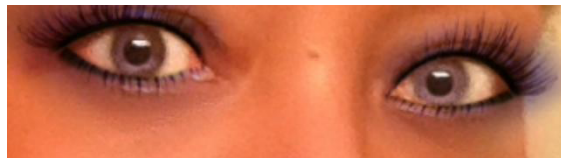


When the Captor is YOU:
A Woman's Guide to Living Life Abundantly



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Introduction

Imagine my surprise when I finally, after nearly 45 years of living, stopped pointing the fingers at others and looked in the mirror! All along, I'd been accepting substandard care from others but guess what, I'd been accepting substandard care from myself as well! I entered into bad relationships. I stayed too long in those relationships. I began a new relationship prior to ending the old one. I said it was ok that I be spoken to this way or left alone or disrespected or emotionally and verbally abused. Yes, I was in the worse kind of prison – the kind where my guard is none other than ME!

I honestly don't know when the transformation or realization began because as I write this I feel like I'm still working on things. I suppose it was a 'process' – a snippet of information here, more information there and like a patchwork quality I finally put it all together! My guideposts were not only people (Oprah, Iyanla Vanzant, Steve Harvey, Tracy McMillan and Maya Angelou just to name a few...) but they were the bad relationships, family and friends. I guess you could say that as life happened, I took notes and after years of 'writing', I decided to read what I'd written!

Acknowledgements

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Table of Contents

Love: ...Page 6

Covers a multitude of sins!

Section I: Get un-stuck! ...Page 8

What's stopping you?

Section II: Get on Track! ...Page 14

Where are you going?

Section III: Get on Time! ...Page 19

When will you change?

Section IV: Get Individualized! ...Page 24

Who is in your way?

Section V: Get Chiseled! ...Page 29

How will you overcome?

Gratitude: ...Page 35

Count it ALL joy!!

Exercises ...Page 37

Love Covers a Multitude of Sins

Author and TV personality Tracy McMillan's book "Why I'm not married, yet" was a real eye opener for me. The title can be a bit misleading because it leads you to believe you should only buy it if you want to get married. But actually, its more about being your true authentic self. Turns out when you do that, you automatically attract like-minded people. So its good for any relationship.

In the book she suggests one thing you can do to begin loving yourself it to say, "I Love You" to yourself. When I was reading it I have to admit I thought it was crazy and not of much substance. But when I looked in the mirror I was shocked at how hard it was to say it and even more shocked to realize I knew I didn't mean it!

There are many things that can (and will) go wrong in your life if you don't love yourself. One of them is this: If you don't love yourself, you become convince yourself that others won't either so you're agreeable to a lot of things that aren't so agreeable like staying home alone rather than getting out and being around people, accepting substandard care in your relationships and even seeking out abusers.

But when you begin to love yourself, you begin to see yourself for who you really are – flaws and all. And you realize that you're wroth loving – all of you.

When I first told myself that I loved me, this was the dialogue that went on in my head:

Me: I love you.

Me: No you don't.

Me: Yes I do. (Angry because I'm being called a liar, when actually I am.)

Me: Then why do you always call me names like fat, stupid and worthless?

Me: I don't mean it. It's just what I've always heard other people say. (Truth)

Me: Well, if you love me, tell me why you love me.

Me: You're smart. You're kind. You're really pretty when you 'fix up' and not so bad when you don't. You're positive towards others and you have a good heart and you are capable of loving others.

Me: Wow! Ok, well I guess you do love me. I just wish you'd say it more often.

Me: I will. I promise.

What I realized from this is two things: 1) I'm not alone in finding it hard to say I love you or be kind to myself and 2) the truth about how we really feel about ourselves is buried up under years of what others have said to us. If you keep at it, the truth will surface. It always does. Haven't you heard that what's done in the dark will come to the light? Well, that is true for the truth as well. Lies only last as long as you keep the lights turned off. **Turn on your inner light!**

"Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins." 1 Peter 4:8 (NLT)

Section I: What's Stopping You?

Fear

Secrets

Fear

I went to see Will Smith's new movie *A.E.* the other weekend. I enjoyed it and a couple of things impressed me. I hear it was his son Jaden's 'break out' movie. The movie reminded me of Tom Hank's movie *Castaway* in that Jaden carried the plot by himself for most of the movie. I admire the fact that someone that young could do something that scary on such a large platform! The other thing that left an impression on me was a line in the movie where Will told his son, "...fear isn't real. Danger is real but fear is a choice!" I left the theatre with chill bumps.

I'm afraid of driving in the dark and long distances. I made the 14 hour drive from Little Rock to Fayetteville by myself. It was the first time I had driven far alone. I drove eight hours the first day and spent the night in a hotel in Tennessee. It was the first time I'd ever spent the night in a hotel room alone. The next morning I checked out of the hotel at 3:30 am and continued on my way. The morning was foggy, cool, dark and rainy. Up until Knoxville, Interstate 40 had been an easy drive. However, leaving Knoxville on Interstate 40 was a different story - the highway was winding and full of steep hills. My moral supporters were all sleeping at that hour of the morning so I was left to motivate myself. I was afraid to pull over and afraid not to. Just as I was about to go into full panic mode, something urged me to pray and keep moving forward. Since it was so early, I was one of only a handful of cars on the road so I reduced my speed, said a prayer and kept moving. I thank God I made it safely.

I'm afraid of bugs! I'm from the country but you'd never guess it. I'm afraid of all animals too! Yes, even the cute ones! I've been known to trap a bug inside of an upside down glass until someone arrived to kill it for me! There are places I won't go if I know there are dogs. The first thing I ask someone

before going to their home is if they have pets. I don't do animals or bugs! The house in Fayetteville is big, old, at the end of a dead end street and surrounded by woods on two sides. The large trees in the front and back yard loom heavy overhead and cloak it in what *others* would call shade – I call it darkness. Because it rains every other day here and I'm living in the forest the bugs and insects are constant visitors. I've never seen so many spiders and caterpillars or centipedes or worms or whatever they are in my life! I've only been here two weeks but every day I've had to kill a bug! I'm so irritated by them intruding on my space that I'm not afraid anymore! Now I trap them in tissue and then SQUEEZE the life out of em! Ugh!

I'm afraid of being alone. I don't think I've said that out loud before and it's so significant that I think I'll say it again – I'M AFRAID OF BEING ALONE. Before moving to North Carolina I moved to an apartment in December of 2011. I lived there alone. It was the first time that I've ever lived alone. For the first few weeks I slept on the sofa and only fell asleep after the sheer exhaustion of being awake for so many hours. I spent a lot of my time on the phone or texting or out. I shooed away the quiet. I didn't want to deal with what was underneath all that quiet – a fear of getting to know me. I knew that if spent quiet time with myself that thoughts long since buried would eventually resurface to know me then I have to face all the things I've spent years burying so deep that I can't remember them all! But now, here I am 14 hours away from family, friends and the life I spent 19 years building spending most of my time alone. It's quite daunting and honestly I've been fighting it every way I can. But alas, there is no escaping it. So, when I'm alone now – I write. And I don't feel alone anymore.

Fear is a very strong emotion. It has held me hostage for most of my life. It's sneaky and conniving as it creeps into your life and situations often times undetected. For instance, I came here with a purpose – to focus on school and writing. But last week I found myself *actively* searching for a high paying job

like the one I escaped. I even thought I thought I missed that job. But a friend gently reminded me that it wasn't the job I missed; it was what the job represented; security and comfort. Fear can cause you to cling to what you've known even when you know that what you've had wasn't what you needed. If comfort was what I needed, I should have been happy where I was right? Don't get me wrong – comfort and security have their place for sure; but not at the hands of fear. What if I don't make it? That's certainly possible. But what if I do? I don't want to cling tightly to comfort because I'm afraid of success. I'm conquering fears (driving long distances, killing bugs, and spending real time alone) one encounter at a time. And with each victory I feel stronger and braver than I did before.

Danger is real. Fear is a choice. I choose to be fearless!

Secrets

Secrets breed shame. Shame begot ownership. To own something is to claim possession of it. When you possess something you hold on to it. When you harbor a secret that makes you feel shame, you somehow find that you're no longer ashamed of the thing that was done, you're now ashamed of the person you are. To be actively ashamed of yourself is a burden that weighs down your soul. A weighted soul is a sick soul.

A secret is only a secret if you don't share it. Painful secrets must be released.

One thing that has weighed on my heart and soul was the placement of my son for adoption.

Yea I know that's something aint it? And for those who know me I'm sure it's A LOT to digest! But, it's true.

Right now, I don't think the details are that important to this blog. I do plan to elaborate in the future, but for now I just needed to get it said. I was young, felt alone, and didn't think there was an alternative. I feared what my family would say. I feared what my friends would think. I feared my ability to care for my baby. As I've said before, fear is an emotion that has kept me hostage for most of my life. When I think of all the things that have went wrong in my life – fear has been the common denominator.

I have several secrets in the repertoire that has become my life but this one is the one that has been especially cumbersome to carry. For years I didn't tell anyone. For years I've worried someone would find out. For years I've felt guilty. For years I've felt ashamed. For years, I've been afraid. I told one of my

friends the other day that I was tired of being so damn afraid of everything! It's crippling! I want to truly be Free from the prison I created for myself.

Before I left Arkansas, I met with the lady who coordinated the adoption. It's amazing how the mind works. As I pulled up to the gates of the catholic diocese, memories I'd long since buried came flooding back along with a river of tears. She was waiting for me with open arms. I allowed her to hug me and I allowed myself to feel and hug her back. She recounted things about the birth of my son that only someone truly invested would remember. I guess I'd packed those extra painful memories away in a bag until I could deal with them. But instead of dealing with them, I pretended they didn't exist. With each year that passed, that bag grew heavier and heavier until the contents began spilling out all over the place like vomit.

Telling this secret releases me from the prison I created. I'm exposing it to the light in hopes that it will erase the darkness.

Secrets breed shame. Shame begot ownership. To own something is to claim possession of it.

Today, I leave the shame behind.

Section II: Where are you going?

Providence

Freedom

Providence

According to Wikipedia Providence *refers to God's extraordinary intervention in the life of people.*

I was watching an old episode of *Oprah's Master Class* featuring actor Morgan Freeman and he was explaining how providence helped guide his life.

Initially I was opposed to what Morgan was saying because it sounded like destiny to me. Personally, I've never liked the concept of destiny (*predetermined course of events*) because by definition destiny implies that we have no control over our lives; that we are just puppets in a play with our strings being pulled by God. I'm not here to debate religion, just stating my beliefs. I think it's important to have a belief system because it can help guide you in times of indecision.

Morgan's views on providence gave me pause to reconsider my beliefs. I realize there is *usually* more than one way to get where you are trying to go / where you will end up. Perhaps where you end up is where you are supposed to be – *your destiny*. And maybe *how you get there* is where free will and choice comes in to play. As a parent it's hard to watch our kids making mistakes in life because we know where those bad choices will land them. But, it's their choice (free will) to listen and take a path that is less painful or to not listen and take the harder route. Either way, they will end up where they end up!

A few of Morgan's principles:

1. Wisdom can come from unlikely places "Every NO sends you closer to where you should be."
2. Declare who you are "I am an actor."
3. Listen "I've never known one bad thing to happen from a person taking time to listen."

4. Do things to challenge your courage “If you aren’t living life on the edge then you’re taking up too much space in the world”

I can remember applying for a trainer job with Blue Cross and Blue Shield and being turned down. I let that no cause me to stop striving for my dream instead of using it to fuel the fire. I know now that being a trainer wasn’t where I was supposed to be; but the ‘No’ shouldn’t have stopped me. The No should have sent me forward in a different direction. Wisdom is doing better once you know better.

Since I’ve been in North Carolina I’ve been looking for a temporary job. My thought was if I could get a job temping some place I’d like to work that would be valuable experience. But instead of searching for writing jobs I found myself searching for jobs like ‘data entry’, ‘claims specialist’, and ‘benefit analyst.’ Those are jobs I’ve had that weren’t fulfilling. They didn’t fit where I’m trying to go BUT I was comfortable with them. Comfort is not always good. I declare that I’m a writer and going forward I will conduct myself as such.

Listening is something that I thought I was good at until I realized that I haven’t been listening. College professors, friends, family and strangers have all told me that I’m a good writer but I’ve never really believed them. So, I never really went after my dream the way I should have; that is until now. I will take in all of the positive things that come my way. I will also listen to the bad and filter out the trash as necessary.

Moving to North Carolina was definitely challenging to my courage. Letting go of my fear based life was the hardest thing to do. It’s still hard. Every day I wake up and the first thing on my mind is fear. Like anything, it’s a process. Courage is not allowing yourself to become too complacent. Fear can help you grow if you dare face it!

Freedom

I've always loved Maya Angelou's book *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It's the autobiographical story of her childhood. The first time I read it, it felt eerily like she'd written MY life story; raised in the south by an older woman, traumatized at an early age, forced to live in an environment that was foreign to her, terribly shy. There was a time when Maya couldn't deliver an Easter Speech to her small church community. Now, she speaks to thousands; including presidents.

Maya's story has been inspirational to me because it reminds me that if she can do it – it can be done.

“The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.”

-Maya Angelou

No one wants to feel stifled or caged. Holding on too tight to something is just as bad in my opinion as not holding on enough. Mary J. Blige sang about 'Loving without a Limit'. That kind of love in relationships is freeing. Don't you want what someone has to give to you *freely* than what they give begrudgingly out of obligation or duty?

Jill Scott's song *Free* is what plays in my head now most days. Being free doesn't mean you want to be alone. It just means you want and need the

opportunity to express yourself and know that the ones you love and who love you are accepting. We don't have to agree, we just have to be accommodating.

‘Free like a flying dove
Free like the moon above
Free like the four letters
That spell out L O V E, love”

-Jill Scott

I watch the show Tia & Tamera. I love it because the show for me is about finding ways to respect and accept others for who they are. Even two people who shared a womb together can find themselves yearning to be ‘free’ of each other’s shadow. It’s ok to be separate and different. I think we all yearn for the safety of knowing that you are wanted and welcomed back ‘home’ – where the heart is.

I’m on my journey to freedom. Things look and feel so different. The view from here is awesome! Surprisingly, the more freedom you acquire, the more love you have to give.

Section III: When Will You Change?

Obligations

Expectations

Obligations

The definition of obligation is something by which a person is bound or obliged to do socially, legally, or morally.

Obligations are a hard and complicated concept. They can be limiting and crippling. Some people allow obligations to guide their lives while others pay little mind to them; to the point of running away from them. I don't know who I sympathize with more; the people who avoid their obligations and pretend they don't exist or the people who fulfill their obligations but are bitter because of it. In both instances, the truth isn't being told.

In *An Abundant Life*, Malcolm has allowed his obligations to his daughters to back him into a corner and render him paralyzed and trapped. On the other hand it appears Pastor Hall has maneuvered his way around his obligations in order to obtain what he wants. Both men are not only wasting their lives but they are also wreaking havoc on the lives of others.

Doing what's right is kindred to a having a drug addiction – there is a compulsive need to please that provides a false sense of well-being (Addicts have a compulsive need to do drugs because for a time they forget their troubles.). Being stuck in a life we don't want is bad enough but it's made worse when the people we obligate ourselves to are unworthy, ungrateful, greedy people.

The heart is an excellent guide to your truth. Is it honorable to give but wish ill upon the receiver? Is it moral to carry a baby to term only to verbally and physically abuse it? Is it decent to serve as an usher in church on Sunday but refuse to serve your family afterwards? Is it really beneficial to remain married to a person you hate and who hates you because of the security it provides? There is no integrity in lies and deceit.

One of my earlier blogs was about a secret adoption. For years I felt obligated to keep that secret and allowed it to ruin relationships. I had spent over

twenty-five years, countless sleepless nights and lots of brain power imagining the horrible fall-out from that decision. After my post only two people mentioned it and life went on as usual. Disentangle yourself from your obligations and allow the light to shine in an area that you've kept in the dark. It's a very liberating and healing experience.

Don't get me wrong, obligations are not *all* bad. If fulfilling an obligation leaves you feeling happy, proud, and productive then you're on the right track. But if you're *begrudgingly* doing what you *think* you're *supposed* to be doing or what others *expect* you to do and you're unhappy, ashamed, and/or stagnant in your life then perhaps you should reevaluate.

Control your obligations. Don't let them control you ...

Expectations

“Blaming others for the pain we feel each time someone fails to live up to our expectations is no different than burning our tongue on coffee that’s too hot to swallow, and then calling our cup an idiot!” - [Guy Finley](#)

Expectations. The act or the state of expecting: to *wait* in expectation; looking forward or *anticipating*.

Prior to moving to North Carolina, I had *expectations* of the state and the experience. I pictured sunshine, white beaches, and a city full of hustle and bustle. I imagined productive writing sessions in which words easily slid from my brain, through my fingers and onto my laptop keyboard. I conjured up images of long lunches with new and exciting friends, late night romantic dinners, and lazy Sunday afternoons on the deck sipping wine, listening to music and having stimulating conversations while enjoying nature.

It rained the day I arrived and continued to do so every day for the first month. I was unable to get to the beach. The rain and clouds were so depressing that my words hibernated and threatened to never return. My laptop sat silent and unused. The opportunities for long lunches with exciting friends are a bit complicated when you move to a place where no one knows your name. The mosquitoes fought hard for the deck and they won. Wishing (or expecting), just doesn’t make it so.

I don’t know what’s worse; having expectations or letting go of all expectations. If you have expectations and they go unfulfilled, you’re left feeling disappointed and disillusioned. If you don’t have any expectations, you have nothing to hope for. A disillusioned hopeless life is one that isn’t worth living in my opinion. In chapter 7 of *An Abundant Life*, Ann had expectations of what marriage would look like and when she didn’t get what she thought she should have,

she became angry and bitter. She went from having too much expectation to having no expectation. She let go of her own beliefs when they didn't produce what she wanted and adopted her mother's because it hurt less to believe that a happy marriage wasn't possible than to think that even when you give your all, it doesn't guarantee success.

Perhaps the issue with expectations lies in the mechanics. For example, are you expecting more from others than you do from yourself? If you want something in your life; figure out how to get it yourself instead of expecting or waiting on someone else to give it to you. And if what you want is love and friendship, then give love and friendship. Karma is real and we do reap what we sow. Not all experiences will be good ones but that's ok because adversity promotes growth.

If you spend your time giving and doing, you will have less time to wait, expect, and blame.

Section IV: Who is in your way?

Conformity

Judgment

Conformity

I believe there is a natural order life. Generally speaking you plant seeds; flowers grow. Rubbing your hand across the carpet one way elicits one feeling while rubbing it in the opposite direction produces a different one. Going with the grain of the carpet is smooth but going against it is rough. Pushing anything up a hill is harder than pushing it down. As a matter of fact, you don't even have to push anything down a hill. Just hold on to it because the force of gravity will do the work for you.

For years I've 'fought' with my hair. Applying perms, adding extensions, and enduring hours of torture all in an effort to 'control' what I now know is an 'uncontrollable' situation. A few months ago, I surrendered control and went natural. No more perms or weaves. I'm letting my hair do what it does naturally-curl. It is taking some getting used to because it's not been the norm for me. It feels good. It feels authentic. The time, energy, and expense I use to spend on my hair can now be better spent on something more productive. More importantly, I'm no longer a slave to my hair – I don't run from the rain, hot showers are awesome, and getting dressed to go out doesn't take near as long!

As I broke free from the shackles of my hair, it occurred to me that as people we tend to treat our lives the same way I was treating my hair. Applying unnatural tactics in an effort to prevent what occurs naturally. Life is hard enough so why choose to waste time fighting ourselves? We are making life harder than it has to be.

How many times have you done something that you didn't want to do because it was what others wanted or expected of you? How many times have you 'gone against the grain' of what you feel inside in order to please someone else? You may make *them* happy but you're left feeling miserable and tired.

But you get up and do it every day over and over again. That's a weight that only gets heavier as time goes on.

No matter how you choose to wear your hair; life is meant to be lived and enjoyed. Flowers are fragrant, grass is green, and birds sing all our pleasure. This all happens without any effort on our part. Usually when we start manipulating nature we end up messing it up. A neighbor I once live across the street from had a beautiful plush green lawn. He decided to buy some fertilizer and make it 'better'. He applied the fertilizer but days later the lawn turned brown and died. Apparently the fertilizer was too strong. (The same thing happens to your hair by the way if you apply a chemical to it and leave it on too long.)

Live life naturally, truthfully and abundantly!

Judgment

I've had several people to ask me, "What is your book about?" The answer I gave always came off as if I was 'rambling'. So, I decided to sit down and really think about it. What is my book about? What message do I want to send? And more importantly, what service am I providing? Now that I have an audience, it's important to me that I make the things that I say matter. As I reflect over each chapter, the theme that turns up over and over is one of judgment. The characters I have invented are *never* what they appear to be at first glance.

People usually irritate me. I am the person who turns away or looks down in order to avoid conversation with strangers. So, I've always thought of myself as a mean, anti-social person especially in regards to strangers. I'm always surprised that others approach me and want to engage in conversation with me because I don't consider myself sociable. However, it has surprised me that now that I'm here in North Carolina, I seem to be *nicer*. The people aren't any different, but yet I am different. Maybe it's not working; I get up when I want and do what I want each and every day so I'm well rested and not stressed or rushing to be someplace. (By the way, I recognize that as a blessing). Maybe it's being alone most of the time; so when I do encounter a person I'm eager to speak to and engage them.

For example, the other day I was in the grocery store checkout line with a basketful of items (I hate going to the grocery store so I always stock up so I won't have to go back any time soon). I noticed the woman behind me only had about four items so I told her she could get ahead of me. She thanked me profusely (obviously this doesn't happen often) and moved ahead. You should know that normally I would have just made her wait. My mentality was, well I have to suffer being here and so you are going to have to suffer and wait in line behind me with your few-items-having-ass. #Dontjudgeme

Anyway, after she paid for her purchase she told the cashier to apply her change to the lady behind her – ME! I heard her and was shocked but made sure to thank her and let her know I appreciated her generosity. After the cashier rang up my purchase she applied the change the lady left to my bill. She'd left me nearly ten dollars!

It got me to thinking. Judgment comes from everywhere – even and perhaps *especially* from within. Why had I labeled myself as a mean person? Others didn't. I think I'd just been tired and irritated with my life and I projected that unhappiness onto others. Un-satisfaction with our lives is probably the number one reason why we aren't kinder in our lives? Even before the lady gave me her change, I felt good just doing something good for someone else. I imagine if *that* small thing made me feel so good – wonder how people like Oprah Winfrey feels giving things to people on the scale that she gives. Wow!

All of that reminds me of a mantra I grew up hearing – *the more you give, the more He gives to you*. Even if the lady hadn't given me her change, I already felt good in knowing that I made a difference in someone's life – even in a small way. I felt taller, happier, and empowered.

Now I find myself wanting to give in a bigger way. I don't know what or how but I'm excited to find out what it is. And don't worry; I'll be sure to share it with you!

Section V: How Will You Overcome?

Strength

Truth

Strength

I've always considered myself to be a strong person because I didn't cry, I held it together, and when life knocked me down I bounced right back and kept it moving! That's easy to do if you operate on automatic pilot; no thinking, no feeling, just moving through life. Another reason I considered myself strong is *simply* because I've had to be. There hasn't been anyone to pick up the pieces, make the ends meet, or carry the load. I know that if I fail or fall or "F" it up – it's all on me to fix. I was in elementary school writing checks and paying bills! I knew how much money was coming in and how much was going out. My innocence was taken *long* before I even realized how important it was to have innocence and a childhood.

I had just turned six the year my father passed. In those few years, he'd managed to become my world. And when he left me, he took a huge piece of me with him. Gone were my spontaneity, my curiosity, and my fearlessness! *That's probably when I became afraid of everything!* (Ugh!) Anyway, haven't you noticed how most kids live life with a reckless abandonment? They will try anything, do anything, and say anything. What comes up; comes out. They don't fear consequences because 1) their brains haven't physically developed that concept yet and 2) there hasn't been anything significant happen to them (*there are exceptions of course but I'm speaking generally*).

I wasn't allowed to grieve for my daddy; which is why one of my biggest pet peeves is to witness parents *stunting* their child's ability to absorb life. When something bad happens you're *supposed* to react just as you are expected to react to the good things. Instead little girls are told to stop or don't cry and be 'big girls' while little boys are told to 'man up' or stop 'acting like a girl'. Consequently, we end up with women and men who aren't capable of expressing themselves appropriately. Guess what, if you harbor negativity within

your body it WILL come out one way or the other. When you hold in negativity it eats away like acid at your soul.

Some of us have had sick souls for so long that we can't even recognize the pain anymore. But whether you acknowledge it or not, the symptoms will be there; sick all the time, depressed for no apparent reason, irritable and mean, or snapping at people for the smallest thing. Holding in pain is akin to gashing open your leg and putting a Band-Aid on it. If you put a Band-Aid (i.e. over-eating, alcoholism, illegal drug use, promiscuity etc.) on a gash (rape, divorce, job loss, death etc.) you may *temporarily* hold the tissue together and you may even stop the bleeding, but the *very* next time you bump that site, the tissue bursts apart, bleeds, and hurts more than it did at the time of initial injury.

After many years of holding all of my pain in and enduring a sick soul, I simply ran out of space to hold all of my unhappiness. The pain began to pour out of me to the point where I couldn't control it. During counseling, I recognized that the more I talked about my pain, the better I felt. I'd be mentally exhausted after each session, but that's no different then working out your body. You get tired, but when it's done you somehow feel rejuvenated!

I've realized that true strength is in *feeling* what you feel, *expressing* what you feel, and then *doing something about* what you are feeling. If you're in a bad marriage; try to fix it /get out of it /or stay in it and change the situation in which you are existing in it. If your job is stressing you figure out how to eliminate or reduce that stress. And if God forbid you find that you're stuck there, well find an activity that makes you just as happy as that job makes you sad. I don't claim to know all the answers (or *any* for that matter) but I do know that trying *something* is a million times better than doing *nothing*. YOU are the only one who can affect change in YOUR life. YOU are the only one who will have to answer for YOUR life. And YOU are the only one who will have to answer for the choices YOU make in your life.

I already know what you're going to say now, "But what about the people who will be affected by the choices I make." To that I say, "What about them?"

Guess what, they are *already* being affected. If your soul is sick, the symptoms are showing up in your life whether you realize it or not. Flight attendant's instruct us to, "Put *your* mask on first and *then* assist those around you." Dear Heart, Fix Your Soul, Fix Your Life! When you're happy, those around you will be happy too! (And if they aren't, well, move them to the back of the theatre that is YOUR life. (Negative, unhappy people do not deserve front row seats to YOUR show!)

Truth

As I sat in the parking lot scarfing down a burger king big king meal before I got home so that I could then eat dinner too, I began to cry. I felt like a dirty drug addict. I didn't have a needle and I wasn't doing anything illegal but I was killing myself just the same. I was using food to numb my pain just as a drug addict does. I could see the effects of my addiction the same as a drug addict could see theirs. Like an addict I've been lying to myself and those around me. It's no wonder weight loss attempts (if successful) have only been temporary. I must deal with what's eating me before I can even attempt to conquer the things I eat.

About a year or more ago, I decided to make a conscious effort to live truthfully. I didn't see what was going to be so hard about it honestly because I'd gotten out of a bad relationship and was on my own. One thing I've learned on this journey is to be careful what you ask for because if you want to be more kind you will encounter unkind people. If you want to be more open, you'll encounter situations that will lead you to be closed. So of course, I began to experience situations where I found myself debating if/how to be truthful! It was very disheartening because my 'intentions' were so grand!

The big truth that I came face to face with this year was that I had given away my power and then attempted to blame the person I gave my power to for my unhappiness! How crazy is that? Well, it seemed to make sense to me at the time. Thank God my eyes are now open. Real and lasting change can only come from within and until and unless you are willing to take a long hard look at yourself, you'll forever encounter quick fixes and disappointing relationships. Dig down deep past the fast food, chocolate, desserts, alcohol and 'socially acceptable pills' and find out what really has you up at nights or worse what have you blocked out of your mind that is struggling to come to

the surface so much so that it has overtaken you life. I double cheese
burger dare you!

GRATITUDE:

Count it ALL Joy!

I used to ask God all the time, “Lord why me?” It wasn’t until recently I realized, “Why not me?” If God sent his only son to die for us who hadn’t committed sins, why do I think I should live a life free from trials and tribulations?

As I began to read and understand the bible more, I realized that sometimes bad things happen to us so that we can have a testimony later. How many of us would remember to pray and praise God if everything was good ALL the time? It’s like that saying goes – how can you appreciate the sunshine unless there was rain? How can we know we’re blessed except for times of sadness and sorrow?

I love the song sang by BeBe and CeCe Winans. And I’ll admit that it wasn’t until writing this that I realized it was based on a bible scripture. (Again I’m not a bible scholar and I’m a babe in the Lord – BUT, I love me some God and I believe I’m his and here to do his will, NOT MINE.)

As the scripture states, we should be happy when trouble comes out way because it has already been promised to us that if we endure, we will grow and soon we shall want for nothing! When times get rough, pray and then pull out the bible and read what promises God has made to you. **Then, get happy!**

“Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.” James 1:2-4 (NLT)

Remember, it's a PROCESS!

Chances are you didn't wake up in the ditch. If you're like me, you woke up one morning and realized you weren't happy. You felt like you should have been and maybe like me you even pretended to be happy. But, even when you lie to others, it's hard to lie to yourself. Don't be so hard on yourself. The first step is acknowledgement. You've done that by taking this class. Now that you have the tools to get started rebuilding your life, **go get to it!**

EXERCISES:

Providence/Freedom

Do you know where you want to go in life? Who are you? What do you want to do? What will make you feel free?

Real Joy

Real joy comes from knowing who you are as well as 'whose' you are? Do you have a relationship with God? If not, I suggest you try one and if you do I suggest you get closer with him. What are some ways to strengthen your faith? What do you think this will accomplish?

Obligations/Expectations

Do you feel obligated to someone? Are you expecting anything from anyone? Have you been let down more times than you can count? If you let go of the obligations and expectations, what would you/could you change about your circumstances?

Series of horizontal lines for writing answers.

Comments/Suggestions

Thank you so much for attending the workshop!

We value your opinion and want to know how we can do better next time.

Please take a moment to complete the attached survey and leave it with your facilitator.

You do not need to write your name on the survey unless you want to do so.

We hope that something that was shared here touches your heart, your mind and your life!

Live life abundantly!

God bless you!

What did you like most about the workshop?

What did you like least about the workshop?

What information did you want to discuss but wasn't?

What one single tool will you take with you and apply?

How did you feel about the cost of the workshop?

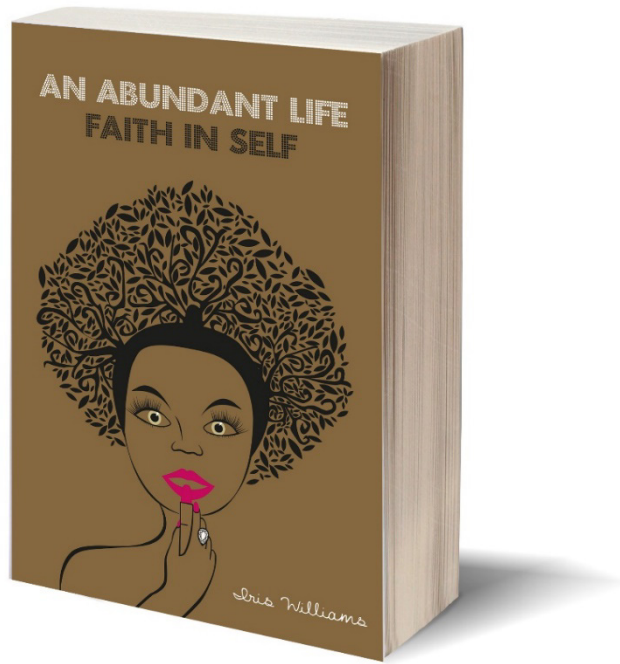
How did you feel about the venue for the workshop?

Would you recommend this workshop to others? Why? Why not?

Also by Iris M. Williams

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