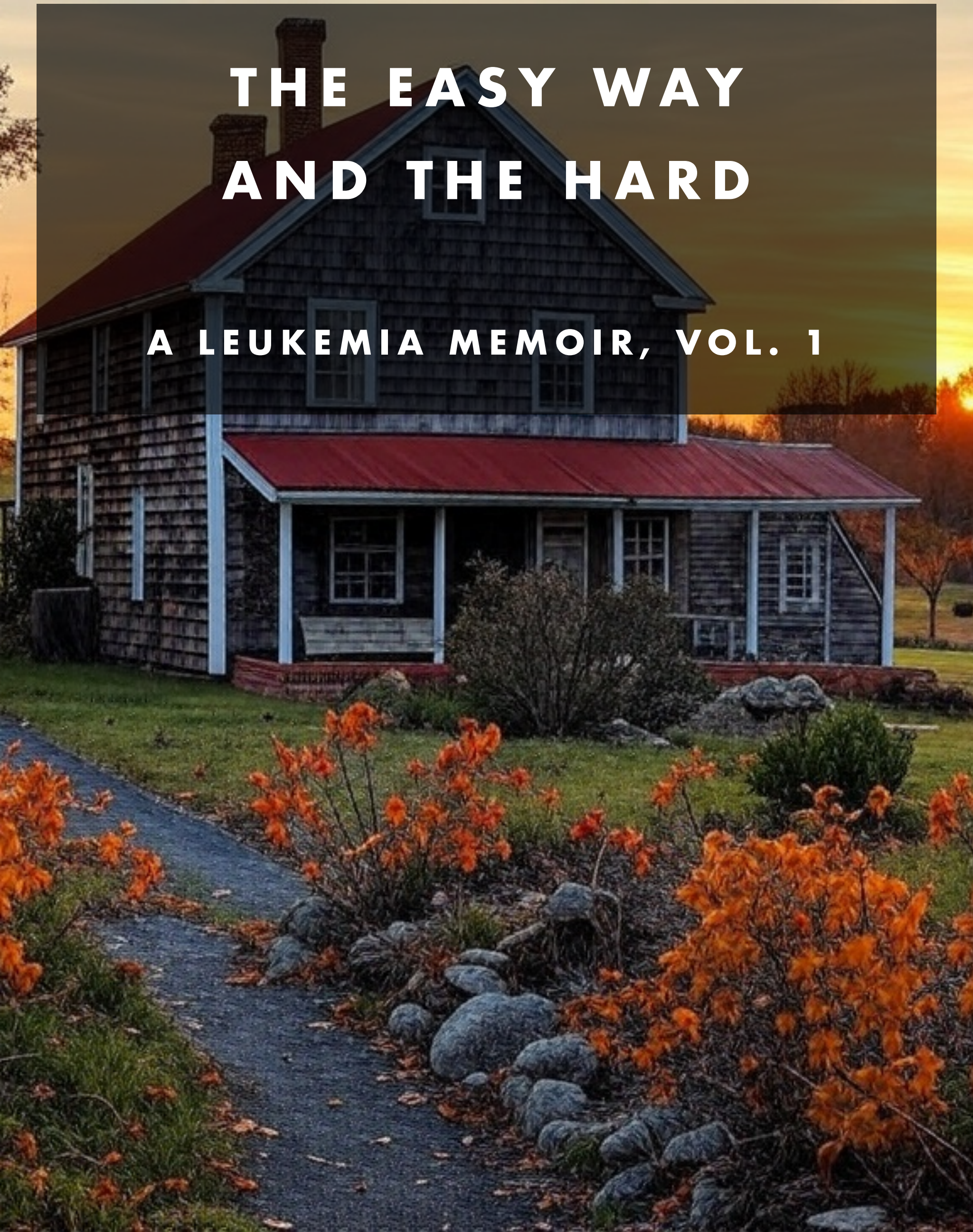


# **THE EASY WAY AND THE HARD**

**A LEUKEMIA MEMOIR, VOL. 1**





# WELCOME, THE RAIN

Promises kept. The sword-like leaves of new green emerge from the detritus of shredded snow; the honoring of a sacred trust that a flaming ball of gas 93 million miles away will still be there when our spot on this rock tilts its face upwards and shakes off the shackles of winter.

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"Don't you hate the rain, Mom?" "I think I'd be setting myself up for a lot of misery if I did, Wallace." We welcome the warming of the air, the sweet smell of damp soil, in the Spring. But do we welcome the flat gray drizzle of late Autumn, though it is the last replenishment of the aquifer until the snow melts, an assurance to the sleeping trees that they can keep their fists closed and toes curled for a few months of rest before the exuberant unfurling and exhausting effort of growth? When we lie prostrate under the swelter of July, are we paying obeisance to the bursting tomato, the voluptuous pepper to come?

The forces that bend us are as much a gift as those that buoy us. In my past, there is a great fortune I fought hard and long to find, and in so many ways it was easier to be me than anyone else; I was on a quest while they were watching a war.

When I first got sick and spread the news around, a friend called to say, "I can't wait to hear how this new adventure turns out for you," a powerful statement of confidence and comfort. Those that bear the burden of worry and doubt are reflecting their own needs as well. I have talked with others who have experienced severe illness about the impulse to try to care for the people who are caring for you; to offer them information and reassurance.

I dreaded calling my parents to tell them I was sick because I was worried for them; I burst into tearful apologies on the phone. I think this is a large part of why it is so important to let people give; it is for themselves as much as for the recipient that they must do it. It is the gift that we who suffer can give in exchanged for the gift of the illness itself; strange gifts both, but powerful.

To hate the rain would be futile, but it would also be a terrible loss. What greater promise is there than the rain?

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A chimera. A single organism composed of genetically distinct cells. A monstrous fire-breathing mythological creature composed of a lion, a goat and snake. Siblings: Cerberus, Hydra. Something fantastic and implausible.

A girl, hooked up to tubes, nibbling dry toast and then returning it gracelessly to the emesis bucket. A girl who is swallowing a dragon's egg.

We condemn the bloody Aztec priest for offering innocents in sacrifice to a slaving god. But what if we are chosen for sacrifice, beyond all earthly volition, and bound to the reeking stone with the promise of salvation?

There will be blood, vomit, tears. It cannot be an easy task, to incubate a dragon's egg. Calciferous substances must dissolve, jagged shards reveal a fledgling beak. Will it accept this new nest? It must be kept calm. The handlers are ready, tense, syringes in hand.

She's uncomfortable, but she's calm. These wings will unfurl, like the monarch's on the milkweed, painfully, through the skin, a rending of the fibrous cocoon. But then they will dry in the sun and the breeze, and be hers.

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In the eternity of my life there is a life I can't remember, a life that may never have happened, a life that requires redemption. It is a life full of misery, and suffering, and horrific violence, and loss. It is a life of betrayal and cruelty. It is a life a woman, a mother, witnessing the wheeling of life's woes like ravenous raptors, greedy for a feast. It is a life of abandonment and pain.

Perhaps it is in the past. Perhaps it is in the future. Perhaps it is in all time, along with this life.

This life of joy and fulfillment. This life of reward, welling up, bursting into constant bloom unsought. A life of plenty. A life of motherhood and marriage and miracles, where blessings rain down in blinding squalls out of a crystal sky.

It is the journey of this life to redeem the other, to forgive and forgive, to carry its weight and leave peace in its wake; to be in this moment of plenty with grateful and gracious acknowledgment of pain. Will I manage it? Can I roll away the wheel and reveal the world, cleansed? It is not for escaping; there is no escape, but in presence it can be remade.

To this task do I apply myself, and in the effort there is only liberation.

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At the kitchen table, I made a cavalier declaration, “I’m not going to die of cancer,” as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

With tears in his eyes, my husband asked,

“Do you promise?”

And I had a choice: stay in the story that was killing me, or keep that promise.

The next day I left my two children, four years old and eight months old, with a friend, and drove to Mercy Hospital, and checked in.

In the story I intended to write, there was no place for cancer. And there was certainly no place for chemotherapy. I took a lot of pride in my conscientious decisions about diet and lifestyle. My children were born at home in a rural Maine farmhouse. I baked my own bread and sometimes ground my own grain. So when a doctor I had never met before called to tell me that some bloodwork I had ordered casually had come back with concerning results, I smiled and thanked him and said I would do some research. “You might have leukemia. You should go to the ER right away.”

I didn’t. Instead, I did the most American thing I could do: I started shopping. I bought juicers and supplements and pounds of bulk foods. I got on forums and facebook and google. People like me don’t get cancer. And if they do, they definitely don’t get chemotherapy.

But the week wore on and the reality that I hadn’t slept in several months and was feeling worse by the minute started to weigh heavily.

I checked in through the ER. My children had never slept apart from me; my infant had only nursed. I had to sign a consent form acknowledging that the treatment could leave me infertile. I was 33.

The relief I felt when I made that decision was immense, and I didn’t go in with any fear. I chose to hand over the medical procedure to the oncologist, and take charge of MY job, which was to engage with the spiritual gift of serious illness and enter into a sacred journey to my highest self. I had to find out why this was the best thing that ever happened to me.

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Acute Myeloid Leukemia is a tidal wave of an illness. It comes on hard and fast, depleting the body of infection-fighting and clotting ability. For this reason, it also kills fast if untreated. When I received the diagnosis, I was stunned. My diet and lifestyle were nearly pristine; indeed, it was my identity. How could I get cancer? Furthermore, as a mother of two young children, one a nursling of eight months and the other just four years, how could I possibly manage an additional responsibility as large as healing myself from an acute and fatal condition?

Cliches abound as to how life is about letting go. "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans," right? How often, and to what extent, do most of us really take this advice to heart? We need our plans to help us make a mental path upon which to embark, but then we become attached to this path, often finding ourselves hacking away at the underbrush, soaked with sweat and harassed by flies, hungry and tired, in order to try to continue in the pre-determined direction when the mossy track is quite clearly bending in another. Sometimes, however, we come up against an impassable barrier to our plans. In my case, the wall was cancer, and I had to turn aside. Imagine my surprise at seeing the mossy track right there, beckoning me to follow, if only I could let go of my preconceptions!

Hence began the path of leukemia; the dance with the dragon. It made me a better parent, a better partner, and a better person.

Life threatening illness is one of those things that makes life really simple. All your priorities become very clear. The people you love, the people who build you up, the emotional requirements of survival: these are what move to the foreground. The physical demands of your body and the illness are consuming; without the cushion of robust health to absorb assaults, you must put yourself in the middle of the universe and make everything else revolve around you. That you are not in control becomes very clear, but so does what influence you have. You know what you miss, and what you don't, when you can't do very much. The muse is really loud, the path is really clear.

Then a funny thing happens during recovery, or at least during my own. All that stuff that seemed so simple, whether important or inconsequential, starts to feel complicated again. Where there was in-focus and out-of-focus, now there is soft focus, and then everything gets crisp and urgent again. Life returns to...normal. The difference, though, is that it's easy to see that you are choosing. You can see that you are deciding what is or is not a priority. You have the chance to say "The universe has handed me a moment in which to redefine myself. What matters to me? Who do I want to be, starting right now?"

I know that sounds wonderful and amazing, and it is. But it is also traumatic and terrifying. It is a rebirth, yes, but it is also a re-adolescence, with all the struggle and drama of that liminal passage of self-discovery. At fourteen, I felt completely alienated from myself, adrift in a culture I could not navigate. Now, I know that I am responsible for taking care of me, and that the world will come to me if I give it a soft and solid place to land. I have spent most of my adult life honing the ability to hear and interpret the muse. My experience with leukemia and transplant has made it so easy to stand on the ledge and look out over the landscape and say, "Who I want to be starts right now!"

You don't need to get sick to do that. I just got lucky.

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In my hospital gown before they started treatment, so toxic that would destroy my veins and had to be delivered via a line directly into my heart, I nursed my infant son for the last time. I didn't know it at the time, but he would never breastfeed again; of all the trials of that time the one that brought me to my knees was that loss, of withholding my poisoned breast until he embraced the solace of a bottle.

I was not even able to pump- I tried but I was too depleted to produce much milk, and most of it had to be thrown away because of the drugs. And so I gave it up. My one job would be my only job: to believe in my healing.

I lost my hair. The fullness of my breasts. My muscle tone. I lost and lost and lost. I entered the hospital a young, fertile woman; I left bent and aged and unfamiliar to myself, weighing 92 pounds. Within a few years I would go through medically-induced menopause in treatment to prevent hemorrhage; the consent to that haunts me still.

The apples dropped, and then the leaves, and I matched their senescence to my own, cloistered in my cell as the air turned golden and then gray.

I know how many times I nearly died. Three. The first time was when I went into septic shock. The second time was when I had pneumonia. The third time was when I developed venal occlusive disease. Every round of treatment is a reckless dalliance with death, a brutal obliteration of the life force and then a tenterhooks tiptoe of apologies and beseechings that it will recover and forgive.

What an opportunity, to experience, to know, how fine an edge is on that knife, how fragile and robust life is, and how filmy the veil that sways between! And then to clean the bathroom!

I am a chimera - I have two DNA profiles. I had to swallow the egg of the dragon and then let it crack open and rend my flesh with poison fire and hope that my vital force could remember what had been sundered.

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That was the end of what conventional medicine could do for me: destroy every cell that rebelled and wait. I was not willing to accept a life sentence of lowered quality. I am grateful for what the doctors did for me, but I had to recognize where their work ended and mine began. With gratitude in my heart, I left the transplant world behind and sought out the healers who could help me. I found the people who believed in my healing as strongly as I did. I found homeopathy.

The magic of this field is that there's always hope; there's always the opportunity for true, deep healing. It works, and it works when little else does. I understand that I don't know more than the client tells me about their wounds and their suffering, and I can see them well and whole when they are in doubt. I can apply all my skills and knowledge toward that goal with the humility that it is not me, but they, who are doing the healing, with the tools I provide.

There is a late summer day a thousand years ago when I am ignorant of the fact that the walls are about to close in. A few days later I will have a diagnosis of Acute Myeloid Leukemia. I will sit on the grass in the sun in front of my house in a hallucinogenic daze, weeping in fear and in joy and in confusion. I will realize I don't know anything about leukemia. The world will become very small, the slant of light thin and blinding; the periphery will disappear. I will spend most of the Autumn that I had so looked forward to, that golden child of the calendar, in a series of small, white rooms in an aging brick building. I will spend the rest of it trying to rebuild myself from inside ninety-two pounds of flesh, behind sunken eyes, under a shaved head.

Sometimes the moment is so big that you can't climb out of it even if you want to. Sometimes the sky falls so far that you find yourself sitting in the clouds. Sometimes, somehow, gratitude and fear are the same.

The language around cancer, and illness in general, is often very violent. I hear terms like "battle," "war," "fight," "survivor." If violence is not the path to peace over geopolitical differences, how can it be the path to peace within our bodies?

In declaring war, I name an enemy. It seems to me that this act makes the "enemy" stronger. The more violent the assault, the more powerful this enemy becomes. Look at the other wars we live with: the War on Drugs, the War on Poverty, the War on Illiteracy and Ignorance, the War on Obesity, Mental Illness, Disease, Terror, Cartels. Have these become stronger or weaker as these wars have raged on? Or have these wars just made more enemies, caused anxiety and casualties and collateral damage, and squandered resources and lives? Could it be that war is never the answer, no matter how terrible the enemy?

If "what doesn't kill us makes us stronger," what happens to that which we try to kill?

The reason I was willing to go to the hospital at all was a fortuitous coincidence, one of several that brought me to where I am today. It was an humble oncologist, who, when I called him and said, "I don't want to go to the hospital tomorrow," said in reply, "You don't have to. This is your decision. I don't want you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

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I used to think I could rationalize my fears away; I would confront my anxiety with a host of reasons for its cosmic insignificance. Then it would continue to sit and smirk in a corner of my mind, enlarged and empowered by my efforts to banish it. Then one day I sat down across from my own mortality, and I looked at my hand, and I had nothing to bid. I was scared. I was so scared that I had to admit it, admit that I was afraid to die and without any argument for why I wasn't going to.

Then a strange thing happened: the anxiety went away, and my course of action was clear. The unknown was still there, the source of the fear, but the fear itself had no power. I didn't feel afraid anymore.

I don't know whether I've taken the easy way, or the hard. But I know I'm where I'm meant to be, pursuing the higher purpose of my existence, welcoming the rain and sun with equanimity and curiosity and gratitude.



This is the healing process. This is what it looks like, how it works, and what it offers you. To find, at the center of all your pain and all your story, the thread that connects all of it, and to turn that into a unique superpower that launches you into the life you were meant to live; THAT is the purpose of homeopathy. Do you want to heal deeply, without drugs, understand core susceptibilities, and get off the medical merry go round? Then book your free consult here: <https://calendly.com/innerseahomeopathy/embarkonhealing>