from HealthWorks to The Abundance Company, as a reminder that there is no limit to joy and pleasure when you are happy with who you are. The company that made my T-shirts liked the idea of abundance so much that they hired me to do a presentation for their national sales force. They used the concept of abundance as their marketing theme for the year—a reminder that there are plenty of customers wanting their services. They asked me to define abundance, and here it is:

a•bun•dance (a-bun´-dans) v. [Lat. abundans, to abound, p.part. of abundare, to overflow.] 1. a. The act of wiggling one's buns in a wild dance-like motion, alone or with kindred spirits: frolic. b. A swinging motion that starts at the hips, moving side to side, bobbing up and down and in circles, and then spreading to all of the body. slang: shake your booty; let's boogie. 2. a. A light-hearted style of dance with big smiles accompanied by shouts of delight, rhythmically with or without music <Let's abundance.> b. A mix of belly dancing and folk dance where spontaneously whirling dancers may obtain an excited emotional ecstasy; may include bun-to-bun dancing in a massage-like fashion —n. 1. The belief in the fullness to overflowing of life: bountiful <Abundance is everywhere.> 2. The action or expression of the attitude of gratitude: celebration <I am full of joy for the abundance of love in my life.> 3. Creating an extremely plentiful life richly supplied with self-love. <The little joys and simple acts of kindness create an inner sense of abundance.> Caution: may cause celebrations that include loud singing, wild and disorderly dancing, nudity and mass hysteria.

Syns: copious, teeming, lavish, exuberant, bumper, bottomless, fruitful, productive, fertile, well supplied, bursting, alive, generous, liberal, beneficent, plenty. Core meaning: to feel both an inner and outer inexhaustible wealth of love and joy.

Ant: insufficient, deficient, lousy, avoidance (void of dance), scarcity as in scar city; scar = the hurt that we self-inflict; city = your body as the home where your spirit lives. core meaning: thinking leaves scars on your spirit <scarcity thinking>.

Bonding

I have struggled for a long time to round out my ability to connect. I was lopsided in being able to participate in someone else's pleasure, but only a limited amount of another's pain. If a friend was hurting, my emotional immune system tried to block me from experiencing their suffering. I have come to realize that I was trying to prevent their pain from triggering my own unhealed wounds. I was able to connect more profoundly when I learned how to protect myself while giving others my full attention, regardless of their personal situation. Now I can be wide open and bond at depths unimaginable to me when I was younger and less experienced.

When my previous partner Linda was pregnant with our child, we wanted to have a home birth. But there were complications that required our son to be delivered via cesarean. At this time, it was rare that the father was allowed into the operating room, but I insisted. Our birth instructor had emphasized how important it was for the father to have contact with the newborn in order to bond properly.

When we are young, we form bonds with our parents, siblings, relatives and neighbors. As adults, we might start a family of our own with which to bond. Bonding with kindred spirits requires a high degree of skill. Several years ago at a conference, I met a wonderful man named Steve. We hit it off from the very beginning. He was not shy about his willingness to connect at a deep level as he made it very clear that he wanted to be my friend. We bonded at professional and personal levels by sharing what was important to us. For the next couple of years we continued to meet up at conferences.

When Steve's career changed, we no longer attended the same conferences. He reached out to Maggie and I by intentionally scheduling time together. There were many physical obstacles to our being together that we have had to resolve. Steve has been willing to travel from his home in Canada to attend our workshops and go on adventures with us. Once he called and asked if he could come and live with us for a week and be part of our lives. We have also gone to his home and vacationed in the

area together. We know that all of us have changed and grown since our last meeting. When we're together, we work to bring the bond back to where it was before and re-energize the relationship to a new level. This helps us to endure the next period of separation.

Whenever Steve and I are together, it is quality time as we participate in each other's growth. The experiences we share are bonding. There is a base of established love and intimacy that is built upon each time we reconnect. Steve is currently working in Europe and his calls, cards and emails are always appreciated. His presence in my life gives comfort. We are good for each other and we bond easily.

Our friendship bond has been tested when we've encountered our differences. Once, I needed to express some intense feelings about something he did in which I believed he was lacking integrity. I realized that I was starting to pull back from the relationship. A choice not to say something would have definitely weakened our bond. On the other hand, I knew that he might become angry with me if I expressed my discomfort with his behavior. But when I called him on it, Steve agreed that he had acted in an inappropriate manner and would change to restore alignment. The way he responded demonstrated his commitment to our bond of friendship.

All relationships go through rough times. Our response determines if the bond is strengthened or weakened. Steve and I are committed to keeping the bond vital and not taking for granted that the friendship will always be there.

Now that I have bonded with Steve, it's hard to imagine what my life would have been like without him. I am proud to call him a kindred spirit. Even though we are seldom in the same spot on the planet at the same time, we are continually in each other's thoughts. There is a special joy in knowing and being known over decades as we watch each other grow. It is hard to imagine being without our kindred spirits.

*Close friends strengthen our will
to live and give meaning to
existence.*

The better developed a person's virtues, the easier it is to bond with them. Steve is a fantastic role model who has mastered the virtue of bonding. He is skilled in the art of caring interactions. He is willing to reach out and establish new friendships, able to maintain and nurture them over time and distance, bounces back during conflict, co-creates meaningful experiences and memories, has a sense of family and a strong commitment to friendship. All of these skills are necessary to reach a high level of bonding in our friendships.

Maggie is especially good at establishing bonds with dozens of people at once and sustaining life-long relationships. I asked her if she could explain what happens when she forms a union:

We send out arches of color energy that form bridges between us. I can feel the moment when a connection is made. I can see these radiant colors that bind us together. I have different blends with each person. These bridges can only exist when the desire for bonding is mutual. With certain people, the streams of colors flow effortlessly; with other friends it has taken hard work to build the bridges.

When I interviewed people who admitted they had problems with bonding, I inquired if they had any clues about why that was. Following are a few responses to my question, offering a window into such difficulties:

We enjoy each other's company, but the glue that is supposed to hold us together is missing. I start a friendship, but it seems to only last to a point and then it falls apart. I have come to understand that although I want closeness, I still resist bonding. I fear my heart being broken.

When I experience powerful moments of passionate sexual attraction, it is easy for me to bond. My hormones and breeding instincts compel me to connect to the man of my affections. I want him to be the father of my child. My problem is that I bond too quickly. I have had to short circuit my instincts and stop bonds from developing. I have learned from past failed relationships that there are negative consequences to getting involved too quickly. Now my rational mind warns me that bonding may not be such a good idea.

I grew up in a small Midwest town where everyone knew everything about everyone. I was on a first name basis with all the students in my high school. There was a kind of bond, because we all had the same type of experiences growing up. I never needed to plan to get together with others ... we would just regularly bump into each other and go and do something. Now I am having a ter-

rible time meeting anyone, since we are all so busy. I need to reach out and devote more time to starting friendships. I must become faster at connecting and more patient in cultivating relationships.

Through shared visions and common life experiences, we can bond in many positive ways. Pleasure bonding is a choice to come together through joy. Pain is another way we learn to bond. When one person is in need and another helps, both may become closer. During sickness, conflict or tragedy we need to be able to center ourselves while continuing to reach out and stay connected. However, we need not wait for a crisis to occur before helping each other.

Commitment

I had known Diana for years, through the Common Ground Wellness Center. One night, I attended a dance class that she led across the street from my house. We smiled in recognition and I could feel a connection beginning to form. I called the next day to express my interest, and there seemed to be a mutual spark. We spent an evening in stirring conversation and concluded that this was the stage in our lives in which we were to become friends. When I returned home, Maggie inquired, "How was your visit?" I replied, "Diana and I are going to be kindred spirits."

Diana has proven to be a skilled friend. She brightens my day when she calls just to say hello. We have personal and professional interests in growth and spiritual development. We are both busy people who live quite a distance apart. Diana is a great model of a friend who makes a commitment to the relationship by scheduling regular time together. When she is in the neighborhood, she makes a point to stop by for a visit. We both enjoy our time hiking in nature or going out for lunch. The three of us have had great adventures together on vacations. As in all relationships, there have been times of conflict. Diana has repeatedly demonstrated her commitment to resolve any difficulties.

As I have had the privilege of getting to know her over time, I see that she has made an investment in many quality relationships. She constantly volunteers her time and talents in service of her community. She is balanced by her commitment to replenishing her well-being with regular exercise and good nutrition. Her life is in alignment with her principles. Diana is a treasure and an inspiration to those around her.

There are many different kinds of commitments that friends can make. Diana and I are emotionally supportive of each other. She has helped me brainstorm many of the ideas in this book. When out of town, she takes care of our house and dog. Over time, I can see how Diana's commitment has strengthened my marriage.

Changing or Breaking Commitments

Being a counselor and wedding officiant, I see people in all stages of relationship. Maggie is a matchmaker in our circle of friends, so we often see relationships just as they begin to form. When a couple arrives to begin planning their wedding, I ask how they met and whether they took the time to become friends first. Many of these couples' stories are wonderful.

But not every couple is so fortunate. In consulting with couples, I frequently hear scenarios in which one partner applies pressure on the other to make a commitment before they are ready. For instance, in the following scenario, the girlfriend stated the issue as she saw it: "The problem is that he won't make a commitment to me." Her fiancée's response was:

I am barely able to take care of myself. Now she wants me to take care of her. I have too many other commitments that I'm not fulfilling and I'm not comfortable taking on more. I am unable to deal with my feelings and she has more emotions than I can handle. We don't cope well with each other's feelings and neither of us have experience with healthy relationships. Both sets of our parents are poor examples: my dad worked hard his whole life but had no time for himself. My mom had five kids, which she wanted, and expected Dad to provide for all of us. He was a good man who died young of a broken heart. My mom is still alive, and twenty years later she is still bitter and doesn't know how to care for herself. I don't want to fall into this trap! I want a mutually committed marriage.

Obviously, there was significant disparity in perspective on the relationship of this couple. Until this unhealthy dynamic was addressed and resolved, the seeds of painful dissolution were bound to grow and lead to an unhappy relationship that neither partner wanted. Beyond focusing on "commitment," these people needed to focus on exactly what they meant by that word, and what actions they would take to strengthen their relationship.

This next story is about a couple's first marriage. Years later, Joan is dealing with the ramifications of the premature promises she made:

I take commitment seriously. I made a commitment to Bryce, but he was not honest about his true self. He projected an illusion to fit what I wanted him to be. I see now that I just blindly accepted him. I made commitments to a person that doesn't exist. There is a huge discrepancy between what he promised on our wedding day and what he did. When I committed to loving him, I knew in advance that I would find behaviors I did not like. Now, there is a complete loss of integrity in our marriage. If I stay, it seems that I am not being true to myself. It is bad enough that he betrayed me, but I cannot tolerate betraying myself. I promised "until death do us part," but now I realize that the marriage is dead and I have been living with a corpse.

When one person fails to keep their commitment, are we relieved of our obligation to keep ours? I think we need to be rightly cautious, and avoid relationships where the level of commitment is not mutual. Most of the painful stories I have heard over the years are the ones in which one person gave and gave, and the other person mainly took.

Frequently I officiate at weddings where the couple has been living together for a while and raising kids from previous marriages. I have each couple create their own ceremony. I like the realistic commitments that the following couple recited in their vows:

We begin with the willingness to love and then commit to the energy that needs to follow. We come together to heal and grow as long as it serves us both. Our vow is to provide a place for the shame, wounds, fears and anger that we know will arise. We are equally committed to joy and kindness. The primary commitment is to oneself, then to family, to friends and to our community.

The first several years of my relationship with Maggie were focused on our family and careers. Our commitment was tested by parenting. All of the individual personal work and growth we had done really made a difference in our relationship. Because

of our mutual commitment to love, I could always count on her, and she on me.

Friend to Friend Commitment

I find that I am willing to make different types and levels of commitment with each friend. I want friends who are committed to being a good friend to themselves and to me. I also want to make a commitment to a circle of friends.

People frequently comment that they long for a sense of community. When we become connected to our larger community, we feel whole. As our lives merge, we introduce each other to new experiences.

Commitment implies a concern for the well being of another. Friendships honor the need to care and be cared for. This requires a high level of maturity. Sometimes you need to be able to put your own needs aside to focus on the needs of your friend. An increase in commitment helps to boost intimacy. A rise in intimacy generates a desire to be committed. Both grow over time in a faithfully guarded friendship. Calling someone a kindred spirit means being willing to commit to him or her. Commitment and closeness create a perpetual cycle.

Why do friends rarely make commitments to each other?

*Commitment increases intimacy,
and intimacy increases
commitment.*

I have worked in the wellness field for many years, and have seen how hard it is for people to keep their commitments even to themselves, let alone another person.

The concept of commitment includes loyalty and being accountable for one's actions. Making and keeping agreements demonstrates devotion to maintaining a high quality relationship. Sometimes duty to the friendship means admitting and correcting mistakes so they do not occur again. Making an agreement to care for each other means keeping the

slate between you clean with clear communication.

In friendships, the level of dedication is assumed. But most people never discuss what kind of commitment they have to each other. Promise yourself and your friends that you will dedicate the resources needed to clarify your relationship.

When I am hurting and lonely, will you still love me? Can I count on your love even when I am at my worst? Will you love me even when I act in an irresponsible manner? Will you stay committed to me when I do something that you dislike, and be forgiving with grace? I want a commitment from you. I want love that is loyal, and a willingness to do what is challenging. I want love that is not dependent upon being perfect.

People sometimes avoid making any agreements because they then feel locked into something rigid. Give yourself the freedom to make changes to your agreements over time.

Do you have a friend with whom you would like to bond? Begin by making a commitment to yourself to be the best person you can be. Then discuss with your friend how you can define and increase the commitment in your relationship. Determine what commitments you are both willing to make.

Depth

A synonym for kindred spirits is “deep friends.” We make an effort to become connected at a deeper level than with casual friends. It is fun to be social, to share the ins and outs of our daily lives, but we also need to explore what’s beneath the surface. Deep friends are able to share what is meaningful to them. Their conversations involve a high proportion of time devoted to important subjects.

When I see a group of people, I like to imagine that they are a grove of trees. I hike in to find one that I want to explore in depth. I identify the species, then note the foliage, height and age. How thick is their protection? What is the texture of their bark? How do they protect themselves and what wounds have they suffered? We all need a strong layer of

protection. I look for marks of recent injuries where they have been hurt and are healing.

If I feel invited to go deeper in my study, I attempt to go beyond the bark to the inner layer of growth. How do they grow under the surface? In what season are they? Is the sap rising like on a sunny spring day, or are they entering into a dormant part of their cycle? Where are they growing? How are they anchored in their community? With whom do their roots mingle? What are their special relationships to the others in the grove? How do they draw nourishment from their environment?

I find it fascinating when people are open to revealing their growth rings. They can share their history of the times when growth was slow and difficult, and the years they grew the most. As with trees, each year of life leaves a record of our own growth.

When people sense that you are sincerely interested and trust you, they frequently are eager to show you their heartwood. What are their important beliefs? When a level of safety is established, I then proceed to climb up into their branches. Which branches of their personality are strong, and which are weak and cannot support much weight? Are there any broken branches? I like to go as high as I can, to see the view from their perspective.

At the end of my visit I stand back and see the whole person, inside and out. We are all beautiful trees in a forest. We are shaped by the elements of wind, water, sun and shadow.

The craft of friendship is mastered in the deepening of our virtues. The more we study virtue, the more we see how they all build upon each other. We become better at bonding and making commitments, and our friendships deepen.

My first friendship, my primary, essential friendship, is with myself. I believe that I can only go as deep with my friends as I am willing to go with myself. And when I know myself, there grows within me the desire to be known and to know others, center to center. Having done significant personal work, it fulfills me to find those who are also doing theirs. I am happy to have many great friends.

I have stimulating friendships with many different kinds of people. Most of my friendships have progressed slowly over time to reach the level of kindred spirits. I like seeing our intimacy grow as the relationship matures. Once someone reaches this level of intimacy, years can pass between our visits and even though we both have grown, the connection is still there. Time and distance do not diminish these friendships, and I expect they’ll last a lifetime.

On the other hand, some friendships only last a few hours. Several times I have met people at con-

ferences with whom I really connected. We went for a walk and the sharing was profound. We became friends in an instant. Our attraction exploded at the speed of light. Our spirits connected at a deep level. This can only happen when two people are present, open and ready. We know that we may never see each other again. My preference is that we will have regular contact, but that is not always the nature of these friendships. The gift is in the moment.

Empathy

I can feel sympathy for people I have never met just by watching a program about their tragedy on the news. I can feel sorry for their loss, and I may want to help alleviate their pain.

Empathy has a different vibration than sympathy. Empathy implies the strong desire and capacity for connecting directly to another person's life experience. Being empathetic means being able to sense how another person feels the world. I do this by being aware of what the other is undergoing, and by being receptive to their emotions and ideas. I try to sense their essence, free from my own fears, associations and projections. Though I am not able to empathetically connect with every person in every topic or situation, I enjoy the empathetic connection when it is possible, and love receiving the closeness that results.

Empathy is being open to the full spectrum of another person's being.

Empathy can flow just one way, or it can be a two-way virtue. The level of sensitivity and skill varies vastly from person to person. The higher the degree of mutual empathy between friends, the more

closeness is fostered core to core. Empathy is a useful skill, both personally and professionally, for bonding at a deep level.

I want to be around people who can empathize with me when I am feeling pain as well as pleasure. I also desire to form friendships where people want me to be with them to grieve losses and celebrate their successes.

Empathy is easier when both people experience the same event, such as being promoted, or the loss of a friend. Being empathetic is more challenging when someone is relating a story in which you were not involved. We tend to connect well if the content is of a highly experiential and emotional nature.

A shift in awareness from self to the other person occurs with empathy. We are willing to be transformed by their experience, at least in the moment. But empathy involves more than forgetting ourselves and just focusing on another. Rather, it's about retaining ourselves while receiving another.

If self-knowledge is missing, empathy is not likely to occur at a significant level. When we are conscious of our center, we feel secure enough to relax and let another in. Empathy involves joining with the center of another in a moment of oneness. The other may sense the connection and open further. In turn, we have an even greater sense of them, to feel as they feel, to see as they see, to hear from their perspective. This temporary setting aside of one's self and entering into another's reality is intrinsically expansive.

Paint Me a Picture

When a friend begins to share something of value, I imagine my mind as a blank canvas. I slow my breathing and focus completely on what they are sharing. My goal is to undergo as closely as possible what they are experiencing as I try my best to be a clear space for them to paint their picture. I ask myself, "what can I do to be inside their frame of reference?" Empathy is a completely present experience.

I have had to practice to improve my ability to be a receptive listener. I attempt to enter into the other person's sphere of reality. To do so, I pose these questions:

How does this person make sense of their life?

How do they feel about themselves?

In the course of this active listening, I constantly remind myself to be present, not to slip into unconscious free association as my mind tries to jump in and tell me what points I agree or disagree with. I still struggle to improve my ability to put aside my values and interpretations.

My buddy Daniel reluctantly opened up about a disturbing incident that had occurred recently in his relationship. I was not able to listen very well, because his story triggered some strong emotions about my relationship. He sensed this and stopped talking. I needed to stop my mental chatter so that deep listening could occur. This gave me an opening to his reality. I wanted to empty myself while Daniel opened up a space for me to enter. Eventually, I was able to suspend my feelings so he could easily pour forth his.

Daniel expressed his pain about how he had been treated. Then, with tears flowing, he reported how he had reacted and mistreated his partner. I struggled to simply hear what he was saying without finding fault in either person's behavior. The smallest amount of criticism or judgment would dam the flow of feelings. Although I did not agree with what he was saying, I just listened and was as open as I could be. My acceptance and empathy encouraged him to go even deeper into his experience.

Holding the image, "I am just a canvas" gave Daniel an open space to paint using the colors of his feelings. When he was finished, we sat in silence. We needed to stay present with what we had just experienced together. My mind kept wanting to race off to my reactions. I thanked him for his openness and honesty.

Being Met

I am passionate about ideas and principles. Only a few friends can connect with me at this level. My desire is for them to experience me at the same depth that I experience myself. I am better able to hear myself when I am with a friend who has the virtue of empathy well developed.

I am in an extremely creative phase of life. The range of feelings that arise as I struggle with the length of time it takes to complete a project (like this book, for instance) is difficult even for me to comprehend. To get the empathy that helps me to thrive, I have learned to gather from each friend what they have to give. I want my friends to empathize with me, to share in the experience. With Ella, I can share the thoughts and feelings in this book for hours non-

stop, without her even thinking about food or a bathroom break. She has the rare capacity to fully participate in another's feelings and ideas.

I cherish those magic moments when I am the recipient of empathy. When I experience a deep awareness of myself, I want to share it with someone who knows my spirit. I live on the edge, and realize that if I want empathy, I will need to find others who enjoy meeting me where I am. "I want to be met," was an expression I heard in reference to empathy.

I feel empathy when my partner is sensitive to my feelings, to the point where he experiences my experience. I can see him as he lives my experience. One of his greatest gifts is his curiosity to know my emerging spirit. He gets turned on when I reveal my naked self. He is able to listen to the words and to the spaces in between. I feel deeply cared for when I am honored in this way. He stands before me like a mirror with a clear reflection of who I am. Many years ago, I read the book Stranger in a Strange Land by Robert A. Heinlein, and it stuck with me. In it, the term "grok" referred to the ability to perceive a person's experience to the point where you had the identical experience. I marvel at my good fortune to have found a man with empathy.

Josh is more skilled at empathy than any person I have ever encountered. I asked him, "Have you always been this way?"

In order for me to develop empathy I have had to lengthen my attention span. Before, I could only listen to someone for a few sentences, before I would cut in to tell my story. Now, when someone shares something important, I pretend that they are an actor in a dramatic play. I have a front row seat, they have center stage and the spotlight is on them until they exit. Being in the audience, my role is to focus my attention on the action on stage. I like being pulled into the emotional content of the dialogue. All of us are familiar with being emotionally involved with a character in a story. I find that most people only need a few minutes of my full attention. At the end of a person's soliloquy, I thank them for what they have shared.

When I am able to define what I need from a friend, the likelihood of my needs being met increases. I practice taking responsibility for my needs by explaining how I wish to be treated.

In sharp contrast to empathy is apathy, the opposite of being met. Once, when I was sharing something important, I thought that the person was listening. Upon closer inspection, I found that they did not care what was important to me. Lack of in-

terest and emotional indifference result in feeling ignored. It can also be frustrating when I have strong feelings that I want to share, and right away the other person switches the focus to their thoughts. They become triggered by my situation and start to relate one of their own past experiences. I prefer for them to first hear, sense my story, acknowledge the connections and then in a reasonable time, express their feelings.

Competition for attention kills empathy.

One summer I presented at a conference in Vancouver, B.C. That evening there was a cruise and dinner. I was on the upper deck enjoying the night, when a woman approached and offered me her story of friendship:

I never really knew what empathy was until I was gifted by my special friend Paul. I wish there were several people like him in my life. The first time we met, I knew we were going to be friends. I was relieved to finally meet someone who could be with me in true intimacy.

Paul knows me, knows who I am. He asks questions like, "How is your life going?" and "Are your dreams coming true?" and then he listens. Our spiritual paths are similar. We are friends in order to learn from each other. Our karma is interwoven. Paul's love for me awakens new ways for me to love myself. We also have profound differences, but they're assets rather than liabilities.

We feel healed in each other's presence and expect the highest quality of friendship. There is a strong mutual intention to cultivate the relationship. We see each other only once or twice a year because we live so far apart, yet I feel there is a devotion between us that transcends distance. He brings me joy and every day I feel his presence. I am committed to finding others like Paul who I can be closer to daily. We share a vast common ground. We talk and write regularly.

My husband Joe was envious of my relationship with Paul at first. Now Joe realizes that my friendship with Paul enhances our marriage. Joe and I trust each other and were able to work out our issues of possessiveness. I feel closer to Paul in some ways than I do to my mate, but that is not a bad thing. I don't expect Joe to meet all of my diverse needs and interests. Paul and I have been close

friends for years and I suspect we will be close for the rest of our lives. I am truly fortunate to have such a friend.

A couple of years ago, troubling memories from my childhood began to bubble up. They were provoked by an interaction with my daughter. A flood of emotions engulfed me until I thought I was drowning. When I tried to express what was happening to me, my husband was very sympathetic and tried to be helpful. Then he became distraught as well and many of his feelings were activated, too. He genuinely felt the intensity of my sorrow. I felt supported and I told him how much his support meant to me. He is a very sensitive man. But then both of us were in deep water and struggling.

A few days later, there was a second wave of pain and I felt exhausted from treading water for so long. Once again, Joe was there for me with compassion for my suffering. With tenderness and strength, Joe tried to bear the weight of my emotions. Now I was like the classic drowning person who, in a panic, clutches the one who would rescue them. Joe was smart enough to pull back and get some distance so I did not pull him down. He attempted to calm me and alleviate my pain. He has the "emotional handyman gene" and used his tools to try to fix me. He didn't want to see me in such pain and offered suggestions. I instinctively knew that I needed more than sympathy and compassion. I needed to stay in my pain that had been repressed for so long and continue my thrashing. I had swallowed quite a bit of water but I knew I could count on Joe's support.

Joe urged me to call Paul but I resisted at first, out of pride. When I finally called him, he came to see me the next day. As soon as he walked in the door, all the water I had swallowed came gushing out my tear ducts. Paul held me as I cried and blabbed for hours. He barely said a word. He offered no advice, nor did he express that he felt the same way. Because he wasn't caught up in my whirlpool, I was able to focus on my experience and not worry about him. He listened and was present, which seemed to be what I needed.

I continued crying for help for what seemed like eternity, and Paul stayed with me. The panic slowly faded and I began swimming towards the shore. All the memories were still there, along with the pain. I looked into Paul's eyes and he smiled at me. At first I was indignant. How could he be so happy when I still felt so miserable and cold? I felt as if I was covered in mud, my hair soggy, with a snotty nose and puffy eyes. He was seeing me at my worst—but from his point of view, it was my best. He recognized how powerful I am when I am in touch with my feelings.

He left me alone for a few minutes and went into the kitchen to fix a cup of tea. I was chilled, so he wrapped me in a blanket and rubbed my feet. I was still in shock from the magnitude of what happened. This was the first time in my adult life that I was able to totally experience

my feelings. At age 37, I had been given the gift of empathy by my special friend. Paul explained that he was only able to give empathy to me because he had been gifted by one of his friends when he was in crisis.

When Joe came home from work that night, Paul and I had prepared a dinner. I was able to explain that I needed more empathy rather than sympathy or compassion. There are times when I don't want anyone to jump in and rescue me, but I do want to know that they are on the shore, waiting for me.

No doubt, empathy is one of the most difficult virtues to master, but the better you become at mastering other virtues, the better you get at empathy.

they did not even do. I would feel hurt because of my false interpretations of their actions. I keep blaming other people for the pain I cause myself. They don't even know that I am angry at them and awaiting an apology. The whole drama is just an excuse to distance myself. My counselor suggested that, when my emotions are running high, I focus on the facts.

Forgiveness does not mean I have to forget how another person has mistreated me. I am not required to forget nor excuse their behavior. When a person does something intentionally nasty, I forgive them because it serves me, but I stay out of their way. I am not going to forget how I was hurt and set myself up to be hurt again.

Forgiveness

Forgive for your sake.

I invited a group of friends over to discuss forgiveness. Following are excerpts from varying perspectives about the complexity of being able to forgive and asking for forgiveness:

Forgiveness becomes easier when I understand my feelings of betrayal. Any time that I feel like I've been double-crossed, I reflect on how I might be responsible. Why am I feeling disappointed by another's behavior? Did I make assumptions about her? Was she doing her best? One thing that shows up regularly is that my expectations were unreasonably high and I let myself get hurt because I was expecting perfection.

When I was a kid, I would deny that I had done anything wrong even when caught red-handed. My denial was a futile attempt to avoid being punished. The other day I offended my friend and, even when confronted, I made up a stupid story hoping to get away with it. This only aggravated the situation. I need to be able to admit my mistakes to myself, then to others.

Where I get in big trouble is when my boyfriend makes a little mistake in his treatment of me, and I use this as an excuse to feel justified to dump a ton of garbage on him. He feels trashed. It takes us weeks to sort it out.

I am embarrassed about how many times in the first fifty years of my life I got mad at a friend for something

When I understood that forgiveness is a sign of strength, I was able to let go and forgive. For my own peace of mind, I like to forgive. I started by forgiving my parents for the mistakes they made. This helped me to resolve and release my energy for other things. I have found it good practice to forgive someone even when they don't ask for it. I once created a ceremony to forgive a person, now dead, who had injured me. This gave me the strength to move forward with my life. Forgiveness is something that you give to another, but it is something you give mostly to yourself.

One day when I was five, I came running home in tears. My daddy asked, "What's wrong, sweetie?" I said, "I am never going to play with Sally again! She was mean to me." His words still echo in my mind today: "Forget about having friends if you cannot forgive."

The more forgiving I am of myself, the more others sense this and relax around me. In the past, I was extremely harsh on myself and I finally saw how protective people were when they were around me. When I am forgiving of myself, it is easier for me to forgive another. Once I made a list of what I forgive myself for, and found out that what I find hard to forgive in myself is also difficult for me to forgive in others.

I liked going to confession when I was a kid. The priest would say, "Your sins are forgiven, go and sin no more." I felt clean, like after my mom gave me a bath. I waste so much of my energy on feeling shame and guilt for my actions, instead of asking to be forgiven and mov-

ing on. Even when the other person has long ago forgotten what I did to them, I still worry.

I like the feeling I have when I forgive. It's like fresh air entering a room that has been shut too long. I can give someone another chance. Sometimes when we air out our feelings, the level of trust is higher than before. We begin again and continue to deepen our friendship.

Forgiveness is a quality I have struggled with my whole life. As a result, I am too guarded because I live in fear of being hurt again. I need to learn to be free and open.

When someone hurts my feelings, I wonder if they are hurting me in the ways they are used to being hurt.

All the stuff unhealed from my past infects me in the present. Often when someone hurts me, they have touched an old wound. Forgiveness is the opportunity to heal that old wound. I can heal myself only up to a point. I need others to complete the process.

No one heals alone. No one grows alone.

I have a tendency to hold a grudge when someone hurts my feelings. The problem is that the resentment is like a heavy shackle. When I took an honest look at myself, I saw there were several large weights that kept me exhausted. I did some counseling that helped me discover why I was holding on to old hurts. I was using grudges as an excuse for why I couldn't move forward in my life. When I was able to forgive, I could cut them loose. "Lighten your load" is now my motto.

When I feel hurt by someone, I want to know if they were being simply careless or downright cruel. Was this an accidental bump or an intentional push?

One of my close friends was clueless that he offended me. Once I began to educate him about how I expected to be treated, the problem went away. He was exceptionally receptive to feedback on his progress. When I feel someone has my best interest at heart and makes an innocent mistake, forgiveness is instantaneous.

I had to challenge a friend, because when she was in distress she didn't pay attention to my feelings. This is understandable and I have compassion for her temporary insensitivity. I told her, "If you want us to stay friends, be careful not to give me a hard time when you're having a hard time yourself."

I decided to end a relationship because, even after warning him about respecting my boundaries, he continued rubbing me the wrong way. His constant little cruelties became a cut that started to fester. I had to stop him from hurting me.

Everyone I am close to hurts me in ways that only someone that I care about can. I, too, sometimes make mistakes that hurt my friends. I'm not perfect nor is anyone else I know. Deep friends can cause deep pain. So the way I figure it, I need to learn deep forgiveness skills. My practice is to refine how I choose to feel and respond. The more intimately involved we are, the more I'll need to be forgiving and be forgiven.

When I harbor resentment and am unforgiving, I use what others have done in the past to justify how I mistreat them now. Sometimes I am downright mean to others. This has caused me serious problems. My behavior has been hard for me to change.

Most of the time my mind creates a worse pain than the original hurt. I often wish I could blame others for my pain. I have tried to make others responsible. The truth is I was already hurting.

My wife of twelve years sometimes does things that I feel are inconsiderate. I know she isn't intentionally trying to hurt my feelings, but in that moment it feels that way and my feelings of bitterness toward her increase. I realized that as long as I blamed her for how I felt, I was giving my power away. I have to constantly remind myself that I am responsible for how I think and feel. Sure, she sometimes treats me in a way I don't like, but when I choose to feel bitter, I am the source of my suffering. So when I own my pain, I can get rid of it.

Saying "I am sorry" is hard for me. I tend to avoid the person I have offended. There is a friend I am going to call when I get home and ask to forgive me. If he is willing to accept my apology, I will ask if we can start over again.

I find that many people do not admit to having done something wrong. The offenders are mainly focused on their discomfort and embarrassment and seeking relief. I get even madder when they try to charm their way out of taking responsibility for their actions. A warning light flashes when the people expect me to quickly forgive and

forget. All they want is to return to being in my good graces. I expect them to invest the time and energy to restore the trust, so I can rely on them in the future.

"I am sorry" can mean many things. Sorry (I got caught.) Sorry (I am not free to do as I want.) Sorry (Please don't punish me.) Sorry (You are upset with me.) Sorry (I hurt you.) Sorry (I am out of integrity.) When someone offends me, I am more forgiving when they are sincerely sorry and acknowledge how their actions affected me. I do not prematurely forgive. I find that a slow process is healing and educational for both of us.

Most of the time I take what someone does too personally and get hurt. I have some sensitive unhealed areas that are easily triggered. I've learned to ask myself, what in me needs to change so I won't be hurt in the future? Maybe I'm too trusting of people who don't deserve my confidence. When I feel hurt by someone, he usually has hit one of my hot spots. I looked up the definition of vulnerable: "easily hurt; susceptible to injury, attack or criticism." I am personally responsible for stopping the hurt from happening again. One point I have learned to consider is if I had treated him in the same way, would he be as upset? If not, then he is simply uninformed about how I view things.

Revenge destroys the avenger.

I waited too long to deal with my dad. I wanted him to finally understand that he had hurt me and ask for my forgiveness. He died last year of a heart attack before I was able to tell him how I felt. I have spent the past year forgiving him without his involvement. Slow work, but each step of progress is rewarding. I made a promise at his funeral to let go of everything that is not love.

Formula for Forgiveness

To ask for forgiveness and to forgive are both virtues. Here are some of the ingredients that contribute to forgiveness:

1. Admit

"I made a mistake."

Communicate how you mistreated the other person. Take full responsibility. Be careful not to minimize or exaggerate what you did.

2. Inquire

"How have my actions affected you?"

Express a sincere desire to understand the pain you have caused. This shows that you are not shielding yourself from the consequences of your actions.

3. Apologize

"I am sorry that I hurt you."

"I am sorry that I was insensitive and broke an agreement."

"I am sorry for the negative effect my actions have had on our relationship."

"I care about you and I want to do whatever it takes to rebuild your trust in me."

Demonstrate that you are not just sorry that you got caught.

4. Prevention

"I understand what I did wrong, and I will do everything I can to prevent this from happening again."

When the offended person feels that you understand your actions and you will stay alert to prevent reoccurrences, then they are generally more receptive to forgiving you. They will feel safer being around you when they can see you monitoring your own behavior.

5. Ask for forgiveness

"Will you forgive me?"

Honor that the offended person may need some time to heal and rebuild trust before they are ready to forgive.

6. Restitution

"I want to make amends. How would you like me to make up for the wrong I have done?"

The desire for reconciliation must be backed up by deeds. The greater the injury, the more effort is necessary.

A barrier can remain between the two parties unless the formula is completed. With full forgiveness there is no resentment and the bond can even increase between these two people.

Whenever forgiveness is needed there is always a grand opportunity for learning.

Who has harmed you?

From whom do you need forgiveness?

Generosity

One day, my friend Victoria called and asked for a favor. She wanted to know if she could use my house to have a going-away party for herself. Having decided to sail around the world, she quit her job as a physical therapist. Her apartment was too small to accommodate all the friends she had made over the years. Her plan was to go to San Diego and volunteer to help crew a boat headed out to sea. She didn't know if or when she would return to Portland.

Many of us questioned her sanity because she had never been on the ocean, but Victoria's love of adventure was irrepressible, so we gathered to wish her bon voyage.

Instead of having a garage sale, she decided to give away everything she owned that would not fit in her pack. When her friends arrived for the party, they were shocked to see three rooms filled with gifts. She invited her guests to help themselves, saying she wanted us to be reminded of her as she sailed the seas.

No one moved for over a minute. All of this seemed a little crazy. We weren't sure if it was ethi-

cal to take her things, given her expansive condition. This level of generosity was extraordinary. But Victoria saw the giveaway as an act of generosity to herself. She was freeing herself to follow her dreams before she settled down and had kids.

I loved receiving her postcards from around the world. I am still reminded of Victoria and her giving spirit when I see the old pottery boot she made sitting in the yard.

Receiving and Giving

When I was living at my retreat center, our slogan was, "Ask for what you want." I am amazed by what people are willing to give when asked. One of the things I have learned about receiving is to make sure that I feel deserving, as this is a way of inviting others to be generous toward me. The ability to feel truly deserving of another's generosity directly corresponds to one's own giving nature. Reduced to its simplest form, to give is to receive.

This simple principle works in strange and mysterious ways. For instance, at one of the conferences I present at regularly, I make a point to get to know the newcomers. One year, I noticed a woman who had a great smile, so every time I would see her, I'd wave and flash her a big smile in return. This went on for five days, though we never said a word to each other.

The next week I received a "thank you" note in the mail. The woman explained how my friendliness had made a big difference in how she felt each day. She said that she would try to get me on as a speaker at a conference she would be attending the following year. Later, I received a call from the American Massage Therapy Association to see if I would teach at their first retreat at a Club Med resort in Mexico. Yes! I said. Thank you, Marilyn!

The converse of this principle is equally true. If the generosity within a relationship doesn't flow in both directions, the relationship suffers. One person with whom I discussed generosity reported that they had to stop being generous to a certain individual:

The nicer I tried to be to this supposed "friend," the more abuse I got. I assumed that we had an agreement to both be generous, when in fact nothing flowed my way. Giving without anything returning is not being generous to myself. I am committed to living a generous life by balancing the other's needs and my own. Never give too much or let others take too much. Since then, I have found

plenty of other friends who appreciate me. I am a free spirit, but my spirit is not free for the taking.

I feel full when I give.

Generosity is as beautiful flowing one way as it is going two ways in a mutually giving/receiving relationship. Sometimes we just give for the sake of giving. True generosity is never depleting when we give with a generous heart. The simple act of generosity bonds our friendships.

Once, when Maggie and I visited southern France, where she had lived and studied in her youth, we stayed at a beautiful bed and breakfast in the country and became friends with the owner. He offered to take us on a hike into the beautiful red ocher cliffs. This unexpected adventure was one of the best parts of the trip. I asked Maggie to inquire why he was so willing to give of his time. The translation was, "Your pleasure is my pleasure."

Remember a time when someone helped you out and expected nothing in return. There are so many examples of that in life.

We all have more to give.

During the time I was a single parent, I needed a steady job to pay the bills. An old friend called and asked if I would be willing to help him. Steve was the director of the county mental health agency. One of his caseworkers had to go on leave immediately due to complications with her pregnancy. He wondered if I could fill in for a month. As it happened, the caseworker never returned because she wanted to be a full-time mom. For the next year, I worked with mentally ill people and eventually became a mental health investigator. At the end of the year, I consulted on a special project to help establish homes for my clients so, upon leaving the hospital, they would have a secure place waiting for them in their community.

Each week, I made visits to the state mental hospital to check on the status of those in my caseload. I consulted with a Japanese psychiatrist whom I liked. During one visit, while he was on the phone, I admired a hand-lettered calligraphy scroll that said, "It is a good day when generosity touches your life." Finishing his phone call, he came over and stood next to me. I told him how much I liked the poster's saying, because this was the right message at the right time of my life. He said that he would like to give the poster to me. I resisted at first, sensing that someone special had given this inspiring script to him. Aware of my hesitation, he explained that in his culture, when someone likes something of yours, it is considered an honor to give it to him or her. He took the scroll from the wall and presented it to me with a bow.

While we exchanged notes about our clients, I sat on his black leather couch with delicately carved wood trim. The old fashioned couch sloped at one end so the patient could recline and talk while the doctor sat listening from behind. When I was ready to leave, I stood facing the beautiful couch. "I really like your couch," I said. With a smile he responded, "Don't push it." We laughed and I celebrated the fact that being generous is not an obligation.

Each day for more than a dozen years after that, I saw the saying, "It is a good day when generosity touches your life." I considered the quote to be a precious gift. One day, a visitor admired and asked about the scroll. I related the story about how I had come to possess the scroll as I rolled it up and presented it as a gift. I noticed my attachment to this beautiful artifact when it was my turn to open my hand and let it go.

Who knows how many times since then the message has been admired and passed on?

Push the envelope of generosity until you surprise yourself.

One woman from a seminar summed it up perfectly: "When I noticed how much I enjoyed giving, I wondered why I wasn't doing something that feels so good more often." A homework assignment I like to give in my seminars is to be generous to someone who will never know the giving came from you.

I think that the lack of generosity in our world is based on the belief that there isn't enough to go around. It is irrational to fear that we'll have less as we give more. People who act out of greed fail to understand the principle of generosity.

We have all grown up in a culture that instilled positive and negative messages about being generous. Examine the messages you were brought up with to see if they describe your view of life. If not, adopt new ones. Question any beliefs that limit your generous nature from being expressed.

When we give freely of ourselves, we always receive more than we give. Giving to oneself is a good place to start. As our love of self expands, we find that we become more capable of giving and receiving. The more we invite into our life, the more we have to give.

Generosity often begins with a gesture conveying, "How may I help you?" But be careful not to be generous only when someone is needy or in crisis. Study people who are great givers, people who always position themselves to receive, and those who are good at both.

Kindred spirits are committed to being generous with affection. Just being a good friend to another person is an act of generosity. Just as it's great to be a giver, it's fun being around a generous person. Surround yourself with those who love to give.

What special gifts do you have to give that a friend might enjoy?

Do you want to give more?

How can you share your blessing?

What can you do to foster generosity?

Honesty

Here are some perceptions taken from interviews on honesty:

Being honest sometimes means that there are certain things better left unsaid.

Dishonesty destroys friendship.

If I am totally honest with myself, I admit that I want more love and intimacy.

Often to find the truth, I begin with questions like: "What do I need to do to bring my life into alignment with my beliefs? Am I speaking my truth? Who do I want to spend my time with?"

Honesty can be wielded like an ax that splits a person in two. Or, being honest can be used like a scalpel to precisely cut away a bad growth to make one whole.

I care enough to tell you what I do not like about your behavior ... "carefrontation." Good feedback always contains the message "I care."

Frequently when I feel a need to be honest with someone, it is during a time when I am upset with how she has mistreated me. When I speak in the heat of the moment, what comes out of my mouth is not always the best thing. Besides, when I blurt out the reason for my injury, the message is often met with denial and defensiveness. Before I speak, I need to check out my feelings and remove any intention to hurt the other person. Before telling someone a hard truth, I pause to consider how best to express what I think in a caring manner that is sensitive to his or her feelings. I want to have friendships in which I am able to express all my feelings.

When the truth comes calling, unlock the door and take it off its hinges so you cannot be tempted to close it even a bit.

When possible, I ask if someone wants my feedback: "Is this a good time for me to speak to you? If not now, when do you suggest would be a better time?" Asking if and when my feedback is wanted is a sign of respect that gives someone choice and control.

I have noticed that when I back off from being completely honest with a friend, it is because I do not want to hurt their feelings. I have invented many excuses for not being forthcoming. Yet the irony is that I am doing them a disservice by withholding the truth; it is a form of dishonesty.

I don't like being honest with certain people because they get angry with me no matter how I express myself. Once I have done everything I can to give clear and clean feedback, I remind myself that I am not responsible for how they choose to interpret what I say.

Those who lie to themselves cannot hear the truth.

I struggle with what to do when I believe friends are not being honest with themselves and there are negative consequences to their behaviors. I try to assess how much honesty and what type of honesty they are receptive to. We all have blind spots. I am thankful for my close friends who are vocal about when I step on their toes.

I think the skill needed in giving direct communication is to express myself without contamination from past trauma. I have to remind myself that in most cases, the person in front of me is only the trigger. When I act reflexively, they get blasted. I need time to separate fiction from facts and the past from the present.

To create a world that supports the degree of growth that I desire, I must be honest with myself.

I have a problem with being honest, even about the good stuff. I find it difficult even to praise someone about something they do well. I tend to hide my love for my friends. I have built up a great deal of avoidance because I am fearful that they will reject me.

One of the ways I like to preface my remarks is to say, "I offer my perspective for you to consider. Please be open to my opinion."

When I sense that someone feels hurt by something I have done, I ask them to be honest with me. I assure them that what they say will hurt neither my feelings nor our relationship. I feel we have a better chance of sorting things out when I know what's up.

I used to be polite to avoid speaking up for my feelings, but I've learned that honesty needs to be the foundation of my relationships. I have a thirst for truth. I seek the highest level of truth possible.

I get myself into trouble when I am not willing to see the reality of another person's truth. Everything I believe to be true must be examined. Over the years, I have come to recognize that there is always more than one truth.

Are they really listening to what I am saying? If not, I am wasting my time and my energy would be better used someplace else.

I am better able to hear the truth from someone who cares about me than someone who doesn't like me. But it is easier for me to hear the truth from one of my friends than from my partner.

Being honest and direct avoids confusion. Being up front shows I care.

The Naked Truth

Know the truth.

Live the truth.

Embrace the truth.

Let your actions speak your truth.

Be true to yourself.

One morning, I woke up laughing from an intense dream. My heart rate was rapid when I retold myself the dream as a way of anchoring it, to remember the story later. In my dream, I was officiating a wedding, standing in front of a crowded room. The bride and groom had asked me to speak about the importance of honesty and intimacy in marriage. I said, "You must speak the naked truth." As I was speaking I saw the shocked expressions on the faces of the audience. I looked down and saw that my clothes had vanished and I was naked except for my socks. I glanced over at the bride and groom and they just smiled as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. I repeated, "You must speak the naked truth ... not even one sock can remain." I could feel my bare feet on the stage.

As I lay in bed trying to make sense of my dream, I slowly understood its meaning. Never cover any part of the truth. Over the course of the next few weeks as I visited with friends, I told them what happened to me in my dream. I asked them if I could share my naked truth about how I felt about them. Could I reveal myself, without even one sock? I had spoken the truth to them before, but not the whole truth. The naked truth was difficult but cathartic. My friends were curious and receptive. Because I shared my naked truth they opened more. A new depth of honesty was reached between us.

The more I focus on my virtues, the closer I have to examine areas in my life that need more attention. What do I want in my relationships? Revealing the "naked truth" is the most important aspect. My joke to myself is that I want to be totally naked, but others may have reservations about that which I need to honor. Thus my challenge is how to become better at holding the kind of space where others feel safe.

Independence and Interdependence

As a child, I was dependent on adults because I wasn't capable of doing certain things for myself. My parents encouraged me to become independent and I took it to heart. Early on in childhood, I started saving my money to buy a car. I lived in a semi-rural area and it was a long walk to go anywhere. Shortly after I turned sixteen, I paid cash for an almost-new VW bug. This was a major step for independence. I no longer had to ask to borrow the keys to the family car. On a full tank of gas I could go anywhere, anytime I wanted.

When I was a junior in college, a rite of passage was reached when I moved into my own apartment. I will never forget my first night on my own. I was barely able to sleep from excitement. Being free was exhilarating.

Being independent has always required hard work. In order to pay for tuition, I worked a grueling job during the summer at the Jergens soap factory. At the same time, I was the apartment building manager in exchange for my rent. After a few such regular jobs, I realized I would prefer being self-employed. I like being free every day to do what I want. Over the years I have learned that I can depend on myself.

Independence involves an ongoing process of learning to do things without assistance. It requires a strong sense of self. As we mature, we become increasingly self-sufficient. Independence is learning to have the self-confidence to rely on our own resources to care for ourselves. We need to survive and thrive on our own while our consciousness grows. Independence is a base that can sustain us during periods when we are alone.

Balance is key. Just as being too dependent on others can cause serious problems, so can being too independent. We are fooling ourselves when we act as if we never need anyone else. When a person requests assistance, it is often a sign of strength rather than an unhealthy dependency.

I am an extremely independent person, personally and professionally. In order for me to get where I am, I had to follow my individual quest. Counting on myself was a precursor to creating friendships with others. As I have matured, I have had to work hard to become more interdependent. Once I became

more secure about who I was, I became more open to letting others in. I am not sacrificing any of my independence by forming mutually nurturing relationships. The more strong connections I build with others, the more freedom I feel.

Pure independence does not exist; life is interconnected. The virtue of independence is balanced by the ability to form interdependent relationships.

*When independent,
self-loving beings come together,
intimacy flourishes.*

Maggie and I sometimes struggle when one or both of us are in "individual mode," yet we need to shift to cooperative mode. The challenge is to craft a solution that is better than just compromising what we, as individuals, want. Rather than each of us lobbying for our position, we engage our creativity to get what we want, and more! This is the time when there needs to be a softening around the edges of where we, as individuals, begin and end. Our goal is to have a strong identity that is also flexible. We try to make choices that are good for both of us.

If each of us had not established our independence, we would be unable to have an interdependent relationship. I know that I can count on Maggie and she knows that I am there for her. Our interdependence requires a high degree of mutual respect for the rights and integrity of each. We strive to achieve a blend of independence and interdependence that best serves us. When these virtues are in balance, the self remains intact while the relationship expands. I can function well on my own and yet gain strength by being cooperative. We choose to blend into each other for growth. Our differentiation is essential to being interdependent. The standard of freedom results in true interdependence.

A Gathering of Kindred Spirits

Several years ago, we invited friends to join an historic event. We gathered to write "The Declaration of Interdependence." On the front door of our house, we posted a sign that read "Interdependence

Hall." A delegation of 30 men, women and children assembled. We began by sharing individual experiences of interdependence. The stories told that day brought us to tears and laughter. Each person reported times of feeling a strong sense of community that struck a chord in all of us. We mourned the fact that interdependence happens so infrequently and came away inspired to create more times of connection.

We shared a powerful experience by stating in writing our intentions to becoming more interdependent. We felt great pride in producing a document based on the principles of kindred spirits.

The Declaration of Interdependence

We the People pledge allegiance to all Life.

Now is the time to affirm our interdependence as Kindred Spirits.

United in spirit, our kindness knows no boundaries.

We are one People.

With hands over our hearts, we vow to create an abundance of love.

Promising to fill our lives with purpose and passion,

Evolving to higher levels of love and consciousness,

We are Love.

A reverence for life compels us to respect the laws of nature,

To speak on behalf of those with no voice,

To create sustainable lifestyles using Earth's gifts wisely.

We are in Kinship with all.

Honoring our freedom to choose the best path,

United under the banner of compassion,

Expanding our capacity for love and laughter,

We celebrate Life.

Dedicating our lives to a global vision of peace and harmony,

Building our hope for the future with

our collective inner strength,

Together we will shine like the stars.

We will change the world!

Gather your friends and celebrate your interdependence. Read our Declaration and then write your own or adapt ours to your group's needs. The process of discussing how to balance being independent and interdependent is extremely valuable. Post a copy of the Declaration at home and at work. Establish new ways of strengthening your connection to your community. The declaration can serve as an inspiration to all and can be the foundation for a new global consciousness. Personalize the Forth of July holiday by celebrating your independence and interdependence.

Interdependence is a sense of self with a love of us.

Early in my adulthood, I attempted to find myself. Now I am trying to lose my self. I want more interdependence to help me progress on my path.

Review your own journey of independence and interdependence.

Which needs more attention: your ability to be independent or interdependent?

What can you do to achieve a balance of this dual virtue?

Joy

I would like to dedicate the virtue of joy to my good friend Elizabeth. She deserves this tribute because her joy springs from the depth of her spiritual beliefs. She excels at finding joy in love and friendship. She is a master teacher, my “guru of joy.” Elizabeth inspires me to stay committed to discovering my own joy.

I was invited to Elizabeth’s thirty-second birthday party. She requested that I gather the guests in a circle to wish her a birthday blessing. I suggested her friends each tell the story of how they met her, or to comment on a special quality that she models. I started off by expressing my gratitude for the 11,680 days of life she had lived so far, and the joy she has brought to me. Her two dozen friends gave blessings that had a common theme: her flavor of joy is passionate, affectionate and open-hearted.

We all remembered the moment when we were first attracted to Elizabeth’s brightness. When we are with her, we feel illuminated. Her spirit is like a candle in a cave. Her willingness to share her vitality inspired us to bond with her. We became aware of what we would have missed if she had not been born. We were moved to witness our collective love for her. It is too rare that someone is honored in a public way for her skill at being joyful.

We stood and formed two lines and, as she passed between us, we wished her an abundance of love and laughter throughout the next year. Elizabeth finished off the ceremony by singing to us. She is an opera singer, and her powerful voice projected a burst of laughter that reached a crescendo. Her joy was unrehearsed but the performance was a peak experience for all of us.

Express your joy.

I frequently work at home by myself. Suddenly, there’s a knock on the door, and Elizabeth greets me with a long embrace; she smiles and her eyes twinkle. She is glad to see me and is here to invite me on an adventure. She brings out the best in me. Just going

for a walk together transforms my day. With a long-time friend like her, there is the added benefit of memories to tap into together.

She has devoted her talents to expressing joy. I wish she would make a recording, “The Sound of Joy,” so I could play it even when she is not around. Her vocal range is matched by an equivalent emotional range.

Her joy looks spontaneous, the rapture an overflow of her internal happiness. Someone in her same situation might barely crack a smile while she cries tears of laughter.

I love going to the movies with her. Her laughter is contagious. It seems to be her job to help remind the audience when to laugh. I have laughed to the point of falling to the floor with cheeks hurting when I am with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth has the skill of finding and expressing the joy of the moment. Her inner joy becomes her outer joy. I love to make her laugh. She is like a bottle of soda that’s been shaken up and when she laughs and the lid is released, the joy bubbles over. Any attempt to control or contain her joy would shatter the glass. She is not embarrassed to let the bubbles out. To suppress joy is against our nature. Laughing with Elizabeth is a good workout: inner jogging!

Someone should write a research grant to study her genes. Scientists should analyze her, so that those who are humor impaired could benefit from having her joy genes spliced into theirs. I always look forward to the next time I will be together with Elizabeth and, as always, wish her well on her quest.

No one is expected to be cheerful all the time. I have been in Elizabeth’s presence when her heart has been aching. She has the capacity to vocalize deep sorrow as well as deep joy. She has a special talent for being genuinely happy for others even as she struggles.

Several of her friends were present when she heard the news that her mother had a tragic accident. During this dark time, we were able to reflect back to her some of the light she had shone on us. It is one of the great joys of a kindred spirit community that the joy of kinship can be shared so openly, no matter the circumstances.

Cultivating Joy

Being joyful is a skill that takes cultivation. There are thousands of opportunities to enjoy simple pleasures: the cuteness of baby toes, the first sprouts pushing up in your garden, the colors in the flame

of a candle, finishing a task, buying a gift. Joy takes many forms of expression: amusement, bliss, elation, festivity, glee, levity, merriment and rapture. Three letters make up this small word that describes so many big feelings.

We need to expand the amount of time in joy, regardless of what we are doing or what is happening around us. We live in the Garden of Eden, a royal paradise, Heaven on Earth and Nirvana, all rolled into one. Just being alive provides endless ways to experience joy, if we wish. With joy as a virtue, anything is a source of cheer.

Sometimes we need to find the joy on the inside when outer circumstances are grim, but more often, the quest is to discover how others experience joy. We all tend to experience more joy when we are with our friends as the energy bounces back and forth. Joy is a blessing we bring to our friends. When we reflect on the greatest moments of our life, most have been in the presence of good friends.

Joy is a sign that your quest is headed in the right direction. One of the best sources of joy is a lighthearted friendship. If you want more joy, the formula is simple: gather more friends. Friends and fun go together.

Pay attention when you are in the presence of someone who has the joy of being alive as a virtue.

Kindness

Let me tell you the story of one of my early role model of kindness: she was a plump woman in her late fifties who lived next door to me when I was a kid. One day, she approached our kitchen door and sang, "Yooo-hoooo. It's Tanta Frieda!" She had come to ask my mother if I could visit with her. We left the house holding hands. My hand was that of a four year old, soft and pink; hers was sculpted by decades of hard work.

The short distance to her house was like time travel to me. After rows of houses, her farm dwelt in the trees. She had migrated here from Germany with her husband many years before I was born, and here they had raised flowers and vegetables in a little valley by a creek. Everything about her home was different from the other houses in the neighborhood.

As we walked down the long hall to the kitchen, the aroma of years of home-cooked food emanated from the walls. I climbed on a chair so I could scrub my hands clean. Then we made our way to the front parlor. A picture of her son, Alfred, was enshrined atop an antique stand. I imagined that he was a secret scientist for the government. He played all different kinds of harmonicas. The grand piano, a black reflecting pool, was uncovered and I slid onto the smooth bench.

"Would you play the piano for me?" Tanta Frieda asked. I had never touched anything like this piano in all my short life. "I am sorry ... I do not know how to play any songs." I said. She smiled, her teeth yellow and crooked, contrasting sharply with the straight white keys before me. "Anyone can play songs. You just play. Make the sounds you like and I will listen." she said. I played only the black keys. They seemed to sound good no matter what I did. I played until my little fingers ached.

I was startled to see her husband in the doorway. He wore old pants, a stained shirt and a wrinkled leather hat. His face was like dry cracked dirt with whiskers. He had chased me out of their chicken coop more than once. Now here he was, giving me this look that said, "Are you the one who locked me in the chicken coop?" Even today I can hear the pitch of his voice as he yelled, "Let me out of here!"

He turned on the ancient radio and sat listening. Like me, he had never had a music lesson, nor could he read music. When the song was finished, he turned the radio off. I watched the glow in the tubes fade as he played the notes he had just heard on the piano from memory.

As I prepared to leave, Tanta gave me a piece of candy and a penny. Then I took a deep breath, because I knew what was coming next. She enfolded me in her soft arms and buried my face in her bosom. I felt so loved. I wished I could stay there forever. When she released me, I gasped for air. She hugged me so tight, the lace on her apron left an imprint on my cheeks.

We moved from the neighborhood when I was in the fifth grade and I never saw Tanta Frieda again until her funeral. I was 17 years old then and six feet tall; her widower seemed so small. I shook his hand and explained who I was. When our eyes met, I silently apologized for locking him in the chicken coop.

Tanta Frieda was a wonderful treasure from my childhood. Almost fifty years later, I still find comfort in my friendship with her. I regularly play on pianos when no one else is around. Since her death I play only the white keys.

Kindness is the glue that bonds us together.

The old phrase, “the milk of human kindness” reminds me of a mother nursing her child. Acts of kindness convey the message, “I care about you.”

All virtues are kindnesses. A friend describes kindness as “a beam of grace that flows like a stream of sparkles toward us, surrounding and gently lifting us.” We always have the power to increase the amount of kindness in our lives. The one characteristic that stands out among all my kindred spirits is they are kind-hearted.

A very sweet and dear friend named Bill invited Maggie and I over for dinner. Bill takes pride in creating an atmosphere of fine dining by serving meals on beautiful table settings. The dishes and centerpiece are always exquisite. Bill apologized for the plainness of this evening’s dinnerware. His entire set of prized silverware had been stolen that day. Later Maggie surprised Bill with a set of silverware that she had inherited but rarely used. Bill’s response was, “That is very kind of you.”

I complimented a woman in my dance class on the beauty of the muscles she had developed in her shoulders. Before the next class, she approached me to share how much what I had said meant to her.

At work, people are cold, cruel, nasty and rude to me. By the end of the day I feel like a windshield with their emotional mud splattered on me, until my vision is blocked. Your gesture of kindness was like a warm rain that washed me clean. I wish there was more kindness in my life.

Sharing kindness, we help each other on the path.

Virtues require regular practice. Near the end of your day ask, did I miss any opportunities to be kind? What can I do differently tomorrow? If I offended anyone, how can I make amends?

We are remembered by our acts of kindness.

What is your style of expressing kindness? Notice who and when someone offers you tenderness. Observe how others are kind, and try new ways to be kind yourself. Stretch your imagination and constantly explore ways of pouring kindness into others. Reflect on a time in your life when you experienced kindness and the effect it had on you.

Strangers are fun subjects for the practice of radiating kind intentions. Try a simple smile and “good morning” as you pass someone in your neighborhood. In my seminars on customer service, I recommend that participants practice being good customers by being kind to those who serve them. Another way to practice is to find out what your friends like and focus attention on them. Ask yourself, how can I treat this person in a positive way that they would appreciate? Notice the effect on your friend and on yourself. Perform at least one act of kindness each day.

Leadership

The old model of leadership was “me lead, you follow.” Today there is an exciting new model evolving in which we all have a leadership role. Being a good person is an act of revolutionary leadership.

Leadership begins with the ability to envision something other than what exists. A leader inspires others to work toward building a more loving community. Sometimes we lead, other times we follow. We lead by asking for and giving support.

There is a little note on the tip jar in a local coffee shop that reads, “If you fear change, leave it here!” I have watched customers laugh and put dollars bills in instead of the usual coins. There is a tremendous amount of energy wasted by people resisting positive change.

The first law of nature is that everything is in flux. Adapt or die: it’s the way of the world. Extinction is based on the inability to adapt. Leaders do not wait for a hero to emerge to save them. Leaders do more than simply accept the truth of constant change, they embrace it. The emerging style of leadership utilizes the skills of dealing effectively with change.

*All problems can be changed for
the better by raising
consciousness and working
together.*

A good leader takes the initiative by the virtuous, exemplary way in which they live. I believe inner change, in the form of personal growth, is what forms great leadership and this in turn can transform the world.

Begin with individual leadership, then add small groups that thrive on change. Together, we can confront challenges that would crush even the strongest individual because the complexity, magnitude and speed of change are more than the wisest person can comprehend.

Having the courage to act in virtuous ways may never get you into the history books, but it's what makes our world liveable and loveable. Good deeds are frequently invisible, yet if absent, would be missed. Our collective efforts have a powerful influence on the culture.

Any virtue you exhibit makes you a better leader. Sometimes I wish there was an institute in every town where one could learn to be loving, but upon further thought, maybe it is for the best that we have to teach each other.

Mentor

Ask anyone who has traveled a long distance on their quest, and they will tell you that their journey would have been impossible without help. There is a limit to the number of direct personal experiences one can have. But there is no such limitation on what you can learn from others on the path. We do not all have to make the same mistakes. Mentors are like gardeners, always eager to share their secrets of success. One trick is to call on the person who has the virtues that you need to learn.

My last year in college I signed up for a class on social change. The instructor invited leading activists to come and speak to us on their areas of expertise. I will always remember how excited I felt meeting a man I would later call my mentor and friend. Danny was introduced as an author, philosopher, photographer and professor.

Danny was an older man with coarse, wild, black and gray hair who always wore a scarf like a sage. His eyes were simultaneously piercing and gentle. He held the class spell-bound with stories of his adventures. He was a character, a man who lived his life on his own terms. He was independently wealthy and devoted his life in service to his community. At the end of the class, he picked different students and asked them what they intended to do with their lives. I can not remember how I responded, but when I finished he asked to see me after class. He had to leave for another appointment and gave me his work number. I had no idea how to interpret his request.

As I entered this famous person's office, I was greeted with a warm hug. I noted that Danny's tiny office had bookshelves to the ceiling stuffed with papers and projects. He answered the question on my mind: "I know exactly where everything is."

Danny said that he was impressed with me and would like to be my mentor. He helped instill in me the confidence that I would need to go in the right direction. Just one hour with Danny was more educational and inspiring than four years of college. I felt honored that this busy man would make time for me. My grades were only average, partly due to my involvement in outside activities that I felt were more in alignment with what I wanted to be learning. Danny arranged to have me receive a special evaluation to examine why I had such difficulty with certain subjects in school. Testing showed that I processed information in a uniquely creative manner, which explained why I struggled with some of my classes. With one phone call from Danny, I was accepted to the Graduate School of Community Planning. Here was a man who made a difference in my life.

In a traditional mentor/student relationship, sometimes the mentor is not willing to learn from the beginner. Danny was a mutual mentor and good friend. Although he was an expert in many areas, he was inquisitive and loved to learn from people of all ages. He considered each person to be the expert on his or her own life. He was a teacher who respected me, and my response was to eagerly learn from him.

Conversely, I have resisted learning from those who did not honor me, and I know I am not alone in

this. Eventually, the traditional hierarchical “top-down” information flow can create resentment in a student, who may feel that his or her gifts are not valued. The pupil may rebel against the “mentor” until mutual respect is established or the relationship ends.

A mutual mentor relationship is grounded in mutual respect. Building up from this foundation there are certain qualities we expect to observe in our mentors. Insight is one of them. The dictionary describes insight as, “the capacity to discern the true nature of a situation.” Since all of us are awake in different ways, we have wonderful, exciting lessons to offer each other. At their core, kindred spirits are mutual mentors, guiding each other on the path. In such an ideal relationship, we can be equal parts student and teacher.

What if we lived by the principle that everyone has something to teach and something to learn? When you become committed to growth, you enter into multiple mentorships. We need mentors to see all of the different sides of ourselves.

The best friendships bring out virtues in each other using encouragement, praise and support.

*A friend teaches you something
about love and life
that no one else can.*

People who make massive investments in their careers usually succeed. Think of all the work, time, money and professional education that go into such an investment. Sometimes our career choices result in missed opportunities to spend time with family members or do interesting things.

I wonder why so few people make an equal investment in themselves or their important relationships. So many fail to succeed in love and friendship, with severe consequences to their quality of life.

Examine those around you to discover the virtues in which they excel. What have they gleaned from their life experiences? When you meet a new person, try to sense what gifts they might have to offer. What is their perspective? Ask directly if they are aware of any insights they hold that you might benefit from. Ask your friends to teach you how to be a better mentor. Reflect on how each friend, past

or current, has improved your life. Let them know what you have learned from them and how they have impacted your journey.

What are some life insights you have learned from your friends?

Who can you be mutual love mentors with?

Nurturing

I like to go to parties at the homes of my kindred spirits. You never know when you’ll meet a new friend. Diana was having one of her annual Winter Solstice parties. Diana and I had recently become friends, so I was eager to meet those she considered important to her.

A warm glow radiated from the house as I approached. Entering, I noticed a woman in her thirties who seemed interesting. She saw me looking at her, approached and said, “Hi Bob, I am Erica.” I had no idea who she was or how she knew me. She told me that the reason I was unable to guess how I knew her was because the last time we met was thirty years ago, when she was eight. I had been friends with her mother, Ruth, when I first moved to Portland.

I introduced Erica to Maggie, and over the course of the next several months, the three of us became close friends. We enjoyed having adventures together. Erica called one day to ask us for help. She had become very ill and needed support. She had to move out of her apartment due to toxic fumes emanating from the remodeling next door, which contributed to her already poor health. She told us that she did not want to have to try to heal alone. We gladly invited her to come and live with us while she recovered. Even though she was ill and needed attention, she never drained our energy. She gave to us even though she was in need.

One of the things I admire about Erica is her amazing core strength. Even when she was struggling on many levels, she was able to request our help and at the same time respect our right to give what we wanted. She was good at perceiving our

need to not be the only ones taking care of her. The investment she had made over time in her circle of friends meant that others were there when she needed them. Even when she was in terrible pain, she remained sensitive to the needs of others. She consistently communicated her needs in such a manner that we never felt an obligation to fill them. I was thankful for the opportunity to serve her and for the bonding that resulted.

Several months later, when Erica was back in good health, we received a great surprise. For our wedding anniversary, she gave us a gift certificate for dinner and five tall lilies. She wrote a sweet thank you card:

Thanks for your kindness, modeling, love, sharing, snuggles, walks and the space you create for so many of us to learn a better way. I really want to honor you two for holding that vision. You have helped so many lives change.

I love you.

Erica.

We felt deeply appreciated for offering our home as sanctuary.

I asked her, "Erica, how did you become so skilled at balancing nurturing yourself, caring for others and being able to receive nurturing?"

I was fortunate to have consistently caring parents as models. Mom was always encouraging and Dad was there for me whenever I needed his help. They sent me to a special school that provided a nurturing environment where I was exposed to many good people. The teachers were tuned into me and gave me individual attention. In my friendships I create a bond by being caring. So I am direct by offering nurturing early in a relationship. I let my friends know how much I like them. I invite those people into my circle who want emotionally supportive relationships.

My impression of Erica is that she sets a tone of friendship, a welcoming vibration and radiates a warm wave that flows around other. She is a consistent source of nurturing, both personally and professionally. I have had opportunities to see the focused attention she directs towards family, friends and her larger community. Erica is an inspiring teacher when it comes to self-nurturing. She knows that the best way to care for others is to make sure you care for yourself.

From the moment we are born, we need to be nurtured by others to survive and thrive. We all want caring energy to be focused on us, and we never

outgrow the need to be nurtured. To be adults, we need to develop the virtue of caring for our own well-being, in addition to developing the ability to nurture others. The cycle is complete when we establish mutually caring and nourishing relationships. Friendships must be cherished in order to grow. Being sensitive and responsive to our friends' needs is bonding.

To be nurtured, we must admit to ourselves that we have needs. They are frequently buried under "I don't know what I need," or "I don't deserve to be nurtured," or "I'm too old, that's for kids." Sometimes we simply forget to ask for help. We need to make time to care for ourselves and for each other in nurturing ways. This is a conscious commitment that becomes easier with practice.

Following are examples of how some people wish to be nurtured in a variety of forms:

I want to be acknowledged, accepted and appreciated. I desire to be heard, healed and held. I seek people who can nurture my creativity. Just knowing there is someone who cares about me is comforting. Kind words touch me deeply. I find it comforting when a friend makes the effort to be humorous.

I tend to shy away from committed friendships out of fear that I might then be called upon to help. I am stressed and busy, and I feel I have nothing extra to give. Yet I know I will eventually need help from others. I know that the smart thing would be to establish mutually caring relationships before I desperately need them. My self-preservation is linked to preserving friendships.

I am very good at protecting myself from harm: I built this strong, beautiful castle around myself. One day I realized I had isolated myself. I walled myself in so no one could hurt me, but no one could come in to nurture me, either. I am now learning to selectively lower my draw-bridge.

I am a family doctor at a busy city clinic and I enjoy caring for my patients all day long. I have a great support staff. But when I get home, I have the unreal expectation that my partner should be there to take care of me. The more I demanded, the more resistant he became. We have both worked hard to become better at taking care of ourselves and each other.

I promise that I will take time to understand your needs and my needs.

Let's Pretend

One night there was a soft knock on the door. My friend Cindy stood on the porch. I hadn't seen her for months. She looked a little sad and lonely. "Hi, I want to pretend I'm five years old," she said.

The look on her face and the sound of her voice expressed the intensity of her need. I led Cindy to the guest bedroom and gave her stuffed animals to play with. I explained to my son Adryan that a friend was here and needed our help. "She wants to be treated like a kid. Would you play with her?" I asked him. Adryan went to his room and emerged with an armload of toys and books.

The two of them played for hours and giggles spilled from the room. At one point, I peeked in and my son was reading Cindy a story. The two of them cuddled like puppies until they fell asleep. Cindy woke up later, thanked me and went on her way.

Request to be nurtured by a close friend. Be clear about the length of time you need, how you want to be nurtured and, like my friend Cindy, what age you want to be. If he or she declines, ask another friend. You needn't be dependent on just one person to meet all of your needs on demand.

Review your personal history. How and by whom were you nurtured from day one until now? Can you recall their names and relationships to you? What did their faces look like? Let the feelings evoked by memory spread the throughout your body.

Unsatisfied needs for nurturing from your childhood can leave you constantly dependent upon others to take care of you. Your awareness of your past will be helpful in determining how you might want to change so your future is brighter. In what areas of your life would you like to receive more nurturing? Are you able to receive nurturing, or do you have to be in a crisis to ask for support? Ask your friends to assist you in nurturing your unmet needs.

When were times you yearned for care?

How do you currently nurture those you are related to?

What forms of nurturing are you receptive to?

How can you become an expert at nurturing yourself?

How many nights a week do you climb into bed wishing you had received or given more nurturing?

To whom do you want to give more nurturing?

Ask your friends how they wish to be nurtured by you. A good question to ask is, "How does this friend want me to be attentive to their needs now?" Explore how you two can create a mutually nurturing relationship. Discuss how you are nurturing in sexual and non-sexual relationships.

Openness

While on a business flight to Los Angeles, I was assigned a middle seat between two other travelers already in place. The woman in the aisle seat stood up to allow me to enter. Her eyes were downcast and her demeanor was like a fence post with multiple signs nailed to it: Do Not Disturb. Keep Out. Enter at Own Risk. She made no room for my elbow on our adjoining arm rest. "I was here first" seemed to be her attitude.

Once buckled up I turned to look out the window and was welcomed by a Japanese woman. Her eyes signaled openness. I was greeted with a warm hello. I meant to only make a quick glance at her face, but my eyes lingered for a visit. I started to pull back, not wanting to stare, but she held my gaze. I felt an attraction to this total stranger. Her warmth contrasted sharply to the person on my left.

The beauty of her outer and inner radiance captivated me. Her bone structure formed strong cheeks and waves of gentleness emanated from all the curves. Our experience shapes our life and our life carves our face. A person's life story is etched onto their face.

She made a couple of opening remarks and I sensed her desire to be friendly. She noticed the kindred spirit T-shirt I was wearing and her expression indicated that the term had some meaning to her. She questioned me about its significance. Since I am usually the inquisitive one, this was a happy chance meeting indeed. Slowly and respectfully she asked me to describe in detail everything that I knew about love and friendship. She was sensitive and kept checking to see if she was being too nosy, but this was much more than polite conversation with someone I would never see again. She was interested in getting to know me and skilled at inviting me to be equally open with her.

When I asked her if I could interview her for my book, a nod of confirmation followed. "Do you have kindred spirits?" I asked.

"Yes, I see them regularly." She obviously had a story to tell. She lived alone, every day walking up the hill to her local community center to visit her friends. One thing I learned about doing interviews is that when I invited someone to share their story, I had to be prepared to listen for a while. I heard about a number of close friendships she had developed over the years.

We could feel our connection deepen by our sharing. She was so engaging that time flew by at least as fast as the aircraft we were riding in. As the plane made its final approach, I could tell that my neighbor on the left side had been listening to our exchange. There was even a little smile hovering on her face.

"I am on my annual trip to Los Angeles to see my family. Would you like to meet them? They will be waiting at the airport," the Japanese woman offered. Stepping off the plane, she held my hand as we approached the gate. I said, "Don't you think this is a little early to be taking me home to meet the family?" All of her living relatives were waiting in the lobby to greet her. The youngest of her great-grandchildren had the honor of presenting great grandma with flowers.

I was introduced to the family as her new kindred spirit. When she gave me a big hug good-bye, the faces of her family members registered shock. Was Grandma picking up strange men on the airplane?

Our openness makes us whole.

Beverly and Howard were high school sweethearts and married a year after graduation. As a couple, they had many good friends with whom they'd grown up in their neighborhood. After five years together, they decided that they wanted to move to the Northwest and start a new life. They had been living and working in Portland for 18 months but were having difficulty making friends. They realized they would need to learn special skills to create friendships. They wanted to learn to be more outgoing and understood it was going to take practice.

Beverly:

I would describe myself as a window that has been painted shut for many years. I am not going to be opened easily. I think in the past people noticed how stuck I was and gave up struggling and trying to connect with me. I don't want to feel shut down. It's time to be open and let some fresh air in.

Howard:

I am like my pet turtle from when I was a kid; I only stick my head out when I think it is safe.

The plan I suggested to them was to watch the people where they worked, noting which ones they considered open, and how they behaved. At night, their homework was to discuss what they had observed. The next day, Beverly and Howard would practice the traits of those people who were open. Progress was slow and embarrassing at first. "Fake it until you make it" was what kept them from being judgmental. They pretended that they were actors in a play.

Beverly:

I began by observing how people talked to each other. I used my natural curiosity and began inviting people to open up to me. People slowly began to find me easy to talk to and noticed that I was good at listening and supportive. The hardest part for me was taking the initiative. I learned that a good first step is to find out what is important to the other person. As I feel safer, I can let them know me. We began to form a bond and our lives started to intermingle. There is one person at work who is like a store that is open all the time. I am much more selective, with limited hours and days off, but at least I'm open.

Openness is a virtue that invites good things to happen.

Observe how your level of openness changes at times with different people. Ask, "Is it safe to be open with this person?" We hold ourselves back by holding our breath in, especially when we are tense or frightened. When we are tense, others sense it and tend to find us less approachable. Notice when you hold your breath. To reopen, slowly fill yourself up; breathe in and out, deeply. Breath is life. Open up to it.

The truth is, you want better friendships ... so be receptive to great people becoming your friends. The way to do that is to be open to different friendship styles. Start by examining your ideas about friendship. How do you stop yourself from the love you deserve? We are responsible for the limits we place on love. Say out loud, "I deserve love and friends!" Listen for a response from within.

Passion

I asked my friend Frank, someone I've known for 30 years, to comment on the topic of passion:

I am passionate about food, music, books, art and my family. I am excited to find out who I am, opening to my deeper self and how I can grow. I strive to be the best person I can be. I know what makes me feel passionate, vital, creative, alive and juicy. I give my passions the highest priority. I need to be ever watchful for what drains my passion. I love my work but I can focus too much on my career. Most of my passions are high energy. I have a quiet passion for being alone in nature.

When I follow my passions, I find passionate friends. For a long time I have fostered a strong desire to enter into mutually caring, passionate friendships. We laugh and cry together. We are passionate people in everything we do; our energy sizzles.

I used to think that the only way I could find fulfillment was to find a partner. Boy, was I wrong! I now have so many different kinds of friendships filled with love, fierce devotion, intense bonding and fervent respect. I now have what I want: playfulness, closeness, affection, support, healthy feedback, time for others and emotional connections. Each of my friends brings a diverse collection of qualities to the relationship.

My current romantic relationship is multi-dimensional. We plan great adventures together and make time for listening and bonding. We love each other deeply and passionately. We are intensely in love without being love-sick. We include our circles of friends in our joy. If we decide to declare our relationship as mates, our friends will celebrate with enthusiasm. They will continue to be a major part of our lives, for as long as we live.

I have needed to redefine the term "passion" to include not only the emotional but the rational self as well.

I bring balance and safety to my passions, with head and heart both fully engaged. One without the other spells trouble. I need profound emotions and extensive intellect to live at this level of intensity and intimacy. I seek to be totally conscious. Being loving sums up my passion.

I composed this poem as a way of expressing how I wished to be passionate:

Passion Fire

*Stoke the fire from the inside.
Dance in the heat and the light.
Take responsibility for your passion.
Become the fire.
Do not wait for someone to light
the fire for you.
Stop sitting home alone in the dark,
hiding your light.
Nothing is stopping you, except you.
Get out of your own way.*

*Burn away the things that dampen your flame!
Burn down the walls that separate
you from others.
Burn the past, if it holds you back.
Burn your fear.
Burn anything that gets in your way.
Burn everything that is not in alignment
with who you are.*

*Feel your passion burning within.
Others will gather to warm themselves
at your flame.
They know that your brightness in no
way diminishes theirs.
They will feed your flames and you will be
fuel for theirs.
Fan their passions with your passions.*

*Love is the fire.
Keep the fires burning.
Brighten the path for others to follow.*

*Set your life on fire.
Seek those who fan your flame!*

Q

I wondered what virtue would start with the letter Q. I decided to have fun using words that began with Q to represent the “Q” factor. These examples are some of the qualities needed for deep friendship as well as some traits that can cause problems. Be committed to finding yourself and to make it your mission to be the best friend possible on the quest.

Know how to quench your thirst for love and friendship.

Ask the tough questions. Be inquisitive, request more information, investigate, call for answers, seek knowledge, be uncertain, allow for doubt, suspend judgment and consider new ways of being, rather than assuming you know what someone means.

Quiz continuously. Make sure you are going in the right direction.

Query even with a vaguely formulated purpose, to extract what is of value, to distill to the essence, to open a discussion, to challenge, to test, to do an analysis, to persist until the answer is found, to see where one person’s truth leads and to reveal character. Query how each person in your life could be a rich concentrated source of friendship that can be extracted and applied effectively.

Reveal the quintessential essence of your being.

Examine if you have a quota that limits the love and laughter you deserve.

Discover which qualities constitute your stature.

Explore the qualifications, traits, resources, core values and attributes a potential new friend might possess.

Measure the quantity of a person, to see if they are qualified to be a good friend.

Even the best of friends will quarrel, squabble like children and have heated verbal clashes. When one is in a foul mood, we are more likely to quibble over insignificant things. Friends can come to their senses after a brief spat, take responsibility for overreacting to trivial stuff, admit to being the one who instigated the feud, promise to avoid being quarrelsome and move forward without serious consequences. Sometimes when I am in a bad mood, I choose to quarantine myself. This limits the damage by preventing the spread of the illness.

It is important be watchful so that a quasi-relationship is not used to maintain the illusion of friendship. Determine if this relationship imitates a real one but does not quite qualify. Sometimes people act friendly just to get what they want. When you have qualms about the authenticity of a relationship, heed your feelings of uneasiness rather than quash them. We need to trust that there is always some truth to one’s fears. It is healthy to scrutinize the rightness of a person’s behavior rather than quell the possibility of a betrayal. When you find yourself in a quandary about someone’s behavior, ask, “Are my scruples being compromised? Is this person a quack? Am I allowing the deception?”

Before you know it, you can find yourself in a quagmire, sinking up to your shins, bogged down, struggling for a way to get free of a bad relationship. You are queasy and apprehensive just at the thought of seeing this person again. You have an internal debate, “Do I quit being their friend when things get difficult and abruptly leave without closure, or do I not quit and stay in the relationship to work out our problems?”

I like being in relationships where the other person is quick and unhesitating rather than waiting for me to do the initiation. Being quick also includes being able to respond rapidly to change, acting fast while being agile, learning new skills, adapting swiftly, moving forward when an opening appears and accelerating rather than riding the brakes. I prefer to be around those who are quick-witted rather than quick-tempered.

I enjoy quipping and engaging in friendly banter. It takes a high level of skill to build jokes that each person can add to, with levity that isn’t sarcastic and to be a keen observer whose jesting puts life in perspective. My eccentric friends have a multitude of quirks that provide a twisted look at the ordinary world.

One of the greatest thrills is when I experience a quickening as I meet a new friend and know that we will foster growth in each other. This sudden arousal causes me to quiver and quake with emotions. Just thinking about the fun we will have. I also enjoy the kind of friend that I can be quiet with, who values silence, who is unruffled in chaos and who, when surrounded by confusion, finds tranquility. A good friend is like a quilt that keeps you warm and comforted.

Respect

Recall a time when you were honored for one of your strengths. When someone pays you respect, they are making an effort to let you know that they value you. We glow in the dark when we are treated with respect. Keeping commitments, showing empathy, being honest and treating others with kindness—all are ways of showing respect. Because the virtue of respect is so intimately linked to the other virtues, the level of respect determines the quality of the love.

If you do not have the kind of friendships you want, begin to look at the quality of the friendship you have with yourself. Respect for yourself is one of the hardest qualities to acquire, but is the key to the successful quest. As you increase your self-respect, the ways you respect others also expands. When you have a high level of self-respect, you can reliably expect to be treated with regard.

Respect is a cherished expression of love.

Because I value respect, the challenge is to not be defensive when I feel that someone is acting in a disrespectful manner. Many negative feelings are activated when I am treated disrespectfully. The dynamics are complex, but basically it comes to this: I want my values respected even when they are not in alignment with someone else's. We can have conflicting opinions without being in conflict.

The person who I feel is being disrespectful of me may express themselves inappropriately. Even so, there might be some truth in what they say. I find it useful to ask myself, "Have I done anything that has promoted being treated this way?" If the answer is yes, then I ask, "How can I clean up my act?"

At the same time, I need to protect myself from someone who is upset and just trying to draw me into his or her drama. Asking, "What is their level of

self respect?" helps me to engage my rational mind when my emotions run away with me. People who abuse themselves will likely try to treat me in a similar way if I let them. The trick is not to be triggered by someone who has a lower level of self-respect than me. When I am able to recognize this dynamic, I am less likely to get hooked and feel disrespected.

During an encounter in which I don't like the way someone is treating me, it is often the case that they are feeling bad and are invested in making me feel bad too. I resist the urge to retaliate with a nasty comment. If they can manipulate me into being disrespectful towards them then, in a perverse way, they have proof that I am a bad person and somehow they were justified in being rude to me in the first place. I do not wish to be dragged down to such a level. I am increasingly less willing to be in relationship with people who are not working toward improving their levels of self-respect and respect towards others.

Respect for the Relationship

What is important to you? Whatever it is, you naturally want respect for what you value. The more intimate you become with your friends, the greater the need for an increased level of respect. You want to know that they can care about themselves and you at the same time, and that before they act, they will take your feelings into consideration.

It is our birthright to be treated with consideration. Earning deeper levels of respect beyond this base is dependent on one's actions being grounded in integrity. There is a need to re-inspect the relationship on a regular basis, to see if there are behaviors that are causing the level of respect to drop.

Acceptance is not permission to be a jerk. Some people falsely believe if you truly love them, you must take them the way they are. Any action you take that they interpret to be a desire to change them is seen as disrespectful and they assume a defensive posture. Such resistance demonstrates their failure to understand that entering into relationship is the most powerful means of personal transformation.

A relationship is a living thing that needs to grow or it will die. An agreement to love implies a willingness to grow. The goal is to be true to ourselves, and also to grow and change.

With respect, we accept our friends for who they are, just as we know how to accept ourselves as we are. We are only caught in our own projections when we see our friends as we want them to be rather than who they are. With respect, we see that

there is no need to change the other person. We can be thrilled that our friends are different.

Disagree or Disrespect

It is easy to respect someone who does something that you admire, or who agrees with you. However it is rare that two people's priorities match up and remain in perfect alignment. The challenge heats up when you must act in a respectful manner toward someone close to you who is doing something contrary to your beliefs. Kindred spirits are intimately involved, so differences are more evident than they would be with casual friends. To respectfully disagree is not easy for us humans. To hold one or more different opinions with respect taxes our flexibility. The greater the frequency of interactions, the greater the need to be respectful of the differences. For deep bonds to form, respect and forgiveness are essential.

My intention is to respect a friend even when I have trouble understanding them. We must accept both the ways our paths are parallel and the ways they differ. I require respect for my right to be different. I want a friend to respect me even when he or she does not like certain actions of mine. I like having the kind of friends who will let me know if they feel I have been disrespectful.

When someone I care about and who cares about me makes a mistake, I am able to forgive. But I find it hard to respect someone who is constantly disrespectful of me. At the end of the day, in such cases, they have the right to be themselves and I have the right to stay away from them.

Respect also means refraining from unfair judgement when there is a difference of opinion. When we mutually respect each other, we realize there is often no right or wrong, just different opinions: we are free to be ourselves without fear. Listening to our friend's point of view does not necessarily mean we agree. When a friend listens with respect during a disagreement, we feel great, because we feel heard. There may be areas in which we strongly disagree, but we don't become disagreeable toward each other. Your warning light should come on if friends never disagree with you. Either they are afraid of your response, they are not expressing their feelings honestly or they do not have enough respect for you to exert the energy. Being too agreeable to take a stand weakens the connection.

I mean no disrespect, but I do not like this about you. I care enough about you and our relationship to speak up and voice my opinion.

This is difficult to say and can be hard to hear, but true friends are willing to risk speaking the truth as they see it. Instead of avoiding areas of conflict, good friends learn skills in conflict resolution and prevention.

Seek friends who help you see past your blind spots.

Debate or Discussion

I vividly remember the expression on my high school teacher's face when I disagreed with him on a point of theology. He tried to convince me that I was wrong because he was a Christian Brother and a religious scholar. When I repeated that the principles upon which I had based my opinion were sound, he tried to pressure me to give in by showing me that every student in the class agreed with him, so he must be right. When I said that just because I was outnumbered forty to one did not mean that I was wrong, he dismissed my point of view and went on with the lesson.

To his credit, two weeks later Brother Williams apologized to me in front of the class and admitted that I was right and that he had been wrong. He had taken the time to consult with Rome regarding the official stance on the topic of the debate, and was informed that my position was correct. He explained that he had made an error in his thinking. "Either I am right or I am wrong, and since I do not like being wrong then you must be wrong." He also said he was wrong for the way he treated me. A strong bond formed between us that we enjoyed during our years at school together.

Quite often, disrespect is unintended. I pay attention to the intentions behind a person's words and actions. When a friend acts in a way that I think is disrespectful, I try to determine if that person made an innocent mistake or if the behavior was a result of not caring about my needs. Most of the time when

I feel that someone has been disrespectful, I find, upon closer examination, they were unconscious of their actions and unaware of the effect on me.

It is my responsibility not to be easily offended. When I feel mistreated, I try to step back to see if it is in any way due to a misunderstanding on my part. I am responsible for how I feel and I am learning not to blame others for my unhappiness. As we have seen, even when someone acts in a disrespectful way it doesn't mean I have to feel disrespected. The higher the other person's level of distress, the greater likelihood they will act in an unconscious or disrespectful way. This doesn't excuse the behavior, but I do take into consideration the person's state of mind. The better I become at establishing guidelines for the ways I do and do not want to be treated, the better most people treat me.

Like many other well-meaning people, I have always wanted to please people, to be nice. This has been misunderstood as weakness by some who think it gives them license to take advantage of me. Such people never seem to change their behavior, no matter what I say or do. As I have learned self-respect I no longer let them hurt me. Though I have compassion for those who try to hurt me, knowing that likely they were hurt by others, I don't have to take what they dish out. I act to prevent reoccurrences. I ask myself: What action best serves me and is most effective with others?

How can you increase your self-respect?

Support

Maggie and I dance at a studio a couple of times a week. Over the course of many years, we have formed dozens of great friendships with our fellow dancers. One night, I went to class feeling sad because of the tension I was having with a friend. Five of my male friends noticed my distress and gave me a hug. I did not even need to ask for their support. Their infusion of energy was uplifting and sincere. Such sharing and support has been a much-needed addition to my life.

Frequently, the test of friendship involves questions like, Who could you call in the middle of the night for help? If you were in the hospital, who would come to visit you regularly? Who would you help in a financial crisis?

To be well, we need social support. Friends provide mutual sanctuary during difficult times. When one of our community is in need, calls of love and offers to help flow in. Injury and illness, relationship and parenting challenges: these do not have to be handled alone. We need support during the beginnings and endings of relationships. Friends provide a perspective on events different than our own or our partner's. Our kindred spirit group has overcome major obstacles to reach the point of healing and growth. I am impressed with their commitment to love.

Being skilled at the virtue of support means being able to exchange assistance, encouragement and caring. The better we care for each other, the larger overflow we have to give to our community in the form of service. Friendship by definition means that the support is mutual and comes in a variety of forms. One person may place a premium on assistance during a time of need, while the other friend wants to celebrate the good times. Some people want friends who are dependable and loyal, while others seek guidance. We all need a gentle push when we get stuck, a reminder to stretch to become a better person. Friends can help us rediscover who we are when we get lost.

True mastery of support is one's ability to be supportive of self.

I lost my daughter in a horrible accident. I was so confused, I didn't even know what I needed. I have a great husband who was equally invested and took the blame for what was unavoidable. Thank heaven I have good friends who are reliable! I was in need of emotional first aid and they helped me learn how I wanted to be nurtured. They comforted me as I grieved. I would need support over a long time. My support team arranged a schedule, taking turns coming to my house to hold me in the early morning and evening. I would have died of grief without them.

Everyone experiences a multitude of tragedies. No one knows when or what will strike but we know with certainty that disaster will occur. Be prepared by letting your friends know that you will be there when they need you. We do not have to suffer and struggle alone.

Have you ever helped a small child learn to walk? Their little hands hold onto a finger from each of your hands. With your support, they gleefully step forward. After a few steps, they attempt to walk on their own. This is a perfect metaphor for all of us. Exceptional help from a larger group is essential for us to continue to learn and grow. We may feel growing pains as we are stretched to our edges and beyond. Sometimes, when fears arise, we may stumble and fall. All the while, it is important to keep increasing our support along the way, looking for fingers to hold. Offering help means giving each other the strength to keep moving forward. When we lend our hearts, we will get back the support we need with interest. "I will support you in the ways you need and you will do the same for me."

Offering support doesn't mean you have to promise more than is within your means. If you overcommit, feelings of obligation can cause resentment. You also need to respect a friend's option to give or not to give support. Let friends who offer know how you wish to be supported, then ask what they might be willing and able to give. Support can never be forced. You know when you are being pressured to give more than you want. The best strategy is to have several supportive friends, so if you are ever in a crisis you will not overburden any one caregiver.

There is a symbiotic and synergistic interplay of energy between friends.

Kindred spirit relationships are symbiotic intimate unions that are mutually beneficial. We take care of our needs in ways that respect our friends' needs. Synergy means the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The more we give, the more we have. The energy between friends is multiplied when the support is mutual. The more support I give the more I receive.

Gather your friends and ask them to support your dreams. Big dreams require big support.

Are you better at giving or receiving support?

Trust

During a presentation on friendship, I asked, "What is an essential quality that you expect to have in any close relationship?" Following are a few of the responses the audience gave when defining trust:

A commitment to making and keeping agreements.

To be considerate of one another's feelings.

Integrity.

Having confidence in others' intentions.

Cares for my well-being.

Confidentiality

When you ask kids, "Can you keep a secret?", they always respond in the affirmative because they want to hear the secret. But nine times out of ten, they will tell the next person who comes along. When we become teens, we start to reveal the delicate details of our lives. When we discover that our intimate feelings have been blabbed and we're being laughed at, it's devastating. At some point, we begin to minimize communication to protect ourselves.

I learned not to trust anyone by the time I was twenty-two. I was unable to even begin a meaningful relationship. Now as an adult in my thirties I selectively learn whom I can trust, instead of not trusting anyone. My feelings are labeled: "Precious, handle with care." I want to share my inner world and not be ridiculed.

A cause of many upsets over broken confidences is differences in standards. Say one person shares sensitive information with a second person and asks that it not be repeated. But later the information is told to a third person who is asked not to repeat the private information. The mistake is in believing that if this third person keeps the secret, then the original person will never find out and there will be no problem. Only the secret's owner has the right to decide if they want anyone else to know. What is said in confidence is not for the public domain.

Often people repeat private information to me about another, and I challenge them if they should be sharing this with me. "Did they give you permission to say this to me?" If the answer is no, then I ask them to stop. The problem often starts when someone is tempted to share someone's secret because they will get attention from the person they are talking to. When I hear someone sharing things with me about another that sound private, I naturally become cautious about sharing anything of a personal nature with them. Before I confide, I ask myself if they can be trusted with this kind of information.

My policy is not to say anything about anyone unless I have that person's permission. Because I hold confidences well, I am trusted. Even when I do have permission to share what someone has revealed to me, I am reluctant to pass on second-hand information. Everyone speaks through their own filters, and I could distort the facts.

Some people will request that you never share even minor details about them with others. "My private life is private. If someone wants to find out something, then I suggest they talk to me directly." Another person might feel comfortable about anything being revealed about them: thus, the problem of different standards. The rule is to use the other's standard of confidentiality when speaking to others. Sometimes it is hard to remember what is okay to say about who to whom!

The ability to keep confidences fosters trust.

Breaking confidence can destroy an important friendship in one stroke. When a confidence is betrayed, the person is seldom aware of the level of

pain that they cause the other individual and the relationship. "I trusted you, and you betrayed me! I will never open to you again."

We share confidences with those people we know from experience that we can trust. At a conference, I posed the question, "How do you restore trust when it is broken?" A woman in her late eighties stood up and shared her wisdom:

At my age, friendships are critical. Many of my friends have died but that cannot be helped. A broken trust can kill a friendship as quickly as a heart attack. I try to prevent the loss of any friendship due to ill feelings. I decide if there is a mutual desire to rebuild the friendship and if there is, then we both have to clear up any misunderstandings. We both need to look at our responsibility for the problem. Sometimes my friend is totally responsible. In some cases, I am equally responsible for the broken trust. I am more forgiving than I was when I was younger. I also have become better at selecting friends who learn from their mistakes. Asking for forgiveness restores trust.

A Sacred Trust

Trust begins by diligently working to become trustworthy to ourselves. This means taking care of ourselves—physically, emotionally and spiritually. Trust involves making and keeping agreements with ourselves to nurture the development of our virtues.

From self, trust moves out to include others. Often a friend is defined as someone in whom you have complete trust. Of course, the truth is that no one is entirely dependable, for there will always be differences between our words and actions. We learn to give a level of trust while living with the knowledge that humans are reliably fallible. The longer we know someone and the more positive experiences we have had together, the deeper our trust can be.

"Is my trust well-placed?" Starting with a basic level of trust for a new friend, I only give more trust as they earn it. In this way, I am being responsible to my needs.

Keeping agreements builds trust.

There is an alignment of promise and action. It should go without saying that one never expects a friend to do something that would violate his or her integrity.

If you loaned me money, my top priority would be to repay you as soon as possible. I would stay in communication so that you do not have to remind me about our contract. When payments were due, I would pay them or find a different way that honored our arrangement.

Several times when I have loaned money to people, disaster ensued. They treated me one way when they needed money, and in a different way when they owed me money. What was the pattern? I was obviously missing something. My mistake was in trusting them to behave the way I do. When I studied their history, it was clear that trusting them with a loan was misplaced and I should have known that. When they violated the agreement, I was partially responsible for the problem.

Trust needs to be based in reality.

We need to know our friends and the ways that they can be trusted. Learn to be selective about whom you trust, but you must not allow broken promises to stop you from seeking the friendships you desire.

Seek friends who you can trust to be truthful with you even when it is hard. To be with someone you can trust is one of the best feelings in the world. To know that they will act in a conscious manner provides safety and freedom.

Are they honest with themselves?

Do they claim responsibility for their mistakes?

Do they follow through on commitments?

Can I handle it if they do not keep their agreements?

Are there any broken promises that need to be addressed and healed so trust can be restored?

The Archway of Trust

A kindred spirit relationship is constructed like a stone archway. A stable foundation must be in place to support the structure. The two separate, vertical columns represent individuals seeking to build a relationship. Each person brings their virtues, the hand-carved rectangular stones that are used to assemble the right and left sides of the archway. A straight top doorway functions well enough, but the beauty of a curved entrance is worth the extra effort.

Several carefully curved wedge-shaped stones are placed on top of the two upright, independent columns. The arch is formed when both individuals are willing to do the customizing work of becoming interdependent. Here is where they begin to trust that they will reach out and meet in the middle. In order to connect, they must build an archway to span their separateness.

The virtue of trust is the keystone that must be carved for the connection to be complete. When the final keystone is in place, there is an "us" in the word trust. Once trust is firmly in place, the relationship may be permanent. The archway of trust functions because of the balanced dynamic tension when two individuals bridge the gap by providing mutual support. We welcome the openness of an archway.

Lack of a certain virtue or a weakness in just one person can cause the collapse of the arch. Without trust, even a good relationship can fall apart when any stress is placed upon it. Both partners need to inspect the archway for cracks that, if left unattended, could destabilize the connection.

Trust is the supportive arch of friendship and the gateway through which we enter each other's hearts. Trust is a small word, but it carries a lot of weight. Indeed, there can be no friendship without trust.

Understanding

Understand yourself. To know yourself is to be aware of what is true for you. Seeing yourself clearly allows you to show others honestly who you are. When you know your shortcomings and where you excel, you have obtained an understanding that is complete. This knowledge will help you choose wisely in your relationships.

When you know why you act the way you do, it is easier to be patient, sympathetic and accepting of yourself. When you understand yourself, you will be better able to understand others.

The art of friendship is teaching your friends to be sensitive to who you are. Friendships take time—time to understand, time to think, time to reason and time to focus attention. One thing my long-term kindred spirits have in common is that they have done the work to truly understand themselves and have made the effort to understand me. The basis for empathy is understanding. The level of energy needed to sustain this type of mental power requires commitment.

I am a complex person. Understanding just one facet isn't enough. I have devoted a lot of energy to understanding who I am, and I am interested in being with those who know themselves to a similar depth. I like being transparent and trading personal histories. We all need to become better teachers to those who are eager to learn about us.

I use the image of a code book to help me understand a person's language. We attempt to communicate who we are with words, but words are simply symbols. Each word a person uses to describe themselves has meaning based on their individual experiences. The same sentence heard by two different people can have radically different meanings.

Who a person is cannot be expressed by words alone. Understanding involves all of your senses. Sense behind the words. See what a person's actions say. Listen to what is unspoken. Feel what they are communicating. Taste the delicate nuances of their message. Be touched at the core by their presence.

*When there are no words
listen carefully to me.*

To be understood is to be valued. A willingness to understand is a sign of openness and intimacy. However, never assume you completely know a friend, because this leaves no room for growth. Leave space for the unknown. Just as you are exploring the reaches of your inner self, so are you entering into the world of your friend. Offering understanding to a friend is a great gift that deepens the bond between the two of you. Understanding means to stand under, stand beside and stand inside.

Misunderstandings have the potential to tear the fabric of a good friendship apart. The story below is a classic example of the dynamics that can happen between pals or partners.

Maggie and I were invited to a house warming-party of some new friends. The gathering was a festive affair and we enjoyed meeting their friends. We were pleasantly surprised to see our long-term friends Jason and Cindy at this party. We had a couple of short conversations with them throughout the evening.

The next day we were shocked to receive a call from them expressing how upset they were at us for ignoring them at the party. They said they were hurt and wanted distance from us.

I felt that I had been convicted, sentenced and banished with no chance to defend myself. I was being punished for something I did not do. There was no impartial judge or a jury of my peers to issue such a verdict.

Feeling unjustly treated, rejected and wronged, my first reaction was to say "To hell with them!" Later on I was able to consider that maybe the way I was being treated was just a sign of their distress. I decided that I needed to engage the virtues of trust and understanding. I made a commitment to stay open to them for as long as it took.

All four of us were at the exact same event but each of us had an extremely different experience of the same evening. There were many interpretations of what had happened. Maggie and I felt that their interpretation of our actions differed vastly from our intention. I pondered what factors might be affecting how they viewed our behavior.

I was confused, but honored their request for no contact, and so, for the next several months, I didn't call. When we were at the same social functions, I was polite to them and wished them well. I wanted to get our friendship back on track. I maintained consistent warmth towards them so that there would be no confusion about my interest in healing our relationship. I hoped by giving them space they would come around.

Vision

At one point, I decided to review the videotape my mind made of the whole evening. I played back the recording to refresh my memory of what happened. The next time through I would mentally freeze the frames that included Jason and Cindy. When I filtered out the sounds of the party and zoomed in on them I could see past the smiles on their masks. I had missed that they were clearly upset because I was totally engaged with other people. Jason and Cindy expected that we would spend some time together but they did not say so at the time.

I then remembered the last time we talked. They'd shared that they were in great distress regarding health problems with parents, and that their kids were having troubles in school. I'd forgotten to check in on how they were doing during the party.

I saw Jason at a meeting and his energy seemed to have shifted a bit, so I took a chance and invited him for a walk. Being in the fresh air helps broaden one's perspective. Exercise increases the blood flow to the brain and stimulates fresh thinking. I apologized for any part I had in the misunderstanding. I told him how I'd missed him. I said that I loved him and I hoped we could be friends again. He said something had healed in him and that he too was open to starting over again.

I never will totally figure out what happened that evening. Jason and I agreed we were not at our best. With any long-term friendship there will always be misunderstanding. What matters is how you individually and collectively deal with those difficulties. I believe because we both had a deep understanding of ourselves, we were able to avoid a tragedy. The realization that we both share responsibility for the misunderstanding allowed resolution to be achieved and trust to rebuild. I love this man and cherish our relationship. I am proud of both of us for the caring we have for each other. We have been rewarded for our work by the fun we've had together since. I check in with Jason regularly to see how he is doing.

What does love and friendship mean to your friends?

How does your history affect you and your present relationships? Why are you feeling this way?

A vision of what we want allows us to take the first step. Each step forward allows us to see the next step, and the next. One insight leads to another until the path is revealed before us. Vision gives us a framework to find direction and remain focused on what is important. What is the best use of our talents, time, energy and money? Friends help us to clarify our purpose by reflecting back to us. There are many distractions that can lead us off course. Though side trips are of value, returning to our vision keeps us on track. Close your eyes to see what is important. Guides will appear.

I recall the times when I have been in the presence of people who were infused with vision. They were role models who dedicated their life to a focused pursuit. They were sailboats with charted courses, harnessing the power of the wind to reach their destination, balancing seriousness and lightheartedness with equal weight. They were doing more than just making a living—they were making a life. Fortunately for us all, the skills they learned, anyone can acquire.

In my youth I was like a leaf blowing in the wind. The men and women of vision whom I met along the way stirred me to closely examine the meaning of my existence. "I will do my best and forget about the rest" became my refrain.

*Without vision we stumble
in the dark.*

As I grow older my eyesight slowly deteriorates. My consolation is that my vision of who I am improves. Being clear, sharpening my insights and seeing the big picture becomes increasingly important. This focused insight then begins to raise the right questions and issues; for instance, why do humans exhaust so many resources on worthless endeavors while crucial issues like the welfare of our children are overlooked? There are an infinite number of valuable projects in which to invest our time

and energy. There are many problems that need our attention. The nightly news would depress me if I did not have a vision of how I want the world to be. I believe that the vast majority of human suffering is caused by a lack of love, so the only real solution is obvious.

A New Season

The first twenty-five years of my life seemed like spring and the second twenty-five were a beautiful, hot summer. Just as one can perceive the subtle changes that signal the approach of fall, I feel the change of seasons in my body. Once again I feel an intensity of new feelings that are beyond words, stirrings that I could not have felt last summer. I am restless and curious to discover what this fall season will be like. During this season of my life, who am I becoming? Fall requires a course adjustment, a questioning of everything. I am not settling down, nor will I ever retire from the quest. The landscape is new, the ground uncertain. I can tell I am on the verge of fresh insights and realizations. My writing has changed me and I am seven years older than when I started on this book. What feeds my spirit changes as I change.

I take a step forward, turn a corner and see the next stage of the journey. I have learned to trust that even if I cannot see anyone else going in the direction I am headed, I nevertheless continue on to where I am drawn to go. I also realize that I can only go so far on my own. I have a renewed commitment to structure my life so that I can be together with those I care about. I am constantly on the lookout for those who want to travel with me for a while.

A Whisper on the Wind

*A quickening,
new feelings, images, stirrings.
Turning towards the sounds
faint in the distance,
now seems close, enticing.
Maybe just a trick of the wind.
I turn my head just so
and the wind shifts,
the whisper fades in and out,
other sounds drown the voices out.*

*I cannot make out the words.
Maybe a new language;
feel it.
Not to be named.
I am having so many emotions that
there are no words for.*

*My spirit is calling,
"come out, come out come out
where ever you are,"
like the kids' game.
Time to stop hiding.
But where am I?
I found myself.
Now I need to lose myself.*

*The voices are compelling.
No sound that any ear could hear;
a pure vibration.
Give me your full attention they say,
now forget about everything else.*

*Open to love.
Now open more.
Are the voices from the inside,
outside or both?
I am not the only one who hears them.
Trust the beginning of an adventure;
a new kind of awakening,
ancestors are calling.
The future is calling.*

Awareness to Action

Choose your way wisely so you do not wander randomly. Dreams come true when we are focused. Our world is now too complex for one person to see the whole dream. We need the sight of the young to see the details, and the wisdom of the seniors for their perspective. We all need to expand our view to a global vision of the future.

Your vision may begin by asking the simple question: "What kind of loving person do I want to be?" The process of creating a vision can be transformative. Many people develop a personal mission statement that helps them to align their life with their highest purpose. When we are clear, the universe will send us the resources we need to move to the next step.

*When vision is clear,
the goal is in sight.*

Create a long-term vision for yourself. Try envisioning yourself one year, five, ten, twenty, thirty years from now. Allow your imagination to take you there. Sharpen your instincts to see how your actions affect the present and the future. This vision needs relentless commitment for implementation to be effective. Create an individual plan to put your awareness into action.

What do you strongly believe in?

What will you devote yourself to?

By what standard will you measure your choices?

How will you align your life with your vision?

Wisdom

Wisdom is more than raw intellectual power. Wisdom is to follow the soundest course of action, based on the combination of our feelings, experience, knowledge and good judgment. What begins as an insight is reflected upon and expanded. Wisdom takes common sense to a prophetic level. The foundation of other qualities like vision and understanding build the skill base to reach the virtue of wisdom. Knowledge can be used to harm, but wisdom is never cruel. Wisdom is the highest and noblest use of our intelligence.

Being virtuous is a smart move.

Quality relationships are vital to our health and happiness. Today there is a vast amount of literature dedicated to grasping the complexity of human interactions and suggestions for improvement. Learning to be wise in the ways of love and friendship requires converting awareness to conscious actions.

How can I be so smart but make such dumb choices in whom I spend time with?

Why did I ever get involved with that person?

How could I have been so mean to someone who has been so kind to me?

Wisdom is generated by asking such questions. Even when well advised, we inevitably make mistakes. Wisdom is dependent on being able to learn from our mistakes. Wisdom is knowing what needs to be changed about oneself.

Hindsight requires taking the time after a mistake to glean information about what went wrong and why. Foresight is the ability to use what you have learned from your past to increase the chances of success in the future. Wisdom is a readiness to foresee.

I wish I had met Leslie sooner; I could have used her wisdom. She is so young and has such clarity:

I tend to repeat certain mistakes until I have learned their lessons. I have fallen in the same hole so many times I feel like I live there. Some of the dumbest mistakes I have made are in the area of relationships. I naively believed a coworker was my friend but my trust was misplaced. I ignored the fact that she repeatedly undermined my authority. Why did I act so stupid? I have habits that persist even when I know they are destructive. My old patterns are a collection of the unhealed, unskilled and unaware parts of me.

I have a tendency to avoid people because of the embarrassment and fear of making more mistakes. But I know if I limit experiences with people, I limit the chance to become wise. To become a master of love and friendship I need to draw from a wide range of life experiences. How can I be wise enough to learn from the failures and success of others?

Deciphering the motive behind my conduct is hard work. Each year I am able to make small steps towards fostering an eagerness to learn from my own and others' mistakes. I discovered that, if I backtrack, I find out what was motivating my actions. I begin by examining the consequences of my actions then I look closely at those actions and discover valuable information. I want a level of discernment in dealing with human relationships. My intention is to come to a realization about what I have been doing that no longer serves me, then make a course correction as soon as possible.

We all have areas of wisdom that we can tap into. A wise person has a good understanding of self. Be open to learning from anybody, even from those who are less aware or have a different opinion. Anyone who is wise will learn from others wiser than themselves. Being able to admit "I do not know" is a prerequisite to learning. Seek the good advice of those you respect but do not act on blind faith, because only you know what is best for you.

Wisdom is a penetrating examination of the truth to see what is of value.

One of the more unusual consulting jobs in my career was with a law firm in Chicago. I was hired to suggest ways to improve the well-being of the company. As we sat around the conference table, we tried a few activities so I could assess whom I was dealing with. All of the men and women were smart and powerful. From my research on the company, I knew that each of these people earned \$500 an hour for their expertise.

I asked them to select a partner and take turns communicating their definition of success. After watching the groups struggle with defining success, we regrouped and shared the insights they discovered. From youngest to oldest, they all exclaimed that they had never considered what success meant to them. They reported that success seemed to be elusive because they all knew lawyers who made even more money than they did.

As the day progressed, it became obvious that the well-being of the company was being pulled down by personal problems. All confessed their lack of self-care and repeated failures in the areas of love and friendship. Many lawyers expressed that they were emotionally bankrupt after each failed relationship. They admitted their unhappiness with their personal or professional lives. The animosity between coworkers was off the charts. They sold their time for large sums of money but had no time for themselves, family or friends. Their definition of success was not serving them. One lawyer confessed that he needed to rework his definition of success to include wisdom and happiness.

Know that love and friendship are the best part of life.

Near my house there is a cemetery managed by the city parks department. I call it "Dead People's Park." Most of the graves are those of early pioneers. But one day I noticed a new gravestone. It was in the form of a bench. This was the message that was inscribed on the front: "This was not in my appointment book."

Now is our time above ground. Ironically, death is a great tool to help us focus on life. When we live in denial of what is inevitable, we rob our lives of passion. We often act like we have all the time in the world. The reality of death suggests that

we make wise use of our unknown allotted time here. There is true wisdom in living with those around us presently. Yes, we need to plan for the future, but we can never live there. The past is history and the future is a mystery. We honor our lives by living in the present.

List the great wisdom you have collected from your friends. What is a piece of wisdom that you might inscribe on your tombstone for the benefit of a passerby?

The wordplay on “nowhere” and “now here” is just a shift of one space, a small opening up that lets in the wisdom. Move from nowhere to now here. If you live each day as if you have one less day to live, each day becomes more important. Your sacred duty is to live full of love.

Are your actions in alignment with your values and priorities?

What do you want now?

What has meaning today?

Now

Joy is now.

Life is now.

Freedom is now.

Act now.

Be here now, be here, be present.

The time to live is now!

X & Y & Z

There are many more virtues than we have listed A to Z in this section. I would like to suggest that you think of three more virtues that are important to you. As an exercise, try writing a page explaining each of them.

Create daily rituals that provide you with the time and space to reflect on your virtues. You might want to review the day in terms of virtues used or missed, and develop an action plan for tomorrow. Learn to witness yourself as you develop these qualities. You may want to keep a journal, writing down your observations in the moment, for review later.

Observe your friends. Identify the virtues (life skills) they have. One of the best ways to develop a skill is by being with a friend who has mastered it.

Start with a virtue and brainstorm a definition. Think of a story or person that represents this quality. What is a personal twist from your life that you might add? What steps can you take to create more of these virtues in your life?

Practice a new virtue or style that you see works well for someone else. Identify virtues everywhere. Finding new virtues in others is a fun game. When at work or home, practice a virtue for one day and observe the effects. For example, treat those you meet as if they are royalty. This will provide endless amusement, because people will wonder what you are up to!

X....

Y....

Z....

Evolve

How and why we evolve is a mystery: human beings are works in progress, meaning that we are never done growing. In regard to physical evolution, we are equipped with biological instincts and mechanisms in every cell of our bodies enabling us to adapt to changing circumstances. Conscious evolution—meaning to awaken, heal, grow and to constantly expand our consciousness—is even more critical at this time in the life of our species.

Embodying virtues can help us evolve. To evolve is to be alert for how we can improve even by a small degree. Growth in one area provides insights into how to expand in others. Where you are on your path is not as important as how you make progress. Each traveler has a different set of obstacles to overcome and talents to draw upon. Find out for yourself what skills you have already developed and use them to gain insight into other areas you wish to master in your life.

I was introduced to the personal growth movement in the late '60s, when I attended an encounter group. The transformation I experienced opened my eyes to new possibilities that I did not know even existed! Up to this time, many people around me seemed to resist growing and maturing. Suddenly I found myself in a group of strangers eager to expand and help each other.

One of the older men in the group compared himself with a tree, and I remember wanting to become like him because of his inner strength and well grounded nature. I remember his words:

I like to add new rings of growth each year. Some of the time, when conditions are good, I grow fast ... during other seasons, I slow down. To maintain what is above ground I need to foster roots that are anchored firmly in the soil. Life has provided me with endless chances to develop during times of sorrow and joy. I grow and evolve best with love.

I've found that up to a point I can evolve my level of consciousness on my own. I like to go out on solo adventures and bring back insights to share. But growth is much faster and more fun when involved in the quests of others. My goal has been to find companions who are a supportive family for evolution. The task is to awaken. Staying awake is easier with the help of others.

Awaken!

All paths provide opportunities for awakening. One of my major gateways to an awakening was in taking a yoga class. The practice of yoga opened my body, mind and spirit to new possibilities. These gentle postures, breathing exercises, meditations and deep relaxations provided the energy needed for growth. I think of growth being like a yoga stretch. The trick is to do just the right amount of stretching. Working too hard causes contraction of the muscles and defeats the purpose. Sometimes change involves “growing pains.”

During the years that I taught meditation classes, my students shared their awakenings. One student told the class her thoughts on the early phase of an awakening:

My meditations are like a hike in the mountains. As I travel along the trail through the forest, I move higher. Eventually, I come to an opening where I have a clear view of where I have been and a glimpse of where I am going. I like to pause at the vista point and absorb my new view. During the last several years of meditation practice, I have come to trust this sense of expansiveness. I keep following where my awakenings lead me.

Many with whom I have discussed this topic of evolution and awakening have referred to the search for new ways to blossom. The process seems as organic as buds opening each spring. I find that those who have grown the most have one thing in common: they surround themselves with those who bring out the best in them.

Love Awakens

I can grow on my own and I also like to mix with my close friends: cross fertilization. The effect we have on each other is dramatic. I enjoy being with people for purely social reasons, but most of the time I prefer to be with those who are challenging, supportive and inspiring. When I am with my friend David, I always feel stimulated by his presence. David likes to get others to join him in play and dance. He's like a kid at night who builds a huge campfire. Then when the fire has settled down to glowing embers, he'll poke at the fire to make the sparks fly and we are laughing again. A moment later, he will be still as he loses himself in the light.

An awakening can be a little shock, like the release of static electricity on a cold dry day ... zap! You didn't even know the charge was building! At other times, you can see the storm coming. The thunder becomes louder, your hair stands on end and then a lightning bolt strikes a tree right in front of you and splits it in two. Either way, you mark your life before and after an awakening.

Awakenings are constantly available. Any situation, pleasant or difficult, provides opportunities to open to higher levels of consciousness. We have the choice to expand or lock down our awareness in each moment. A crisis can trigger the necessary receptivity and energy to notice new insights. The following story about an awakening upon retirement was shared by a woman friend of mine:

My entire life, I worked hard to make enough money so I could be independent in my old age. When I went on a tour of the Grand Canyon, I was overwhelmed by the fact that I had neglected to invest in my body. I vowed to become fit by my next trip. I wanted to be able to do more than walk out of the bus, take pictures and return to my seat.

I was reminded of a connect-the-dots picture book from my childhood. I could not understand what all the dots and numbers were for until my dad explained. As I followed the sequence of numbers and joined the curved lines, an image magically began to appear.

As I look back on my life, all the information was there, but I didn't see what was slowly happening to me. If I had known that I would live this long, I would have taken better care of my body. The dots were everywhere but I failed to make the connection that if I wanted to enjoy myself when I retired, I needed to take care of my body.

I have had awakenings in which I just wanted to crawl back in bed and pull the covers over my head. The temptation was to hit the snooze and go back to sleep. But the spell was broken and I was awake. I could see that there was a problem that needed my attention. Once you have had an awakening, the work has only just begun.

Cultivating friendships on the path is the best means to wake up and stay up. Awakenings are a catalyst to reexamine your beliefs. Friends are uniquely positioned to help you to understand that there is something beyond what you know. There is a special kind of wisdom to be realized by being open to learning from others. It starts with letting go of the white-knuckle grip on what is no longer serving you.

You cannot force an awakening, but one will embrace you when you least expect an insight. They are like old friends who drop in unexpectedly because they know they are always welcome. When you listen to the stories of those who have had these moments of clarity, you realize how unique they are—no one ever has the same awakening as another.

Awareness begins with a consciousness of self. The more self-aware you are, the more you will be able to see awareness in others. As you open to each new level, adjust your outer life to be in harmony with your inner world. Give thanks for your awakenings.

Healing and Moving On

Growth will always involve a certain amount of healing of old emotional wounds. Severe damage can occur during the early years of our lives. To evolve, we must visit these times and examine how we were injured and what is still causing us pain today. We need to know the defenses we created as children to protect ourselves, and how those weary ways of acting now can stand in our way.

Value your deep friends because they help to expose the core issues that need to be understood and healed. Those who care about us can act as a container which is strong enough to protect us as

we revisit our past. Without close friends, we tend to hide from ourselves. I have seen too many people get hopelessly stuck in the past and ignore the joy that surrounds them presently.

When an event is extremely painful, the injury can leave a wound that is hard to heal. Scars, whether physical or emotional, do not stretch very well. The more emotional injuries you had as a child, the harder it may be to stretch and grow consciously. Some wounds we can prevent, but many are just part of being alive.

The task is to maximize growth while minimizing the pain. What a great surprise to meet someone who has wounds and is passionate about healing and growing. How much greater it is to be such a person!

The Elements of Awakening

The adventure begins with a realization that there is a new direction to follow. Often, we are on the threshold of fresh perspectives and we just need to step forward. We might be minding our own business when one surprise realization totally alters the course of our lives. That surprise can come in the most unexpected ways—we may be jarred by a book that exposes us to a world of new ideas we want to explore more deeply. A crisis offers us an opening to find meaning and significance to our existence. Like a daydream, it invites us into an alternative reality. However it happens, an awakening is a rite of passage, an initiation to the next part of our quest. All beings are awakened in different ways.

*Be a beginner by cultivating
a constant state of wonder.*

Here are some of the common components that travelers report about their evolution and awakenings: wandering, surrendering, entering the unknown, vision and action. Visualize these components as the five points of a star. No one point is a discrete stage nor are the points arranged in an orderly sequence.

Wandering

I see countless people scurrying through life. On the surface they look like they have direction, but when I talk to them, they confess that their lives seem pointless and empty. Then there are those people who don't scurry, who aren't working endlessly as part of some recognizable social institution or system. The world tends to judge them harshly, but a popular bumper sticker offers a sophisticated perspective: "All who wander are not lost."

Getting to know yourself must become a priority, and that means eliminating busywork. Make a commitment to allow yourself the free time to wander and explore the inner spaces. While you're in this wandering phase, you may feel fuzzy and unsure or confused, with a mix of discomfort and excitement. Just because you're struggling doesn't mean you have fallen off the path. More likely, you're right where you need to be. You might make mistakes while wandering, but these provide you with rare opportunities to learn new lessons. This is the time to find out something that is beyond what you already know, for what you "know" to be true may change. You lose yourself so you can find yourself, an endless cycle.

Surrendering

The journey will lead you to unprecedented places. To facilitate movement, foster surrendering. The temporary suspension of criticism allows brand-new information to come in. To feel fully alive you must walk away from your illusions of control and security. When you hold on too tightly to what you think you know, nothing fresh can enter. The goal is to let go of what might have served you in the past, but which slows you down now. When you surrender to the flow you can notice how you usually hold yourself back. You may be afraid of being lonely, out on the edge, but when you surrender, you will find that there are others out there traveling the same path.

Peer pressure strongly demands that you stay put. But if you stay in line and follow the masses, you exchange a world of individual potential for unremarkable herd mentality. When you surrender, you step out of line and change direction even though you don't know what the final outcome may be. Ultimately the journey becomes the destination, and miracles happen.

My favorite adventures have been when I have left the crowd behind. Often, I am many steps down a path before I see where I am headed. I have learned to trust, to keep moving in what feels like the right direction. The way eventually unfolds and reveals itself.

Unknown

When you depart from the familiar, you face the unknown, nose-to-nose. Imagine closing your eyes and taking a step forward, using your senses to guide you. Trust your instincts, though they may be rusty.

There can be pain and confusion when blazing a trail. Embrace the struggles inherent on any quest. Inner work is like shining a flashlight into a dark room. Entering the unknown requires courage; there are things in the darkness you might not want to see. To evolve, you must visit your interior.

Vision

Out of the darkness a vision appears. Visions can spring from any event. Like a high note, a vision can be a scream that jolts you awake from a coma. A vision can build in an orderly manner or leap straight up in surprise. Allow new pictures to form. To stay awake, we need like-minded people around to help us grow. Create a mission statement to clarify your vision and make choices that support your revelations.

Action

Converting your awareness into action helps to integrate your insights. Those who have not moved in years may appear to be still ... but there is growth in the center of one's being. The task is to gather insights from wandering, surrendering, entering the unknown and visions—and integrate them into your life.

Starlight

Just after sunset one August, I was walking by myself on a rugged stretch of the Oregon coast. I was in a serious mood as I mentally tried to untangle a sticky jumble of problems. The rolling waves breaking on the beach were the only sounds. There was no moon, no city lights to steal the darkness. One by one the stars began to appear until the sky was bursting. I was pulled into the present by the beauty and grandeur of my surroundings.

I had recently read a book about the universe and remembered the fascinating facts that had stuck in a fold of my brain. Looking back into the Milky Way, I saw the vastness of our galaxy. There are billions and billions of other stars like our Sun out there. The next closest star is four light years away. Our Sun is a second-generation star that formed after another sun went supernova. Our Earth was created from the remains of our Sun.

A great light show commenced. I witnessed a shooting star every few minutes. I softened my vision to take in the biggest amount of sky, increasing my ability to see the quick streaks of light. The light show was a special gift.

I stopped walking to look out over the ocean. The crests of the waves were the color of fireflies, a greenish yellow. As the waves broke, they glowed with light for just a second. What was I seeing? Algae had bloomed and created a phosphorescent light in the water. Where I walked on the sand, a halo formed around my footprint. The algae had washed onto the beach and responded to contact by lighting up.

I come from the same source as algae. These beings are my ancestors. The light was coming from the stars, the shooting stars, the glowing waves, and the halos under me. Everything was alight!

I felt a flash inside and I uttered the words, "I am starlight." I danced in wonder under the stars.

I had read about the concept of oneness in countless sources before this event. I was attracted to the idea and had felt the oneness to a certain degree. This profound experience caused waves of sensations. I was engaged in a conscious moment of insight and transformation.

The sand is just like the billions of stars above. I live on a planet made of stardust. Since I am from the Earth, I am literally made of stardust. Every atom in my body originated in the stars. I am in constant flux, like everything in the universe. I am one with the stars.

As of that night, all that I now see is changed forever. My awakening is constantly with me.

I have seen shooting stars before and experienced no big awakening. Any act, thought, feeling, object or person has the potential to create an awakening for us. Ordinary life provides an unlimited potential source of inspiration, and a turning point can happen any time. It doesn't require a cataclysm or an explosion: evolution can equally occur in subtle and gentle ways. An awakening is not dependent on external circumstances.

The beauty of an awakening is available to anyone, anytime. Everybody experiences growth in degrees, from small insights to profound transformative realizations. What one does afterwards is even more important. Changes on the inside can make changes on the outside. I enjoy asking my friends to share the stories of their major moments and the ways they have been transformed.

I live in trembling awe of the universe and feel that an epiphany is waiting for me every day. I have shared this amazing event with others who had similar experiences. I spend entire evenings just looking

at the stars. I see them as kin, as kindred spirits. I receive energy, particles of life from all the stars in our galaxy. I experience my connection to life and feel one with the shooting stars and with the tiny forms of life. We share common ground.

Stars have a different meaning for me now. I use them as a reminder to lighten up on the path to enlightenment. I bought a package of glow-in-the-dark stars and positioned them on my ceiling as the Big Dipper. When I turn off the lights, they guide me to my bed. Before I fall asleep, I ponder how I have evolved this day.

While I wrote notes for this book, I began drawing stars next to ideas that I thought were especially brilliant. When I was a kid in school, I never once got those shiny stars on my papers. A small healing has occurred, hence a new meaning for my starlight awakening.

Years later, I returned to the same beach, hoping for a repeat performance of my light show and awakening. I walked for several hours, searching the heavens for even one shooting star. Disappointed, I headed for my cabin. Just before I reached the door I laughed at my attachment: here I was, putting my happiness on the line for a celestial event and wanting shooting stars to happen on demand.

I turned to face the ocean and was frightened to see a ball of flame low in the sky. This was no shooting star. The streaking light looked like a comet with its tail aglow. After a few seconds the ball of fire split in two with an explosion of light. Concerned that a catastrophe was underway, I shared with my friends what I had witnessed. They thought that I was making up a UFO story.

The next morning, headlines read: "Russian Satellite Crashes into Atmosphere and Bursts in Two Balls of Flame."

The Gap

The gap is the distance between where I am and where I want to be. It is the difference between who I am and who I am becoming. I feel the tension between what I have and what I want. My level of awareness always exceeds my current ability to actualize my insights. A commitment is needed just to make the next step. Closing the gap between an awareness and actualization takes days or decades. So when I experience a quantum leap of awareness, I know I will require some adjustment to fill in the steps. The gap is a natural part of awakening, growing and evolving.

As I evolve, the distances increase between my inner awareness and the outer-world level of consciousness. There will be times when I move faster than the pack. An awakening always generates insights that are ahead of where I am. The greater the gap, the greater the discomfort tends to be. The gap, although unnerving, is a good sign. These gaps are indicators that I am growing. The task is to learn how to create the optimum environment for evolution.

For example, when I first began my quest, a gap existed between the amount of love and friendship I desired and the friends I actually had. At this early stage of my awakening, I only had a small percentage of what I wanted. I wanted intimacy but I felt lonely. I knew that when I directly reach out to others, they frequently reach back. So I focused my efforts and progressed from no friends to a complete system of kindred spirits in a relatively short time.

I became aware that I wanted to expand the virtue of generosity. Just as I started to catch up, to close the gap between awareness and reality, my awareness jumped ahead. I saw new ways of being generous that I had never known to exist before. A new part of the path was revealed.

Growth requires increasing energy. This practice takes time. Be kind to yourself.

Bamboo

When I was a young boy, my dad bought me a bamboo fishing pole. I was impressed by its smoothness and lightness when I saw its slender tip yield as I caught my first fish.

Several years ago, while walking in my neighborhood, I noticed a beautiful green stand of bamboo growing in a dry, narrow curb strip. The bamboo measured one inch in diameter and was about fifteen feet tall. When I went for a return visit, I was shocked to see only stumps. I knocked on the door and inquired if I could dig up the special roots, called rhizomes. The family said that their grandfather had just died and they needed to sell his house. I learned that he had transplanted himself and his bamboo from China in 1901. So with pick and shovel, I sweated for hours and loaded the rhizomes into a grocery cart for a ride up the street.

I planted the bamboo in my backyard. Once the rhizomes became established, bigger and bigger shoots came up each year. Every spring, they broke the surface at full diameter, seeking the light. What I had planted was actually timber bamboo, one of the fastest growing plants in the world. With extra care,

my bamboo is now three inches in diameter and thirty feet tall. You can watch the bamboo grow about a foot a day in the summer! Bamboo reaches its total height in a couple of months.

There is equally amazing growth occurring silently, just below the surface. The rhizomes hold the world record for the subterranean 100-yard dash. They can sprint long distances as they travel underground before emerging. The system of interlocking roots gives individual poles the support they need to grow tall. The canes stand alone yet are deeply interconnected. Their network of roots adds stability to soil during floods and earthquakes.

The speed of the roots is matched by their determination to grow. Many varieties can tunnel under and over most barriers. I had been warned that bamboo can not be easily contained and had built an escape-proof containment. Or so I thought. My bamboo spent years of secret plotting to find a way out. The bamboo roots sent a forty-foot long probe into the basement before I discovered its presence. Initially, I was angry with the bamboo for invading my house. Then I became mad at myself for letting the bamboo escape. Eventually I learned to laugh at myself, accepting that the nature of bamboo is to grow in any available direction. Once my anger subsided, I realized that all these rhizomes could be cut into sections and planted in pots. I now have a beautiful shaded pathway in front of my house.

I dug a deeper trench surrounding the grove and doubled the thickness of the barrier. As I patrolled the new enclosure, I sensed the bamboo watching me, plotting its next escape.

Bamboo is inherently sturdy and its strength is enhanced by its flexibility. I have seen the tall poles bow gracefully to the ground from the weight of ice and snow. Bamboo yields to the forces of nature and seldom breaks. The kitchen skylight provides a great view for watching the leafy tops moving in the breeze. The invisible wind spirit might otherwise pass unnoticed. As the wind picks up the tempo, the canes are like dancers, swaying in several directions all at once. Then, as if on cue, they return to stillness.

There are a thousand varieties of bamboo that have learned to adapt and flourish in many environments. Although this evergreen grass is not native to North America, its hardiness has helped bamboo overcome many hardships. The traits that helped it survive and evolve have bestowed wonderful functionality, from a human perspective. Besides the roots in my basement, I have noticed bamboo in every room of my house. Bamboo thrives in the kitchen as chopsticks, a tea strainer and as a can of edible shoots. In the living room hangs a Chinese scroll of

a panda bear, a bamboo connoisseur. On the dining room table sits a bamboo vase that I made myself. A soap dish and laundry basket bear evidence that bamboo has climbed to the second floor bathroom. A depiction of bamboo is the logo for my consulting business. The beauty and versatility of this plant is limitless.

Every day as I wash my dishes, I enjoy looking through the window at the slender, green poles. The tendency to get caught up in the practical matters of daily life can be offset by such an awareness of beauty. I experience a sense of peace and I am reminded of my kinship with life. Poems have been written that praise the plant's virtues of nobility and simplicity. Bamboo has come to represent the qualities that I admire and hope to manifest.

To grow, I need to be nourished and supported by my community. To grow fast, I must be especially open. I must not allow any barrier to stop me from fulfilling my destiny. To be truly strong I must also be flexible and graceful. Yet activity in life needs to be balanced by time for stillness. If I seek to thrive, I must learn to adapt to many different environments.

Bamboo is a symbol of the virtues to open, awaken, grow and evolve. Any time I see bamboo growing or a bamboo product, I remind myself to be like this amazing plant.

Over a hundred years ago, a man traveled across the ocean to a new country with a rhizome of bamboo, a memory of his homeland. This one action has triggered a sequence of events culminating in many of my friends owning an offspring of the original start, complete with instructions on care and handling of this wild being.

I'll always be curious to hear the lessons the new owners glean from their bamboo.

A New World

When I was in college, I read *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. He projected a warning, set 600 years in the future, describing an overzealous, well-intentioned Utopian society. He portrays a scenario we will want to avoid. In his forward, the revolution he calls for is not one of external technology but rather the transformation of human consciousness.

A year after reading the book, I was fortunate to be given a free, ten-day course with his wife Laura Huxley, called "Between Heaven and Earth." She had recently published an excellent book entitled *You Are Not the Target*. While her husband had shown what to avoid, she created a seminar that was a

sample of the kind of world I would like to live in all the time.

Recently our neighbor set out a free box on the curb. As I fished through the box, I found a soggy, crumbling copy of *Brave New World*. In 1932 it sold for 95 cents and had been resold many times, judging by the list of names and dates inscribed in the inside page. As I reread Huxley's book, I was reminded of how much it had inspired me long ago. Aldous and Laura helped me to be brave enough to imagine and create a new world where love and friendship are highly valued.

Whenever I visit Powell's bookstore, one of the biggest in the country, I imagine all of the numerous shelves of books as brains to access. Just browsing through a book has changed my life.

Throughout recorded history, humans who are profoundly aware have arisen and inspired the masses. These rare individuals were separated by time and geography. Today there are hundreds of thousand of beings worldwide who sense the need for higher consciousness. They are wide awake and they live in the same time and can learn from each other. This gives me hope for the future.

Evolving Point of View

Writing this book has helped me evolve my point of view. Before I reflected and wrote down my ideas, I was not as conscious of how important love and friendship are to me. I want to constantly evolve my virtues.

Awakenings are like a dream. Imagine that you are asleep, unconscious, drifting ... you start dreaming. Your breathing expands, your heart beats faster. You were asleep but now you awake, bit by bit. You open yourself to a reality larger than anything you have ever known. You see. You understand. Henceforth, you will be unable to act without bearing in mind this new state of awareness. Remember your awakenings, write them down. Use this book as your journal of insights.

Personal awakenings and virtues have a powerful effect on all our relationships. As we intentionally seek out and co-create kindred spirit relationships, sharing the pieces of what each of us has learned will complete the "big picture" of what is possible in our world. Our collective awareness is needed to make the breakthroughs that will evolve all of humanity.

Who are the kindred spirits who support your creative process?

In which areas do you want to expand your awareness?

Ask yourself: how have my awakenings impacted my life?

Cosmic Friends

Recall the names and faces of those who have inspired you to grow and assisted in your evolution. Using the night sky as a metaphor, give the stars the names of your friends. Make a drawing of these heavenly bodies and keep the picture where you will see it often.

The sun is you, the central star.

Planets are your family of choice to whom you are closest.

Moons are friends you see in the evening.

New stars are friends with whom you have become close during the past year.

The North Star is the person you look to for direction.

Shooting stars are bright surprises you see only once in a lifetime.

Dead stars are those who have died but are not forgotten.

Comets are big teachers that cycle through your life.

Super novae are rare, extremely bright beings that explode into your life and emit vast amounts of energy.

Constellations are those clusters of people that you relate with regularly.

Galaxies are large groups of people with whom you enjoy associating.

Love

“Love” is a relatively new word in the human vocabulary. The dictionary defines love as “a strong affection for another arising out of kinship.” Some of the words that indicate love are: cherishing, devotion, fondness and tenderness. Love is often wonderfully expressed in poetic form.

When asked to describe the meaning of love, people have a difficult time. With study, I began to understand why. Most people, when talking about love, go into a deeply emotional place. Those who had been loved could easily describe what it felt like. For instance, when I love someone, I feel warmth spread throughout my body. As I looked into their eyes, I imagined them watching a vast stream of memories flowing by. Many could not switch from the feeling state to choose words that express love in a rational way.

When I asked my good friend Michael to explain love, he paused and became reflective. His voice tone softened as he used feeling words:

I feel a mix of attraction, affection and admiration for the ones I care for. Love is a special bond, a choice, an availability combined with a deep honesty that is able to endure anything life can throw at you.

People have told me how important love is to them yet how hard it is to find—and that sheds light on one of love’s mysteries. Love remains elusive until you clarify what it means to you. Each of us must find our own way of discovering this meaning.

I spent time asking family and friends to share their thoughts and feelings about love. I liked my mother’s response to: “What is love?”

I love different people in different ways and for a variety of reasons. I love them for who they are. Because each person is so distinct, I love each one differently.

I attended La Salle High School, an all boys school taught by male instructors. Most of my teachers were Christian Brothers, an order committed to spiritual teaching. I liked most of my teachers because they treated me with respect. These men understood me, accepted me and encouraged me. They became models for me of the kind of man I wanted to become.

Many of the threads of virtues I have today originated from the presence of these good teachers. My high school experience was rather unique because every day we had a class on religion. In my senior year, Brother Kenneth asked the class to discuss the subject of love. By the end of the week we came up with the following definition: “Love is wanting what is best for the other person.”

I liked this concept of wanting what is best for the well-being of another. Loving someone means supporting what he or she feels is optimum for themselves. Love is a decision to care for another’s happiness as we would our own.

Both the culture we grow up in and our life experiences contribute to how we view love. Our individual experiences with the topic of love help us to define what love means to us.

Kinds of Love

To understand love you need to examine your own personal history. Each type of relationship creates a special kind of love. Many feelings you have about love and relationships will be based on early memories and how you saw love modeled.

Next I will explore some different kinds of love: family love, puppy love, kindred spirit love, roman-

tic love, real love, committed love, unconditional love, conditional love, self-love, whole love, conscious love, integrated love, balanced love and virtuous love.

Family Love

As babies we cannot care for ourselves. Babies need to be lavished with consistent affection and loving physical contact or they can die. Insufficient love is neglect, a form of abuse. We require nurturing until we can care for ourselves.

How we were treated when we were very young affects every thought and feeling we'll ever have. Those of us who received love as a child expect to have love as adults. Those who did not receive much affection early in life may crave love continually. People lacking enough early nurturing sometimes give up on love altogether, for to crave love and not have it can be too painful.

Anyone who provides tender loving care to a child when they are growing up is giving family love.

When a baby is in distress for any reason, it cries as an instinctual call for help. Babies' caretakers attune their ears to distinguish the sound of a whimper that does not require immediate attention, from a scream that generates shock waves. A clear indicator of serious distress demands immediate attention.

My parents, Lena and Larry, were married at St. George's Church in 1945 after World War II. They gave me the best inheritance that any parents could ever give to their child. I grew up watching Mom and Dad love each other every day of my life. They were my first role models of love and friendship. Only when I became an adult did I realize the rare precious gift my parents had bestowed upon my sister Debbie and I.

The skill level of our caregivers can range from low to high. This level is affected by the quality and consistency of the love they received in their own past. Sadly, few adults received enough positive attention when they were kids.

Study the skill level of your parents and others whose role it was to care for you. We often know so little about the history and struggles of our parents. Understanding what happened to you during your infancy stage will provide useful insights about how you treat others and how they relate to you. Understanding opens the possibility for compassion.

If possible, ask your parents what your first few years were like. Invite your parents to share their

thoughts, feelings and insights about love. You need to know what your primary role models believed while they were raising you. Inquire what they loved about you then, and what they love about you today.

In what ways do you need love from your family?

In sharp contrast to the love my family gave me were the hard times I experienced during my years in grade school. I got poor grades and even had to repeat the fourth grade. Going to summer school was an extra humiliation. Some of my teachers were downright mean to me. There were two older girls in my neighborhood, Carol and Sue, who regularly beat me up. During the latter part of grade school, bullies would also gang up and severely beat me. I remember the moment I decided that I would not be like those nasty kids. Looking back, I now see that the kids who were being cruel to me were likewise treated badly at home. Unlike them, I was fortunate enough to go home to a loving family.

Puppy Love

My first crush happened the summer between the seventh and eighth grades. I vividly remember my infatuation with a young woman named Mary Lou who was visiting from California. We spent several weekends water skiing together with our families. Although, we were about the same age, Mary Lou was more developed than me in several important ways: she was smart, mature, fit, confident and had traveled all over the country with her family. She was from a different world than anyone else I knew.

I had strong feelings for Mary Lou. One afternoon while water skiing, as I helped her into the boat, her large breasts popped out of her suit. A dam inside me broke as my hormones rushed into every cell of my body. If this had been an actual dam breaking, many lives downstream would have been lost!

At the end of the summer, Mary Lou and her family returned home. I sent her dozens of letters filled with boyish yearnings. My letters went as unanswered as did my longing. I suffered in ways that I never knew before. "Oh, it's just a crush, you'll get over the infatuation," I was told. I felt like a cardboard box that had been run over by a truck.

I am grateful for that "summer of love." I still have tender feelings recalling the experience. A picture of Mary Lou will always hang on the walls of my mind, her smile as fresh as the first encounter.

Wet dreams clearly marked the beginning of my sexual development. When puberty made its first appearances, I began to feel new emotions that I never knew existed. The sheer volume and intensity of these feelings were overwhelming. At the beginning of the eighth grade, I was transforming into a young man. My voice deepened dramatically, coarse facial hair sprouted overnight and my feet enlarged to support my new height.

Everything about me changed in high school. If you were to look at a picture of me as a freshman and compare it to one from the year before, you wouldn't think these were pictures of the same person. My selection of friends expanded beyond those who lived in my neighborhood.

Immediately after graduation from high school, I began working at the Jergens Soap factory during the summer to pay for my college education. My job was physically and emotionally demanding. I helped to manufacture the soap in a harsh environment that was often unsafe due to slippery surfaces.

Looking back, I realized that I learned as much at work as I did in college. I was struck by the contrast in how my coworkers treated me. Some seemed to go out of their way to be cruel, while others made a point to help me and be my friend. I was impressed by the example of those who retained their dignity even after many years in difficult working conditions.

For some, the rite of passage into adulthood is marked by a distinctive event; for others, the transition happens over time. At each stage of our development we learn lessons about what love is and is not. Compare and contrast the love you experience as an adult with the earlier stages of your life.

Kindred Spirit Love

It is indeed a special kind of love that lets you care for someone as if he or she were your brother or sister, or beloved. The closeness and familiarity that you share is replete with mutual appreciation. This book is devoted to this special form of love.

Ron and I had been good friends since high school. Late one night Ron called, asking if he could come over. He sounded like he was in rough shape and didn't seem to be in a condition to drive, so I told him I'd come to his house. When I arrived he looked worse than he sounded on the phone. He just needed a friend to listen as he blew off some steam. What was best for him was that I not try to fix him. I suggested we go for a walk-and-talk.

Ron shared that he wanted to break an old pattern of suffering alone. Up until now, he had forced himself to handle any problem by himself, but this had never served him. It was time to break the mold and cast a new one. I felt honored to be present with him during this time of growth and healing.

Ron thanked me for the comfort and caring gave him. He asked if there was anything he could do for me. His offer unleashed a wave of unfamiliar feelings. My whole life, I have had great relationships with women with whom I could share my feelings. They had helped me and I them in times of need. This was the first time I had a mutual caring friendship with another man.

I liked our times laughing together and I felt a rich appreciation for his being there for me. The level of trust between us went up several notches. Since that evening, our friendship continues to deepen. Some months later, when I was going through a rough time with my girlfriend, Ron was there for me. His willingness to share his troubles sparked an opening in me. Over a couple of beers, we both made a vow that we would give up suffering alone.

Romantic Love

During courtship, attraction is extremely exciting. Sexual desire, a biological function to propagate the species, is strong. Powerful feelings and bodily sensations are generated as we focus our attention on each other. The onset of hormones—new emotions, new desires and new needs—changes everything about all our relationships. Our intense attraction leaves us feeling alive and juicy. When we are aware that our feelings are mostly about breeding instincts and reproductive drives, we are less likely to confuse desire with love.

It's fun to watch friends newly in love. They are on their best behavior as they treat each other in special ways. The new lovers are on an emotional high because they feel loved and accepted. Being romantic can be a virtue while on the quest to seek a primary partner. Romantic love can bring so much joy.

Romantic love can also have problems generated from "falling in love," "falling in illusion," and "falling in lust."

Falling in Love

The process of “falling in love” titillates us. Frequently, when we fall in love, we fall for the wrong person. When we finally recognize our mistake we may gain the wisdom that falling in love is not the same as being in love. Play with falling in love. Be romantic and enjoy the drama and attention. With awareness, you can turn the falling in love into soaring with love.

The following are a few warning signs about what “falling in love” is like:

I experience a flood of feelings, a rush of adrenaline and energy. It is fun and exciting! I become obsessed and I cannot get him out of my mind. I feel like I have been charmed and a spell has been cast over me.

I have the tendency to get lost in the rapture, fascination, yearning, flirting, enchantment, fondness, desire, passion and excitement when the love is new.

I remember the early times when I fell in love. I felt like I was running down a hill. The speed was thrilling. My legs could barely keep pace with my momentum. Going slow was not an option. So I ran full out and I reached the bottom of the hill panting. Then one or both of us would fall out of love. As good as the falling in love felt, the falling out of love hurt.

When I fall in love, I forget the need to continue loving myself. I expect the other person's love to be all that I'll ever need. But the relationship always flounders.

I finally had to face the fact that I was addicted to the euphoria of love. I become intoxicated by the attention. I wish there was a detox clinic where I could go to for help. I can become obsessive to the point that I don't make good decisions. Time for me to sober up and realize what I am really thirsty for is love, not the falling.

I had to install a big flashing danger signal to warn me that I was about to fall in love. As soon as I hear myself saying, “You make me feel happy” the light starts blinking. I am afraid of being lonely and I give away my power by believing that I need someone else to make me happy. I had to learn the hard way that I am the one responsible for my happiness.

When I am in love, I feel like I am flying. The falling is fun, but the reality is more like I was dropped out of a plane. The faster I fall in love, the more speed I pick up before I hit the ground.

My problem is was that I bonded before I knew whether we really loved each other. All of a sudden I was

married with kids. Ten years later I began to wonder: who was this stranger in my bed? I fell in love but we fell apart. Now we are divorced and I never want to see this person again. I wondered how this is possible with someone I created children with.

I try to own the one I have fallen in love with. I want her as my possession and for what she can do for me. If she gives attention to others, I believe I will get less. Even when she is kind to a stranger, I get triggered. I expect her to stop being with her friends ... even though I know that I wouldn't want her to treat me the way I am treating her.

I ask myself these questions to engage my rational mind when emotions are running high: “Is our togetherness serving us? Are we compatible for the long run?” If the answer is no, then there is too small a love base for this relationship.

When we say that we love each other I check in to see what our actions say.

New love is so exciting! I am thrilled with both the unknown and the special attention. The attraction and desire make me giddy. I question if this will lead to lasting love. In the past, I believed that there could be love at first sight. Love takes time and experience to deepen. I want that type of love even when love is not easy.

Falling in Illusion

When we are thirsty for love, we frequently see a mirage. “Falling in illusion” is a blend of fantasy, projections, delusions and dreams. Illusion will always be woven into relationships, but when there is an unbalanced ratio of illusion to reality, there is need for concern. Our illusions can make us ill. Just as a relationship is the matrix from which springs our romantic illusions, a relationship is the best place to work through them.

We fall in illusion with a murky distortion of reality because one or more of our eyes are closed. With only one eye open, we have selective vision and no depth perception. We tend only to see the good, and that which we have in common.

Are these feelings love or illusion? Our feelings of love are never 100 percent pure. They range from instinct and impulse to insight and intuition. It takes careful reflective sifting to separate what is love from what isn't. Just asking the question, “Is this love?” and listening to your first response is helpful.

Illusions are around you—see them, use them and enjoy them. Have fun with your fantasies. However, the goal is to love with minimal illusion. Lower

the level of illusion while raising the level of reality about yourself, your partner and the relationship.

Remember when you were in the early stages of romantic love. What parts were illusion? Everyone has different symptoms of illusion.

Being desired blinds me to reality. I find myself pretending to be someone I'm not. In an attempt to be lovable, I create a false image of who I am. Ultimately, I am miserable. I lose if they do love me because it's not the real me. I fall in love as an attempt to escape from my loneliness.

I eventually realized that I needed to develop a network of friends to make me less likely to fall into illusion with one person. When I had loving friendships, the illusion of love was easier to spot. I began to use the collective wisdom of my companions to help me see what my illusions were. Uncovering the truth required a special form of courage.

I want love so badly that I create the illusion of love.

The problem with illusions is that they feel good only temporarily. Frequently I would realize that I was in love with an illusion rather than the real person. Plus, when I checked, the other person had illusions about me. The illusions represented places in me that needed more love and growth. When I started to become aware of the illusions for what they were, I could avoid or limit the pain.

I have learned to ask myself: "Am I in love with an actual person or a picture in my mind?"

The electricity is incomparable to any other event that I experience. But the problem is that I am frequently shocked later when I realize that I do not love this person whom I felt so strongly about three months ago.

Early on in a relationship when I start to feel strong emotions, I double date with other close friends and ask for their frank feedback. I want to know how they see us as a couple. This reality check has saved my neck more than once.

Falling in Lust

One way to minimize the downside of "falling in lust" is to understand the effects of the hormones released in our blood stream. Here are some examples of people describing a variety of perspectives. Notice which stories you identify with.

What I used to call love I realize was a hormonal hallucination.

I have often mistaken lust for love. I want good chemistry with the person I am attracted to but I also want good compatibility.

I like the hot sex but I get cold feet to real involvement. The pleasure of such juicy contact prevents me seeing the truth. The problem is that both love and lust warm the body parts.

When my glands start working overtime, my rational brain goes on vacation. It took me about a dozen romances before I understood that I am the one creating these feelings.

The way to improve your love life is to love life.

Fairy tales frequently give us images of life and love that are unattainable. Most of these heroic stories are about a strong, outside force which makes the person happy. Mr. Right sweeps in and it's "happily ever after." This model of fantasy love is reinforced in television, movies, songs and books. When we expect to find happily ever after, we are usually disappointed.

During your life you will hear thousands of love songs. Most of these songs refer either to the falling in love or the tragic ending and break up. There are not many love songs about the joy and work of being a mate and growing old together.

Try this little game: Listen to the songs and name the illusions you hear. Are there any parts about love, friendship and intimacy ... about knowing the real person? Listen to the songs that are playing in your head and the feelings that arise about falling in love.

Real Love

Real love means you love the person based on self knowledge and knowledge of who the other person is. We frequently hear the reference that "love is blind." Real love has excellent vision and thus sees clearly with both eyes the virtues and vices, similarities and differences. Real love acknowledges the importance of compatibility.

We want to be loved by someone who is aware and honest about their wounds and their weakness, rather than keeping them hidden. Real love brings out the unconscious, unaware and unhealed, which is positive, offering the possibility of true growth and healing. Every relationship is a mix of fact and fiction about the true nature of our feelings. Our illusions spotlight where we need greater love and increased understanding. Consciously shifting from fantasy to fact and combining romantic love and real love, we can enjoy the pleasures of being in love.

Real love flows from being a mature adult. Real love takes heart-pumping effort to build a relationship based on the principles of kindred spirits. Developing one's virtues sets the stage for this type of love to flourish. Post a list of what real love is for you.

Are your relationship based on kindness, intimacy, passion and trust?

Committed Love

Committed love requires a high level of maturity for us to make mutual commitments to each other's happiness. Of course we all want to be accepted for who we are (blemishes included), but committed love has us equally accept others in all their fullness and faults. We want to be true to ourselves while respecting what is true for those we love. Commitment to love includes willingness to be influenced and transformed by another. Meaningful relationships require commitment from both parties, especially during times of crisis.

Maggie and I both perform weddings. When a couple comes to us wishing to declare their love, we help them write an original ceremony. As part of the process we suggest they clarify the meaning of their commitment and advise them that creating such a ceremony is sacred.

Creating the ceremony starts with two visions that mark the blending of two lives. How these two people treat each other in designing their ceremony gives an intimate look into their process as a couple.

Maggie and I watch to see if they are respectful of differences they may have about how they want the ceremony to unfold.

The maturity of committed love shines through in the ceremony that some couples create. I've noticed that couples marrying for the first time are often in a romantic stage of love that contains a degree of illusion about themselves, their partner and their relationship. Couples who have been married before tend to have a more realistic view of their relationship. Such differences are reflected in the ceremony created.

Standing up in front with the couple, we feel the intensity of their love and the love that is being directed toward them by their family and friends. There is an unusual heat generated from all this attention. We have to remind them to breathe and take all the love in. Each wedding expresses the unique form of love that has been created by these two unique individuals, and it's an honor to witness their commitment to this love.

Committed love takes people on a journey that is unimaginable at the romantic beginning of a relationship. Following is a letter that was sent to me, dealing with the complicated dynamics of when to stay or when to leave:

Our kids had grown up and were on their own ... Bruce and I needed to create a new relationship. Our time together had been so busy raising the kids, taking care of the house and establishing our careers that we hardly knew each other. We were not the same people who married 25 years ago.

We had been fighting a lot. In the confusion, we were pulling away from each other. I signed us up for a couple's workshop on love. The openness of the other couples helped us to get in touch with our buried feelings. Our unhealed resentment brought us both to the realization that we were hurting each other. We each expressed our pain, wanting to understand what the other was experiencing. Bruce and I worked to separate which problems we were individually responsible for. A sense of safety in the group helped us to expose parts of ourselves that had been hidden.

At one point we hit a wall. The work needed to dismantle the barriers between us seemed hopeless. In our distress, we contemplated ending our marriage because there was so much pain. Our marriage was like an old car: maybe it would be better to just junk this one and start over. I looked at him with tears streaming down my face.

Our tears of truth washed away enough of the stored up pain to see the love we still felt for each other. This love seemed to be untouched by the pain. Suddenly, we could see a future together! The best moment of our lives hap-

pened when we agreed to recommit to intimacy based on the new us.

Committed love based on virtues like truth-telling and forgiveness can take you through murky places that would break up a less secure relationship.

Unconditional Love

Many people have told me that they want unconditional love in their relationship. The intensity of people's desire for this form of love has always aroused my curiosity. What exactly do they want and why?

I am profoundly sad when I recall growing up. I felt unloved by my parents, who seemed only to love me when I acted the way they wanted me to. The slightest transgression on my part resulted in love being withheld. I just wanted to be loved regardless of what I did.

As an adult, I search for the unconditional love that I didn't receive as a child. The problem is that other adults will not love me unconditionally. Expecting another adult to love me no matter how I act is a set-up for disappointment. It is unfair to expect someone to make up for the love I didn't receive as a child.

There is nothing wrong with the desire for unconditional love. But the adult-to-adult practical application can be problematic. Many are convinced that love should always feel good, and when it becomes hard work, they walk away from the relationship. Unconditional love is as much a choice and a practice as it is a feeling.

To practice unconditional love, commit to sending messages that you love someone even when you are displeased with certain behaviors.

Love yourself unconditionally.

I was taught that God loved me unconditionally. But then I was told that God would send me to hell for eternity if I did not repent my sins. This does not exactly seem like a model of unconditional love. If God does not

love unconditionally, how can I expect humans to love without conditions?

You need to be careful when you are being expected to provide unconditional love, especially if your partner cannot love you unconditionally in return.

We all need help not taking someone's actions too personally as they pull back or push us away. What is happening to them is not necessarily connected to us. They might be in a health crisis, having relationship problems or difficulties at work. There are many reasons why people get defensive and feel a need to protect themselves.

When someone is in distress, practice not reacting to his or her pain. Do your best to be loving even when you don't like the way a person acts some of the time.

How do you react when you are in crisis, pain or fear? Do you pull back or push away?

Conditional Love

It is reasonable to love someone while not liking ways they treat you. It is a loving act to set limits and establish conditions for how you wish to be treated. We all give more love to those who treat us the way we want to be treated.

Following are the reflections of individuals trying to sort out the type of love that they do want:

I may choose to love someone who is not acting lovingly toward me or I can decide to maintain a protective distance. I am not obligated to love someone who abuses me. I love you for who you are but, because I love you, I want you to change certain behaviors that are damaging to yourself and me.

I think it's healthy to set reasonable conditions for a relationship. My partner's dishonesty reached such a level that I had to impose certain standards for the relationship to continue. The problems were addressed and there was steady progress.

I became angry with my girlfriend for attitudes that I felt was disrespectful. I communicated my hurt feelings and told her I loved her. She told me that this was the first time she had experienced someone's anger with her when they did not simultaneously withhold their love and affection.

My love has conditions, and one of them is that you must love yourself if you want me to love you. I have the right to establish the conditions for me to give love.

I like to be there for my friends when they need me. One person I know seemed to always be in trouble. Clark did not take responsibility for causing these recurring conflicts. He expected me to give him attention whenever he needed it. He always took my energy and if I let him continue, then I would feel drained. When I resisted, he would try to make me feel guilty. Clark was not open to feedback about his behavior. Finally I came to the realization that I was not really helping by listening to him complain. I was actually doing him a disservice and in the process, being disrespectful of my own needs. I felt like an accomplice to a crime. He was robbing my energy bank while I drove the getaway car. When I was truthful to myself, I had to admit that there was no real friendship there. So I called Clark and told him, "If you only need me when you have problems and you are not there for me when I need you, then our relationship needs to end." I never heard from him again.

Luckily, I found a new friend. When Ladd comes to me with a problem, he asks if this is an okay time to share. I feel like I have the freedom to say yes or no, and he treats me respectfully either way. When I do agree to listen, he shares his pain for a limited amount of time. I am not expected to be a free counselor. Ladd does what is possible to prevent the repetition of a problem. He is willing to look at how he may have contributed to the problem. He is thankful for my attention. I then have a chance to share whatever I am going through. This is a clean exchange. We both part with more energy than we had at the onset.

Other times, Ladd and I come together just for fun. We are becoming more bonded as a result of how we treat each other. When I decided to respect myself, I found a friend that honored my feelings, too.

Even when we do not behave respectfully, we still deserve fair treatment. We want a level of love that is constant. We want to be able to count on love and support. We don't want to be with someone who storms off at the slightest provocation.

I am willing to earn love. You do not have to accept everything about me. If I am being a jerk, tell me. If I continue, leave me.

Being accepted by a friend is easier than by a partner because the friend doesn't have to live with you. The consequences of your behavior has less impact on a friend. Would your friend be as accepting if you mistreated them as often as you mistreat your partner? If the answer is "unlikely," do not expect your partner to be patient and understanding in the ways that your friend is.

Acceptance of weakness, to a certain extent, is a good thing. We want to be accepted for who we are and be encouraged to heal and grow. If someone's behavior is continually destructive, it doesn't serve anyone for the relationship to continue.

I once gave this advice to a friend: If you continue this unhealthy relationship, he will eventually hurt you and you will have to reject him. Prolonging the relationship does not serve you or him. It is loving to put on hold or end the relationship before it becomes tragic. Uncritical acceptance is neither real nor healthy. Each of us has the right to be selective about whom we love, what kind of love we give and the treatment we accept from another.

Here are some different feelings and points of view, as people deal with the subject of acceptance:

My biggest fear is that I will break up my family. Then in a year, I might be involved again and have the same problems to deal with, because I haven't changed. I keep picking partners who bring out the worst in me. Do I stay in this relationship and do the work here? Or do I leave and try to find a better person with whom to do the work?

I still love you but I don't want to be around you right now.

I can be loving of someone's strengths but I am less willing to accept someone's weaknesses. I want people to love all of me yet I do not like my failings ... so why should I expect someone else to?

I make mistakes, fail to keep commitments, neglect others' needs. I hope for forgiveness. Yet if I repeatedly make mistakes that are destructive to our relationship, he might leave me. It's not realistic to expect people to be perfect. I want to be loved by somebody that knows my imperfections. Acceptance suggests the possibility of not having to hide parts of myself behind a mask.

Can I trust you to stay with me during the difficult times?

The more I tried to love her, the worse she treated me, as if to prove that she was not worthy of love.

Would you continue to love me if I wasn't there for you?

I want to be free to be me! I want to be respected for who I am and welcome suggestions for how I might improve myself. If I become addicted to alcohol and am unwilling to seek treatment, then you have the right to leave me. If I am on a self-destructive path and you get in my

way, you will be destroyed. If you stay, you will become part of the problem.

Love has limits and conditions.

Where is the line between smart and loving, staying or walking away? It is a grey area, each case having different issues and considerations. One person might safely stay in the relationship because they have the skills and strength, while another needs to remove herself to escape harm. It is always important to clearly communicate which behaviors will never be tolerated and that, if needed, you will do what you must to protect yourself. It is not loving to continually allow another person to hurt you. It is neither good for you nor is it good for them.

When I was young I met Bart. He was good to me and I vowed to love him. After we were married for about a year, he started yelling at me. I did some checking around and found out that he had a long history of aggression toward women. He totally misrepresented himself as a gentle man.

I grew up in an abusive home and promised myself, when I moved out at sixteen, never to let anyone mistreat me the way my parents did. But I was.

I did not feel safe with Bart, so I left. He was still in such total denial about his problems! Sometimes the smartest thing to do is to end a doomed relationship. No matter how much you pump and bail, a boat with this many holes in it is going to sink.

Over the course of several years I healed my wounds. My new skills helped me to see that it was up to me to make good choices in selecting a partner. I have been happily married for nine years now.

Five minutes after being certified as a mental health investigator, I was sent to the state mental hospital where the movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, had been filmed. To reach the ward where my client was being kept, I had to pass through five electronically locking gates. I will never forget the panic I felt as I heard the sound of the dead bolts clunking behind me. As I entered the cell, I saw an older woman with matted gray hair sitting in the corner. She was fidgeting with her fingers and avoided looking at me. I knew that she had just stabbed her husband. As I talked to her in a gentle voice, she would occasionally peek through her hair at me, then look

down again at her hands. I was breathing slowly to calm my nerves. This was the first time I had been confined in a small room with someone who was labeled as criminally mentally ill. I did my best to treat her with loving kindness.

Gradually, her story revealed a long history of violent abuse by her husband. I wondered if I would have fought back and attacked someone who had abused me for so long. I did not need to accept her behavior to see that she was clearly in need of love. Later, when this woman was released back to her community, she entered a support group and I admired her for the recovery she made.

All beings need love. Yet, for a long list of reasons, this basic need is too often withheld. Have you ever witnessed the effect of love on someone who has been shunned most of their life? It is a human tendency to express love only to those who do something for us. Practice expressing love toward someone you initially judge as unlovable, inferior, repulsive or not good enough.

What characteristics attract or repulse you?

Self-Love

We usually define love by our relationship to another, but love is inseparable from our relationship with ourselves. The virtue of self-love makes loving others possible. When you know yourself to be special, people will treat you as such. Once you have begun to accept yourself, you naturally gravitate toward those who meet your desire for intimacy. Creating the time to be with those who love you is an act of self-love. The ideal is for two self-loving people to form a relationship.

*To be loved, begin by being
in love with yourself.*

Recognize your personal responsibility to love yourself. Become an expert at giving to yourself. Then give love to others and complete the cycle. The watermark we create in self-love frames the love we feel for ourselves.

The higher your level of self-love:

The greater your chances to find someone who loves you.

The more love you can have for and from others.

The more you enjoy being with yourself, the more you will cherish another's company.

"Love yourself; no one can do it for you." This statement is true and invites deep reflection. The application of this principle requires continual effort.

The fastest way to find true love is to first love yourself.

Self-love requires an intimate knowledge of self. The more you know about yourself, the more there is to love. Begin by examining your past to discover who you have been. Wake up and ask the question anew: Who am I becoming? Share with your friends your emerging identity. Look into yourself and love all that you see.

My need for solitude has increased at the same rate as my need to be deeply connected to others. As I expand who I am, I want to share this with a friend. I enjoy being with the one I love yet still enjoy being alone. To know myself I need time alone with me. Who am I when I am alone? I am my own sanctuary, available any time. Now that I enjoy being alone with myself I am no longer afraid of being lonely.

I enjoy being alone in nature for long periods of time. There are certain friends who have the special talent of respecting solitude while we are hiking.

Caring for each other creates an abundance of love. When we love ourselves, we build up a reservoir that overflows. Love envelops others who are in need. If you are less than full, find ways to support filling yourself up. When you have self-love, you trust that your own love will sustain you even when you end a relationship.

Strive for relationships where both people come from a place of fullness.

The law of love is give love away and love will find you.

Insufficient self-love can negatively affect any relationship. Until you awaken to our own self-worth, you will resist the esteem others offer. If you feel you are not receiving enough love from others, you need to increase self-love. Learn to appreciate yourself for who you are now.

Love is the ultimate trickster. Its favorite joke is to hide the unloved parts of ourselves in other people.

When our self-love is low, there is an increased risk of mistaking lust for love. The more lonely and starved for affection we are, the more likely we will make unwise decisions about our involvement with others. When we raise our level of self-love we are less dependent on the approval from others.

I was raised on God's greatest commandment: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." The problem was that I loved myself too little. It is difficult to love others until you love yourself. When my confidence is low, it pulls down my other relationships. Without self-love, my actions are destructive. When I search for reasons why my relationships are not healthy, I begin by looking at my level of self-love. Frequently when I am critical about some trait in another, it represents what I find difficult to like about myself.

There seems to be an unspoken taboo against self-love, while self-sacrifice is universally lauded. But, by putting ourselves last, we ultimately undermine our relationships. Bitterness, anger, resentment and depression build if we refuse to acknowledge our own needs and feelings.

Your relationships will shift when you are not dependent on love from the outside.

Maggie and I have been close friends with Gretchen over the years. She is a wonderful example of someone who has followed up on her commitment to love herself as a means of enriching her other relationships:

Love seemed elusive, so I decided to examine myself to find out the causes for my lack of love. I used to try to find someone to love me, to make up for the false belief that this would compensate for my lack of self-love. I also had to train myself not to get involved with people who have major self-destructive behaviors. If they cannot care for themselves, they sure can't do it for me.

One of the things I did was to stop needing a partner to feel love. I invited a group of friends to celebrate my marriage to myself. I started to treat myself at least as well as I would a new boyfriend. When I enjoy being with me, others tend to seek my company. I have made a commitment to cherish myself.

I began to tune into my thoughts about myself. Sometimes my self-talk was like gossip, "She is not good enough." I have struggled to love myself even when other people put me down. Learning to experience my own love clears the way of obstructions. Qualities I appreciate in my friends are clues to uncovering what I like about myself.

I was shocked to discover as my self-love and self-confidence grew, some people were less able to relate to me. They seemed to resent my admiration for myself. One person whom I had considered a close friend accused me of being selfish. I was relieved to hear feedback from another long-time friend that I was not self-centered but rather becoming centered in self.

As I accelerate my growth, new friends have begun to appear. I am changing fast, I want those who love me to stay updated.

We all deserve love. The main obstacle to increasing the love in our lives is the belief that we deserve only a limited amount. To believe you deserve love is a virtue. As we become convinced of this, the love in our life will grow. Love is a gift we give.

You deserve love, intimacy and companionship. Discover what kind of relationships you want. Promise yourself that you will not let your life slip by without the comfort of heartfelt friendships. Any improvement you make in your ability to be a good friend to yourself radiates out to all.

"I deserve love and I am lovable." Say this out loud several times ... experiment with different tones. Observe how you feel and your level of conviction. Additionally, write a list of everything that you think you deserve.

Asking for what you want is an important form of self-love. I decided to write an "Owner's Manual" for how I want to be treated. I gave a copy to my friends and asked them to give me a list of what they wanted.

I desire to:

Be treated with compassion, understanding and respect.

Spend high quality time together, bonding and becoming friends.

Bring out the goodness in myself and others.

Reveal the worst of me without fear of rejection.

Know what you think and feel.

Find friends who share both our highs and lows.

Make friendships a priority.

Everything seems to be based on the ability to understand, care, nurture and love yourself. Strive to become your own best friend.

Willingness to take care of yourself is the key to satisfying, long-term relationships. The better you care for yourself, the better suited you are to care for others.

Here are a few exercises that I have found useful in developing my friendship with myself.

A great way to judge your level of self-love is to describe the friendship you have with yourself. Reflect upon how you nurture yourself. Learn what makes you feel good about yourself and how you can increase your self-care.

What are you secretly hoping for? Give it to yourself. Spend an entire day on a date with yourself. Treat yourself as if you were giving this day to your closest friend as a gift. Plan special events. Get a massage and take a long soak in a hot tub. Go on a hike. Do whatever you need to feel connected, alive and free. Make your day the greatest day of your life! At the end of your day, make yourself a promise to plan more adventures.

Be a good friend to yourself.

Compose a letter to yourself as if to a best friend or lover. Praise yourself, thank yourself, acknowledge yourself. Choose the stationery with care. Consider how you want to open and close your letter. Decorate the letter and envelope when you are done.

Tell yourself what you wish others would say or write about you. Give yourself the time it takes with no distractions. Dig deep until you surprise yourself. Listen for the voices that try to talk you out of writing the letter. "Oh, that's silly," or "I am too busy now," or "This is too hard!" Write as if your life depended on it. If this letter seems hard to do, that is only because you need practice. This may be the most important letter you will ever write.

Ask your friends to do the same for themselves then share the letters. Give your letter to a friend and ask him to mail it to you at a random date. Here is an example of a love letter I found that I had composed years ago when I started my quest.

Dear Bob,

I am writing to tell you how much I like and respect you. You are a great parent. The past three years of your life have been stressful to say the least. You have made the most of your opportunities. Instead of going backwards, you realized your dreams: running, making new friends and buying a house.

I love you from the inside out. Each year you are becoming healthier and happier. I want the best for you because you deserve it. I like how you take care of yourself with night walks, delicious food and new clothes. You are inspiring by how you enjoy being with yourself, like when you arrange a date with yourself to go to the movies. I love you just the way you are. I am proud of you. I like who you are becoming.

Love,

Bob

Being your own best friend is doing what is best for you. To embody love is to be in love with yourself. There is no substitute. Love is only sustainable when it originates inside. The love that is within is what shines out. Promise to love yourself passionately. Do this and you will never be lonely.

Self-esteem is a special form of self-love. Your degree of self-esteem affects every thought, feeling and action. At a functional level, self-esteem acts as a catalyst to bring the kind of people you want into your life. When self-esteem grows, friendships flourish.

Self-esteem is a balanced belief in one's own dignity and a realistic understanding of one's skill level. Enrich your self-esteem by developing your virtues. Building your special qualities will increase esteem from your friends. Then the love you share can begin to compound your self-esteem.

*Love yourself because no one
can love you better.*

Early on in my quest I began to see, with the help of a counselor, that I had a problem with my self-esteem. I needed to be needed and thus formed relationships with people who wanted me to take care of them. Too much of my belief in my own goodness was linked to helping others. I wanted attention, acknowledgement and a sense belonging. I was shocked that no one came to my aid when I needed help. Once this dynamic became clear to me, I changed. Now I wanted people to form friendships with me, not just because they needed me, but because they desired a mutually beneficial, even ecstatic, relationship. I observed who was giving, who was in need and with whom love was mutual.

As I examined my level of self-esteem I noticed many different characteristics. I invented this self-assessment tool to help me identify different areas of my persona that I wanted to develop.

The following ten qualities of self-esteem lead to a well-rounded sense of self. The sentence after the definition shows the link between how you feel about yourself and how that determines your perception of others.

1. Self-Concept is how I think about who I am.
I am special, and I acknowledge your uniqueness, too.
2. Self-Image is how I feel about how I look.
I look good; you look good too.

3. Self-Confidence is a realistic belief in my capabilities.

I am capable, so likely you are capable too.

4. Self-Reliance is the trust in my abilities to solve problems.

I trust my abilities and yours.

5. Self-Responsibility is my ability to make conscious choices.

I assume responsibility for my choices and trust you to do the same.

6. Self-Control is the power to direct my emotions and actions.

I am in charge of myself so I expect you to be in charge of yourself.

7. Self-Respect is a high regard for myself.

I honor who I am and respect you.

8. Self-Worth is the premium I place on myself.

I am valuable so I value you.

9. Self-Care is the concern for my health and happiness.

I enjoy taking good care of myself so I support your care of yourself.

10. Self-Acceptance is the ability to be compassionate toward myself.

I accept who I am so I accept you as you are.

What is your current level of self-esteem in each of these areas? What can you do to improve?

Our friendships are a reflection of our self-love.

Look at the friends in your life. When you esteem yourself, you invite great friendships. If you have great friends, your self-esteem rises because you attracted them. Whom you spend time with and the quality of these relationships will give you valuable information about your feelings about yourself.

Whole Love

The quest for love and deep friendship starts by loving each facet of yourself: your strengths as well as your weaknesses.

When we require another's love to feel whole, we are incomplete. When we lack self-love, we crave love from others. This sets up a dangerous dynamic and ends in dependence. When we love others to get the love we do not give ourselves, we are trapped. There is never enough love, if we need someone to love us in order to be whole. When someone does not give us what we expect, we resent them for withholding love.

Our craving for someone to make us feel whole is useful in one regard: It puts a spotlight on that which needs to heal. Whole love means respecting our persistent injuries. When we resist loving a part of ourselves, we are not free to love others with compassion. Whole love includes pain and pleasure, conflict and caring.

This is a letter I saved from a woman who came to see me for several counseling sessions. I think she is a hero for saving her own life. All she needed was a little guidance and support.

I used to think and act as if I were half a person. When I found the right man I would be complete. But when I was with him, I still did not feel happy. So I thought kids would complete me. Then I thought I needed to lose weight, have the right job and so on.

As a nurse in intensive care, I witnessed daily the suffering and deaths of those with lethal lifestyles. They smoked, they drank too much and they lived insanely stressful lives. Many patients would return years later to my unit because they had not taken care of themselves.

My lifestyle habits were just as destructive as those of my patients. Major health issues were developing. Why didn't I take better care of myself? I tried to justify it: I was okay because I cared for others. A co-worker helped me see that there was a problem with my self-esteem. I did not believe that I deserved love. I invested little time and energy into relationships. My life was too busy and drained my energy. If I got sick, who would nurse me back to health?

Learning to nurture myself has been the hardest work I have ever done. I had to put myself in "intensive care" by caring for myself intensively.

All of this hard work has been worth the effort. Today I am doing well. I don't need others to make me feel complete. I do need my new friends who support me in taking good care of myself. Learning to love myself has saved my life.

Conscious Love

Everyone makes painful mistakes in the areas of love and friendship. We must be bring greater awareness to our relationships. It is better to be deliberate than be emotionally kidnapped by our fantasies. A commitment to constant communication creates the optimal environment for the exchange of love. Conscious love is about conscious choice. You can decide to have more love in your life; likewise, having less love is also a choice. You make thousands of choices each day that either move you closer to love or farther away. Be honest with yourself about how much you really want to give and receive. Accept your responsibility as an evolved being to make conscious choices.

Choose love.

Love is a choice to act from your higher consciousness, rather than from fear. You decide to love and choose to be loved. You are free in every moment to expand or contract your love. You can be receptive or you can resist. You choose to be with this friend and choose not to be with that one person. The choice is always yours.

A tremendous amount of effort is needed to direct one's intentions in a loving manner. We must seek our highest self without feeling guilty when we are less than perfect. Our friends help us to make good choices in love.

Everyone you meet has love lessons to teach you. All you need is the humility to ask. Learn everything there is to know about love. Take advantage of every opportunity to express love. Open your life to conscious love.

Integrated Love

Over the years, there has been a debate about which is the more appropriate faculty to employ with relationships: head or heart. One rally cry is: "Follow your heart, be spontaneous and let the feelings flow!" The other team shouts, "Think before you speak, be reasonable and follow the facts!"

Our head and heart are two necessary guides. Neither is right all the time nor has all the information. By using both head and heart, things work out pretty well. When we have strong emotions, we need to assess if our feelings are serving us and the greater good. Then decide what the optimal means of expression would be.

Emotions reside in certain areas of the brain, while our powers of reason are concentrated in others. When a situation becomes highly emotional, your rational center may shut down. It's good to know which part of the brain is in use—reason, emotion or both.

Problems arise when emotions are undervalued or their expression is repressed. Dismissing reason is equally dangerous. Just because we think or feel that this is love doesn't make it so. Actions speak the truth.

Integrated love honors both thoughts and feelings. Be alert, thinking clearly and feeling clearly. The head and heart can mislead, especially if working alone. Practice teaches us which thoughts and feelings to follow.

Listen to the rational and emotional parts of the brain as if they are the right and left speakers of a stereo system. In this metaphor, the full integration of better understanding and open-hearted emotional expression produces the highest quality sound. The better informed and more in touch with our feelings we are, the better decisions we make.

During the early stages of a romantic relationship, emotions often run high, as the following discussion shows:

Tom:

During the first year of dating, Susan and I loved to talk about our "urge to merge". Our love opened us up and brought incredible highs. We glorified our similarities and were enthralled with our common ground. The romantic attraction turned us on. We had feelings of hope and ecstasy. The rush was good for our health and our spirits. The touching, bonding, attention, fantasy, fun ... everything about love was intoxicating. Our joke was that we were so drunk on love it was best not to drive under the influence. So we should stay over and sleep it off.

Susan:

Now after three years of marriage, we often fall asleep without kissing good night. Although we lie in the same bed, the distance is vast. When we first met, I adored Tom's brilliant mind, but I began to make mean little comments to myself, ridiculing him for being so "in his head."

Tom:

In the beginning, I loved Susan because of the wide range of emotions that she expressed. Now, I am repulsed by her constant emotionalism. I feel rejected and have been licking my wounds for months, but they have not healed.

Susan:

I don't know what happened to the romance! When we first fell in love, I ignored Tom's flaws. I imagined him to be everything I desired. Later, when I was able to see his faults, I thought I could fix him. Now I realize this was disrespectful. Love means valuing differences. I try to pause and make myself see that he is human.

Balanced Love

Earlier in this chapter, I shared my high school definition of love: wanting what is best for the other person. A refinement of that definition is balanced love—wanting what is best for you, me and us. This kind of love seeks respect for our individual needs and the needs of the relationship. When our independence and our interdependence are honored, the relationship flourishes.

Love is a skilled juggling act. Only one of the three balls—you, me or us—is on top at any given time. Sometimes the focus is on the needs of one individual and then the focus changes so that the other person receives attention. Being able to juggle what is best for “us,” rather than just for one person, takes concentration and regular practice. Switching from competition to cooperation keeps all the balls in the air.

Two me's do not make an us.

What is the best for both of our growth? Seeking to love and to be loved are dual paths. We place ourselves in another's care yet are mindful of the other's needs. We are never required to give more than we have available, yet stretching our abilities is always good. Our individual interests are served in being a loving person full-time.

Take equal pleasure from giving love and feeling adored. Balanced love is always a synergistic experience.

Balanced love is linked to the virtue of abundance. When we do not react out of scarcity we find ways to meet everybody's needs.

What are you going to do for me and how may I assist you? Help me get what I need and I will return the favor. In a mutually nurturing relationship, I take care of my needs in ways that also benefit you.

Being overly needy can profoundly alter the balance in a relationship. I remember watching many an old movie where the woman says to the leading man, in a simpering voice, “I need you!” Today, need is tricky territory. “I need you” can be about dependency as much as it can be about love. Like many I want to be needed, but I have to be careful about my need for approval from others to be happy. I make it a practice to examine my relationships to see if I am acting too much out of need.

Each person in a relationship has unfulfilled needs which the other partner can help satisfy. Seek to be with those who are sensitive to your needs as well as their own. A strong, lasting relationship must evolve to this balanced state. A triple commitment to you, me and us creates balanced love.

We never outgrow our need for love. Use your adult skills to heal and fulfill your needs. Make sure your love exceeds your needs. Useful insights can be discovered by noticing when you start to exchange love in a relationship, instead of just needing love. Deep needs are met by deep friendships.

Virtuous Love

As we grow older, we become increasingly selective about who and how we love. Virtuous love between kindred spirits is our goal. The more we love, the larger capacity we have to love. The stronger your virtues are, the stronger your love. The deeper the bonding, the deeper the kindness, the deeper the respect, and the deeper the love will be.

*Seek love,
be love,
give yourself
to love.*

Sabina wanted to find a life partner:

Sabina:

I am a beautiful being but I have a dilemma. It seems that since I have done healing and growth work, I have had a hard time finding a partner with whom I can be close. I know who I am and I want someone who can meet me. I want a partner to share my joy. Having reached this stage of my life I will not settle for less. I spend too much time alone. I have not found the right person ... am I tragically flawed?

Bob:

You have worked hard on being a good person. You have reached a high level of awareness and developed many virtues. The kind of love you want is unlikely to fall in your lap, especially since you want more than the typical romantic rush. The reality is that what you are looking for is rare—which means to be successful, you need to commit time to find what you want. Each of the choices you make will move you closer to either loneliness or love. It is true that since you have grown so much, fewer people can match you. You go to the gym all the time ... are you willing to put that much effort into finding the kind of partner you want?

Trust me, there are others who are also looking for the kind of love you have to give. You will meet some fantastic travelers along this path who will welcome and help you on your quest. Be in love with life and kindred spirits will appear.

One year later, I got a note from Sabina saying: "My ship has come in. I found the loving friendship I have been seeking"

Trust love.

All the virtues presented in this book represent different kinds of love. The next chapters will provide additional virtues, qualities of love that you may wish to explore.

EvoLove

The very first day I arrived in Portland, I ventured out to meet people in my new hometown. A few blocks from my apartment I walked into a community social services office and was greeted by the smiling face of Shannon. We had a great talk and she invited me to join a counselor training program. Decades later, I discussed my writings on the virtues evolve and love with her. She jokingly said, "When you combine evolving and loving you get the new word evoloving."

In the two previous sections we explored the meaning of evolve and love. Evolve plus love equals a new double virtue: *evoLove*. To *evoLove* is the prerequisite of higher levels of conscious love for yourself and with your friends. *EvoLove* is simply a term for love that evolves. *EvoLove* represents the qualities needed for healthy relationships.

Later, when I showed the word "*evoLove*" to Shannon, she pointed out that it was a seven-letter palindrome: a word spelled the same forwards or backwards. When I told her that I had never heard this term before, she laughed. "Your name, Bob, is a palindrome, too!"

Evolve + Love = EvoLove

I needed an expanded definition of love to reflect my emerging awareness. A bigger love needs a bigger word. *EvoLove* is symbolic of the kind of friendships that nourish our body, mind and spirit. The ultimate goal of *evoLove* is to integrate all the parts of ourselves into a unified, *evoLoving* self.

EvoLove is a constant refinement of love and intimacy. How can I become more nurturing, develop mutual relationships and make mature choices and agreements? *EvoLove* encompasses all human virtues. In order for me to be *evoLoving*, I must expand my awareness of my weaknesses. While a significant percent of humans seem hell-bent on destroying themselves, others and the planet, I must be a positive force by reducing my vices and increasing my virtues. *EvoLove* is not about perfection, but is rather being and doing my best in the moment. My path is to integrate love and consciousness into every aspect of my life.

EvoLove is an advanced developmental stage of love. *EvoLove* can be just as emotional and passionate as romantic love. To evolve and to love takes a great deal of energy. To be *evoLoving* is to make a commitment to intimacy and mutual support.

To foster the unfolding process that stimulates a co-evolving, co-loving environment is part of the quest. As I learn to be interdependent, synergy results, creating more than I could possibly produce as an individual. This synergy provides the foundation for kindred spirit relationships.

EvoLove is an empathetic resonance between kindred spirits. Miraculous things happen to me as I develop a passion for growth and love. One of the main driving forces behind human evolution is love. Love encourages our evolution, by deliberately seeking love, our evolution is boosted through intention. Love evolves as we evolve.

Love evolves.

EvoLove is a transforming experience. Friends help each other see our weaknesses. They are guides for each other, recreating themselves as a powerful presence in the world. They manifest deeper levels of intimacy, as the creative expression of spirit comes into their awareness. EvoLove stimulates consciousness, expands awareness and magnifies compassion.

The Path of EvoLove

Over time, I developed a system to put my commitment to evoLove into action. I see evoLove as a seven-fold path that encompasses a full spectrum of expressions.

There is a crystal prism hanging in the west window of my office. As the sun sets, its light is transformed into a full spectrum of color components onto my walls. I started using the rainbow as a reminder to be evoLoving in all areas of my life.

Each color represents a path of action. On the path of evoLove, we blend and balance these areas:

Red - Love Yourself

Orange - Nurture the Children

Yellow - Cherish Family and Friends

Green - Honor Home and Work as Sacred

Blue - Be of Service

Indigo - Enliven the Spirit with Joy

Violet - Respect the Earth

1. Loving Yourself

A special freedom comes from giving yourself love. When you have self-love you are less fearful of being abandoned by others. The reward of self-love is that you are free to love others without unhealthy dependency. You choose for yourself the healthy, interdependent relationships you need.

So energize yourself with self-love by spending time with people, activities and places that nurture you. When you are good to yourself, you'll be amazed at what you learn! Treat yourself with tenderness. Spend time being as virtuous with yourself

as you would be with an infant. Then seek to exchange this love with others, expanding endlessly beyond yourself. While you're at it, be open to a person loving you in a way that you have not yet learned to love yourself.

2. Nurturing the Children

How we love children is a measure of our humanity. We are all responsible for loving and nurturing them. Only when we treat every child as a community responsibility can we call ourselves civilized. Unfortunately, we have a long way to go.

Children need role models of adults who practice evoLove. We must learn to care for ourselves and each other, then model this caring for our children. Every child needs love. Love yourself, then extend that love to children and feel their love in return.

There is no better use of our time, energy and money than to nurture children. What would it be like if all adults were committed to helping kids? What if every child had several caring adults in their lives? Maybe then children could learn to care for themselves in healthy ways. They would learn real sharing because there is plenty for everyone. What if the best people on the planet chose to work with our youth? Boys and girls would excel beyond our wildest dreams.

Being around kids has always been important to me. I have helped to raise several children besides my biological son. I am an honorary Uncle Bob with the kids of my kindred spirits. There is a wonderful three-year-old boy named Chamden who lives two houses up the street. His mom brings him by for visits. After a certain amount of time playing together, a silent bell goes off and Chamden decides it's time to leave. The other day, he gave me a sweet kiss on the back of my hand. I melted.

Children are the future unfolding.

3. Cherishing Family and Friends

Every close relationship takes effort and commitment. Invite into your inner circle members of both your birth family and your family of choice. Begin by creating the time to evoLove your family and friends. Use the virtues as a guide to cherish your kindred spirits. Practice the deepest level of evoLove possible with each person. Relationships grow when we pay attention to them. Give high priority to enjoying each other's company. I enjoy having adventures as well as quiet times with my loved ones. These shared experiences heighten our level of intimacy.

Let your family and friends know that you are elated just to see them. Tell them how they brighten your day. Treat them like a grand prize by instilling zest and excitement into each encounter. Make your home into an amusement park where fun things are available at a moment's notice. Hold family and friends dear by refreshing them with your love.

4. Honoring Work as Sacred

I find it strange, even counterintuitive, that our society places such emphasis on the distinction between "making a living" and "getting a life." A life well-lived integrates meaning into all of its activities.

Many of us spend a majority of our adult life at work. An occupation without meaning is depleting. When we integrate our virtues into our work life, the workplace can become a holy place. It is as important to do our inner work at work as it is anywhere else in our life. Awakenings occur by bringing our spirit into our livelihood.

Work, in the broadest sense, is our relationship to self, to coworkers, to customers, to the Earth. The workplace exists to serve us. Build a sense of community with those you encounter, even if you talk with them for only one minute. Engage in business activities that promote growth and love. Become a leader and take responsibility for initiating changes that raise the level of kindness and joy. Make your workplace an enriching place to be by bringing your work life and your principles into alignment.

Employers are beginning to recognize that the health of their employees determines the health of their companies. Insist on finding work that nourishes you. Do not work just to earn a living, but rather create work worthy of your life.

5. Being of Service

The heart of service involves a mutual exchange, a giving and receiving. Anyone who attempts to serve others without taking care of themselves in the process will be doing a disservice to all. Ideally, service is never an obligation. Being open to receiving from those you serve recognizes and honors them.

Service is more than giving to the needy, the hungry, the sick and the homeless. We all need service. Create a sense of community by giving to and supporting each other. Our spirits are interconnected; what happens to one happens to all. Each of us has an abundance of something that we can give. To be of service to others, fill yourself up with love and give from your fullness. In being the best we can be, our community grows with us.

Do not allow yourself to get depleted. Be in touch with the energy you need to sustain yourself. EvoLove requires putting your special gifts, talents and virtues into action. All the forms of evoLove are ways of being in service. The greatest service is love.

6. Enlivening the Spirit with Joy

Cheer each other up. Be hopeful and optimistic. Savor the exhilaration of being together, doing ordinary things. EvoLove is joyous. Love and laughter are stepping-stones on the path. Seek people you can play with. Celebrate the miracle of your existence. Say, "Yes!" to life.

Humor is important to every aspect of our lives. When we can see the humor in a situation, we activate our higher consciousness. We all need to take ourselves less seriously in the larger scheme of things. When we can laugh at ourselves, we see the relative importance of something more clearly, allowing us to relax in difficult situations and maintain perspective.

Discover humor in your own imperfections. See the world's problems yet remain joyful. Practice finding amusement in the situations life treats us to. Find comedy where others may only see problems or pain. Such a course will allow you to work longer and harder on the most difficult problems.

One of the most profound things you can do is to uplift your spirit and spread joy to others. Joy energizes and empowers evoLove. Use the power of joy to transform your surroundings.

7. Respecting the Earth

The Earth is our home. Our bodies come from the Earth and we will return to the Earth. The Earth has been good to us, giving us life, sustaining us with food and providing our shelter and livelihood. Sense how the Earth supports you. EvoLove requires our treating the Earth virtuously. Bond with the land and make a commitment to serve.

We can create our relationship with the Earth as consciously as with other kindred spirits. The virtues we refine in our friendships are the same qualities we can extend to the Earth. We take time with our friends, we care for them, are interested in their well-being, and provide for them when necessary. We can do the same with the living, breathing Earth.

Our desire for a deep friendship with the Earth is part of our quest. Self-love is incomplete unless we also love the Earth. Feeling the sensation of gravity holding us against the planet reminds us that we are connected to sacred ground.

Vow to evoLove the Earth.

EvoLove includes reverence for the Earth. Foster respect for all kindred beings that inhabit the planet by recognizing them as your kin. Live simply and give back to the planet. Be a model for a sustainable and liveable future, knowing that through moderation and ingenuity we can all live well. Recognize that each of us is responsible for the condition of the planet. We can change the future of the world with evoLove. Make everyday, all day, Earth Day.

My personal spiritual path involves looking for ways to expand my ability to be a loving person. I continue to notice those people who excel in one of these categories. Start a daily practice of learning more about loving. Nurture and be nurtured. All of our actions can be described as either as evoLoving or not. Discover new ways to expand your consciousness.

*Embrace the path of evoLove by
your actions.*

Intimacy

Intimacy refers to knowing and being known at your intrinsic core, your deepest nature. Intimacy can be physical, mental, emotional, sexual, spiritual or any combination of these elements. It is a need common to us all, yet to experience it, we must customize intimacy to each person and situation. The kind of closeness we share with a coworker differs from that with our parents, a lifelong mate, a sibling or a new lover.

When we know we are truly safe in the presence of another, the feeling of closeness emerges. Such connections help us to heal and do our personal growth work. We need intimacy to feel we belong, for it validates our innate feelings.

We can experience intimacy in myriad ways: dancing at a club, singing with a choir, walking in nature, working on a project together, struggling with a crisis or planning an adventure. We can tap into multiple sources of intimate energy with people, places and animals. The frequency of interactions, the length of time spent and the desire to generate closeness all affect the quality of the intimacy.

Our experience of authentic intimacy is so uniquely positive that we wish these moments would last longer and occur more often. It is a desired state of being. Yet no matter how strong our intention is for personal connection may be, our direct experience of intimacy can remain elusive.

As desirable as it is, intimacy is inherently risky because, inevitably, it can hurt to be so open. It is important to know who you can and cannot trust with the inner you. Ultimately, we want to share intimacy with those who make it safe to lower our guard, for they have mastered trustworthiness.

Virtues are the advanced relationship skills needed for intimacy. The interplay of basic virtues such as commitment, empathy, and openness cre-

ates the strong base needed for intimacy. Developing the ability to be intimate requires the clearest intention to create a relationship in which nurturing flows, for intimacy is a mutual exchange, a giving of one's self and a willingness to receive from the other. The virtue of understanding plays a vital role in the unfolding into intimacy.

The reward for developing our virtues is intimacy.

I struggled long to define what intimacy meant to me. Finally I tweaked the syllables of intimacy and I got "in-to-me-see." Now the key to the meaning is always in front of me.

The deeper your awareness of yourself, the greater capacity you have to love. Intimacy demands more than a glance. It involves discoveries about yourself. In-to-me-"I"-see. The deeper you look within, the greater your ability to be intimate. As counterintuitive as this may seem, getting to know yourself is the greatest reward of intimacy; thus the value of introspection, of spending quality time alone with yourself, is great. Becoming friends with yourself involves gaining an intimate knowledge of who you are.

Your level of self-reflection determines the level of intimacy you can attain with others. The deeper you look into yourself, the more you will want this same level of intimacy with another. It is only when you look inside and discover your own treasures that you can share these gifts with your friends. The more

you see into yourself, the more others will want to see into you. Being self-aware gives you the clarity to relate to another's core, and to offer your own.

How do you define intimacy?

What kinds of intimacy do you seek?

Strip

*Strip away your roles
and responsibilities.*

Be open to your essence.

Lay bare the center of your being.

*Reach farther in than you have
gone before.*

Discover what is true for you.

Intimacy springs from one's core self;

You will be lonely until you know who you are.

Witnessing

On the quest for love and friendship, intimacy skills must be developed. I would like to offer you some of the skills that have helped me to deepen the intimacy with myself, my mate and my circle of close friends.

To advance your process of self-discovery, you must witness yourself as objectively as possible. This is the continual practice of being able to observe what you are doing. At first, you may look at your actions in retrospect, but when you get really good at it, you understand your motivation as it arises. Then you merely take notice and make the necessary adjustments as you go. As with any skill, this becomes easier with practice.

*Self-observation is the foundation
of intimacy.*

We need all the parts of our brains witnessing. Our primitive brain needs observation by the mammalian part of our brain. The mammalian brain

needs to be watched over by the uniquely human, or conscious, part of our brain. The whole needs to be monitored by our higher, or spiritual, consciousness. This style of witnessing provides checks and balances. When you are in "fight or flight" mode, you may need to move to a better vantage point, higher in your brain's evolutionary structure, to make a good decision.

Asking good questions is an essential quality to expanding your witness. Asking the right question at the right time puts you in a frame of mind wide open to information.

Below are some sample questions to ask yourself and others to engage witness and enhance intimacy:

What are my fears and fantasies?

What is my motivation at this moment?

What side of my brain am I in, reasoning with, feeling or both?

What is my emotional state?

What are the beliefs that are operating in this situation?

What is my stress level? Is it rising, falling or consistent?

What principles have I selected to guide me?

What experiences have influenced me?

What do I want now? What are my needs?

What excites me, gives me energy?

What are the positive and negative consequences of these actions?

What inspires me?

What habit patterns do not produce the results I want?

What can I learn from this?

What am I avoiding looking at about myself?

What meaning do assign to this situation?

An Electrifying Experience

Here is an excerpt from a conversation with Philip. He has clearly developed an understanding of intimacy:

I experience intimacy as electricity that flows between me and my friends. My body is an electrical system that carries an emotional charge. I perceive a measurable stimulus from those I am close to. Even when I am just remembering an intimate experience, I feel the energy of life. I am enlivened by our exchange, whether it's sensual, emotional, physical, sexual or soulful. So, I look for the opportunity to share intimate time with friends, by playing, talking, listening and learning together.

Here is a list of questions that help me to generate energetic intimacy:

What does this person want to transmit?

What is the power level of the message I am receiving?

How can I be a better receiver of the signal?

Have I done anything to turn off another's willingness to connect?

Am I being a good conductor and receiver, or am I blocking intimacy?

The meaning we attach to an experience affects our behavior. The witness watches this sequence of unfolding events. Watch what happens and learn, before attempting to change a feeling, thought or behavior. Notice what works well and which actions cause problems.

Your interpretation of an event reveals your inner story. For example, the meaning you ascribe to a dream is more important than the dream itself. Just so, the meanings that you attach to your circumstances and the events in your life are more important than the events themselves. Therefore, listen to how you are describing your life experience, moment to moment. This is the story of your life unfolding. Ultimately, you are the cause and the effect of how you choose to feel, no matter the circumstances. Change the meaning, and an entirely different set of events rolls out in front of you. Who watches you from the inside?

We make up stories about what happens to us that are a mix of fact and fiction. Our stories may contain elaborate scenes, complicated dialogue, stunt actions, colorful personalities and surprise endings. When an event occurs, we establish a category, good or bad, and often seek to protect ourselves by making someone else wrong.

Witnessing involves detaching ourselves from this moralistic duality and delving for the deeper truth. I always find it interesting to see what role I have cast for myself. Even the title I give to the story is revealing.

What type of stories do you invent?

What is the point of the story?

Witnessing requires fine adjustment, just like taking your morning shower. You want the temperature just right ... one degree off, and you notice. If you have too little witness activated, you deny your flaws. Scheduling regular times just to be still is a useful practice in the development of the witness.

I ignore my mistakes and am unaware of my feelings. I become self-absorbed to the point of missing the beauty of the present. But when I am witnessing, I am observant, centered and I see all. I frequently need to quiet the excessive chatter in my mind so I hear what is happening.

Everybody witnesses themselves in different ways. Here are some examples to help you identify how you might activate your witness:

I am slowly learning to listen to all the voices in my mind and sift out what is of value. If I am busy all day, I take time out to rest ... and thoughts come rushing in that have been trying to get my attention.

I felt like a race horse with those blinders that limit peripheral vision. I have always been good at seeing what was right in front of me. Straight ahead, full speed, beat everyone else, was the way I ran my life. Because of my limited view, I missed what was happening on the sidelines. I was winning the race, but losing so much.

An emotional snow storm comes out of nowhere and is upon me before I know it. In the white out, I can't see a thing. I become excessive and out of balance. Yet, I would rather feel too much and learn how to handle my emotions than to be numb.

I began to turn my life around by developing specialized mental tools. I used my magnifying lens to get a closer look at the small things I did that prevented me from having the intimacy I wanted. My binocular vision helped me to get a better understanding of where I was headed.

I ask myself: What level of internal and external emotional expression is appropriate in this situation?

In the past I felt harassed by my emotions. I would feel out of control and uncomfortable. Trying to deny or repress these feelings only made them more persistent. Now when feeling badly, I let my emotions run rampant until I decide to stop. If I want to worry, I worry as long as I like. Giving myself permission to feel how I want for as long as I want is empowering.

My task is to witness my mood swings without swaying. I need to soothe myself rather than expecting others to calm me down. I have a special collection of music that I know will mellow me. I call my self-centering technique "managing my moods with music." This self-regulation of my emotions has helped me immensely.

I have needed to be more forgiving since I have developed my witness. I see that I collect resentments like some people collect coins. I sometimes have too little compassion for others because I am so unforgiving of myself.

My feelings carry an emotional charge that I can either use for my benefit or detriment. I have to ask myself what sensations I experience and what I want to do with this energy.

Sometimes I get stuck in certain feelings. I noticed that by changing my body's position, my feelings shifted. Each movement expresses different emotion. I watched myself walking in a plodding, dejected, undirected manner. I couldn't figure out why I was feeling so low! When I was ready for a change, I started skipping. Instantly my feelings lifted. I recommend practicing changing how you feel at will.

When a stranger is rude to me it's one thing, but when I am rude to myself, it doesn't make sense. When I am in a lousy mood, I have a little talk with myself. I say, "Why are you doing this to me? I'm tired of your crap!" I do this as a kind of joke to jar me into reality. I deserve to be treated with kindness. Then I say out loud, "I am sorry, self, and I promise to be nicer to you." I am no longer at the mercy of my feelings.

I feel all of these conflicting emotions. My mind has dozens of voices all telling me different things. I try to listen to all my thoughts and feelings. Many of them just want to be heard. When I truly listen, they quiet down. If I repress my thoughts, they operate in the background without my awareness and that's dangerous! Better to give them a voice up front.

My best strategy to engage the witness is to take a time out to cool down and count to ten ... or twenty. When I sense that my emotions are starting to run wild I like to watch my breath.

Framing

There are thousands of words to describe our feelings. How we label an emotion affects the emotion. Our choice of words has immense power. Someone asked me how I was feeling and I replied, "Okay." Then I noticed that when I said, okay, I only felt okay. But the truth was, I had been feeling fantastic.

One of the things I witness when it comes to feelings is how some people tend to exaggerate their emotional state to get attention, especially sympathy. It's good to be precise. Are you feeling a little sad, or deeply depressed?

Each of us can develop the skill of deciding how we want to think and feel. We have a choice about which ideas and feelings to focus on. If I decide I don't like my communication defined by a particular thought, I can change. I can allow a spontaneous stream of consciousness, or I can take control of the flow. At any given moment I can elevate my happiness just by framing which memories I want to remember.

I used to believe that I didn't deserve intimacy. Finally, I challenged that underlying assumption and examined the reasons I thought that about myself. Then I began to tell myself that I deserved all the love and friendship I wanted. This altering of my belief patterns has helped to release powerful forces inside me. Each day I strive to make improvements in my outer world that match up with my inner world. I see now that I am the source of change. I may have started out with a set pattern of responses, but I am responsible for my transformation.

My technique is to notice that I am stuck on saying the same thing over and over. My mind resembles a scratched record that is spins constantly but the needle is stuck in the same groove. I give myself a little bump to get unstuck.

When I'm scared, it's a big signal that I need to change my thinking. I pretend I can open up my skull, reach in gently and take out my brain. I rinse off the grime with warm water. Then I carefully place it back in there and blink three times to restart. Crazy, but it works for me.

Every emotion is a choice.

The biggest insight for me was the realization that my interpretation shapes my feelings. When I change the way I perceive a given situation, my thoughts and feelings change.

Over the years, I have written out a list of my negative patterns. I can't always stop them right away, but the sooner I see them, the faster I can prevent them from taking hold. Each time I notice a negative thought bubble up, I count it. I don't try to change it. But, somehow, by counting my emotions, I do not dwell on them.

I give myself multiple choices about how I feel. Do I want to avoid, reduce, eliminate, go around, ignore or cope with this feeling?

When I am still, it's easier to see the messages from my sub-conscience rise to the surface. The bubbles have tiny messages, like a comic book. But if I am agitated I can't read them. This practice helps me to be still when life is swirling around. I want to be highly emotional and still be in my witness.

We all experience a wide range of sensations yet are unaware of many of them. A revealing exercise is to record how you feel for a day. List the positive and negative emotions and then assign a negative 10 to a positive 10 value to indicate the degree to which you felt bad or good. Add up the negative numbers and the positive ones to see the ratio. At the end of the day review your list and values.

What are the emotions you feel most often?

Who have been your emotional vocabulary teachers?

Intimate Friends

I have come to realize that even at my best, I won't be able to witness all of myself. I need several people who know me intimately for a multifaceted, comprehensive view. I need many pairs of outside eyes to see all of me. The more my friends have traveled along the path of self-discovery, the more accurately they reflect me.

To see yourself through the eyes of those who see you clearly is advanced witnessing. The advantage of an outside perspective is that it can greatly speed up your self-discovery progress. We all have areas that elude self-awareness. Different friends show us parts of our self that only they can see and reflect. Intimate friends are needed to foster our personal intimacy with ourselves and them.

Those whom I call my "mutual mentors" are invaluable for this process of watching. We compare notes. Watching how others increase their intimacy helps me to expand consciousness into new areas. Each person offers a unique opportunity for self-examination and insights into life.

To manifest profound intimacy requires both parties having witnessing skills. A complete cycle of intimacy includes being able to see into yourself even as you see into another, while the other sees into themselves as they see into you. Both individuals are intent on developing their personal intimacy skills and uncovering their strengths and weaknesses. Intimacy requires continual effort, especially when both people are growing and changing.

The quest for love and friendship involves finding others who are committed to knowing themselves and have an equal desire to be in intimate relationships. Those who know that a comprehensive understanding of oneself is enhanced by relating to another are the best kinds of friends. The joy of intimacy is attained when two people who have a clear sense of themselves connect. Simply put, intimacy defines the depth of a relationship. For instance, the most noticeable difference between casual friends and kindred spirits is their level of intimacy.

I want friends who can see all of me, inhale me deeply into themselves and savor my scent to the point of being able to distinguish what kind of spring flower I am. They touch me in ways only they can. Body-to-body, mind-to-mind and spirit-to-spirit intimacy is what I truly desire. I hope to know all the ways we are the same and to be able to discern those ways in which we are uniquely different. I am constantly growing and I want people to see the new me, to update their knowledge of me as I change. Conversely, I want to see my friends in their essence.

Sensations of intimacy begin as the distance between individuals fades and bonds begin to form, creating a sense of "us." As the usual resistance dissipates, we are invited in. Being warmly welcomed feels like coming home to where we are loved and respected. Completely open and feeling safe, we are free to be ourselves.

Joy flows out of every pore when we are with an intimate friend. A rush of energy pulses through our entire body. Intimacy is produced by the exchange of ideas, hopes, dreams and fears. There is an understanding that we are sharing something of importance. Even our memories of intimacy generate enjoyable feelings right down to the cellular level.

Intimacy is one of life's greatest gifts and it is too seldom experienced.

*The more you know about
yourself and others, the more
there is to love.*

Intimate friends are vistas along life's paths. Stop to look and enjoy the grand view, be open to seeing new aspects of yourself. Keep expanding your personal intimacy while you expand your intimacy with friends. Help each other look inside. Mutually reflect your essential being. Spend time with friends who can observe themselves. The desire to be known is strong. Be bright, be clear, and reflect each other's light. Intimate friends have intimate experiences together. This requires scheduling time to be with each other.

How do you encourage and discourage intimacy?

Tender Loving Care

In the early '80s I was asked to teach a class on wellness to the students of the East-West College of Massage. My objective was to help the students learn to take good care of themselves even as they cared for others. I covered the usual topics like fitness, nutrition and stress management, but what piqued their interest was the lesson about touch. The stu-

dents shared emotionally charged stories about their hunger for touch. Everybody had issues around physical intimacy and touch that required healing and learning new skills.

I asked them if they currently received nurturing touch. Their answer was a resounding "No!" The students seemed to be struggling with how to heal their past wounds and create the loving touch they wanted. They admitted that they wanted more physical intimacy, like walking hand-in-hand with a friend. As we talked, it became obvious that a significant percentage of their motivation for entering the massage field was to fulfill their need for touch by becoming professional touch-givers.

Their impression was that all the bad press about disrespectful contact had given touch a bad name and suggested that there was a need to create a new vocabulary for healthy touch. Many students went so far as to say that they had difficulty making meaningful contact in social situations. They expressed their frustration about the many unfortunate "no-no's" around touch. Their conclusion was that people were afraid of making a mistake about how to touch so they generally avoided any touching at all.

In the next class I tested out an idea. I decided to call healthy touch "Vitamin T." I pasted a label on a jar and made it look just like a vitamin container. This label contained all of the attributes of Vitamin T, just as any other full disclosure label would for any other vitamin. It stated:

Vitamin T

Vitamin T is absorbed through the skin, via handshakes, hugs, holding and receiving rubs. Massage provides megadoses of this important daily supplement. Keep within easy reach of children and adults. Safe for all ages. Active ingredient: TLC (Tender Loving Care).

Research has shown the many benefits of Vitamin T. It soothes the body, calms the mind, nourishes the spirit, warms the heart, relieves stress, restores a sense of humor and strengthens self-esteem.

Vitamin T is recommended for day time and night time use. Please give with permission only. Ask for Vitamin T as often as you want. Vitamin T is 100% natural and there are no reported cases of overdose or side effects.

The students approved and encouraged me to write a book describing this special nutrient. An idea had been born.

Meanwhile, Maggie, a licensed massage therapist, reported the numbers of her clients who were starving for touch. Several people shared with her that she was the only one who ever touched them.

We reviewed literature on the subject of touch and found information on the problems of neglect and abuse, plus the need for healthier touch. What appeared to be missing was a “how to” book on creating TLC in one’s life.

As a result of all this research, Maggie and I began giving seminars that offered people an opportunity to talk about their issues concerning touch. We were surprised by the degree of hunger for touch expressed by participants. There seemed to be a lot of confusion about how and when touch was appropriate.

Late one night, I came up with a piece of the language that I thought would help to clarify the differences between healthy touch and unhealthy touch. Simply put, it goes like this; Touch can be pleasant or painful but Vitamin T always feels good. Vitamin T heals painful touches, known as “ouches.”

Touch minus the T = ouch.

In time, an entire language developed around this work. For instance, the lack of Vitamin T is destructive, a form of neglect. A Vitamin T deficiency can cause depression, anxiety or alienation. Establish clear boundaries and give feedback about what you want. It is important to learn to say “no” to unwanted touch. A “yes” to a particular touch one day may be a “no” the next time, and that’s okay.

You can administer Vitamin T with or without direct physical contact. The way you listen, what you say, tone of your voice and just being near or sending a letter creates a caring connection. That feeling of connection is Vitamin T at work.

Once I worked up my complete touch history. I started by spending a whole day writing out the times someone had given me an “ouch.” The list was especially long when I was a kid. The next day I wrote about and named the people who had given me Vitamin T. When I analyzed my touch history, it revealed that I had received more Vitamin T than ouches. Closer scrutiny revealed clearly that I was

not engaging in as much healthy touch as would be good for me.

Over the years, I have come to understand that the touch people really want and need comes in the form of tender loving care. To have a regular supply of Vitamin T, you need to create tender loving relationships. Our friendships provide the highest quality and quantity of this nurturing nutrient that is so essential for growth.

Higher quality relationships results in higher quality Vitamin T.

We invented a system called “leveling,” where the kind of touch and the degree of intimacy is communicated with mutual respect. This is because intimacy fluctuates between two people depending on how they feel moment to moment.

In many regions of the world, our country included, people seldom touch each other. Maggie and I began having discussions with our friends about creating a culture where we could freely exchange Vitamin T. We admitted that there would be difficulties opening up to physical intimacy, but we also acknowledged that it is possible to do this in a good way. Our goal was to create a supportive environment in which warmth and affection could be freely exchanged.

We began by getting together with our friends to dance, walk holding hands and give foot massages. Many friends said they wished they could afford more massages so we set up massage tables and did trades.

As our circle of friends grew more confident, the hugs became longer and more frequent. Physical intimacy brought us closer. Our bonding helped us to feel nurtured, safe and loved. If you were to observe our group interacting, you would wonder what country we immigrated from because we are so loving and playful.

By opening up our friendships to physical intimacy, Maggie and I improved our ability to nurture each other. In 1991 Maggie and I self-published the book *Vitamin T: A Guide to Healthy Touch*.

A Day of Play

Intimacy comes in a myriad of forms but the principles are the same: caring, making time and being present. It starts at the beginning of our life. Kids need us, and grown-ups need to be with them in consistent, special ways. Every mature healthy adult that I ever met was fortunate enough to have at least one grown-up who really cared for them during their childhood. The following story by a young working mom named Rose illustrates this aspect of intimacy beautifully:

I needed to slow down and follow the pace of my eighteen-month-old daughter. I decided to spend a whole day being with her, with no chores. I wanted Molly to see me unhurried. With a little planning, the rest of the family was on their own. I wanted this to be our special day.

We played and picnicked in the park. The wading pool was a big hit! We splashed for hours. How sensual was the day! Even the towel on the warm concrete was a treat. The other children's laughter was like a background chorus. Taking a nap and waking up together was divine. I loved to see how much she grew in just one day. I was pleasantly surprised to see Molly smile so much. We reflected joy on each other's faces.

Dinner time was a mix of food and playing with toys. We enjoyed the picture books and pointed to familiar images. The summer night seemed like an eternity. Bath time was water, toys and splashing. I trimmed her toe nails, a delicate job made easier because I had slowed down. Brushing hair and a fresh diaper were just more playtime.

In the soft light, she rested on my bare chest. The warmth of the day, the hot bath and our natural body heat were comforting. Our breathing, the rising and falling of my chest, was a kind of rocking. As Molly relaxed, I felt her weight increase as she sank into me. Her little fingers opening and curling were the final movements of our day. I am thankful for being able to hold my precious girl.

We will store this memory in our bodies for the rest of our lives. I am passing on the tradition from my parents who played with me. I want to hold her forever.

Love Story

When I met Sara, she obviously had a story to tell about when she felt love and intimacy:

Mark and I had been living together for almost two years when he surprised me with a three-day trip to the mountains. The remote cabin was a much needed retreat from our lives full of people and activities. Even the drive was pleasant and relaxing; we both needed time to transition into another world.

We bought groceries along the way so we could eat our meals at the cabin. The best gift in the world was time together. We played, napped and talked the first day. The next day we sat in silence. I decided not even to read a magazine ... I could do that at home. I wanted to experience myself and my boyfriend in the "now." We didn't even care what the weather was like. How sweet it was to focus on us. We were reminded of how much we enjoyed playing together in nature. What a luxury!

That night I began to gesture, to tantalize, to cuddle, to excite Mark. Preparing dinner together was a sensual appetizer. We danced for dessert—yummy! Mark and I traded massages by candlelight. We held hands and walked outside. The stars were our love-blanket. The mountain air and sounds of the night animals were our aphrodisiac. Our passion was even stronger than when we were first together. Our commitment to love each other grew day by day as we discovered new ways to pleasure each other. Lovemaking was an adoration. Our wild sounds echoed back to us and we basked in our afterglow. We were like two lightening bugs with our lights stuck on!

Suddenly we were greeted at the cabin with flashing lights. One of our neighbors, concerned by our cries, called the police! The officer took one look at us and was easily convinced that we were more than okay.

I realized that we would grow old together. I still wear my beloved's T-shirt from that weekend when he is out of town. I want his scent close to me while I sleep. The memory of this intimate time together warms me years later.

Mutual Respect

Respect is a critical concept in our quest for intimacy. We must always be willing to adjust our actions when we encounter a friend who wants a greater or lesser degree of intimacy than we desire. A high degree of mutual respect is necessary or a short circuit will stop the flow of energy. After all, people have different paces at which they develop friendship. Finding out where the desire is mutual demonstrates respect.

Know that we all make mistakes, it's inevitable. Ask for forgiveness when you hurt someone whose desired intimacy differs from yours. Even mistakes can lead to greater intimacy if we consciously examine our behavior.

Deep intimacy requires permission to enter another's inner world. Each person has a different level of willingness to be seen into. Listen for the invitation to take an inside look. People want to share what is consequential and they watch your cues to see if you are receptive. Accept the invitation with admiration for who they are.

Are you trustworthy? Will you respect what I share? Can you comprehend me? When I let you into my tender places, will you be gentle? These are some questions that arise.

When I interviewed people, I had lots of opportunities to practice the virtue of empathy. They wanted to be sure that I was sincerely interested in what was important to them. When they felt that I was safe and would not judge them, they were thrilled to have somebody with whom to share. They often said that this was the first time anyone cared to hear something so deep and personal. During such interviews, I remained respectful and receptive to what they were willing to share. I learned not to interrupt once they got going, although they often rambled. I let them speak as long as they wished. Often, they would test me to see if I could handle what they were sharing. I waited until they were finished then, by asking questions, I expressed my interest in knowing more.

When you asked me, "Do you have the love and friendship you want?" I realized how seldom even my friends ask about me. Just by asking, you showed me that you are sincerely interested in my life. I'd love to share what is important to me.

During these sessions, I had to remind myself not to assume that the people I was interviewing thought and felt the same way I did. Even identical twins in identical situations have different interpretations of events. I wanted to become like an instrument, calibrated to measure the slightest areas where we converged and diverged. Intimacy requires a special sensitivity to facts and the feelings.

Over years of doing interviews for this book, I noticed that the quality of what people shared with me was deepening. The willingness of a stranger to reveal what was important to them is always a wonderful surprise. I wondered if there was something I was doing that encouraged people to be so revealing. I began to ask, at the end of my query, about the circumstances that encouraged them to be so open.

Here are some of the responses:

If I detect that the person I am talking to has lots of internal monologue, I shut up.

I like to share what is important to me with someone who is really interested and not judgmental.

Before I turn myself inside out, I need to know that what I say will remain totally confidential. I am comfortable discussing first hand who I am, but I do not want a second hand telling.

When exposing something very personal, I wait until you invite me to go deeper. I am eager to share but need to make sure the desire is mutual.

During the interviews, I was like a good detective who investigates to get a true sense of who the person being questioned really is. What important details have shaped this person? How do they interpret events? How do they feel similar to me, and how do they differ? How many layers do I need to excavate, to see the complexity of this person?

Transparency

Friends are only able to love you if they know you. Transparency allows others to understand what you know about yourself. Intimacy requires a commitment to reveal what is true. This includes letting someone look into you.

Intimate friends truly know who I am. I can be real with them. Being myself is awesome! My desire for intimacy is strong because of the enjoyment and satisfaction I experience. I want relationships where we strip down to our common humanity, our core, where we remove our masks.

In the past, I used intimacy as a code word for the sexual passion I desired. Now, with a deeper understanding, I realize I want a wider range of intimacy, from social intercourse to sexual intercourse.

Gwenn, like many of our friends, is a half-time single parent. We like being Uncle Bob and Aunt Maggie to her sweet son Nathan. Because so many kids have no relatives that they see regularly, an extended family of friends becomes even more important, and that is an important piece of our relationship with Gwenn.

One night after dinner I asked, "Gwenn what would you like to be remembered for?" Her reply was:

I want to be transparent and let my loved ones see all of me. I am doing my best to be clear so you can see inside. I want the light to shine in and radiate out and to be entirely visible without pretense. I need to be understood without distortion, shields or obstructions. I cannot hide a thing from friends; they see right through me.

Just as Maggie and I have been there for Gwenn as she has gone through the stages of marriage, separation and starting a new life, she is there for us. One evening while we were visiting after her son was in bed, tension between Maggie and I arose. Gwenn was fantastic in holding space for both of us while we processed our difficulty. She listened, gave her perspective and asked questions that helped us see the underlying issues in our emotional struggle. This was an intimate moment in our marriage and our relationship with Gwenn.

Gwenn demonstrated her love for both of us with humor and wisdom. It's important to have intimate friends of this nature because people can sometimes be resistant to hearing the truth from their partner. An intimate friend has a unique position that allows us to hear the truth we may not see.

Maggie initiated a new Thanksgiving tradition a couple of years ago. She rented a beach house and invited several close friends to spend four days living together. This past year we had a glorious time with Gwenn, Harold, Anna and Kevin, feasting and having fun together. We agreed that our friendships have been deepening over the years because of our commitment to being transparent.

You grow constantly. You are not the same person you were yesterday. Invite your friends in through your willingness to be transparent.

Who knows who you are and who has the skills to meet you at your core?

Communication Skills

A deep interaction leaves us feeling satisfied, light and full. To have intimate friends, find those who have a long attention span. A good communicator can stay present and listen while their partner opens gently. How we communicate speaks volumes about the degree of mutuality. It is satisfying to expose ourselves and be received by our friends.

I seek to be with those who can listen as well as share. I want to find friends who are interested in each other's lives.

There is a distinct difference between merely social conversations and those between kindred spirits. With intimate friends, small talk is minimal. Communication involves doing activities together that are far more bonding than just talking. We are always communicating who we are with our words and actions.

It is unrealistic to expect every conversation to be mutual and balanced. When interacting, ask yourself:

Is this person listening? Are they interested in me?

Do we need to find topics of mutual interest?

What percentage of my words has meaning to them?

Do they ask questions about me?

Effective communication begins with expressing myself in ways that convey exactly what I mean. The other person then does the best they can to understand my intention.

Watch the pictures forming in your mind as a person speaks. Find out how well the picture sent resembles the one received. Ask for clarification to see if communication is clear.

Conversation doesn't always equal companionship. We've all observed that many people are more willing to talk about themselves than they are to listen to another. They are excited when they share, but their energy drops when someone else opens their mouth. It's as if their bodies remain but their minds go to distant lands. This isn't really conversing; rather they are just using up the free attention wherever they can find it. When you get two people doing it, their conversation become a competition for who wins the attention and air time.

How tragic it is when people talk at each other and no one listens. If two people cannot have a mutual exchange, they are unlikely to be mutual friends. I want dialogues where we share the attention creatively rather than subjecting each other to monologues.

Curiosity

Intimacy flourishes when there is mutual curiosity. Being inquisitive is a crucial quality in all areas of life. For fun, watch someone open up when you are curious about them. Curiosity is a virtue that demonstrates your genuine interest. Long-term devotion is cultivated by being able to focus on the intimate details of a person's life. Deeper intimacy necessitates more curiosity than a casual relationship.

A long rope is needed to reach the depths of a deep well.

When I meet someone interesting, I like to pretend that they are a new culture I am visiting. I try to be like a seasoned traveler, respectful of the local customs while being true to myself. Though I see them through my own filters and values, I enter their world with as much sensitivity as possible.

Do they have any special vocabulary, dialect, phrasing or slang that is important to them? Communication necessitates a mutual desire to learn each other's language, and language is a living thing. It is a sound system of vibrations in which the same word can have vastly different meanings, and since I define words based on my experience and interpretation, I expect other people to do the same. What the other person chooses to emphasize tells a lot about what they value.

"Bilingual" means having the skills to understand one's own language and another's with a high degree of accuracy. Understanding differences in age, gender and history requires a multicultural sensitivity. It is best to assume that you do not understand, until you have inquired. Asking for more information and clarification is a good idea, especially in a new relationship. What are their actions saying? Are their words in alignment?

Sacred Stories

Each person is a marvelous collection of sacred stories, containing the intimate details of their life. Their stories are a book to be read cover to cover. Be an avid reader of people by checking out a book on

one of their mysteries, dramas, comedies, romances, adventures or fantasies. Visit their childhood, teenage and adult sections as if you were visiting a library. What is novel about their struggles and triumphs?

Become curious about your friend's history. Wander beneath the surface until you grasp the subtleties of their personality. Know their fears, dreams and insights. What is your friend excited about? What are their special gifts and talents? Give your friend the time to tell their stories.

Sharing sacred stories tells your friends what is important to know about you. Exchanging the important life events that have shaped you helps to build intimacy.

I have wanted to be known, and know another. I love it when the veils drop and their real self emerges. Being my total self with another is bonding. I like creating shared experiences as a way to better understand each other. I feel a sense of freedom when I am my uncensored self. I want to open up, to grow and to love. I am surprised by the contents of our interiors.

We need to have a small group of close friends who all know the sacred truths we have learned. Exploring our innermost being reveals, layer by layer, who we are.

You may wish to write or record some of your personal life stories. A good place to begin is by reviewing your major life events.

Which of your dreams have come true? Is there a dream you still want to come true?

What is your dearest joy, funniest time and greatest adventure?

What are examples of great pain, injury and loss you have experienced?

When did you have the rite of passage into manhood or womanhood?

Who have been your mentors?

What are some life lessons you have learned?

What insights do you have about love and friendship?

Ruben

Ruben and his mother came to our house to visit Maggie for an acupuncture treatment. When I walked into the room, I noticed the bored seven year-old boy sitting and listening to the adults. I introduced myself to Ruben by extending my hand, which he held without hesitation. I gave him a funny noodle handshake. His touch clearly communicated that he was hungry for male attention. A full, wide-open smile exposed big white teeth surrounded by a summer-tanned body, earned by much playing outside.

He looked up into my eyes. I could see all the way into his heart. We exchanged the words that identified us by name. The first few seconds of our encounter established an instant bonding. He understood that I was sensitive to his needs.

He asked, "How are you doing?" He was demonstrating that he was also interested in me. His mother had taught him well.

"Would you like to play?" I asked.

"Where?" He replied.

Jokingly I responded, "This is a yes or no question."

He was clever enough to grasp the meaning. He followed me to the toy box I keep in the dining room for just such occasions.

I asked him, "Do you like to play soccer?" His grin said that he loved the game.

"Do you have a ball?" I asked. He sadly said that he didn't. "Would you like to have one that my son used when he was your age?" His eyes said, Yes! "You are the best man I have ever met!" was his sweet reply. Ruben's comment touched me in a way I have never been touched before.

We played darts and laughed as we continued our adventure. He wanted a tour of our house and especially wanted to see my bedroom. He wanted to see and understand what was important to me. A look inside my room is a look inside me. In just a few minutes together we had established an intimate connection.

Ruben and I may never see each other again. Our pleasure was in the moment. When he left with his mom, his wave good-bye warmed my heart again. I hope that the world will be kind to this sensitive boy.

Nutritional Analysis

I was invited to a potluck dinner party. I thought this would be a fun place to learn how I could improve my communication skills by observing myself and the guests. Greg, the host of the party, had a spectrum of fascinating friends. As I approached the open door, the aroma of the food and flowers greeted me. The sounds of lively conversation and music filled the summer night air.

Greg welcomed me and introduced me to his friend Jane, a nutritionist. She commented on how the dishes that arrive at potlucks usually manage to cover all the major food groups. As we talked, I noticed that Jane was very skilled at taking turns sharing and listening. She was also very balanced in her conversation style. She spoke equally about her past, stayed focused on the present and shared hopes for her future. I told her about my interest in mutual communication and suggested that we do research on the nutritional content of the words that come out of people's mouths. This sounded like great fun to her.

Approaching a group of people she knew in the living room, we listened in for awhile and compared notes. I liked Clark because his words were like fresh ingredients from his garden. Jane had a hard time listening to Sally, because she told the same old stale stories, like leftovers that had been in the fridge too long.

Next we watched a man and woman who had just met and seemed to be interested in each other. Although we could not always hear what they were saying, from the tone of their voices we could tell it was appetizing. Their body language communicated that the topics they shared left them salivating for more. It was tempting to watch these two gourmet cooks feeding each other.

Jane and I walked into the kitchen and were struck by the sharp contrast of a group of people who had too much to drink. What came out of their mouths reminded us of junk food, all empty calories. Everyone was talking loudly at once and no one was listening. This was like watching a food fight at a high school cafeteria. They were just making a mess and jabbering at each other, uninterested in the nutritional content of mutuality.

Moving to the food table, we observed several other communication styles as people held plates of food. One couple spoke as if they were in a hurry at a fast food restaurant, eating as quickly as they spoke. By contrast, the three people standing next to them ate and told stories in the most evocative way. It was like a movie scene of a luxurious feast

served in courses. They savored the silence between bites of food and ideas.

Another group was laughing, enjoying each other's company and conversation as though they were having a picnic in the park. So many different moods at one party!

Jane and I both love to cook for our friends using different seasonings and spices to produce flavor and aroma. Good communication, like good food, illustrates the care that people put into it. Just as the presentation of even the simplest of fare can be a disaster or a work of art, so the presentation of feelings and ideas can be profane, profound or in need of salt.

Listening to the talk at that party reminded us of different cooking styles. I like my food and people spicy, but not so hot as to be overpowering. Jane has a preference for culturally diverse foods and conversation topics. We both agreed that we like sweet and sour, the ability to share both the successes and disasters of the day. We would listen to someone speak and then confirm "too bland," as if they had limited themselves to salt and pepper topics. We walked away from another conversation like a bad restaurant, the man's words were so bitter.

Jane watched me as I attempted to enter a meaningful dialogue with a man who came to the party alone. He revealed that he didn't know anyone except the host. Afterwards, Jane gave me feedback to help me understand my frustration with this unsatisfying encounter. She observed that the newcomer was only willing to feed me crumbs about himself. His skimpy proportions would leave anyone hungry. Good communication should be more like a satisfying meal.

Jane began to talk to one of her coworkers. I could see that she was uncomfortable listening to the woman talk on and on about work. The phrase "get to the point" kept flashing like a neon sign in my brain. Jane tried to steer the conversation to topics of mutual interest, but no substitutions were allowed. Her coworker only seemed to be happy as the centerpiece. Finally, Jane sat in a chair, stuffed from too much detail. She realized that she was contributing to the problem by faking enjoyment with this woman's words. I told her that the woman's monologue was hard to digest and gave me gas just watching it. We laughed and walked in the back yard to relieve the bloating.

Jane and I scanned the groups of people at the different tables arranged on the patio and carefully chose a collection of diners who were obviously engaged in a delicious discourse. Each person was communicating in a natural and wholesome style, free from artificial fillers and additives. The ideas and

emotional content were refreshing sips of a cool, tropical drink on a hot, humid day. We both concurred that these were the kind of people we would like to indulge in more often.

Beyond Words

A couple wanted my consultation for some perspective on their relationship. Betty did most of the talking for the first twenty minutes:

Betty:

The problem with our relationship is that my husband never expresses his feelings.

Bob:

Are you able to understand what Sam had been feeling?

Betty:

No! He has hardly said a word.

Bob:

Sam, may I summarize what I interpret as the feelings you have expressed here today?

Sam:

Sure.

Bob:

I see that you are frightened at the prospect of your marriage ending. You seem hurt and feel on guard from perceived attacks by Betty. I sense that you have been lonely for some time. You want love and respect from your wife. You pause before saying anything, as you consider the effect. There is a build up of energy you want to release in a way that does no harm. You have been signaling to Betty to slow down, but you believe your warnings have been ignored. The rpms are too high. You feel, if you do not stop now, you will blow a gasket. Most importantly, you miss being connected to Betty. Does this accurately represent how you feel and what you have expressed here today?

Sam:

Yes.

Betty:

Wait a minute! I didn't hear him say anything like that. Is he speaking in a secret code that you two have invented?

Bob:

I've been watching Sam while you talk, and noticing his reactions. Sam does not say much in words but his body language communicates volumes. Betty, you are better at the spoken word while Sam is good at expressing what is important to him in different ways. Sam has learned your spoken language although it is not his "native tongue." He needs to become better at using words, and I suggest that you improve your ability to see and understand his language.

Betty:

How do I do that?

Bob:

Watch how his body responds to what you say. He is listening to your tone, change in volume, where you place the accent. Look especially at his facial expression, his mouth and eyes. Also pay close attention to what his actions say. Ask him, as I did, to see whether your interpretation matches his intention. Both of you place a strong charge of energy on what is important as you speak. Sam's charge is present but the volume is less.

Since I have known you Sam, I have had the opportunity to see you in many social situations. You think before you speak. Sometimes the conversation has raced on to other topics before you are ready to say anything. Talking one-on-one, you are eloquent. You are direct without cluttering details.

Sam:

Some people turn themselves inside out when they have intense feelings. I like to feel my feelings inside. I can only talk about it when someone has the time and willingness to listen. I can be stoic at times and I seldom shed tears, but you'd be wrong to assume that my feelings aren't as deep as someone who is sobbing. Most of the time I choose how I feel, when I feel, how I express, and with whom. And there are a few times when I spill over with joy or sorrow. I would rather keep my pain to myself than express it to someone who doesn't care. If someone is curious and respectful, I don't mind expressing my feelings.

*We are expressing our feelings
100% of the time.*

It is best to assume that everybody is having feelings, though we may not be able to see or hear what those feelings are. The trust placed and energy expended on words to describe our feelings is often wasted. People overuse words in an attempt to connect. I have caught myself just blowing syllables out my mouth. Funny to see them fall to the ground in a pile in front of me.

When someone communicates with me, I can increase the intimacy through nonverbal means. By carefully listening to their words, I sense the meaning and intentions behind them. I listen for moments of truth when something important is being shared. Most of my focus is on the emotional expression behind their words. I watch for vivid gestures that oscillate with the emotions. How is this person feeling about what's being said? I look for clues from the intonation, inflection and vibration of their voice. I practice being a keen observer of the energy patterns that emanate from someone's body language.

I ask myself how I feel being around this person. Am I drained or recharged as he or she speaks? How am I touched by this person's voice, eyes or hands? What are their actions saying? Are their words and actions in alignment?

Commitment to Intimacy

Maggie and I started out as friends and became kindred spirits. I feel fortunate to have found a partner who has such an extensive capacity for intimacy. The intimate understanding of ourselves and each other has been enhanced by our friendships with other couples and single people.

We honor our close friends as we do each other. We expect and receive a similar level of love and commitment from our intimate friends as we find in our marriage. The main difference is that we spend less time with our friends than we do with each other. Many of the same qualities Maggie and I seek in our friends are what we enjoy in each other.

The caring we experience in these friendships is brought back home. Our marriage is expanded and strengthened by our commitment to each other and to our circle of friends. We are supported to become as whole as we can be, in surrounding ourselves with these expansive relationships. Commitment increases intimacy and intimacy strengthens commitment.

The dominant culture expects that if you are married, all your needs should be met by one person. Direct experience tells us that this is often not the case. Maggie and I have found that our friends

uplift and enliven us. To make this work, we, as partners, have had to clearly define the terms of our relationship so there is no confusion when we relate to others. But just as important as the agreements we have with each other, are the agreements that we have with our kindred spirits. The trust we expect in our marriage is also found in our friendships.

Our intimate friends share the common characteristics of intimacy and love. We love ourselves, life and nature. We are one of the happiest groups of people you will ever meet, as you can see in the cover photo. Each of us diligently works to develop the skills we need to listen and love more inclusively.

Maggie and I like building relationships with people of different religions, races, ages and cultures. We see ourselves as valuable individuals worthy of respect and consideration. In our group of kindred spirits, everyone takes care of each other. We allow and encourage ourselves to have a variety of high caliber friendships to receive the nourishment we crave. The benefit of this intimate community is that all of us have grown and healed in ways we could never have achieved on our own.

In to Me See

*I have seen into myself.
My innermost thoughts and feelings
have been revealed.
I want you to see who I am,
to understand me
as well as I do myself.
I want to look into you,
really see you,
know your longing.
I wish to love you
as fully
as you love yourself.
Seeing into you,
I see
myself anew.*

Erotic

What did you think when you first saw the word “erotic” listed as a virtue? This word can trigger an array of feelings, from illicit fears to juicy fantasies. Our culture has thousands of conflicting messages about what is considered erotic. Reflect for a moment on your own attitudes.

The dictionary defines erotic as “tending to arouse desire and sexual love.” The thesaurus provides an interesting array of positive and negative synonyms for erotic, including:

indecent - improper, nude, racy, suggestive, unbecoming;

reproductive - carnal, erogenous, genital, procreative, sexual;

tempting - alluring, amorous, attractive, desirable, exciting, hot, passionate, provocative, seductive, sexy, spicy, sultry, tantalizing;

sensual - hedonistic, delicious, enticing, lusty, luscious, lush, luxurious, pleasure-seeking, romantic, sexual, titillated, torrid, turned on, voluptuous, wanton;

vulgar - bawdy, coarse, crude, dirty, filthy, foul, gross, lascivious, lewd, nasty, obscene, off-color, pornographic, profane, raunchy, rank, risqué, scandalous, smutty, tainted, uncouth and x-rated.

How would you define erotic?

What erotic experiences have you had?

I gave little consideration to the normal and formal definitions of the word erotic before writing this chapter. Instead, I have enjoyed stretching what erotic means to me, based on my preferences, values and ideals. I am quite fond of the word as a sym-

bol for a great range of experiences. I wish to honor my erotic desires as long as I have a pulse. I invite you to explore the following line of thinking that may help enrich your close relationships.

Erotic Energy

By my definition, “erotic” means to arouse the desire for love and intimacy. I consider erotic energy a virtue because it implies being able to derive pleasure from both the sensual and sexual spectrum, and has wider applications than sexuality alone. An erotic feeling, thought or act is virtuous when it is grounded and respectful.

Most of us are aware of the problems that can occur when passion increases while consciousness decreases. Erotic energy, describe here as a virtue, is different. This erotic energy requires passion and consciousness rising together. The challenge is to combine our primal animal instincts with higher states of awareness. Passion, used properly, is an exquisite tool to develop one’s consciousness.

Eroticism has the ability to extract pleasure, joy and passion from simple, everyday experiences. It is a cultivated, artistic appreciation that some people may totally fail to notice. For instance, two people engaged in the same experience might have vastly different levels of pleasure. Some are suspicious of pleasure and believe that sooner or later things will go wrong, so they minimize or banish pleasure from their experience. Others exalt pleasure as one of the sweetest offerings of life and season their experiences with it regularly.

An idea, bodily sensation or even spiritual awareness can evoke an erotic experience. Because the realm of eroticism is a massive source of energy,

tapping into it can lead to healing and transformation. My intention is to make eroticism a virtue by expanding the pleasurable feelings into the non-sexual arena.

Erotic energy fuels the quest for love and friendship.

As I open, I feel more alert than usual. I become more sensitive and alive. As the energy builds, I feel excited with anticipation. My imagination stimulates me to a state of euphoria. Buoyancy floats me along.

Sensual/Sexual Continuum

I would like to suggest that eroticism be defined as a long continuum, spanning sensuality and sexuality. The sensual realm refers to the experience of pleasure by way of the five senses. We are sensory beings, capable of myriad feelings. Sensuality can be experienced alone (eating a wonderfully ripe mango, watching an incredible sunset), or it can be shared (being fed a piece of chocolate or stroked with a feather). Sensuality is self-contained and has no particular goal or end result. It cares about nothing but the present moment. Sensuality does not necessarily include sexuality.

Although sexuality is also a total body experience, there is a focus on hormones, desires, excitement, genitals and, usually, orgasm. Sexual intimacy always includes sensuality. There are many occasions in which sensuality and the sexuality overlap.

The concept of leveling describes the delicate dance of matching energies between two partners who meet on the sensual/sexual continuum. As we have seen, different people have different comfort zones when it comes to the degree of intimacy they desire during such a meeting. Leveling requires the willingness of both partners to recognize and adjust to an agreed upon common ground of intimacy, as a sign of respect.

Engaging our erotic energy requires a high degree of integrity. We must be clear in our communication, obtaining permission before moving from the sensual to the sexual arena. The right balance of self-expression and self-restraint is required of this virtue. Mistakes are inevitable, so be willing to give or to ask for forgiveness.

Our hunger for human-to-human nourishment is profound. It is important to make a clear distinction when one desires sensual affection only. Where sensuality ends and sexuality starts varies from person to person. When does a kiss or dance become

sexual? Ask yourself, "What is the best way at this time, in this place, with this person, to express my sensual/sexual nature?" When you experience strong sexual feelings for another, it may be best, considering the situation and the friendship, to express yourself in sensuous ways only. You should adjust your own erotic energy like you would use a rheostat on a lamp, with many gradations, from ambient to bright.

One's sexual life cannot be separated or compartmentalized away from daily life, yet there is a need to be clear about the appropriate use of sexual energy. To maintain this distinction in one's intention and behavior is difficult. In one situation, it may be best to honor the sexual feelings but not act on them. In another setting, one may wish to have full sexual expression. Our sexual expression should include a high level of mutual respect. It is as wrong to treat another in a sexually disrespectful manner as it is to deny one's own sexuality.

When I was in my early 20s I lived in a yoga camp. Vickie and I became close friends over the course of the summer while working together. The swami who guided the camp required that the staff maintain strictly platonic relationships with each other and the guests. Even so, Vickie and I would occasionally spend the night together and felt our levels of sexual desire on the rise. Being a modern dancer, she suggested we channel our sexual charge into dance. As we danced naked for three hours, our sexual desire found a creative expression that was satisfying. There was freedom in finding an alternative way of being fully erotic without needing an orgasmic release. This and other experiences have helped me understand the value of being able to generate erotic energy, individually and collectively. As my love of life increases, my love life improves.

Early in our marriage, Maggie and I signed up for a retreat, "Follow your Heart," taught by Jack and Melanie. We had never before been in a group where we openly discussed our sexuality. The weekend included exercises to wake up our sexual energy. During these sessions, we practiced special breathing techniques to help raise our energy and enhance communication. We were assigned homework: extend our orgasmic energy in the privacy of our cabins. This was our first exposure to tantric practice and the concept of sacred sexuality. Saturday night was full of ritual and sensual dance as celebration. Sunday, we discussed how to integrate our new awareness into our life. Before the weekend our sex was great, and afterwards, our sexual relationship has constantly grown.

Maggie has been studying belly dancing for several years. She loves dressing up as much as the dance itself. The movement of her toes, the shimmering of her hips, undulation of her belly and the graceful swaying of her arms create massive amounts of erotic energy. For Maggie, this art form of tribal dancing is primarily an expression of her own personal eroticism.

I am deeply blessed to have such a long-term intimate partner. The excitement, passion and play all contribute to our sexual intimacy. Maggie and I endeavor to make all areas of our lives alive with sensuality. Our erotic energy has continued to increase with age even as the frequency of our sexual union has decreased. We strive to find a place of mutual desire and are respectful when there are differences. We have promised to keep our sex life alive and well.

Erotic Forms

I asked my friends when they felt erotic, and was pleased at the variety of sources of erotic expression that they told me about:

I do not wait until I have a sexual partner to feel erotic. My erotic self is not confined to my sexuality. I am passionate about my commitments. My imagination is a big sexy organ. What turns on my mind, turns me on. Most of my vacation destinations involve swimming with fish and coral. The feel of the warm saltwater and being surrounded by so much life is erotic. I like feeling plugged into life.

I seem to cast spells on cats. They run to greet me. When I squatted down to pet a new cat, he looked me in the eyes, leaped over my head and onto the back of my shoulders. He began to rub up against my ears and stroked my face with his tail. I was purring.

Currently, lips are the most erotic thing for me. They are the edge between the outer and inner wet part of my body. I have begun to kiss my friends and they seem to enjoy it. When I greet them, I plant a kiss on their forehead, neck or back of their hand. I am especially fond of a first kiss on the lips, when I am dating.

Eroticism for me includes seeing beauty in all things. Flowers are among the most erotic forms in nature. The color and fragrances drive me wild. The flight of birds, the movement of clouds, a delicious meal ... all are erotic.

Being fondled, while I just lay back and receive.

The look of my wife's smiling face and sparkling eyes, when she laughs.

Both my boyfriend and I get erotically excited as we speed down the mountain in the fresh snow. We are strange, I guess, because we like falling into big snow drifts.

Falling asleep together after great sex is the most erotic time.

Reading an erotic story totally turns me on.

The tone of my boy friend's voice on the phone arouses me. There is a slight inflection in the way he speaks that alters my chemistry.

My entire body is erogenous. The feel of my clothes is stimulating.

When I go for a professional massage, I want it to be sensual and relaxing. When my husband and I trade erotic massages, we tell each other what mix of sensual or sexual we want.

I find erotic rapture when I sing gospel and devotional chants. These types of songs demand all my energy.

A hot shower is my favorite daily erotic ritual. I used to get up late for work and rush in and out. Now I get up early so I can linger. I begin by smiling at myself in the mirror and welcoming myself to a new day. I like to drop my robe to the floor as I enter the baptismal of hot water. I close my eyes and feel the stream of liquid running down my body. I take long slow deep breaths of the steam. I use soap and shampoo to anoint and massage my entire body. When I turn the water off I pause for a few seconds to experience the feeling of being clean and refreshed. My towel is lush and I pamper my skin. Brushing my wet hair adds to the ecstasy.

Erotica

I especially enjoy erotic art depicting the beauty of the human body in artistic poses. When Maggie and I visited France, we toured a couple of museums that included erotic art in the forms of sculpture, paintings and photos. In Paris, there is an entire seven-story building dedicated to erotic art from

many different cultures over time. The different styles are endless.

Recently, while visiting a friend, I found myself drawn to look at a calendar of black and white photos of water scenes. I saw that naked male and female bodies were blended into the photographic composition. The snapshot stopped the action so one could see the soft and subtle forms. Lighting and shadows capture the imagination. I was excited and curious. What were they feeling? Would I like to be in that picture? I had to peek at next month's scene.

Nudity is frequently linked to the erotic in a sexual way. I have been exchanging massages most of my life and know that a naked body does not automatically evoke a strong sexual reaction. In Oregon, we have state parks that are designated as nude beaches. They have funny official signs: "Caution, you may encounter nudity past this point." Generally these beaches are respectful places where all ages can relax in the sun. Near our home is a wellness center called Common Ground. It has two large outdoor hot tubs for men and women, where bathing suits are optional. Although Maggie and I soak weekly, I chuckle to myself that nudity is not the norm.

In front of an insurance company downtown is a fountain with a larger-than-life sculpture of five naked women and a man. Every day, people of all ages walk by these realistic figures. Would it be illegal for five or six people to pose nude next to the fountain? I think so. Art transcends legal barriers.

Erotic Dance

Purely for research purposes, I visited several commercial establishments that featured "erotic dancers." I was surprised by how non-erotic most of the women were. Few of the customers seemed to be having any fun. The sacredness of the human body was nonexistent. The live dancers were a turn-off.

I was fortunate to discover a club that had several good male and female dancers. They would perform and warm up the crowd. The audience would dance in between their shows. A woman who calls herself Pauline was the best example of someone who was truly an erotic dancer. Although she was probably the oldest dancer at the club, she was the most vibrant. She performed like a black panther roaming in the forest at night. Her animal nature electrified the entire audience. She would stop and focus her eyes on you and your heart would race.

When I took a break to get a drink, Pauline asked if she could sit with me and watch the crowd dance. I explained that I was doing interviews on what people found erotic and she volunteered to comment. She was endearing, charming, gentle and street-smart. Here are some of her comments:

I had to overcome a feeling of shame for my wild side for many years. I hid my erotic self because any time I let it out, I was criticized. As I grew older, I realized that I didn't want to lead a boring life like those who were trying to squelch me. I understand that being erotic scares most people. Why don't they learn how to handle this force?

I have been teaching dance full time at a university for the past ten years while I perform here one night a week. The students in my classes are focused on being technically perfect so they can land jobs. I enjoy people-watching on campus during lunch breaks. Most of the students and staff are too heady, not in their bodies. They have overspecialized brains and undeveloped bodies. When they walk, there is almost no movement in their hips, their faces are without expression, their eyes are blank and you can feel the tightness in their shoulders. There is no juice in their bodies. Some of the students come to the club to learn what I cannot teach at school.

I am fortunate to have a partner that is accepting of my art form and besides, he reaps the benefits of all my dancing. Being erotic is not just about how you move your body. It is more about how you encourage your energy to move. We are all erotic by nature but have become domesticated. I love to dance at this club because it provides a safe public place to express myself and the pay is great.

You can see that there are other women here who have better bodies than mine. The stereotype of "exotic" is a young, voluptuous, sexy woman. But it just goes to show that erotic is not about looks, it is an internal pleasure. Although I draw energy from the audience, I come to work fully charged with erotic energy.

The key to showing the customers a good time is tapping into my erotic nature. I am thrilled so it is easier to thrill them. Even when the crowd has had a few drinks, they can appreciate that I am dancing my dance. They can feel the difference.

I watch the eyes in my audience— some are here just for the titillation and that's okay. But I like the men and woman who come here regularly to tap into their own erotic self. They tell me that they come back to see me because I am always adding to my art. Many men have told me that this is a secure place for them to get in touch with their erotic side, because being wild is not always welcomed at home. Women have confided that they have never before seen a healthy model of what it is like for a woman to be erotic. Not everyone needs to be as erotic as I am in public. I would be out of a job!

Sex

What is sex? Our sexuality is a complicated and frequently confusing topic. The source of our sexual desire is pleasure, reproduction and love. Seeds, nuts, grains, flowers, milk, fruits and vegetables—almost everything we eat is in some way related to sexual reproduction. Sex is inherently wholesome.

Once, in a stream-of-consciousness-way, I wrote out a list of words I associate with sex. I was surprised to see that sex was a symbol for such a wide range of experiences. The word “sex” has only three letters but I came up with over three hundred words that it represented. I have included my list but you may first want to play with compiling your own before looking at mine.

Sex is:

alive, amazing, adoring, adventure, amour, anus, arousing, affection, aggressive, animal, alert, attraction, afterglow, bedroom, babies, belonging, body, bold, balls, breathing, breasts, bottom, bliss, brazen, buns, boundaries, blood, butt, birth, complex, compassion, contact, caring, closeness, climax, conquest, connecting, cuddling, chocolate, caressing, charming, clitoris, delicate, divine, devoted, desire, drifting, daring, dancing, dripping, darkness, erogenous, energy, enter, eyes, emotions, ears, exciting, enthusiasm, emotional, ecstatic, enlightened, enchanted, erection, eccentric, electric, embrace, excited, eros, engorging, eager, ejaculating, empty, erotic, earthy, eggs, fantasy, flirting, frisky, fondling, focused, feathers, flowers, foreplay, falling, fear, frolicking, fullness, floating, fantasy, feisty, forceful, forward, frank, free, goofy, giggling, goosey, generous, goddess, glowing, groin, genitals, healing, humor, holy, hips, humping, horny, holding, honoring, hugging, hungry, heavenly, hot, hormones, hurting, irreverent, intensity, intertwined, intercourse, instinctual, ingenious, innocent, inventive, insatiable, intimacy, joy, juicy, kinky, kissing, kindness, love, laughter, lovemaking, lotion, lingam, lusty, lips, lonely, lubrication, lying, licking, lingering, longing, messy, mental, mutual, massage, mysterious, moon, mouth, mischievous, masturbating, mouthwatering, movement, mate, nude, nurturing, needs, noisy, necking, naughty, naked, nipples, oil, open, orifice, oral, overjoyed, orgasms, oneness, ornery, play, permission, panting, private, pubic, physical, passive, powerful, potent, playful, primal, penis, passion, pleasure, peak, presence, patient, plateau, pheromones, pregnant, pain, playmate, pelvic, quest, quiet, quickening, quake, risky, rough, rowdy, raunchy, rubbing, receptive, rejecting, restless, romance, rising, re-

pressed, respect, responsive, release, raw, ravaging, relaxing, rebellious, silly, stroking, silky, seduction, slippery, scary, sperm, spontaneous, stimulating, saucy, seductive, sensitive, silky, slender, slow, spontaneous, spunky, stimulating, strong, sweet, sultry, semen, sucking, sacred, safe, secretions, sights, spiritual, scent, senses, smells, sounds, saliva, stirring, sleeping, sweat, skin, stillness, sweet, sexy, shameful, serious, surrender, searching, satori, thirst, tenderness, toys, touching, top, toes, tribal, tongue, tender, tears, taste, timeless, tantra, titillating, tension, transformative, thoughtful, thrusting, tango, together, tickled, thrilled, timid, tough, tranquil, throbbing, thighs, uninhibited, unknown, union, us, velvet, vagina, vibrations, vitality, vibrant, virtuous, vivacious, warm, wild, wet, wanting, whimsical, wholeness, witty, x-rated, yielding, yin, yang, yoni, zest, zeal, zipper, zowie and zapped

When I reviewed my list I was surprised to realize that what I consider to be sex is so expansive. My sexuality connects with every area of my life rather than being reserved solely for the bedroom.

In my younger years I had several great sexual partners but there was only one partner who I would call truly erotic. He was confident and attentive, and had a wild imagination. He was passionate in many areas and came to bed already turned on. It was exciting. His pleasure was focused on the present rather than achieving a future goal. We liked playing with the nuances of mystery. We built tension, slowed down and released again and again. Eager and patient, we harmonized until we were on a similar wavelength. We explored until we flowed together instead of imposing a particular way. This was extremely pleasurable. There is nothing more erotic than intimacy and love. This is the man I chose to marry.

Sexual Energy

Sexual energy is neither good nor bad. Our lowest and highest selves are expressed through our sexuality. Any personal problem can show up in our sexual relationships, just as our spiritual impulses can.

It is the misuse of erotic energy that can cause serious difficulties. Misuse often comes from unhealed wounds, poor judgment or a lack of awareness and skill. For example, many people falsely assume that uncaring behavior acted out through casual sex is okay.

Far more consequential is the unethical use of our sexual energy, which can be devastating. A long list of crimes committed under the name of sex—adultery, rape, incest and abuse—has tainted the reputation of sex. But sex didn't do those acts, people did. Sex is unjustly labeled, guilty by association.

Obviously, to avoid hurting and being hurt, one needs to be selective about which impulses to act on and which ones need to be left as part of a vivid imagination.

The amount of energy wasted by trying to repress the erotic is costly. Personally, I am not willing to stuff my erotic energy in a locked box and hide it under the bed just to make other people feel comfortable with their low levels of pleasure. One task is how to respect our erotic energy as part of the total life force and consciously direct it for the good of all.

I have difficulties allowing myself to be turned on, because when I run sexual energy it tends to run over me. I make mistakes like having sex with someone that I later regret being involved with. This person doesn't care about me, nor I about them. It can be fun in the moment, but frequently the relationship becomes a disaster. I need to learn how to generate high levels of erotic energy and be smart at the same time. I try to feel the energy, then decide if I want to act on it. I want to stop holding back affection or racing forward too fast. Being reserved without being repressed is my goal.

If too little erotic energy makes for a rather boring life, how do we explain those who intentionally inhibit their desires to the point of dulling the senses and shutting down emotions? I think the answer is fear. Many people can't even enjoy affection because they fear what might happen if feelings become romantic or sexual. Such strategies stagnate energy and inhibit the ability to be intimate.

Fear of sexuality leads many people away from reality and towards the most painful and destructive conclusions. For instance, some believe that if they are exposed to dangerous temptations they might go wild and do reckless things. What they fear is a loss of control. Some make the irrational assumption that sexual pleasure can destroy them by causing them to go mad. They do not understand that it is precisely such repressive attitudes towards human sexuality that drive people insane, not sex itself.

Every person on the planet is the result of people having sex.

Erotic energy when used consciously can do great good. The best lessons are learned through intimate relationships. We have the choice to fear or embrace our erotic energy. To live fully, our erotic energy needs to flow. But it is hard work to learn to use our erotic energy only in healthy ways. High levels of courage are necessary. We, as friends, need to help each other to reclaim our erotic selves.

I have always felt criticized for my erotic nature. My family was strictly religious and shunned any form of erotic energy. As a teenager, I felt like the walls of my mind were totally plastered with scenes of passion. I was convinced that eroticism leads to animal behaviors, resulting in loss of self-control and people being hurt. I was told that if I didn't avoid this evil temptation, I would turn into a beast. At first, I repressed my desires ... but this only made me more frustrated and eventually all hell broke loose.

For ten years I was addicted to sex in ways that hurt me and everyone I touched. I got my thrills from danger and rebellion. I used my sexual good looks as a means of seduction and getting attention.

I was fortunate that a friend recommended a counselor. I still have problems and I sometimes avoid closeness with those I love because I fear my erotic feelings. Slowly I am healing and I hope to begin to use my energy wisely.

I am so frightened by my sexual feelings that as soon as they arise I go numb. It is like a hand that falls asleep from being laid upon until the circulation is temporarily cut off.

I am either too cold or too hot, I have to find a happy medium. One minute I think I should be celibate, and then the next I feel that my sexual appetite is cause for celebration.

I was lucky to have come into my sexuality in an era when most problems could be handled by the pill or penicillin. In those days, the greatest fear was pregnancy. Now expressing your sexuality can result in death by disease. Today AIDS has forced us to talk or die. Careful balance is needed to protect oneself and simultaneously create pleasure.

The Jungle

I have been waiting for tonight all week long. I've turned off all the lights. I've made the front door look like the opening of a cave.

As soon as she arrives, we start playing. I leap from the shadows and we grab at each other's clothes. She breaks loose and runs. I chase her through every room in the house. I feel hot and sweaty. I can see in the dark. My ears are like radar, getting a fix on her position. I listen for her breathing but can't hear it. I try to find her by smell.

I can tell that she is close by. I open a closet door and slowly feel through the hanging clothes. My fingers search for warm skin. Suddenly I feel her body and we both shriek. Even though I've caught her, she bursts out for one last attempt at escape. We wrestle each other to the ground, biting, kicking, clawing and rolling on the carpet as if it were jungle grass. The hairs on our skin feel like fur. Like tigers at play, we show our teeth and growl. First, I am on top, then she rolls me over and I gladly give up.

Now I hide and she seeks. My heart is beating so fast it feels like it might burst. I'm afraid the sound of my pounding heart will give me away. My face drips with sweat. Afraid she'll find me, I run out screaming.

We would never stop playing except that we suddenly get hungry. Without a word, we run for the watering hole. The only light is a candle. Now for the first time we can look into each other's eyes. We stop to wash our hands and faces. We jump and scamper into the living room where we both light a match to start a fire in the fireplace. We gobble our food with our fingers, licking them clean.

Later we play more gently and purr like kitties. We cuddle and make up stories for each other. Then we begin to yawn and know that it is getting late. Time to bathe under the warm waterfall. Splashing, we soap up and scrub until we run out of hot water. We wrap each other in a towel and comb our hair.

We race naked for our treetop nest. We crawl under the covers and snuggle, both wondering if the other is as sleepy.

In the morning I wake up first and roll over to watch her breathing. I want to wake her to start playing again. But before I'm able to pounce, a voice calls from the kitchen, "Kids, time to get up, breakfast is ready."

The Joy of Friendship

Erotic feelings become stronger the closer we become. Fear of these emotions inhibits the development of intimate friendships. When one reaches a level of intimacy with a friend, it is best to talk about where you are on the sensual/sexual continuum. Being intense and intimate necessitates respect. Notice what excites your friends and what they are passionate about.

Erotic love is not just reserved for sexual partners. I find erotic love in both sexual and nonsexual relationships alike. I want all my interactions to be safe, respectful and consensual. My friends and I discuss our boundaries because when you become close, issues of sexual intimacy arise. We want our feelings out in the open and we try to express our sexual desires in ways that are appropriate.

I am passionate about my friendships. Some are purely sensual while others are at different levels of sexual expression. My friends and I enjoy giving each other wet kisses and intimate hugs. I like to pursue friendships with the kind of passion that is usually only available between new lovers. I don't choose to repress my feelings for those I care for. In the past, I would just have blocked such feelings, but we are mature enough now to act on sexual feelings that would have damaged relationships before. I want to experience the full degree of attraction for my friend and not be compelled to be sexual with them.

Many of my lovers are gone but the close friends I have made are still around. Friends deserve high status for being loyal and so I am unrestrained in the affection that I feel for them. My friends have been like a steady stream that never runs dry.

Just for fun, list the feelings, emotions and thoughts that are highly pleasurable for you.

How can you heighten your receptivity and sensitivity to pleasure?

What attitudes and actions assist you in raising your energy to become erotic?

How do you evoke erotic energy?

What is an erotic fantasy of yours that you wish would come true?

Do you like erotic art? Do you have any in your home?

Spiritual

All cultures have a word for spirit: just for starters, there is Indian *prana*, Egyptian *ankh*, Greek *pneuma*, Chinese *chi*, Tibetan *lung*, Hebrew *ruach* and Japanese *ki*. Indigenous North Americans often use the term translated as “Great Spirit.” Scientists today make references to spirit as “subtle energy” and “the electric flow of life.” Science fiction writers and the movie industry have worked with the concept endlessly for example, the intentionally directed spiritual force in *Star Wars*: “May the force be with you.” Animals, plants, rocks and solar systems are viewed as life forces in a spiritual cosmos. Spirit is essence, cosmic energy, divine influence. Spirit is the source of life, the vital principle, the animating force, the essential nature.

No single explanation of spirit will ever satisfy all, so each of us must find what spirit means for ourselves. Defining the term can be compared to teaching meditation or explaining the *Tao*. In this discussion, I refrain from using “soul” because organized religions seem to have appropriated the word. “Spirit,” by comparison, belongs to no one group.

I like to approach the meaning of spirit through shared experience. One of my callings is to conceive and manifest events during which we learn to raise and strengthen our spirits. I guide participants in using their resources to discover the teachings spirit has to offer. Once I offered a weekend beach retreat called “Spirit at Play,” during which I taught classes and sponsored games for the kids, while others led dances ... one man even went from cabin to cabin, singing to wake us for breakfast. A hundred people sat at a long table, laughing and talking in celebration. Other events that I regularly offer include a workshop for corporations called “Team Spirit” and my “Laughing at Life” presentation with its byline: “Laughter is aerobic exercise for the spirit.”

There are certainly other approaches understanding the concept of spirit. Once, while traveling through an airport amid the hustle and bustle, I saw a neon sign flashing SPIRITS ... SPIRITS ... SPIRITS. The bar beckoned drained travelers to enter and have a drink of spirits. The question occurred to me: could the distillation of alcohol from organic ingredients be viewed as concentrating the essence (spirit) of a certain kind of life form?

The definition of spirit is as myriad as its nature. One thing is for certain: spirit is not fully grasped by the linear mind. Until you experience spirit directly, it is just another interesting idea or abstract theory. Experiencing spirit pulls you out of your normal frame of reference. And there’s one more thing I know for certain: if you are not mouth-dropped-open-awestruck by life regularly, you’re missing the greatest show on Earth. To understand the essence of spirit while savoring the mystery the whole picture is to live consciously in the cosmos.

I am what I seek. I am spirit.

To be human is to be spiritual. Each of us has our own way of being spiritual, of expressing the life force that flows through us. Spirituality is expressed by the act of living. Whether we realize it or not, we bring spirituality into everything we do. To be spiritual is to perform an inner search as well as an outer one.

I seek to foster openness in spirituality by borrowing from any spiritual tradition that exists. At the same time, I continually question what is sacred

to me. I want to discover my own spiritual truths and offer them to the world. I want to express my individual spirit and I wish to merge my spirit with others. I cherish feeling bigger than myself. Spirit is that quiet, reassuring voice that guides me.

My spirituality expresses itself through what I value and the virtuous way I live my life. My goal is to be in love with the universe. I feel reverence for life at the cosmic level and seek balance between spiritual solitude and communion with other pathfinders.

For a long time, Maggie and I have been exploring our spiritual natures. Neither of us belongs to an organized religion, yet we considered ourselves to be deeply spiritual. Living life as a sacrament, we have developed a holistic approach as we integrate spirituality into our daily lives.

Being spiritual requires nurturing the spirit and refraining from actions that harms it. By living our truth, we bring our life into alignment with spirit.

Holy Man

The nuns in my grade school would occasionally give someone a holy card for good behavior. These were beautiful pictures of saints who had a circular ring of light surrounding their heads. I was fascinated by these golden halos. Even though I was seldom caught demonstrating good behavior, one of the nuns took pity on me and gave me a holy card of Saint Francis anyway. She said she would pray that I would learn to be a good boy. I loved his story, about how the animals were not afraid of him. I even wrote up a little story about St. Francis and the wolf. I did not really understand how one became a holy man, but I hoped I might have my own halo someday.

Just before graduating from the eighth grade, the parish priest asked me if I wanted to become a priest like him. He was a good man and I liked the way he treated me, but I declined his offer. Four years later, as a senior, I was called into the counselor's office. He informed me that the Christian Brothers had decided to invite me to join them and become a spiritual teacher. He jokingly added that they had observed me at dances and were sure that I was more into "celebrate than celibate." I thanked him for his kind invitation.

Though I rejected the role, whenever I have asked myself, "Are you a holy man?" the answer comes back: "Yes." I consider myself a good man who does his best to live by high standards. I freely

confess that I am not perfect; I am even rather attached to my imperfections. Having always been high-spirited and a little devilish, I have learned how to have fun while staying out of trouble.

My journey has involved seeking out spiritual role models everywhere. I describe myself as a "spiritual omnivore," deriving spiritual insight and nourishment from diverse sources. Since all major religions have accounts of historic figures they call prophets I seek to honor these sacred traditions, but I also look closely at what's emerging now. I like to put all spiritual teachings, from the early pagans to the philosophy of the new-agers, into a big blender and give it a whirl.

Each of us has to find our own spiritual path. I feel as though I have been blessed by the Great Spirit in achieving a degree of enlightenment and transcendence. I am not unique in this attainment, for I believe everyone is enlightened in different ways and degrees. I have no superhuman powers and I cannot perform miracles attributed to the saints, yet I daily perceive the miracles that surround us all.

Early on, when I was teaching yoga, certain students tried to make me into their guru, but I didn't want followers. I preferred, then and now, to be in the companionship of mutual mentors. We all need to be treated with reverence as we strive to understand and to live in accord with spirit. I vow to do my best to be a good role model as I devote my life to love and being in service. I am content to be like a rogue Zen monk, having no need of an institution. Like that monk, I enjoy wandering around the countryside, looking for things to learn, having fun all the while.

Similarly, I invite you to enjoy discovering what kind of holy woman or holy man you are.

Betty and John's Story

My friend Barb asked me to present my ideas on kindred spirits to a group of her friends. We gathered at her farm at sunset. The evening was warm, the air rich with the smell of apple blossoms. The last couple to arrive was Betty and John, married for 65 years. Barb was surprised to see them there together explaining that John had never attended any of the group's functions before.

We visited and got to know each other. When the group felt settled, I asked if they would like to do an activity. They agreed, so I asked if each person would describe his or her spirit. But when it was Betty's turn, I asked her instead to describe John's spirit.

She looked at him and said: "You are a good man and a loving husband all those years. Your spirit is strong and I know I can always count on your love."

John's voice and chin trembled as he began to describe her spirit: "I know that I am not the easiest person to live with. Betty's is the kindest spirit. I feel blessed to have her in my life."

They both started to cry and Betty said, "I did not know you felt this way about me!"

John nodded and reached for her hands. He said, "I had no idea how you felt. What if we had not come here tonight? We might have died and never known how we felt about each other."

The group was mesmerized by these expressions of love. The barn could have caught on fire and it would have gone unnoticed until the fire trucks arrived.

Describe Your Spirit

What words would you use to talk about your spirit? In my research, asking this simple question has produced some amazing insights. Most people brighten just from being asked and I have been thanked for my curiosity because this question touches people in such a special way.

As people answer, I particularly observe the energy that rises to the surface of their being and the expressions on their face. The question often reveals their spirit even before words crossed their lips. Several were surprised to be learning something new and wonderful about themselves for the first time. It is powerful to witness them sensing their spirit and opening to that.

Be

Be as a pond.

Be still.

Be clear.

Look deep.

Some people have no idea how to describe their spirit, while others discuss it freely at length. Not everyone has an instant glowing response. Some seem troubled and have difficulty accessing a description. "I've never thought about my spirit before," is a common comment. Others struggle to ver-

balize a description of their spirit because they don't feel that they are doing it correctly. I assure them there is no right or wrong answer.

I invite you to describe your own spirit by writing it down, drawing it, telling a story, dancing or singing. Notice what you feel as you describe your spirit. Your virtues will provide insights into your spirit. Accept all you see, including your weaknesses. The clearer you consciously describe your spirit, the easier it is for others to see the real you.

Ask a friend to describe his or her spirit. By listening attentively to your friends, you give them a great gift. When they finish, ask questions to deepen your understanding. Since words are a scant ten percent or less of communication, consciously focus the other ninety percent of your attention on this conversation. Be present. Now is the perfect time to practice empathy.

Additionally you may wish to ask a friend to describe your spirit. "When you see into me, what do you see?" Try not to immediately evaluate what they are saying. Show them you are really willing to hear what comes up. Accept what they say and allow quiet reflection. Tell your friends what you sense about their spirits.

Spiritual Path

Maggie and I once visited a couple at the beach. We were greeted by Lily, a radiant woman in her late fifties. She introduced us briefly to her husband Scott. He indicated that we could reconvene when he had finished some work. We were given a tour of the new house they had just finished building. She proudly showed us her meditation room and shrine. The three of us went for an exhilarating walk in the coastal forest behind their home.

Our host wanted to hear about our kindred spirit project. A mile or so into the trees, I asked Lily to describe her spiritual path. She gladly revealed layers of the ways she saw herself as spiritual. She described in glowing detail the richness of her daily rituals and practices.

When I asked Lily about her husband's path, she laughed and said that he was not spiritual at all, and that actually was a source of some tension in their relationship. She belonged to many different groups that meet regularly, but Scott refused to attend. She was shocked when I said it was obvious to me that her husband was deeply spiritual. Scott's quiet presence had welcomed me. His home office revealed how he had created a career dedicated to making his community better:

Lily:

I have been living with this man for almost thirty years and I need some help here. Could you teach me to see his spiritual side?

Bob:

When you two are next on a walk in these woods, tune in to what he is feeling. Join him in his solitude. Have you ever observed Scott with kids?

Lily:

Yes, they light up when they see him coming.

Bob:

They see his spirit as it is. His spirituality looks different than yours.

You will have to see beyond how you define spirituality and discover his way. His is more private, with no external trappings. If there were more people like him in the world, it would be transformed!

Lily:

I am beginning to understand what you mean. I have wronged him in pressuring him to pursue the same path as I.

While we all had lunch, Lily confessed and apologized to her husband. He was surprised and pleased.

Sensing Spirit

During the years of teaching yoga and meditation, I began to get in touch with my spirit. I started by sensing it by being quiet, eliminating distractions, sitting with it and witnessing the sensations. This provided a sense of self. I wanted to know who I was beyond my roles and responsibilities.

Next, I began to experiment with trying to sense the spirits of my students. I used the language of virtues as a way for my mind to comprehend their essential spiritual natures. One of the best techniques I developed for sensing the spirit of others was to notice the effect their spirits had on my spirit. Then as I got to know them over time, I checked to see whether I was accurate in my projections or not.

Learn to tune into your vibration and energy. Your whole body is needed for awareness of spirit. The body is an organ designed to sense spirit.

It may take a few attempts to feel your own spirit, but with practice, you will can very familiar with it. Spend quiet time and see into yourself with a sense of wonder and an open mind.

Sense the spiritual essence of your friends.

When sensing your spirit, what words, emotions or images come to mind?

Discover Your Spirit

Consider the task of eating a simple strawberry. Focusing all your senses on the luscious fruit will heighten your awareness of your experience. If your mind is preoccupied with something else, you will miss its tart taste, scent, smooth feel and early-summer sheen. Similarly, cultivate a focused presence when you want to feel spirit. Slow down and pay attention. You will gradually understand your spirit's texture and beauty.

Developing an understanding of your spirit allows you to share a special form of intimacy with your friends. You may rediscover your ability for sensing spirit in each other. Become fully present in the moment. While you are in this human form, learn to bring forth your living spirit and experience this oneness.

My spirit senses your spirit.

Go beyond your five senses and transcend the mind. We are all able to sense more than we think. Foster a sense of self, a sense of community and a sense of oneness that extends to the infinite universe.

We sense spirit with our known five senses, and spirit to spirit. Notice the spirit of those around you. Observe their flavor and fragrance, see their brightness, hear their vibration, feel the effect as their spirit touches your skin, muscles, bones and organs. Sense another's spirit with your spirit. Learn the rhythms of spirit: opening and closing, expanding and contracting, absorbing or repelling, centered or unbalanced, hurting or healed.

Be open to what the spirit of another truly wants to communicate to you as you sense each other and communicate spirit to spirit. One of the best times to sense another's spirit is when he or she is

still. The window of intimacy is also often wide open when people are laughing, dancing, loving or grieving. Become aware of the movement, vibration, pulse and breath of spirit.

Spirit as Light

Just for fun, let us pretend that our spirits follow natural laws. Think of spirit as light. Modern physics tells us that light is both particle and wave. In this metaphor, spirit, like light, is both particle (matter) and wave (energy).

Now consider the following theory of spiritual relativity. Simply stated, "Spirit creates reality." Thus spirit and matter are interchangeable.

When I began to imagine spirit with both physical mass and the properties of energy, my thinking opened up. Spirit can neither be created nor destroyed, it can only change form.

I believe that spiritual energy is in every cubic inch of the universe. The empty space between atoms is spirit. Spirit is the cosmic glue that holds us together. Our bodies are not solid, mostly water and space. We are a fluid dance of atoms in constant motion.

Spirit is the divine spark that gives life. We are spirit, being conscious. The power to alter consciousness arises from spirit. Spirit eternally expands and evolves as the physical universe expands and evolves.

Let Your Light Shine

Each of us is gem-like. When the clear light pours through us, we impart our unique color and vibration onto spirit. We have many facets that bend and color this light as it passes through us. Consciousness is refracted light.

Relationships are like two colors mixing to create a new color. You have your spiritual colors and your friend has hers. The wavelengths of both of you combine and amplify each other to create an "us." As we shine our colors onto each other, light to light, a rainbow of colors appears.

*The light in me sees the
light in you.*

Time to show your true colors! We see the light in each other and our own inner radiance is reflected back. Become a full spectrum being and let your light shine through. Know your spirit as you recognize what nurtures and strengthens your light.

Use the presence of the sun as a daily reminder of spirit.

Spiritual Family

For most of human history, people have lived in tribes, clans or extended families. These were close-knit groups that gave members a sense of belonging and secured their physical survival. People worked together for the common good and taught each other the basic principles of life according to their culture. Generally, they shared similar spiritual beliefs and trusted their elders for the wisdom born of experience.

In our culture, the small nuclear family is the norm. This is a relatively modern social invention with its own strengths and weakness. As recent as it is, even this social institution is evolving with time. Over the past few decades, more and more people live outside of this nuclear family norm: many live alone and there are an increasing number of single-parent households.

In an ideal world, we are all born into a loving extended family and are surrounded by good role models in healthy relationships. Our spiritual growth is given the highest priority, and cultural institutions foster development of its citizens' virtues.

Unfortunately, we do not live in such an ideal world. Families are often broken and scattered, good role models can be as much the exception as the rule, spiritual growth is frequently given a lower priority than the ethics of profit and our institutions aggrandize distorted relations based on power and politics.

Given this bittersweet reality, the question must be asked: "What is best for the growth of the spirit?"

In this new social context, I see an emerging trend in which people are taking the best attributes of the ancestral tribal environment and blending these with the best of our modern culture. One indication of this emerging trend is people creating an extended family for themselves, regardless of their marital status. People, with kids or without, need a sense of belonging to a larger social group, and children flourish when they are loved and supported by such a group. As adults, whether alone or in

nuclear families, we yearn to belong to groups that assist not only with physical survival, but emotional and spiritual survival as well.

I call this new cultural form the “spiritual family,” and I participate in the formation and ongoing life of one myself.

One of the purposes of a spiritual family is to raise healthy, happy kids. Likewise, adults have their varied needs met even as they are able to better meet the needs of the children.

I enjoy finding my spiritual family. Each person in my new family has connections with others who participate in their own unique clusters. We are creating a loving web that is strong, light and open. Our connections spread, uniting us all into one community. We nurture and help each other to reach emotional and spiritual maturity.

It is through connections like these that our consciousness matures, thus leading to a fuller and more interesting life.

Spiritual Kinship

Our kindred spirits are sacred. Beyond our skin, past our bloodline, we are united in spirit. Our quest is to seek the deepest relationship with self, then to make our love available to others. The essential part of this endeavor is to form several friendships and, where possible, link our friendships together. This is how we will create a critical mass of consciousness. Spiritual kinship is where all the virtues come into play.

Our kinship is with the light. The bonding begins as a brief flash, a mere glimpse, felt by our spirit. The sensation in our spirit is a kind of harmony, resonance, a brightness that guides us. We recognize the other as kin in spirit.

I belong to a group of men and women who are my network of spiritual friends. Our relationships are based on kindness and a mutual commitment to nurturing each other’s spirits. The common ground we all have is our emanation from spirit, yet each of us has our individual spirit. We are eager to overflow into each other. On top of my dresser are pictures of my kindred spirits that remind me of my family.

“Sangha” is an ancient Sanskrit term for fellowship, meaning a relationship between many individuals used to advance the human spirit of all. The spiritual family of kindred spirits is a new sangha. We are an unusual collection of people with differing beliefs yet we share a common spiritual path of friendship. Our devotion to our friendship

transcends the variety of spiritual practices we follow. We share a reverence for each other’s enlightenment, celebrating each new revelation. The memories we create uplift the spirit. The quest for kindred spirits is a search for spirit.

Each of our lights is brighter for having known each other. Our consciousness expands and grows from the center in all directions. We are transformed by our love, full of tenderness and strength. We cherish and honor each other. We feel supported and embraced in warm, peaceful, uplifting love. Kindred spirits are necessary for our spiritual well-being. They are deep friendships that reach our spiritual core: spirit-centered relationships.

Spiritual Intimacy

Intimacy occurs when we caress the spirit of another. We come together for fun, love and enhancing each other’s growth. Our spiritual nature has a need to know and be known, to look into another and see them, and to truly be seen for who we are, virtue and vice alike.

Spirits thrives on intimacy.

In our friendships, we experience ourselves. Our friends help reflect our spirit back to us, revealing the spirituality we have mastered. The quality of our spiritual life is reflected in the quality of our interpersonal relationships. Friendships at the level of kindred spirits arise from our spiritual center.

We are all on an amazing journey from birth to death. Travel along the path with others who, together with you, seek the spiritual nature of intimate friends.

Resonate

Sense the resonance between you and another, the movement and the vibration of your combined energies. Feel your growing love for this person.

Seek those with whom you feel a mutual recognition of spirit. It might be a humming, a pulsing, an echo, a kind of inner heat or smile. You will not be able to form a bond at this deep level with just anybody. They must resonate with who you are, as you do with them.

Our spirit resonates with certain people like neighboring strings on a sitar. They are like a note of music we harmonize with. Our life forces are energized when we are together. Even when we are apart, we are connected despite distance. We feel the love we hold for each other whenever we recall their name.

Spirit Exchange

A spirit exchange is the transmission of energy when we open our spirits to another. A spiritual conception occurs when two or more people exchange their spirit. A new spirit is birthed with each encounter.

Exchanging spirit is as natural as breathing. Think of spirit as the air you breathe. Feel your breath, maybe for the first time. Is the air dry or moist, cool or warm? Notice the energy as the spirit enters and the nerve endings in your nose are stimulated. Hear the soft sound as the life-giving breath rushes in. Be thankful to all the plant beings that gave their spirit to the air now in your lungs. Sense the spirit breath flowing into every cell in your body. Breath invigorates the spirit. The fact that you are alive and breathing is proof that you absorb spirit. Hold your breath as a reminder of just how long you can live without a fresh supply of this spiritual nutrient. Each breath is a miracle.

During all human encounters there is an exchange of spirit. The quality of the spirit exchanged is affected by the virtues that the individuals bring to the relationship. Exchanges are mutual; energy flows both ways. When you transfer spirit with another, you both feel bigger and brighter. When you share your passions, you share your spirits. The more you give to your friends, the more flows into you. The quality of spirit energy is enhanced and strengthened with each exchange. The spiritual mass of both individuals increases.

Maggie refers to a spirit exchange as a rainbow bridge forming between two people. The more open and receptive, the more vivid the colors. When

the desire to connect is mutual, the streams of light form bridges.

Be alert for those moments when the spirit of a person opens to you. The opportunity for a spirit exchange may pass if you hesitate or hold back. Make an effort to match their openness at a split-second's notice. Be intentional and synchronize with the spirit exchange. Follow through. Who knows whether an encounter may develop into a lifelong friendship. Seek your kinship through bonding, spirit to spirit.

Your spirit naturally seeks to expand to a higher level of consciousness through a spirit exchange. To grow spiritually, you need to deepen your spiritual exchanges. Seek them from a variety of sources. We can only go so far on our own. Spiritual exchanges create spiritual intimacy. When you exchange with another, you nurture each other's spirit. We form spiritual families for the expressed intent of being involved in each other's growth. We need each other to evolve spiritually, with love, to evoLove.

Guardian Angels

I delivered an interactive keynote speech in Washington to a group of people from all over the state. The organizers wanted everyone to bond and loosen up. One of the exercises was called "Guardian Angels," in which participants ask each other to do something special for them. At first, the audience got tense at the mere thought of asking a stranger to give them what they wanted. Then there was a sudden release of energy as they chose a partner and began to make their requests. The room filled with laughter as they got into the swing of being guardian angels.

After lunch, a participant approached me in the hall. Tears of happiness coursed down his face. He was beaming:

I asked my guardian angel to give me flowers. I have given flowers to many people in my life, but in my 55 years no one has ever given them to me. I never told anyone that I wanted flowers. Asking a total stranger for flowers was the hardest thing I have ever done. But just look at these beautiful flowers!

He was holding a bouquet so huge he could hardly get his arms around it. His guardian angel had gone straight to the hotel florist and bought the gift. Fred and I stood admiring the flowers. It was an amazing experience, that a stranger would be willing to fulfill such a special request.

Magic happens when you ask for what you want.

I like to think of my kindred spirits as living guardian angels. These spirits guide us on the path and work miracles on our behalf. The world is not always as kind to us, so it is wise to provide a sanctuary for each other. As guardians, we hold sacred space for each other. When we talk to each other in kindness, we know that we are safe and loved. We need our friends for both the high and low times. Supporting each other's hopes, dreams, fantasies and goals are part of what it means to be friends. We have the power to make dreams come true.

Ask your friends to be guardian angels with you. As guardian angels, they have the divine right to refuse, but do not take a refusal as rejection. They love you and you love them. "No" is a respectable choice. They are not obligated to do anything for you.

Spiritual Nourishment

We grow up knowing that our survival depends upon others' care. As adults, we tend to look to just one person, our mate or best friend, to provide for our needs. When that person leaves or is not there for us, we fear for our emotional or physical well-being. We might be tempted to project back to our childhood, to a time when our parent wasn't there for us and we felt lost and helpless. But as adults, we know that relying too completely on ourselves or just one other person for everything we need can be dangerous. We need to fortify ourselves with several close friends who lend support.

Everybody needs spiritual nourishment. When we are spiritual omnivores we can derive energy from many sources. It can be as simple as two people smiling at each other. I nourish my spirit by intimacy, passion, joy, music, reading, animals, beauty, laughter, love, dance, adventures, exercise, time in nature, playing with kids and meaningful work.

Another way is to teach the care and feeding of our spirit to our friends. We can ask our friends to show us how they would like to have their spirits nurtured. A kindred spirit relationship is based on a mutual commitment to nurture each other's spirits.

Asking the question "Would you teach me how you would like me to nurture your spirit?" strikes a chord and may create intense, unexpected responses.

Be open to receiving the other's honest requests. Asking indicates intent to care for others in a meaningful way.

Embody your sacred, centered self. Find people, places and activities that fill you up and give you nourishment. I like to ask people what they do to brighten their spirit, so I can add it to my list. In these ways we learn how to mutually assist each other.

Nancy's Request

I asked Nancy, a good friend of mine, to teach me how to nurture her spirit. Her response to the offer was a mix of tears and joy. Nancy explained that she had spent her entire life taking care of others, personally and professionally. This was the first time anyone had ever offered to care for her. Nancy said she would need some time to consider what she wanted.

A couple of weeks passed before we talked again. Nancy shared that she was stressed and frightened after a visit to her doctor. She had discovered a lump in her breast. Nancy was also having serious problems at work and would likely lose her job. The combination of health issues and the threat of being fired pulled her down. "I am single," she said, "and sick, and about to be unemployed. I feel like a complete failure!"

I held her as she cried. After a while, we talked and came up with a plan. She wanted to be nurtured by having her friends tell her how they loved her.

I made a forty-five minute tape of all the ways I thought she was special. She listened to the tape before her operation and while recovering in the hospital.

*The path is simple:
nurture the spirit.*

Sometimes when a friend has problems, we are unsure how to respond. We all eagerly wanted to give Nancy what she had so eloquently requested. Each time I see Nancy, I am reminded of the healing power of love and her bravery.

Flash Point Experience

When I am with one of my kindred spirits, I feel energized. A dynamic level of vibration is reached that I have hitherto experienced only with a lover. When my energy resources run short, a spirit exchange feels like a transfusion. Respect and trust for each other quickens the threshold for "spiritual combustion." The flash point is the initial moment when a spiritual exchange occurs. My friends help each other create the energy necessary to reach this point of ignition.

I feel as though I am a combustible liquid, heated, turning into a vapor. One spark and I will burst into flame! Our mutual love is fuel for our individual flames. I am excited to have such great friends in my life. I experience the spirit of each person who reaches through me and holds my spirit.

There is no shortage of energy and spirit within us. I am learning to focus this energy. I can do a great deal of good with it. The more friends who come together to exchange spirit, the easier it is to reach a spiritual flash point. There is a collective elevation of consciousness. Spiritual flash points, in turn, contribute to the awakening process.

Embrace the spirit.

Spirit Beings

The first time I experienced this spiritual exchange was with a friend from college. Afterwards we felt confused and elated. The experience was invigorating, sending a ripple of pleasure like a spiritual orgasm through our bodies. It was like making love with a great lover though we had not even touched. The increase in energy we felt was the conception of our relationship. I was speechless, realizing I had no language to explain what had just happened.

When two people mate, they can create a new being. Their progeny exhibits qualities of each of the parents. Similarly, through a spirit exchange, a new being is created, representing the spirit of the relationship. Our energy fields connect and an unexplored aspect of spirit emerges. A fresh life is born.

When we bond in friendship, we create such a

new spirit. This light-being grows as our relationship grows. We feel mutual responsibility to feed this new life with our virtues. When we nourish our relationship, it nourishes each of us. We depend upon each other's strengths without losing individuality. Our combined forces result in interdependence.

Spirit at Work

Any discussion about spirituality must include the world of work. I remember when I first heard the term "right livelihood." I decided at that moment that I would create work for myself that integrated my spiritual principles. Now as I sit in my home office and swivel my chair to take in a 360° view, I see my temple, my shrine ... a place where everything is sacred.

The skylight over my desk provides me with a view of clouds and stars. As I sit and write by the window, I see the trees change through the seasons. Next to my computer, I keep a round granite rock I collected in the San Juan Islands that was tumbled smooth by glaciers. On a shelf there is a horseshoe crab shell, an artifact from a life-form that has remained unchanged for millions of years. I treasure the picture of the redwood trees I have visited. These trees are among the biggest and oldest living beings on the planet. I also have photos of bears, whales, eagles and wolves that surround and inspire me. In one of the windows is a full-length silk painting of the pregnant Earth mother. I see feathers that I have found on hikes that remind me of the miracle of flight. National Geographic magazine provides a bounty of images of nature and people with whom I share the world. I recently added to my collection a brass singing bowl from Tibet. On a shelf are statues of Buddha, Kwan Yin, the goddess of compassion, and Mickey Mouse as the sorcerer's apprentice. To honor those who lived on this land before me, I have a Native American drum, dream catcher, an Inca figure and Northwest Indian carvings. My meditation pillow and reclining chair offer places for reflection. My bookshelf is home to the inspirational books of my many teachers. There are an increasing number of books and articles on the subject of spirit at work, and I am encouraged by a growing awareness that the bottom line and a higher path can coexist.

*Time to turn our workplaces
into holy places.*

When we value ourselves, we assign meaning to how and where we work. Our bumper to bumper lifestyle is killing us and the planet. We can either pull together or we will be pulled apart by the tensions that are building worldwide. Our inner work belongs at work.

Guided by Virtues

Writing about the virtues has helped me more than I could ever have imagined, for virtues form the path to understanding what spiritual being is. Our virtues manifest universal qualities and the full range of spirituality. Spirit, as well as love, can be defined by virtues. Virtues are the foundation for our spiritual journey. Virtues illuminate our path. Being spiritual is a virtue and acting in a virtuous way is spiritual.

Virtues represent our core self, our spiritual center. One way to imagine this concept is humanity as part human, part angel. Virtues are the link between the two: humanity's link to divinity. Each virtue is a facet of our spirit and together, virtues are spirit-making. The virtues are a system and language that has helped me see my personal and our global evolution.

Virtues are spiritual assets.

We need our kindred spirits to help us fully develop our spiritual virtues. Empathy is a true spirit-to-spirit connection, one's spirit welcoming the spirit of another. Kindred spirits help co-create a critical mass of virtue-centered consciousness.

Each of us was imbued with a spirit at birth carrying different propensities for good and evil. Our spiritual development is promoted through the practice of reducing our vices and increasing our virtues. Our virtues and vices reveal the current state of our spirit. In this life, we have the free will to ignore our inner guidance, or we can choose to call on the wisdom of those around us. Our spirit will guide us unerringly if we let it.

Evolving the Spirit

Researchers have measured and recorded increases in human brain size over the past. More difficult is the measurement of growth in our individual and collective spirit.

I believe the human spirit is expanding in every direction. Our current position is not the highest possible stage of evolution for humans ... we've got a ways to go yet. Even as breakthroughs in science astound us, we have created problems and conflicts that will require the best of us working together to remedy. As I sit with these realizations of what is to come, I wish I could live for thousands of years just to witness the unfolding.

I am proud to see so many brave men and women helping each other evolve their spirits. I see a massive underground network of people who send up shoots where they live and work. Contrary to all the doom and gloom, the future is hopeful. Our whole species is moving forward, despite what the evening news may tell you. The essential question is: How do we create the optimum environment for consciousness and spirit to continue blossoming? A powerful force is created when individuals take personal responsibility for their own conscious evolution.

In the past, monks reprinted words of wisdom by hand. Later, the printing press speeded up the process. Today, one person's moment of self-reflection and awakening can instantly be spread around the world via the Internet. And what of tomorrow?

The enhancement of human consciousness, once the private reserve of sages and saints, is now accessible to any human beings who choose it. As kindred spirits, we must develop reverence for all life. Our mission is to evolve the human spirit.

*Our quest is the evolution
of the human spirit.*

Uncle Lawrence

My mom's oldest brother, my Uncle Lawrence, was a Fuller Brush salesman in rural Indiana. One summer when I was young, I went with him on his route as he traveled from farm to farm. The housewives would come out to welcome him as soon as they recognized his car. He greeted each lady with a warm smile. If they could afford to, they purchased some household items.

When Lawrence laughed, you laughed with him. You wanted to be around him, to feel what he felt. I laughed more with my uncle than with any other, for he had a spirit that brightened everyone's life. When he returned home at the end of a long day, I saw the affection he gave his wife and my four young cousins.

I was shocked when my mother tearfully informed me that Lawrence had been killed by a drunk driver.

My family arrived at the funeral parlor early to help with some of the arrangements. I had been to several funerals before, but this was different. Here was the body in a coffin before the flowers had been arranged. The spirit was already gone. Lawrence had combed his hair in a special way his whole life. The undertakers had brushed his black hair straight back. I had never touched a dead body before, but I put the wave into his hair so he would look like himself. Our spirit gives warmth to life; death releases the spirit.

Birth and death are simple doors, gateways at the end of a long hall. The spirit of Lawrence lives in his kids, in me, in the housewives and in all who laughed with him.

Spiral of Delight

The best way I know to prepare for a spirit exchange is by loving myself. I have chosen friends who love themselves and are in touch with their spirits. My love flows into them and theirs into me. I feel their caring and I send it back. We see our friendship as a reflection of our spirit.

At times, the love of these friends for me is greater than my own love for myself. They show me new ways to cherish myself. Learning to expand the ways I care for myself allows me to appreciate others in new ways.

Loving others builds up a charge. When our energies begin to merge, we experience each other's pleasure and love as our own. When we meet, a "spiral of delight" begins with an overflow of joy. This

enchantment spirals ever upward, in widening circles, carrying us both up into the light. Our happiness is intertwined and the emotional charge increases, spreading to everyone we meet. The love we feel is blended so well that its source is impossible to distinguish.

Spiritual exchanges create the foundation for my deep relationships. I look for others who have a spirited relationship with themselves. These relationships produce the energy needed to evolve the spirit.

I first met Dorianne at a discussion group entitled "Dangerous Conversions." We were mutually attracted to each other's spirit and wit. Now, though we only see each other perhaps once a year, I witness her spirit growing brighter and brighter, and she moves mine. Dorianne is one of those unique people who somehow manages to travel around the world. Once she lived at the South Pole for six months, then moved to Japan and married Richard. They teach cross-cultural communication. I asked her how she grows so much from year to year:

I am changed by the people I meet.

Her innocence and intelligence are a special combination of virtues.

Evolve the Spirit

To evolve is to do that which has never been done before. Body, mind and spirit can be discussed separately but they are not separate. The evolution of consciousness and that of spirit are the same. As the spirit evolves, the body follows. We are powered by our spirit. It seeks to grow, expand and to fill the universe. Our destiny is linked to the evolution of spirit.

The most exciting part of my journey is watching my spirit awaken and evolve. As I become more aware of my spirit, I become more aware of spirit everywhere.

Inner Space

There are millions of individuals working to change their inner and outer worlds. Today there are vast resources available to help us grow. Ancient texts provide time-tested principles, and modern writings abound from which to learn. While my spiritual library has many books, I believe the best is yet to come—time to build more bookshelves! A

life-long quest provides many opportunities to explore a combination of methods and to find out what works best for each of us.

Sanctification, at one point on the path, may involve being more understanding and less rigid. Living life to the fullest, as a spiritual practice, may be used as a form of purification. One person told me that currently he practices seeing beauty everywhere. Positive or negative interactions with everyone we encounter are opportunities to grow. Even the most ordinary of experiences has potential to expand the spirit. Refinement is asking, "What will I do today, to contribute my part?" Time spent fostering inner peace always advances the cause.

Just as Charles Darwin put forth his theory of evolution, I have a theory of my own: humans evolve as the spirit evolves, in a symbiotic relationship. We humans have the uncanny capacity to consciously evolve our spirit, and one of the primary ways we do that is by loving with intention. As energy and spirit evolve, our own capacity for enlightenment is enhanced. I believe that we are rapidly evolving beings.

Love evolves the spirit.

I find proof of my theory all around me and in everybody I know. Observe for yourself the evolution of your own spirit. Humanity has the power to transform from within.

New Species

My ideas relating to the evolution of the spirit were originally generated during a conversation with a futurist named Ruth. Our reunion after 20 years was the critical spark that launched the writing of this book. We agreed that a new global spirit was emerging. We probed these questions:

If a new species of humans were discovered, what qualities would we like them to have?

In what areas do we want the human species to evolve?

What is next after *homo sapiens*?

Can humans achieve a higher level of consciousness of love and kindness?

After three hours of brainstorming and laughter, I realized that I wanted to participate and be a member of the new species. But how was I to evolve into it?

The quest for consciousness is constant.

Paleoanthropologists have classified the humans of the past 40,000 years as *homo sapiens*. *Homo sapiens*, translated from Latin, means "wise man." Wise is fine as far as it goes, but wisdom is only one of the virtues we need to make the evolutionary leap to a virtuous and sustainable society based on loving principles. A change in the name of the species can occur only when advances are profound. We live during a great transformation of the spirit.

The entire human species is evolving spiritually, a shift that is sensed by many people. As this new spirit is conceived, a new species emerges. In time, we will no longer be *homo sapiens*.

I see groups working hard on every substantive issue, in every corner of the world. As a consultant presenting around the country I have an inside view of many companies, and have witnessed them shift profoundly over a relatively short time. I see signs of change everywhere. The good news is that the new species is flourishing. And we are growing in strength.

Today, we humans must make changes equivalent to those made long ago by ancient animals that left the water and learned to live on land. We have come a long way from gills to lungs, cold blooded to warm, on all fours to upright, from animals of limited consciousness to human beings who comprehend and cherish infinity and divinity. When early primates banded together, learned to use tools and cared for their offspring, intelligence flourished and so did the species. The next major shift will be from survival of the fittest to mutual nurturing. We have to evolve into a new spiritually-oriented species to live and flourish.

Life evolves through a variety of forces: natural selection, mutations, genetic drift and chance. During human evolution, our bodies have changed;

we are taller, we live longer. Compared to virtually all other animals, our brains have increased to a massive size and capacity compared to our body size. This capacity for consciousness and intention gives us some choices that will affect our future. This element of choice is as profound as the evolution of our own species, a uniquely human characteristic, and is a miracle, when you think about it.

Advancements in science and technology must be combined with greater advances in consciousness. The continuing existence of our species relies on the evolution of the spirit. Whereas it takes the human body many generations to change, the spirit evolves in the space of each breath. As the spirit evolves, the body follows.

The rate of spiritual evolution greatly increases when we collectively nurture each other. The spirituality we manifest in our lives unquestionably betters us as individuals; but perhaps more importantly it is a gift to humanity, for it raises the consciousness of the world. Kindred spirits are a forum for the evolution of consciousness, ensuring a future of our own choosing. The continuation and evolution of our species is dependent on our ability to love ourselves, each other and the Earth.

I call the new species *kindred spirits*, which I translate as “virtuous beings.” We are a link between the human and the divine. We have a higher destiny to seek, for ourselves and our species. The principles that guide our relationships differentiate us from the species out of which we evolved. Being virtuous raises our consciousness. Our spirits are growing bigger and brighter. Our purpose for existence is the evolution of the spirit. The spirit evolves as our virtues grow.

We are totally responsible for the future. Only a change in the collective human spirit will be enough to transform the world. It is only our power to alter consciousness that can affect the course of evolution.

Our community of integrated awareness is spiritually evolving to a more sustainable, ecological way of being. We must find our individual passions, focus our vision and then help each other on the path. Our synergistic strength is the power that can transform the species and lead to the next evolution of humanity. Each of us has a part to play as we form spiritual communities to be of service to our larger community and the world.

Gather to foster spiritual evolution. Kindred spirits is a highly visionary yet pragmatically grounded model for the future.

Become the new species.

Energy Centers

Among the best tools to evolve the spirit are the energy centers known as *chakras*. Chakra, an ancient sanskrit term meaning “wheel of light,” describes a complex human energy system of awareness. The seven chakra centers are associated with specific areas of the physical body. These are: Survival, located at the base of the spine and extending down the legs to the feet; Sensation, in the genitalia; Power, in the region of the navel; Love, around the heart and radiating out the arms to the hands; Self expression, located in the throat area; Wisdom, located at the forehead and the Spiritual center, which is located at the top of the head.

Our chakra energies extend out from our bodies, with the first and seventh expanding to connect top with bottom, bottom with top. Each chakra is equally important to our energy flow and vitality, and each affects all the others. The individual chakras are not actually separate at all; rather, they collectively represent seven aspects of the whole self. They combine with each other individually, opening and closing as we encounter other energies and situations in the course of our lives. Issues that reside in each center are accumulated or released as we become aware of their presence. When we are in relationship to another, our chakras and the chakras of the other person can combine and compound feelings in a relationship.

Development of the chakras means focusing on the emotional, spiritual and physical concepts each represents. Developing one chakra while neglecting others only creates an imbalance, weakening overall strength. The goal is to have all seven chakras open, balanced and integrated. An open chakra indicates growth and understanding represented by that center. Our higher needs are realized as the lower chakras are actualizing. Each of the centers is a kind of virtue; the seven together are a system of deepening our understanding of ourselves and our relationships. The chakras are the virtues of our spirit.

In the following section, I will share my perceptions of each center, including the positive results of awareness and growth, and negative effects when an essential energy center is not developed or is ignored. To achieve the maximum benefit, you will need to apply the following examples to understand how these forces act in your life. The energy you spend discovering your relative position in each center and how all of these centers correlate will reap vast rewards.

The following descriptions provide some attributes of each chakra center. Please recognize that this is only a brief synopsis. The saints and sages of the past spent lifetimes studying these seven energy centers.

The Chakras

I was impressed with Stephen Covey's popular book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The following is my version, "The Seven Chakras of Highly Spiritual People."

Questions at the end of each description will help you to personalize each center. Use the space at the bottom of each page to record your sense of what the centers mean to you.

1. Survival Center

Earth Principle

Location: Base of spine, including legs and feet

The survival center is called the root chakra, our connection to the Earth. When we are open here, we feel well anchored. We are born of the Earth and will eventually return. Be in touch with the Earth; send this root energy down into the ground and awaken to the life force. Walk, run, dance and play with this energy. When your will to live is strong, you are grounded.

Out of our efforts to stay alive unlimited forms of self-expression unfold. I have a need to touch the land, to sleep on it, go to the beach and be buried in the sand, grow my own food, hike and be surrounded by nature.

Primary needs of sleep, warmth, food and safety are based in the first chakra. This center is the home of the primitive fight or flight response, the instinct to avoid pain. The safer we feel, the more open we tend to be. When there is danger or we are afraid of injury, we are naturally closed and protective. Sometimes the best course of action is to shut down and protect oneself. If we are in pain, our energy is focused and drawn to this center. This is useful in alleviating pain and ensuring our survival.

Pay attention when your energy is concentrated in the first chakra. When one feels fear, it is valuable to investigate to see whether the fear is real or imagined. When someone is constantly in fight or flight because of worry, their energy is mired and other important areas of life get neglected, causing serious problems.

How does your first chakra find expression?

Are you in fight-or-flight mode or are you relaxed?

When do you feel physically safe or unsafe?

What pains, struggles or problems do you experience that make you want to run away?

How do you take care of yourself?

How can you strengthen your connection to the Earth?

2. Sensation Center

Water Principle

Location: Genital area

Tap, for a moment, into the vast reservoir of memories stored in your pelvic region. We all have early memories of peeing, farting, pooping and sometimes the pain of a rash or being spanked. Our skin remembers the pleasure of being cleaned up, powered and freshly diapered.

As children we are barely aware of the forces that will later awaken within our bodies, and adults who try to explain it to kids can only allude to what will blossom in a few short years. With the rite of passage called puberty, our desires arouse from sleep, like a bear long in hibernation, now looking for food. Spring fever stirs our loins. As young adults we are alternately fascinated with the sensations, energy and life situations caused by our genitals, or embarrassed and shamed by them.

The second chakra is the center of our ability to experience and create pleasure. Here, play, humor and joy originate. Our sexuality and reproduction manifest here in thousands of forms. Our desire for physical nurturing springs from this energy center. We are blessed with the capacity to experience ecstasy or anguish as a result of the energy that flows through this center. The physical connection to another is propelled from this center. The sensuality/sexuality continuum is sensed here because this energy stems from intimacy and sex.

When I have the chance to watch a baby nursing I am reminded of the power of the second chakra. Mental images cascade back to when that baby was completely surrounded by amniotic fluid, then further back to the sperm speeding in search of an egg to fertilize, then back further still, to a male in search of a female to inseminate and a female in search of a male to give his seed. How our entire bodies are captured by our sex drives! How awesome to be lovers, to breed in the way we ourselves were conceived, to

reenact the creation dance of a billion years on this planet! Hormones have to be one of the greatest inventions in the universe. To feel the pull of creation in your pelvis is ancient and mysterious.

When this center is well integrated with the other centers, our lives are balanced. But if this area is damaged or unconscious, disasters can befall. There is great value in reviewing your sexual feelings and experiences. Everyone has their own unusual mix of sorrow and joy, and we need to understand how our past influences our present relationships.

The amount of energy that our culture exerts to suppress sexuality is staggering, especially when we consider the institutional forces that seek to entice and exploit that same energy. In sexuality are vast stores of energy that can be channeled for the good of humankind but, if repressed and abused, explode to cause great suffering. It is astounding to think how much pleasure and pain this one center can generate.

What kind of nurturing do you want?

How do you feel on the sensual/sexual barometer?
Satisfied or hungry?

What level of joy are you experiencing right now?

3. Power Center

Fire Principle

Location: Solar plexus, belly, navel

We have strong feelings radiating from the power center—confidence, discipline, control, assertiveness and will power. Our self-worth is centered here. When this chakra is open, we feel empowered and take responsibility for our lives. We feel centered and able to handle whatever comes along. Livelihood, money, security, ambition, fame, status and possessions are constant themes. As we become more integrated our resilience and strength will grow.

This is the center of personal power that, when used for the good, generates successful results for our life. Leadership is centered in this third chakra. Just as we want respect from others, we also need to respect that others equally have the right to control their lives. Be a strong leader and simultaneously encourage others to be good leaders within their own realms.

The abuse of power has plagued humanity since our species came into existence, but real power is never exercised at another's expense. This is one

of the lessons of the third chakra when it is in balance. Some times it is crucially important to act out of the power center, but it is also appropriate to hold back our energy so as not to overpower another. Discernment in the matters of power relations is a sign of balance in this center.

What causes a loss of power? "I don't have what it takes, so I have to take or receive my power from others." Reclaiming our power means taking responsibility for our lives. We must all learn to generate most of our energy from within, with supplemental sources without.

Our mothers transferred their power, their life force, into us through the umbilical cord. When we look at our navels, we see a physical artifact of our past connection to another's power.

In what areas of life do you feel in control?

Are you satisfied with your level of mastery and your ability to make things happen?

What drains your power or renders you ineffective?

4. Love Center

Air Principle

Location: Center of chest

The pure qualities of sympathy, compassion and empathy reside in the fourth chakra. We learn to exchange love with all our brothers and sisters from this center. Our sense of connection to community flows from our heart center. One moment we may wish to be nurturing and embraced, and later seek the silent soloist of self. Sometimes we reject love, contracting out of fear. It is at the fourth chakra that we balance our needs to be independent and interdependent. Here we feel self-love and the love we give to others.

Our love chakra energy needs to be integrated into all the centers for us to be balanced. This heart center integrates the first three chakras (survival, sensation and power) by expressing them emotionally and balances them with the higher three centers (self-expression, wisdom and cosmic consciousness) above. Thus, the love center is the crossroads between the three lower and the three upper chakras.

When we tense or hold our breath, our energy centers close. Fill up and let go, emptying your lungs as a way to tune into the entire area of your chest. Keep flowing by noticing your breath. Use your arms for reaching out and hugging, a good exercise for your heart. Opening wider is a way to stretch your generosity. Feel the grace within and radiate it out

as far as you can.

Each of us has different strengths and weaknesses in the giving and receiving of love energy. For instance, I am good at giving but am lacking in my ability to receive. Check in with yourself to see how well you let love in. Witness when you are contracted. Sometimes it is wise to protect and defend your feelings, but more frequently the problem is forgetting that it is safe to open up.

When our hearts are broken, we can literally die of a heart attack. When we are too needy, people are scared away. When someone has experienced a great loss, pain is felt in this region.

When my heart is open, I am more likely to be cooperative. My care extends from the center of my chest and I respond with acceptance and warmth. I like to rest both hands over my heart and thank it for every beat. One of the ways that I like to greet certain friends is for both of us to place the palms our hands to the center at each others chests, heart to heart.

What are your levels of love, intimacy and affection?

Are you receptive to love and nurturing?

Is your heart expanding or contracting?

5. Self Expression Center

Ether Principle

Location: Throat and neck

Seeking guidance for our choices, we begin to turn more of our energy inward with this chakra. When we spend time on reflection, awakenings bubble forth and we make choices from our new awareness. Our level of motivation is determined by the energy we command from this location. Vibrations, sound waves are formed into communication. For healing and growth to occur, this center must be as open as possible.

Our voice, our effect on the world, reverberates from this location. The importance of speaking the truth, honesty to ourselves and others, vibrates here. We are inspired by a person singing from this center. The voice is the manifestation of the life force as it is heard and understood. Tears and laughter are given a voice here.

What do I say to myself? Is it helpful or destructive? Can I hear my inner voice? Am I paying attention or allowing myself to be distracted by white noise? The choice of words has a strong effect on

others. The tone of voice gives meaning to language. What I choose not to say aloud will affect my destiny. What is the best way to express my anger? Sometimes silence speaks the loudest.

I have a strong need to share insights and to speak. But I frequently overuse words in an attempt to communicate. Sometimes I am frustrated by not being able to say what I mean.

How receptive are you to your inner voice?

When have you spoken your truth? And when have you failed to say what needed to be said?

When do you need to speak the truth to yourself or to others?

6. Wisdom Center

Higher Self Principle

Location: Mind, third eye, between and just above the eyes

The purpose of introspection is to know oneself. Here, the rational and emotional come together. We realize our free will and the range of choices open to us. The higher our consciousness, the more options we can see. Dreams and creativity flow day and night.

Our interpersonal skills help us access our higher self; senses feed information to our minds. Intuition, vision, intelligence, knowledge and philosophy intermingle at what the ancients of India referred to as the "Om center."

If we study hard, we can become smarter. Wisdom takes even more effort. Profound wisdom requires deep reflection on our life experiences. As we access our higher self, the greater good becomes our focus rather than mere individual survival.

Our brains need to be treated with special care, for we demand much, and they require long periods of rest. How well do you treat your brain? The health of the whole body is obviously linked to how well your mind functions; brain and body are one.

We develop our higher self by expecting higher standard for ourselves. This is linked to enhancing our ability to learn from others.

I enjoy expanding my understanding by learning how others see themselves and our world. It helps to be receptive to new ways of thinking. New realizations are the result of the growth. We install new neural pathways as we, in effect, rewire our minds. For example, writing has helped me more than I would have dreamed possible to see deeper and farther. A few creative ideas lead to sentences,

to paragraphs, to an entire book.

Have you ever thanked your mind?

How can you access this center to assist you?

What can you do to stimulate your creativity?

7. Cosmic Consciousness Center

Spiritual Principle

Location: Above the top of head

The area just above our heads is called the crown chakra. It serves as an entrance for energy from the universe and cosmic consciousness. We experience bliss, freedom and a sense of oneness through awareness here. Many have called this divine force "God." In the great void we are centered and aware. We can obtain a level of detachment from external existence that liberates us. We see beyond self into spirit. We all are enlightened to varying degrees and in different ways. Feel the light enter here.

In order for this chakra to be open, it must be integrated and balanced with those below. If one or more of our centers do not function properly, it is difficult for this more advanced area to be fully accessible. Conversely, when I am troubled by money problems or a broken heart, I can restore harmony by accessing forces not physical through this chakra.

Sometimes we can use the massive amounts of energy from a crisis to open up this skylight chakra. Practice accessing your connection to universe before you need it. We all have the ability to go beyond our own limited experience, to tune into the cosmic channel in our own way.

Most of the time I am surprised when I notice that my seventh chakra is active. But if I exclaim, "Hey, look at me!" the door closes and I return to my regular brain waves. I just laugh and let go, knowing that awareness is always waiting but is not a function of ego. If we are not grounded in reality, we can cause great harm to ourselves and to others. How is your spirit doing today?

What are some of your entrances for cosmic consciousness?

What is your growing edge?

Chakra Dance

I have been attending a fantastic dance class taught by my friend Paula. By day she has a professional job as a computer tech, and by night pursues her passion for dance. She is a powerful example of a seeker on the path and someone who has invested in developing her chakras. The classes are a mix of lightheartedness and depth.

The class begins with a welcome to all and an introduction to those who are attending for the first time. Paula shares a focus for the evening and some sweet personal information about her chakras and sometimes requests that we share our experience and progress. Seven dynamic pieces of music are then played, each corresponding in order of the chakras starting from the bottom and dancing our way up to the top. Each dancer's movement is improvised and free form. Sometimes an eighth piece of music is played so we can spend extra time integrating all our centers.

I like to focus my attention and even touch the chakras, then spread the gathering energy to the other centers, sending blood and warmth with attention. I am busy all week, but while I am dancing with my chakras I am focused and spontaneous. In each class I am amazed by the need I have to express myself in this manner. All of my feelings that have been bottled up come bubbling out.

Sometimes I need to have my primary focus on the survival center. Later, I may also want to bring in my seventh. Some nights, I send power to my heart. Most of the time, by the end of class, I am in touch with my whole self. The transformation, using music and movement to remove blocks, is energizing.

This style of dance seems to be a necessary addition to my sitting meditations. I am always surprised to discover what fills a deep need, a need of which I am frequently unaware. For just one moment in my week, I feel balanced. This, of course, becomes a point of reference for all those times I am out balance, allowing me to better take action to redistribute my energy. The class is so valuable I wonder why I have not done this all along my life.

Chakras and Kindred Spirits

Part of the quest is to find others who want an intimate seven-chakra relationship, a full chakra knowing from spirit to spirit. The chakra system is an excellent way to examine areas of mutuality where deep needs can be met. Integration in all energy centers is the goal for which kindred spirits strive. Cultivate your ability to understand and bond fully in each of these centers. We develop our chakras because we want to be involved with others at our level. The spirit longs to belong.

The older I grow, the more I desire to be with those who have done a significant amount of personal growth. I like to choose friends who are advanced in several chakras and study with them to refine my own relationship with these energy centers. Everyone develops these centers differently, so there is an infinite amount to learn. I have only met a handful of people who can be expressive, balanced and integrated in all seven.

Seven chakra relationships are open, balanced and integrated.

Every chakra has positive and negative qualities. Any center that is underdeveloped, unhealed or not integrated will lead to serious problems. I am only starting to become more aware of how a problem in one center can short-circuit energy in other centers, and that in turn affects my interactions. The more I understand myself, the more effectively I deal with others. When I notice that I am in pain, shut down, repressed or fearful, I am able to access self-compassion. A deep compassionate understanding of self is needed before I can have compassion for others. The chakra system helps to give me valuable insights into myself and my friends.

I recommend setting aside time to honor the unique energy that you generate between yourself and others close to you. When I make a shift in myself toward better balance, I frequently see the person I am relating to make a similar adjustment. If we are both stuck and stubborn, no change is possible. It is revealing to share your strength and weakness as a tool to ease conflict.

Using the chakra system is unfamiliar to most people. If that is true for you, give yourself time—years, decades—to practice. Focus on sensing

changes in yourself over time. Learning to monitor your spiritual well-being with another is the ultimate balancing act. When you sense a problem in one of your relationships, practice developing your skill level with the chakra system. I have found this system to be extremely useful in helping me to identify the source of internal struggles and create practical, imaginative solutions.

Oh, that explains why I am having trouble with him today! I am too much in my head, and he is hurting and in survival mood.

I like to scan my friends' chakras and evaluate my impression of their progress. Then I check in with them to find out how reliable my sensors were. I notice what effect their chakras have on my chakras. This diagnostic evaluation is the best I have ever practiced. I now can sense early on when my energy is drained. Look around you and spot who provides the best example of each chakra fully developed, and where chakra energy is lacking. This will be a real eye opener.

Do I want to shield or open to this person?

What energy channels flow between me and this person?

When am I resistant to opening, starving for attention, blocked to feelings, hurting from the past or injured currently?

A Chakra Blessing

I once gave a keynote presentation at a national conference. The audience was great. We laughed and told stories. As I gathered my materials at the end, I discovered an unsigned note written on a napkin. Over 1,000 people were in attendance, so I had no idea who had left it. The message said, "You will be kidnapped at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow, be ready for an adventure."

Excited, I waited outside my hotel, looking at everyone who passed by me on the street, wondering if they were the mystery person. Finally, an old pickup truck pulled up in front of me. A woman dressed in shorts, T-shirt and a baseball hat shouted, "Hey! Are you ready for your surprise?" She waved me into the truck and off we went.

We drove to a nearby park and went for a walk. Colleen, I learned, loved to plan surprises for her

four kids and friends. She wanted to thank me for the insights she had gained from the presentation, and asked me if I would like to experience a chakra blessing.

She requested that I lie down in the grass next to a flower garden. As she gave a little blessing to each chakra, she placed a flower by that center. I was being honored in a way that I had never experienced before. What a precious gift from someone I had just met! She gave me a pressed flower with a note that said, "Nurturing a friend soothes the spirit." Colleen and I have become good friends and we visit each year at the annual conference. My wife and I have since repeated this ritual with our friends.

Ask a special person in your life if he or she would like to exchange the chakra blessing. Create your own blessings for each of the chakras.

Chakra Check-In

Find a quiet place within yourself. Breathe fully and focus your attention on each chakra, one at a time. Sense the location of this energy center in your body, and its principle. You may want to place a hand on the location of the chakra. Information is usually waiting at the edge of your consciousness, trying to enter your awareness. Ask the question, "What do I know about my energy in this chakra?"

This practice is especially effective during times of chaos. Do a chakra check-in with yourself regularly, to gauge your energy in each of the centers. The question in this exercise is, "In what ways and to what degree am I open, balanced and integrated in all seven chakras?"

A fantastic way of strengthening your connection with your friends is to share who you are in the seven energy centers. When witnessing a check-in, listen with your whole being. We tend to listen better when we know we will get our turn. This is a great intimacy exercise, a view into each other's spirit.

Sense the other person's spirit behind the words, and you may glimpse who he or she really is. The insights shared help to generate strong bonds. Exchange spirit at these energy levels with your kindred spirits.

Paradoxical Pot Holes

The spiritual path is not really a path until many travelers have used it. Most of the time, trailblazing is necessary. Although the trail appears smooth, you might at any moment hit a paradoxical pot hole that shakes you up. These holes come in infinite variations of inconsistencies, contradictions, enigmas and mysteries. The classic signpost reads, "You can't get there from here." Perplexed, turn right. Puzzled, turn left. Confusion is more prevalent than certainty. What a dilemma!

Even cleared paths are still riddled with obstacles as you go around the next bend. A path that you believed to be straight will challenge you with dangerous twists and dips. Some holes you can skirt and miss; others you see clearly yet still fall into. Every adventure has a certain amount of misery.

Spirituality necessitates bold moves. You frequently need courage to follow your own path, especially since there always seems to be someone around giving you unwanted directions. It takes courage to put into action what you value, when you're being pulled in another direction. Your principals will always be tested. Examine what you believe to be true on a regular basis, and if necessary, make a course correction. Making lifelong spiritual growth your number one priority takes fearless resolve and spiritual stamina.

It requires a dauntless commitment to be *evOLoving*. There are times when it is daring just to reach out in an attempt to cheer up the spirit of another.

A critical mass of consciousness is needed for humanity to move forward, yet just a one percent change now will result in major future shifts.

I perceive a powerful current silently changing the world. Nothing can stop this force, our collective spirit, this light reflected through each of us. Working together, we can accomplish what would crush even the strongest of us alone.

Enlightenment

I try to treat everyone I meet as enlightened, whether they have realized their potential or not. Each person has learned insights that have evolved their spirit. I have a great respect for all those who have suffered as children yet managed to retain their will to live, to be happy and to find love. The trick is to discover in what ways they have evolved.

My friendships are my primary way to awaken my capabilities. A friend once said, "Being enlightened in an insane world is enough to drive you crazy."

Kindred spirits are a vehicle for spiritual transformation.

As spiritual explorers, our task is to become masters at evolving a new spirit. Enlightenment means allowing more light to pass through us unobstructed. Spiritual growth is only limited by our imagination.

While stuck in traffic, I spotted a small bumper sticker that provided an answer to one of the great cosmic questions:

What is the meaning of life? Have a life that has meaning.

A basic human instinct is assigning our lives inherent meaning. Question the reason you are alive and ask what your purpose is. How do you give meaning to your life? For me, being the best person I can be is synonymous with having a meaningful life. Friends give meaning to my life, so I make the time to be with these people in meaningful ways. Discover how to increase your radiance.

Kindred spirits give meaning to our lives. Our spiritual destiny as kindred spirits is to be on the cutting edge. Talk about spirit with your friends. Let your spirit be your guide.

Below are questions to help you explore your spirit alone and with others. Discover shining threads of meaning that will clarify your understanding of what is important to you.

How do you define spirituality?

How will you invest spirit today?

How does your spirit express itself in the daily choices you make?.

Who are your spiritual role models?

What are your sources of spiritual fulfillment?

What is sacred to you?

Who are the holy men and women in your life?

What was your childhood spirit like, and how has your spirit grown and changed over time?

What is your essence?

How can you increase your spiritual intimacy?

With whom do you exchange spirit?

How do you enrich your spirit, nurture its growth and provide for its needs?

In what ways do you like to be nurtured by others?

What brightens your spirit?

When is your spirit the brightest?

What drains your spirit?

What are some ways you repress the best parts of yourself?

What is your higher purpose?

Play

The virtue of play is a collection of traits represented by a sense of humor, happiness, fun, pleasure, laughter, joy, creativity and a positive attitude. As a species, humans excel at play.

When I was a kid, I kept myself entertained for hours with a cardboard box. I loved to throw mud balls and snow balls. I spent most of my time outside playing with my neighborhood friends. Roller skates, wagon, scooter and bike—I really liked these toys with wheels! Life was a game.

I was rebuked many times in grade school for expressing my joy and enthusiasm. On every report card, the section, “Does not exercise self control” was checked. But it wasn’t really about a lack of control; it was about a love of playing. I got into trouble because, hour after hour, I could not sit still. I became the class clown to get attention. The kids laughed at me and the teacher punished me. Recess was the best part of grade school.

By high school, things had totally changed. Other students and even a few teachers had fantastic senses of humor. I loved to laugh and learn. Considered a problem in grade school, my playfulness became valued as a virtue.

May Day ... May Day!

When I was 38 years old, life was good and I was flying high. That all changed dramatically one dark night in May of 1986, when I was returning home from a research project. I was driving in rush hour traffic and it was raining hard. I still do not know exactly what happened next.

I found myself alone in a white hospital room with total amnesia. I later learned that I had been unconscious and rushed to the hospital by ambulance. At the time I was unaware that I had a body and was still on planet Earth. Floating in the void, I heard an inner voice say, “You are dead!” Terrified, I passed out of consciousness, only to reawaken to the same dreaded void and the same frightening message. Because I had no short-term memory, each recurrence seemed like it was happening for the first time. Nearly 20 years later, I am still shaken by the experience.

Then, inexplicably, a miracle occurred. I went from believing that I was dead to the profound realization of “I am alive!” Knowing nothing but the ecstatic fact that I was alive, I passed into bliss. Dread was replaced by a profound state of joy. With no past and no future, only the present existed. Zen monks would kill for the total oneness I experienced in that moment. My wife and son soon arrived but I was too unstable to go home. A comprehensive medical exam revealed that I had multiple injuries in both inner ears and the damage upset my equilibrium. I stumbled and fell just getting out of bed. I could not do yoga because it increased pressure in my ears and made my symptoms worse. Muscle tension produced daily headaches. Reading and computer work was impossible and my hearing was as unreliable as my eyesight. The ringing in my ears was so loud that I thought others could hear it. I would lose the hearing in one ear, only to have it return in a day or so. My eyes became overly sensitive to compensate for my ears. Even sucking on a straw was too strenuous. I was stretched to my emotional limit. *This is not me!*

I was quickly gaining weight due to inactivity. One second I had been strong and independent, the next moment I was weak, dependent, ill, lonely and disabled. I was forced into a form of early retirement.

I was unable to spell the names of my wife and son and I developed a speech problem. I'd think of the right word, but the wrong word would come out of my mouth. I became increasingly alarmed and sometimes I thought I was going crazy. What if my brain was irretrievably injured?

Desperate, I called my friends and explained my condition. They came to my assistance in many ways—preparing meals, giving me massages and bringing movies, books and tapes for me to listen to.

The miracle of true friendship then moved into high gear. As a self-employed person with no long-term disability insurance, I was fast running out of money and forced to cash in my IRAs. I would have panicked had not some close family and friends stepped in to lend me their support in the form of no-interest loans. Their interest was in my healing. Other friends helped too, further sharing the load. I discovered that I had developed true friends, for now my kindred spirits had become my health and life insurance.

The severity and duration of my problems had me despairing—would I ever get better? A little research on vestibular disorder statistics showed that many people with this kind of injury are prone to depression and even commit suicide.

Some of my friends couldn't understand what was happening to me. After all, I looked good on the outside. I had to educate them on the subject of "invisible disabilities." Had I simply gone blind, it would have been easier to perceive the problem and figure out how to relate to me. As it was, I needed support over an indefinite period of time. I had to ask for more understanding and help.

My injuries changed everything about my life. Had this happened when I was a single parent with no support system I would have been in major trouble. Without the backup safety system of my kindred spirits I would have experienced a major out-of-control, chain-reaction melt-down. My injury was too much for one family to handle.

I am glad I did not wait until I needed a friend to be a friend, for it was only the saving grace of my friendships that brought me through.

The Adventures of Saturn Man

A sense of humor was the other saving grace that carried me through this personal crisis. My playfulness was sorely tested.

About a year after the accident, I visited a toy store where I spotted a brightly colored cloth ring with a hole in the middle that you throw back and forth. It's called a Woosh ring. I just had to add it to my toy collection! As it happened, my hands were full so I placed the ring on my head like the brim of a hat. Then I saw my reflection in the window. The Woosh ring around my head reminded me of the rings of Saturn, and suddenly a light came on. I whispered, "I have found myself!" Dropping my packages, I placed my hands on my hips and proclaimed "I am Saturn Man!" I think the clerk was a little concerned about my mental stability, but I knew I was onto something.

The next week I was interviewed by a newspaper on the subject of humor in the workplace. They wanted a funny picture of me to go along with the article. I pulled out my favorite Hawaiian shirt from the closet. The colorful cotton flowers always cheer me up. I couldn't find a regular clown nose so I used a hacksaw to cut a slit into a big foam ball. With the addition of the Woosh ring, my Saturn Man outfit was complete.

I began to use the Saturn Man personality as a way to engage my sense of humor and deal with the struggles from my injury: What would Saturn Man do in this situation? Just asking this question forced me to alter perspective and consider new possibilities. I always listen to the voices in my head but I don't always do what they say! I have painfully learned that certain things are best left for my inner amusement, what I call "innertainment."

What would Saturn Man do?

I started to pretend that I was a visitor from another planet. Most of friends were already convinced of the fact. This gave me a peculiar freedom of self-expression that I had never before known. I would announce, "On Saturn, our customs are different than here on Earth."

Pain and Pleasure

Too much pain can shut down growth and weaken our will to live. After struggling with the effects of my injuries for several years, I had to admit that the equivalent of a 10,000 pound weight was pressing down on me. I visualized this weight on one side of a balance scale as pain. Then I examined the other side of the scale to see how much pleasure was in my life. I estimated the positive side to be around 1,000 pounds. "What would Saturn Man do?" I asked.

Saturn Man's recommendation was a simple two-step program:

First, decrease your pain.

Second, increase the pleasure in your life.

Saturn Man was right! It is not enough to just avoid pain. You need to seek pleasure, which has the power to transform pain and heal the past, and it does miraculous work in the present moment! Taking Saturn Man's advice, I made a commitment to start increasing my capacity for pleasure until it weighed more than the negative weight.

The big insight was that I have control over the ratio of pain and pleasure. I could only slowly reduce the pain, but I could quickly add pleasure. This adjustment in my understanding has helped me immeasurably in the years since that revelation. True, there was an unavoidable loss of control in certain areas of my life, but at the same time, I could take more conscious control of other areas. I committed myself to learning everything I could to keep my spirit up while my body was falling down. Life can be excruciatingly painful, but taking responsibility for creating joy and pleasure is a means of balance.

To heal, I needed to know what hurt, and did everything possible to reduce the pain from my injury. I developed a pain management plan to help me. The plan was simple: there was no room for surplus pain from my past because there was so much of it in the present with the probability of even more pain in my future. I identified several sources of pain that I was holding onto. Significantly, these included relationship trauma from my past that needed to be resolved with forgiveness. These were wounds that I kept open because I had been unwilling to let go of the hurt. What we resist will persist.

*Destructive fear is past pain
preventing present pleasure.*

I began by asking some important questions. For starters, was there any pain that I was inflicting on myself? I noticed that pain was always present when my cherished image of myself didn't match reality. For instance, I was used to projecting an image of constant strength; however, with the extent of my injuries, I was forced to face the fact that I was now chronically weak. I wasn't handling the discrepancy between self-image and reality very well. Allowing myself to experience pain and weakness made me better able to understand and cope with my problems.

Another question: was I causing any pain to those around me? I noticed that the more pain I experienced, the more I inflicted pain on others. For instance, sometimes I would blame my wife for my bad mood. I apologized to Maggie for all the unconscious ways I was hurting her.

I had to train myself to feel pain, but not react from that place. When I allow hurtful words out of my mouth, I create a sequence of negative reactions. I closely monitored the feelings and words floating around in my mind, and became much more careful in my communications with others. "Think before you speak," I counseled myself.

As I practiced being responsible for the pain I was inflicting on myself and others, I slowly began to see the truth about myself and the consequences of my choices. It was hard to admit that I was the source of this intense pain and therefore it was my responsibility to hold it and to heal it.

*Pain is a reminder to heal
and grow.*

Most pain is unplanned and happens outside of our control. Wisdom and experience teach us that suffering is unavoidable and that hurt, disappointment, loss, betrayal, illness, accident and death are inevitable parts of life. Isn't it interesting that, though we cannot prevent such suffering, every cell in our

bodies is designed to avoid pain and seek pleasure?

Pain is a call to action. The task is to know when pain is optional and to do something to reduce or eliminate its source. Ask aloud, "Is this pain necessary?"

By contrast, pleasure is never an accident but rather a choice. We create every bit of pleasure, happiness, love and friendship in our lives.

U-Turns

When I was a young boy, Dad took me for a ride in a plane that his friend owned. This was the first time I had ever been in a plane and I was so excited! We flew high over the Ohio River, which looked tiny below us. The pilot asked me how a roller coaster goes, and I used my hand to show how it zoomed down and then came racing back up. Then he made our plane dive towards the river below. I will never forget the sound of the air rushing by, the pressure in my ears increasing, as well as the quickening of my pulse. I was frightened and thrilled as I was thrust forward toward the dash as the river sped closer by the second as we picked up speed. Alarm turned to relief as the pilot pulled back on the controls. I felt the power of the engine working to stop the downward momentum to avert disaster. It took a few moments to level off, and he began to climb back up again. This ride was one of the highlights of my childhood.

During my recovery from injury, I remembered this childhood experience and Saturn Man came to my rescue. I asked, "What would Saturn Man do when confronted with the downturns and turbulence?" Make U-Turns, of course! To make a U-Turn, you must first be aware of your loss of altitude, determine the source of the problem, and have the energy to stop the downward motion and climb back to original cruising altitude.

I took Saturn Man's advice and began to practice. While still in bed, I would perform a preflight check on my systems to see how they were functioning. I examined the internal weather report—clear skies or foul weather? My present condition determined the flight plan I would attempt. Many days, I preferred to stay grounded and tried to heal.

Altitude

I imagined I was Saturn Man, blasting off each morning in his space ship for a new adventure. Some days my maximum cruising altitude was only ten feet due to low energy. Other days, if I was in good

spirits, I could reach much higher altitudes.

I regularly checked my cruising altitude to see whether I was maintaining, gaining or losing height. I developed a "personal altimeter," an instrument to measure my position relative to the ground. When flying so low, any downdraft could spell disaster. My goal was to reach the highest altitude possible so, if I took a downturn, I would still have room to maneuver.

Life is full of highs and lows. We know that there will be unexpected downturns, so it's wise to fly as high as we can.

Warning Signals

When I began recovering, I was unaware of the forces that sought to drive me down. I discovered that, if I noticed negative trends early on and took corrective action, I could regain my previous altitude with a small expenditure of energy. If I let myself become distressed, I fell further down and it would take considerably more effort to avoid a crash.

I programmed my personal altimeter to immediately signal any loss of elevation. My emotions were excellent antennas to give me feedback about my relationship to the ground. Just as soon as I noticed clues from my body that I was in a foul mood—angry, sad or feeling tense—I'd better pay attention and take corrective action immediately. Sometimes it seemed like there were several warning lights on at the same time.

Once I became aware that I was losing altitude, it was important to discover the problem so I could effectively correct it. Was this an internal problem, like loss of energy, or was a force from the outside pushing me down? Most of the time, the malfunction was due to my physical challenges and the pain. I discovered also that my own fear and uncertainty drained me. It was only with constant practice that I discovered how to master such internal forces and control my own direction.

Before my accident, I had some friends and acquaintances who were a minor strain on my energy. But now I had no extra energy at all to spare. Facing the fact that even a minor downdraft could make me crash, I chose not to be around people who dragged me down.

Dip, Drop or Dive

As my skill for detecting loss of altitude improved, I began to develop corollary awareness: was this a dip, a drop or a dive?

A dip was a small, slow loss in altitude and a simple adjustment, brought me back to my original cruising elevation. I realized that my internal dialogue in these first few seconds affected my internal

chemistry and electrical system.

A drop was a significant loss of altitude in a short time period. This type of decline required stronger action to recovery than a dip.

A dive was a sudden, drastic loss of altitude that, if uncorrected, could spell disaster. Pull up! Pull up! was the alarm signal. The speed of descent called for extreme measures just to slow the decline. The farther and faster the dive, the more serious the problem became, and the harder to correct. Stopping the downward momentum required knowledge of the cause and necessary courses of action. My goal was to avoid falling into that same dive again.

Free Energy

Fear can be useful in rallying our will to act. When I lose altitude, my fear became the short-term free energy I would use to refuel in flight. But fear is like sugar; it gives a short burst of energy but is ultimately draining. For energy that sustains over a long period at higher altitude, we have to draw from other sources.

Self-love, positive attitude, good health and caring family and friends—these are the sustaining fuels needed to keep flying high. The ideal is to fill our regular tanks and reserve tanks so, in an emergency, we will have the extra energy to bring us through and get us home safely.

Emergency Landings

Sometimes I could make a quick recovery without landing because I adjusted in the air. Other times, it was all I could do to pull up before hitting bottom. If a soft landing was achievable, there was little additional damage. Once safely on the ground, with help I could make a few quick repairs, refuel, fix problems and lift off.

Having survived several emergency landings, I assessed how I might have prevented the dive in the first place. I knew that I could not always prevent dives from happening, so it seemed wise to acknowledge I needed to upgrade my skills. By forming stronger friendships, I increased my chances of surviving.

Disaster

I had a choice. I could either be a helpless victim in an inevitable crash, or I could reverse my course.

Believing that you can transform your thinking gives you the power to take control of your destiny, even after personal disaster strikes.

I began to study people who had not only survived a disaster but thrived. They reported that their saving grace was a sense of humor and the support

of friends. Resilient people have dives and disasters like everyone else, but they excel at manipulating gravity to propel themselves up again. They need less leveling-off time and frequently achieve greater altitude than before. They are like a superball: the harder you throw it down, the higher it goes. Engaging one's sense of humor is one of the major ways to start to make a U-Turn. The other survival skill involves asking for help before you hit bottom.

Creativity helps us to bounce back from hardship and avoid panic.

Turning Point

The turning point happens when you change the trajectory course of your life. To do this you must rally and apply more energy than the inertia that drives you down.

Turning points are influenced by the following belief: "I have the power to turn this around. I need to pull back and change the direction I am headed." In the beginning, making a turn requires a lot of effort to slow the downward motion and level off, but with practice the turns become easier.

Our sense of humor and creativity give us the power to bend, curve and alter the downward force to start to rally energy to make the first part of the turn. Friends help with the turnarounds.

Attitude

There are powerful internal and external forces that can cause a loss of altitude, but remember that you always retain control over how you choose to respond. I have found my attitude to be the biggest factor in determining how far and fast I fall or how high I fly. What I think and feel about myself regarding the challenges of my life is often the difference between making a nick-of-time correction and crashing.

Being playful and in good humor helps me examine contradictory points of view and opens me to new possibilities. A creative attitude converts the ordinary world into an adventure and encourages experimentation.

Even when things look bleak, we have the power to be light-hearted. Focus on the bright side but don't ignore the problems. Being playful and creative gets us ready to respond to a bad situation with a good attitude.

Saturn Man says:

*Reverse your attitude
to raise your altitude.*

Attitude determines altitude. To maintain a vital quality of attitude, we need a blend of determination, tenacity, vigor, willpower, endurance and stamina. Ultimately, we are each in charge of determining our own attitudes, regardless of our circumstances. Hardening of the attitude is just as deadly as hardening of the arteries.

When I feel out of control and the world seems to be going crazy, the fastest way to regain control is with humor. When I laugh, at least I am in control of my inner world.

A negative attitude causes a tailspin while a positive attitude causes a spiral of delight. The challenge in a well-lived life is how to keep our spirits up when we are feeling down. Being positive and optimistic puts problems in proper perspective. Notice your smiles per hour; it's an accurate assessment of your current attitude and altitude.

Self-mastery involves witnessing your self-talk, both positive and negative. It's important not to block the negative messages because there may be useful information in hardship. But a negative attitude tends to produce negative results, and a persistent negative attitude always makes a bad situation worse. Being aware of one's negative feelings is qualitatively different from being negative.

There are two kinds of downward forces: external and internal. External forces, like gravity, are generally outside of our control. But internal forces are usually within our control, or at least have that potential. Only our negativity deprives us of this potential ... and in this we have choice.

What I call "grave-ity" is the attitudinal equivalent of the famous law of nature and acts in a similar fashion. Grave-ity and negativity are internal forces that can pull us down as surely as gravity sends us crashing to Earth. When our downward movement is the result of both exterior and interior forces, we are at a big, unnecessary disadvantage. Identifying the causes of our loss of altitude is critical to being able to stop the descent. If one of the causes is preventable, that is the first priority. The way to turn your life around is by starting with your attitude.

Hold space for a wide range of feelings. Sadness and happiness coexist. No one can be cheerful all the time. Give yourself permission to have a "BADitude;" sometimes delving into your negative feelings can be fruitful. It can even be fun to exaggerate a problem to an absurd degree, then laugh and return to a more realistic attitude.

Leveling Off

Once you pull back from out-of-control momentum, you can level off. Sometimes you can quickly begin your upward climb; other times you

need to make certain corrections before you start to ascend. This is a good time to access the causes of the dip, drop or dive.

Joystick

Once I am able to safely level off, I can take the time to plan and execute my ascent. When I pull back on my joystick, I begin to climb.

I am in control. Scheduling fun, playing a game, engaging my sense of humor, being creative and lightening up ... all help me redirect the energy. The effort to stop the dive, level off and make a turn-around takes a vast amount of energy. Play helps generate this upward energy even when I am at my lowest ebb.

The Climb

The ascent to original altitude is arduous. A fall of a hundred feet might take only moments, but regaining lost altitude can take months. Through trial and error I have learned that the trick is to harness the energy created from the dive and transfer it to the climb. There is a point where downward energy can actually be bent with the will; use that energy to power your upward motion.

Just like that airplane ride of my youth, a personal U-Turn is the process of losing altitude, identifying a turning point, leveling off and climbing again. The following sections offer insight and skill to make successful U-Turns. My idea is to use different aspects of the play virtue to reach heights greater than your original cruising altitude.

I experienced a major U-Turn in my life while recovering from my injury. I began each day glad to be alive. Despite my pain, I was happy to be above ground. Daily I looked for simple joys. I practiced the art of distilling pleasure from ordinary life.

I am alive!

Since I could not be as active as I wanted, I began to devote spare energy to being playful and understanding humor. My goal was to regain the altitude I had before my injury, and to go even higher. New skills were necessary.

Sense of Humor

Over the years, I feel that humor has expanded my thinking and rewired my brain.

We are born with five senses which generally grow as we grow. But our sense of humor requires training, practice and attention to achieve competence. Five of senses have an organ associated with them: the eyes, ears, mouth, nose and skin. The entire body is the organ for our sense of humor. All our senses are feeding us information that can be used for pleasure and play.

Our sense of humor adds sparkle to other virtues. Humor is a special human skill, a mode of expression, a choice in how we respond to situations. The benefits of a well-developed sense of humor are literally endless. Healthy humor boosts our immunity, conveys "I am approachable," lowers defensiveness, promotes trust, enriches life by building intimacy, brightens our spirits, brings forth good will and instills hope. All of these qualities assist us in our personal and professional lives. A good sense of humor is an essential stress survival skill.

Problems occur when someone's humor skills are underdeveloped or were repressed repeatedly when they were young. A big problem occurs when someone tries to make one style of humor fit every situation. It is better to have a grab bag of tricks from which to pull.

*Good humor is wisdom
and wit combined.*

Finding just the right amount of humor requires discretion, and creative adaptation shows we care. We can learn to customize our style of humor to the temperament of another. All this occurs in a split second without sacrificing spontaneity. Mastering these complex social dynamics is a big challenge when we are dealing with a new person. Below is a sampling of questions I like to ask myself before being humorous:

Is this a good time?

What is the mood of the individual or group?

What is a sensitive style that will work with this person?

What type of humor is best for this situation?

How much playfulness is appropriate here?

Being socially sensitive requires understanding that one joke may sit well with one person and fall flat with another. It is important to know when not to engage one's humor externally. It's just plain smart to refrain from saying something that you think is funny when others would not share your amusement. Telling true, funny, personal stories is usually better than repeating jokes. Many people find jokes hard to remember and it's easy to screw up the punch line. We all have the creative license to tweak the facts a little, for effect. It is better to invite people to laugh with you rather than trying to "make" people laugh.

Humor heals.

Humor is the best medicine when the spirit is down. Just the right dose makes pain bearable, reduces tension and helps us to cope with tragedies. Our sense of humor helps us at all of the points of the U-Turn.

Our sense of humor helps promote what I like to call "mental fitness." We need flexibility, strength and endurance to be strong mentally and physically. Resistance to distress is dependent on your level of mental fitness. Flexibility is the ability to change your attitudes to best fit the situation, mental agility. It takes strength to balance our rational and emotional minds to make the best decisions. Endurance is needed to respond day after day to challenges that arise.

A person possessing mental fitness needs these skills to make successful U-turns:

Welcomes challenges;

Copes well with adversity;

Deals with difficult people;

Handles stress with a positive attitude;

Possesses good problem-solving skills;

Remains calm in demanding situations;
Sees problems as opportunities;
Learns from mistakes;
Asks for help.

Happiness

When I see a happy person, I like to find out what they do to become so. Very little is known about happiness so I like to interview happy people and discover their secrets. Matt is a genuinely happy person and he was glad to share:

I quiz myself when I am feeling low. Is there any danger, problem or crisis right now? If not, then I play. I refuse to suffer any more than is necessary. I can feel good whenever I want. The Declaration of Independence guarantees us all the right to the pursuit of happiness. I focus on my inner wealth as source of happiness.

I have asked participants from my seminars to form "humor support groups" and brainstorm what happy people do. Here are some secrets of happiness from these sessions:

Laugh at themselves;
Seek out the good in life;
Know that feeling good is an inside job;
Surround themselves with fun friends;
Act warm and friendly;
Delight in surprises and see life as an adventure;
Love being alive and make the most of each moment;
Believe they deserve to be happy;
Choose to look at life with a positive attitude;
Enjoy a well-developed self-esteem;
Assume responsibility for their happiness;
Take good care of themselves;
Remain young at heart;
Make happiness a top priority;
Act spontaneously.

Laughing at Yourself

Certainly, one of the best ways to be happy and improve your sense of humor is to learn to laugh at yourself. Laughing at my errors helps me to back up, realize I goofed and say I am sorry. Admitting that I am not right all the time takes the pressure off. An inward look helps me perceive myself in a realistic manner. It is always better for me to catch my own flaws than have someone else point them out to me.

*Do your best and forget
about the rest.*

Humor makes it easier to see the truth. I am a constant source of amusement to myself. The more I laugh at myself, the less others are inclined to laugh at me. People around me are aware that I have faults just like them. By laughing at myself, I invite others to laugh with me.

Ironically, if you take yourself too seriously, others won't take you seriously at all. If you laugh at your own imperfections, a tone is set that invites others to laugh at their transgressions. People trust those who are willing to face their own character.

Being able to laugh at myself is a saving grace. I do my best to admit when I have made a mistake. It's easier for others to be forgiving when I am aware of my blunders. When I forgive my own mistakes, others trust that I will be forgiving when they make a blunder. I consider it a personal victory to be aware of my weaknesses.

Notice your reactions when you are around someone pretentious or who talks in a self-righteousness, arrogant manner. Such people are frequently humor impaired. No one is so important that there isn't something funny about them.

Being able to laugh at one's own bloopers is an advanced virtue, a trait that requires the capacity to see all of one's self. In a hand mirror we may only see our face, but objective self-study is like being surrounded by full-length mirrors. An honest and insightful reflection of this sort is always revealing, never self-degrading.

Laughing at yourself requires a high level of self-analysis. It is important to have an accurate sense of proportion about one's abilities rather than exaggerated importance.

When we cannot laugh at ourselves, others laugh behind our backs. Respectfully poke fun at the illusion of perfection and not the person. We all have blind spots and need to help each other to laugh at ourselves. The necessary skill is a degree of awareness to see oneself as others see you.

When I was a junior in high school my hair started to fall out. Since that time and through my adult life, people have made jokes about my baldness. This gave me an important choice early on: I could feel insulted, or I could feel good. And I learned an invaluable lesson: When I can laugh at myself no one else's laughter can hurt me.

Fight or Flight, Fun and Flow

During a real emergency, the "fight or flight response" can protect us from harm. This primitive survival mechanism was a necessary evolutionary adaptation to help us survive by reacting quickly to danger. But the world in which we live has changed from that ancestral environment. For most of the dangers that confront us today, a considered response is preferable to the reflexive fight or flight.

I observe that many people, in situations where they can neither fight nor remove themselves from danger, freeze up. To such people I submit an alternative reaction. Instead of fight, flight or freeze, have fun.

Finding our sense of humor allows us to regain perspective. When I sense danger that does not require an immediate reaction, I pause and try not to panic. Pausing allows me to engage my sense of humor. With fight or flight, the choices are limited to two. With flow and fun, the choices are unlimited. In this creative state I can select an effective solution to help resolve the situation. I am free to stay and play.

*Laughter is the best antidote
for distress.*

When I was a kid, my parents took me to see a house that had been destroyed. I can still see the image of a pile of boards that had once been someone's home. Dad explained that the pressure

relief valve on the hot water heater had failed to open when the heat got stuck on. The resulting pressure built up until the tank exploded with such force that it wrecked the house.

This childhood experience works very well as a metaphor for relationships. Friction can escalate to a feud, benefiting no one. Too much heat with no relief of pressure invites disaster.

Every relationship is enhanced with humor. When tempers flare, comic relief is needed. The closer the relationship, the more we need a good sense of humor to help us harmonize. Humor has the magical ability to defuse trouble. We always have the choice to be either alarming or charming. Be grateful for those who offer humor.

We must be able to access our lightheartedness before we can help relieve tension in another. Notice an awkward setting. Comic relief may be useful to adjust the mood and energy. Never deny a serious problem, but rather keep it in proper perspective. The ability to take yourself seriously and lightly at the same time is paradoxical yet creates balance.

When I am feeling stressed I like to remember that "stressed" spelled backwards is "desserts"! Which would I rather have? This is a helpful way to turn my attitude around.

Funny Introductions

When introduced in formal settings, it is tempting to take ourselves too seriously. I know this from experience because, since I do presentations at worksites and conferences, I am regularly introduced to audiences. Once I was scheduled to open a statewide conference. A prayer and honor guard were on the schedule before my presentation. I was seated beforehand at the head table, and the organizer asked me how I would like to be introduced. I told her that reading my resume was too boring for the audience and to just make up my introduction. Minutes later she stepped up to the podium and read her notes:

Bob Czimbab was raised by wolves in the Rocky Mountains. In his teens he was discovered by a trapper. Dropped off at a monastery, he was educated by Zen monks. He has a degree in Humorology, the study of people at play. He specializes in Refrigerology, the science of analyzing personalities by examining the contents of an individual's refrigerator. Bob was abducted by space aliens and is currently recovering from total amnesia. He has a medical excuse for his behavior.

I had to restrain my giggles, especially when I saw that the attendees initially seemed a little confused about how they should react. Ever since then, I request that my introduction be made up on the spot. I then ask the audience to make up their introduction as they greet new people. It is amazing what people can invent about themselves!

Act crazy so you stay sane.

Have fun making up your introductions. When you are introducing a friend, add some inventive information.

Cosmic Humor and Comic Vision

Life is full of incongruity, irony and ambiguity. The grand paradox is that everything we do matters, and at the same time, nothing matters. Each of us affects the universe in some way that we cannot even imagine.

Awake each morning and seek to be the best person possible and keep in mind that you may not be alive come dinner time. The end of the world is near and we are all going to die. In about five billion years, the sun will expand and vaporize our solar system. Our home planet will return to star dust. Until then, I figure the best use of our time is to evolve the human spirit.

Birth is fatal.

Knowing that I will die and everything will be destroyed gives me a detachment that fosters involvement. I attempt to act as if the fate of the world, indeed, the universe, depends on my goodness. In the same moment, I laugh at myself and the cosmic joke.

During the years that I have been writing this book, the local and international news media have been full of violence, suffering, death and the de-

struction of the Earth. The coexistence of good and evil are intrinsic to our being. I feel the weight of the world's problems. "Just do my part each day" is my refrain. Humor is often born of pain. Cosmic humor eases the pain by helping us gain perspective.

*Before righting a wrong,
make sure it is the
right wrong to right.*

I am encouraged by the goodness I see. An increasing number of people are working hard to make the world a better place. History has provided us with many examples of how one person's good deeds can affect us all. An amazing thing about the human species is that we care so much, knowing all the while that what we work so hard to create will ultimately be destroyed.

Emotional Self-defense

When someone experiencing intense pain enters your space, you can feel their pain. How you respond is your decision. Your particular reaction depends on factors such as your history with that person and your current emotional state. Human beings are connected by imperceptible links, feelings are certainly among them.

Sometimes the person who is struggling seems to want us to feel as bad as they do. And understandably: people don't like to suffer alone and pain isn't a particularly rational motivation. Often the subject isn't aware of the effects of their pain. We need to defend ourselves emotionally when someone close to us takes such a dive.

A friend describes his unconscious reaction to his friend's pain:

When my girlfriend is upset, she starts dumping on me and she knows just how to trap me. She pushes my buttons until I lose control and I go into automatic, saying and feeling things I later regret. I am blind-sided and react too quickly.

When I get caught like that, I can't help her. Although she makes personal accusations, I remind myself that I have a choice to make. Some of what she says is

true, and I just ignore the rest.

I do not like it when I react emotionally. This is not how I want to feel! I try to understand what she is feeling and wonder what my automatic reaction says about me.

Babies in distress get attention from adults when they scream. Some people revert to expressing pain to get attention even as adults. Acting out can have a seductive quality because of all the energy that is focused on the person doing it. Ideally they must ask for attention and receive it just because it's needed rather than manipulating another into giving them what they want.

Here are some steps that you can take to protect yourself when someone is trying to manipulate you:

Notice if the person is under stress. Ask yourself if the person is in pain or frightened.

Evaluate what is aimed at you personally and what has nothing to do with you.

Resist being dragged into the other person's drama.

Do not play the role of victim.

Gain perspective by choosing how you want to respond.

I mistreated a friend recently. She didn't take it personally and, instead of treating me the way I treated her, she responded with loving kindness. She was centered and immediately understood what I needed. This helped me recognize my misbehavior rather than focus on the confusion. What a fine example of compassion! She taught me by example, without judging my weakness.

I feel guarded around people who, for their own reasons, want to blame me for how they feel. One of my favorite emotional self-defense techniques is called Q.T.I.P. ("Quit Taking It Personally".) I laugh off insults by putting my finger in my ear to adjust my brain, as if it were a Q-Tip. I am responsible for how I feel. As soon as I take responsibility, everything changes.

I use a variety of measures to protect myself when I am around someone who is down. Kung Fu is an ancient martial art. Today we need to learn "Tongue Fu," the modern art of emotional self-defense. I imagine how I can best shield myself from this person's negative vibrations. If I let them hurt me because they hurt, the relationship suffers. So instead of rolling with the punches, I duck!

Play Time

A good sense of humor is a great gift to any relationship. When I am with a friend, we can find something amusing about even the most mundane thing. I want to be close to people who inspire me to be creative, people who have integrated a sense of humor into their lives. I need to have friends with whom I can play. Together we take each other higher.

I have seen my friends rise above their woes, even as they struggle with loss and illness. They do not drag their pain around with them full time. I am impressed by how they support someone else when they are down. What starts as with tears often transforms into laughter. Being playful and having fun is an expression of affection.

*To be humorless is to be
friendless.*

As I age, I become more selective. I naturally want to be around those I have fun with, and avoid joyless people. When I greet a friend, I demonstrate my pleasure that they are part of my life. I like to figure out what each friend enjoys. I believe that we self-create 100 percent of the love and laughter, fun and friends that we experience in our lives.

Good-natured fun brings out the finest in the human spirit. You can seek your playmates by looking for a playful spirit. I know from experience that a playful attitude is welcomed in almost every setting. Play needs to be integrated into all the virtues.

In grade school, we worked hard in class and, when it was recess, a bell sounded and we all went outside to play. Now I use the sound of any bell as a reminder to play.

Parties, Life Changes and Celebrations

My close friends are a talented group of people who enjoy creating celebrations and ritual. Just five minutes at one of our gatherings and you would experience the meaning of kindred spirits. Maggie and I love to organize adventures with these friends

like camping, hiking, cross-country skiing, weekends at the beach and kayaking trips. These events help friends meet and bond with each other. Our friends, in turn, have great parties and so the circle expands.

January

Over the years, these parties and gatherings have evolved to a new level of outrageousness! For example, to ring in the new millennium, a group of us teamed up to create a New Year's Eve party for the year 2000. We were part of an elaborate celebration that involved over five thousand people. The celebration was a euphoric experience, as we danced around the wheel of time to honor its passage. The formal Portland Convention Center was transformed into sacred space. Adults and children became an extended community to invite positive energy into the world. At the stroke of midnight was an invocation, a magical parade of puppets and ritual theater. The wisdom of ten archetypes, displayed on floats, rolled out of a wall of smoke: the Magician, Gaia, Goddess, Healer, Happy Child, Lover, Wise Ancestor, Spiritual Warrior, Holy Fool and the Great Mystery dazzled the crowd.

February

A recent Valentine's Day was another traditional holiday we celebrated with a twist. Our friend Sharon organized a community potluck and each of us brought a video clip of our favorite love scene from a movie, cued up to play. Everyone introduced their entry to our film festival. Their comments were intimate and revealing. The movies ranged from old black and white classics to modern ones. Some of the love scenes were romantic and sexy, while others were comic or tragic. What great fun we had, watching and laughing together! We rejoiced in the freedom to say the things forbidden in a darkened movie theater.

March

Steve and Nora hosted a Rite of Spring Party on equinox by transforming their home into a "Pleasure Palace." The evening was full of feasting, delicious encounters, dressing up with body adornments for dancing, chanting and cosmic skits to channel bliss. New friendships developed and old ones deepened. Hot, wet towels bathed juice from our bodies after a sensual interlude with oranges.

April

The most outrageous party of the year is the annual Prom Dress Disaster Party features everyone—and I mean *everyone!*—wearing an outrageous dress. Carola, its creator, is from Germany where

they don't have proms, and she's making up for it in a big way! This was the first prom for some, and the first time in a dress for many.

Finding a dress was half the fun. One of my friends escorted me to a women's formal rental shop to help me find a dress. After trying on several dresses that just were not me (and to the amusement of the sales ladies), I found a long, form-fitting, sequined fuchsia dress on consignment. I finished off my outfit with a novelty store crown. Maggie gave me a gardenia wrist corsage to complement my dress. Half of the entourage went out to dinner in costume before the dance, causing quite a stir at the restaurant; we were a little different from the other high school students out for their big prom event. Many diners thought we were beautiful, but several ate fast and tried to ignore us. Men, brave enough to attend, were handsomely rewarded with women fussing over us as we made our grand entrance. The Prom King and Queen were determined by a collective applause-meter. Everyone posed to have pictures taken under a large, winged heart to commemorate the evening.

May

Rituals and ceremonies honoring all of life's passages are forms of celebration, too. In May, when the phone rang, I had no idea what I was about to hear. Felicia was sobbing, her husband had died tragically. Geoffrey had been missing for three days and been found, electrocuted while at work. She needed help planning a funeral service that would respect and honor the playful spirit of this man. As a mom, she was equally concerned with the sadness and loss for her two young daughters.

I asked the girls what their daddy was like. They grabbed my hands and led me in to the kitchen to show me the pictures on the refrigerator that they loved to make for him. I explained that soon their father would be buried in a long box that was like a refrigerator. I asked if they might like to draw several pictures so we could place them on the coffin. This focused their attention while Felicia and I discussed the rest of the ceremony. It was on a balmy, sunny spring day that we assembled for Geoffrey's final rite of passage, and an opportunity for us to express our sorrow. Those attending were invited to share their thoughts on how he had touched their life or to offer a blessing. Sadness and joy were both conveyed. As I looked into each person's face, I reminded myself that not one of us knows how long we have left to live. To the sound of tears and laughter, Felicia and her daughters taped their drawings on the coffin.

June

The Summer Solstice Healing Retreat at Breitenbush Hot Springs is a highlight of the season, for the 500 adults and kids in attendance. Our multicolor tents sprout up in the wild strawberry field like mushrooms, as organic an arrangement as the food we contribute to the communal kitchen. Many tribes come together to celebrate our connection to each other and the Earth. We gather to create traditions which nourish our spirits. Classes and healing sessions are offered free of charge, organized in the interest of increasing our skills for personal and planetary healing. The Saturday night talent show is homegrown entertainment at its best! Dancing to live music under the stars finishes off the evening. Sunday brings the children's parade, followed by a giant give-away circle in which each person places an item in the center of the circle and selects something in return. The peaceful culture we invent restores my hope. The community blossoms, then, like seeds, we scatter to the winds to take root elsewhere.

July

Marriage is an ancient ritual, performed in infinite variations around the world. Maggie and I were invited to attend a wedding for two of our close friends. Their handcrafted ceremony symbolized what they valued. Planning the wedding became part of the ceremony itself, because of the delicate process of blending each partner's vision of the ceremony. Susannah and Dale were married in a state park and invited family and friends to come early and camp out. This arrangement encouraged the two families to get to know each other. Everyone swam in the rapids before the festivities began. Unsure what to expect, most guests reported how they were moved by the tastefully customized service. We were honored to witness their commitment to each other and their community.

August

Our friends like to have one last party at the beach for a day of picnicking and swimming. This event has been dubbed the "A bun dance Picnic" because we paint our bodies and dance. The human body is a great canvas for color and designs.

September

There are several birthdays in our community during the month of September. Michele sent out invitations reminding guests that their "presence," not their "presents," were required. She was placed in the center of the circle while her friends described her impact in their lives. She glowed inside and out

as forty people spoke of their affection for her.

October

Although my tribe dresses in costumes any chance they get, they made an extra effort for this year's Halloween party. Many spend considerable time creating outfits and staying in character during the party. Several people were so disguised that we never did figure out who they were!

I especially enjoyed Dan and Magan's "Day of the Dead" ritual. We were asked to bring a token that reminded us of an ancestor. We invoked each ancestor's name and told a story about them. We were all moved by the undiminished connection to those who came before us.

November

This Thanksgiving, eight of us gathered at the beach for four days. We are all great cooks, so the aromas wafting into the living room were like continuous waves rolling into shore. We held hands in a circle of gratitude for our many blessings and gave thanks for all the Earth has provided. This was my family of choice enjoying the simple life. The youngest person was 29 and I, at 53, was the oldest. We cuddled by the fireplace and savored the pleasure of each other's company. Some of these wonderful people I have known for decades, while others I have only recently met. What mattered was being together.

December

Maggie and I hosted the Winter Solstice Ritual. We remind ourselves that the returning light will last longer each day. We turned off all the lights and lit a single candle. Each person made a wish in turn and lit the candle of the person next to them. When the circle was finished, the room was ablaze with good wishes. We held the intention for an even brighter future.

The front of our refrigerator has become a shrine, displaying the pictures of our friends. Maggie and I are so grateful for all the wonderful people and memories that have graced our life and our refrigerator in just one year. We joke that after so many rich and original parties, we wouldn't know what to do at a regular one!

I asked our friend Erica, present at many of these gatherings, what she thought made these events so special. Her response: "The love."

Humor at Work

For decades I have taught classes on stress management. After attending a lecture on the value of humor, I altered my presentation style. The funnier I made my presentations, the more work I got. As opposed to being a stand-up comic who entertains a passive audience, I prefer to teach the audience to stand up and entertain me. I provide skills to help them learn to laugh at life and hone their own senses of humor.

I begin with a couple of activities to test the audience to see what they are receptive to. Over the years I have noticed that certain activities almost always strike a chord and result in a burst of laughter. But in every group a small number of people have their arms tightly crossed and their faces set in a scowl that says, "You shall not make me laugh!" They're missing the point, of course. I am not there to make them laugh; rather I offer them an invitation to play. I have to work hard not to let these few people intimidate me.

*A good laugh is good
for business.*

From my childhood I remember the story, "The Three Little Pigs." The pig who builds the brick house lectures the other two pigs that "work and play don't mix." How untrue that is, and what a strange thing to teach to children! It is often the case that work and play mix quite well. Creativity is essential for problem-solving at work and our playfulness can add perspective to convert scarcity into abundance. When you can play with a problem, you can solve it. Many people with the most creative minds started their life's work with playful, child-like questions.

Because we spend vast amounts of time at our jobs, our worksite is a good place to practice our humor skills. Employees work better when they can laugh together. Laugh your way to success.

Humor is the power tool to build quality products and services. It's easy to work hard when you're having fun. Incorporating humor at work requires a balance of work and play. Find pleasure in everyday tasks rather than waiting until after work to have fun. All work and no play is a formula for disaster. Take your work seriously and yourself lightly.

While listening to the seven dwarfs singing a

song, I noticed a problem: "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go. We work hard all day long but we don't know why."

Why do so many people work themselves to death? Working harder, faster, and longer, with less staff, fewer resources and no job security seems to be the emerging expectation, but it's not a positive development. A sense of humor lends perspective to your work. Become the corporate jester. Like the court jester of medieval times, help the boss laugh at his or her mistakes and see the truth.

Saturn Man says:

*You can either have a breakdown
or a breakthrough. Time to work
smarter by converting deadlines
into finish lines. That way,
everyone feels like a winner.*

Humor or Hostility

A good humor policy at work defines what is humorous and what is not. Unfortunately, what is often called humor comes at someone else's expense. Brenda, an acquaintance, uses sarcasm to make people laugh at work ... but there is uneasiness in their laughter and I suspect it's because they realize that the sarcasm might be directed at them one day. So people keep a safe distance from her, which is precisely the opposite of what she wants in her life. Brenda may think that being sarcastic is an acceptable form of humor but what she doesn't realize is that when sarcasm is directed at someone in a mean-spirited way, it's really disguised hostility. The word "sarcasm" comes from the word scar, as to tear flesh.

In every relationship we need to monitor our behavior to keep it respectful. Ideally, we elevate it to match our virtues.

*Good humor always shows
you care.*

Humor is an invitation to join in the fun and an expression of feeling good. Following is a list to help contrast the differences between humor and hostility.

Humor is:	Hostility is:
mature	childish
caring	cruel
rewarding	punishing
encouraging	discouraging
respectful	diminishing
bonding	alienating
playful	harassing
empathetic	insensitive
welcoming	excluding
unifying	divisive
tender	nasty
appreciative	shaming
constructive	destructive
compassionate	humiliating
healing	harmful
complimentary	offensive
warm	cold

cheer others up. I love seeing the expression on kids' faces when Cookie waves to them in their cars. You can read their lips as they explain to their parents that they just saw Cookie Monster. We have fun with adults and kids alike as we travel along on our adventures. We especially enjoy entertaining the cashiers at the drive-in window at my bank. Cookie monster asks the teller how many cookies I have in my account.

I can always brighten my mood just by looking up at the sky. I was practicing that one summer evening while Maggie and I were driving along on a wide-open stretch of road in rural eastern Oregon. I said to Maggie that it would be fun to have a plate that said, "LQQK UP." The QQs would be like eyes looking down. I swear, not more than five minutes had passed before a car went by with LQQK UP on its plates!

Virgil, the Latin poet, summed it up 2,000 years ago: "*Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit.*" (Some day we'll remember this and laugh.)

Laughter is an instant U-Turn.

Fun in the Car

Have you noticed how few drivers on the road are smiling? Maggie and I publicly address this by putting the bumper sticker "Perform Random Acts of Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty" on our car. This is our answer to the media's treatment of random acts of violence and senseless acts of cruelty as news.

Going beyond the bumper sticker, I decided to start a campaign to increase the "smiles per hour" on our highways. I figured there's no speed limit for smiles, so rev up! Smiling changes our body chemistry, and how others see and treat us. I wanted to find something that would easily bring a smile to people's faces.

*Happiness happens one smile
at a time.*

To further the cause of fun in the car, I purchased a hand puppet version of Cookie Monster, a character from the TV show Sesame Street. Cookie Monster became Saturn Man's sidekick, a prop to

Whenever I see a U-turn sign posted on the road, it's a humorous reminder to find some new way I can turn my life around. If this speaks to you, print up and post a U-Turn logo with an arrow pointing up on your dashboard or rearview mirror.

It didn't take me long to discover that the word "turn" is in Saturn Man's name. I have the classic male-pattern baldness (though I no longer refer to myself as bald for the simple reason that most of my body is covered with hair). I saw the top of my head in a ceiling mirror once and laughed when I realized my hairline was a U, reminding me to make U-Turns. Now, when I see another's bald head, I imagine that they are related to Saturn Man. We're the U-Turn tribe, so give a warm smile when you see one of the beings from my planet.

Imagination is "creative curiosity." I like to imagine that I have been awarded a lifetime pass to an amusement park with all sorts of rides. Everyday life is bursting with opportunities to laugh and play. Print up a calendar where instead of Monday through Sunday the days of the week are all Funday. Life can be one big playground ... so play!

Laughter is aerobic exercise for the spirit.

One of my secret ingredients for increasing the love in my life is just to be proactive about spending time with loving friends. When I schedule time with my dear ones, love doubles. It starts by calling a friend and planning something that we will both enjoy.

I could never have guessed where this new Saturn Man persona would have led me in my relationships or professionally. Saturn Man strikes a chord with my audiences. He gives them permission to be more outrageous. They like to ask Saturn Man what he would do in their situation.

Experiment with finding your own comic persona. Give it time to reveal itself to you.

Take the Saturn Man Pledge. Hold your ears and say out loud:

*I promise to play everyday
for the rest of my life!*

When and how often do you laugh at yourself?

How can you evoke laughter more often?

In what ways do you want to improve your virtue of play?

Have you invited anybody to laugh today?

On the Quest

What is your current ratio of pain and pleasure?

How do you want to increase the pleasure in your life?

How can you improve your sense of humor?

What are your warning lights and alarms that indicate you are losing altitude?

How do you stop a tailspin and make a U-Turn?

How do you amuse yourself?

What do you like to do for fun?

What are some new ways you can learn to play?

What tickles your funny bone?

What do others find funny about your shortcomings?

Erotic Spiritual Play

Several years ago, Maggie and I attended a weekend event called "Sacred Sexuality." This tantra workshop was great for our relationship. We started to regularly attend other workshops and events exploring sexuality and spirituality. After many such experiences, we observed that often workshops on sexuality focused too much on sex and too little on the love that makes sex so good. At the other end of the spectrum are the many wonderful teachings on spiritual practices, most quite solemn and serious. I began to wonder if there is any common ground for these essential human expressions.

I will never forget the first time I wrote the phrase "erotic spiritual play." I stared at these three powerful words and wondered why I had never seen them strung together. It was like seeing three rowdy students, now sitting together. There they were, almost touching, separated by just one space. Their proximity had a hint of blasphemy, as though I were a 16th century mystic questioning the church dogma that the Earth is the center of the universe. I tried to envision a world in which the shared expressions of sensuality/sexuality, spirituality and play were abundant and unpolarized.

When I showed Maggie the new presentation themes I was working on, she instantly saw that the abbreviation for erotic spiritual play was "E.S.P." What fun! We usually associate ESP with "extrasensory perception," a phrase denoting the ability to perceive phenomena not usually comprehended by the normal five senses. I hereby offer pragmatic and, I believe, a more useful definition of ESP.

To perceive our ESP nature, it is important to start with the usual five senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch—but that's just the beginning. Eventually we develop those "extra" senses that really count within the context of life. I'm talking about our senses of humor, community, self, belonging and

responsibility. Beyond these, I believe it is possible to explore what one's spirit is capable of sensing in the realm of the transpersonal. Through ESP, our spirits seek to sense the spirits of our kindred friends in this world.

To live so richly it is important to learn how to sharpen and invigorate our feelings and thoughts relating to our internal and external world. In short, expressing our ESP nature requires a new level of awareness.

In previous chapters, the virtues of being erotic, spiritual and playful have been explored separately. Eroticism, spirit, play ... these are three of my favorite spices. By blending them together we might just create a new curry, a delicious new flavor. Having come to understand the nature of each of these singular virtues, let's investigate them as a triple virtue.

*How is your laugh life?
Once a week is not enough!*

I am not interested in a joyless spirituality. Sex can be sacred and spirituality can be sexy. Both can be playful. Play enhances my erotic nature as it does my spirit. I like making my spiritual quest into a comedy and life a sacred playground. With courage it is possible to infuse spirit with sexuality, and with playfulness, too.

Kindred Spirits and ESP

The elements within erotic spiritual play enhance each other like voices singing in harmony. I want to keep these essential qualities in balance then integrate this balance into my personal life. My goal is to create a community of kindred spirits that provides the opportunity to explore the physical, spiritual and emotional intimacy possible with oneself, another person or a group of peers.

I explore my ESP nature internally and externally with my mate Maggie, as well as with my friends. In each relationship, the form looks and feels differently. For example, each relationship must be clear about its proper place on the sensual/sexual continuum. Yet given all these variations, the principles and qualities of the relationships are guided by the essential underlying virtues: eroticism, spirituality and play.

I have explored these virtues extensively, but combining them was a new process for me. Maggie is equally committed to this quest. We have become respected in our community by those who take the time to understand us and this work. Of course, there are also those who think us crazy and reckless. Regardless, Maggie and I have been increasingly unwilling to hide the best parts of ourselves. We feel that our adventure into deep friendship with ourselves and others has enriched our marriage. As we open to love, we have more to give.

Repression and Separation

One of my very first childhood memories is of being in church one Sunday morning. I started laughing uncontrollably, though I cannot remember what possessed me. I noticed that everybody was staring at me. The priest and altar boys glared. I was frightened and it occurred to me that something I was doing must be very wrong. In my innocence, I did not know what I had done wrong, but I hushed up.

Hesitation to combine the erotic, spiritual and the playful are like an old habit passed down to us from fearful forbearers. These virtues are largely repressed in our society. The separation of these vital expressions has led to a lack of connection to one another and to the Earth. Yet with the inertia of history and culture, only our own fear prevents us from realizing the powerful interplay of these essential qualities.

I have observed a strong tendency to be far too serious in both sexuality and spirituality. Some be-

lieve that chastity and celibacy lead to a spiritual life, and no doubt this is true for some. However, I am convinced that the celebration of our erotic self enriches our spirit. Sex is a sacrament, a holy union that creates life itself. Play is a celebration that brightens both sex and spirit.

This awakening showed me that my attitude toward my sensuality and sexuality are inextricably tied to the relative health of my spirituality. Developing the erotic self in combination with the spiritual and playful self is no easy task. Our spiritual nature should never contradict the fact that we are erotic beings, for our erotic nature is intrinsic and inseparable from our divine nature.

*Flesh and spirit live together
in one temple.*

We all have been abused by our culture. We must reclaim our erotic, spiritual and playful selves to heal. Our erotic natures are shamed, our spiritual selves are unwelcome and treated with suspicion and playfulness is considered childish. Thousands of times a day we are expected to conceal the fact that we are sexual, spiritual and playful beings.

Imagine trying to hold down your erotic nature with one foot and your spirituality with the other, all the while warding off your playful self with both hands. Exhausting! Keeping these expressions of your essential nature separate takes too much energy. Once the repression stops, however, vast reserves of energy are available for growth. When these three virtues are united, they enhance and amplify each other. Spirituality is enhanced by sexuality, and playfulness magnifies both. Suppressing one aspect reduces the others. We must choose either to let fear rule our lives or to find the strength to face our fears and take action.

To get an idea of what this means, I tried an experiment to test the degree of acceptance or rejection of my sexual nature. How would I feel about giving Maggie a long, wet kiss in public? What kind of responses or looks would we get? Alternatively, how would people respond if I were to engage in open spiritual practice, praying or meditating in public? What would the expressions on peoples' faces be if I laughed, whistled a tune or danced for joy?

I tried all these things. The range of responses went from looks of disgust to laughter at my antics. I was surprised to notice my own reaction, too, for in it was shyness and embarrassment. It's human. We all have old voices that are critical, skeptical and judgmental. They're all based in fear.

On my quest, I have come to accept the reality that no matter what I do or do not do, someone will likely criticize me. So, I do what I believe in. I refuse to repress and separate the triple virtue for it is my birthright to be erotic, spiritual and playful.

The new twist that Maggie and I discovered after we took our first tantra workshop led us to perform a profound experiment, investigating the nature of eros, spiritus, and transformative fun, using our own lives as a laboratory for that investigation. We've learned a lot in the process. Comparing what we now know is possible between kindred spirits with the generally accepted cultural norm in relationships exposes a mind-boggling potential for enhanced life. Given the possibilities, Maggie and I are astonished at the lack of attention given to erotic spiritual play in most people's lives.

We are erotic, spiritual and playful beings.

We must reunite our spirituality with our capacity for pleasure and fun. When we have united these aspects, the potential for healing and transformation is limitless. We can co-create a safe space by honoring each individual's right to determine his or her level of play and intimacy. Our spirit is the inexhaustible fuel that feeds our passions!

Dance

When I was a teenager, I wanted to see the movie *West Side Story*. My mother said that I probably would not like the film because it was a musical. The dancing and the drama were so thrilling, however, that I stayed in the theater and watched it a second time. I was attracted to the beauty and connection between the dancers. I, too, wanted intensity and the intimacy, but I was not interested in making a career of dance.

Before a modern dance performance reaches the stage, a choreographer improvises movements with the dancers and eventually combines them into a sequence. As we watch these talented, young, strong, creative, graceful dancers, we are amazed by what the body can do. How do they memorize all those moves? As we sit in our seats, we feel the tension; one mistake could be disastrous.

Happily there is dance beyond choreography and it is available to all. Over the past two decades, I have been involved in a movement form called contact improvisational dance. Like modern dance, there are solo dancers and couples, as well as men dancing with men and women with women, and groups in movement. With contact improv, we stay in the creative, experimental phase throughout the life of the dance.

In contrast to many dance forms, there is no male lead in contact improv. Most of the time, no one leads. In other dance forms, there are steps and variations that are repeated, but with this free-style dance, each move is unique. Contact improv is not about performance and perfection; mistakes are welcomed. There are moments of grace and clumsiness, gentle and rough, slow and fast, all mixed together. There are moments of wonder: "How did we ever do that move?" Suddenly, a dramatic, spontaneous flow of movement unfolds. Awareness shifts to the remarkable thing you just did, but this realization pulls you out of the present flow and into the past: time to let go and return to the present interplay. You have to be in the dance; there is no audience.

Sometimes we dance with background music; other times we move in silence. Our bodies are instruments as each person discovers his or her own pace. Even when there are live drummers we are not concerned about being in time with the beat, only with being in tune with our dance partners. I enjoy dancing just for the sake of dance. With the freedom to make it up as we go, anything is possible.

This style of movement allows for a maximum dose of Vitamin T to be exchanged. The potency is increased as the connection between the dancers deepens. Due to the high degree of intensity and intimacy, there must be standards of safety and respect. Each person is responsible for themselves and for their dance partners. You need to be constantly assessing skill and comfort levels of those who you are in contact with. As in all dance, there is an invitation which can be declined or accepted. The guidelines for close encounters require clean energy. For any reason, or no reason other than you want to, you might choose to end the contact.

There is an element of this movement that is like two lovers playing for the first time. Their touch history is blending. In fact, the only time that I have experienced such levels of expression in the past is with a lover. Now, with this dance, there is a healthy alternative. Singles and couples agree that this is a place to intermingle like any social dance. There is a level of safety, trust and respect with contact improv that I have rarely seen elsewhere.

Emotions in Motion

During a contact improv session, start by tuning in to your feelings and translating them into spontaneous movement. When you are ready, engage with another dancer. Dancers report that they express feelings that often have no words, feelings that can be communicated only by using the body.

After a dance, I feel full and empty and hungry for more. I feel so many feelings at once that my core is expressed.

The movements involve points of contact as an intimate conversation. Learn to read the body language of your partner. Body parts that rarely connect in other environments come together in contact improv. One dancer's head may move in a massage-like motion on the back of another. Your senses become heightened; does this person want more or less pressure on skin, muscles or bones? Your mood shifts unpredictably, and you may turn to do a few solo moves, then return to a new point of contact. Wordlessly, you are engaged in feedback, sensing intentions, hearing sounds and feeling intuitive vibes. One group of dancers looks like organic molecules bouncing off each other, while others resemble a school of fish making a sudden change of direction. Some dancers tumble like chimps and wrestle like kids.

Dance is a perfect metaphor and reflection for how one behaves in relationship. If you need to be more sensitive to your partner, opportunities arise to show you where you require improvement. You practice pushing and yielding, control and surrender, giving and receiving. I like the chance to practice the balance of you, me and us, by being responsible for myself and alert to the needs of my partners. You invite someone to enter a relationship for a few moments as you enhance your verbal and non-verbal communications skills. The result is increased sensitivity to the similarities and differences, strengths and weakness of your dance partners. I have found that these skills, learned on the dance floor, transfer to my other relationships.

Dance always has an erotic element for me. I must confess that I find contact dance so satisfying that I am less dependent on sex with my wife to meet my needs for physical intimacy. The intimate con-

nections created during this divine dance form give me freedom to express my passionate nature in a conscious way. Sacred trust encourages an exchange of spirit.

Contact improv brings tears and laughter. The dance floor often explodes into gales of laughter. If you have ever delighted in being with puppies at play, you know what I am talking about. There are moments of bliss where I feel that there is nowhere else I would rather be. I wish everybody could experience this joy. This movement form provides the perfect public arena to practice the triple virtue of erotic spiritual play.

Meditation in Motion

When I sit still to meditate, my impish mind jumps about the jungle treetops. When I jump around in my dance, my mind is at peace. The dance is so demanding of my attention that my mind is quiet. I have found that my ability to be a witness has expanded by sensing, being more aware of myself, my partners and those around me.

I am fond of the stillness at the end of an encounter: our breathing, the beating of our hearts, the heat and sweat as we hold each other in delight. We rest in the afterglow. A drink of water refreshes our bodies as we anticipate the next dance. We bring the energy of the previous dance to the next one, and feel the energy build.

After taking several classes on contact improv, I was encouraged by a core group of friends to offer my own version: "A Bun Dance." I open the class with a brief introduction to some of the basics, then turn the class loose and see what they create. It is amazing to watch the human sculptures being created, dissolved and reformed into new shapes. The class is diverse in age, some with extensive dance training and some who have never taken a dance class.

Several opportunities a month have emerged to gather and dance with my kindred spirits. Afterwards, we share food and drink. There is a deepening tenderness that is precious to us. Many dancers have commented that there is a profound healing of old wounds.

Through the dance I am able to be fully met, to use my full energy with all my chakras. My body and spirit crave positive healthy outlets of communion and community. With our newly created sense of belonging we see the transformation that is possible. This is how I have always envisioned my life could be. Our dance exemplifies the elements of kindred spirits that I have long tried to explain in print.

Temple of Ecstasy

I was once in a movie theater in which an erotic film had everyone spellbound. We sat in the dark, passively watching an intimate candlelit scene. The audience was serious; no one was touching, breathing, moving or making a sound, not wanting to be discovered. We paid our money to practice collective voyeurism, a strange custom to observe.

The love story was bigger than our lives, full of sexuality, violence, shame, betrayal, tragedy, danger and suspense. The muscled man and voluptuous lady were living out our fantasy. Their love-making was so hot that I could not contain myself any longer, and started squirming in my seat. Finally, I spontaneously moaned in a release of tension. This broke the spell and the entire audience responded in laughter.

As artful as that fantasy film was in depicting our erotic nature, in the end it was a two dimensional experience and nowhere near as compelling as my own fantasies. I started to review other movies I had seen, but none were like the images I had in my mind of erotic spiritual play. I wondered what a movie would look like that matched my imagination. Then I thought, I've always wanted to be in a movie! So I decided to be the writer, producer, director, casting agent and one of the actors in a real life experience designed to model this triple virtue and produce the pictures in my mind.

For fun, Maggie and I decided to embody the themes of erotic spiritual play by sketching out an improvisational film we called "The Temple of Ecstasy." This theatrical performance would be a new cultural trailer, one that supported the virtues we desired. We created an outline of a program and scheduled a date for the evening event.

I like the word "ecstasy" it conveys strong emotion. I treasure those times when I have entered a state of being beyond reason, overwhelmed with delight. To be transported past normal reality to a new place of rapture is always a surprise and a supreme treasure of life.

It was a big step, even to think about contacting our friends to see whether they wanted to play a part in our live theater. We prepared a list of about 40 people who might be interested in attending this event at our home. We were amazed to realize that we even knew this many people who might be open to such a daring experience. It was challenging trying to explain the script and the role that we wanted them to play. We answered a lot of questions!

The vast majority accepted the invitation, and a few declined gracefully. One person offered to make invitations, which turned out to be individual

works of art to help set the mood. It stated, "Come with an open heart and an untamed imagination."

In advanced we furnished a program with a few guidelines to help participants prepare their part. A few scenes were scripted in advance but most were to be improvised. We instructed our talented friends to, above all else, be themselves. There was no audience and we would be our own live entertainment.

A collection of married and single people, ranging in age from 20 to 70, of all imaginable sexual preferences and a wide range of spiritual backgrounds, agreed to be our cast. Most were eager to come but several had concerns. Each person was asked to make an agreement to be responsible for her or himself, and for the group to honor boundaries. It was a big decision for many. The uncertainty about what would happen and how they would respond built up an atmosphere of suspense and mystery. The term "erotic spiritual play" was to be birthed at the "Temple of Ecstasy."

Knowing that rituals are enhanced by preparation, we asked everyone to bring candles, fresh flowers, their favorite dance music, food and drink to share. Clothes symbolic of each one's ESP nature were worn to set the mood.

All the participants pitched in to produce this community theater. After a month-long process of making our home a sacred place of worship, the cosmic stage was ready.

Opening Night

The cast ascended the curved stairway to our house, the railing decorated with ribbons and the porch pillars wrapped with small white lights. A sign on door proclaimed "Welcome to the Temple of Ecstasy." As a sign of respect, everyone removed their shoes in the foyer before entering through the sheer curtains which represented the transition from the outside world to the inner sanctum. On our cosmic stage we would be cast in ancient mythic roles, as gods and goddesses.

Each person was welcomed by designated greeters. Their feet immediately felt the lush carpet beneath as their eyes were met by the beauty of the temple décor, dozens of candles and a blazing fire in the fireplace. Vases of flowers emanating exotic fragrances graced the perimeter of the room. The combination of sensuous atmosphere and radiant beings already seated caused a shiver down many a spine. There was both the joy of recognition of familiar faces and the knowledge that the unfamiliar faces would become quite personal by the end of this special evening.

A divine parade of costumes revealed the diversity of tastes among the cast members: floor-length velvet capes, long silk tunics of different colors, belly dancing outfits with billowing harem pants and jingling jewelry, sarongs and saris, sexy, form-fitting evening gowns, a stunning Japanese kimono with obi sash and a Hawaiian shirt adorned with an orchid lei.

Act I

The festivities began as each person was given an opening blessing. We thanked everyone for their willingness and courage to participate. We reviewed the guidelines for safe boundaries. As part of the introduction, each one shared their intentions, wishes, dreams, hopes, fears and fantasies. Not everyone knew each other, so we featured activities that promoted bonding.

Within a short time, most were glad they had decided to come. A shrine was assembled with significant items like gongs, statues, bells, shells, pictures, toys, natural artifacts and erotic artwork honoring various spiritual traditions.

The next scene featured all of us as temple dancers. We created free flowing movements to drums, sexy vocals, powerful rock beats, heart-opening lyrics, and cosmic rhythms. This scene provided the dancers the opportunity to explore conscious connections and levels of mutuality with each partner. Dancing raised the energy level and exalted the body as the sacred temple of our spirit.

The focal point was in the dining room: a gorgeous banquet table overflowing with abundant hors d'oeuvres and treats. We circled the table hand in hand, awe-struck by what we beheld. Standing in silence, our eyes fixed on the feast before us, our senses were truly engaged. The colors of the different foods were so vivid!—the earthiness of the stuffed mushrooms contrasted with the bright platter of mango, papaya and strawberries. Every green shade of the spectrum was represented in the salad. Appetizers included a platter of edible day lilies that, in turn, were vessels for delectable patés of avocado, salmon or roasted red pepper.

The directions were simple: we could only be fed by another. This would serve as a symbolic gesture of our interdependence and the need to nurture and be nurtured. Silver finger bowls with floating rose petals dotted the table to allow the rinsing of hands. Our hunger was already heightened from the dancing.

One pair decided to use the experience as a meditation. The woman invited her friend to settle back into the crook of her arm and close his eyes. She directed him to think of this as communion, a

chance to slow time down. She requested that he utilize all his senses, to chew slowly, notice textures, tastes and smells during this rare opportunity of being fed like an infant. It made her think of the pleasure of feeding her small son so many years ago. Her friend commented how satisfied he felt after only a few mouthfuls.

Now that the main courses had been consumed, our attention focused on the famous key lime pie, still intact. The baker, who carefully guards the family recipe against all inquires, began to dollop the fluffy green filling onto her smooth, inner forearms, elbows and up to her shoulders. The group looked on, incredulous. Arms outstretched, she informed us all that “Dessert is on me!”

One couple fed each other the chocolate-dipped strawberries. They enjoyed smearing the still-warm fudge all around their lips. From this point on, the messiness escalated until there were peals of laughter. The high point of this scene for me was watching our friends have this much fun with each other.

We scheduled a short intermission to clean up and change clothes. Several people said their good-byes and departed.

Act II

The second act featured each performer on center stage. We all would have a turn as the lead in a scene of our own design, with the whole group as supporting cast members. All guests had been instructed to prepare for this scene. They had to consider what they would like to be given during their ten minutes of total attention. Just figuring out what to ask for was an experience wonderful and terrifying in itself.

The requests were simple. One person wanted her name chanted while being lifted aloft and paraded around. Another wished to lie below the skylight with the full moon as a spotlight and be the center of the universe. A man requested having his karma cleaned with feathers and fur. My own request was to be part of a pod of dolphins dancing in the water. Several people requested a massage from the entire cast. Imagine the deep healing generated by ten minutes of loving attention from twenty actors!

One of the scenes I will always remember was a brave woman's request for a deep healing. For years, she had been afraid of strong, sexy men. “Hold me, while I breathe and let my body experience your full power. I want the experience of being safe and respected.” She asked the men to surround her and dance while the women formed an outer circle. Slowly the men directed their energy towards her.

To see her move from fear to joy transformed us all.

Maggie and I know the life stories of those in attendance and the many steps it took them to arrive at this point. Stepping back, we admired a living work of art. We were in awe of what loving, spiritually alive and playful people could create. We were impressed by the group's ability to support and nurture and deal with issues as they arose.

Over the closing scene, we bowed to each other in appreciation for our award-winning performances. Everybody spoke of the sense of trust and connection that resulted from our amazing sharing.

*We heal together,
we grow together.*

There is a tendency to fear our erotic side. When passion is rising, we can get swept away and wind up making decisions that we later regret. Even in this group setting mistakes were made, but in this environment there was a better chance to make a course correction. We gave ourselves and each other an extra measure of grace while exploring. It was inspiring to see a member of the cast come to the aid of another who was stumbling into scarcity. It was as if they had forgotten their lines, when a co-star gently guided them back on track.

For some, this event brought up emotional injury, particularly around issues of rejection, loneliness and abandonment. We welcomed the struggles and tears as these brave people faced their fears. Exchanges of spirit abounded. Only hours earlier, our house was full of people who scarcely knew each other. Now these same people were extending loving kindness to each other.

The personal transformations we witnessed there were miracles. It was an honor to behold the courage of those who attended. One moment there was massive tension, until something magical happened and we fell to the floor laughing.

One woman revealed, "This evening has changed my life, like a landslide that alters the course of a mighty river. The love that is possible is far greater than I ever imagined."

A lesson reaffirmed by the Temple of Ecstasy experience was this: we are responsible for our own healing but are not alone on the path. We heal best when we work together.

Reviews

The level of tenderness ignited at the Temple so greatly exceeded what any of us had expected that a new standard was effectively established. Many participants desired to integrate what they had learned from this rite of passage into their lives, wanting to experience this joy regularly. People wished to have a place like the Temple to go to any time, where they could enjoy the companionship of kindred spirits and feel the virtues of erotic spiritual play encouraged. "This feels so good, why is it so rare?" they asked. Many wanted to remove the limits we have placed on our pleasure. One person expressed it beautifully, "I want the Temple of Ecstasy to be as common as coffee shops in Portland." We all agreed that there needed to be more opportunities for us to practice our virtues together.

The abundance of love and laughter possible in this life is far greater than we imagine. To begin planting the seeds and to see the fruit of this potential, we can create a new model for healing and growth by converting our homes into pleasure palaces. The community we create is the living Temple of Ecstasy, and we can manifest this loving space wherever we gather.

When our Temple experience brought forth the powerful interplay of the three virtues, our love evolved and new thresholds of pleasure were reached. We learned that it takes real energy and skill to hold the erotic, the spiritual and the playful in union—and it's worth the effort to do so. Now I hold real images in my mind of what I had envisioned for ESP. I hope someday that a movie can be made accurately portraying our evening, that others might see what is possible.

Celebration of Love

We were strongly encouraged by our friends to take this show on the road by offering public seminars to continue the exploration. It was a big step for Maggie and I to consider offering more public events. What would others think? Even so, we agreed that this was too good not to share.

We called the seminar "Erotic Spiritual Play: A Celebration of Love."

At first we thought, "This is crazy, no one will want to attend an event like this!" We were wrong, of course, and have been amazed at the numbers of fantastic people from all walks of life who have since attended our retreats. The description is:

Imagine a world where there is an abundance of erotic energy, spirituality and playfulness. These essential qualities need to be developed, balanced and integrated. In a tribal setting, the potential for healing and growth is boundless.

Erotic spiritual play harmonizes our life energies. Let's discover sexuality in our spirits and spirituality in sex. Joy can heal the split between our spirit and our flesh. Let us honor our bodies, minds and spirits by creating a safe, sacred space together. In that space, beauty and divinity will evolve naturally. Passion and compassion will flow to our deepest pleasure centers as we connect with the abundance of life.

Our erotic nature provides us with a range of choices, from sensuality to sexuality. Our spiritual nature represents the sacred essence that connects us with all living beings and the Earth. Our playful nature springs from the joy of being alive!

I wish the whole world could experience the love and joy that Maggie and I see the participants create in just one weekend. One woman gave us a peek at her journal entry about her experience at one of our retreats:

I have always wanted to go to Breitenbush Hot Springs for a retreat. When I read the description in the catalog, I knew that this is what I wanted. As I called the number for registration, my hand shook with fear and excitement. The voice in my head said, "Hang up now and save yourself the embarrassment! You are an average-looking single mom in her 40s, what do you think you're doing?" The other voice interrupted firmly, "You need help with your sexuality, and your spirit needs a boost."

A gentle male voice answered. It was Bob, one of the presenters and he said he would like to interview me to see if I was ready for the retreat. I asked apologetically if he took singles. I was relieved that there would be a mix of singles and couples, a balance of men and women. I was surprised to share struggles from my past with a stranger on the phone. Bob asked what some of my fears and fantasies would be about attending this kind of seminar. My fear was that I would be required to be intimate with someone whom I didn't like. He said, "Ask for what you want and say no to what you do not want." My fantasy was that I would find others like me, who wanted more love in their lives. Bob explained that this was not a therapy session, yet healing and growth would occur. After an hour on the phone, Bob and I both thought that I would be a good addition to the group.

I had signed up and paid my deposit months in advance so I would be less likely to back out. I was given a

phone number if I wanted to carpool. Jane and I also shared a cabin. We were like kids going away to camp for the first time! We found our cabin in the woods and unpacked. We made a pact with each other that if this was a bunch of weirdos, we would leave together.

Friday night, time to begin, we waited until the last possible moment to enter the room. I was scared spitless. The forest shelter building is round, with full windows that look into the trees. There were two dozen people sitting in a circle. They seemed as nervous as we were.

The instructors welcomed us and explained that we would be journeying together on a wild river ride. We quickly felt confidence in the skill level of our guides. They explained that, although they had been down this river many times before, the river changes. We need to help each other and be alert for danger.

I realized that I was watching for the first time a couple, our instructors, working together to create a culture where love flourishes. Bob and Maggie seemed so at ease offering their teachings to a room full of tense participants. What a tough crowd! They said that just a few hours before, they had been struggling with hurt feelings. They were not feeling erotic, spiritual or playful. They honored their feelings and decided to do what they needed to do to shift so they could hold space for the group.

We were told to be specific about the level of intimacy that we were ready for. No drugs or alcohol were permitted that might impair judgment. We were a diverse group and respect was necessary to enjoy the adventure. I liked knowing that a high standard of integrity was expected.

Still tense, we began fun, interactive exercises with each other. By the end of the first hour, we were laughing and becoming a group that could ride the wild river. Jane and I were so excited that we could barely stop talking to fall asleep.

Saturday, my life changed. I was inspired by the love of the group. I was accepted and loved in ways that I had never been with my family or friends. We were here for the same purpose. Just as Bob said in the interview, there were times when people bliss out and freak out. One person left because he felt that he was not ready for this level of intensity. We all struggled with pain from past relationships, but at least we were not struggling alone. We laughed and danced and gave each other TLC. By nighttime, I was overwhelmed with joy! I had to stretch just to take the pleasure in.

I wanted to become the radiant person I was meant to be. With the wear and tear of life over the past nine years, my light had dimmed. My promise was to shine inside and radiate to all around. I used to be a fashion model ... looking good on the outside was my focus then. Now, my sights are set on my inner radiance. It was time to reclaim my erotic self. I sat in the hot springs soaking in the night and stars.

Sunday morning, we circled for the last time. I was amazed to look into each person's face and see their transformations. Several people still struggled with the issues they came with, while others were challenged by what they had discovered about themselves. Before I came here, I knew that I wanted to change. Now I had the opportunity to be a new me.

I have seen miracles of healing that I did not know were possible. I feel respect for these fellow explorers who have made progress with so many obstacles in their way. The willingness of people to help someone struggling has permanently altered my perception about the love a stranger can give. We learned compassion for ourselves and extended compassion to each other. I have formed new friendships that I hope will flourish on my journey. As Bob says, "We all have more to give."

I see a need for these three virtues to be combined and practiced. I was shocked to discover that only one of the adults in our group had a positive talk about the "birds and the bees" from her parents. When I returned home, I had a series of discussions with my teens about love and sexuality. My actions or lack of them had been sending negative messages about sexuality.

I hope to stop avoiding my sexual passions just because my desires have caused me problems in the past. The biggest lesson for me was that "as passion rises, there needs to be a corresponding rise in consciousness." The challenge is to create a world like the one we created on this retreat. I will never forget how loving and playful life can be.

Pathways to Higher Consciousness

Combining E, S and P requires the highest degree of respect, integrity, communication, witnessing and mentoring. There are moments when an individual or a group can be passionate and light-hearted in all three areas. Fear of being affectionate and caring can be overcome by learning and practicing these new skills. Fully experiencing the *joie d vivre* (joy of life) and celebrating love unleashes the energy necessary to transform the world.

What effect have your life experiences had in encouraging or discouraging your own erotic spiritual playful nature?

Passion, spirit and joy are our paths to higher consciousness.

Maggie and I have been invited to many other, similar events since our first Temple of Ecstasy. Mentoring each other is one of the best ways to learn; in so doing, we experience the evolving power of combining these three forces. We invite you to create with your kindred spirits your own temple of ecstasy.

Maggie and I have already begun to write our next book *Erotic Spiritual Play: The Celebration of Love*. We are collecting insights and stories, and we welcome your ideas and experiences. We are looking forward to doing the research!

ESP

*Sacred play is erotic.
Erotic play is spiritual.
Erotic spirituality is playful.
Erotic spiritual play is the celebration
of our wholeness.*

Courage

The root of the word “courage” derives from the French *coeur*, meaning heart. It is the special force we summon to realize our principles and integrate them into our actions in the real world. Courage empowers us to perceive the best path and take it. The energy of courage rallies the cells, the nerves, the muscle, the emotions and thoughts of the entire body to perform. Sometimes, when you think you have no courage, you find an inner strength that was dormant, and that changes everything. This strength of the heart is a common thread connecting many virtues.

As a child, I consumed heroes like Zorro, Tarzan, Superman and the Lone Ranger through TV and comic books. These heroes performed heroic deeds, against impossible odds, to save others. Their feats of strength and character inspired me and as I grew up I, too, wanted to become a hero by saving a life. I believed this was the only way one earned love and respect. Maturing into an adult, I came to see the truth of these super hero projections. The male characters I so admired and hoped to emulate when I was a kid were isolated and disconnected from their families. They were often misunderstood by those around them and lacked social support. Their physical feats were impossible by mortal standards. It was all fantasy.

With maturity came a dawning realization about what I truly wanted for my life. Instead of heroic acts based on supernatural strength, I wanted to be the kind of man with the courage to love, day after day.

Deep and enduring love is only accessible with courage. Willingness to open your heart every day, regardless of hurt feelings, takes courage. The brave among us are often slow and deliberate, taking small courageous steps toward long-term goals. Indeed, courage is a choice we can make in each moment of our lives.

A Personal Parable

When I was a small boy, I went to work with my grandpa. He was hired by a farmer to find water and drill a well. I watched with fascination as my grandpa walked back and forth over the land, witching for water. As time passed, I began to doubt that my grandpa would ever be able to find it. Finally, the forked stick began to shake and dip downward. The stick marked the spot where the drilling would begin. After a while, the drill bit ground into hard rock. Grandpa had to use dynamite to break it loose. We were all wondering if there really was water where the stick pointed—all except grandpa. As the dynamite smoke cleared, we saw that the rock was broken loose. Just under the rock was a steady flow of water.

Courage can be like the water my grandfather was seeking. To find our courage, we must explore deeply within ourselves, trusting that the quality we search for flows beneath even if we cannot detect it right away. With practice we’ll find it; then we can retrieve a cool drink to refresh ourselves and find the strength to overcome our fears.

What would I like the courage to do? Following are some of the answers to that question. I want to summon the courage to:

- Choose a positive course of action;
- See who I am and love who I am;
- Say yes to what I want;
- Look foolish and accept my imperfections;
- Admit need, reach out and ask for help;
- Find the strength to forgive;
- Love, knowing that I may suffer loss;

Act in a loving manner when someone has just hurt my feelings;
Not strike back when hurt;
Be compassionate;
Laugh at my follies and illusions;
Reach out for love even with the likelihood of rejection;
Speak the truth even when I am sure to get an angry reaction;
Show my true self when others are in hiding;
Love those who I do not understand;
Be still in the middle of chaos;
Look inside and see how I am hurting myself and others;
Stand up for what I believe;
Leave a relationship that is destructive;
Be loyal to my principles;
Proceed even when the risk of success is doubtful;
Stay when I want to run away;
Sense an opportunity and have the courage to act;
Take risks yet not be reckless;
Stand up for myself.

Fear

Fear can be defined as a feeling of agitation and anxiety caused by the perceived presence or threat of danger. It actually serves as an internal feedback system, delivering valuable, sometimes critically important information about the immediate world around us. There are two primary kinds of fear—real and imagined.

Fear grounded in reality is healthy and can protect us from harm. This kind of fear alerts us to dangers, physical and emotional, and goads us to act to ensure our survival.

We all fear the pain of being betrayed, rejected, abandoned. No one wants to be poor, ill, injured, starving or dying. Nonetheless these tragedies can happen, and we need to be prepared. Recognizing our fears and the conditions from which they arise keeps us at the point of choice and, with a good dose

of courage to make wise choices, enables us to stay safe.

But what we fear can control us. Imagined threats are destructive because they drain our energy and can paralyze our will to act wisely on our own behalf. This type of fear has the power to destroy us. When fear consumes us, our reactions may be disproportionate to the situation and actually make things worse.

Fear demands our complete attention but it doesn't tell us the whole truth about what we face. Though fear makes us feel trapped with limited choices, there are always more options. It's crucial to not let our fears get the best of us, to resist the tendency to go into scarcity thinking. It takes a courageous intention to break through patterns of fearful emotional reactions.

To deny your fear is dangerous. It is neither shameful nor is it something that will disappear if you ignore it. The tremendous amount of energy it takes to suppress fear is not a wise investment because it diminishes the energy available to us for loving.

Fears will always arise in life so it's important to be prepared to deal effectively with them. Courage is the foundation of that system because it fosters the ability to harness and redirect the massive flow of energy generated by fear, using it as a fuel to take constructive action.

When we make fear an ally, it increases our power. Become fearless by fearing less and less.

Bless that which frightens you.

Whether your fear is real or imagined, you will need courage to act wisely on your own behalf. When you feel fear arise, ask yourself: Is this real or am I just imagining a threat? Each day opportunities present themselves to practice strengthening your courage. The courage to change yourself in small ways can add up to changing the course of your whole life. Courage is one of the main forces needed to make a U-Turn when your emotions are taking a dive.

What kind of fear dams the flow for you?

What can you do to act in ways that convert the energy of fear into positive action?

Loneliness

Even in committed relationships, everyone is lonely for love some of the time. For those not in long-term loving friendships and relationships, loneliness can be a dominant and corrosive experience.

Many people have a fear of intimacy because fears naturally arise when you open yourself to love. What they are really afraid of is the potential for pain when you get close to someone. It takes great courage to keep opening your heart, knowing that you risk getting hurt again.

When you are lonely and afraid, make a promise to yourself: "I will keep reaching out until I find the love and intimacy I want." That is an important promise to make to yourself but not an easy one to keep because, as frightening as it is to face life without love, it can be even more terrifying to seek the love that you want. It makes you vulnerable—and vulnerability incites fear.

To enjoy love you must be able to effectively deal with the fear and pain.

I asked Helena why she thinks people are lonely:

People are sometimes lonely because they forget to love themselves. They can't even be alone with themselves because of their own unhappiness and disconnection to source, God, nature, whatever. Some people can be in a room full of their friends and family but still they feel lonely because they don't love themselves. There is so much courage involved in loving yourself.

Loneliness is a bigger issue than most people think. For starters, it is one of the greatest risk factors to our health and happiness. People who feel lonely are at the highest risk for heart attacks, strokes, cancer, suicide and accidents. Loneliness is such a painful human experience that it can even break the spirit. Yet, with all this liability, loneliness remains mostly a self-inflicted form of suffering. The good news is that this dis-ease of the heart is preventable.

The first and most readily available cure for loneliness is self-love. It was a big realization for me to understand that the only life-long relationship I will ever have is the one I have with myself. This is true of everyone. Think of it—you will go to bed with you every night, and wake up with yourself for the rest of your life. Every thought, every emotion, every kindness that passes through your mind affects your well-being. With courage you can make conscious choices to be your own best friend, to nurture and take care of yourself in ways that shift the quality of your solitude from loneliness to self-loving.

Our friends are another potent form of health insurance against loneliness. Feeling lonely and afraid is a signal to reach out (and in) for more love. Use your pain as a reminder that you need to devote more time and energy to fostering friendships. Make an investment in friendship so that support is there before you enter a crisis. If you haven't cultivated it through your own generosity over time, then the love, intimacy, affection and understanding you need will be scarce at the crucial moment. This is the most important long-term investment outside of yourself that you'll ever make.

One of the greatest pains is not being loved by the one you love.

Margaret, a woman in her late thirties, has reached a point of clarity in understanding her fears:

When I deny my weaknesses, I don't let anyone get close enough to see my flaws. If I let someone get close to me, they might be critical or reject me. With my last boyfriend, when I was hurt, he knew exactly how to rub it in. It was exhausting because I could never let my guard down. I learned to be very cautious of intimacy.

After several rejections, I become confused and even afraid of my desire for love and intimacy. I fear what I want and I fear not having it. This is a great dilemma.

Close relationships make the difference between love and loneliness. Loneliness, common to all, is profound and potentially crippling. Yet this longing for love often goes untreated.

What would loneliness sound like? Whimpers, sobs, cries or screams as loud as a frightened baby at night. I think we can all sense the loneliness in each other, but we have a tacit social pact to ignore it. It takes a lot of courage to notice such an unspoken truth and do something about it.

Millions of human beings starve for food, with many more starving for love and friendship. The tragic irony is that there is no shortage of food or love in our world. The problem in both cases lies in the distribution processes. The good news is that we can do something about it.

If someone you knew was hungry, you would gladly offer what you food you had. But in the matter of love, people often lack the courage to ask for

what they need, or the courage to open their heart to give what is requested.

The courage to keep seeking love is an amazing human virtue. Are you willing to ask for the love and affection you need?

Listen to an interview with Don and Sara:

Sara:

I am concerned for Don because I am his only friend. This places too much pressure on me. All the friends we visit with were my friends before we married.

Don:

I get along well with my co-workers and I belong to a couple of professional business organizations. But outside of work, Sara is the only one I am close to. Honestly, if I were to change jobs, the people at work would not stay in contact with me. I want more friendships but I don't know how to develop them. I am envious of the closeness that Sara has with her girl friends. I'm lonely. When I am lonely, I am more likely to overreact to problems between Sara and me. I'm afraid of losing the one I love.

Sara:

A couple years ago Don's mother died, his father died a week later. I'm afraid that if I died, he might die of loneliness just like his father did. I love Don so much, but I don't know how to help.

Most of my life I have been strong and independent; traits I am proud and happy about. It is harder for me to admit that I am still lonely sometimes, but the type of loneliness I feel has changed over the years. It is less painful and more of a longing now. I feel sad when I want to talk with a friend but no one is there, or I am with people I don't feel connected to. Sometimes I hurt and don't want to cry alone. It's like being a kite with no string. One of my life goals is to reduce lonely times and expand the moments when I feel connected to like-minded and like-spirited people.

Though, I may never totally eliminate loneliness, the pain is almost entirely a result of the choices I have made. When I am in distress, there is a strong tendency to pull back and withdraw. I don't want people to see me in pain and so my isolation grows, leading to loneliness ... which only makes my problems seem worse. But what is done can be undone: because I have chosen isolation, I can reverse the decision and choose not to be lonely.

It is ironic that the joys of friendship inevitably lead to some sort of sorrow. The sweet pleasure of loving will always turn to pain if the relationship ends—and all relationships end somehow, someday. I have to remind myself that, though I hope to cre-

ate long-lived relationships, the quality of the relationship in the present is more important than its duration.

I began my own quest as an isolated single parent with no close friends. Today, my life is infinitely richer as a result of thousands of small and large acts of courage. I now have a supportive wife and dozens of mutually nurturing kindred spirits. I thrive on these intimate interactions.

It is the nature of the quest to seek ever-greater intimacy. As my self-love has grown, my desire to be with those who support my new self-love increases. My passion for love and friendship expands as my awareness and skill levels rise. Sometimes the old voices chime in: "What's wrong with you? You have all this love and you still want more?" "Why are you not satisfied?" My reply remains the same: "We all are capable of infinitely deeper levels of love and friendship."

The last line of a poem I once sent to a friend has stayed with me: "Why can one have so many while so many have none?" With all the blessings I have, I am struck by the fact that so many people spend their entire life having no love, no happiness, no health and no basic necessities. I feel a strong need to give back the abundance that is passing through my life.

I promise to surround myself with those who know and love me. I promise to be worthy of this love. The choices I make each day will determine if I am lonely or have a life full of friends.

Love and Loss

We love our parents, knowing that they might die before us.

We love our friends, knowing that they might distance themselves from us.

We love our partners, knowing that they might divorce us.

We love our children, knowing that they might desert us.

We love, knowing all of these things.

We never know how or when or why those we love will go. We may be rejected, abandoned and betrayed by those we love. We may lose love at any time. We know that everyone we love will leave us one way or another, and still we love.

In the middle of the word friendship is the reminder that all of our relationships will end. There is a beginning and ending to everything. It is courageous to love knowing that the relationship will terminate.

There are no lifetime guarantees.

Maggie and I were married in our living room, surrounded by a hundred family members and friends. On our anniversary each year, we like to look back through our collection of pictures and read over our ceremony. With the passage of time, it is surprising to note how all our lives have changed. One of our friends named Will has died and many others have moved on to new lives, different careers and other relationships. As we look at our wedding album there are only a few faces from our past that remain in our lives.

After Maggie ended her career as a teacher, her friends changed. She seldom crosses paths today with most of the people she was close with before. When Maggie examined those whom she thought were her friends, she realized that many of these relationships were not mutual.

None of this is unusual; many of us form relationships based more on circumstances than conscious choice. Knowing this gives us a clue about how to make intelligent and courageous choices about what relationships to foster and how to nurture them in the future. For instance, after leaving her career, Maggie vowed to develop loving, mutually supportive friendships based on values that go much deeper than what circumstances usually allow. On her fiftieth birthday, dozens of treasured friends were there to help her celebrate and enter the next decade of her life.

Courage to Love

It is up to us to create a bounty of pleasure to balance out the pain that living generates. Suffering isn't necessarily saintly and, when preventable, we should prevent it. It is a shocking fact that much human suffering is unnecessary.

I wonder how things would change if we thought we deserved enjoyment in every moment. What if we all set about counterbalancing the trials and difficulties in our lives with greater amounts of joy? Courage helps us to reach inside and bring the happiness to the surface.

Never let yesterday spoil today.

Suffering and death are inevitable. Sometimes we can laugh even in the face of death. With courage, we can love despite the most desperate circumstances. There is no pain that love cannot heal.

The pleasure of an intimate moment can contrast sharply with the pain that may arise in relationship. A newly wedded couple takes vows to be together for all their days. Twenty years later, after the kids leave home, they divorce. Another couple in a loving relationship is parted by tragedy: A car crash cuts short the life of a husband.

There is a crucial distinction between the pain inherent in the loss of love and unnecessary suffering. With the latter, pain can be a habit, a place revisited again and again because it's familiar. This conditioned, familiar pain is preventable but it takes consciousness to identify patterns of behavior that keep it in place, and courage to change those patterns.

*Love involves suffering.
Let us learn to suffer well,
so as not to fear love.*

To prevent unnecessary suffering in my own life, I pinpointed myself as source of most of my pain. When I feel pain now, I search for ways in which I myself am the cause. If, for instance, a friendship ends, I take time to grieve the loss. Then I move on. I have learned that life will always provide me with more opportunities to be courageous, open to love, and let go of those I love.

I experience my greatest pleasure and greatest pain with those I have loved. I must continue to love despite the certainty that a certain percent of the time I will be disappointed, criticized and misunderstood. It hurts to be close, but it would hurt more not to be close. I can use my suffering to become stronger ... like tempered steel.

Imagine a past experience that caused you pain. Ask yourself the following questions:

What percent of the time was suffering my choice?

How could I have minimized my suffering?

Saying Good-bye

Relationships are cyclic: we reach out, come together, grow and release. Like breathing; when you think about it. Freedom allows the relationship to breathe. We must release our breath to breathe in again. Healthy relationships honor the individual to change and grow in different directions. It takes courage to know when the time has come to grow apart.

We need different friends at different stages of our life. Each friendship has a life span of its own. It hurts to consider that it's time to break up, but courage compels us to be truthful. When the relationship is over, be direct. Simultaneously honor the special sadness and be ready to bond again.

In a marriage, we vow to stay together "until death do us part." Unfortunately, divorce is still considered cause for shame, an admission of failure. But the truth is that, even in a marriage, the day may come when the most loving thing to do is to let go. When the marriage is dead, bury it and move on with the rest of your life. A parting ritual can help to mark the end. Friendship is priceless during this time. The courage to say good-bye is a difficult but necessary virtue.

Early on in my career I taught a class called, "Can You be Friends with Your X?" The participants agreed that it took a certain kind of courage to sustain love and raise a family. It takes a different type of courage to admit that the relationship is beyond repair. It also takes courage for partners and parents to remain friendly through a divorce. You are not required to break yourself or the other person apart when breaking up. It takes courage to resist hurting the other when you are hurting. It is possible to be friends with your former spouse with time, distance and a mutual desire to forgive and move on.

Profiles in Courage

Over the past couple of decades, I have maintained a small private practice that is a mix of counseling and consulting. I offer suggestions and recommend resources to my clients. My sessions are open-ended and may last as long as five hours, a flexible time frame that allows clients to delve deeply. I only see people who are willing to do the homework I assign.

Through my work with clients, I have observed that courage is essential for long-term, successful relationships. Even if both parties involved have many other virtues but lack courage, their relationship may not survive.

The story of Janice and Wayne illustrates the depth of courage needed to love. These sessions were creative, dynamic, and exposed layers of fear, pain, loneliness and loss. There are many lessons to be learned from their story.

On my answering machine one morning, there was a message from Janice, a long time friend. She requested that I call her promptly. I had known her husband, Wayne, before they met. Their wedding was on the shores of a beautiful lake. The audience saw two boats approaching in the distance from different docks. The boats were decorated with flowers and rowed by friends. The two boats landed together and the couple stepped out of the crafts barefooted into the water and waded ashore. It was a grand entry to a beautiful ceremony.

Janice picked up the phone before it rang twice and burst into tears:

Janice:

Wayne just called me ... he's out of town. He's been on a business trip for several days and has not been sleeping well. He told me that our marriage was falling apart. We've been fighting about building our new house, but I didn't expect this! He said that he's not happy with me any more. It was like lightning had hit the phone line. I blacked out and my hand was melted to the phone. I vaguely remember hearing him say good-bye. I was so numb that I couldn't speak. Five minutes later I managed to put the receiver down. I'm terrified that I will lose him forever!

My foundation, everything is being washed away. How dare he treat me this way? How dare he reject me? I'm so angry! He doesn't want our dream house.

Wayne will be home on Friday. I know he trusts you and I think knowing our history will speed up the process. Could we get together so that you can help us resolve this house issue?

I was pretty sure that there was more to the problem than the house project. I told Janice to plan on a couple of sessions. She agreed. I explained that the work they did between sessions would be even more important than what happened in a session.

First Session

We gathered in my living room. They both sat on the couch, but there was obviously a wall separating them. Furious with Wayne, Janice wanted to speak first:

I have worked so hard the past year finding the land, designing the house and lining up the contractors. And now you want to put everything on hold! I thought that

we both wanted this dream house. We got married right across the lake from the building site. I am so frustrated. Why did you wait so long to tell me that you don't want the house?

Wayne:

I've expressed concerns about this project from the beginning.

Bob:

Janice, are you in pain?

Janice:

Yes. I am going to lose everything. But I don't know how to stop it.

Bob:

Have you felt this way before?

Janice:

When I was a kid, my parents were always fighting about something, and I was afraid that they would split up. Our home was a nightmare. None of my friends would come over to play because of the yelling. They were young, with a couple of kids and lots of baggage left over from their childhoods. My mother's daily refrain was "misery loves company." She took her suffering out on me. Dad was stone cold and the head of the house. Mom never got what she wanted.

Bob:

Your parents were in pain and passed it to you. And so, with your husband, I see his reaction to the way you treat him. Both of you have demanding, full time jobs. Your relationship needs your attention now. Are you two willing to invest as much energy into your relationship as you have been putting into this house project?

Janice:

We have not seen our friends in so long, nor can I remember the last time we went for a walk in the country. I guess I've been expecting him to build my dream house and be my hero. I guess I expect men to save me. I am way over my head with this building project.

Bob:

I want you both to recall a time when you were brave. Think of when you were afraid, but acted anyway.

Wayne:

A memory just popped into my mind ... on a hot summer day, I was about fourteen, hiking by myself along a river. I discovered a tree next to the cliff with boards nailed to the trunk, so I decided to explore. The boards were loose and spaced far apart. There was a small platform high up with a rope attached to a branch stretching

out over the river below. As I wrapped my hands around the thick hemp rope, I gave it a test pull. I could sense all the others who had stood here before me. Excitement and fear filled me. I was so scared! A voice deep within was saying, "Swing! Leap!"

Before the voices could speak again, I was swinging out over the river. At the highest point, I was almost twenty feet up in the air. I was afraid to let go. My hands were tightly gripping the rope but sprang open as if from an internal command. I screamed. For a fraction of a second, I was weightless, suspended, floating. Then I went into the water.

My toes were the first to take the plunge. Splash! I reflexively closed my mouth. The impact jolted my tight muscles. The river was cold and dark. I wanted to stay in the deep but I was running out of air so I swam straight up as fast as I could, following the bubbles. Breaking the surface, I opened my mouth wide and air rushed in.

I let the current take me downstream, elated. Then I swam hard to reach the shore. I climbed onto a warm boulder and the sun's heat baked me from above until I was dry. I experienced a new form of joy that day. I guess it was my reward for being brave. I'm not the same person who climbed the tree. A couple of seconds transformed my life but I could have missed the whole experience if I hadn't had the courage to let go.

Bob:

Obviously, every cell in your body remembers that moment. I suggest that you call upon this memory when you're afraid to do what you need to do. Find the courage from that day in your past and bring it into the present. Your current struggles are more difficult than letting go of the rope swing, and the reward will not be so immediate. You will need to be brave several times a day in your relationship. Find the love you have for Janice during struggle. Act in love, be in love.

Wayne:

I am afraid that I'll do the wrong thing.

Bob:

You may find it helpful to open and close your hands as a reminder that there is courage in holding on and in knowing when to let go. Wayne, tighten and relax your fists a couple of times. Practice this next week when speaking your truth.

Your turn, Janice. Were you able to recall a time from your past where you felt brave?

Janice:

As a little girl, I lived on the edge of the city, surrounded by farmland. I loved horses! Their beauty, power and grace ... I enjoyed watching their muscles as they ran full speed.

I will never forget the first time I touched one. While I was rubbing his face, he moved forward and stepped on my foot. His weight was crushing my toes through my sneakers. He wouldn't move. I yelled for help. After that, I saved all my money and bought myself cowgirl boots.

I remember riding bare back with James, who was a little older. He was in front and I had my arms and legs wrapped tightly around him so as not to slide off sideways. A rabbit spooked the horse and as it reared up, I slid off and landed flat on my back. James fell right on top of me and knocked the air out of me. I thought that I would die!

In high school, a friend let me ride her horse. I had never used an English saddle. The instant I was seated the horse took off running. When it approached the end of the grass, it stopped suddenly and lowered its head. I flew through the air and landed in the gravel. I swear, that horse was laughing at me.

Once, I was nearly killed when I fell off a horse. I almost landed on a stake, but luckily it just scratched my ribs. It almost went right through me. I walked my horse back to the barn. The next day, I signed up for lessons. I never told anyone about my close calls because I knew if my mother found out, I wouldn't be allowed to ride again.

When I approach a horse, he senses me and I him. When I have one foot in the stirrup, holding the reins, I feel excited and a little bit afraid. I have been hurt, but I get back on and ride. Being around horses kept me sane while growing up.

Bob:

These are great memories. Your body knows how to be brave. The fear you experienced as you started to climb up onto the horse was real. You felt the fear, remembered the pain and acted anyway. You will repeatedly need to summon this energy to have the courage to love. There is real fear and pain in your marriage.

Wayne:

It was hard for me to say "no more!" on the phone this week. That was probably not the best way to get your attention, but you refused to listen to me. Janice, I have been feeling lonely, living with you. At our wedding, I believed that I would never feel lonely again. I won't live this way. I, too, was caught up in the excitement of our new house. But I know now that, unless we change, I will never be happy. I admit that I've made mistakes. I falsely believed that as a man I should keep quiet and make you happy. My father did everything for his family. I was afraid that I was not man enough.

Janice:

I'm sad and confused. Bob, can you give us some advice?

Bob:

Remember, you have the power to be brave and loving. Keep developing your ability to act courageously by being conscious rather than reacting reflexively. Remember the rope swing and the horse, the times when you were brave.

You will both need to change to be happy. What is happening in your relationship is happening inside of you, so look there for the solutions. You have both brought personal pain to your relationship. I suspect that this conflict has almost nothing to do with each other or the dream house, so dig a little deeper.

You are like two cars headed toward each other, both crossing the centerline. If both of you don't gain control, a head-on collision could cripple or kill your relationship.

It's easy to see each other's weaknesses. Both of you are skilled at seeing what the other person is doing wrong. Have that level of understanding about yourself. Be brave and strong enough to save yourselves. Much courage is needed to balance your needs and the needs of your partner and the relationship.

Why did you decide to get married? Were you happy before you met each other? I want you to review your reasons and look again at the vows you made. The reasons for being together have changed ... you both have changed.

Both of you are responsible for where your relationship is, and both of you need to heal it. Before our next session, I suggest that you spend some time reflecting on your individual part in the struggle. See what part is your partner's, and what do you need to clean up together? Are you willing to put the house on hold temporarily?

Keep a journal of your insights. They are like dreams that slip away from you in the morning unless you write them down.

Finally, there is a movie I want you two to watch before our next session. In the early '70s, I was in an excellent training program for counselors called the "Yellow Brick Road." I recently rented The Wizard of Oz. This fairytale story has applications for your situation. Your homework is to watch this movie and take notes.

Second Session

When Janice and Wayne arrived for their second session, the tension was still there, but they were more relaxed together. They had been having some fun and some of sharp edges had been smoothed over. As they sat next to each other and held hands, their breathing was relaxed. Both carried notebooks with insights and questions to revisit from their first session. We began with a check-in:

Janice:

Wayne has been writing to me every day about his feelings. I am having a hard time taking in all he has to

say, but I appreciate his openness. We have been taking evening walks together and are both sleeping better. It took me three days to stop obsessing about the house. One reason I wanted a new house was that I wanted our house to be perfect before I got pregnant. I had never let myself know this or said anything to Wayne. We both agreed to put off building the house for the time being.

One of the insights I had this past week is that when I am hurting, I hurt others. Then, I feel worse because I have hurt the person I love the most. This is crazy!

Bob:

Everyone hurts others, so it's important to know when you are doing that. Next, see that you are in control of your pain. What you say to yourself can reduce your pain or increase it. Both of you have a backlog of pain from your past that you sometimes try to dump on your partner, but you only wind up with more. Living together is guaranteed to generate conflict.

Wayne:

Now that the pressure is off about the house, I don't feel so rushed. I found a videotape of our wedding that we haven't seen since we got married. I typed and posted a copy of our vows.

Janice:

Thank you for the movie recommendation. We bought a used copy and have watched it several times. As a child, it was easy for me to identify with Dorothy because I used to spend a month each summer with my dog on my grandparent's farm. Like Dorothy, I longed to go far away, over the rainbow, to escape, where all my troubles would melt away. I often thought of my mother as a wicked witch.

When the twister came and everyone except Dorothy made it safely to the storm shelter ... well, that was how I used to feel. She runs into the house and a window swings open and knocks her unconscious. I guess I still look for protection from emotional storms. I always wished that my grandpa would rescue me and let me live on the farm full-time.

My life seemed boring, like the black and white of the first part of the film. I wished that my world would turn to the bright colors like for Dorothy, when she lands and begins her journey to find the Wizard of Oz.

In Dorothy's dream, when the Wicked Witch of the West appears and says, "I will get you my pretty!" I was reminded of my mom, who was jealous of my youth and beauty. She resented that I used my good looks to get what I wanted.

I was very fortunate to have my Aunt Roxy who was like the Good Witch, showing Dorothy the path that she was already standing on. In order for Dorothy to find her way home, she needs the help of three men. I have

always felt incomplete without a man in my life.

Wayne:

I identified with Dorothy's three traveling companions, who all felt there was something missing in them. I was like the straw man who had no brain and needed wisdom, and the tin man with no heart and thus no love. I have felt stiff and empty as a kettle. I want to be tender, gentle and have friends ... so I married a woman with lots of feelings. I am like the lion, lacking courage: a coward. I imagine that Janice was embarrassed to be seen with me, because I was less than a real man. Secretly, life has been unbearable for me. If Janice was frightened like Dorothy, at least she was determined. I feel like a man who is missing a brain, without a heart and lacking courage.

Janice:

Dorothy has the courage to see behind the curtain and face the fact that the "all-powerful wizard" is just a man. I have to face the truth, to see behind my curtain of false beliefs. My childhood home was not safe. Ever since our wedding, I believed that the new house is where my dreams would come true. Wayne was supposed to be a wizard and build me a magic house to make up for the one I did not have as a kid. I have been expecting my man to save me.

The last scene is my favorite. Dorothy is about to be taken home by the Wizard in the same balloon he arrived in, but because she runs after Toto, the balloon leaves without her. Just when she cries, "Now I will never be able to get home!" the Good Witch appears with a wand. Dorothy asks for her help to get home. The Good Witch answers, "You have always had the power to go home anytime you wanted too, just by clicking your heels together three times. No one, not me or your friends can do it for you." The scarecrow asks, "Why didn't you tell her this before?" and the Good Witch answers, "She wouldn't have believed me, she had to learn for herself."

I realized that I am all the characters in the story. I want to find my way home. I also need the virtues of wisdom, love and courage to find my way. To find my heart's desire, I need to look in my own back yard. I have to find love for myself. I have a loving husband. Wayne cannot love me enough to make up for the love I need to give to myself. And I already have a beautiful home!

Wayne is a good man but not a wizard. We have to decide to stay in our present home and invest time, energy and money to remodel our relationship. We will use the land to camp on. I feel powerful and energized. My big insight is: I will never feel safe until I feel safe inside.

On the way over, I stopped at a thrift store and bought a pair of red slippers to represent the magic and courage I have. It was funny ... I stood in line to pay, whispering, "There is no place like home," when I heard the people around me whispering along, too!

Being Brave

Being brave sometimes means deciding what is real. If you feel stuck in an area of your life, review your beliefs. If you don't like the reality you're in right now, summon the courage to change it. To create the reality you desire, you must let go of the parts that no longer work for you. Maybe they never did, familiar though they might be. Ask yourself, "Is the image I have created serving me?" If the answer is no, change. You created this life; you have the power to shift it. You can choose not to suffer.

It takes courage to consciously decide what you want. It takes even more courage to act. Growing past yourself—past your limits and your pain—often means growing past the past. It may be the hardest thing you'll ever do. But it can be the most rewarding effort you will ever make. Live in the present and look to the future.

Imagine yourself in a situation where you were courageous. Study how to foster courage in the face of fear so it will be active when needed.

What do you fear?

Is the danger real or perceived?

What is the source of this fear?

Are there good reasons to be concerned?

The 50 Year Reunion

Once, on my way home from a presentation, I gave up my airplane seat in exchange for a free round-trip ticket and lunch. While eating at the counter, the man to my right struck up a conversation. He wanted to know who I was and what kind of work I did. I explained that I was writing a book about friendship. He wanted to know if he could tell me his story:

Andy:

Fifty years ago, I met my first wife, Helen, a couple of months before I shipped out for the war in Europe. We loved each other passionately and impulsively got married. A couple of months later, we realized that the marriage was a mistake and divorced. When I returned to the states at the end of the war, I settled in a new town and eventually remarried. Now I am widower and a retired insurance salesman.

When my brother was visiting our hometown, he ran into Helen and gave her my number. She called to say hello, and I blushed like a school boy. Her husband had

died the previous year, and she invited me to come for a visit. I wondered, do I take a risk or stay home?

My whole family gave me the royal send-off by renting a bus, so we could all ride to the airport together. I was a little nervous about spending a week together with my first love.

She has a guest room.

Bob:

Do you think you'll spend every night in the guest room?

Andy:

We'll see!

Thank you, Andy, for your story. If you read this, please contact me and tell me how the visit went.

Making Your Dreams Come True

Some of my dreams are epic, but this one was short and powerful. In the dream, I was teaching a class about how my dreams have come true in the past. A female student stands up and asks, "What does your heart cry out for now?"

In the dream, I felt proud and content that my dream list had come true. As I lay awake in the dark, I wondered "What are my new dreams? Have I forgotten to take the time to dream new ones?"

What does your heart cry out for now?

The first step to making your dreams come true is to know what they are. Once you realize what they are, you must know, deep in your heart, that you deserve them. You deserve to have your dreams fulfilled, and to be healthy, happy and loved.

Practice being courageous by creating your own dream list. It is incredibly powerful to express your desires to yourself or another. Gather the courage to make your dream list a reality. You do deserve it and it will change your life.

Here is a sampling of my dreams and desires:

I want to be loved and be loving.

I want to become the kind of person that attracts virtuous people.

I want to discover the best of our species and what we are capable of.

I want to travel with my kindred spirits as we explore inner and outer space.

I want to be with friends who are very skilled at taking care of themselves and who want the caring to be mutual.

I want to spend more time with those who have traveled farther than I can imagine.

I want to be surrounded by peers who are committed to evoLove.

I want the companionship and support of those who are fearless.

I want to work with people who have a shared vision of how they want to change the world.

I want to be with people who commit time and energy to healing their vices and developing their virtues.

I want to continue to find those with whom I resonate.

I want mature and mutually nurturing relationships.

I want deep, spiritual exchanges.

I want conscious, seven-chakra relationships.

I want to be with those who encourage erotic spiritual play.

I want these moments of intimacy closer together and with more people.

Appreciation

When I compliment someone, their frequent response is, “No one has ever complimented me in that way before.” The act of appreciation is a nurturing form of feedback and encouragement, expressing your care for another. Fortunately for the world, there is no shortage of people who deserve to be recognized and acknowledged for their virtues, great and small.

*Appreciation is too good
to keep inside.*

What you appreciate tends to grow and expand. The first beneficiary is you ... but the ripple effects don't stop there. The acknowledgement that you give yourself for who you are, what you do and your affect on the world extends out, in ways you cannot predict or manage. One of the initial benefits is that you are less likely to pressure others for attention when you appreciate yourself for doing your best. Self-appreciation leads to greater self-confidence, better boundaries and a happier mindset. Rippling out beyond self-appreciation is acknowledgement and appreciation of others for their strengths, their contributions and their unique approach to life.

The Magic of Appreciation

You have the power to transform a person's life just by honoring what they have done. Being acknowledged can make pain disappear and smiles emerge. Acknowledgement and appreciation invite someone to the center of attention—indeed, the center of the universe—for one moment. That moment can change a life.

When I am appreciated, I am being bathed in sparkles! The glow lasts a lifetime and I draw comfort from it during my bleak moments. I have this friend who, by the way she looks at me, makes me feel loved. There are no words to describe the energy in her eyes as she beams at me. Recalling her face from memory gives me pleasure. When I cherish a friend who appreciates me for who I am, I feel good inside.

I learned the magic of appreciation early, in college, where I majored in sociology. Two of my professors were older, single women who had spent their entire adult lives studying and teaching at the University of Cincinnati. For some unknown reason, they criticized me in class. Maybe it was because I looked like a wild man with my long hair and beard ... who knows? Maybe they thought I was unfit for their profession. Whatever the reason, these two teachers made it difficult for me to pass their classes, which I needed to graduate.

I wondered if anyone had ever been kind to them. I decided to try an experiment: when they were critical of me, I would shower them with appreciation.

They shared a dank basement office. Once I convinced the maintenance man to open their door on a Friday after they had left for the weekend. I filled the room with flowers that I had gathered and

left a note thanking them for all the years that they had devoted to their profession, signed, "Love, Bob."

Monday morning as I walked across campus with my friends, we spotted the two professors. As soon as they saw me, they waved and called out hellos. My friends were perplexed by the girlish smiles I received as the professors passed.

I wouldn't say that my act of appreciation affected my grades, only that it humanized the social environment and seemed to dissipate the sense of judgment that had entered the academic realm. Appreciation gets people to interact at a more functional level than negative judgment.

Appreciation is a quick magic trick that anyone can perform.

Have you recently thanked someone for his or her support, or for helping you see the brighter side of life? It's fun to find out how people like to be appreciated. One may prefer being honored privately, while another loves a public acknowledgement. How you set up the situation can be as important as the appreciation itself. Take time to plan so that the recipient is at their maximum receptivity. Prepare your thoughts in such a way that what you say is a detailed compliment, and include the positive effect the person had on you.

Dear Dad

Several months after I left my hometown to move out west, I met an interesting man my age who had been traveling the world. One evening, he wrote a letter to his parents telling them how he was doing and that he loved them. He felt that parents are extremely under-appreciated for all their self-sacrifice and effort.

Later in my travels, I realized that I had never written my parents a letter. I decided to write my dad a letter thanking him for being such a great father. He was a consistent, loving role model of responsibility.

He replied with a short thank you note. Later my mother mentioned that it was the first letter he had written in 25 years. The last letter Dad had written was to his parents, when he was a young man fighting in World War II.

Letters of Appreciation

Once, while teaching a course on self-esteem to grade school teachers, I was asked for suggestions on how to better involve the parents in esteeming their kids. I suggested that they send the kids home on Friday with a note asking parents to help with a special homework assignment. The kids asked their parents to write a letter on what they most appreciated about their respective child. On Monday, the kids read their letters aloud to the class. These students were surprised and thrilled by the appreciation expressed for them in these letters. Many teachers reported that this was the best day of their careers.

Ask your parents, or any adult who was close to you while growing up, to write a letter of appreciation for you and see what comes up.

A Gift of Love

I have a beautiful jade green, circular stone with a hole in the center. A silk cord is strung through it so it can be worn around the neck. Maggie and I take turns giving the necklace back and forth as a gift. It serves as a reminder of our love and appreciation. We may exchange the gift once a day, or one of us may wear it for a month.

When I am feeling especially close to Maggie, I bestow the necklace on her as if it were an orchid lei. Another time, when I feel distant and want to signal my desire to strengthen our connection, I present it to her formally. We trade the necklace back and forth, its exchange symbolizing our in-to-me-see; the intimacy to look into my center. That necklace is now the only jewelry I wear.

Start a similar ritual exchange with a special friend. Each time the gift is given, treat it with honor. The gift is a symbol of the love and growth you share. It has value only because your friendship has value.

One Rose

On my 50th birthday, I had the privilege of being the keynote speaker for a group of health professionals at a conference in a fancy hotel in Chicago. The presenter before me was awarded a dozen red roses by the association for the outstanding work she had done. Afterward, she gave me one of her roses in appreciation for my presentation.

Later, as I was packing up my stuff in the hotel room, a maid entered. She was an older woman who I supposed had worked at the hotel her whole life. As she moved closer I could tell by the way she walked that life had been hard on her body. She was tired but her spirit was bright. As I watched her I had the image of a grandma who cherished each of her many grandchildren. As she cleaned the table in front of me, our eyes met and I saw one of the most beautiful smiles I have ever seen.

"Hello! I would like to present this rose to you in appreciation of your smile," I said. Her eyes and smile went on high beams as I extended the rose. "Bless you," she said and gave me a fierce hug.

Friendship as Family

Early into my research, I reviewed the anthropological literature on friendship. I discovered that in certain indigenous cultures, the tribal chief designated a friend for life for each person in the tribe. The friends made a commitment in a formal ceremony. The intention was to foster loyalty among all members of the group.

Such friendship ceremonies have been replaced in recent times by the institution of marriage. In our culture, this commitment is focused on spouse and offspring. Such relationships are indeed important, even sacred, but marriage isn't the only relationship that needs commitment in order to thrive.

In the course of many interviews I have asked people to discuss their long-time friendships. They talked about such relationships with the same admiration one might hope to hear of a good marriage partnership. I have met many people who have an informal agreement to treat friendships as sacred relationships.

This elevated status of friendship is seldom recognized but is extraordinarily significant in a well-lived life. It is an unrecognized but essential form of kinship in our culture. Think about it: the US Census asks us about our marital status: single, married, widowed or divorced. Wouldn't it be refreshing to see an additional category, "kindred spirits" added to the list? Love and family are an evolving form. Time to give our sustaining friendships the value they deserve.

Family and Friends

Who doesn't have a story to tell about one side or the other of this relationship duality? In my own story, family has provided some big relationship challenges, and friendship has given me some of my greatest relationship rewards.

Clearly, on the "family" side, the hardest struggle on my path has been parenting. During the past several years I have had only limited contact with my son. Our estrangement has been a source of personal pain for me, and a continuing conundrum. Though I miss him, I respect his right to make his own choices. I hope that, when we meet again, our hearts will be open to each other. All of us have hurts that need to be healed, and I pray for such a healing with my son.

At the same time, on the "friend" side of the equation, a fantastic friendship with a young man about the same age as my son has developed. Tony and I met while I was assisting at a seminar about living one's vision. His artwork was on display, and I instantly wanted to meet the person who drew these larger than life portraits. Upon meeting, we exchanged phone numbers and addresses.

One day while working at home, the doorbell rang. Opening the door, I was unprepared for what appeared before me. There was Tony, ablaze in a Native American costume he had created for a powwow. The costume would have been amazing enough by itself, but he was also perched on a unicycle, juggling. "Can we be friends?" he asked, grinning. "Yes!" was my enthusiastic reply.

Tony is persistent in expressing his desire to deepen our friendship. He regularly calls to check in and schedule time together. We dance, hike, go to movies, cook, attend seminars, vacation, work on projects and double date together. We are mutual mentors and we love to talk about our lives.

One day, while we were walking down the street, he put his arm around my shoulder. This simple gesture evoked a cascade of emotions within me. One wave was warm, but this was quickly washed away by cold fear. What would other people think to see this young man physically showing affection towards me? I shivered, shook off the chill, then shared with Tony the flood of feelings I had. He listened to me, and answered. Tony has traveled to foreign countries where it is quite common for men to walk this way or to hold hands. He was so natural and unselfconscious about his affection for me that I relaxed and received it.

I am almost twice as old as Tony, yet the equality in our friendship is unique in my experience. His eagerness to learn from me is matched by what he

has to offer. Tony has a wonderful set of virtues that, during our time together, I have seen mature. I can only imagine what he'll be like when he is my age and I hope to live to see the day. Without a doubt, ours will be a lifelong friendship. At the end of our times together, Tony is fond of saying, "I love you and appreciate having you and Maggie in my life."

Kindred Spirits Commitment Ceremony

During the past five years that we've been friends, our relationship has been an inspiring model of what I have been writing about in this book. Once, Tony requested that Maggie and I help him plan a party to celebrate his upcoming 30th birthday. He wanted to set the mood for the next decade of his life. He has little contact with his birth family and asked, "Can we adopt each other as family?" I suggested we combine a kindred spirits commitment ceremony together with his party.

What began as a chance meeting years ago grew to a deeper level and we wanted to honor our connection in a more conscious, intentional way. Tony's party evolved into formalizing our commitment to being involved in each other's life and personal growth. Tony, Maggie and I decided to celebrate our love by treating our friendship as sacred. This would be a rite of passage in which we would gather with our circle of friends and express our oath to be kin in spirit!

Midway through Tony's party we rang a bell to gather our friends around. Everybody expected us to begin singing happy birthday but instead, Tony explained that the present he really wanted tonight was the birthing of his new family. We spread out a blanket on the floor to establish sacred space. In the center was a tray with three candles and flowers. To begin the ceremony, each of us told a part of the story about how our friendship began, sharing the fun we'd had and what we hoped our new family would be like. We explained how our lives became enriched by knowing each other. We handed out copies of our "Certificate of Commitment," our intention to become kindred spirits on this holy day, January 20, 2001. Finally we read our vows to the friends assembled:

Bob:

The three flames in the center of sacred space represent our spirits. Our light burns brighter together. A new entity is being created in this ceremony—us, a new spirit.

Our commitment binds us together. We wish to honor the sacredness of our friendship. We three are deeply committed to being involved in each other's spiritual evolution.

Maggie:

We wish to acknowledge our transformation in a public ceremony. We hope our love inspires you to recognize your families, even as you focus your love on our union. We request all present to recommit to love. We are encircled by our friends, and entreat you to hold us in your hearts. We welcome your blessings in the years to come. Please witness our commitment and support us as we make these sacred vows.

Tony:

We will push the edges of generosity, continually strengthen our spiritual bonds and respect our differences. We pledge to be kindred spirits, mutual mentors and guardians of one another's spirits. We promise to bring out the best in each other, live in abundance, deepen our intimacy and cherish our friendship.

Bob:

These vows will alter the course of our lives. We are forever changed by our promises. We are grateful to be on the same planet simultaneously in this vast universe. We declare that we are kindred spirits from this moment forth. We vow to renew our quest for deep friendship daily. By the power of our love we are a family. Encircled by our friends, we seal this union with a kiss.

The three of us were wrapped in a prayer shawl and hugged and congratulated. Several people expressed a desire to create a similar commitment ceremony with one of their own kindred spirits.

Later on, Tony gave us a magnificent wand of macaw feathers and buffalo hair he had made. He had also prepared his favorite dessert, tiramisu, and asked the guests to feed it to each other. I will always remember gazing at the joyous faces of our friends. Our ceremony had become a bonding for the entire group. Finally we proclaimed, "Let's dance!"

We later gave a picture of our new family to our parents and siblings. Maggie and I are proud to have Tony as our kindred spirit. This has been a dream come true. We have assembled a shrine with pictures and three candles in our home. The dynamic relationship I share with Tony has been a creative outlet for my love in this lifetime. Thank you, Tony, for being in my life.

Is there someone in your life with whom you wish to create a kindred spirits commitment ceremony? When you recognize that a friendship has matured to singular level, consider making a formal

commitment. The degree of commitment and intimacy can be clearly stated in your ceremony. The ceremony may involve two or more people making a commitment; it can be a private ritual or include family and friends. Your ceremony may take the form of an oath, a pledge, a promise or a statement of your intent.

Create a personal celebration, a ritual, a holiday or a holy day to appreciate your friendships. You might wish to write statements of your intentions. Make a sacred vow with your friend to:

Develop your virtues;
Honor your belonging;
Be guardians of the spirit;
Follow the path of evoLove;
Push the envelope of generosity;
Rejoice in your interdependence;
Strengthen your spiritual bond;
Respect your differences;
Deepen your in-to-me-see;
Cherish the friendship;
Celebrate your delight;
Live in A Bun Dance;
Be awakened.

A Celebration

Georgia and I worked closely together on creating the illustrations for my book, *Vitamin T*. Combining our creative energies was deeply bonding and we have continued our friendship. Georgia and Maggie also became close friends, and when Georgia met Ella, the four of us hit it off from the very beginning.

Georgia and Ella's relationship developed into kindred spirits. Both had other close friends, but their connection was strong and unique. They wanted to commemorate being friends and planned a day to honor their love.

The invitations were elegant, hand-made creations. Georgia and Ella had asked us if we would plan a surprise at the end of the ceremony, so we asked everyone to gather in a small meadow by a stream. Georgia and Ella were instructed to stand

facing each other and hold hands. Twelve friends approached with different colored rolls of crepe paper. The two women held the ends of all the rolls as they were unfurled. Friends and family were woven between the colored strands and the couple was gift-wrapped in love. Then the tribe began to sing. This was a visual gesture of our vow to support them.

The effect of witnessing this conscious commitment ceremony remains with us, years later. With regular contact, our friendship has deepened and we feel blessed to call Georgia and Ella kindred spirits.

Friends and Appreciation

Research has repeatedly shown that appreciation is a vital ingredient to successful, long-term relationships. We tend to seek out those who appreciate us for who we are, and the reverse is equally true. A simple expression of gratitude alters the energy of the relationship. As people grow older, there is an increased awareness of the value of friendships.

The investments that we make in friendship enrich our lives.

So often we acknowledge friends only on special occasions, yet our lives are continuously affected by them. Deep friends are treasures on the path, because they remind us to keep opening up and reaching out. I have learned to acknowledge and appreciate my friends any time, any day, for their parts in these glorious relationships that so sustain me.

Acknowledgement and gratitude are too seldom expressed. Take a moment to transmit a message of thanks to those who have been your friends. Send a thank you note to let people know how much you appreciate their virtues. Say thanks just because you are friends, any and every day of the year.

Greeting or saying good-bye is a particularly good time to share your feelings. Thank your friends for their acts of love and reflect on the wonderful insights and adventures you have experienced together. Tell them how you want to be appreciated and ask them what they desire in the continuing relationship.

Early on, I started giving awards to honor my friends, and I pass this on as a creative suggestion to you. Create a certificate of appreciation for a friend and frame it. On it, list the special virtues this person brings to the friendship. Friends who receive this will feel appreciated every time they look at it.

Call or write someone now.

Birthday Appreciation

Beth is a special friend of John's. Her birthday was approaching, and she was feeling blue because it had never been properly celebrated when she was growing up. John decided to help her honor the day of her birth in a way that would change her uneasiness with her birthday forever.

Knowing that Beth liked to use the term "think big," he planned a BIG birthday event. It was a big hit and Beth thanked us all for the wonderful party. "I feel so loved and appreciated!"

John responded, "Ah, but this party isn't over! We have a super surprise for you. One day to celebrate you isn't nearly enough, so we are going to shower you with appreciation for the next month!"

For each of the next 30 days, Beth was treated by one of her friends. One day it was flowers on her doorstep, the next, dinner at a fancy restaurant. There was breakfast in bed, a massage, desserts delivered, and finally, a ticket to a Grateful Dead concert. She got calls, cards and gifts in the mail. Maggie and I used large chalk to write messages of appreciation on her sidewalk, stairs and porch. Over the next four weeks, Beth was transformed by the love her friends shared with her.

Such is the level of appreciation that kindred spirits can provide. John and I have created *The Birthday Appreciation Kit* to help others plan big birthday celebrations.

Show You Care

Since we all like to be acknowledged and thrive on love in the form of appreciation, I often wonder why we don't do it more often. There is no shortage of ways that appreciation can be expressed yet we miss so many opportunities. Words of praise are precious.

Are you receiving the appreciation you deserve and desire? If the answer is no, which is true for most people, there are reasons why that is so. Look for the answers. Begin by being receptive and reflect on those times when you received the gift of appreciation. If needed, educate your friends about how you like to be acknowledged.

Observe how others show appreciation and then review your own skill at bestowing it. Perhaps it's a good idea to keep a record of compliments you have given and received each day.

Do you go to sleep at night with the satisfaction that you have expressed your love for those you matter in your life?

Remember all of the special things you did with your friends. None of these precious moments would have happened without them. You create friends and the fun you have together. There are many simple joys that await you when you reach out in friendship. Being receptive and trusting create resonance.

Our friends touch our lives in many meaningful ways that we cherish. There are events and people that could be removed from our life stories and not missed, but there is not one friendship we would want erased. We want these moments of love and friendship to be longer and more frequent. Our loved ones fill our life with wonderful memories and meaning.

Breathe slowly. Inhale, fill your lungs, exhale and empty. Repeat until relaxed. Allow a bubble to float up to the quiet surface of your mind. The name of a good friend from your past is inside the bubble. When it pops, the name is a surprise. Say this name aloud. Feel it pass over your lips on the exhale. Recall a time and place when you were together. See this person's face smiling at you. Hear him or her say your name in greeting. It is so good to see him or her again! Welcome this person for a visit. Will you shake hands or hug each other tightly?

Feel how this memory is stored everywhere in your body. Images appear in your mind, sensations are felt in different parts of your body and your spirit lights up. Though the memory is old, the experience of your friend is new. Thank him or her for being your friend.

At the end of a week, reflect on the time you spent with your friends and how you will make an even better investment in these people next week. What can you do now to create the memories you want?

Remember a friend who:

Took the time to know who you were;

Taught you a new way to play;

Helped you move into your new apartment in the rain;

Loves to travel with you;

Believed in you until you learned to believe in yourself;

Noticed you were sad and asked what you needed;

Held you and just listened;
Helped you bounce like a trampoline rather than hitting bottom;
Called during your “day from hell,” inviting you over for dinner;
Got you to laugh at yourself;
Found you the perfect job;
Checked on you during your illness;
Called you during emergencies and offered to help;
Supported you financially;
Helped you to celebrate the good times in style;
Offered you encouragement at a critical time;
Remained at your side during the collapse of your love life;
Welcomed you into his or her life;
Told you the truth while others were just being nice;
Comforted you during a time of loss;
Noticed your efforts and praised you;
Celebrated your birthday with a surprise visit;
Sent you letters to keep the connection going;
Went on silent walks with you;
Changed your life;
Died yet his or her spirit lives on;
Invited you to practice being your loving self;
Introduced you to a new kindred spirit.

Appreciation at Work

Appreciation is a benefit that costs nothing yet is greatly prized. The most frequent complaint I hear as a consultant at hundreds of worksites is, “My boss shows no appreciation for all I do around here, but has plenty of criticism for my mistakes.” I observe how employees tend to wait for their busy managers to give them praise.

I have two recommendations: first, employees can take a proactive approach and compliment and reward each other, especially because they will naturally be more aware of what each other does in the

workplace. Secondly, employees can do more to appreciate those who have the stressful job of management. Supervisors, too, feel under-appreciated for their talents and efforts.

Appreciation reinforces what is praised. In the workplace, and everywhere, people are more willing to work harder if their efforts are valued.

Appreciation is priceless.

Once, at the end of a daylong training on teamwork, I gave each team member several blank address labels and asked them to write what they had learned and appreciated about the other people on their team. Then they stuck the notes on each other like badges of honor. The group picture of smiling faces was an unmistakable demonstration of the power of appreciation.

I teach a customer appreciation seminar called “Keep Your Customers Happy.” One of the creative practices I ask the class to do is to practice being a great customer and to observe the responses they get.

Recently, I put myself to that test when I wanted to show my appreciation to my dentist for her exceptional health care. She had mentioned that there is a great deal of tension directed at dentists by their patients. After all, many patients are in pain and the procedures are uncomfortable and costly. She asked me if I could help her better manage her stress. I decided to plan a surprise for her. What would Saturn Man do?

The next time I came in, I placed a small plastic frog in my mouth. When my dentist entered, she asked in concern, “Are you all right?” I shook my head and mumbled, “uh-uh.” When she leaned forward and asked me to open my mouth, I stuck out my tongue with the green frog on it. She jumped back in shock and started laughing uncontrollably. She hugged me and thanked me. Now every time I come in, the staff wonders what I might do next.

Have you hugged your dentist recently? Find your own way to express your appreciation for those who serve you.

The Mountain

Some years ago, I registered to participate in a meditation retreat at a Zen center in northern California. Arriving early, I decided to hike up majestic Mt. Shasta. I wanted solitude, so I made my way up to an isolated ridge. I had climbed about 100 feet up a steep incline when a falling rock the size of a softball struck me on the head. Dizzy, blood dribbling into my eyes, I clung to the mountainside. Had I passed out, I would have fallen. I was barely able to inch my way over to a ledge and rest until I could climb down safely.

Later that day, I arrived at the Zen center with a bandage on my head. I was greeted by monks in black robes with shaved heads. It was a silent retreat center, so I was handed an instruction pamphlet and shown to my room. I read that our meditation retreat would focus on two practices: being aware in every moment and honoring all things with a bow.

At breakfast we were seated at a long table. Our place setting consisted of a cup and silverware perched on a metal plate, covered by a paper napkin. I watched the monks silently remove their cup and utensils. Then, as the food was passed from one person to the next, the person receiving the food bowed with one hand touching their forehead as their other hand grasped the food. There was only one serving, so you had to take just the right amount to last you until the next meal. I thought I was doing pretty well with the bowing and passing of food until, as I bowed, my elbow hit the corner of my metal plate, which flipped and landed with a loud CLANK! There were tiny smiles and silent laughter among the monks.

During our many periods of meditation, we began with three bows: one to our fellow students, one to our teacher and finally to our cushions. After a couple of days of this routine, I noticed I was developing a deep appreciation for my soft cushion. This bowing extended into the chores we were assigned each day. I especially liked to bow to my bed at the end of a long day. The quiet time gave me the opportunity to reflect on being alive.

When the retreat was over, I felt a need to return to the mountain. The full moon lit my way as I walked up its flank. At last I sat in meditation at the edge of a rock field where I focused my gaze on a particular rock about the size of the one that had hit me days earlier. At the end of my meditation, I bowed in thanks to the mountain and then to the rock.

I walked over and picked up the rock. I held it, feeling its weight as I rolled it in my hands. Then I saw the symbol for OM was etched into it and I

roared with laughter. My laughter echoed about the mountainside in a chorus. It seemed that the mountain was laughing with me as it gave me this unexpected gift.

Bowing in appreciation has stayed with me. Sometimes I nod my head in subtle, internal acknowledgement. I feel that this practice has helped me better appreciate the small things that others do for me every day.

Bow each time you notice something for which you are thankful. It can be a simple nod of the head or a full, deep bow with hands together in a posture of prayer. Soon you will notice how naturally bowing comes to you and how often.

Appreciation of the Earth

Recently I have found myself wanting to capitalize the word "Earth" as a sign of respect. How we treat the Earth is a measure of our virtues. I believe that everything we learn about being virtuous translates into being a better inhabitant of the Earth. A balance of self-interest and respect is necessary. Inner harmony is directly related to the harmony around us. One goal is to live in a way that is equally good for ourselves and good for the Earth. A strong will to live has to include the will to support those systems that support our life.

*Celebrate your kinship
with the Earth.*

People tend to ignore their relationship to the Earth. If we treated our friends with such neglect, we wouldn't have any. Some people act childish, expecting the Earth to take care of them. Others behave more like rebellious teenagers, with an "I don't need you" attitude. Yet, if these people had no water for a day, they would develop a heightened sense of the precious nature of water and their relationship to it.

The Earth is constantly giving. Since friendship, by definition, is mutual, our responsibility is to complete the cycle by being mature in this relationship, including gratitude and appreciation.

Every action we take has a negative or positive affect on our planet. We may have a great rela-

tionship with ourselves, our mates and kids, but if the life support systems of our Earth are cruelly disregarded, we will have nothing.

Our Home in Space

This blue and white globe floating in the dark night of space is alive!

The concentration and diversity of life make Earth a rare entity in the universe. I think of the Earth as a huge, self-contained, living being, a bubble that supports life in the hostile environment of space. I feel that I am a small cell of the life form Earth. I display a photograph of the Earth as seen from space as a constant reminder that I am privileged to live in this paradise.

I honor plants which absorb energy in the form of light from our sun, 93 million miles away. I marvel at plants' ability to capture photons of energy traveling at the speed of light. I appreciate a plant's capacity to extract energy from inorganic material.

We breathe Earth's miraculous atmosphere thousands of times a day. Notice, for just one minute, your breath. Each breath is a prayer of thanks for the trees, meadows, ocean and plants and the oxygen they create. Make a pledge of loyalty and devotion to the Earth. Every day is a holy day. Each day as you rise, ask how you may be of service to the Earth.

The Farm

As a child, I would spend a week during the summer on my grandparents' farm. I loved going there because I was warmly welcomed. I would soon scamper outside to explore the buildings, fields and animals. I returned when the big dinner bell rang.

Looking back on these memories, breakfast time stands out. While my grandma cooked, I helped my grandpa feed and care for the animals. The kitchen was warmed by a big wood-fired cook stove. I liked splitting the wood into small pieces for my grandma. When the chores were finished, I pumped the water and scrubbed up with homemade soap.

By the time we finally ate, I was ravenous. "Hunger is the best spice," my grandma used to say. Most of the food on the table was from the farm. I'd gathered the fresh, warm eggs from under the chickens. The bacon came from the pig I'd helped to butcher the previous year. The flour for the corn

bread grew in the fields plowed by a team of twin workhorses. I can still feel their rippling muscles as I rode on their backs. The butter was hand-churned from fresh cow's milk; I never could get the milking action right. The applesauce came from the trees I had climbed, shaking the branches until the ripe ones dropped to the ground. Peeling and canning were hard work. Hash browns were once the potatoes that I'd helped dig out from the garden.

We worked hard and the land produced much. No one ever went hungry. This experience instilled in me a lasting appreciation for the land and cycles of life. It is amazing how many people never raise one calorie of food though consume tons. I like to honor the land by using the energy from my food to serve it.

Honey

One morning, while drizzling honey onto my cereal, I imagined the process that occurred just to get the honey to my table. I once installed a beehive at my retreat center. I read that bees are responsible for as much as 50 percent of our food, so effective are they at pollination. Living next to an orchard showed me how true this was. The retreat center's apple trees used to produce only a small crop, but the next year, when the bees were present, the branches nearly broke from the bounty.

The hive, an intelligent community, awakens at first light. A scout bee returns to communicate the finding of flowering nectar. He dances around, wagging his tail to indicate the distance and direction to the source. The bees watch the dancer carefully and hum with excitement. The vibration of their wings stirs the air.

The bees see the vibrations of energy that each blossom radiates, with their special compound eyes. Bees are a kind of sexual go-between for the blossoms. They gather the nectar and pollen and transport it to the hive. There the nectar is processed into honey. The worker bees build wax combs to store the honey. The queen deposits her eggs in the combs. The bees work hard and have a short lifespan. The survival of the hive depends upon producing enough bees to replace those who die.

The enormous effort of all these bees sweetens my life. Thousands of flights are needed to bring this honey to me. Just as the bees collect, transport, process and store the honey, the same steps are repeated again by humans before the honey arrives at my table.

The fragrance of honey is a delicate echo of the aroma of the fields. I love watching the slow flow of golden honey as I pour it on my cereal. It tastes divine. The spirit of the Earth and sun is in the honey, spirit which feeds my body. The bees are my kindred spirits.

I would like to see "Made by the Earth" stamped on all products, above the manufacturer's name.

Madness

I feel sadness for the condition of the planet caused by my species. I am frightened by the complexity of the damage we have done to every aspect of the environment. Myriad environmental problems are like trains without conductors, racing at top speed toward the same intersection. How can they be stopped? This is a real emergency. No one, heroic act can avert the impending disaster, thus the situation calls all of us to step up.

I used to work in the field of mental health where one of my responsibilities was to investigate the mentally ill. The legal criterion asked: Is the person dangerous to themselves or others? If so, that person could be committed to an institution.

It dawned on me that, in certain ways, we are all mentally ill. We have illusions, delusions, mass amnesia and pathological denial about the dependent nature of the relationship we have with the Earth. These feelings of separation cause painful loneliness that drives us crazy. High levels of fear result in behavior that is dangerous to the rhythms and cycles of the Earth and to future generations.

Irrational consumption is a contagious disease these days. Greed has reached epidemic proportions. It has poisoned every aspect of the environment. Selfishness has reached what I would call criminal proportions. In effect, humans have declared war on our planet.

This global environmental crisis is a relationship crisis. Individual problems become family problems, which in turn become cultural. The culture abuses the individual and individuals abuse others. The ripple effect on our planet is "eco-cidal," hence suicidal. Our environment can only take so much neglect and abuse. We all know at some level that this abusive treatment of our home planet cannot continue.

Healing the Earth

I believe the disastrous condition of the planet mirrors our own individual levels of self-hatred. We endanger the life-sustaining systems of the planet at our own peril. To stop, we must end anger.

We must heal ourselves and heal the Earth. Each act of loving kindness improves the ratio of love to hate.

Love yourself by loving the Earth. True respect for ourselves translates to respect for the Earth. A lifetime of sustainable choices is needed. We have a responsibility to use the Earth's resources wisely.

*What are you doing today
to save the world?*

Maintaining my sense of humor while surrounded by insanity prevents me from losing it entirely. I rely on my friends to contain this pain that, individually, would destroy me. Literally, my loved ones are antidepressants. I am committed to keeping hope alive and raising consciousness. Though the magnitude of problems seems so vast, the solution is simple. We must all love the Earth as our kindred spirit.

The good news is that we created the problems, and we can solve them. There is no major problem that cannot be changed for the better by more love and friendship. Learn to love and heal yourself, then work to heal the Earth. Humans have the power either to annihilate life or create a paradise for us all.

Balancing Belongings and Belonging

The following interview with Pat is typical of the struggle to break free from being owned by possessions:

Several years ago, my life seemed empty. I tried to satisfy my hunger with belongings but I was a bottomless pit. Things had become more important than my relationships. I was starving for a feeling of community while my house was full of possessions.

I needed a new definition of success and searched for it. I began by examining the time I spent just working

to earn money. Then I looked at the time and energy it took to buy and maintain my possessions. I realized that I was spending my life on material things when I actually needed very few of them to survive. If everyone consumed as much as I did, there wouldn't be enough to go around. It would destroy the planet.

Now, I define success not by how much money I make but rather by how well I attend to my life. I realize that I have the power to change the world by how I earn and spend money. I cast my ballot each day for how I want the world to be.

Because of the changes I've made, I feel like a multi-billionaire with a diverse portfolio of friends. I have invested wisely in relationships.

Sometimes the return on my investment is instantly rewarding. Other friendships require more time and energy. I have learned to cut my losses when the relationship becomes a drain on my resources.

I have accumulated necessary material things, but not more than that. I am focusing the rest of my life on being in service to the Earth. A livable Earth is the best inheritance I can give to my kids. The more love I exchange, the fewer belongings I need.

Wealth without health and happiness is worthless.

Millions of Miracles

For our ten-year wedding anniversary, Maggie and I treated ourselves to a trip to the Bahamas. We discovered an educational facility that offered swimming with dolphins in a large bay. We were able to play with them for almost an hour! It is easy to feel a kinship with these advanced beings. That evening in our hotel room, we happened to turn on the TV. The movie *Cocoon* was playing. Amazingly, it featured the same dolphins we had just been in the water with that very day!

I treasure those times when I see an animal in the wild for the first time. I can imagine the setting where I spotted my first bobcat, wolf, buffalo, baby bear, moose, porcupine or a new bird. Just as friendship takes time, so does having the bond with nature.

Every living being is a miracle!

Each day, find one new way to realize your connection with the Earth. Practice seeing the beauty around you. It can be as simple as a leaf suspended from a spider's web, slowly twirling in the morning breeze. Discover the many gifts from the Earth. Be intimate with the Earth by knowing its beauty.

Spiritual Ecology

Spiritual ecology explores the relationship between the human spirit and the Earth. Spirituality is a seamless communion between self and nature. Our planet is an integrated system, thus what affects one has consequences for the whole.

When we nourish our spirits there is a positive ripple effect which radiates outward. When we change our inner world, the outer world will follow. When we nurture our spirits, we nurture nature.

Our bodies came from the Earth. We were born into a world inherited in good faith from our ancestors and have been given a short time to be above ground before we give our bodies back. Our responsibility is to create a world that we would be proud to pass on to future generations. We need to evolve until protecting the environment is a daily, spiritual practice.

Our quality of life is dependent on our ability to love the Earth. Our spirituality needs to be grounded as well as connected to the heavens. Raising individual and collective consciousness is a critical practice.

Do your best to live a conscious life. Develop a passionate love for your friend the Earth. Make your relationship to the Earth an integral part of your spiritual path. Work hard for the planet's well-being. Our spiritual responsibility is to take a stand with our lives. Become kindred spirits with the Earth.

How will you show your love and appreciation for the Earth?

What are you giving back to this Earth from which you came?

Virtues and Vices

Previous chapters of this book have described our virtues as acts of love. Virtues are the long, strong fibers that weave us together. Each is a form of loving energy that adds a distinctive color to the fabric of our relationships. When our virtues are mutually exchanged, we become kindred spirits, perhaps the most highly evolved form of human relationship. These virtues form a vocabulary to assist the witnessing of a conscious life.

Although the focus of this book is primarily on virtues, an inspection of our vices provides a useful contrast to sharpen our understanding. Every virtue (light) has a flip side (shadow). The duality of virtue is vice.

Vices are often errors in judgment, negative attitudes and actions that do not reflect our ethical principles or spiritual values. Prolonged vices can wreak a havoc of negative effects with potentially dire consequences to self and others. There is, however, a silver lining to this dark cloud; our virtues are often developed and honed through interaction with our vices. After a particularly bad binge, for example, we are all the more repentant and resolute the next morning. But often vices are unconscious, highly defended and rationalized patterns of behavior. Such ingrained character flaws require extensive awareness, commitment and effort if they are to be corrected.

Each vice presents us with a challenge. How to will vice into the service of virtue, or better yet, eliminate vice altogether?

When someone acts in a destructive manner, the ability to identify the vice reduces its harm—but it takes courage to name such things by their true name.

When you think about vice, what comes to mind? For many, it conjures up the image of moral depravity or corruption. But there are many other kinds of vice—faults of judgment or character—with

which we all must deal. Vices frequently represent unhealed wounds that still need work. Just like the scars on our bodies that allude to past traumatic injuries, our vices often tell us about earlier emotional injuries. Life has given all of us some minor scrapes and a few deep wounds. If we don't work on these wounds, they work on us. Unhealed people often hurt other people, as well as themselves.

Self-loathing is a vice that is passed along from one generation to the next. "I'm not good enough" is the most common emotional injury I see. This core belief is usually instilled when we're young and taints our world-view and actions as adults. In this way, a vice may start with emotional trauma in youth, only to become an unconscious pattern of defensive or destructive behavior later on.

When someone acts disrespectfully towards another, it matters if his or her actions are intentional. A person with little self-awareness or poor social skills differs from someone who either tries to hide the fact that he is being disrespectful or flaunts it. It is easier not to take offense when none is intended.

There are many kinds of vice and, as troubling as they are, each one can be used as a tool to achieve greater consciousness.

My Shrine

One night I was awakened by the intensity of a dream. I was compelled the next morning to construct the elements that were presented in the nighttime vision. I got dressed and went into the backyard.

Many years ago, a friend had given me a round white marble table top as a "thank you" gift. I had rolled the heavy one-inch thick, three-foot diameter

disk across the lawn to a spot next to an ancient oak tree, and there it had stayed. Now, following the image from the dream, I stood the luminous lunar shape upright by planting it a few inches into the ground, with a stake behind for added support. The white sphere was lightly streaked with gray impurities.

Next, I added the second component from my dream by digging up a stepping-stone I had placed in the ground long ago: a four-inch thick shiny marble monolith that I had originally extracted from a dumpster at a tombstone company. This treasure from the trash was a black beauty with flecks of reflective material. I placed the rectangular slab of stone against the white marble sphere, burying its bottom end into the ground. Finally I stepped back, heart racing, to view my first art installation.

The contrast of the two elements created a powerful visual image. I decided to dedicate these elements—dull white against gleaming black—as a shrine to honor the constant dynamic of good and evil.

That night, I placed candles at the base of the new shrine to acknowledge that these facets of ourselves exist side by side and always will, like these ancient stones. The flames flickered and danced.

Since then I have invited visitors to place a candle to honor their strengths and weaknesses. Each day I look out the window and I am reminded to see both the virtues and vices in others. I search for those variations in myself.

Vices have consequences.

Humans, through the exercise of free will, are capable of the greatest good and the worst evil. External codes of behavior, via tradition and custom, have been developed for damage control. These cultural forces attempt to guide us to “do the right thing.” Beyond the pressures of social approval and disapproval are legal systems comprised of laws that define what is illegal and describe behaviors that will be prosecuted and punished. Religious systems define which actions are considered immoral, with punishments that range from guilt to exclusion from the group. The mental health profession lists hundreds of symptoms and behaviors that are considered illnesses, with any number of recommended therapies.

These construct a complex ethical and behav-

ioral framework, often in contradiction with itself. What is perfectly acceptable in one place will get you in trouble somewhere else. What was once considered mental illness, homosexuality, for example, is redefined based on a new understanding of human biology, psychology and dignity.

These legal, religious and mental health systems are primarily focused on problems, and mandate solutions from a larger group. Such is the world we live in, but it doesn't have to be that way. As individuals, we can become better at acknowledging the good in ourselves and others, evolving beyond our vices through intention, commitment and the help of our kindred spirits.

We'd all prefer to be thought of as virtuous rather than vice-ridden, but let's admit that a whole person has both virtues and vices in their makeup. Though a virtuous life is the goal, acting thus means more than merely avoiding destructive behavior. Seeing our vices as great opportunities to heal and grow helps us to achieve excellence.

My Shadow

Maggie and I met Darlene through a personal growth seminar; there was an instant connection between us. We shared many visions and our conversations were deep and lively. We all had a sense that we had much to learn from each other.

Ten months later, for reasons I will never understand, we received a letter from Darlene: she was ending our relationship. Stunned, we asked ourselves, “Where did this come from?” It was as if we had been running down a mountain trail and hit an invisible wall. Darlene accused me of being dishonest with her. She stated that, because I was so ignorant of my shadow side, she would never talk with me again.

We cared about Darlene. Clearly she was hurting and I was being blamed. I wondered if there was any truth in what she said about me. Were her accusations true, or were they really concerned with unhealed wounds from her own past?

There is usually some element of truth in every criticism, so I delved for the truth in this one. I approached twenty-five friends and asked what they could tell me about my “shadow side.” Were there any behaviors they'd observed over the years that were unhealthy and damaging to others? I instructed these friends to be direct and not to worry about offending me.

Difficult as it was to hear, this request brought in quite a lot of feedback. I tried to be receptive and gracious. Ultimately, the general consensus was that Darlene was blaming me for her own pain, but certain aspects of her assessment of me were valid:

I deny my flaws and focus on my strengths. Too much of my self-image is based on being the strong one.

I tend to ignore my unhappiness by overpowering my emotions with reason. I try to ignore pain and always play.

I attempt to “fix” others and want them to just be happy.

I hate to be wrong. If I am “right,” others must be “wrong.” I think I have all the answers; I want to solve other people’s problems to show them how right I am.

I try to gain love and trust by taking care of people. I falsely believe that since I am needed, I am better than others.

My friends, in sharing such truths, helped me understand some changes I needed to make. Their many mirrors helped me to see parts of myself of which I was barely aware.

We all hurt and need each other to heal. What is your responsibility within your relationships? Listen to another’s pain: what arises from the present and what seeps in from their past? Compassion is easier when you do not allow yourself to take on the blame for someone else’s personal history.

Ask several of your friends which areas they feel you could improve. Give them an example of the level of honesty you want. Make it safe for them to be direct with you. Let them know in advance that you will consider what they say. Thank them for reflecting a facet of your personality back to you.

History Lessons

I remember being in Sunday school one morning while my parents attended church. The teacher explained how each of us had a devil on one shoulder, tempting us to bad deeds, and an angel on the other telling us to do the right thing. Both were whispering in our ears, one tempting us with mischief and the other with heavenly guidance.

In grade school, it seemed as though I was always doing something wrong. If it wasn’t spelling errors it was sloppy penmanship, poor reading skills or mispronunciation. I was just a good kid who just wanted to have fun, but in school I was treated like I had horns while the other kids had halos. My misbehavior got me scolded, sent out to the hall, or off to the office for a spanking. The more I acted out, the further behind I fell.

The most frequent reason I was kept after school was because I laughed when it was not allowed. I was the class clown and for that I was made to write 100 times before I could go home, “I will not laugh in class.” After awhile I knew I would be punished for laughing, so I’d start writing “I will not laugh in class” in advance, to help me go home sooner. “Does not exercise self control” appeared on all of my report cards.

In adulthood, I do my best to heal the wounds from my school days. I have written and published several books, and now I am hired by groups all over the country to help them to raise their spirits. I find it wonderfully ironic when I get paid to make school teachers laugh and play.

And yet I still overcompensate for being wrong in my youth by always trying to be right. I act superior because it hurt to be deemed inferior as a child. No doubt I come off sounding arrogant at times. I have been called bullheaded, obstinate, self-righteous and in need of humility by a few people over the years, and I am working on it. Though I do detect this pattern in my personal history, I confess that I take pride in who I am. Am I being self-centered or centered in self? This vice leads me to temper what I think is correct with respect for others’ opinions.

*To be strong you must know
your weaknesses.*

I have found that a helpful technique to get through my own defensiveness is to jokingly label any vice as a problem of my evil twin. When I’m a bad parent or partner ... well, it’s not me! While I blame my wicked brother for the problem, I can see around my defenses. Then, at a more profound level of my being, I am able to own all of myself.

In this self-exploration, I uncover my own attempts to hide my vices and deny my shortcomings.

Accepting the existence of negative, underdeveloped parts of myself has two benefits: I become a better person, and I am better able to accept such vices in others. Beyond acceptance there is healing. I want all of my actions to be guided by compassion as I consciously cultivate the ability to forgive myself and others for mistakes made.

Not knowing your shadow can be dangerous to you and destructive to your relationships. You can chase out the shadow with the light of conscious awareness.

In all of my intimate relationships, there comes a time of fear. It might appear the first day we meet, or after many years. Details vary but the core is the same: My mask is cracking.

Soon the other person will see what is hidden behind it. He will see my pain, my weakness and my fear. I am a dork, dogs scare me and I don't feel like I'm living up to my parents' expectations after college. My past haunts me today. I will falter and be unkind. Part of my mask will fall and shatter into fragments ... too many pieces to fix! My illusion wrecked, my defenses exposed, I can no longer hide my secrets—so I strike first. I hurt him so he will look away. I guess I fear abandonment and push others away. Better him than me.

Vices in Relationship

When choosing any relationship, one affects the karma of the other. Contact bisects our life stories; friendship intertwines them. To do the relationship justice, I want to be very aware of the effect we have on each other.

Vices are like moths, destroying the fabric of our relationships. As important as it is for us to see our vices clearly, we often can only glimpse them in the mirror of another person's feedback. This isn't always easy and is made more difficult by the common agreement of "you ignore my faults, and I ignore yours." In this way mediocrity reigns supreme.

Kindred spirits ditch that agreement right away.

There is value in studying the vices of people with whom you're in relationship. Everyone, friend and foe, can be your teacher. What weaknesses or failings do you notice in others? This line of questioning is beneficial if it leads to understanding of the other person. Flaws you see in others can be areas in need of self-improvement in ourselves. However, studying others' weaknesses can become a vice if being critical of others makes you feel superior. It

can be much easier to see faults in others than it is to see what you need to change about yourself.

To see all of me, you must delve deep below the surface. Can you understand my unhealed parts—the nasty, distasteful, cruel and petty parts of me? Can you look directly at my ugliness and not avert your eyes?

Denial and defensiveness prevent us from seeing those characteristics that erode our relationships.

When I act defensively in any relationship it is usually to protect my wounds. The initial trauma that causes a wound can become a tragedy that repeats itself endlessly. Now when I am critical of others, I try to see the flip side and reveal my unhealed self. This is a useful tool to transform oneself in relationship.

Criticism or Feedback

Notice when someone makes a negative comment about your behavior. Is this person a friend or foe? Do they have your best interest at heart? Is their feedback useful or are they just trying to hurt you? Even an enemy may be giving you some valuable information.

I have frequently been criticized for being so happy, as if it were a sin to enjoy myself so conspicuously. About the people making such remarks I have to wonder if they are happy with themselves and their lives. My conclusion is that such criticism is directed at me because of some unrelated problem in their life.

This is an intriguing phenomenon, more common than we might imagine. When a virtue is treated as a vice it is usually a strategic manipulation. If you are strong, you may be criticized for being overpowering. If you take a stand on principle you may be criticized for being inflexible. Those who lack personal power are more likely to be judgmental. Being weak, they fear your strength. Such tyrannical relationship patterns greatly complicate the task of getting clear in our virtues.

Any time I find myself being criticized I ask, "Which argument is true? Is one of my vices causing a problem here?" I sift through the information and separate fact from fiction. I determine for what I am and am not responsible. Even if one percent of the criticism is true, I work to clean it up. If I become emotionally triggered by negative comments, I want to know why. Is my defensiveness and denial a sign that I resist and repress the truth, or stand up for it.

You're a good friend, and I like that there's nothing I have to hide. You are welcome in my home at any time; my messy living room and the dirty dishes in the sink are there for you to notice. Hold me, know me and love the real me.

The foundation of kindred spirits is the sharing of loving truth. We need friends who can skillfully help us see the truth and who are strong enough to teach us about those places we need to improve.

On Time

As a kid, I always had to be on time for dinner. In high school, I was never late for even a single class. I am usually early for important engagements so, in case something slows me down, I have a buffer. Though this level of punctuality is generally considered a virtue, the reality is that my efforts make me rush sometimes. For example, it's dangerous when I drive too fast.

Ultimately, I need to lighten up about being on time when it's not an issue, because punctuality for its own sake isn't a virtue. I've also learned that I need to relax and not impose my punctuality standards on others. In making appointments with friends, I have come around to agreeing on an approximate time, so they don't feel pressured.

Feedback

During a presentation at a large conference, I was feeling ill and was a little nervous before addressing the audience. I got through my address that night, and thought I had pulled it off pretty well because the audience liked it.

A gentleman approached me afterwards to ask if I was open to his comments regarding my presentation. He enjoyed what I had to say but his training with Toastmasters had given him some insight on how I might eliminate a mistake that he noticed. I was shocked when he told me that I had repeated the phrase "you know" dozens of times. I thanked him for his feedback and said that, since it was videotaped, I would watch to see if his comments were true.

I thought to myself that maybe I had said, "you know" a couple of times. But then I watched the tape. Somewhere past my fortieth repetition of the phrase, I realized that he was right.

I use this story to remind myself that I am not always able to see or hear how I present myself. I need reliable feedback from others to help me develop my own witness of myself. We need others to compensate for our blind spots.

Another way that I develop my witness is to use my mind like a video camera and review scenes from my interactions. What can I learn about myself as I pause and study one frame at a time? Often I see things that I missed in real time. Though this is useful, I remind myself that my mind will always distort the facts to some degree.

One place to practice the witness is in observing the effect we have on each other. People take us at face value. Notice when you change your facial expression or voice tone and see how people treat you differently.

Virtue / Vice System

All virtues and vices are inherent to human nature. I think in terms of a graduated scale of intentions and behavior to give a more accurate description of a person's virtues and vices. For instance, there is a big difference between someone who lies all the time and someone who rigorously tells the truth. The virtue/vice system can help us distinguish between love and everything else.

Master List of Vices

Following is a sample of one-word descriptions of vices. Add your own words or phrases about vices that from minor irritations to serious problems in relationships. When you see a vice in someone, say its name and silently thank the person for the reminder that each of us may have this vice to some degree:

abusive, addicted, apathetic, arrogant, aloof, attacking, aggressive, agitating, artificial, antisocial, bad, bragging, bully, belligerent, boastful, buffoonery, boorishness, cruel, corrupt, controlling, closed, critical, cold, condescending, cynical, coercing, chauvinistic, confused, cheap, contrary, cowardly, cranky, complacent, complaining, dangerous, disagreeable, dependent, dishonest, demanding, demeaning, disrespectful, denying, dogmatic, destructive, dictatorial, deceptive, disruptive, draining, defensive, dividing, dishonor, difficult, disorganized, evil, excessive, elitist, exclusive, exploitative, empty, escapist, embarrassing, egotistic, frightening, frivolous, flaky,

greedy, grasping, gullible, guarded, hateful, harmful, humorless, harassing, hoarding, hurtful, injurious, immoral, immature, intolerant, irresponsible, inflexible, irritating, impulsive, inflexible, indulgent, indecisive, insecure, isolated, ineffectual, impatient, insensitive, judgmental, jealous, knave, leach, lies, lustful, loner, lazy, mean, malevolent, manic, meddling, materialistic, manipulating, neglectful, negative, nagging, naive, needy, narcissistic, offensive, oppressive, obsessed, overconfident, over-competitive, over-idealistic, over-exacting, poisonous, predator, parasite, pessimistic, preoccupied, petty, possessive, punitive, pompous, prejudiced, quarrelsome, repulsive, ruinous, reckless, rigid, rejecting, removed, resentful, righteous, ruthless, rashness, repressed, reclusive, strict, stubborn, scheming, secretive, shaming, severe, stern, selfish, sensationalistic, snobbish, taking, toxic, tyrannical, transgression, troublemaker, tactless, temperamental, tortured, unforgiving, unskilled, uncaring, unbalanced, unaware, unsafe, unloving, unfair, unheeding, unrealistic, unyielding, unsettled, virulent, venomous, violent, vicious, villainous, vain, wicked, weak, workaholic, x-treme, yahoo, zealot

Here are some questions that I consider when I examine my own vices:

Is this just a temporary behavior, or a consistent pattern?

Would other reasonable people consider this a vice, or is it how I am uniquely perceiving the issue?

What are the ramifications and consequences of this aspect of my personality?

To what extent is this destructive to myself or others?

Is this a weakness I was born with or the result of a wound?

Is there a problem with my perception?

Are my actions conscious or unintentional?

Am I open to feedback and willing to modify my behavior?

What resources and conditions do I need to improve my behavior?

Am I improving, stagnating or deteriorating? Is the rate of progress/decay slow or fast?

Is this vice mild, moderate or extreme?

How am I self-destructive?

How do I harm others?

How do I let others hurt me?

What are the vices that I enjoy?

Void

I used to wonder why I had such a hard time getting along with certain people. I now realize it was the result of an absence of one or more virtues. People do not plan to fail at relationships; rather they just neglect to develop certain virtues critical for long-term bonding. Someone who has never been treated with kindness will struggle to be kind. The lack of a single virtue can drain energy from all of the other virtues.

During one interview, I asked what was needed during conflict in a friendship. June offered this golden advice:

When Mark and I have trouble, I feel like I am running through a minefield (mindfield) wearing snowshoes. It seems that no matter what I do, I anger him. I have trained myself over the years to warn me that something important is missing. What virtues can I use to defuse this situation? I have found that a combination of kindness, appreciation and humor works best. I have also learned to stop expecting Mark to change. Instead, I try to act in a caring way regardless of what he does or says. I tell myself that no matter what happens, I will use this experience to foster virtue. In this way, the experience is helpful even if the relationship doesn't improve. I am learning to see which virtue is missing then adapt.

If I have a problem with someone's treatment of me, I have different options. I can adjust my emotional reaction by not taking it personally. Or, if I think the other is weak, I may compensate by being stronger. Introducing this dynamic into the relationship could be a helpful interdependence strategy but may also lead to damaging co-dependency. In the second case, do I need to ask them to maintain their part of the relationship? It is okay to temporarily rely on someone else to compensate for a missing virtue, but eventually it's crucial to do the personal work to develop that virtue in oneself.

When a virtue is missing in another, I can explain the effect it has on me and ask that person to modify her behavior. How she responded is revealing. Some relationships will end because one or both people are unwilling to work to solve the problem.

How do you handle yourself when you encounter a situation where a virtue is missing?

Master List of Virtues

The master list of virtues is a great tool for stimulating discussions about love. There are a vast number of virtues needed to be a kindred spirit. Here is a selection of personal qualities you may wish to elaborate on:

abundance, accepting, adventurous, affectionate, assertive, aware, artistic, aspiring, appreciative, bonding, balanced, brilliant, beautiful, bold, courageous, committed, centered, creative, compassionate, cheerful, curious, calm, charming, concerned, charismatic, communicative, composed, capable, depth, deliberate, delightful, democratic, devoted, dignity, disciplined, discerning, dynamic, dauntless, dependable, empathetic, enthusiastic, encouraging, ethical, expressive, empowering, energetic, entertaining, enterprising, exciting, erotic, forgiving, fearless, flexible, fair, fun, frank, friendly, generous, growing, gentle, gracious, giving, graceful, honesty, helpful, harmonious, healing, humble, honoring, independence, interdependence, insightful, intimate, integrity, imagination, intuitive, inspiring, inventive, joy, joker, just, kindness, kindred, knowledgeable, leadership, lovable, loyal, loving, lighthearted, lively, mentors, motivated, mature, merciful, nurturing, nutty, natural, noble, novel, openness, objective, observant, optimistic, organized, outgoing, original, passionate, playful, patient, purposeful, peaceful, powerful, principled, productive, questing, questioning, quick, quiet, quality, respect, responsible, resiliency, relaxing, reliable, resourceful, supportive, spontaneous, simple, strong, serene, steadfast, sincere, stable, sensuous, sexual, spiritual, straightforward, solid, sensitive, trustworthy, transformative, tenderness, thoughtful, truthful, tactful, teamwork, talented, transparent, understanding, unflappable, unassuming, unique, universal, unusual, upright, unselfish, vision, vitality, verbal, versatile, vibrant, vigilant, virile, virtuous, wisdom, willingness, warm, welcoming, wholesome, witty, worldly, x-tra special, x-quisite, x-traordinary, youthful, yourself, zany, zealous

What are the virtues and personal assets you bring to your relationships?

What are your strongest core virtues?

What are the characteristics you want in your kindred spirits?

Too Little Virtue

Serious problems can arise in relationships where a particular virtue is underdeveloped. Without the virtue of commitment, for example, trust can not be built. I have seen many relationships fail due to inadequate nurturing and support, for these are the virtues that sustain an intimate relationship. I wonder why some people give so little attention to such an important area of their life?

What quality do you have too little of?

What virtue would you like to develop more deeply?

Too Much Virtue

The master list of virtues includes dozens of wonderful qualities. Virtue essentially brings a certain kind of positive feeling to everything it touches. If it doesn't, it isn't a virtue. For instance, being greedy is an extremely dangerous vice, but being overly generous can result in having no energy for yourself and can lead to burn-out and resentment. Virtues, by their nature, are sustaining; any virtue taken to the extreme can become a vice.

Balance

Empathy and caring for others must be counterbalanced with the same depth of care for oneself. Such a balance of potentially competing virtues requires amazing skills of perception and prioritization. For instance, one needs courage in the face of danger, but this must be tempered with the wisdom to know when to turn and flee.

Every relationship is a constantly changing mix of needs, from petty to profound and balancing them all is a most intricate dance. An example would be a relationship in which one person consistently gives while another wants to be the one who receives most of the time. A relationship based on, "What can you do for me?" tends to dissolve when the needs, advantages and usefulness no longer exist. If the only basis for the relationship is pleasure, then, when pain inevitably arises, both the pain and the person are to be avoided. Mutual balance is required of all involved.

Our instinct is to avoid pain and to seek pleasure. However, in a true kindred spirit friendship, pain and struggle can be used to develop an even closer bond. This deepening bond results from a creative response to adversity and can be a pleasurable learning experience for both parties.

Multiple levels of pleasure become available to us when we balance our needs and the needs of our friend.

When someone we care about behaves in a hurtful way because they are in distress, we do not have to react in kind. In fact we can feel good when we choose a virtuous response. To love the whole person, even during times of weakness, is a profound act of compassion.

When someone hurts, they may treat us in a manner that mirrors our own wounds. Not to turn away or attack contributes to the establishment of an enduring friendship. It is a wonderful feeling when we succeed in compassion.

Our resolve to be virtuous will be tested. It's easy to be virtuous when others are loving, but when the relationship struggles, our good intentions are challenged. Relationships expose both our virtues and our vices.

Sometimes we will be esteemed for virtuous acts and other times are condemned for the same deeds. Ultimately, outside opinions have little influence when we act based on our own principles. Goodness is the capacity to act in a caring manner even when virtue is not recognized or esteemed.

This test by fire tempers and strengthens our skills. Being virtuous can be a challenge, like climbing to the top of a mountain, while vice is an easy slide down.

Create community where wounds can be healed and virtues will thrive. Virtue is its own reward. Being virtuous feels expansive and any praise for our good deeds is just a bonus.

Vice to Virtue Transformation

We all have the potential to perceive any experience as either negative or positive. A crisis does not automatically build character. Your behavior during a crisis reveals the state of your character. You always have a choice to allow a vice to continue, or you can heal the wound and birth a virtue. We become strong by eliminating the negative effects of our weaknesses.

Dealing with one's vices is a bit like tending a garden. We need to weed constantly to open up space for virtues to blossom. Part of gardening is enjoyment of the exercise of pulling out unwanted weeds. Maturity and mastery are found in learning from our own mistakes and the actions of others. Our relationships will be a series of successes and struggles based on our virtues and vices. I found this insight in a fortune cookie:

What's a vice today may be a virtue tomorrow.

Use the virtue and vice lists and take note of your strengths and weaknesses. Understanding your vices helps you identify problems areas. Awareness of your virtues can show you the solutions.

Is there a wound you want to actively heal? Identify one of your own vices and develop a plan to transform this limitation into an asset. What would be the positive behavior needed to convert that particular vice into a virtue?

You might find it revealing to make a list of virtues and vices for each of your parents. Now compare this to the list of your own virtues and vices and compare them.

You can extend the virtue/vice investigation by selecting a couple of close relationships and comparing your lists.

Review a relationship where the struggles were painful and persistent. Notice how even one missing virtue or the presence of a vice can doom the entire relationship. To survive and thrive, every long-term relationship must overcome one or more vices.

Learn from both your virtues and vices. If you do not have the friendships you desire, embrace the need for change. An honest review of your own virtues and vices will highlight the areas that you can cultivate your own growth. This system helps you to see the whole picture, assets and liabilities.

Matched and Mismatched

Use the virtue and vice system to improve your relationships by revealing where you are matched and mismatched. Any relationship where both parties have highly developed virtues and minimal vices will probably run smoothly, but this is exceptional and rare. Many relationship difficulties are the direct result of a disparity between levels of virtues. Relationships have a higher likelihood of success when both people understand their virtues and vices.

The struggle between good and evil is a popular theme. Down through millennia via the oral tradition, dramatic stories of human relationships have developed separate characters to symbolize virtues and vices. Some of these were so important that they became the stuff of myths and legend: Beowulf, Moses and Darth Vader. In our society, such stories provide the plots for the movies, TV programs and

novels we consume. In the old black and white movies, you could quickly tell the good guys from the bad: the sensitive hero wore white, and the cruel villain black. Modern stories describe complex characters who exhibit elements of virtue and vice alike. Like these stories through the ages, all of our virtues and vices operate simultaneously.

When viewing a movie, I practice naming the virtues and vices of each of the characters. I try to notice, in the development of the characters, if they become more virtuous or if their vices take over. Here are some questions I ask when I take in a story:

How are the people with virtues affected by the people with vices?

Does the good guy get pulled down by the bad force?

Are there any roles that involve a more complex character with both virtues and vices?

What are the special qualities portrayed that deepen relationships?

Notice the characters with whom you identify. Now look at the characters in your life. Everyone has developed their virtues and vices in unique ways.

We bring a long list of qualities to our relationships, good and bad. I like the classic marriage vow: "I take you for better or worse, in sickness and health, richer or poorer, in good times and in bad." With our close friends these vows are quite applicable. The success of any meaningful relationship is based on virtue. Our friends and foes, partners and parents, all bring out the best and worst in us. Some of our work is internal. Other times the best place to improve our range of virtues is within our close relationships. Every relationship is an opportunity for learning.

The quest for love and friendship is the quest for virtue, healing and understanding. Our journey between birth and death always includes joy and suffering. Though good and evil are intertwined in the fabric of our life, the conscious commitment to evolve our virtues is where the fun begins and suffering ends.

Point System

The idea for the following point system started out as a joke from an email I received. It was about a husband gaining and losing points based on his wife's judgment of his actions and intentions. I chuckled when I read how randomly the points were assigned or deducted. The tension in my laughter hinted that there was something deeper to this notion. A little voice in my head said, "Pay attention, this is funny, but there is more truth than you might care to admit."

Add points for behaviors you like and subtract points for what you dislike. Learning to understand your own point system is an excellent way to sharpen the vision of your witness and deepen intimacy. In any type of relationship points are gained and lost, so it's important to know how the system works—both your own and the other person's.

Play the intimacy game so that everybody wins. It's easy and a great way to learn as much as you can about yourself and those you're in relationship with. This system has been an exciting exploration for me on the quest for intimacy.

How do I give and deduct points for myself?

How do I give and deduct points in each of my relationships?

How are others adding or subtracting points?

Are you more likely to award points or deduct them?

There are written and unwritten rules by which we judge others' behavior, but all of us rely on agreements to define the playing field. An agreement is made when both parties know what is expected and both have agreed beforehand to the rules. The intentional breach of agreement results in a major loss of points. This is quite straightforward but there are complexities in the system. For instance, it's one thing to give yourself a hard time when you break one of your own rules, but it's another story when you subtract points from someone else who violates one of your rules without knowing the rule. Uncovering your point system and its rules is revealing of your principals and code of conduct.

Understanding your system will help you become aware of your behavior and its effect on others. The primary value comes from focusing most of your attention on your actions. The best strategy is to change the inside and then let that work to affect your external behavior.

Keep score on yourself. A majority of people I interviewed reported that they are extremely harsh on themselves, deducting major points for minor offenses.

What about your system needs to change?

Is your system fair to yourself?

Is your system fair to others?

Witnessing your own point system requires a sophisticated level of self-awareness and sensitivity. It is crucial to monitor large point gains and losses. Small gains or losses can add up over time and must be consciously tracked. Evaluate your decisions to ensure that your system is even-handed toward yourself and others. There is always room to fine-tune the evaluations that result.

I didn't think I would ever keep score on someone until I remembered my date with Bill. He was late and dirty; he lost so many points in the first few minutes that I almost bagged the whole date. Then I switched into my witness. He was happy to see me and apologized for being late. He explained that he had stopped to help at an accident and needed to use my bathroom to clean up. His score went from minus twenty to plus fifty. Our past several dates have been promising and he continues to be a conscious man.

You may resist the idea that you even have a point system, but rest assured it does exist. It may be operating fine and serving you well without your attention—or it may be damaging you and your relationships. Either way, it's a good idea to investigate how your system works.

One place to begin your investigation of this point system is to research how the adults who raised you scored themselves and you. Accessing this information about your role models will give you an invaluable insight into how you approach relationships in your life. Examine which ways, good or bad, you have adopted their system. How does your system serve or not serve you in relationships?

When I looked closely at my parents' system, I understood why I still have a hard time being around them. They still rate my actions as if I were a child. I had a serious talk with them about being treated as an adult. They surprised me also by requesting that I stop acting like a child, which caused them to slip into a parental role. In the end, we all want each other to act like adults and be respected as adults.

The virtue section on forgiveness describes a procedure that can remove large negative point spreads. Resentments often cause us to deduct points far beyond good sense and fairness. It is a virtue to remove from the record the loss of points incurred when someone sincerely begs forgiveness and makes an effort to change. People make mistakes. It is important to acknowledge and work to prevent their reoccurrence. Be on the lookout for ways to give points and show appreciation. Before deducting points, pause to ponder:

Why did this person behave like that?

What were they thinking?

Did they forget to take my feelings into consideration?

Review your system to make sure it is fair to you and to others. Who are you most likely to judge too harshly: yourself, your parents, your children, your mate, your friends or your co-workers?

It is a tough call to end a friendship that has become negative. Sometimes you need to be the kind of friend that hangs in there, even when the other has been losing points for a long time.

To be in my inner circle a person needs to score major points. They can still have negative qualities, but it's the ratio that counts. Skill level, maturity and personal growth are traits that one has to work consciously to develop.

The master lists of virtues and vices can help you identify areas of progress and decline in your relationships. Are there more strokes than pokes in this relationship? Do you want more intimacy or less? Instead of drifting apart because you don't like this person's treatment of you, use the virtue and vice system to communicate what you want. The point system can be a powerful tool to assist the witness and strengthen intimacy.

Rules and Standards

Conflict is a great opportunity for reviewing point systems. When I am upset with someone, it is almost always because I feel they have broken one of my rules.

For people who do not know the rules of their own point system, the ups and downs of a relationship can be bewildering. When people do this self-revealing work, they may find themselves dealing with challenges like:

Who invented these rules that I blindly follow? They are not rules I would choose now. Many of these rules seem arbitrary and not grounded in principle. I need to change or update them.

Certain rules result in pain. Perfectionism is guaranteed to make us feel imperfect and make those around us miserable. When someone breaks one of our many unspoken rules, we feel badly and attempt to make others feel bad. For this reason, communicate your rules as you discover them. Even then, when they are communicated, they are only in effect if there is an agreement to follow them.

I have a high standard of self respect. I am too easily offended when someone does not show me the respect that I think I deserve. In such cases, when I engage my witness, I often find that the other person has a lower, different definition of self-respect than I do. They are unlikely to give to me what they do not give to themselves.

What personal standards have you established to feel good about yourself?

How do you expect respect?

Even though I have established high standards for myself, it may be unfair to impose these standards on others without adjusting for where others are coming from. Another set of problems arises when I hold others to a higher standard than I hold for myself. This is a classic double standard, where I expect someone to behave better than I myself do. It is unkind to set a standard impossible for someone else to achieve.

I lack intimacy in my life. I have been too harsh on myself and others. I often ignore my own attributes while being hyper-vigilant about how others do me wrong. I fail to notice kindness all around me. It took years of work to admit that I was both too critical and under-appreciative. I tried unsuccessfully to make myself feel better by making others feel worse.

I had to laugh when I saw a bumper sticker that read, "If you are not happy with the way people are then lower your standards." That bumper sticker contains a grain of truth: if I make myself and others miserable with impractically high standards, it might be wise for me to change. It only makes sense to lower your own standards if what you need from others is perfection, because people simply cannot deliver that. Everyone has the right to establish and hold themselves accountable to their own standards.

I find happiness by raising my standards and

working to achieve new goals. I know that I will frequently fail to meet others' needs and expectations.

I check the degree of accuracy of my interpretations before deciding how I want to feel and respond. This type of witnessing requires honesty and intimate self-knowledge to understand the complexity of human relationships. To increase intimacy, refine your awareness of how you add and subtract points.

Falling in love and being physically intimate is no guarantee of emotional intimacy. Glossing over a person's flaws because you love the attention you receive from them will come back and bite your butt!

Some people allow others to mistreat them. Such mistreatment can go undetected for a long time until the problem can no longer be ignored and a watershed occurs. It is better to be vigilant and make course corrections regularly.

It is easy for me to give good marks, yet I have been blind to how my uncle mistreated me. Several other relatives sat me down and explained what was happening before it sank in that I was allowing him to hurt me. When I confronted him and told him that I didn't care for his actions toward me, my uncle ignored my feelings. I ended the relationship.

Evaluation and judgment exist in every relationship. They may be conscious or unconscious of the judgments they make, but they do it. Though you may find it distasteful to investigate other peoples' judgments of you, it is imperative to know where you stand. Problems build up when, unknowingly, you are marked down unfairly and not informed. Before you invest too much time and energy into the next stage of a relationship, it is helpful to take a look at how the relationship has scored so far.

I noticed that Brenda took a dim view of my spontaneity. That is not something that she values in herself. She judged my actions as silly, but that was not a good reason to put me down. I will not change behavior that I value just to please her.

Similarities and Differences

Comparing and contrasting our point systems with important people in our lives strengthens communication and develops depth. Understanding similarities and differences provides invaluable insights, and it is fortuitous if point systems are compatible. For instance, in scoring myself, I honor the ways I am different and I ask my friends to accept me as I am in their own systems.

In preparing this book, everyone I talked to had different point systems and areas of focus. While one person focused mainly on how he did in relationships, another paid most attention to how she was respected at work. For some, professional relationships are more important than personal ones, and for others, the reverse is true. Upon close scrutiny, I discovered that many people had different systems in place that changed based on factors such as age and gender.

It is safe to assume that point systems are unique, so if you want good communication and intimacy, you will need to learn how others keep score. Frequently, scoring depends on the other's current level of stress: if they feel good, you may only lose a couple of points for being insensitive. But if they are in distress, you might be deducted ten times as many points for the same remark.

I especially saw this occur as a parent. One day I would laugh at something my son did, but the next day, if I was overly tired, I might become upset at the same action. Before I became a parent I had little sympathy for someone's frustration with his or her child. After helping to raise several kids and one of my own, I am much more forgiving of parents!

In the past, I have reactively and unconsciously subtracted points for certain actions; not altogether a fair or rational approach to evaluation. Making the point system a conscious exercise is the goal. Conscious awareness gives freedom of choice based on known principles, and that's a good thing when it comes to allocating points in important personal relationships. Now, if a person accidentally misbehaves, I subtract few or no points. If they intentionally inflict pain, major points are lost.

One of the most interesting types of relationships to observe is that of a wide discrepancy between the two people's awareness and skill levels. The person with the higher investment in quality interactions becomes upset when they feel that they are not being treated the way they deserve. In other instances, the more sensitive person becomes more understanding and forgiving. One person informed me that because they were so sensitive they had to develop extra thick skin, so as not to get hurt as eas-

ily while simultaneously retaining their sensitivity. Just because you may feel greater or lesser pain in a given situation, it is best not to assume others have the same values and depth of feeling.

In my own counseling sessions with clients, I have asked each person in the couple to rate the other, the relationship and themselves during the past year. People with big point deficits are discouraged, because it's hard to muster the energy to do the personal work necessary to repair themselves and the relationship. I offer suggestions to stop generating negative and start raising the positive points. Sometimes just showing how the point system works and getting it clear between two people is a big step toward healing. Most of us do not notice or give enough appreciation for the wonderful things that someone does for us everyday.

Are you on the lookout for anyone who is being good to you?

What are the similarities and the differences that we share?

What do I admire about this person?

Do I recognize this quality in myself?

Where do we share common ground and where are we radically different?

What are the virtues and vices we share?

I have a digital scoreboard in my mind, resembling something you'd see at a sporting event. As a referee watching the players on the field, I know exactly when someone has earned points. I blow a whistle when they break one of my many rules. I have witnesses in the stands and sometimes they stand up and boo when I make an unjust call. Everybody is self-destructive in certain ways. If that energy is directed at me, they are in the penalty box. If they are resistant to hearing me, I might throw them out of the game. Breaking trust, especially in the area of confidentiality, is cause for major point loss. I make my expectations clear up front that what I share is strictly private.

Most of those interviewed who were aware of having a personal point system indicated that they add and subtract points regularly. A point range of negative 100 to positive 100 for any single act might be designated. Behaviors like betrayal, lying, stealing and violence score major point losses, while kindness and compassion score high marks.

How you and your partner handle disagreements in relationship tells a lot about yourself, the other person and the nature of the relationship. A complex formula is at work in every situation. Where one person might deduct major points, another would barely notice. The amount of pain and pleasure that one perceives determines points lost or gained, and calibrating two people's approaches to the point system is tricky at best.

Here is a story that was related to me about a person whose friend was always at least 15 minutes late:

The first time Kerry was late, she called to say she was stuck in traffic. I subtracted zero points for tardiness and she earned bonus points for calling.

The next time Kerry was late, we going out to lunch. I had barely eaten all day and when we got to the restaurant there was an unusually long line. When our food finally arrived, I was in a foul mood and subtracted points. This was perhaps somewhat unfair, because it was not her fault that my blood sugar had dropped.

The third situation was when Kerry arrived late for the walk we had planned. I had asked her to make sure she was on time, because important matters needed to be discussed and a decision had to be made. She promised to be on time. When she finally showed up forty-five minutes late, there was no explanation or apology.

Several months later, Kerry offered to give me a ride to the airport. My mother was seriously ill and needed me to care of her. When Kerry arrived late again and we had to stop for gas on the way, I was fuming. I missed my flight. Luckily, I was able to reschedule my trip for the next morning. On the plane, I worried that my mother would die before I could reach her.

After several weeks of nursing my mom back to health, I returned home. I was still angry with Kerry but I could see that she had been a good friend to me for many years. I realized it would be a mistake on my part to continue to expect Kerry to be on time.

Virtues, Vices and Intimacy

Intimacy is a voyage of discovery into all of our virtues and vices together. Virtues invite people closer and vices push people away. Trust invites us to open the innermost parts of ourselves. As two people become close, their virtues and vices are spotlighted.

When I become aware of someone's vices, I try to learn his history, pain and the reasons for his sorrow. Understanding who he is and why he acts the way he does is revealing. I like to imagine that each

of us is like a house. While some maintain locked security gates that require a password, others have streamers and welcome signs, inviting people in.

There are always reasons for someone's reluctance to let you in. But even with the windows blinds pulled tightly down, you can get a clear peek inside. Caring for another yields the strength to gently deconstruct such barriers and to address the vices that prevent deeper intimacy. Being cared for by another can foster the safety to open guarded doors to your self and understand the reasons for your own vices.

Every vice is an opportunity for growth. It's important to try to catch negative patterns early. What are some destructive thoughts that run through your head? The witness includes seeing all the virtues and vices in operation. This light and shadow provides the contrast that gives depth to your self.

What mannerisms frequently occur that cause you problems?

There are times when I don't want intimacy. I resist allowing someone to see my vices. I throw up different masks to prevent being seen; I like to blend in so no one will even notice I am here. I am totally invisible! No one can hurt me. I have a collection of masks to prevent others from seeing underneath. I don't want anyone to know me. It's one thing if they don't like me and are clueless about who I really am. But it is another thing if they do know me and still reject me. Ouch! I am not going to let anyone get that close.

When our awareness expands, our spectrum of good and evil broadens. Begin with self-examination to have a deeper understanding of others. Allow your friends to get up close and see the blemishes. We are all twisted by the storms of life. Virtue and vice are important considerations about ourselves and those we are involved with. Understanding the ratio of virtues and vices helps us to see a person with the proper perspective.

She's just down on her luck and doesn't mean to hurt me. I'm okay with that.

Every imperfection can be transformed into beauty. Each of us has unique flaws that make our lives together interesting. See each person for what they are and look for the good in us all. It is all around us. Be thankful for the cast of characters that run through your life. It wouldn't be the same without them!

Grace

Grace is a compassionate virtue often associated as coming from God, but we ourselves can be the source and the recipient of this beautiful virtue. We need to bestow grace upon ourselves and all those we encounter. Grace is a clemency for weakness and a reprieve from the tyranny of perfectionism.

Using the virtue/vice point system requires awareness that you are doing your best while working to improve. It also means extending that trust out to others in your life. The closer you are to someone, the more profound an effect you will have on one another. The better you understand yourself and others, the less likely you will be hurt or take unkindness personally.

Those we care about and trust deserve the most generous treatment, when it comes to keeping tabs in the point system.

Grace is that still, small voice that reminds you not to act in ways you know would cause suffering. You could make a witty, apt comment ... but you don't. Do your best to prevent the suffering you can control. Develop a system that serves you and your relationships. Monitoring and refining the point systems in your relationships is a lifelong practice.

Water Buckets

A young boy lived in a village and his morning chore including making several trips to the stream to fetch water for his family. He enjoyed using the old wooden buckets that his grandfather had made, even though they leaked a little and required more trips. His older brother criticized him, saying, "Why don't you use these plastic buckets? They would save you work." But the boy pursued his chores as before.

By summertime, flowers were in full bloom all along the path where the boy had planted seeds, watered by each trip from the stream. On the last trip of the day, the boy picked a few extra flowers for his family's home.