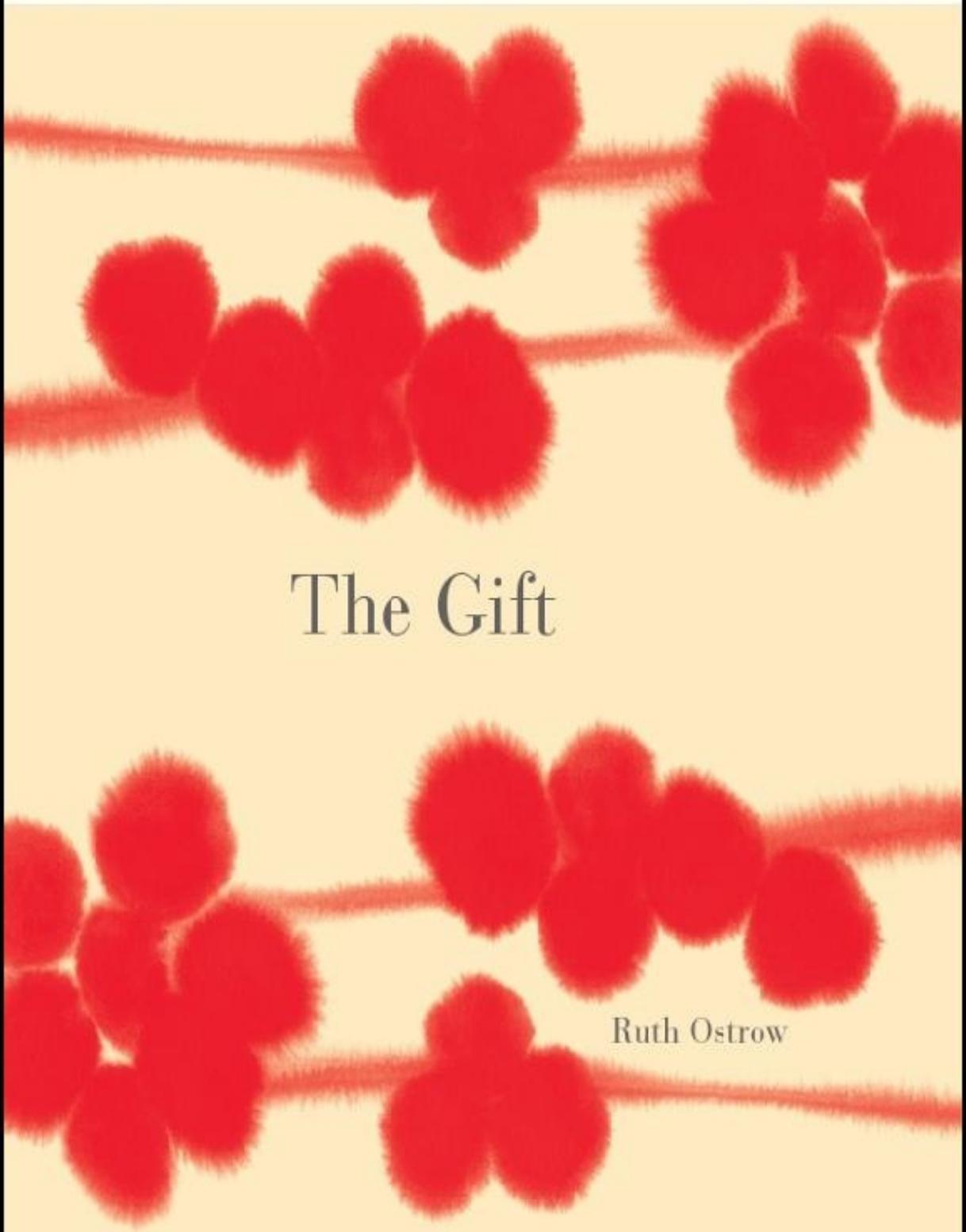
The background of the cover is a light, warm orange color. It is decorated with several clusters of red, fuzzy pom-pom flowers. These flowers are arranged in a pattern that resembles a stylized floral arrangement, with some clusters appearing to be on thin, horizontal stems. The overall aesthetic is soft and decorative.

The Gift

Ruth Ostrow



The Gift

Ruth Ostrow

The Gift



Ruth Ostrow is one of Australia's leading MindBodySoul writers, with her regular heart & soul contribution in *The Weekend Australian* newspaper read by millions, and a host of books to her credit in the areas of human relations, sex, money, wellbeing and spirituality.

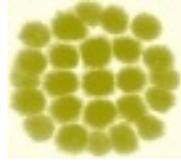
A leading finance journalist in the 1980s with the *Australian Financial Review*, and author of a bestselling book on the secrets and psychology of success, she traded spreadsheets for bedsheets on her return from living in New York, becoming famous for her writings on sexuality and her controversial radio program on Triple M.

Throughout the 1990s Ruth defended the right of people to speak freely about sex and tell the truth about their relationships before deciding it was time to work on her own life. As the millennium drew to a close she moved her family to Byron Bay where she now writes about

spirituality and life matters, and has become involved in the study of eastern philosophy, mythology and sacred psychology. She continues to promote the human body as temple of the soul.

Her latest books are *Sacred & Naked* and *Burning Up*.

If you would like to get in touch with Ruth, please go to www.ruthostrow.com.



The Gift

Ruth Ostrow



Hardie Grant Books

Published in 2004
by Hardie Grant Books
85 High Street
Prahran, Victoria 3181, Australia
www.hardiegrant.com.au

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:
Ostrow, Ruth, 1960- .
The gift.

ISBN 1 74066 261 X.

1. Self-actualization (Psychology). 2. Self-acceptance.
I. Title.

158.1

Cover, text, typeset and illustrations by Mahon and Band
Printed and bound in China by Everbest Printing Co Ltd

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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My nine-year-old daughter came to me the other day.
She was being teased at school and was feeling very
sorry for herself.

‘Poor thing,’ I said.

‘Don’t worry, Mum. It’s just stuff kids have to go
through to grow strong.’



I dedicate this book to Naomi, my inspiration .

Everything that happens is a gift. I have but to open the wrapping covering my own life and celebrate.

Every emotion or trait is a gift, even those we are taught to reject as wrong or sinful. Everything that happens to us in our day-to-day life is sacred, even those experiences we consider challenging or painful. We have just to open our eyes and recognise the treasures buried in the everyday and let our foibles, mistakes and difficulties heal and transform us.

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

Welcome and entertain them all!

*Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.*

*He may be clearing you out
for some new delight ...*

– Jelaluddin Rumi (translation by Coleman Barks)

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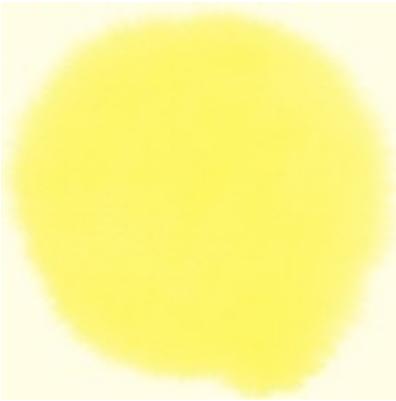
zen

affirmations

I begin this book by paying homage to positive affirmations – the gift of being able to turn negative situations and thoughts into things of beauty and inspiration that we can treasure and learn from. Mystics believe that the mind is the cause of all one's joys and sufferings.

Affirmations allow us to stand in our discomfort or fear and say, I can do it, I am beautiful, I am loved, I have grown and benefited from this painful experience. It is the blessing of being able to take lemons and make lemonade.





*We are powerful creators of our own
Destiny.*

We manifest what we most believe.

*We recreate in the outside world that
which is true in our inner reality, as
Life becomes a self-fulfilling
prophecy.*

**‘Be realistic! Trust that magic
happens.’**

– Sign on toilet door



aging

To age is to grow into our power and wisdom. In some societies – primitive and modern – aged souls are revered as tribal elders and seers. Sadly, in much of the western world, elder folk are whisked off to nursing homes or written off at the first sign of a wrinkle.

The experience of aging is not easy in a youth-obsessed culture, but our dignity and experience cannot be diminished by the world around.

Our arthritis and aches are our ultimate growing pains, as we become High Priests and Priestesses of our immediate surrounds – leaders of the clan, ripe and brimming with knowledge. We should wear our crowns with honour.

aloneness

Spend any time alone, outside of a relationship, and we quickly feel like the odd one out, like we have somehow failed in love or life.

Despite evidence to the contrary, the expectation is that we are to walk two by two,

like animals climbing the gangplank to Noah's Ark towards Happy Ever After.

And so we lament our times of aloneness.

Many of us feel unnerved, unsafe, incomplete.

Yet solitary times can be the spark for great bouts of creativity, times when we start having a love affair with our own soul.

Turning to the canvas or typewriter or project board, we fall in love with our lives and the Source of our imagination, rather than pinning that honour on to someone else.

anger

Contrary to its bad press, anger is a defining emotion. It is the gift of setting boundaries.

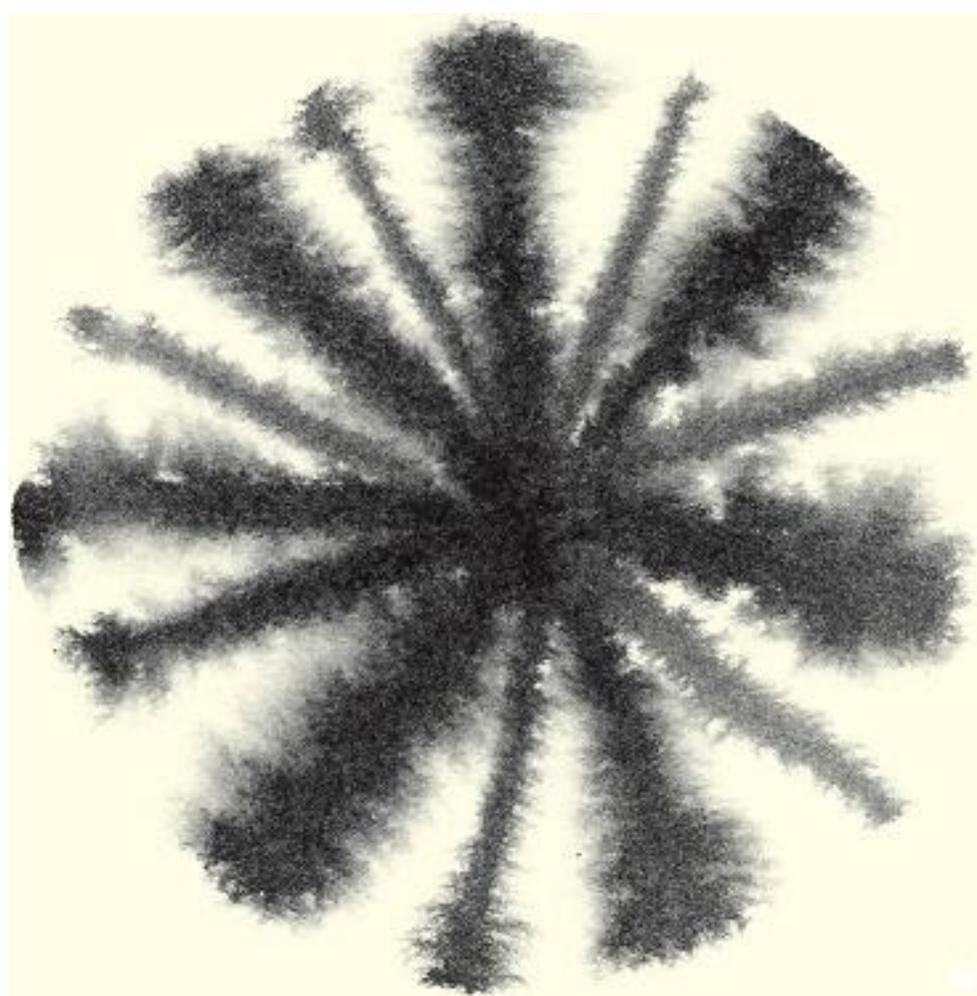
Over my life I've learnt that anger is an exquisite barometer for what has gone wrong, where people have overstepped my limits, where injustice is occurring.

It's a perfect example of the adage, where there's smoke there's fire. The raw emotion itself is powerful and clarifying as long as we choose to express it with care.

When used with discipline and compassion, anger is the warrior's sword that can cut away that which is putrid and unhealthy.

'Our anger may tell us that we are not addressing an important emotional issue in our lives, or that too much of our Self ... is being compromised in a relationship. Just as physical pain tells us to take our hand off the hot stove, the pain of our anger preserves the very integrity of our Self.'

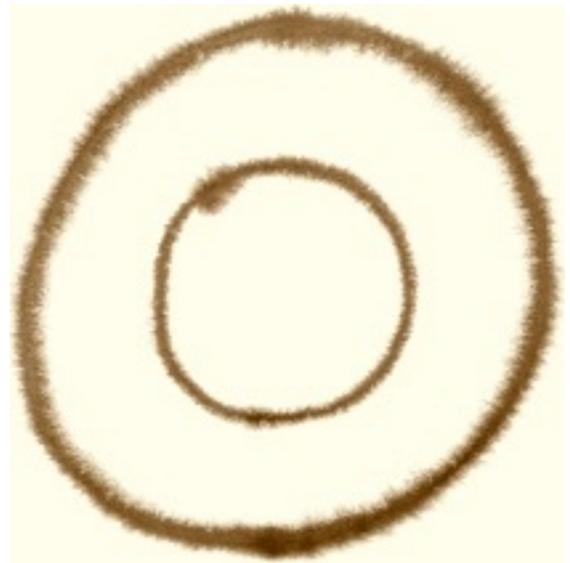
– Psychologist Harriet G. Lerner, *The Dance of Anger*

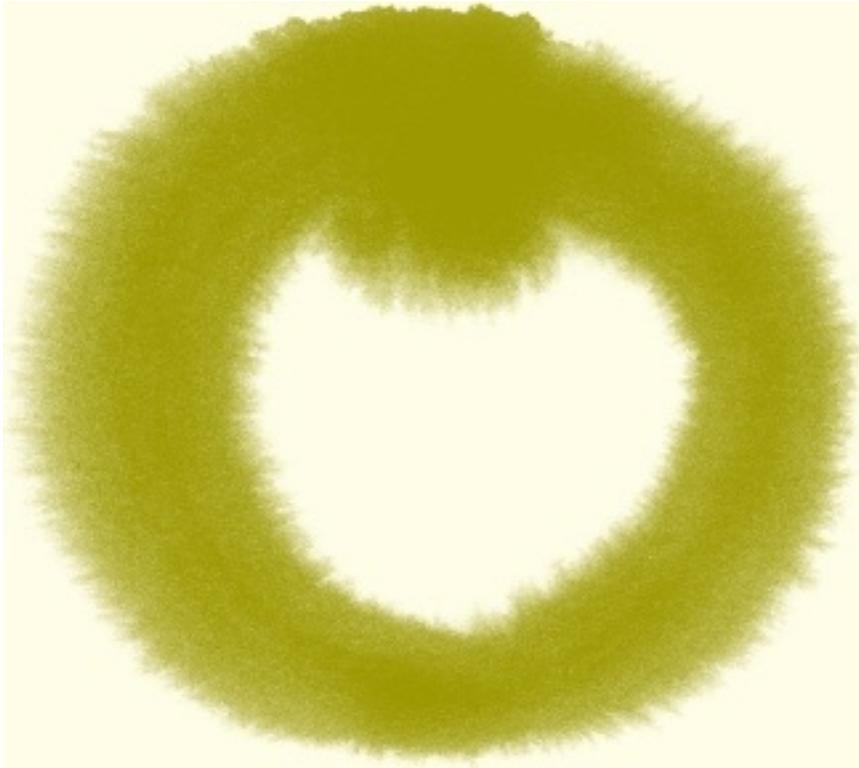


appetite

Avarice may be considered one of the Seven Deadly Sins, but I see hunger and appetite as a display of exuberance and sensuality.

A metaphor for being a lover of life, for joie de vivre. For grasping life with both hands. It's the laughing Buddha, big-bellied, big-hearted.





Appetite connotes ripeness, richness, voluptuousness and fecundity.

My most self-indulgent friends are always the most generous and joyous of souls, spilling over with abundance.

'As I receive pleasure so too does the world receive pleasure through me.'

– Tantric saying

be-ing

Human be-ings are ironically defined by their do-ings in this competitive consumer society, by achieving, by winning. We feel the need to run around and prove ourselves all the time.

Rest

stillness

surrender

are much undervalued qualities. Be-ing is the gift of slowing down. It is sitting and breathing, making time count. Be-ing is the gift of savouring, of staying passive and open like a child, and accepting things as they are.

birth

When I was in childbirth, I was in such pain I thought I would die. As hours became days, I wondered why I had to suffer so much.

After my beloved child was born, I realised that I'd been humbled. A working woman, obsessed with keeping control, my ambitious, young body had been pummelled, softened, opened up, forced to yield. I had been taught to surrender my power. I had been prepared for motherhood by the earthquakes and floods that wracked my bodily landscape.

There were parts of me that died that night. And parts that were transformed. For as much as I birthed my child, she birthed me into a different way of being – deeper, kinder, more accepting.

Everything we birth changes us profoundly.



blunders

In mythology, each hero faces a time when he or she makes a terrible mistake. Which changes the course of Destiny. So too in real life.

We blunder.

We trip up.

We kick ourselves for our stupidity, disbelieving that time and experience have not prepared us better.

However, the blunder, being either a personality flaw or a fatal decision, is often the point of intense insight and transformation for the hero, as it is for us in our daily lives.

Our mistakes are our greatest teachers.

It is because of them, not despite them, that we go on to create new possibilities.

'It is my belief that any action, especially a big 'mistake', a blunder, may turn out to be a call to the deeper life. Often our big mistakes lead us into experiences we never thought to have ...'

– Jean Houston, *The Hero and the Goddess*

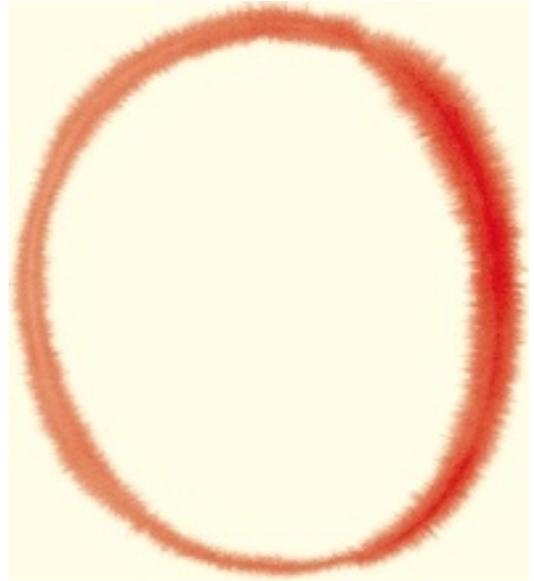
ceremony

Ritual ceremony is the alchemist's wand that turns our tribulations into gifts in a very practical way.

When we perform sacred rites we transform energy. After we have grieved a break-up we can summon the elements and turn the experience into a 'becoming whole' ceremony, a time of writing down all the wonderful things we've learned, and all the things we want to attract into our next relationship.

Death thus becomes a time of symbolic rebirth. Transition festivals like New Year's Eve can be celebrated as a time of relinquishing old patterns before welcoming in the new.

Things we take for granted can be powerful spiritual tools.



Fire burns, the moon purifies, the sun bakes, water cleanses, the earth buries, cold freezes. We can use the elements of Nature to help us perform healings, completions, farewells and all forms of honouring of the sacredness in our everyday lives.

‘When a ring symbolises joining two lives, when flowers symbolise life beyond death, when water is used to cleanse the spirit not just the hands, we bring the forces that rule our lives into a form we can see, touch and understand. Ritual makes us human.’

– Lynda Dean, *Byron Bay celebrant*



change

A few years ago I decided to leave behind everything I knew in the city and move to another way of life, to make a sea-change.

Several journalists asked if I had been frightened.

I told the truth. I was terrified.

Change is always scary as we struggle to look into a non-existent crystal ball and work out what lies on the other side of our decisions, or of those changes that are forced upon us.

But I was more frightened *not* to change.

I fear atrophy far more than I fear change. I fear the rigidity that will seep into my bones, my soul and my relationships if I don't stay open to the inevitable movement of life.

*Change is the art of transformation –
powerful terrifying exhilarating
enlivening.*

compassion

Once I had a nasty boss. I'd wince every time she approached, and she certainly disliked me.

I began practising loving compassion, sending light and love to her each night before I went to sleep, and imagining us laughing together.

Suddenly she was smiling warmly at me. Whether she got the vibe, or whether it was simply that my positive thoughts changed my body language when she was around, I'll never know. But of this I am sure:

When we practise the gift of compassion, we send loving kindness back to ourselves.

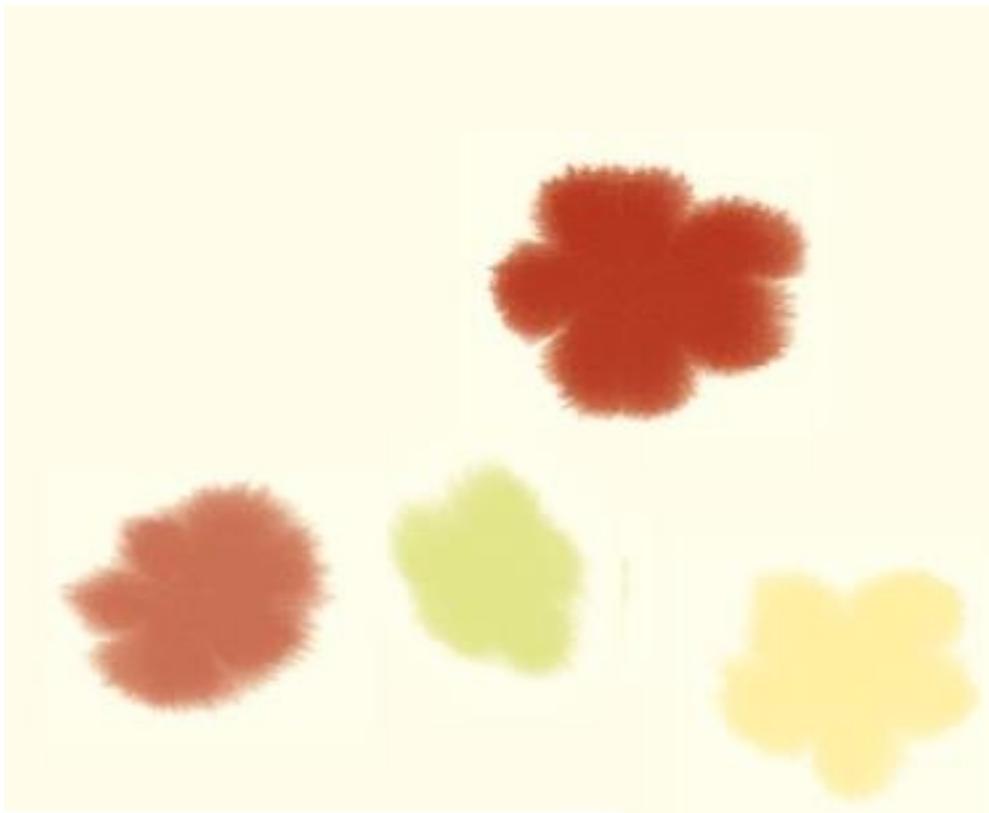
confusion

I often become frustrated with myself when I don't have the answer to something.

I rail against that feeling of having cottonwool in my head, and yet the more I rail, the more foggy-headed I become.

Recently, I sat with the feeling of confusion and just let it be. By accepting it, I suddenly realised the power of letting go.

When we lack clarity, there is nothing to do but to sit on the proverbial fence, and observe until our vision clears.



Confusion is like autumn, a time to collect food and gather wood in preparation for the season ahead. A time to watch leaves fall away, and to live in the ambiguity. A time to trust that fog always evaporates in the sun.

curiosity

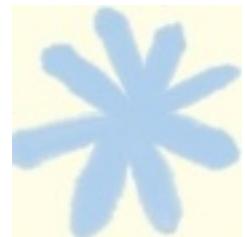
They say ‘curiosity killed the cat’ as a way of dissuading us from our adventures and misadventures.

But curiosity is an essential gift for helping survive life.

My Persian cat was recently discovered in a kitchen drawer. He jumped in when I wasn’t looking and I closed the drawer by mistake. It was only by pure accident that I heard him scratching or he would have suffocated.

After the incident I observed him gazing at the drawer from the safety of the ground with new-found respect.

From our explorations we learn two important things – where to go in life, and where not to go. What better way to glean wisdom?



[cycles](#)

Our natural cycles are a time of regeneration and power. We are not disabled, rather differently abled, and must be mindful not to deaden our psyches and kill the gifts along with the inconveniences in our eagerness to ‘normalise’ ourselves.

— Alexandra Pope, healer and feminist author

Hormonal cycles such as menopause and menstruation are considered ‘the curse’. But in ancient times they were considered sacred.

Women were worshipped for our times of great clarity, when the expansive, creative, intuitive parts of our brain were coming to the fore, and day-to-day skills were less relevant. We were considered visionaries and healers.

So, too, today do our bodies become a ‘sensing’ organ – knowing, loving, feeling the truth, aligning with the natural world. And we need to honour these difficult but very special times of heightened sensitivity and

awareness rather than push ourselves too hard.

darkness

We buried a seed the other day, my daughter and I.

It went deep into the earth.

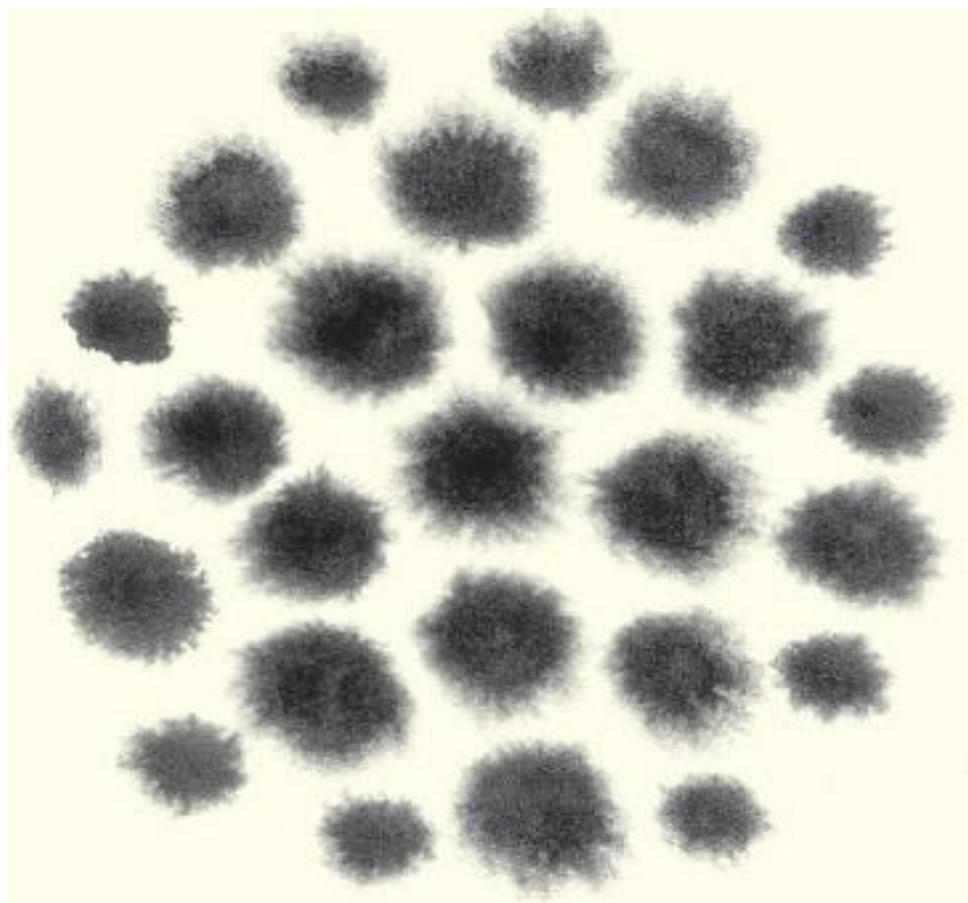
‘Mumma, I don’t like the dark. Do you think the seed is going to be lonely and scared in there?’ she asked.

‘Maybe,’ I said, remembering how I used to sleep with a light on. ‘The truth is that darkness is scary. For grown-ups as well as for little kids.’

It’s the vast unknown. The long, shadowy night of the soul.

‘But there is also comfort in it,’ I said.

‘Darkness, and the rest it brings, makes the seed grow.’



death

During the past four years I have lost four very close friends to cancer and disease.

Devastated by each loss, mourning for the young children they left behind, but also fearing for my own child, my challenge has been finding a way to reframe the reality of death into something positive.

The gift has been awakening to my own mortality.

The ancient Greeks used to carry a skeleton on a stretcher between guests at parties to remind revellers of the grand, terrible impermanence of all things, believing that awareness of death intensifies the beauty of the moment.

Death reinforces our sense of gratitude for our own lives – but most certainly for those people we love and hold dear.

If I knew it were my last day, would I live it this way? If I knew it were your last day, would I treat you this way?

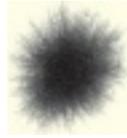
‘Keep death as a friend always on your shoulder.’

– Buddhist saying

‘Dance as if no one were watching. Sing as if no one

were listening. And live every day as if it were your last.'

– Irish proverb



disappointment

It's so hard not to be disillusioned with ourselves and others. We expect so much. We are groomed to demand the best, to want everything, all the time.

And when mere mortals don't deliver, we are groomed to think there is something wrong with them, and with us. We blame and become embittered.

The gift of disappointment is that after you've experienced it often enough you just can't take any more of it.

And finally, finally you learn to live each day without the curse of expectation.

discipline

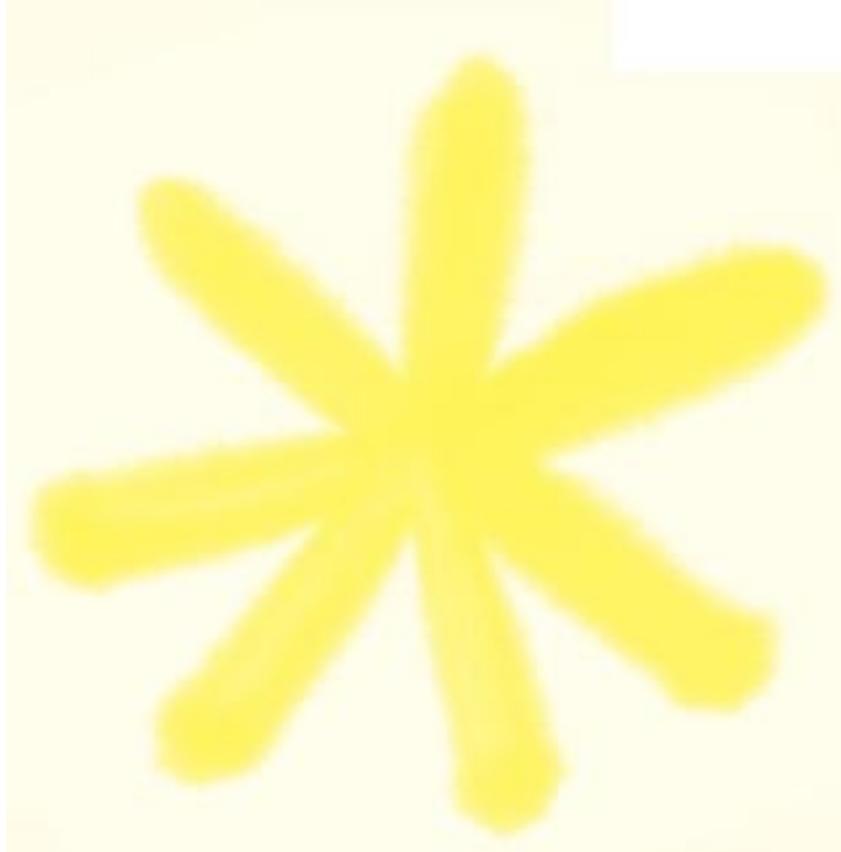
Trying to force myself to do things that I don't like:

exercising each morning getting my tax done flossing my teeth organising my papers – this is my greatest challenge in life.

I have searched hard to find a nurturing way to view discipline. And indeed I have discovered that, underneath its wrapper, discipline is actually the gift of pleasure.

Because once we are nicely polished, have our chores out of the way, and are on top of all those things we've avoided doing ad nauseum, we can really start to have some fun.

ecstasy



Ecstasy is healthy. It is now accepted that certain chemicals linked to wellbeing are found in the brain when we allow ourselves to do pleasurable things.

Potent drugs used by primitive cultures to commune with the Divine occur naturally during intense states such as

birth

near death

meditation
passionate sex and
ecstatic singing and dancing.

Meanwhile, deep breathing, tears and laughter trigger
feel-good hormones.

Ecstasy transports us into magical realms and flushes our
bodies with nourishment, proving what I have always
suspected –

having fun and lots of sex is really
good for you!

envy

Famed as one of the Seven Deadly Sins, envy can in fact be seen as one of the Seven Deadly Gifts.

It is a great motivator.

It can help us to aspire beyond our limitations.

We all tell ourselves we can't do this or that, can't have this or that.

But when we experience envy, we act from a visceral place that short-circuits the negative voice inside our heads, and allows us to shoot for our desires.



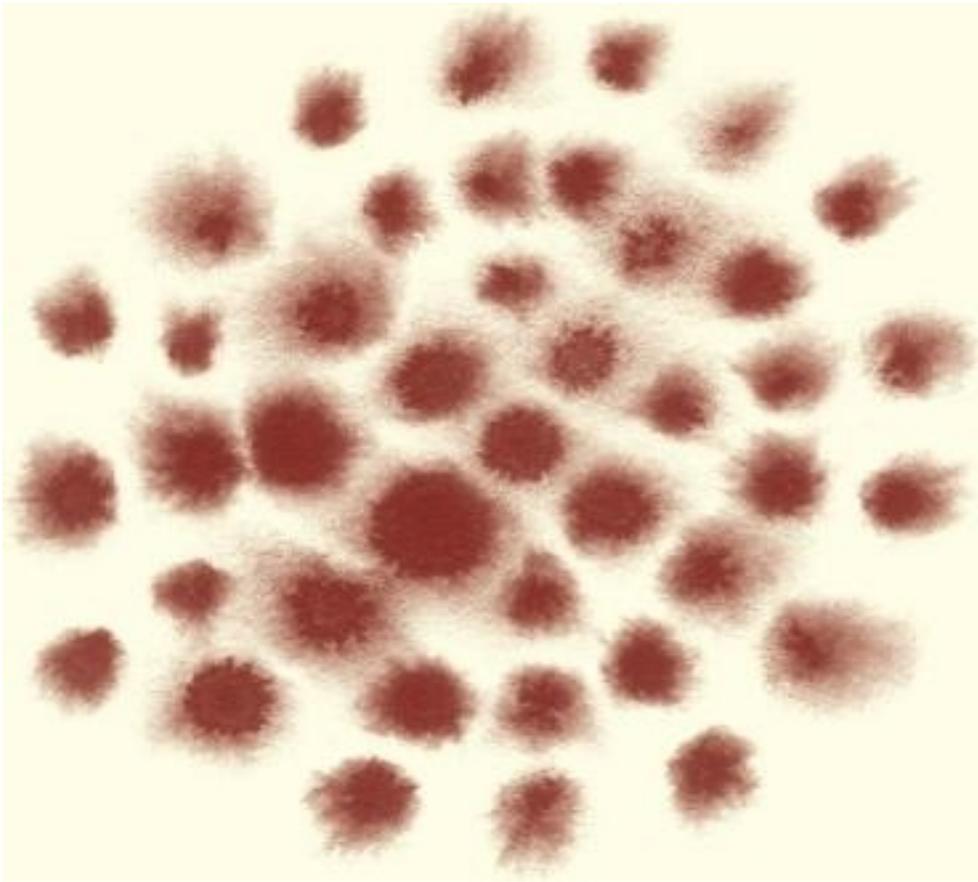
failure

Therapy rooms are full of people feeling dreadful shame at their ‘failed relationships’ rather than paying homage to the half-full glass – that it lasted an amazing few years or decades, brimming with intensity, passion, pain, children, sex, love and shared experiences.

It is a triumph in today’s troubled and stress-filled world to master the compromise necessary to be with another human being for any length of time.

We don’t say we had a ‘failed’ car when it finally gives up the ghost, or a ‘failed’ carton of milk when it passes its use-by date. We don’t say someone had a ‘failed’ life because they died.

And equally there are no failures in love, only endings.



falling down

We fall and fall from the time we are children.

We fall a thousand times a day, and for the rest of our lives, breaking from the rigidity of our expectations, our negative attitudes, our desire to control others.

And slowly, tired and aching from each splinter to our soul, we learn how to fall with grace.

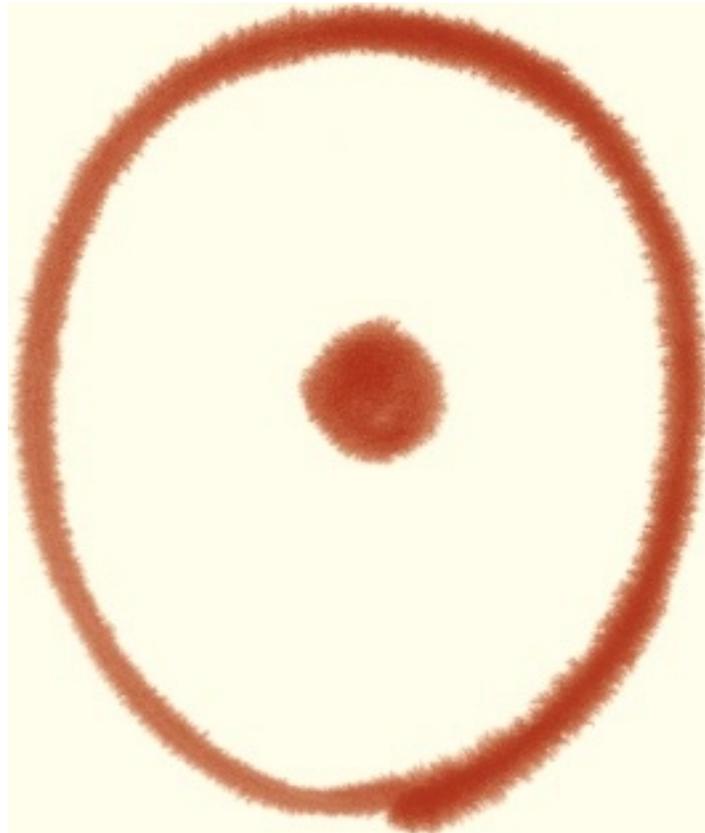


To fall with dignity, to fall softly like leaves fall from the trees, is as important as breathing.

It's about learning to surrender to what is, to collapse into the natural order of things.

To accept the disappointments, to absorb the hurts of life, to let go of our opinions, friendships, those things and people we treasure, our looks and even finally our own lives, as we roll down, heroically down, the other side of the great mountain of our years.

fantasy



Erica Jong says her current and third marriage is successful where others failed because she writes down her sexual fantasies and reads them to her husband.

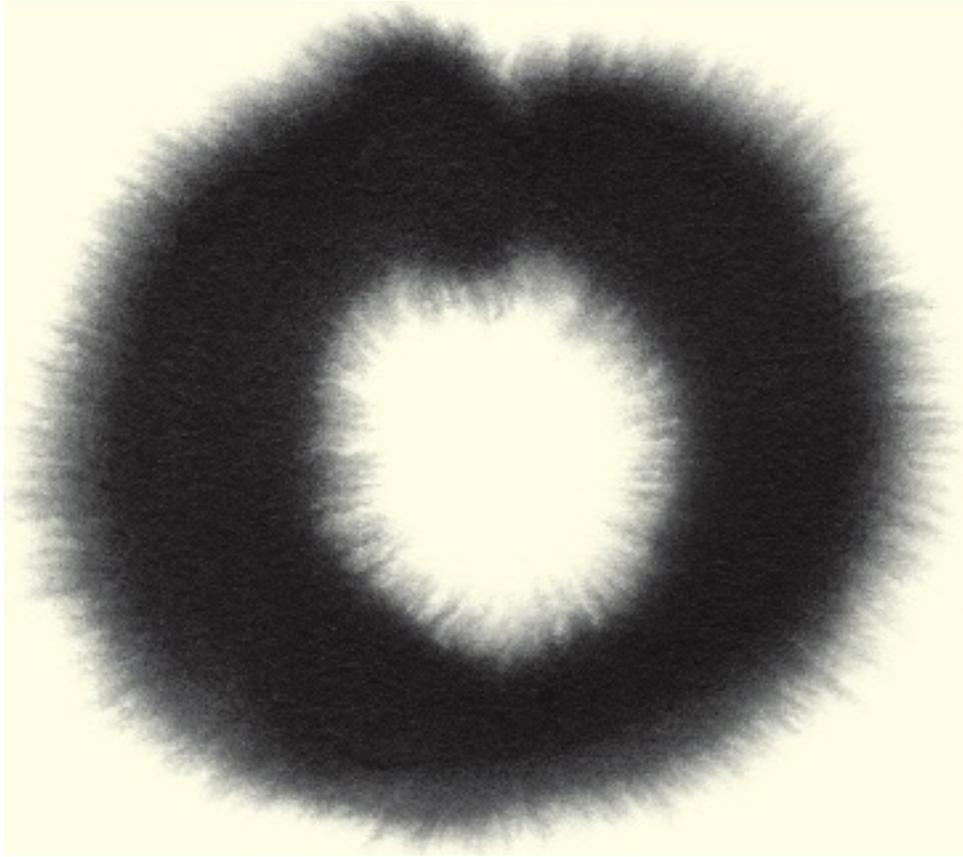
Her actions are a potent ingredient for preserving arousal and passion in their relationship.

Much maligned, our fantasies and secret imaginings are wonderful things. They are our own private erotica collection, our secret jukebox of colours and textures

and wonderful images that can play to our innermost being, help liberate unexplored parts of ourselves, heal broken bits, and keep us vital and juicy whether we are in relationship or not.

‘A sexy mind is one of the most undervalued of all erotic tools. I don’t call my inner world filthy. I call it glorious.’

– Dr Marta Frid, psychologist, quoted in *Burning Up*



fear

Fear keeps us safe.

*Fear helps us to stop and
take calculated risks.*

Fear wakes us up when
we have to act, and
grounds us when we
don't. It is a primal and
basic instinct, to be
honoured when it's
needed, and when not we
can 'feel the fear and do
it anyway'.

'Mumma, I'm frightened,' my little girl sobbed the other night during a violent storm.

For years I've been trying to teach her the gift of storms – the cleansing of the Earth, the renewal that comes from passionate wind, the healing power of destruction – to no avail.

She just looks at me and shakes her head.

'Mum, you are sooooo weird!'

In the end I relent and admit the truth. I am scared too.

Not of Nature but of the things I see on television, of strangers who may harm her, of violence, of unseen threats that lurk behind shadows in my mind.

I live each day in a nebulous anxiety like most parents I know. For years I tried not to be afraid, but lately I've made peace with my fear. I have learned to accept it as a treasured friend.

flaws

So many of us feel we have to cover our scars, our war wounds, the signs of a life well lived, a life that has been marked by broken bones and broken hearts, smile lines, frown lines, the fat of enjoying food, the time we crashed our bicycle.

These are our stories and our memories. They are the disasters we lived through and survived. Though we are encouraged by the world around to get our battle scars smoothed and our wrinkles lifted and tucked, how much braver and richer to celebrate them and show off our humanness.

And how much more beautiful to others are we because we look imperfect, and truthful and real.

A friend who lost a breast to cancer told me the experience taught her self-love.

'When you see your scar, when you look in the mirror and really see it, you suddenly want to offer thanks for the lesson it has given you. I learned

*not to take my existence for granted.
My scar is the flaw in a precious
jewel. It is my teacher and I'm
grateful for it. '*

– Bubula Lardi

forgiveness

My grandmother, God rest her soul, was a stubborn woman who you'd never want to cross.

Her adage was a reverse of the old truism, 'I forgive but I never forget.'

She would say, 'I forget but I never forgive!'

'But Booba, if you forget how can you remember to be angry?' my sisters and I would try to fathom.

No use. She knew what she meant.

And surprisingly, as the years go by, so do I.

Not all things are forgivable.

But at the point where not-forgiving can become corrosive to the soul, my grandmother found a way to cope.

She would forget.

Not the deed, rather the heavy emotional grief, hurt and baggage around it. In essence she found her own strange path to forgiveness, and the blessed relief it brings.

[grief](#)

There is an agony in grief, but what people don't talk about is that there is also a profound ecstasy in it.

My friend Vanessa, who lost a little girl after birth, says that grieving rips open the heart, rips us open to new levels of ourselves and others. And in that fragile, wounded place we become deeply connected to humanity, to the outpouring of love we receive; we experience pain, but also the humour of being alive; and we get close to that powerful, eternal force that is God.

‘In that state of heightened sensitivity, I began to see the beauty of what was around me: the afternoon light dancing on the edges of silver gum leaves; the million shades of green in the foliage; the exquisite delicacy of the currawong's call. And from a place so broken open, the magnificence of that afternoon entered me and filled me with itself until I was only crying at the extraordinary beauty of it all.’

– Vanessa Gorman, filmmaker, *Losing Layla*

guilt

There is much to feel guilty about.

Even when we forget, the Bible in various spots reminds us what to repent over: for the sin of envy; for the sin of stiff-necked behaviour; tale-bearing; causeless hatred; breach of trust; despising of parents and teachers; foolish speech; denying and lying; bribery; scoffing; wanton glances; haughty eyes; obdurate brow; hardening of the heart; unchastity; vanity; violence; profanity; evil inclination; perversion; for the sins committed while eating, for the sins that deserve forty stripes ...

Personally, I like guilt.

A dash of guilt – like a smidgeon of shame – can often make the naughty things we do taste all the sweeter.

But more importantly, it's priceless if we can stop wallowing in it, and learn to harness its fire as fuel to help us change and take responsibility for unhelpful or aberrant behaviour.

happiness

Allowing in happiness is the gift of self-nurturing, which not only helps replenish us, but also replenishes those around us who have been drinking from an empty cup.

Surprising as I found it, most people I talked to for this book felt bad or apprehensive when they became too happy.

As one man said. ‘When I feel happy I become anxious. I think I’d better not get used to this because it’s all going to end in tears.’

Most people seemed to feel suspicious of, undeserving of, or simply scared of, contentment. Hence they unconsciously deprived themselves of it. They could not give themselves permission to be happy.

Others too easily became sacrificial martyrs, depleted and drained by a sense of obligation, denying themselves simple peace of mind.

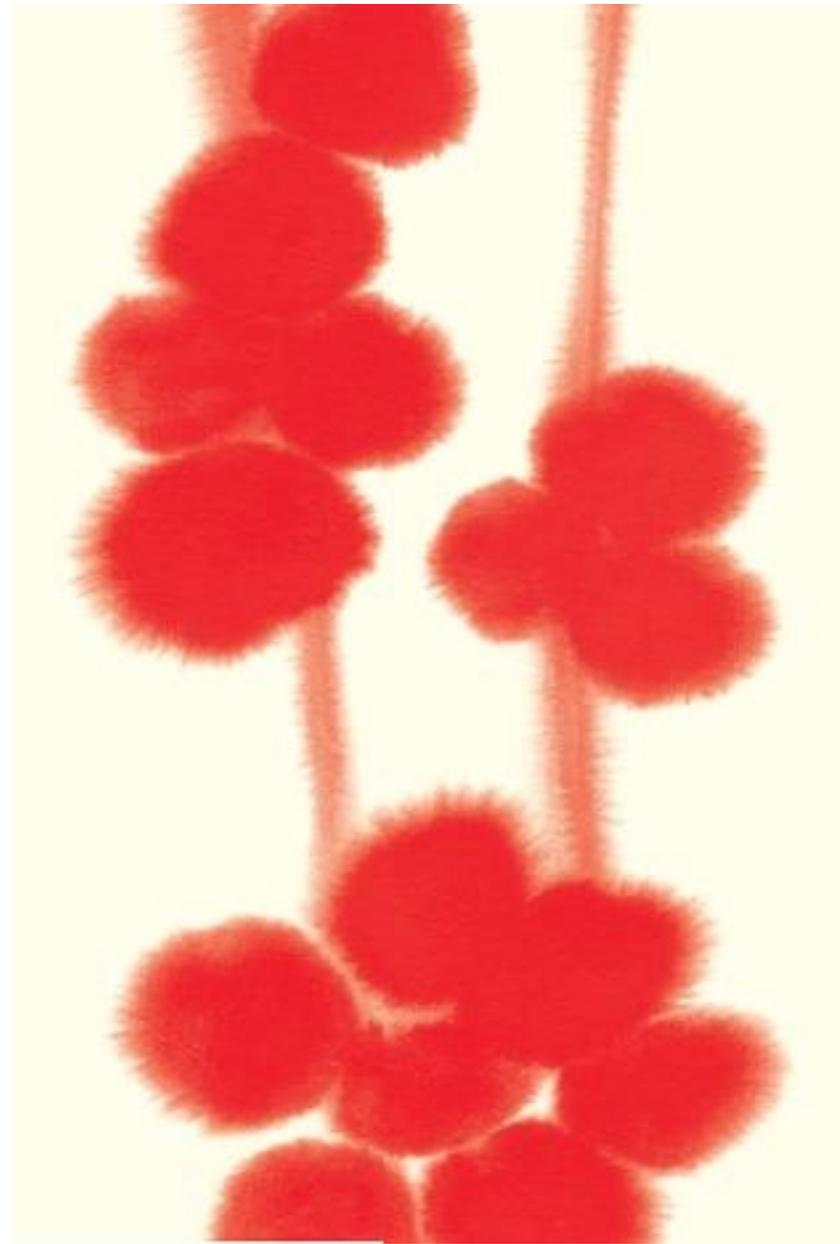
heartache

Rather than cursing our badly behaved lovers, we can grow to see those partners who hurt us as our true angels. Our Nemesis, or sacred enemy, holding up a mirror for us.

Only from a place where our hearts are cracked open are we truly able to see. The more despairing we become at the hands of our dark angel, the deeper we go into our own wounded souls and the more we can see of what we've created and attracted in our lives, and what is possible in the healing.

Our Nemesis prepares the way for self-love, out of which appropriate partnership will come.

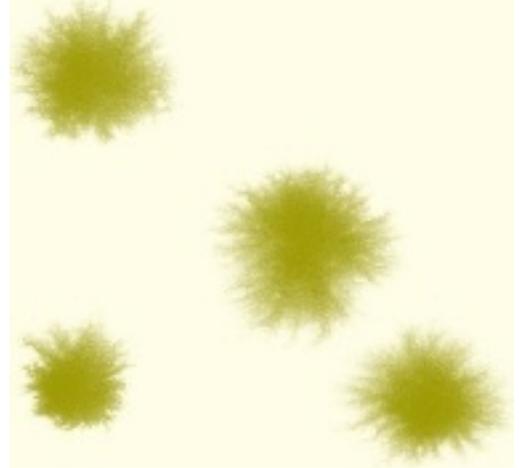
Sleeping Beauty may be awakened by her handsome prince. But not necessarily in the way she expected.



honesty

Honesty is difficult to give and receive; self-honesty is even harder. But for those brave enough to dish it out or swallow it, honesty makes life clean, and clear, and simple.

I find honesty a blessing.



irritation

Irritating people can be our best teachers.

Buddhist nun Tenzin Palmo tells the story about a French nun who went to live in a convent, but hated another nun who kept making clicking noises with her tongue.

The sound was so insistent that the French nun believed she couldn't cope. But instead of clobbering the 'clicker' on the head with a brick, the nun befriended the woman and grew to understand her.

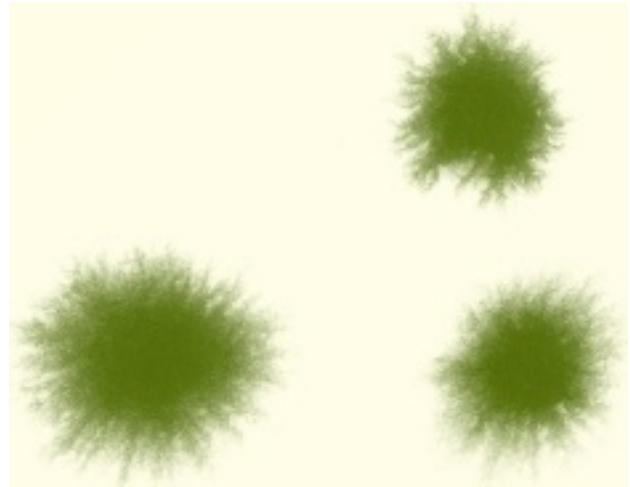
Challenging people are my Zen Master, hitting me with the stick to wake me up. I thank the Universe

every day for them.

As a result she cared more about the woman, felt great pity, and the annoyance bothered her less and less.

She learned tolerance, conflict resolution and acceptance, which helped her in other key relationships and areas of her life.

So too can we benefit from our noisy neighbours, bossy bosses and frustrating partners.



jealousy

Jealousy is like doing exercise: uncomfortable while it's happening, bliss afterwards.

Despite the pain it causes, jealousy enlivens.

When used with caution and care, it can be a powerful, invigorating aphrodisiac for a tired sex life.

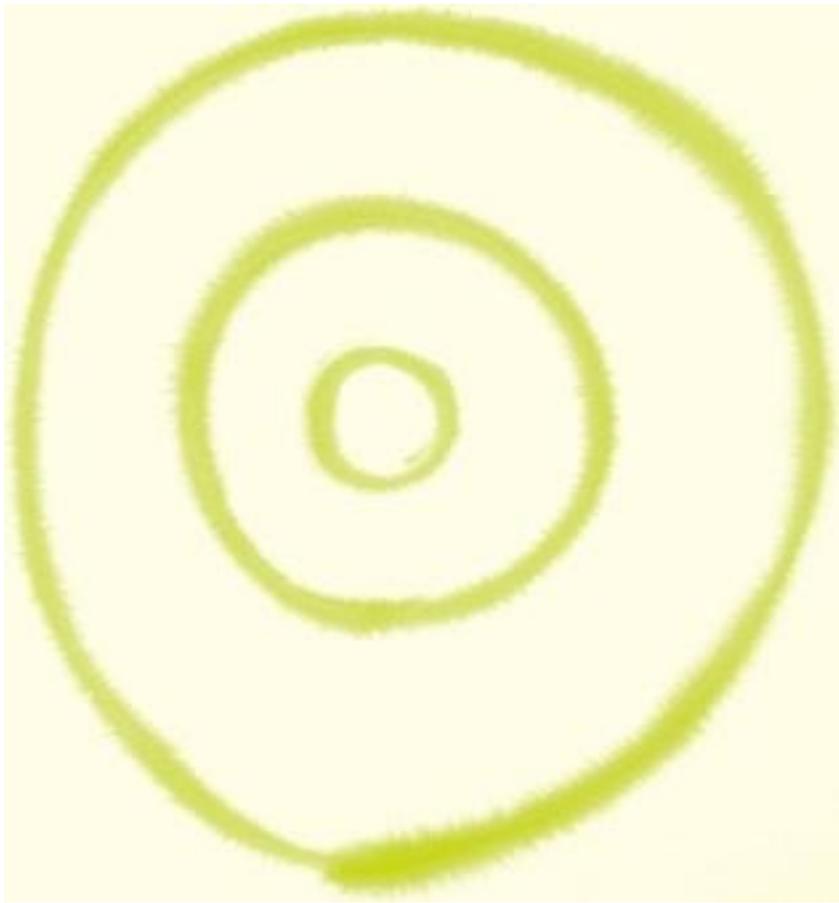
The whole notion of Eros or passion is linked to unrequited love. In the early days of love the body generates juicy hormones to help us pair-bond. Over time these wear off and boredom sets in as we take each other for granted.

Jealousy brings back the insecurity and, in that delicate place, lust is reborn.

Like using a dash of chilli, just see how good the sex tastes after a pinch of the green-eyed monster.

'Doesn't matter where you get your appetite as long as you eat at home.'

– Old saying



karma

Mystics believe in the law of three-fold karma.

Which means that everything we do or wish on others is going to come back to us manyfold.

Good deeds return in abundance. So too if we kill a creature or steal someone's beloved, will we have the experience returned to us by the Universe at some stage of our journey.

Which is always good to know in the scheme of things.

The gift of Karma is that it does help limit the excesses of human behaviour. It's a positive path for those who can't find meaning in the Ten Commandments. And it reinforces the most important of all ethical codes, the grand Mummy and Daddy of them all: 'Harm none!'

'As you sow so shall you reap.'

– The Old Testament

letting go

Every time my little one leaves the house, I worry. It is hard as mothers, fathers, lovers and carers to let go of those we love.

We feel the pain of holding on too tightly in our chests and in our arthritic fingers as we try to keep things as they are, try to clasp at life and never let anything go.

It's our way in the west, this greediness, this neediness.

Then as we get older and watch things we love vanish – our youth, health, loved ones – we can only grieve and fear, grieve and fear.

In the east they have another way. Buddhists try to accept the gradual divestment of all things until they are attached to nothing, need nothing.

Everything will end. Nothing stays the same. To lie in bed at night and fear loss is futile. To allow things to slip from our grasp graciously is the kindest way forward.



limitations

I cannot make sandwiches: the knife doesn't cut straight, slices go from half-an-inch at the top to three inches at the bottom, the tomato ends up in huge, ungainly lumps and there is food everywhere when I'm finished.

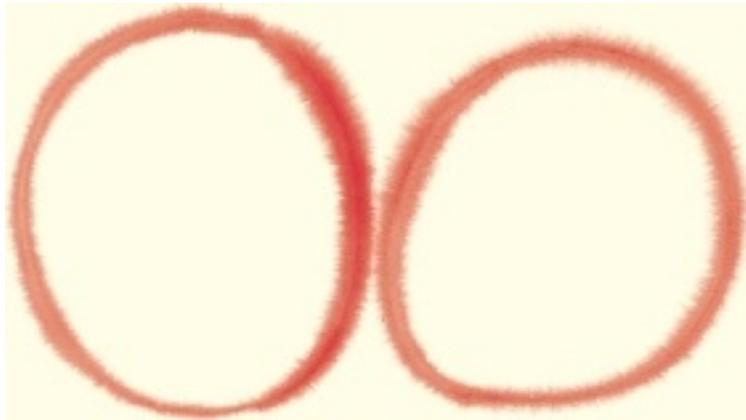
No matter how hard I try to do it 'properly', I make a big mess. All my life I've beaten myself up for not being more coordinated, more tidy, more aesthetic or organised – talents other people seem to take for granted.

I have chided myself for the messy state of my hair, handbag, kitchen. But as I mature, I'm learning the truth.

The messiness of my life reflects the messiness of my mind – a mind that is not literal and meticulous, but rather open, conceptual, without boundaries.

A mind that allows me the freedom to think outside the box and challenge convention, a mind that has brought me to this point.

Our weaknesses are our blessings. Because the very things that limit us in one area of life prove to be our greatest gifts in another.



love

There are those who say that only two real emotions exist at either end of the spectrum, love and fear, and that all others spring from them.

True or not, the gift of love is that it is a powerful antidote against negative forces: it can quell fear, harness hatred, tame anger and inoculate us against all the poisons of the heart.

There are many things to be learned from the shadow traits in this book, but when we have had our fill, it's good to know that we can open the gates and let in this dear friend.

madness

Our breakdowns are often our breakthroughs.

Our maddest times can be times of great visionary genius and high imagination, where we can see with the most penetrating lucidity and insight.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell talks about a dropping down into Self that comes from being incapacitated – either physically or mentally. He describes mental illness as akin to the hero's journey into the Underworld, where the warrior battles demons, monsters, sheds layers of identity and dies unto himself before emerging with great clarity into the light.

*'Privation and suffering alone open
the mind of a man to all that is hidden*

...'

– Eskimo shaman

mundanity

Picking the nits from children's hair, washing clothes, doing the shopping – these are the traditional symbols of personal oppression.

Yet there is sacredness in the everyday.

Cinderella, the heroine of folklore, finds her true power and worth only once she has spent time doing menial tasks, as does the mythological Psyche in sorting the grain to win Eros' love.

Sorting the seeds forces us to be truly present for ourselves and those around, and is considered a transformative religious experience by all spiritual masters.

**'Earth's crammed with heaven; and every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.'**

– Elizabeth Barrett Browning

naughtiness

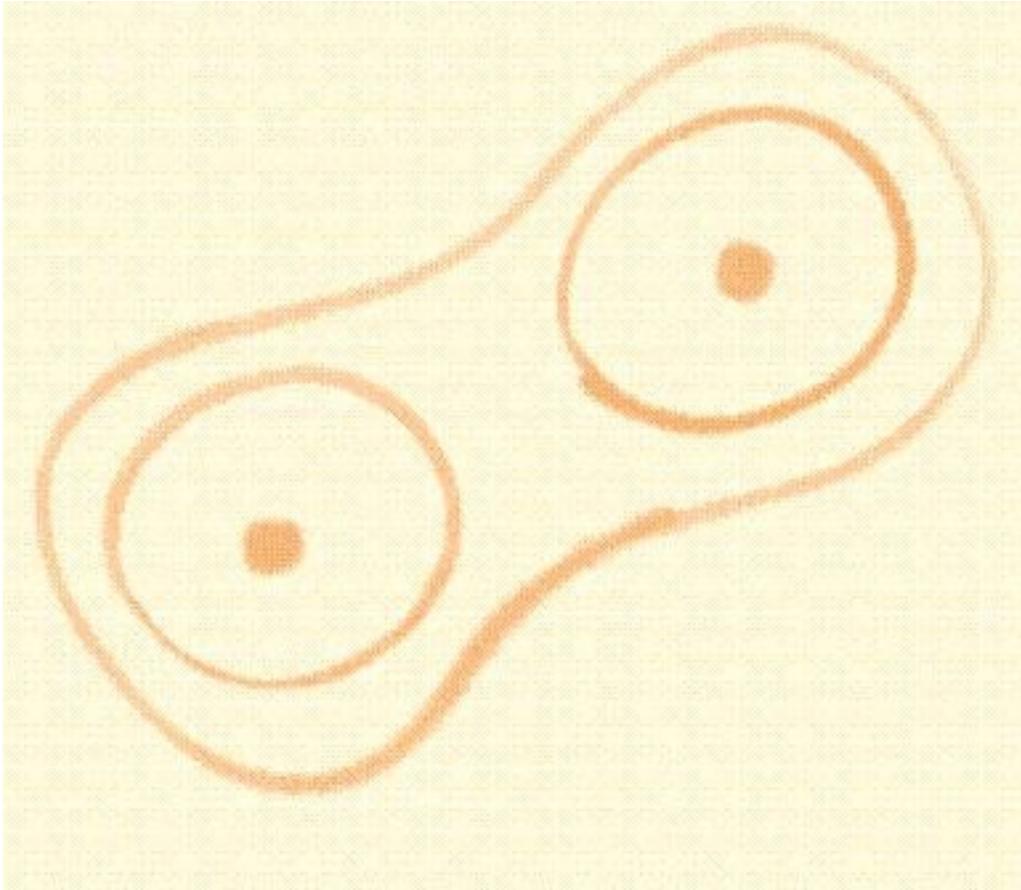
My daughter came to me the other day smothered in chocolate.

Though she denied eating lollies, I discovered a packet buried in her school bag.

I told her she was naughty.

And suddenly she turned and said, 'But Mum, I am *supposed* to be naughty! That's what little kids do!'

I burst into laughter.



The gift of naughty children is that they remind us to be naughty adults and teenagers too sometimes:

to break the rules to savour the wickedness to disobey and forge our own way as free spirits.

To stay mischievous and not to be too obedient, too nice, too tame.

no

We are terrified of letting people down, even at the expense of our own souls, even at the expense of our health. We often suckle those we love from an empty breast rather than deny them nourishment, only to find ourselves savagely depleted and unable to then do and give the things we want to.

There is so much guilt around the word No and its kissing-cousin Should. So much fear, shame and sense of obligation.

And yet No is the word of liberation and release.

*Say 'No' and feel the tension drop
from your shoulders.*

obstacles

I once reported on an experiment that revealed earthworms in captivity thrived best on rough and hilly surfaces.

The experiment was repeated on cattle, who seemed to love the challenge of a difficult terrain.

Buddhists pray for obstacles, believing that humans blossom when they are extended beyond their capacities and pushed out of their comfort zones.

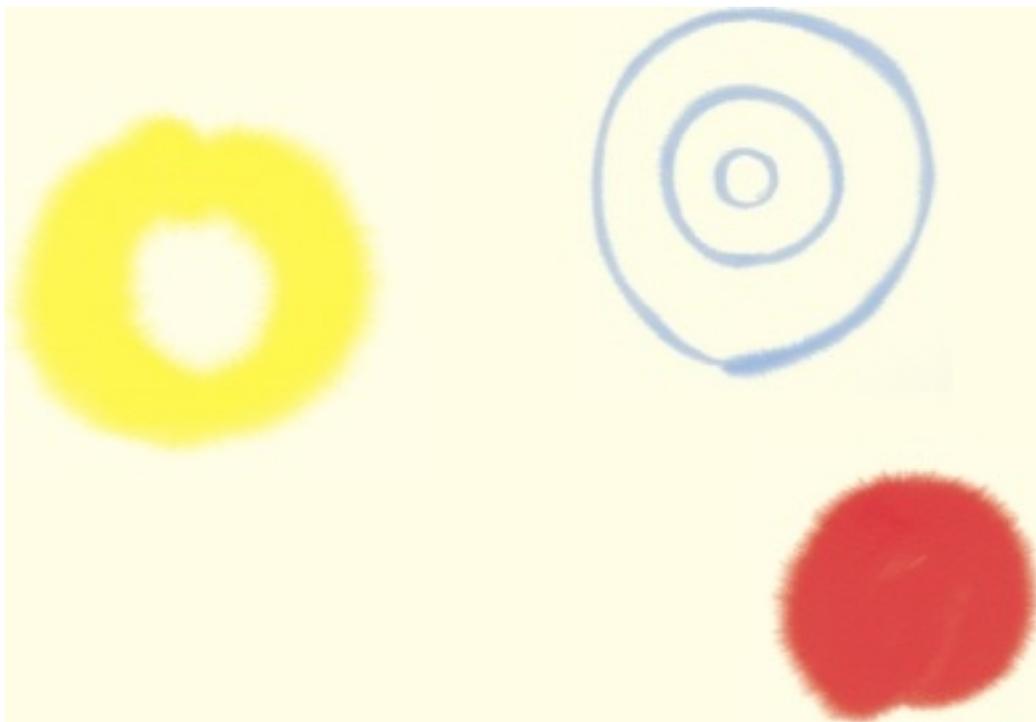
Since most spiritual masters believe that growth, not happiness, is the point of existence, our challenges become important gifts.

‘The dark thought, the shame, the malice; meet them at the door laughing and invite them in; Be grateful for whatever comes; because each has been sent; as a guide from beyond.’

– Jelaluddin Rumi, *The Guest House* (translation by Coleman Barks)

orgasms

There are not just sexual orgasms but many things that make us explode in euphoria. Things that make our hearts pump, flush our systems with oxygen and fresh blood, unblock stagnant energy and keep us thriving:



Gourm-gasms of the tongue when we taste something gourmet that makes our tastebuds climax, ear-gasms on hearing exquisite music, eye-gasms on seeing beauty, laugh-gasms, itch-gasms, dance-gasms, as our bodies move in erotic exotic rhythm with our heartbeat.

We should never deny ourselves orgasms of any kind.

Ever.



pain

I recently met a man who suffered from chronic tinnitus. Every moment of his life was torture due to a loud piercing noise in his ear. The pain was making him desperate; at times he wanted to end it all.

Instead he started searching for ways to make life tolerable. He began meditating and became more involved in spiritual life, which helped him find meaning.

Now he is a full-time spiritual teacher and healer, travelling the world and writing books. The ringing in his head hasn't stopped, it's just that the outside noise has become louder.

'My pain has been the greatest gift of my life. It has helped me discover my Dharma or life purpose.'

– Spiritual healer

There are many pains we must endure – of the heart, the body, the soul. Some are chronic, some are fast and furious, others are haunting, like the omnipresent melancholia of depression. It's always hard to

understand why we must suffer. But for one man at least his curse was his blessing.

passion

Passion is at the heart of all that is birthed from our loins – great civilisations and religious ideas, great works of art and music, not to mention life itself.

Yet we are forever silenced and repressed in this society by the passion police.

Our culture doesn't encourage open or loud expressions of:

love, excitement, sexuality, crying, euphoria or anger.

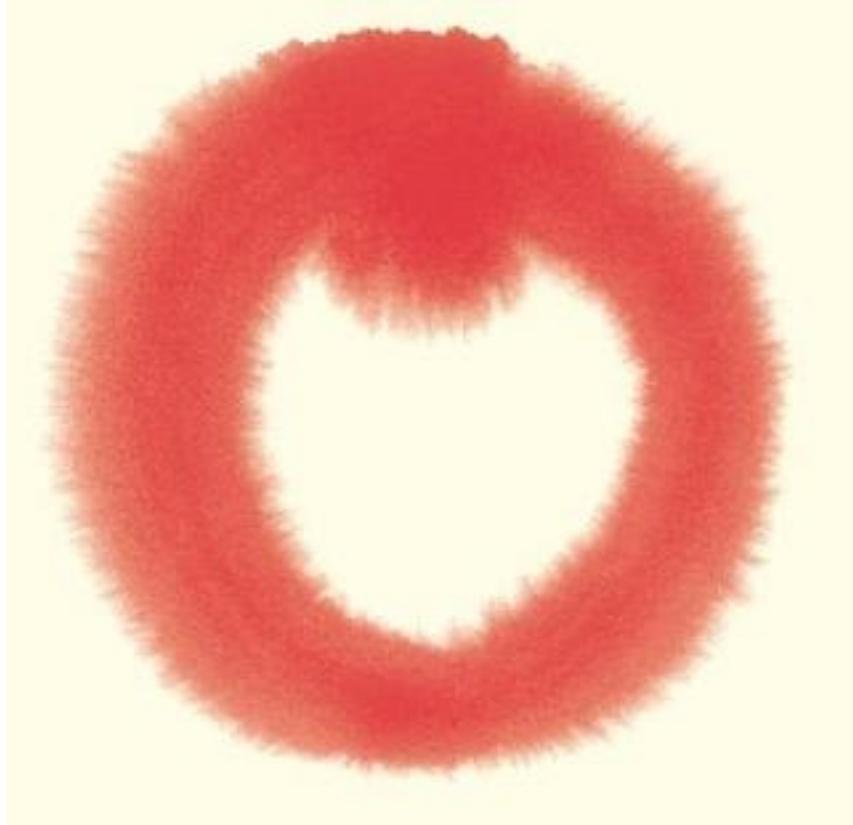
'Sadness and passion do not equal anti-depressants. There is no truth that people should always control themselves or that strong emotions equal madness.'

– Mal McKissock, grief counsellor and author

We are encouraged to pop pills as a way of treating normal emotions, which in turn blocks the natural flow

of life-force.

When we kill the passion, we kill the essence of our creative souls.



patience

I was recently held captive by a traffic cop at a road block and was ready to have a bout of road rage when I decided to stop obsessing about getting to where I needed to be, and enjoy.

I have come to see that journeying is often far more fascinating than arriving, something we overlook in this outcome-orientated, instant-gratification world.

Having embraced my fate, I turned on the radio.

A favourite Beatles song came on, one I had not heard in years. I immediately went into bliss.



Waiting is never easy but when we accept delays on the

path of life, we can discover many wonderful things we weren't expecting.

And we get to savour the anticipation of it all, allowing our appetites to be whetted by slow simmer.

'There's plenty to be said for pleasure delayed.'

– A friend

'Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.'

– John Lennon

play

Not just for children, but for all of us.

The ancients believed we have many different sub-personalities living within us, rather than one unified Self. I agree that in each of us there exists not only a responsible adult, or good parent, or a hard worker, but also

an impish kid

a trickster

a romantic

some sort of play creature who needs to play ‘dress-ups’ and be given voice.

Play releases that side of us, gives us a giggle bath, keeps us sensual and in our bodies, helps us not take ourselves and others too seriously, and keeps us young, creative and potent.

pleasure

Taoists and practitioners of Tantra believe that pleasure, not abstinence, is the key to Divinity.

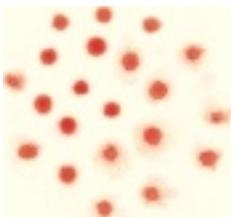
Pleasure is the vehicle that will take us to the higher spiritual realms.

As we accept our humanness in all its facets, including a total embracing of our sexuality, erotic soul and bodily bliss, we open ourselves to the power of God, Goddess.

Some esoteric rituals combine the breath – the ultimate cosmic penetration – with movement, in order to unlock energy in the spine. The resulting euphoria is a pathway to what we call Heaven.

'We cannot become butterflies until we have lived as caterpillars.'

– Tantric saying



pride

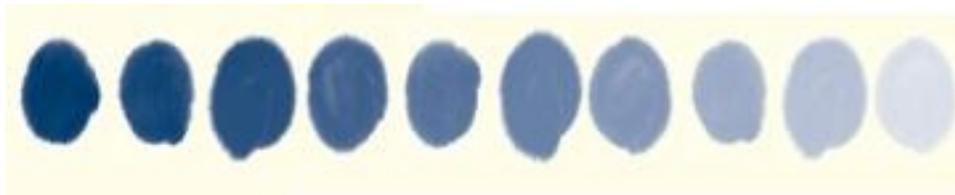
They say those with pride have little or no humility.
They say pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

I see it another way.

Pride in ourselves is an act of gratitude.

If we don't appreciate ourselves, love ourselves, we cannot appreciate others. The Bible says we are made in God's image. So too, do shamanic and indigenous Earth-based religions believe that the human body and soul are the embodiment of Nature and thus of Divine inspiration.

Therefore we have great cause for pride.



procrastination

During times of intense procrastination – usually when deadlines loom – I’ve become enormously industrious and creative in unrelated fields.

With the tax due I’ve written great poetry; with poems due I’ve cleaned out entire wardrobes.

Once I wrote a whole book because another was due for delivery. Putting off until tomorrow what we are supposed to do today is the gift of allowing for spontaneous and wanton acts of productivity.

quiet

There are many silent retreats on offer nowadays as part of the eastern lineage of spiritual training.

For good reason.

In silence and quiet we discover parts of ourselves that are far deeper than language can ever express.

We stop needing the reassurance of others who mirror us, we stop being distracted and seduced by the emotionality of words.

When we still the lips and mind we find succour in the gentle lessons that come to consciousness.

We revel in the beautiful sound of birds and life teeming around us.

Silence is the language of Source, which is comforting for those brave enough to listen.

*‘The soul lives
there in the
silent breath.’*

– Rumi

risk

I was told by an avid mountain climber that there is a saying he and his friends live by. It concerns the moment when the climber is clinging to the rock face in relative safety. In order to move to the next level, the climber has to pull out the peg he has implanted in the rock and re-implant it. Sometimes he freezes.

Overwhelmed by terror, he finds himself unable to take the terrifying risk he knows he must take. In these circumstances if he doesn't take the risk he will end up frozen to death, or starved to death. In short, he must move forward.

I use this metaphor often in life.

Without the gift of risk we remain stuck in an illusory comfort zone, and we never get to relish the full and rapturous vista around us.

'Cut loose or die.'

– Mountain climbing adage

sickness

Indigenous cultures like Native Americans consider illness the supreme teacher.

Only once someone has had a close and intimate brush with sickness or death can they emerge as a healer of the tribe, having entered the dark recesses of the psyche and met with those powerful forces that guide the human spirit.

My own doctor believes sickness is a time of great transition and wisdom getting. He says that during times of illness or 'dis-ease' we release toxins from our bodies, as much at an emotional level as at a physical level.

Sickness sensitises us to the suffering of others. In times of infirmity, we get to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, which is perhaps one of the reasons why great healers are born of physical suffering.

Sickness is a time of profound spiritual healing.

sloth

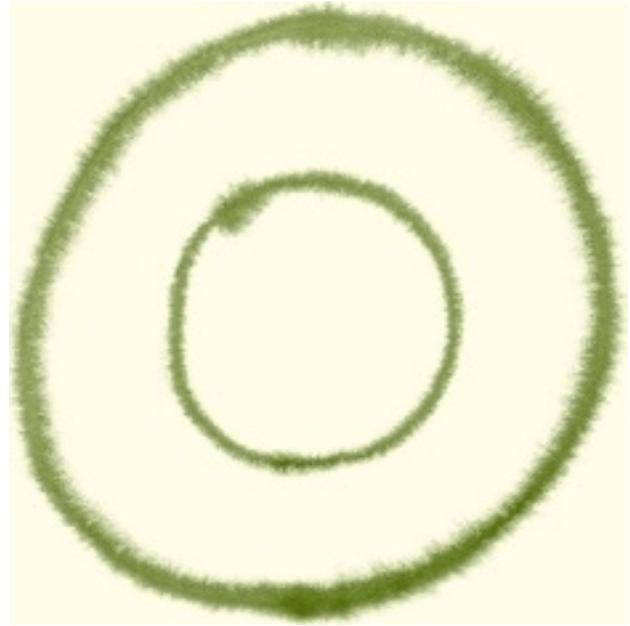
Sloth is the gift of sensuality. We are trained to feel badly about ourselves when we are slothful, and lazing around doing no-thing.

Yet, just look at
a cat basking in the sun
or a snake
or lizard on a warm rock
or a hippo wallowing in the mud.

Watch them stretch, curl, unfurl ... and feel the luxurious, luscious pleasure of lying about, and the utterly delicious relief of letting go.



snakes



A metaphor for gifts that hide in the long grass.

When I first moved to my rural property I became quite phobic about snakes, bats, spiders, bush rats and other creepy crawlies.

One day a deadly black snake slithered up my garden path.

I called the snake man to come and kill it.

‘I am here to rescue it, not kill it,’ he told me in contempt. ‘Black snakes eat the deadlier brown snakes. If it weren’t for this snake there would be more brown ones. And without the brown snakes, there would be

other predators less shy and eager to slither away.’
There is a natural order to things, says the snake man.

spice

In the east, they rely on many flavours:

sweet

sour

bitter

salty

to feel happy, balanced and in harmony.

In the west we have become overdosed on sweetness.

And it is a metaphor for how we live, as we fast become spiritual diabetics hooked on a sugary Happy Ever After.

We have lost our natural taste for spice and chilli, for bitter herbs and sour tangs and raw things. The gift of spice arouses the palate and soul.

suffering

Death awakens.

Fear enlivens.

Vulnerability sensitises.

Jealousy stimulates.

Pain purifies.

Storm clarifies.

Envy arouses.

Suffering cracks us open, then makes us whole.

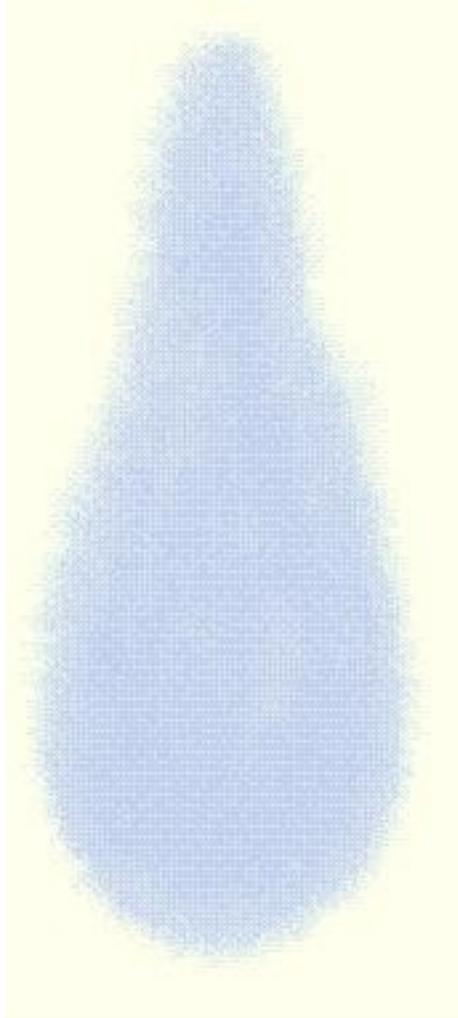
Shamans, tribal peoples and ancient care-takers of the planet understand.

There is no shame in that which sears our landscape or our souls. Aboriginal peoples understand the cleansing and revitalising power of fire. Wise women, daughters of Mother Earth, know the healing and alchemical powers of tempests and tears.

In Nature there is light and dark, day and night, yin and yang.

There is no bad or good, just opposites keeping each

other in balance.



tears

Though we often feel humiliated when we cry, latest research shows that crying releases opiates into the tear ducts that are essential to healing.

So too when we scream in pain or fear do we notify the body to produce its magical balms.

Our emotions are Nature's way of helping us cope.

Crying is a salve we can put on our aching souls.

touch

Touching, kissing and hugging are things we are trained to do only with intimates. Yet in a recent workshop I attended, we discovered that by holding people, touching them, gazing into their eyes and allowing ourselves to pretend we loved them, we actually started to fall in love with them.

Our feelings sprung from a deep gratitude.

Humans so crave to touch and be touched, to hold and be held, that we develop a sort of *skin hunger*. When our hunger is satiated we produce a rush of nurturing hormones that mimic the bonding between mother and child.

The result is the most intoxicating feelings of love.

Energy goes where attention is.

Thus Biology rewards us for doing what we should be doing more of: holding each other close.

‘Learning to live with uncertainty is the greatest gift we can have.’

– Successful business identity

uncertainty

There is a parable about an old farmer. Each time something bad happened the farmer would reply to his wailing friends, ‘Let’s wait and see’ and his fortunes would indeed change.

Each time something good would happen he would reply to his excited friends, ‘Let’s wait and see’ and his fortunes would indeed change.

And so the story goes, indefinitely.

Nothing stays the same, good and bad times come to an end.

Seers say that those who can live with uncertainty remain the happiest.

vulnerability

I have always been frightened of feeling vulnerable.

Like many people, I've spent my life running too fast in order to stay one step ahead of an imaginary tidal wave that I thought would come crashing down and annihilate me if I stopped.

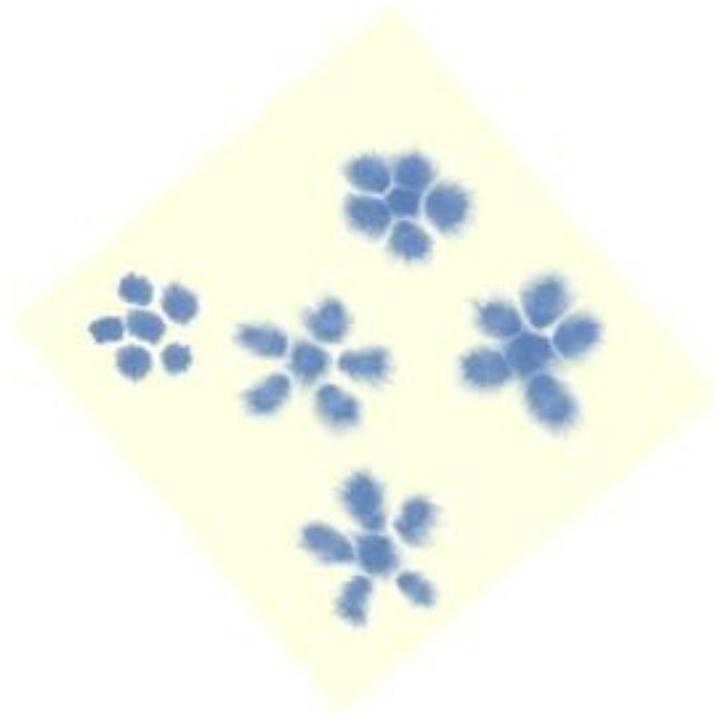
One day I did stop. The wave came down, but I didn't drown or die.

I felt small and mortal and human. I cried a lot.

And in this state of trust and acceptance, I felt more alive than I had my whole life.

When we stop trying to impose our will on everything and everybody, and allow the Universe to come flooding in with its abundance and flow, we enter a state of Grace.

Our times of fragility can thus become our times of truest strength.



winter

A time of rest and reflection. We put pressure on ourselves when we're not being productive, or when we are in a dark, icy, introverted place.

But every year has its winter, a fallow time of rest. A time for hibernation, when we go into a metaphorical cave to gather strength for germination – the creative spring – that is to follow.

In emotional or artistic terms, winter is the time of letting ideas percolate and grow. Of accepting the symbolic storms that wash the earth clean, and the cold

winds that blow away stagnation.

x-rated

The notion of werewolf and vampire comes from a mythological acknowledgement of the inner wolf and inner bat, half-human half-beast, the untamed and primitive, x-rated parts of ourselves that yearn to be set free.

For we cannot repress our instinctual drives, our desires and our demons, without killing-off our very souls.

Carl Jung coined the term ‘the shadow’ to capture the aspects of personality that remain dark and socially unacceptable but crucial to our sense of unity and psychic health.

Only once we've embraced our x-rated souls without judgement – those precious parts of ourselves that lie buried beneath the civilised veneer – can we taste the gift of true wholeness and true freedom.

yearning

Buddhists believe that desire, yearning and craving cause suffering.

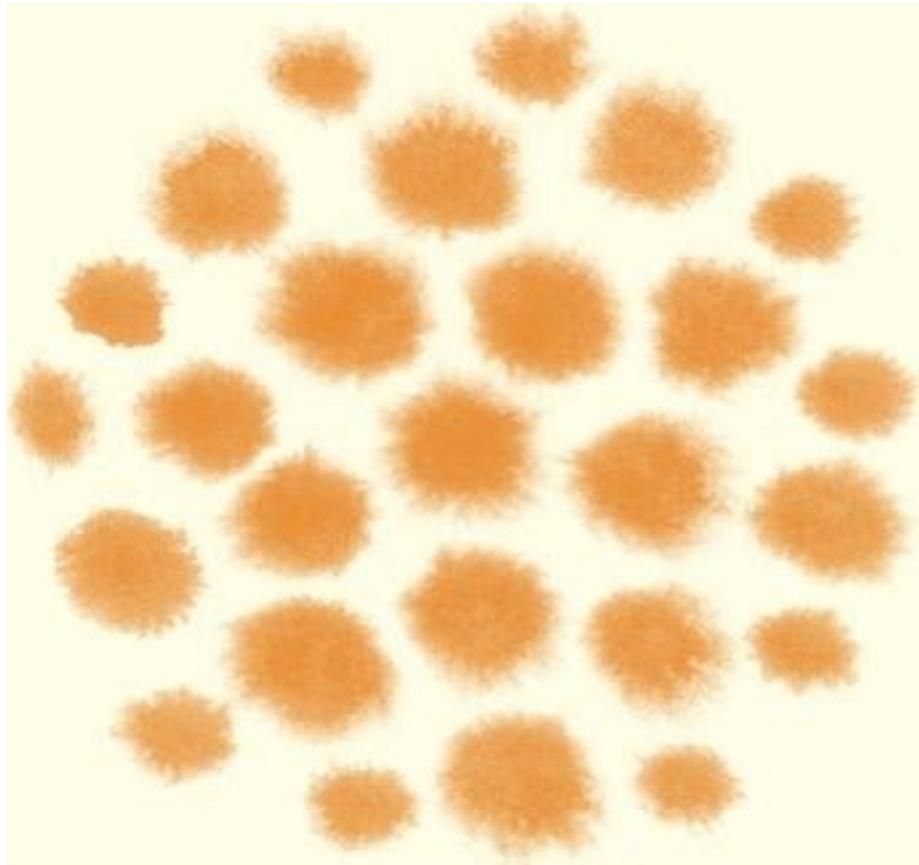
That the art of life is to practise emptiness and non-attachment.

I am not yet ready to let go of my humanness in this lifetime.

I choose to yearn and therefore, inevitably, to suffer. For yearning is the essence of humanness and the gift of self-discovery.

'We shall not cease from exploration; And the end of all our exploring; Will be to arrive where we started; And know the place for the first time.'

– T.S. Eliot



zen

Simple. The gift of Zen is simplifying.

Pruning back. Accepting that less is more.

It is being in the moment, day by day.

No expectations.

No tomorrow.

No yesterday.

Everything as it is right now.

The past has gone.

Tomorrow will teach us how to deal with what She dishes up ... if She ever arrives.

The Present, the Now, is the real present buried under the gift-wrap of life.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my good friend Lynda Dean, who helped me to pull this book together but, more importantly, whose endless ability to see value in adversity has deeply inspired me; my agent Mary Cunnane for believing in me for so long; editors Foong Ling Kong and Alexandra Payne, and the lovely people at Hardie Grant; my editors at The Australian and News Limited; my PA and soul sister Fay Goodchild, a great source of encouragement; my treasured friends and family for the stories, love and passion they so generously share with me; my soulmate Morris Kaplan, always there.

Thanks also to those people whose ideas and words of wisdom have contributed firstly to *Sacred & Naked* and thereafter to this book, including my daughter Naomi, sisters, family and friends especially Vanessa Gorman (*Losing Layla*); Jean Houston (*The Hero and the Goddess*), Harriet G. Lerner (*The Dance of Anger*), Alexandra Pope (*The Wild Genie*), John Lennon, Tenzin Palmo (*Cave in the Snow*), Mal McKissock, Dr Marta Frid, Joseph Campbell (*Myths to Live By*), Bubula Lardi, Carl Jung, Laibl Wolf (*Practical Kabbalah*), T.S. Eliot (*Little Gidding*), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (*Aurora Leigh*), Jelaluddin Rumi and translator Coleman Barks (*The Guest House*), all the shamans, gurus and spiritualists whose profound insights I've drawn on, and

finally my own 'wise-woman' matri-lineage: my mum
and grandmothers.