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NURTURING the SOUL of YOUR FAMILY

10 Ways to Reconnect and
Find Peace in Everyday Life

author of *The Mother's Guide to Self-Renewal*

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Chapter 2

PEACE BEGINS with ME: A JOURNEY to WHOLENESS

During my twenties and throughout much of my thirties, my internal dialogue went like this: “Relationships are hard, and I don’t really have any great models for how to be in a relationship, so I’ll probably never be very successful.” My parents divorced at age forty-eight after twenty-six years of marriage and seven kids together. Both sets of grandparents went through divorces, my brother divorced after fourteen years of marriage, and I’ve had good friends in long-term marriages that ended in divorce.

Can you relate?

A few years ago my husband and I visited Big Sur, California, to celebrate our tenth wedding anniversary. During our vacation, I realized how much I had changed in the past ten years — regarding how I view my husband, myself, and our partnership. For instance, one morning while hiking down a quiet sandy trail that led to the ocean, I asked my husband some big “life questions.” He paused for a while and responded thoughtfully. Then I waited to see if he’d reciprocate and ask me the same questions.

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He didn't. And I was fine. Actually, more than fine.

Ten years ago, I would have been irritated, hurt, and possibly angry for hours at his “insensitivity.” I would have perceived this as a barrier to our emotional intimacy! Today, after a lot of inner exploration, I've come to understand three things that changed how I viewed this experience: First, my beloved is an introvert. His internal world is vast and rich, and he needs time and space to digest introspective questions. Second, he and I don't need to talk or discuss every topic to enjoy intimacy. Often our most intimate moments are found in silence. But most of all, I no longer need my husband to make me feel complete or whole. I know who I am. I am in touch with my needs. If something is important to me, I can bring it up and explore it with him, and he's always receptive to listening.

I felt giddy at this realization, and we finished our walk to the waves in silence. Later, I also shared this epiphany with him. Of course, at first he felt horrible for not reciprocating my questions, until I explained that I was mentioning it, not because I was upset, but only to share the important things I'd realized about myself.

UPON ARRIVAL, PROCEED to BAGGAGE CLAIM

Relationships of all types can be challenging. In particular, family members, partners, and children often develop a sixth sense for how to push our buttons. For myself, to become less reactive, I've had to slowly become more self-aware, compassionate, loving toward myself, and attuned to my needs — which has made me a much more emotionally present parent and partner.

Some of the keys are to show up in our relationships with a soft and open heart, a healthy perspective, and a full cup rather than a half-empty one. Before we can do that, however, we have to examine ourselves: we have to release and heal old self-limiting beliefs by understanding what we're holding on to and why.

We all have emotional baggage. Ever heard the phrase “the issues are in the tissues”? Our beliefs, scars, and old patterns from our family lineage, childhood, culture, education, and birth order all significantly affect our

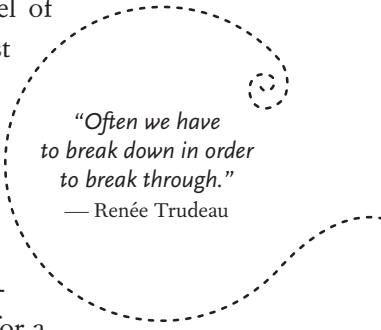
worldview and habitual ways of being. These, in turn, guide how we show up and relate to our family members.

Some days we get easily triggered. Maybe our child not putting their dirty clothes in the laundry room sends us over the edge, while other days they could break the front door and we'd just roll with it. Our state of being has the most impact on how we respond to external circumstances. Some days we receive the gift of observing when we're stuck in an old pattern or way of seeing things, and other times we just feel stuck, or else constantly critical or judgmental, thinking of our partner or children: "If they'd just listen to me, we'd all be happier!"

When this happens, look inward to see if you have any unclaimed baggage. For instance, when my son, Jonah, was about to turn ten, he and I went through a really difficult patch. He's a beautiful, passionate, mature, intense kid, and as he reached adolescence, his level of defiance at times overwhelmed me. A simple request to finish homework or put his dirty dishes in the sink could invoke an emotional tsunami. Since I have a tendency to be controlling, our interactions were a Molotov cocktail.

After a particularly hard stretch involving lots of crying jags (mostly mine), I called Terri, a parent educator, and asked if my husband and I could see her for a session. I was exhausted from the stressful interchanges and needed help. After I explained our situation, Terri turned to me and gently shared, "You are going through mourning — Jonah is no longer a child. He's an adolescent." Terri went on to highlight some of the science around early-adolescent behavior and how best to support my son; in short, offer love and acceptance, not solutions and tips for improvement. After that illuminating session, things got much easier in our home — not yellow-brick-road happy, but the crying and yelling diminished greatly.

In part, the improvement occurred because my husband and I tweaked our language and gave Jonah more freedom, but mostly things changed because my husband and I shifted ourselves internally. We realized we were holding unrealistic, supersized fears that were causing us to be overly critical; our heads had become filled with visions of our out-of-control nine-year-old



*"Often we have
to break down in order
to break through."*

— Renée Trudeau

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turning into a sixteen-year-old heroin addict. We were “parenting from the future” and from our own fears and wounds, rather than from the present moment, which was what our son most needed. This aha moment and shift in our awareness are what created the big shift in our family dynamic that we needed. Often we have to break down in order to break through.

HEALING IS a PROCESS, NOT an EVENT

My dad’s favorite song growing up — which he’d sing loudly, much to our embarrassment, when we attended Mass or when he was out working in the yard — was “Let There Be Peace on Earth.” The song continues “...and let it begin with me.”

As I look back at my upbringing and the many spiritual traditions we were introduced to, it’s clear my parents strove to realize this. They were doing their best to contribute to a peaceful community by working to create peace within their own hearts through practices such as meditation and prayer. I believe that, more than anything, they desired to teach us how to seek out and find this peace within ourselves. I watched them struggle with their emotional wounds, with little support and without taking time for themselves, while juggling the demands of parenting seven kids. *Peace* was not the word that defined our household, and yet I have never forgotten my parents’ persistent efforts to create peace. Healing is an ongoing process that continues, in some form or fashion, throughout our entire lives.

One Saturday, I led a self-renewal workshop for moms at a teen girls’ conference. We were exploring self-care and identifying doorways for self-nurturing and nourishment, and at the end of our session, I gave each woman a juicy clementine orange. I invited them to close their eyes and “fill” the orange with whatever they most needed in that moment — emotional support, the ability to say no, self-acceptance, courage, clear boundaries, and so on. After this reflective meditation, I asked them to slowly smell, peel, and mindfully eat their orange — which now symbolized the act of fully “receiving” the qualities they had just imbued it with.

After the exercise, the moms — who were mostly single, working women juggling way too many obligations — shared how difficult it was to

slow down and become present and attuned to their needs. Christy, whose son has Down syndrome, said, “It felt foreign and kind of scary. I just never take time to get in touch with what’s going on inside of me.” Marion, a single mom to three teenagers, confessed she was afraid to slow down because she was worried that if she allowed herself to “feel her feelings,” she might never recover or be able to return to her typical zero-to-ninety pace. Can’t we all relate to this at one time or another?

When the workshop ended, almost all the women asked for extra oranges to bring home to their teenage daughters, so they could repeat the exercise with them. I happily obliged.

AN EXPLORATION: HEALING from the INSIDE OUT

What do you need to heal? In the following journaling exercise, write responses to the following questions, and give yourself permission to really tap into what you need. Find a comfortable, cozy space and make sure you have at least an hour of uninterrupted quiet time. If you have a history of emotional or physical abuse, be extra gentle with yourself. If a question stumps you or causes you too much discomfort, skip it and come back to it later or disregard it completely. Then, take time afterward to share your responses with a trusted friend, mentor, family member, or therapist.

- What issue or relationship do I most need to focus on healing right now? Consider writing (but not sending) a letter to your mom or dad about your childhood: What would you most want them to know? How would it feel to write your parents a letter of forgiveness for their shortcomings?
- What did I need to get from my family that I never received? How can I give that to myself now?
- Have I talked to my siblings about our family growing up? What insight might they be able to offer about our family dynamic?
- Who are possible mentors, therapists, or ministers I can go to for a heart-to-heart? Who in my life allows me to be vulnerable and show up “warts and all”?

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- If I could tell my parents about my family and what's important to me, what would I most want them to know?
- What do I most need from my family members that is essential to my emotional well-being?
- Am I ready to do the work to heal? Do I believe I deserve to have a joyful, connected family experience?
- What am I ready to release that's no longer serving me?
- What old wounds or blocks are keeping me from being the parent and partner I desire to be? What feelings am I not allowing myself to fully feel?
- What action am I being guided to take right now to begin my healing journey?

As you write, periodically take some deep breaths and make sure you are fully present in your body. To help find emotional balance, I highly recommend learning the Emotional Freedom Technique (www.eftuniverse.com), a wonderful acupressure-based tool for calming the emotions, which we use often in our home. One simple method is to vigorously tap your thymus gland — which supports rebalancing and stress reduction — located in the center of our chest.

Through this process of self-inquiry, we become more self-aware and develop a deeper understanding of why we do what we do. Then, as our inner state shifts and expands, our outer world begins to look different — often becoming a reflection of the healing work we've done.

Are you ready to unzip the old, bulky space suit you're wearing and fully step into a new way of being? Are you open to releasing the antiquated patterns, habits, thoughts, and ways of seeing things that no longer serve you? This is healing from the inside out.

Years ago I attended a mindfulness retreat at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health where I was challenged to explore my old thinking, particularly about relationships. I was feeling restless and disconnected from my partner, and if asked, I could instantly come up with a nice list of things my husband “needed” to do better to enhance our emotional intimacy! On the first day of the retreat, I was paired with Elena, a French Canadian woman who was

contemplating divorce. Together, we spent the better part of three days challenging our beliefs about our relationships.

On the last day, a veil lifted. While lounging with Elena on the lawn outside the retreat center, I had an epiphany: What if I was in the ideal relationship — actually my dream relationship? What if my partner was completely available for the level of emotional intimacy that I desired, but because of my stories — my clunky, outdated thinking and my own clouded lens — I just wasn't able to see what was there all along? The door to his heart opened every time I was near, but my criticisms and judgments about how things "should be" slammed it shut before we even had a chance to connect on a deeper level.

My return from that retreat marked the beginning of a major shift in how my husband and I related. I began to question the stories I had created and how I view — and show up in — all my key relationships. Healing from the inside out is an evolutionary process.

FAMILY: AN INCUBATOR for PERSONAL GROWTH

I am nineteen years old and a sophomore in college. I am home and having lunch with my dad at a local cafeteria. My parents have separated after twenty-six years together. They are on the rocks and headed toward divorce. Feeling wounded and working on his own healing, my dad is doing all he can to keep his head above water.

However, I plead with him to give my mom a break and take the kids for a while. Five of my siblings, from age five to sixteen, are still at home, and I don't think she has it in her to care for them. I have been having nightmares about my siblings floating in outer space alone. In one recurring dream, I am on my hands and knees combing through a green shag rug for small penny-sized plastic babies that have been placed in my care, but I am unable to locate them.

Yet my dad is in no place to take my siblings, and two years later — after tremendous emotional turbulence and a custody battle — my parents divorce. Afterward, my siblings only see my dad on the weekends.

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Those years leading up to and immediately following my parents' divorce were some of the rockiest our family ever experienced. It was a time of intense learning and growth for me, and in hindsight, as difficult and painful as it was, it provided a truly perfect training ground for the work I'm doing now. These events held meaning and purpose that I couldn't see or appreciate at the time.

Family is sacred. It's a spiritual entity. Some believe, before we are born, we choose our families and actually enter into a sacred agreement to be together. I used to get so mad at my mom when I was young. As a rebellious teen, I'd yell at her, "I hate you. You're so mean. I wish I was in another family." She'd always respond, "Well, your soul chose to come to us!" This always just irritated me more.

What do I believe today? Families are definitely much more than a bunch of people who happen to live together. I believe there is a divine orchestration at play. We're together for a reason. These souls. At this time. In this place. There's no more perfect incubator or hothouse for personal and spiritual growth than one's family.

Our family provides us with many opportunities, such as

- giving and receiving love, including self-love, love for others, and Divine love;
- learning compassion, empathy, and sympathy;
- heightening self-awareness by serving as one another's mirrors, and sometimes flashlights;
- experiencing deep purpose and meaning and exploring what we're really here to do;
- remembering who we really are; and
- experiencing a playground for working through our own issues.

We can't escape our family. Despite how staggeringly scary it may be, the bonds of family endure permanently. As adults, many of us understandably want to run away from our birth family and create new families through



friendships and other support systems, but as my brother Kert always says, “If you think you’re enlightened, go home for Thanksgiving.”

But being in a family also provides us with a chance for healing — for experiencing more love, deepening our capacity to love, and choosing moment to moment to come from love.

CHOOSING LOVE over FEAR

As most great spiritual teachers tell us, we only ever have two choices in how we approach our lives and day-to-day interactions: from fear or from love.

When we come from our hearts, and family relationships are viewed through the eyes of love, we

- trust — and allow those we love to follow their unique path (even if we don’t agree);
- practice acceptance and let go (of homework struggles, of who’s right, and so on);
- listen from our hearts in our interactions and respond in the moment;
- communicate openly and are more receptive and flexible;
- come from a prosperity mindset and see that there is always “enough” time, attention, space, and resources;
- see everyone’s true essence, who they really are, not how they’re acting in the moment; and
- slow down and experience gratitude for all that happens.

When family relationships are viewed through the eyes of fear, we

- try to control, manipulate, and micromanage people and situations, thinking we always know best;
- think things are good only when they’re going “our” way;
- operate from our heads all the time — overthinking and over-managing;
- become reactive and get easily triggered;

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- react negatively and see problems first, instead of acknowledging what's good;
- come from a poverty mindset and feel like there is never enough; and
- punish, judge, and close ourselves off from others.

Reading these lists, who wouldn't want to choose love over fear? We prefer to expand and open rather than contracting, shutting ourselves off from one another and from feeling good. Learning to do so, however, involves cultivating awareness and consciously choosing to come from love moment to moment. This takes time and, for most of us, lots of practice.

Recently, I was challenged to step outside my own habitual reactive behavior. My husband asked me to coach him as he prepared for his upcoming performance review. This is something I used to get paid big bucks to do, so I helped him create a document outlining his accomplishments and major contributions, which he would submit to his boss before their meeting. Then, one night while we were brushing our teeth before bed, he casually mentioned that he had gotten the date wrong and missed the deadline for submitting support materials for his review. My jaw dropped, and an army of accusatory thoughts lined up in my mind; I barely managed to stop myself from unleashing a rapid-fire interrogation.

Then the next day I experienced a series of stressful setbacks — a schedule glitch, a miscommunication, a technical malfunction, a lost check, a plan that fell to pieces — and suddenly everything felt like it was going from bad to worse. I was trying to wrap up an intense week filled with lots of deadlines before leaving town on a family beach vacation, yet my swirling negative thoughts were preparing to morph from a small dust devil into a powerful full-scale tornado that would ruin the family getaway for everyone.

But something surprising happened. After stewing for a few minutes on all that had gone wrong, I paused, which has been one of the many benefits I've received from a regular morning meditation practice. Within that pause, I recognized this familiar emotional terrain — how my body was now constricting and tightening. I asked myself, "Do you really want to succumb to this downward spiral of negative thoughts? Is this *really* where you want to go and who you want to be?" Of course, it wasn't. I wanted to be open,

loving, and compassionate. What I really wanted was to just let go of all my negative reactions. And so I did.

Actor Larry Eisenberg reminds us, “For peace of mind, resign as general manager of the universe.”

Not every situation ends this successfully. Sometimes the allure of a good argument takes me down an old worn path. But increasingly, I’m learning to pause, check in with myself, and make sure I like the destination this particular train is headed. If I don’t, I wave it on, let it keep going, and consciously choose to return to my river of well-being within.

A SHIFT in PERSPECTIVE

My first therapist used to constantly remind me, “Don’t believe everything you think.”

Author and spiritual teacher Byron Katie tells a great story in her book *Loving What Is* about an experience she had at a busy airport restroom. She waited in line, and finally a woman emerged from the stall nearest where she was standing. Katie walked in and was immediately irritated to see the seat was completely wet! How inconsiderate and thoughtless of that woman, she said to herself. After Katie cleaned up the seat and was done, she flushed the toilet, but as she unhooked the latch to leave, she noticed water from the commode had backfired and completely sprayed the entire toilet seat!

Katie likes to say, “We’re not always wrong, only 99 percent of the time.”

How often do we charge down a trail of thought based on an assumption we’re clinging to — about another person, a situation, or whatever has triggered us — which in all likelihood is just flat-out not true? Perhaps the primary faulty assumption is that our problems are caused by other people or circumstances.

One fall, my son and I kept butting heads; it seemed we couldn’t agree on anything. One afternoon at a yoga class, a lightbulb went off. In my family, we were raised to believe that one of the ways we expressed love was to offer solutions, ideas, and tips for how things could be “better.” I realized that I was unconsciously doing this to my sweet, big-hearted son — more often than I cared to admit. I saw clearly that all he wanted from me was

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absolute love and acceptance. That's it. Unplugging from this piece of my personality was a huge gift, and it immediately shifted my relationship with my child and brought us back to home base. This came from my willingness to challenge my own thinking.

As a career coach, for years I heard stories from clients who felt “wronged” by bosses, coworkers, clients, companies, HR departments, and on and on. Many times, when I suggested another way of looking at a difficult situation (such as, the layoff was not personal; it was simply a necessary restructuring), they realized how skewed — and often wounded — their perception was about what had actually transpired. We're all guilty of this.

Sometimes we can get so locked into one viewpoint, we can miss out on beautiful opportunities and new ways of seeing. One Saturday morning when my son was six, we decided to let Dad sleep in while we headed out for a bike ride. For the first time, we rode to a local Mexican restaurant two miles away for potato-and-egg tacos. From my perspective, the journey was a harried obstacle course — navigating around dogs, other bikers, sprinklers, traffic lights, and cars blocking driveways, while monitoring my son's progress and safety. When we were done, I was exhausted and doubtful I'd ever suggest doing something like this again. But my little guy perceived the morning as absolute perfection: “Mom, I loved the breeze. I loved riding our bikes somewhere new. We saw so many cool things, *and* I just found a beautiful acorn on the sidewalk. This was the best morning ever!”

I'm grateful for my small, wise teacher. My son was on a completely different bike ride, and he helped me realize that a change in perspective — and how we feel — really is only a thought away.

TAKE a STAND — OWN YOUR POWER

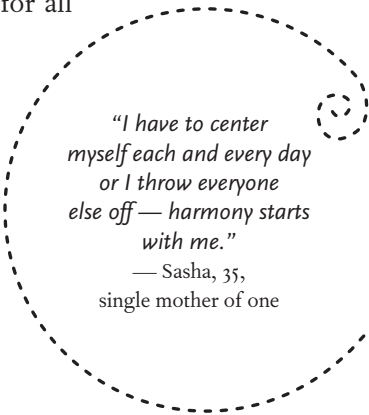
Are you more afraid of wild success or dismal failure?

Part of the healing journey — for both men and women — involves learning to fully own your power. This means being willing to be seen and to step into the highest expression of who you are — as a person, a partner, a parent, and a spiritual being! It also means to stop playing small. Most of us

rarely feel comfortable shining brightly, or letting others see our brilliance, our gifts, and our unique talents. Why is this?

I once spoke to a group of three hundred ten- to thirteen-year-old girls at a young women's career conference. As I was waiting to go on stage, I overheard a small group of four talking about their day. One of the girls was really on fire after learning about civil engineering, and she was inspired to share her career dreams with the others. I could see her face quickly shift from a state of open excitement and joy to one of embarrassment and withdrawal as the other girls subtly expressed their discomfort at seeing their young friend so clearly own and express her personal power. If only Self-Love 101 was a required course for all junior high girls.

Personal power is about living your truth, aligning with your life purpose, and expressing your authentic self. It's fully expressing your potential. Often we dance around our power, jump in and out of our power, or maybe dip a toe in our power pool — occasionally experiencing a moment of enlightenment but then retreating again to the safety of obscurity.



*"I have to center
myself each and every day
or I throw everyone
else off — harmony starts
with me."*

— Sasha, 35,
single mother of one

After years of coaching clients, I agree with author Marianne Williamson, who wrote in her book *A Return to Love*, "It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us." I've found that when people feel held back in their lives and careers, it is most often due to their own insecurities, inadequacies, or fears of how others will perceive them. People often worry that if they speak their minds or score big accomplishments, their friends will say, "Who do they think they are?" People often fear that if they break away from the pack, they will be ostracized and not allowed back. So they stay safe, play small, and never really tap into or express their full potential — their personal power, as I like to call it.

When you begin to access and own your power, you align with your life purpose and authentic self. You become more whole, and you express all that you were meant to be.

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Standing in your personal power takes time, practice, and courage. Here are some ways to do so:

- **FIND YOUR VOICE.** When you have a unique perspective or disagree with someone, do you remain quiet? Speak your mind and express how you really feel.
- **MAKE SELF-CARE A PRIORITY.** This is one of the best ways to send a message to yourself that you are worthy. Nurture yourself physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.
- **STOP CARING WHAT OTHERS THINK.** You'll be working on this your whole life. Imagine who you would be or what you would do if you didn't care what others thought of you!
- **BE DIRECT AND ASSERTIVE IN YOUR COMMUNICATION WITH OTHERS.** Notice how people respond to the way you communicate. Sometimes we undermine our message by the way we speak. Make sure when you talk, you're heard.
- **BREAK AWAY FROM THE PACK.** If you'd rather go for a hike than go see a movie — listen to your needs. Don't just go along with what everyone else wants.
- **LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE.** Don't hold back. Let others see your talents and gifts.
- **BE A FEARLESS MONEY MANAGER.** It is empowering and liberating to become financially savvy — creating your own nest egg, managing a household or business budget, and getting a handle on the green stuff.
- **STOP SETTLING.** What do you really, really want? Stop settling. The more comfortable you become owning your power, the easier it becomes to connect to your needs and desires.
- **BECOME COMFORTABLE USING YOUR MASCULINE AND FEMININE STRENGTHS.** Living powerfully comes from the ability to balance both our yin and yang energies — being assertive and receptive, driving for results and letting things unfold, and so on. Learning to balance these polarities, which we all possess, can be life changing.



EMBRACING YOUR FEMININE ESSENCE

Ever heard the saying “When Mama’s not happy, nobody’s happy”?

A mom’s ability to feel whole, alive, creative, and in touch with her feminine essence or power plays a huge role in her family’s overall emotional well-being. Of course, it’s important that both parents be in equilibrium. Parents often divide and conquer, each balancing the other within the family but becoming out of balance within themselves. One may be the emotional anchor, while the other is the disciplinarian; one may rule the kitchen and the other the bank account; and so on. Yet for mamas (and papas) to be truly happy, they need to be whole, healthy, and living in harmony on all levels — thinking and feeling, being and doing, giving and receiving. This helps the entire family come into equilibrium. (I discuss the yin/yang dance of balance further in chapter 8.)

I heard an interview with a relationship expert who was coaching a frustrated couple struggling to come into balance. The woman was exhausted from feeling like a drill sergeant — and she was angry that everyone in the family seemed to turn to her for their strength. The relationship coach suggested some strategies and emphasized that women are not robots or task-masters (though we often feel that way). We are vibrant, juicy, creative, sensual beings, and if we’re out of balance or not in touch with our feminine essence or power, the whole family will feel off-kilter.

Do you ever feel more like a police captain than a goddess?

Women can be imbalanced in all sorts of ways, but for many, learning to embrace our feminine essence can feel particularly challenging if we’re used to carrying a heavy load and are overburdened with responsibility. (For discussions of sacred masculinity, I highly recommend the work of David Deida and Richard Rohr.) For some women, learning to embrace their feminine essence might be a critical piece of their healing work; it certainly has been for me. For years I was solely career focused. Throughout my twenties and thirties I was more interested in building my career than nurturing my femininity (I never realized I could do both). After I had my son and launched my first business, I tapped my deep well of creativity and began to actively celebrate and embrace my feminine essence and its many gifts. This

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awakening — that I could be both strong and soft — became pivotal to my healing on all levels.

Here are some ways I have learned to connect to my feminine essence and bring more balance and joy into family life:

- by reclaiming dance and encouraging my family to dance and move for the pure fun of it;
- by embracing pleasure and creating a pleasure-infused life at home and at work (whether that's enjoying self-massage, a lavender-infused bubble bath, or fresh flowers on my desk);
- by creating a home sanctuary, using candles, aromatherapy, family pictures, color, relaxing music, and more;
- by encouraging creative expression — whether through cooking, gardening, or building — in each member of our family and as a family;
- by embracing the natural world, both by getting into nature as a family and bringing nature into our home, such as by putting a juice glass filled with sprigs of rosemary from our yard on the dinner table;
- by practicing receptivity and allowing others to help me, so that I receive as much as I give; and
- by learning when to initiate and when to allow, rather than habitually launching into action or “fix-it” mode.



HEALING IS NOT OPTIONAL

What would happen if you continued with “business as usual” and chose not to do any healing work? Would your family keep setting you off and triggering the same issues over and over again? You bet!

As long as we continue to think and do the same things — and remain unconscious of our behavior, habitual thinking, and issues — we’ll keep getting triggered. We’ll experience the same reactions every time and continue to suffer and swim in our cesspool of negative habitual thought.

For two days I had the flu and felt awful. When my normally thoughtful

son came home from school, he got mad at me that he couldn't watch TV. Then he was angry that he couldn't go to a friend's house until he had put away his lunch box, practiced piano, and finished his homework (his normal afternoon routine). Then when I asked him to get a box of tissues for me from upstairs, he huffed off, muttering under his breath, and slammed the pantry door.

I could feel my thinking spiraling downward as I formulated a mental list of "reasons why he should help me." We'll always have things happen that are contrary to what we want. This is a given. The question is: Will we allow ourselves to keep getting triggered every time, or will we choose a different response?

Until we change — from the inside out — how we respond to family members and interactions that cause us pain, we'll keep getting the same result and experiencing the same feelings, over and over. I think we all know this, but doing it is harder. Whenever my girlfriends and I get angry at our partners and joke about "greener pastures," we remind each other that in truth you "pick your partner and do-si-do." That is, it doesn't matter who you're with; it's always "same stuff, different day" until you begin to heal and examine your own stories and state of being.

As we slow down, pause, inquire, do the work that's needed to heal, and invite our wise selves to have a voice, we begin to experience more space around our problems and how we see things. We create breathing room in which we can choose how and when we respond to the screaming toddler, the teenager who just broke curfew, or the partner who seems constantly distracted.

As we begin to heal our inner world and come into greater wholeness, our outer world changes, too. Our choices and circumstances shift and align with our values, so we live with greater integrity with who we really are. Our outer world begins to mirror our inner world. For instance, I recently explored the difference between how I used to experience pleasure compared with what I now seek out and enjoy. Here are some of the things I used to do to experience happiness:

- Eat out, especially big, fancy meals — the richer, the better.
- Go shopping; America's favorite pastime was fun no matter how much I spent or what I bought.

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- Have regular over-the-top sensory experiences, like attending large music festivals, art shows, and multisensory events drawing big crowds.
- Be outdoors and go for a hike, but only when accompanied by a food- or drink-centered soiree.
- Pack my schedule with lots of activity, stimulation, and things to see and places to go!
- Maintain a large circle of interesting, diverse friends and schedule lots of “play dates.”

Here are the things I prefer to do now:

- Cook for a small group of friends and family and enjoy fresh, delicious, in-season fruits and veggies (which are even better if I get to harvest them locally!).
- Spend time relaxing with my family — playing games, swimming, or just hanging out in the backyard.
- Ensure each weekend includes long, quiet expanses of unscheduled time, which feels luxurious!
- Experience nature as much as possible in all sorts of ways: on vigorous hikes in national parks, lazy walks around the lake, and overnight trips to the mountains.
- Create space for heartfelt conversations with close friends and family — but most importantly, being with friends who let me show up “warts and all”!
- Exercise daily and in truly pleasurable ways: through yoga, dance, hikes, walks with friends, canoeing, or anything that’s fun.

Just to be clear, I’m not being critical of my old ways. I still enjoy the things in the first list on occasion, but now only in moderation. By reading this book you have already started your own healing process, which is unique for each of us. You have different needs and will follow a different path than anyone else. Here are a few ideas (some of which I’ve mentioned already) to consider to support you on your healing journey, but first and

PEACE BEGINS with ME: A JOURNEY to WHOLENESS

most important — tune in and hear what would best serve you and your current life stage:

STEPS TO WHOLENESS

- Ask yourself every morning when you get up: What do I need to heal today?
- Cultivate mindfulness, the ability to live in the now, and learn to “feel your feelings.”
- Write a letter of forgiveness to yourself or others (you don’t have to mail it!).
- Practice daily meditation or prayer whether alone or in a community. A daily meditation and breathwork practice have had a huge impact on my healing.
- To dislodge old, stuck patterns, try some really good therapy or counseling, or if addictive behavior is an issue, tap into a twelve-step program, like Al-Anon, Debtors Anonymous, or a similar support group.
- Learn the art of surrendering and letting go.
- Explore conscious movement (like yoga, qi gong, or Nia) and breathwork.
- Join a women’s or men’s healing support group.
- Consciously practice self-compassion and loving-kindness.



Remember, healing is a journey, not a destination. Move slowly and give yourself lots of breathing room.

My brother Kert’s therapist once said that healing work is like diving. Some of us start just by trying on a mask, some go snorkeling right away, but none of us go deep-sea diving until we’re fully suited up and prepared — emotionally and spiritually. The time for this will be revealed to us when we’re good and ready.

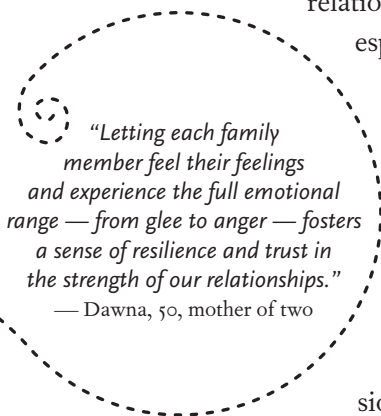
HEALING as SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Part of our healing work can include shifting to view family life as a spiritual practice.

NURTURING the SOUL of YOUR FAMILY

It changes everything if we see our family as a sacred gathering of particular souls. As I've said, I believe all families consciously choose to come together, but that doesn't mean it's easy street. The people you love and care about the most will also challenge you the most. Being in intense, intimate relationships with people will be hard at times,

especially if you need a lot of time alone. (My mom was an artistic, musical, introverted, only child — and she had seven kids. Can you imagine?!) Real intimacy takes a willingness to be both vulnerable and courageous.



"Letting each family member feel their feelings and experience the full emotional range — from glee to anger — fosters a sense of resilience and trust in the strength of our relationships."
— Dawna, 50, mother of two

As a parent, I try to see my son as a wise, mature soul who just happens to be in a kid's body. I try to cultivate compassion for what that must feel like for him. That doesn't mean I treat him like an adult and let him

do whatever he wants, but this perspective can help elevate and shift how we relate to each other. It helps me remember to approach my family as my greatest source of joy and the people I most want to be with.

Envision unzipping an old, outdated, cumbersome zoot suit and stepping into a lighter, freer, more enlightened version of yourself. What would this look like, and how would your relationships change? Consider the following as you look at relating to your family in a new way:

- What could I do to feel more connected to my family?
- How could I express my love to my family in new ways?
- What do I most want from my family members?
- What is my highest vision for my family? How do I see my partner and me interacting when our kids are grown?
- If I were to describe my family with three adjectives, what would they be?
- What do I do to enhance our family's sense of harmony and equilibrium?
- What do I do (perhaps unconsciously) to derail our sense of well-being?

- When I feel whole, alive, and emotionally fed, how does this affect my parenting?

Author Richard Carlson says, when you focus on your own healing, “something wonderful begins to happen with the simple realization that life, like an automobile, is driven from the inside out, not the other way around. As you focus more on becoming more peaceful with where you are, rather than focusing on where you would rather be, you begin to find peace right now, in the present. Then, as you move around, try new things, and meet new people, you carry that sense of inner peace with you. It’s absolutely true that, ‘Wherever you go, there you are.’”

As I watch my five parentless siblings hit major life milestones — marriages, divorces, new babies, moves, career changes — and observe their individual journeys toward emotional health and well-being, it makes me reflect on what I needed and wished I could have heard when I was their age.

If I was sitting across from her now, here is what I would say to my sweet thirty-year-old self:

Dearest Renée:

Your work is to remember who you *really* are. Who you are is not defined by your family history or the pains or tragedies you experienced growing up. Your parents loved in the best way they could. Moving into compassion for them can bring you to a place of liberation.

Self-awareness and self-acceptance are the doors to freedom and peace. Don’t be afraid to become very acquainted with your fears, dreams, personality, self-limiting beliefs, strengths, shadow, and brilliance. Love *all* of who you are. Your ordinary self is enough — you don’t need to do or be more for anyone.

Reach out and ask for help. There is never any reason to go it alone. We were designed to be interdependent. Cultivating this ability is key to your emotional health.

Release “shoulds” and become comfortable saying no with grace and ease. And watch the universe respond with delight in

NURTURING the SOUL of YOUR FAMILY

delivering to you what you *really* want, not what the media or society dictates you *should* want!

Allow yourself to be vulnerable and let people see your fragility as well as your strength. Sharing this side of yourself is transformative and freeing. Lastly, don't be afraid of becoming very still. You already have *all* the answers within you. You just have to get quiet enough to hear them.

With the deepest love and compassion,
Your Wise Self

If your Wise Self wrote a similar letter to your younger self, what would it say? A big part of my journey to balance and peace has been learning to cultivate a deep sense of self-compassion and know I'm doing the best I can, wherever I am on my journey.

When I lead weekend women's renewal retreats at Esalen Institute and Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health — two beautiful, world-renowned retreat centers — we set two chairs facing each other in a quiet corner of the room. Between the easy chairs is a side table with two inviting tea mugs and sometimes a lit candle. These two empty chairs serve as a symbolic invitation and reminder that the retreat is an opportunity for each woman to sit quietly and receive guidance from her Wise Self. Whether this represents God, your intuition, or a higher power, it is that which holds the highest and best for you, never leaves, and is with you always, waiting and ready to respond.

As we become more integrated and whole, we spend more time with our Wise Self. As we align with our inner knowingness and act from this place, we tap into our river of well-being, and those around us feel this and respond as well. Relationships change. Parenting shifts. Households become more harmonious. Problems evolve, become irrelevant, or disappear.

We all want to be heard, to know we matter, to feel connection and intimacy, and to feel loved and supported exactly the way we are — both parents and kids alike. So how do we get there? By starting with the utmost compassion for self, by acknowledging there is work to do (inner and outer), by having the courage to ask for and receive help, and by taking small steps.

And finally, by remembering we're not trying to "fix ourselves" but to come into the highest expression of who we are. Our true selves.



Pat on the Back

WHAT'S WORKING?

What is one thing you're currently doing — or have done in the past — to facilitate your healing and coming into greater wholeness?



Putting It into Practice

CREATE A HEALING COCOON

Set aside twenty minutes for some quiet time. In your journal or a notebook, list all of the people, places, teachers, and things that soothe and heal you — that remind you of your innate wholeness and health. This could be a mentor or counselor, a specific yoga instructor or music teacher, certain music or songs, a place in nature or in your home, or a book or inspirational teaching. We often forget what heals us until we really pause and reflect. After you've made your list of the things that promote healing for you, take a large, blank sheet of white paper and draw a healing cocoon with yourself in the middle — surrounded by all those people, places, and things that help bring you to the highest and brightest expression of who you are. Put the picture of your healing cocoon somewhere you'll see it — maybe the bathroom, the kitchen, or your office. Remember, your job is to tap these resources when you feel stuck and need to soothe your soul and quiet your mind. This exercise may also serve to illuminate what and where your greatest areas of need are. Either way, it's all good.



Imagine a New Way of Being

A JOURNALING EXERCISE

Close your eyes for a minute and place one hand over the center of your chest. Take a deep breath. Observe with curiosity and compassion whatever thoughts and feelings this chapter has stirred up for you. When you're ready, explore the following:

- What might your life look like as you heal your unresolved issues and relationships?

NURTURING the SOUL of YOUR FAMILY

- How does it feel when you experience true emotional well-being and resiliency, and you don't take things personally?
- How might your family's sense of peace and harmony shift as you heal and come into greater wholeness?



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