WHY DANCE IS **BEST FOR BRAINS**

PRACTICES FOR **SHATTERED NIGHTS**

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# SPIRITUALITY + HEALTH

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF TOTAL ALIVENESS

EMBRACE
- your age
- your gifts
- your wisdom



Modern Elder Academy's **Chip Conley** on joy in midlife

## the time of our lives




## Why does this Olympian use herbal extracts in her daily routine?

**Brandie Wilkerson is the reigning female World Beach Volleyball Silver Medalist and also the first and only black woman to ever represent Canada in her sport at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. She's currently competing on the AVP Tour across the U.S. while keeping her eyes on the prize of Olympic Gold at the upcoming Paris 2024 Summer Games.**

**There's no question that life can be busy. We live in an on-demand world. Everything is go, go, go...all day, every day...but it's essential to make time to take care of your mind, body, and spirit. For Brandie, as a professional athlete who often lives out of a suitcase, liquid herbal extracts are her go-to source for some self-care. She enjoys the convenience of being able to drink in that plant-based wellness every day, whether she's at home or on the road....and you should too!**





"I've quickly added liquid herbal extracts to all aspects of my life...and I'm seeing the results, almost immediately. My energy levels are sustained. I feel more balanced. The stress of travelling is made just a bit easier."

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Although Brandie only recently discovered their products, Herb Pharm has been helping people live in sync with nature since 1979. They offer more than 160 single herbs and more than 85 proprietary formulas, becoming the most trusted liquid herbal extracts in America. And the best part? Their herbs are grown on their own organic farms in southern Oregon and ethically sourced from all corners of the world, ensuring the highest quality extracts.

In fact, Herb Pharm has received B-Corp /Regenerative Organic Certified® farm status for their farms. From soil to bottle, they do what's right for plants, people, and the planet.

Personally, that's very important to Brandie as she says "Herb Pharm takes care of the plants so that they may take care of us ....and we can live together in unison with Mother Earth."

Plant and herbal extracts have been experiencing increased demand due to changes in our lifestyles and our preferences for natural and organic products. With over four decades of leadership within the Traditional Western Herbalism community, Herb Pharm is well-versed to help guide those looking to embark on a healthy and socially-consciously lifestyle....in just a few drops!

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SPIRITUALITY + HEALTH
25 YEARS OF TOTAL ALIVENESS

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JULIE LIGER-BELAIRE




KYLE MICHEL / KOLORMORE

may / june 2023

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SPIRITUALITY + HEALTH 25 YEARS OF TOTAL ALIVENESS



Fifteen years ago, when this magazine was turning 10 and I was turning 50, I set up a test of *S+H* "Total Aliveness!" as well as my own promise of immortality. What happened is that an unlikely series of events allowed my rowing partner and me to qualify for the 2008 Olympic trials, so we rowed our two-person shell to the starting line to race against current Olympians. My goal thaat day was to compare my middle-aged self to my much younger Olympic self. And for the first 30 strokes, I was 21 again—*heading for Beijing!*

Over the next couple hundred strokes, however, I pretty much lost my vision, my hearing, and my ability to think beyond a veil of humiliation. Parts of me I didn't know I had shrieked in protest. The rowing movements are so deeply engrained that I'm fairly sure I could row for some distance even after I'm dead, so I didn't stop. But all I wanted was the finish line, so I could. Looking back over those eight minutes, I immediately dropped from age 49 to age 21 and then aged exponentially to 101. Meanwhile, I learned something about aging: *It sucks!*

Looking back, however, I am also reminded of the wisest words I've ever read: Gandhi's "Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it because you never know..." That soul-sucking defeat put our picture on the front page of the *NY Times* Sports Section, which got me into Mary's apartment, and the day became our anniversary, and (for me anyway) launched *The Time of our Lives!*

That's what much of this issue is about, and I hope you enjoy the journey—as uncomfortable, intense, and beautiful as it is. The theme begins with Cori Howard's experience of "The Missing Middle" *(page 20),* her lovely account of dropping off her daughter at college in Paris and returning to her beautiful-but-now-empty-nest in Victoria, BC—where she discovers—albeit with more artful language—that *it sucks!* Something is missing.

Perhaps what's missing is an invitation from my new friend Chip Conley to a weeklong workshop at the Modern Elder Academy he cofounded in Baja *(page 44)*. I went there in January with only a vague idea of what I was getting into, but it proved to be the most inspiring workshop of my career. My 30-member MEA cohort included different nationalities and sexes, the far left and far right, the super-rich and those on scholarship, yoga types and non-yoga types. By design, everyone got to know everyone else very fast "from the inside out," and I'm sure each of us heard deeply held beliefs that elicited a cringe. Yet nothing about the experience sucked. Quite the opposite. The week was profoundly challenging, empowering, moving, and often really good fun. To show up at the Modern Elder Academy is to "come out" as an elder—and to realize we're not alone. Far from it. The curriculum is designed to mint elders who are "curi-

25 YEARS

*from the* **Archives**

Age proves more than a number—but also a grand adventure at the 2008 Olympic Trials.

"Racing Time," November/December 2008

spiritualityhealth.com/racingtime



ous, wise, playful, audacious, and generous" as well as to help you find or reinvigorate your own unique mission. Conley's dream is a worldwide network of passionately inspired elders on the scale of Airbnb—which he also helped launch.

On the subject of wise elders and workshops, I received a wonderful reminder of a *S+H* writer's workshop we held in the Yucatan in 2007. Suzanne Marriott aspired to write a book about caregiving for her husband, who she had just lost. From the way she told the story, it sounded like a great book—and now it is. Read the first chapter of *Watching for Dragonflies: A Caregiver's Transformative Journey* (page 36).

Another beautiful story is digital editor Brenna Lilly's account of a weeklong apprenticeship—"Delightfully Deep in the Weeds"—with another remarkable elder, Larch Hanson, of the Maine Seaweed Company *(page 26)*. Who knew such slimy hard work could be so rewarding?

I think you'll find this issue full of great stories. And if you do, I hope you'll use the QR code to subscribe or give a gift subscription. *We need you!* I also hope you'll accept an invitation from Chip Conley and me for "*Spirituality + Health* in Midlife & Beyond" at the new MEA campus in Santa Fe from March 24–31, 2024. I think we can at least guarantee a fine time will be had, and maybe the start of a great new chapter. Maybe even a book! *Join us!*

Thanks!
Steve

Stephen Kiesling
Steve@spiritualityhealth.com

SPIRITUALITY + HEALTH
volume 26, number 3

## At Spirituality + Health we define Spirituality as Total Aliveness

Our Mission is to explore the rituals, practices, beliefs, and ideas that enhance the health of our bodies, minds, communities, and the earth that supports us.

**Please contact us with any comments or inquiries at the email addresses listed below.**

EDITOR IN CHIEF **Steve Kiesling** steve@spiritualityhealth.com
CREATIVE DIRECTOR **Sandra Salamony**
LEAD DIGITAL EDITOR **Brenna Lilly**
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR **Rabbi Rami Shapiro**
STAFF WRITER **Julie Peters**
DIGITAL EDITOR **Zachary Avery**
EDITOR AT LARGE **Peggy La Cerra, PhD**

PUBLISHER **Natalie Dayton**

**ADVERTISING & MARKETING**
spiritualityhealth.com/advertise
DIRECTOR OF SALES & MARKETING **Tabetha Reed** tabetha@spiritualityhealth.com
SALES EXECUTIVE **Peter Lymbertos** peter@spiritualityhealth.com

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Customer service: spiritualityhealth.com/care
spiritualityhealth@pcspublink.com
PO Box 460279
Escondido, CA, 92046
844-375-3755

**CIRCULATION**
Laura Garrity, NPS Media Group

**NEWSSTAND DISTRIBUTION**
Ron Murray

**MAIN OFFICE**
52 Golf Oval, Springfield, NJ, 07081

**EDITORIAL INQUIRIES**
steve@spiritualityhealth.com

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GOOD HARBOR MEDIA

# Julie Liger-Belair

Lead digital editor Brenna Lilly spoke with artist Julie Liger-Belair about sacred art, household altars, and the "muscle" of creativity.

**The contrast in your assemblage pieces and collages is stunning—you often place nonchalant human subjects in vibrant, surrealist surroundings. How did you develop such a unique style?**

I have always been fascinated by dreams and surreal worlds evoked in books, films, and artwork from many different cultures and times in history. I think humans have always been drawn to the realm of the "implausible" because it is so easily glimpsed in our own "real" world. From microscopic views of cells to photographs of our solar system, these strange worlds are tangible and are not just to be found in dreams.



**How do you balance your artistic practice with your "everyday" life? Is there a line between the two?**

My "everyday" life IS my art practice! Now that my kids are all in school and more independent, I am able to work full-time on my art. That certainly was not the case when they were little, and it was definitely a struggle to be able to find time to create. I'm very thankful that I can now be a full-time artist and work regular "office hours" in my garage studio at the back of my garden. But I guess my creative life also extends into my home life, too, as all three of my kids are amazing makers and artists in their own right and are often joining me in the studio during "off-work" hours to collaborate on various projects. I'm really lucky to be surrounded with creativity this way—it feeds my fire and propels me forward.

**There's an ethereal, curious quality to your pieces—I can see your fascination with dreams. How do you work with the sacred (and its balance with the mundane) in your art?**

It seems that humans like to think of the world in dichotomies; good and evil, sacred and mundane, happiness and sadness, but of course the lines between all these things don't really exist or are blurry at best. I started my art career fascinated by the religious

Julie Liger-Belair in her studio. Her piece *Blue Vase* can be seen in the background, and in its entirety on page 19.



« *the waiting eye 1*
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

symbolism found in European artwork and enjoyed playing with these symbols and ideas in the contexts of everyday objects (ex. little altars to saints, gods, and goddesses made with sardine tins). This has changed over the years to looking at the dualities between inner/private life and outer/public life and how these could also be viewed in this context, the inner world being sacred and the public persona being mundane and how ambivalent we are to draw a line between the two.

**You mention those little altarpieces—do you also incorporate altars and/or sacred spaces into your daily life?**

I really feel that my studio and home are my sacred spaces. They are both filled with my kids' art and other artists' work as well as all my favorite colors. I'm a collector of all kinds of things: tin toys, natural elements (shells, rocks, fossils, etc.), ceramics, and colorful fabrics, and all these things are arranged around my house (little altars, if you will) where they delight me daily and constantly inspire the imagery that pops up in my pieces.

**What influence does nature have on your work as an artist? Your collages feel very organic and grounded.**

Nature and spending time in it have always been very important to me. I spent all my childhood summers in a small, rented, one-room cabin on a lake. We had no running water, electricity, or indoor plumbing, so my siblings and I spent all our time outdoors exploring and making our own games. I think this was really instrumental in molding my inner creative life. I suppose it is no surprise that elements of landscape, foliage, and fauna find their way into my work.

**How does your artistic practice affect your emotional life? Do you use art to process your emotions?**

Absolutely! There is really no feeling comparable to immersing myself completely in a work. I lose all track of time and love the feeling of taking a walk along an unknown path to a place that is new but familiar, too. It is very meditative and soothing. Making art is so paramount to my mental wellbeing that I can really feel the emotional change in me when I've been out of the studio for too long.

**What advice would you offer to readers who feel called to artistic practice but don't know where to start?**

I feel like whatever someone's artistic interest is, they need to do it every day even, if it is just for 15 minutes. Creativity is like a muscle that needs constant priming and exercise to stay fit and well "oiled." I do this myself by "playing" daily in my sketchbook, even when on vacation. It is important for me at these moments to not think at all, grab whatever materials are on hand (I often use the paper scraps laying on my desk from the previous day), and just start drawing, collaging, or mark-making in my sketchbook. The outcome doesn't matter at all, just the act of play is important.

We too often lose this spontaneous form of creativity when we grow up. That is one of many things I have learned from being a parent and making art with my kids: their ability to fully immerse and enjoy the process of making. S+H

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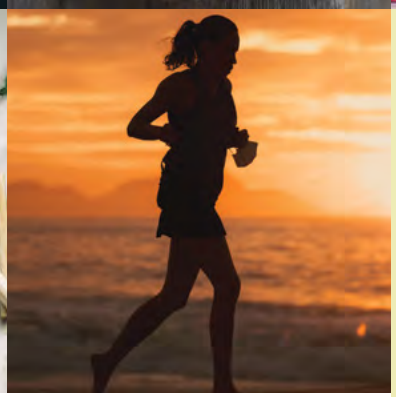


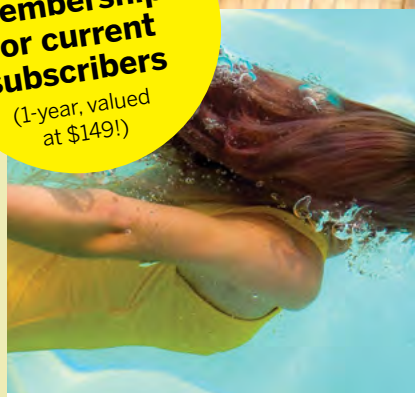




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# "I'M A GIRL, GRAMMA, I DON'T WANT A BOY GOD."

**My eight-year-old granddaughter came home from Bible School insisting God is a boy. "I'm a girl, Gramma, I don't want a boy God." "But He loves you," I said. "See, Gramma, your God is a boy!" I don't believe my God is "a boy." How can I help her see God differently?**

**RABBI RAMI:** Let's apply the duck test to your God: If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck. If your God looks like a boy, is spoken of as a boy, and is prayed to as a boy, your God is probably a boy. If you want your granddaughter to "see" God differently, speak of God as *Harachaman* ("The Compassionate One" from *rechem,* the Hebrew word for uterus), or borrow language from the medieval Catholic mystic Julian of Norwich who spoke of Christ as "our very Mother," and the Lutheran pastor Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) who referred to Jesus as *Christos Sophia* blending the masculine Christ with the feminine Sophia/Wisdom. If you can't do this, admit to your granddaughter that she's correct: Your God is a duck; I mean a boy.



For over half a century, **RABBI RAMI** has been devoted to a single teaching: *Alles iz Gott,* "Everything is God." To learn more, visit the website rabbirami.com.

**I'm writing on behalf of a group of friends who fear for your soul. With all due respect, aren't you afraid that your open-hearted embrace of spirituality will cause God to damn you to Hell?**

I appreciate your concern, and with equal respect, I must tell you that after 50 years of contemplative practice and spiritual exploration, I find nothing to fear from God and much to fear from those who choose to believe in a God who would damn people to Hell for being open-hearted.

**My teacher urges me to surrender my will to his will as a necessary step toward enlightenment. Is he right?**

While there are moments where "my will" is surrendered to the greater Aliveness of which I am a part, being surrendered isn't a willful act but a gift of grace. As for surrendering your will to your teacher—watch out! That isn't a recipe for enlightenment, only exploitation.

**As a Jew, I'm put off by Jesus saying, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). Is Jesus such a narcissist?**

Jesus was a Jew who taught as a Jew and should be understood through the lens of your shared Judaism.

When Jesus says "I am" he is referencing *Ehyeh,* the Name of God revealed to Moses in Torah (Exodus 3:14). A form of the Hebrew verb "to be," *Ehyeh* is the nondual "I Am" happening as all-being the way an ocean happens as every wave. Jesus is saying *Ehyeh* is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the only way to awaken to this is by realizing that you, no less than Jesus, are a happening of *Ehyeh*. There is nothing narcissistic about this at all.

**How do I judge if a spiritual teacher is worthy of my time and effort?**

When considering working with spiritual teachers, ask yourself four questions: 1. Can I learn something valuable from them? 2. Do they teach without demeaning? 3. Do they not only welcome my questions but help sharpen them? 4. Do they charge reasonably for their time and effort? If the answer to these questions is "yes," the teacher may be worthy of your time and effort.

You should also ask four questions to judge if you may be worthy of the teacher's time and effort: 1. Am I willing to have my biases and beliefs tested and challenged? 2. Am I willing to be held to the same ethical standard I apply to my teacher? 3. Am I willing to live the truths I learn? 4. Am I willing to pay a fair price for my teacher's time and effort? If the answer to these questions is "yes," you may be worthy of your teacher's time and effort.

**I was outraged by Super Bowl commercials selling Jesus alongside Cheetos. Does it bother you that capitalism has commodified the Son of God?**

Bother me? Yes. Surprise me? No. But what really irks me about the Super Bowl Jesus ads is the tagline: *He Gets Us*. Of course He gets us—He's Jesus! The more important question is *Do we get Him?* Do we love our neighbor (Luke 10:28), welcome the immigrant, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, and heal the sick (Matthew 25:3–46)? Do we love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) and forgive those who hurt us (Matthew 6:14)? Do we envision a future where the meek rather than the mega-rich inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5)? The answer to these questions is "no." What Jesus gets when *He Gets Us* is the fact that we don't get Him at all.

**I'm a Palestinian American with many Jewish friends. It enrages me to watch the nightly news and see their people killing my people, and it enrages them to watch the same broadcast and see my people killing their people. Neither Islam nor Judaism sanctions such evil. When will this stop?**

I beg to differ: Islam and Judaism as well as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism *do in fact* sanction evil whenever Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists want them to. This will only stop when humanity undergoes a spiritual revolution that shatters tribalism (religious and secular), and its innate hatred of and violence toward "the other." Sadly, I don't see this happening any time soon. S+H

**I'm an atheist. My wife reads your magazine monthly and has the annoying habit of reading your column to me out loud. While she denies this, I think you're a closet atheist hiding behind a gaseous spiritual fog. I dare you to tell her what god you believe in.**

You're right: I don't *believe* in God; I *experience* God. The God I experience doesn't choose one people over all others, save or damn, write or dictate books, have a dress code, demand the slaughter of animals or humans, or dabble in real estate. The God I experience isn't obsessed with race, sex, or gender, isn't traumatized by women's hair, and isn't obsessed with female or male genitalia. The God I experience is the nondual dynamic Happening happening as all happening hinted at by the ineffable Hebrew verb *Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay* ("to be"). I hope this isn't too foggy for you. In any case, please thank your wife for her support, and, so that you know, we are a bimonthly magazine. Her reading out loud only seems monthly to you.

I find nothing to fear from God and much to fear from those who choose to believe in a God who would damn people to Hell for being open-hearted.

# Experience The Lightness Of Being That Comes With Cleansing

It was 1989 when I first heard of Arise & Shine and "mucoid plaque. Similar reports of people expelling "long dark rubbery ropes" and dark "pellets" towards the end of a 40 day water fast were intriguing. 40 days of water only wasn't for me.

However, four weeks of alkalizing the body and cleansing with herbs, juices, and light meals seemed manageable. Gradually reducing meals to go deeper made the Cleanse a comfortable and amazing experience that I found well worth repeating.

While I have never seen any double blind, randomized clinical trials with placebo controlled studies evaluating cleansing or the removal of "mucoid plaque," there are numerous studies on mucosal build up and its many effects on the intestinal tract. Personal experience and thousands of reports from customers sharing the benefits of their Arise & Shine Cleanses further support my belief in the value of cleansing.

I was so impressed after multiple cleanses that I accepted the management of the company from 1996 through 2009. When the opportunity arose to bring back the Arise & Shine Cleanse, I said yes! Now we can again experience the clarity of mind, lightness of being, energy, vitality and overall radiant health that accompanies cleansing. Try it and see what it may do for you. **–Avona L'Carttier, Spring 2018.**



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# DEMYSTIFYING THE TALKING CURE

**IN 1880, A 21-YEAR-OLD AUSTRIAN WOMAN** named Bertha Pappenheim consulted Josef Breuer, her family physician, for a long list of symptoms for which no organic cause could be determined. These included mood swings, headaches, tunnel vision, paralysis, spasms, and a chronic cough. In repeated visits over two years, Breuer helped Pappenheim talk about traumatic life experiences. Her symptoms improved. She called her visits with Breuer "the talking cure," a term Sigmund Freud later appropriated for psychoanalysis, the precursor of modern psychotherapy.

A century and a half later, as people are finding long waiting lists to begin the talking cure with a licensed therapist, we are still trying to understand what is curative about the talking cure. Though decades of research have revealed a great deal about which approaches are helpful for what problems in therapy, a mystery remains about therapy's most active ingredient: the healing conversation at the heart of the therapist-patient relationship. The 2017 journal article "Talking cure models: A framework of analysis" stated, "Some kind of linguistic activity aims at some kind of experiential problem state of the patient and transforms the problem state in a curative way." This made me laugh! It reminded me of physicist Arthur Eddington's comment about the enigma of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle: "Something unknown is doing something we don't know what."

How is talking in therapy different from the talking we might do with family or friends? After 35 years of doing therapy and being a therapy patient several times myself, here are nine attempts to demystify the talking cure:

- Therapy is a series of non-ordinary conversations. By non-ordinary I mean that the talk in therapy is about things you usually try to keep hidden from most other human beings—or even from yourself.

- Therapy is a place to let go of an "it's all good" way of presenting yourself. It's a chance to talk about your experience of the first three words of M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled:* "Life is difficult." (Ten minutes into a session taking place on a porch under a propane heater in cold weather during the early days of the pandemic, a patient was still in ordinary talk mode. I asked, "Do you know what this heater runs on?" He said, "Propane, I presume." I said, "Yes, propane, but therapy runs on just pain. I'm having trouble finding your pain today.")

- Therapy is an opportunity to speak about what may feel unspeakable with a non-judging, compassionate human being who can help you hold



**KEVIN ANDERSON, PHD,** is a psychotherapist, poet, and writer. His most recent books are *Now is Where God Lives: A Year of Nested Meditations to Delight the Mind and Awaken the Soul* and *The Inconceivable Surprise of Living*. Both are available at his website, thewingedlife.com, or on Amazon.

in a new way what has kept you confused, hurt, ashamed, or stuck.

• Therapy is a human relationship to help you heal how you've been wounded in relationships, including the misunderstandings you have developed about your true worth.

• Therapy talk differs from ordinary talk because it is protected by complete confidentiality (except for a few legal exceptions) and by the understanding that the relationship will not extend to any other form, such as friendship, romance, or business partnership. By avoiding multiple roles it stays focused on its sole purpose: soul healing.



I am restoring a masterpiece.

I am restoring a masterpiece
from my childhood, a priceless original.

I am restoring a masterpiece
from my childhood, a priceless original
Self painted over by layers of self.

I am restoring a masterpiece
from my childhood, a priceless original
Self painted over by layers of self-
criticism and self-judgment.

From *Now is Where God Lives: A Year of Nested Meditations to Delight the Mind and Awaken the Soul* © 2018 by Kevin Anderson

• Therapy talk is one-sided; that is, the focus of the conversation is always the patient's healing. When the therapist shares personal experiences, it should be to further the patient's healing process.

• Therapy is talking with a person outside what David Foster Wallace called the "skull-sized kingdom" in which each of us lives. A therapist is trained to point out things you may not be seeing, feeling, or putting together about your life story. This frees you to live a new story instead of continuing to loop through the old one. In computer terms, a therapist helps you see bugs in your inner operating system and begin the slow, patient practice of installing a better one. But this doesn't happen overnight the way your smartphone updates its operating system!

• Therapy conversations can "cure" in the medical sense: A diagnosis is determined, treated, and successfully resolved. But much of the cure may be more like the original meaning of the word, which comes from the Latin noun *cura*, meaning "care." The non-judging, compassionate caring that therapists offer can help you see that you don't deserve the abuse you've lived through or the self-judgment you often heap upon yourself. Therapeutic caring can help you remember and live more from your sacred self, which remains unscathed under layers of struggles.

• Therapy invites you to be accountable to another human being for working on your life between conversations, much as you would need to practice piano between lessons with a teacher. This gives momentum to dealing with things that may be easy to avoid or put off for years.

Though the path to healing that she began with Dr. Breuer was long and bumpy, Bertha Pappenheim recovered from her multiple afflictions to become a writer and poet, an advocate for women's rights, and the founder of a home in Germany for "endangered girls and unwed mothers." She appeared on a postage stamp in 1954 as part of a "benefactor of mankind" series and was honored in 1997, 50 years after her death, with a memorial on the original site of the home she founded. The woman who helped discover psychotherapy and dubbed it the talking cure is a shining example of how deep human suffering can be healed and converted into compassion and service. S+H

« *scrappy blablah 2*
Julie Liger Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

Information in this column is for general psychoeducational purposes and is not a substitute for assessment and care provided in person by a medical or mental health professional.

# DANCE INTO A NEW GROOVE



**NOT MOVING** is a good way to get stuck emotionally and intellectually, to remain the same, to avoid any new flow of old emotions, and to keep things locked up in our body and mind. Even if we do move regularly, when our bodies are always moving in the same way, we can lose the vital possibilities of sending breath into the areas of our bodies where those stuck emotions, inspirations, or ideas are hiding.

So, if you're feeling numbed out, stuck, exhausted, or down in a rut, movement is the best medicine—specifically new kinds of movement. The good news is that there are plenty of ways to get moving in new ways, including going online to find recorded classes that you can start right now.

BY JULIE PETERS

## 1



## INTUITIVE MOVEMENT

Intuitive movement is a simple practice that can be done with or without music. You can do it alone, and it's best if you can do most of it with your eyes closed without a mirror or a witness (except, of course, yourself). You can also do it as a part of a ritual, setting an intention to invite a certain energy into your body or to release something. Or simply allow the movement to teach you what you need. All you do is start in a comfortable position, like seated or lying down, and begin paying attention to your breath. Allow your breath to "move" you, and simply follow it wherever it wants to go, leaning into what feels good and avoiding what doesn't. There's no right or wrong here. Try it with a song that evokes something for you emotionally.

## 2

## CONSCIOUS DANCE

Conscious dance is a practice of getting together with a community, putting on some music, and simply moving. Different groups may have different rules, but generally, the practice is un-led and open-minded. You can choose to interact with other dancers or not, exploring how your body wants to move that day. Everyone is welcome, nothing is required. Some branded styles you can look for in your area are 5Rhythms, Open Floor, and Soul Motion.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GETTYIMAGES.COM / NKTN / IRYNA SHEK / MASTER1305 / PEOPLEIMAGES

## 3 BELLY DANCE

Belly dance is an ancient style oriented mostly around women and women's bodies. This is a powerful way to connect with the hips and belly, which is an area that can hold creativity, sexuality, and sometimes trauma. Some studies have shown that belly dancing benefits pelvic floor health. Women of all ages and experience levels can join a belly dance class online or in person in your area.

## BALLROOM AND PARTNERED STYLES

Partnered dance is a wonderful way to make friends, spend time in community, and enjoy moving your body in conversation with another person's body. This can be fun social time as well as exercise, and it can be a great way to open the social aspects of your mind and body. If you have a partner, you could bring them, or choose to learn something together at home for date night. Again, here, different styles have different emotional resonances: Salsa, tango, and rumba are sexy and emotional, while ballroom and waltz are a little more classical and contained. Swing is a good way to bring some fun into your life. Find a class that resonates with you in your area and go meet some people.

## 4





## 5 ONLINE DANCE CLASSES

There are plenty of ways to practice online classes, and affordable online platforms, such as STEEZY, offer a range of fun beginner-friendly styles, like dance workout, contemporary, house styles, and so on. Pick and choose the ones you like and go from there.

**SOME LINKS**

steezy.com
5rhythms.com
essencebellydance.com/en/tutorials (free)
duetdancestudio.com/virtual-dance-lessons-for-couples

25 YEARS OF TOTAL ALIVENESS

In May/June 2008, Carola Mararshi described going from "dancing defensively (DON'T TOUCH ME!) to dancing with full-body contact: arms, legs, and hair entangled." Here are three of her guidelines for such a truly ecstatic dance:

1 **DANCE INTEGRITY** Commit to exploring YOURSELF even when you're dancing with someone else. Remember you are your primary partner FOR LIFE! Everyone in the room is a reflection. They are there for you.

2 **STRETCH YOUR BOUNDARIES** Your boundaries are elastic just like your heart muscle. Be generous giving and receiving love. This is your sacred playground.

3 **BARE YOUR SOUL.** Imagine communicating so clearly from your heart that your words and your body gestures say the same thing: "I am moving through the world with my eyes and heart wide open..."


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# TIONS + CONNECT



*blue vase*
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

# THE **MISSING** MIDDLE

**CORI HOWARD** finds that it takes more than Marie Kondo and burning sage to transition to an empty nest.

**WHEN I ARRIVED** at my front door after moving my youngest child halfway across the world to a university in Paris, I expected a grand threshold moment. At the very least, I expected to walk in and fall to my knees bawling. It was a moment I'd imagined so many times over the years with dread. But it was nothing like I'd imagined.



On a warm September morning, I walked into a house that was clean, quiet, and dappled in sunlight—like a temple for my old life as a mother with all its energy, but none of the mess. Without unpacking, without the anticipated weight of self-pity or sadness, I burst into a frenzy of activity and got to work. I reorganized and reclaimed spaces. I Marie Kondo'd for hours, then, jet-lagged and bone-tired, I passed out.

When I awoke the next morning, it was peaceful and calm. That feeling lingered for days, and only occasionally would I drop into the well of sorrow. Usually, the grief came from a day without hearing from either of my children, or the sudden realization that after all the years of foreboding grief, my life had become stiflingly solitary. On those days, I would let myself cry. I had learned over the years to sit with sorrow and see what it had to teach me.

Mostly what I felt was an urgent need for some kind of ritual to mark this moment, but I didn't know where to start. I half-heartedly took some sage and went room to room calling out to the four directions. Unsatisfied, I realized that burning sage didn't feel meaningful for my particular situation, entering this new phase of life post-motherhood, single and leaning hard into another transition: menopause. What I was craving was somewhere to put my grief, some way to mark this rite of passage and honor what I had been through: a long marriage, a divorce, a major career

« *under / above*
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

> **Ritual, I believed, could offer the time and space to explore and contemplate the important questions of this age and stage:**
>
> **What is home? What is our purpose? What do we long for?**

change, and years of solo parenting and disaster dating. Some method to help me envision where I was going. But without any cultural tools, a map, or guidance, I was adrift, lost, and unsettled.

Ritual, I believed, could offer the time and space to explore and contemplate the important questions of this age and stage: What is home? What is our purpose? What do we long for? And what can we do to help mother the world now that we have moved on from mothering our own children? As the author Sharon Blackie wrote, "Our creativity as elder women isn't about birthing others anymore—it's about birthing our own unique wisdom, our own unique gift to the world."

I wondered if I needed to invent a ritual, one that included others. As an introvert, that wasn't my preference. But as author Francis Weller writes in his book *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*, there is value in bearing witness and holding space in community. Ritual, he writes, "provides something else that we deeply need: a level of witnessing that truly enables us to be seen. Attention is necessary for embodiment, for fully stepping into the world in an open and vulnerable way."

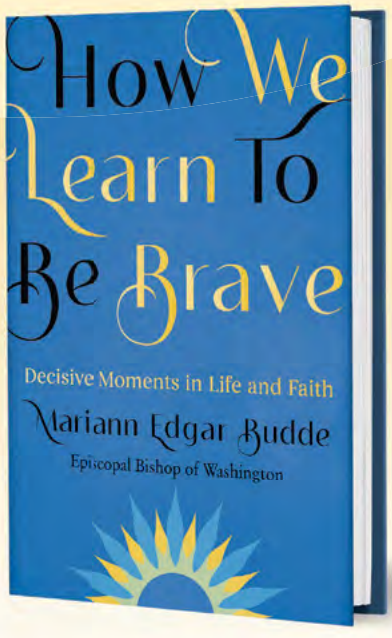
Weller leads very popular healing retreats, and having led dozens of writing retreats myself, I understand


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AVERY





*room 34 (in your absence)*
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his message about how deeply transformative it can be to be part of a talking circle, sharing vulnerable truths and stories with strangers. I wondered if a community ritual for women was the remedy I was seeking. But what I really wanted was a ritual that was already part of my culture, without my having to create or invent one. That felt like work, and I was already exhausted. Also, I knew that, although I felt supported by friends and family, this was my loss to carry, my own unique journey with grief, and, therefore, any ritual would be better performed alone.

Until we arrive at this threshold moment, very few women discuss the emotional turbulence of this new stage, the yawning abyss of years before we are truly elders. And then in hushed whispers, we look deeply and soulfully at each other and ask: Are you as lost as I am? Are you feeling this deep sorrow? What do we do now?

> **“If we are sad and mourning the empty nest, we are told we should just appreciate our new freedom and “choose happiness.”**

Granted, some mothers feel elated or liberated, or at least feel emotions much less sorrowful. And some women aren't hugely impacted by menopause. Whatever the experience, we all arrive at this threshold with some serious unanswered questions about who we are now and what's next.

It is an unprecedented opportunity and privilege to have the time and freedom to reinvent and reimagine our lives. Perhaps that is one reason the tide appears to be turning on a more public conversation about empty nesting and menopause. The popular American author, activist, and podcaster Glennon Doyle calls it the “messy middle.” Author and influencer Jen Hatmaker has recently been eliciting a huge public response to her posts about her own empty nest. Sharon Blackie's new book, *Hagitude,* is about reimagining the second half of our lives as women. It's either in the zeitgeist or I'm suddenly paying attention—like when you're a new mom and you suddenly see strollers everywhere.

And yet, society has no idea what to do with us, nor even what to call us. We are not maiden, mother, nor crone. We are the *missing* middle. If we are struggling with menopause, we are told to get on with it; that thousands of women have been through it before us. If we are sad and mourning the empty nest, we are told we should just appreciate our new freedom and “choose happiness.” The

eye-rolling judgment, the Instagram psychology, and toxic positivity hurts those of us seeking a way to cross this threshold with dignity, grace, and self-awareness. This is nothing that self-care, wine nights, or a new hobby can solve.

What if we were given a few months to recalibrate and rediscover ourselves, like a kind of funeral for our former selves? If we had a cultural ritual, would it provide the space to genuinely mourn and find the community, passion, and purpose for a new road ahead?

According to Susan Cain's new book *Bittersweet,* there's a tribe in the Amazon that requires mothers to give up something precious every year to prepare for their sons' departure at adolescence. This multiyear ritual seems to me to acknowledge the depth of the challenge ahead for these mothers, preparing them slowly for the pain of their children leaving home. In a recent newsletter, Cain wrote, "I'm struck by how little our culture prepares us for the empty nest, and for all the moments of letting go (the bereavements, the breakups, our own mortality, etc.). As a culture, we could use some rituals for letting go... The thing is, it's never too late for such practices."

Without ritual, I am finding it hard to move forward, to process the magnitude of what I have lost. On good days, I appreciate the solitude and comfort of my clean, quiet space. On hard days, I fall apart and imagine jumping on a plane back to Paris where I can wander aimlessly, close to my daughter, far from home. **S+H**

**Cori Howard** is a Canadian writer grateful to be living and working in Vancouver, BC, on the ancestral lands of the Coast Salish Peoples. She also co-hosts retreats aimed at women who want to explore, reinvent and reimagine themselves through the power of writing, yoga and connecting with other women. corihoward.com




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# THE FUTURE OF **TOUCH**

Spa aficionado **MARY BEMIS** traveled to New York to receive her first massage from a robot.

**THIS MONTH BEGAN** in a most unusual way. I flew to New York City from my home in Oregon for a 10-minute date with a touchy-feely robot in Chelsea. There was some comfort in the location—my mother and her sisters grew up in Chelsea, and I knew the neighborhood well. If my departed mother knew that I would be returning to Chelsea on a dreary January day to get a massage from a robot, I wonder what she would've thought. She, more than most, intimately knew all about the healing power of touch. At 18 months old, she was stricken with polio—but she fared better than most. Why? The short answer is because her mother massaged her legs every day. For years. But that's a story for another time. Bottom line: I was raised with the knowledge of the power of touch. It permeated our household; it was a part of daily life. It was simply a given.

I had traveled to New York to be massaged by the robot at the invitation of Eric Litman, the charming and personable founder and CEO of Aescape, a tech company set on building fully-automated, data-driven massage therapy experiences. Eric's inspiration behind his creation came from a very real and personal need to help fix a serious neck issue. We had Zoomed in November, shortly after his company had received $30 million in Series A funding. I asked him why he wanted to disrupt my spa and wellness industry in weird

*Day Dream Bot*
Lauren Briére
**robotsinrowboats.com**



ways. And so, an interesting conversation ensued—hence the invitation to experience the prototype that could potentially change the industry and the future of touch at large.

It rained on the day of my date with the robot, but I was happy to meet Eric in person. I entered a serious tech space with serious people doing serious things. I was shown to a small, dimly lit room where the robot—a sleek massage table of sorts—resided. The table had a pair of arms on either side that moved along the table and were controlled by a touch screen visible through the head rest. In the first encounters, the person getting the massage, who lies face-down, has to teach the machine what kind of pressure and placement and music they desire. But the machine learns, so the same personalized massage becomes available at any location offering Aescape. No need to worry about a poorly trained therapist or having your favorite therapist move away. No need to take off your clothes. This is an anywhere experience.

But my first impression: The robot, though inviting, looked lonely. Suspended in time, waiting, waiting for its future. For some odd reason, I felt sorry for it in all of its prototypeness. *So, there you are*, I thought to myself. *God only knows where we will end up.*

So, what was it like? At the end of my 10-minute massage—confined to my lower back and glutes—I sat up and said to myself, *Yes, I do feel better than I did when I walked in*. But essentially, it felt like the touch of a very sophisticated Theragun. Granted, this is still in its demo phase, but I have a hard time imagining how it can really mimic the touch of a human. It can't sense my pain and work me through it, fixing things, though perhaps someday it will.

It was a curious experience, and one I'm happy to have had, for, like it or not, this *is* one future of touch. Eric, who has been working on this since 2017, expects his AI-powered massage therapy experience to launch at the end of this year. He's hoping that it leaves people feeling "healthier, happier, and restored," while fulfilling a demand for massage in an industry short on labor. I can see it being a useful tool for athletic teams, recovery, airports, or a lunch break.

Shortly after my robot massage, I had the most incredible facial of my life. This may sound frou-frou to you, but it goes back to touch. The facial was with renowned skincare guru Pietro Simone, who recently opened an eponymous skincare clinic in New York's SoHo. Before the facial, he showed me all sorts of gleaming new high-tech equipment. *Here we go again*, I thought to myself. *Bring it on! I've just been massaged by a robot!*

Soon, I was lying on his table. But when he put his hands on my face, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. His hands danced on my face. Whatever he did, it felt great. By the end of it, I felt as though I was levitating. He has the hands of a master and an intuitive sense of touch that I just don't believe a machine could ever mimic.

I ended my New York jaunt in the Finger (do you see a theme here?) Lakes region, where I visited The Lake House on Canandaigua. It was snowing the day I arrived at the lakefront property. My first stop was the Willowbrook Spa, where I signed up for a detoxifying massage with Lindsay. It was a good massage, and I felt like I was in capable and caring hands. As I typically do, I struck up a conversation and learned that Lindsay had started her career as a nurse because she wanted to help people. But it was simply too sad for her, so she turned to massage, where she was much happier.

Lindsay made me think of the robot. I had felt sad for the robot, though I knew it would grow up into a much more sophisticated machine. Would it ever feel happy to be giving massages? S+H





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JESSIE WALTERS

# DELIGHTFULLY **DEEP IN THE WEEDS**

Digital editor **BRENNA LILLY** spent a week apprenticed to a master seaweed harvester—and learned much more than how to gather kelp.

**MY BEST FRIEND,** Jessie, and I were told by the Seaweed Man to arrive at EverWild "on the August full moon," which we did after a leisurely seven-hour drive north on Route 1.

EverWild is the home base of the Maine Seaweed Company, operated by Larch Hanson and his partner, Nina Crocker. EverWild is a seven-acre patch of land just a moment's walk from Gouldsboro Bay in Steuben, Maine, where Larch harvests seaweed every summer with a small motorboat, a container boat, two rowboats, and a canoe. He has been there for over 50 years, and Nina for 15.

Once a rocky forest of conifers and mixed hardwoods, the couple have turned EverWild into a flourishing homestead replete with gardens and fruit trees; an extensive campsite for visitors (where Jessie and I shared a tent on a platform); a large, cozy, hand-built home; and an entire operation for the harvesting, drying, packaging, and shipping of seaweed. They ship worldwide, and thousands of people coast-to-coast have been nourished by the luscious varieties of kelp, alaria, digitata, dulse, nori, and Irish moss traditionally used for food and medicine—or nourished indirectly by rockweed fertilizer.

Larch and Nina are also both skilled bodyworkers, teaching hands-on workshops for amateurs and therapists of all stripes. They take apprentices in gardening, carpentry, boatbuilding, bodywork, and seaweed harvesting April through October, and sometimes year-round.

I first saw a video of Larch doing his work back in 2020. Sporting a wetsuit and knife in hand, he effortlessly leaned over the edge of a small black linseed-oiled rowboat, thrust his upper body toward the waves, and emerged in one fluid motion with an armful of kelp. I was captivated.

"Perfect timing," Larch said calmly as Jessie and I arrived. "A visitor from Virginia is just leaving. The plumber is supposed to arrive soon, but I have a feeling he won't make it." And he didn't.

Though Larch and Nina might host dozens of apprentices and guests during a non-pandemic summer, Jessie and I (along with one other apprentice who had been there for

> It was an initiation of sorts, being forced to face my fears of abandonment and solitude and put my complete trust in a mysterious stranger.

nearly four months) were the only overnight visitors.

After emailing Larch back and forth the previous winter to introduce ourselves and discuss everything from varieties of seaweed to Larch's life story and spiritual adventures—apprentices quickly find out that spiritual teachings inextricably accompany Larch's practical lessons on how to identify seaweed varieties, how to cut it, and how to breathe deeply through the process—we'd been invited to assist the season's largest *Laminaria digitata* harvest. Jessie and I hadn't been told exactly what our tasks would be, but we were prepared to work, and work hard. We would leave a week later having helped move and dry nearly 5,000 pounds of the stuff.

Late on our first evening, after dinner and a campfire, Jessie and I offered to help Larch move the boats from the moorings in the cove (which drains out to mudflats at low tide) to offshore deep water anchorage in the bay, a process that happened in late evening to prepare for the morning's low-tide harvest. We quickly discovered that Larch didn't need the assistance of two landlubbers who had just rolled into town—in a pinch, he could run the show by himself half-asleep—but he indulged us.

The water was absolutely still, and the full moon was obscured by clouds and a thick, salty fog. With Larch paddling at the stern and Jessie paddling in the middle, I was seated at the bow of the canoe, which Larch used to move the four working boats. Having no paddle and no flashlight, I stared directly into nothingness, forced to sit with a deep sense of panic—feeling I'd grown familiar with over the last few years. *Did I drive seven hours into the middle of the woods only to be drowned at sea by a total stranger? How far from shore were we?*

As I breathed the bay air deeper into my lungs and tried to summon some semblance of mindfulness, the panic faded, and I was greeted with the pleasant sensation of being totally at one with my surroundings—like being back


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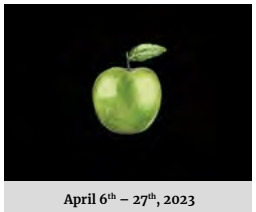
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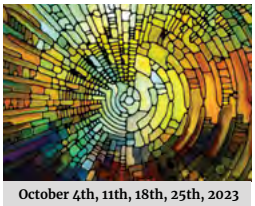
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in the womb. What I thought would be a quick trip out on the water became a lesson on sitting with deep discomfort and fear. It was an initiation of sorts, being forced to face my fears of abandonment and solitude and put my complete trust in a mysterious stranger.

On the water that night, Larch told us that "the ocean remembers." When he wants to talk to his ancestors or when he needs spiritual guidance, he asks the ocean. He believes the ocean to be a sort of Akashic record, where all wisdom of past and future is stored (a perspective he credits to Veda Austin and Itzhak Bentov). We need only beseech the ocean for access.

That week, what could have been seen as dirty work—yes, I used to be the type of person who shrieked when brushed by seaweed at the beach—turned out to be deeply nourishing and empowering.

Jessie and I spent our days hauling digitata in from the boats, hanging the long fronds in the heated dryers (which were fed every four hours throughout the night), and laughing boisterously with the other apprentice, offering up naughty riddles and giggles amidst literal tons of hanging kelp. The first few handfuls of kelp had an "ick" factor, which soon subsided. Majorly occupied with other tasks, Larch would occasionally pop into the dryer to wordlessly offer a perfectly-grown husk cherry or a medicinally bitter piece of cutting celery. We wore bathing suits and straw hats in the heat, our feet bare and tanned.

Every 6-foot-long frond of digitata kelp I lifted coated my arms, chest, and legs with a layer of iodine-rich slime, nourishing my skin and lubricating my joints from the outside in. As I lifted the digitata out of the baskets used to transport them from boat to shore to greenhouse dryer, I was being taught (by both the seaweed and by Larch): *Breathe. Stay gentle. Keep the heart open.*

When we weren't slinging seaweed, our mornings were spent reading tarot cards and runes between strong cups of coffee, and our evenings were spent around the fire singing songs and telling stories. It was as if, for one week, I was gifted temporary entrance into the life I desired the most, living firmly in the heart space. It was pure, unexpected magic. My only expectation for the week had been that I would learn how to cut seaweed. Although this was a healing experience many people would pay a large sum of money for, I was paid for my labor and given pounds upon pounds of dried seaweed upon my departure.





NINA CROCKER (2)

You can find Larch and Nina (and their delicious seaweed) at theseaweedman.com, and contact Larch at hanson.larch@gmail.com.

Only once during this week-long adventure did I have a truly melancholy moment, and I went to the beach alone and prayed: *"Atlantic Ocean, please show me where I am supposed to be. Show me what I'm supposed to do with my life—guide me. Thank you."*

I listened for an answer in the wind and in the crashing of the waves, but nothing made its way to my ears or heart. I worried that I'd lost my connection with nature, or that somehow I'd offended the sea. I made my way back to EverWild where I ate a snack and started working again, and my joviality returned.

It wasn't until I returned home that I was hit by the weight of my seaweed initiation.

In a "normal" year, I used to cry less than a dozen times. After returning home from EverWild, I sobbed daily for two weeks. A deep chasm of loneliness and agitation settled into my heart. I felt as if someone had died, or like I was longing for something I could never have again.

Every emotion—all the fear, anxiety, panic, and shame I'd been suppressing for my adult life— flooded into me through a deep healing chasm carved not by force or pressure (as I had tried in the past) but by the gentle sway of seaweed.

I was faced with a decision: experience these feelings with love, or be crushed by them. And the diviners I consulted all told me the same thing: *Ride the waves.* So I did.

Who have I become after this transformation by seaweed? Less fearful, and more trusting of nature.

I can *feel* more deeply: Smells are more nuanced, colors more vibrant, and touch more electric. I couldn't have believed how sensual seaweed was until I spent a week covered in the stuff, nearly high off of the iodine, able to move more fluidly and gracefully than ever before.

And, perhaps most importantly, I appreciate myself more. Somehow, with my hair in a messy braid tangled with seaweed slime, a borrowed straw hat atop my head, slinging digitata in the summer heat, I felt my most capable and most beautiful, doing what I loved—communing with nature and with people I love.

Now, even in the darkness of a New England winter, I can still summon that feeling with a bowl of vegetable and seaweed soup, a visit to the coast, or just a moment within the spaciousness of my own heart. S+H




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# HACKER SPIRITUALITY

Theologian **ANNE FOERST** suggests that the young man who stole your identity set out to find himself on a quest for freedom.

**IN THE 1960S,** calling someone a computer "hacker" was a compliment, and hacking meant creative, unorthodox problem-solving to overcome the limitations of early computers. This understanding of hacking was prevalent until the 1980s when cybercrime became more common and the term "hacking" started to become associated with it.

In 1986, a hacker who called himself "The Mentor" became disturbed by the many arrests of his fellow hackers. He wrote the "Hacker's Manifesto" to explain what a hacker is at the core. He describes his frustration with teachers explaining math that he was already doing in his head. Then he talks about making a life-changing discovery: A computer does what he tells it to do. If it makes a mistake, it's because he "screwed up," not because it doesn't like him or feels threatened by him or doesn't like teaching. In other words, the computer is a great teacher and very different from a school teacher. One key component of hacker culture is this deep and abiding love for the computer and what it does—as well as a disdain for formal education. The fact that famous hackers like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk are all college dropouts makes this point. The "Hacker's Manifesto" inspired many people to become hackers because they identified with The Mentor.

Hacking culture, according to hackers, is a necessary subversive counterculture that stands against the mainstream of society, which has been brainwashed into prioritizing greed, adapting mainstream norms, and becoming fearful of being different. Hackers disdain authority—decentralization is key—and the ultimate goal is an open political system in which free information is promoted. This cannot happen in a system where bureaucracy rules because bureaucracy kills innovation and creativity.

With all these statements, one can safely say that hackers have formed a kind of religion. Its main symbol is the computer, and its ritual is hacking. The malicious use of information is secondary. Rather, the excitement lies in getting to the information, regardless of its content.

One meaning-giving narrative is that of the underestimated and unappreciated underdog who is, in fact, brilliant and will set the world free through hacking. Another




*double identity* »
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

meaning-giving narrative is that of a free flow of information, which will set us all free. The "Hacker's Manifesto" is its sacred text.

This religion creates a strict insider/outsider distinction in which the insiders are the chosen ones through their math abilities and computer savviness. What the insiders share is an interest in tinkering with and advancing computer hardware and software. They are creative, disciplined, and ambitious. They tend to be proud of their craftsmanship and perceive their hacking activities as fun and rewarding. If they work in a computer-related field, the boundaries between work and leisure are blurry, since hacking is not perceived as work. Most hackers have a problem-solving mentality and exchange tips and tools of the trade in online forums and at conferences. Perceiving themselves as outside-the-box thinkers, hackers take pride in their skills and their results. Hacking is perceived as overcoming obstacles, and so the very process of hacking gives them joy; the final result doesn't matter as much. While all hackers experience the tedium of repetitive tasks and the frustration of experiencing failure, the joy of the process makes such downsides bearable and acceptable.

Often, the turn toward criminal behavior happens gradually and even accidentally. A typical hacker might break into a system for fun and daring. Once inside, the hacker might leave a message and alert the network owner of the weaknesses that let them break in. But some hackers start to look around, explore the illegally entered space, and try to find something valuable that can either be sold, altered, or destroyed for profit.

While criminal hackers—called "black hat" or crackers—can come from all walks of life, the vast majority start as nerdy, young, and male. Hacking becomes a form of rebellion against their parents or a way to enter the adult world on their own terms. Through hacking they gain a kind of independence, which is deepened by the financial independence they get through illegal monetary gains. In a way, youthful hacking becomes a boy culture that is highly competitive, where the less skilled are generally looked down upon and called lame. Hackers commonly taunt each other with threatening overtures designed to provoke fear, and even affection is expressed through aggression. Hacking is not the first religious exploration to become a criminal enterprise, and it won't be the last, but that knowledge may provide some solace the next time your computer is hacked. S+H

**Anne Foerst, PhD**, is a professor of computer science at St. Bonaventure University and author of *God in the Machine,* as well as the new eBook *Cybersecurity and Hacking Ethics*.

25 YEARS OF TOTAL ALIVENESS

In our Spring 2000 issue, theologian Anne Foerst wrote from the MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab, where she was trying to figure out when it would be appropriate to baptize a robot, which meant deciding what separates human beings from other animals. She came up with the metaphor homo narrans (storytelling human). "Why? Because we humans create stories to make sense out of the chaos of our raw perceptions and experiences…To be human is to constantly weave stories. And to be in a culture means to be endlessly woven into a tapestry of more stories. We don't see them as stories because we are so fully embedded in them."

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# FAITH TECH

**STEPHEN KIESLING** has a virtual dialogue with venture capitalists bent on buying the stairways to heaven.

**WE RECEIVED A VIDEO** from a venture capital group raising both awareness and money for what's called Faith Tech. The video raised more than a few questions about the rapidly changing business of faith. Here are some excerpts:

> [Video transcript] *Hey, everybody, my name's Grant Demeter. I'm an investor at the Yard Ventures, which is a Harvard Network Empowered VC fund and part of the Alumni Ventures family of funds. And today I'm gonna be taking you through a deep dive on a topic that's near and dear to my heart. It's called Faith Tech....*
>
> *...Many people, when I brought this up, have asked the question of whether this is really an investible space. And I would give kind of a trite answer, which is that religion has been the stickiest and most retentive human institution of all time. Thus, probably the most fundable startup ever...*
>
> *There are some market studies which define it as a trillion-dollar market based on affiliations to charities or organizations like Chick-fil-A, which have some kind of religious lean to them. But I define it quite conservatively, I think, as a $130 billion market in the US in terms of annual turnover...*

Hmm. If Jesus had just had more cash, he could have done... *what?* Or if the Buddha had been born with less funding, would he still have become enlightened? Is there a right relationship between VC funding and starting a religion? What would it be?

> *For some people, there's a discomfort about using the kind of [VC] business lingo [on religion] as I'm doing now, which, if anything, kind of speaks to how important and central it is to many people's lives. If you're able to facilitate value for people's religious lives, that value, and what you're doing for that consumer, will be able to carry you through multiple years of continued engagement compared with Facebook... I mean, religious communities are not just where people spend most of their time, and thus generating retention because of Mindshare. They're where people spend most of their*

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*[time] or attribute [to] most of their personal and life meaning, which means that the Mindshare is more stable...*

The world's umpteen-thousand, often fractious religions may represent stable mindshare when the lens is focused on extracting cash. But what other values does such focus facilitate?

*One thing I mentioned earlier on is a tech-driven consolidation of religious organizations. So organizations which fail to adopt tech become subsumed by organizations which do adopt tech; megachurches continuing to grow, as an example.*

Ironically, even sects that don't believe in evolution must evolve or die. But does a virtual flight to online megachurches create real-life faith deserts? Dollar General both serves and creates food deserts. Is there a correlation with online megachurches?

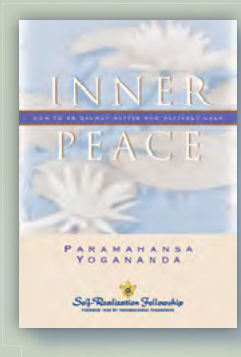
*An interesting fact is there's a Bible app... It is basically the Bible app. It's got more than 500 million downloads, which is pretty wild... So, if this was a for-profit company, it would be a unicorn many times... But think about it: This is a very simple digitization of a text. You know, it's not very feature-rich. Willingness to pay is low, and still it would be a unicorn. You know, what if you're able to serve this same 500-million-person market with a more feature-rich tool, which generated higher willingness to pay? That's kind of my thesis on the space...*

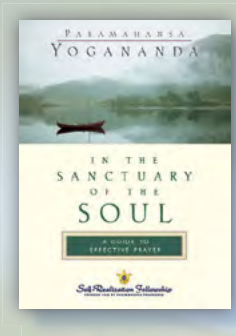
Will these new stairways to Heaven be served by feature-rich tools? Or just owned by them?

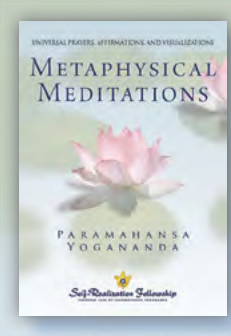
*Cool. Now onto some companies here. So, here are three companies which have very similar business models, which have raised a whole bunch of venture capital from really prominent VC firms.*


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*They're all Christian prayer apps. So, very similar kind of focused, narrow-use case, one might think. But of course, there's 2.1 billion Christians on Earth, and a lot of them pray. [The apps are]Glorify, Hallow, and Pray. Glorify and Hallow are a bit newer. I think they're series B. And you've got strong investors across the board in all three of these: Andreessen Horowitz, SoftBank, General Catalyst, Kleiner Perkins, Greylock, Spark Capital, et cetera... There's been a lot of attention here. The traction has really proved out, and I think these startups are opening the gateway, the floodgates rather...*

Isn't this why the Christian God told Noah to build an ark?

*And then Gloo is an example of this web data-driven—it's actually AI-scraping driven—evangelism and conversion. It's fascinating. It's kind of like Gloo will scrape your social media and all of your cookies data basically to find signs of whether you are convertible; i.e., you're either experiencing financial stress or you're looking more at religious content, or there's been a significant life event in your life, either positive or negative. And based on that, they will provide your information to a religious organization in your area, and they'll use you as a lead for their kind of outreach and conversion efforts. Very fascinating, very controversial...*

The beauty of this algorithm is that you don't have to believe in it—or even know it's there—to be saved. But is this an evolution from prayer app to prey-er app?

*...and Facebook actually has this giant initiative to capture churches and Christians and have them operate their businesses and communities on Facebook's or Meta's Metaverse. Super fascinating. They've already partnered with Hillsong, which is one of the, one of America's biggest megachurches, and a couple others to develop feature sets that are specifically built for churches and find ways to acquire them and everything like this.*

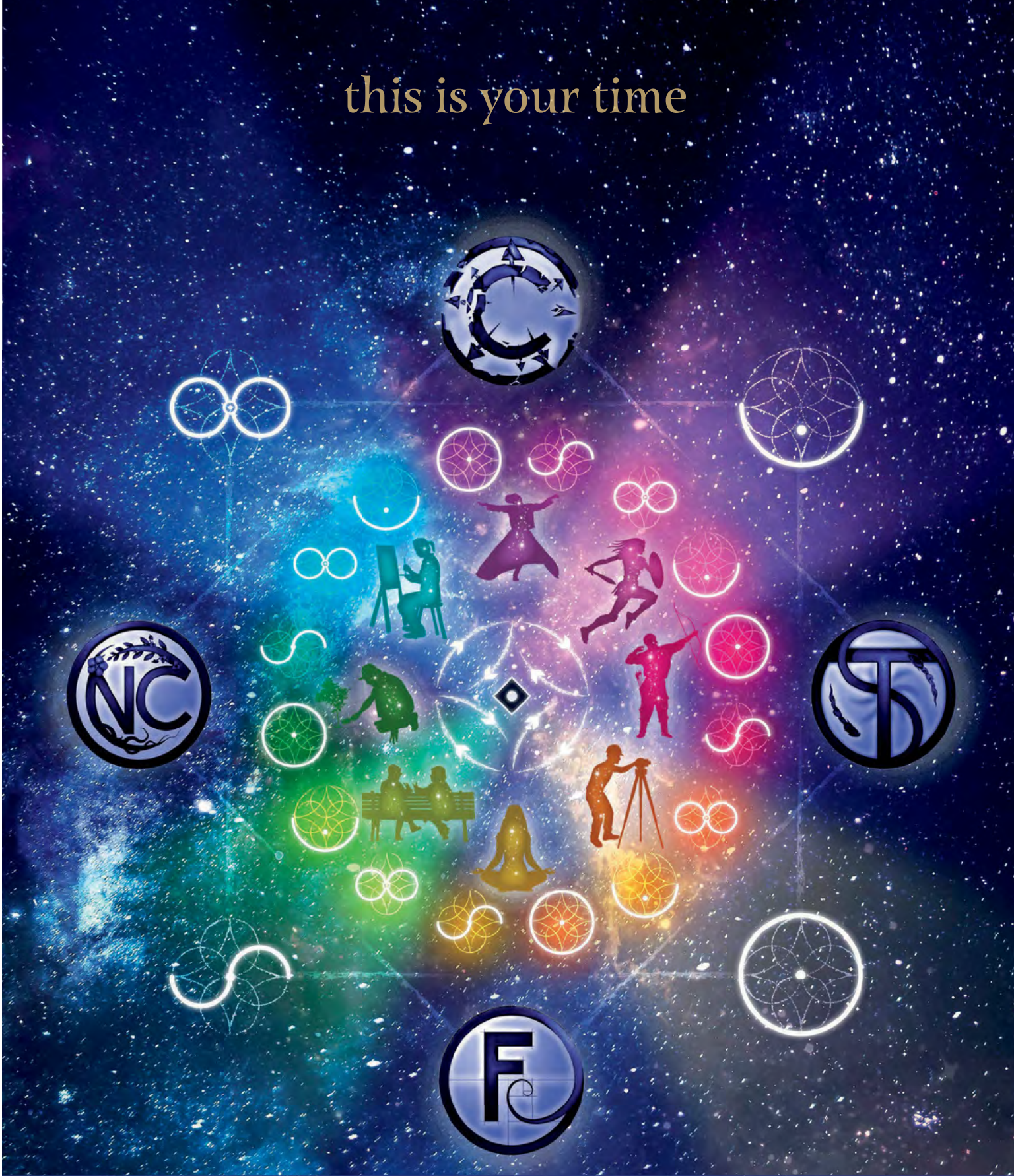
Through his majority stock ownership, Mark Zuckerberg controls the algorithms that control Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp—thus shaping the newsfeeds and perhaps now even the prayers of billions of people. Given the abundance of gods in the world, should we be worried that a small handful of humans are now richer and more powerful than each of them?

*All right, so finally time to wrap things up. I'll say Faith Tech is one of the world's largest markets. It's significantly under-addressed by tech solutions today. And customers are sticky, engaged. There's a high duty of customer attention, which speaks very, very well to kind of the lifetime value of an individual customer...*

Ouch! In the 25 years of writing and editing *S+H,* we've never thought of you, our readers, this way. But we *have* tried to make this your favorite magazine and are extremely grateful to all of you who have stuck with us. **S+H**

25 YEARS OF TOTAL ALIVENESS

S+H founding editor, T George Harris, briefly edited the Harvard Business Review. When T George called me to join him in Cambridge, he was thrilled: "The collapse of the Berlin Wall and communism has created a great opportunity to take a critical look at capitalism." It sounded like fun, but the HBR gig didn't last. Since then, capitalism, armed with ever-more-powerful tech tools, has been bringing us back to a future of what's being called "neo-feudalism" while HBR keeps score. Meanwhile, T George and I were hired by Trinity Church, Wall Street to launch S+H. (Thank God!)


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# CRISIS AND TRANSFORMATION

**SUZANNE MARRIOTT**'s beautiful memoir on caregiving, published this month, began taking shape years ago with conversations at a S+H writer's workshop.

**HE COULDN'T GET INTO HIS TRUCK.** This is how it started: Michael couldn't climb into the cab of his eighteen-wheeler because his arms and legs wouldn't work.

It doesn't make sense. This is supposed to be the day when the exhaustion finally lifts; after a year of working nights, he's finally back on the day shift. Now he's telling me he said no to an ambulance (an ambulance?) and somehow managed to drive home in our Honda to call me instead.

My hands tighten on the phone as I struggle to take in his words. Has he had a stroke? A heart attack? Did he fall?

"Call the clinic and try to get an appointment right away with Dr. Roberts." His voice is strained.

Suddenly I have to be with him, not sitting here making phone calls. "I'm on my way home right now," I tell him. There's a pause. Then he tells me to make the call first. He will lie down and see if that helps.

Somehow my fingers punch the buttons on the phone. Someone answers and switches me to the emergency line. "How may I help you?" The nurse's voice is cheerful.

"Something has happened to my husband—I don't know what. He's a truck driver, and he couldn't get up into his truck."

"Is he conscious?"



*the nowhere plan* »
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

"Yes, he called me."

I quickly give her Michael's medical record number.

"You shouldn't have been put through to this line. It's only for life-and-death situations. Please hold."

My hands are starting to sweat, and I feel as if I'm suffocating. Finally, she returns. "His doctor isn't seeing patients today. Michael's symptoms might indicate a stroke. You should take him directly to the emergency room."

I dash out of the building, and when I unlock my car, the alarm goes off—even though I hadn't set it. I reach in, and, desperate to make the shrieking stop, flip the switch back and forth. A coworker comes out to help but has no idea what to do. We look in the trunk. Nothing. I open the hood and see a horn-shaped object on the left. On impulse I pull a red wire, and the ear-piercing noise stops. I think of the proverbial grandfather's clock that "stopped short, never to go again, when the old man died."

At last I'm on the freeway, but the traffic is crawling; every taillight in front of me glares red. Tense and impatient, I'm right on the bumper of the car ahead. I eye the carpool lane; I check the clock. It's only 20 minutes into the lane-restriction time. I pull over, relieved to be getting closer and closer to home.

Suddenly I see a California Highway Patrol car ahead on the left shoulder. Shit! There's one on the right shoulder too. Fighting back tears, I switch lanes. Almost immediately, one of them appears in my rearview mirror, lights flashing, and I pull over.

When the officer reaches the window on the passenger side of my car, I tell him I'm a teacher and my husband is a truck driver and he has just called me at work to tell me he has collapsed on the job. My mind, trying desperately to forge a connection, figures if he knows I'm a teacher, he will believe me—and, after all, truckers and CHP officers share the same world.

He asks where my husband is now.

"He's at home, and I'm trying to get to him as soon as I can." I gaze up through my tears, silently pleading for help.

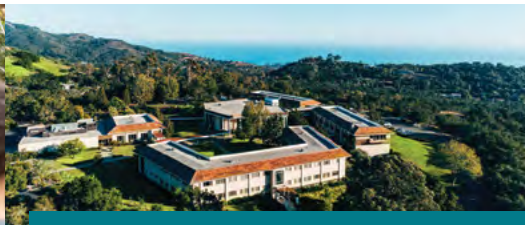
Unmoved, the officer asks to see my driver's license and registration and takes them back to his car. Staring into the rearview mirror in disbelief, I watch him write a ticket. For a second, I had fantasized he would be my knight in shining armor—maybe even an escort home.

"I know you're in a hurry to get home," he tells me as he hands me the ticket. "I wrote you a citation," he adds, as if I don't know what he's handing me. I take it and my license and registration without comment. Following his instructions to merge carefully, I get back on the freeway. Now—insult


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added to injury—I feel abandoned as well as panicked.

I'm still only halfway home, and the gray concrete of Interstate 880 and its looming sound walls make me feel trapped. Then my exit comes up, and the brighter colors of the barrio let me know I'm only 15 minutes away. I continue on the main surface road through Hayward and finally reach Castro Valley, the middle-class suburb where we live—and where my husband is waiting.

My anxiety builds as I'm stopped by the last traffic light. I know Michael would never have called me at work unless it was a dire emergency; he's the type of man who rarely asks for help, proud that he can get the job done himself—meet the bell, he says.

The light finally turns green, and I turn off the crowded street, bouncing the car too fast over the too-deep depression in the road that always tells me I'm almost home. As I pull into the driveway, the house looks just like it always does—no sign that a crisis is unfolding inside.

I don't know whether I'll find Michael passed out on the floor or miraculously recovered, but I fear the worst as I run up the steps from the garage to the living room. Yet there he is, sitting quietly in his chair; I see he has gotten my father's cane to help him balance. I rush to his side and help him up. I'm desperate to know what happened, but I can see from the grim look on his face that he needs to concentrate just to get out of the chair. This is no time for questions. We move awkwardly down the steps to the garage and get into the car. As we race to the hospital, he tells me how hot it was at work, and that as soon as he put one foot and arm up to climb inside the cab, he knew he wasn't going to make it. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't do it.

In the emergency room, the admitting nurse asks Michael when he started using a cane.

"Today."

The nurse pauses to look at him before continuing with his questions. When he's finished, we take our places in the waiting room, where Michael manages to keep his spirits up, joking about inane fantasy creatures on the TV. We exchange a complicit smile, glad for some comic relief.

Soon we're ushered into an exam room, and Michael lies down on the table. It's not long enough for his six-foot, five-inch frame, and his feet stick out over the end. A doctor enters and asks more questions, then tests Michael's reflexes. When a neurologist joins us, the seriousness of the situation starts to hit me. Something must be very wrong if a specialist is brought into the ER. Suddenly, I want to protect my husband and, moving closer, I take his hand. Michael looks up at me with concern in his eyes. Meeting his gaze, I feel my heart expand. It's as if our fears are joined, and I can hold them both.



**As we talk, it becomes clear we are facing a problem that isn't really new; it's been coming on for years.**

The doctors leave, and we wait. Someone has left a crumpled newspaper in the exam room; I pick it up and begin to read an article aloud to distract him. Instead it seems remote and meaningless. Discarding the paper, I give voice to what I know Michael must be feeling. "It's strange, isn't it?" I ask him. "You're not in control. People tell you how it's going to be."

His response has a chilling effect on me. "I'll take whatever they dish out," he says, his face hardening as his body tenses to receive whatever blow is about to be dealt. Suddenly he's ready for the worst. But am I? What in God's name is going to happen?

The first doctor comes back in and says he has arranged for us to see our primary care physician, Dr. Roberts, the following afternoon. He tells us the situation is serious. I think he wants to frighten us so we will be sure to keep the appointment.

"This is definitely a neurological problem," he adds. "At least you haven't hurt yourself yet."

In the days to come, we will hear this phrase or another—"At least you haven't fallen down yet"—many times, and we'll come to understand just how much Michael's balance is becoming impaired. But right now, we wonder why he's telling us this. We want to know exactly what he means, but we don't risk asking; instead, we just nod. More bad news can wait; we've had all we can handle today.

I bring the car around, and Michael slowly gets in. We're quiet on the drive back. Both of us are tired and, I think, more than a little in shock. I make some tea when we get home, and we sit in the living room and try to make sense of what has just happened.

As we talk, it becomes clear we are facing a problem that isn't really new; it's been coming on for years. Several summers ago, we vacationed in the Northwest. On one of the islands off the coast of Washington, we went for a hike, during which Michael found the perfect branch to use for a walking stick. During the next week, he collected shells and bought rawhide and beads to decorate it. On Victoria Island, he commissioned a woman at the Native American Crafts Fair to make a deerskin cap for the top of the stick, and she attached the shells and beads on rawhide strings. We thought of it as a crafts project, but that concealed the stick's real purpose, one we weren't willing to admit: Michael was losing his ability to walk and to keep his balance.

There were other signs we ignored or greeted with denial. Michael had always been the one in the lead on our

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hikes, often turning around to urge me on or retracing his steps to help me over rocks on the trail. Now, rather than Michael, it was I who began taking the lead. I remember feeling increasing concern as I noticed his left leg beginning to drag shortly into a walk. I noticed, too, he began to turn his left foot out to compensate for its growing weakness.

"You're getting stronger," he would say as he lagged behind, attributing the change to me and not himself.

He also began to do less strenuous work around the house. The last time we gardened together, I found myself getting annoyed. I was doing all the work while he sat in a chair and watched, only doing a little raking for a few minutes. This was the same man who, bare-chested and glistening with sweat, would work for hours without a break, digging garden plots or laying winding stone paths.

He made excuses such as, "I'm tired because I work nights," or, "My leg drags because of the way I sit in the truck." And that was that. Michael was never one to go to doctors; he decided what was so—about himself or anyone else—and his opinions could not be changed by me, by others, or even, sometimes, by the facts. His pronouncements became a protective blanket under which he hid from the realities he'd rather not face.

This time, however, is different. Now there are doctors involved. We are finally up against it. Our uncharted journey has begun. S+H

**Suzanne Marriot** is the author of *Watching for Dragonflies: A Caregiver's Transformative Journey,* published this month by She Writes Press. suzannemarriottauthor.com




**25 YEARS OF TOTAL ALIVENESS**

[A longtime subscriber writes] I hope you will remember me from the Yucatan writing workshop you led in 2007. What a wonderful time that was! I will always remember with fondness and nostalgia the lake of seven colors—Lake Bacalar—and being part of such a supportive group of aspiring journalists... As you may remember from our conversations at the workshop, my husband, Michael, died in 2006. My memoir, Watching for *Dragonflies: A Caregiver's Transformative Journey* [published this month], is about my spiritual and psychological growth during the 10 years Michael suffered from multiple sclerosis and I was his caregiver. I believe my story will bring comfort and inspiration to other caregivers and to anyone who has experienced grief and loss.

—Suzanne Marriott



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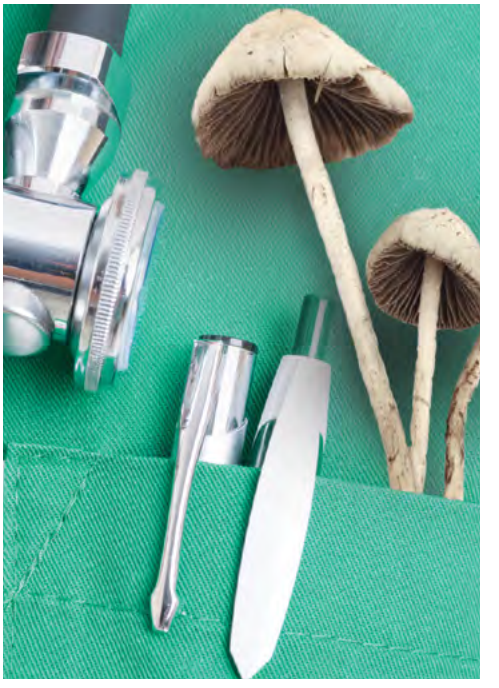
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# WHY—STILL—THE SOUND OF SILENCE?

Three healing professionals—**AMZA ALI, MD, JUSTIN GRANT, PHD,** and **MARY-ELIZABETH GIFFORD**—consider the high costs of not speaking up for palliative care with psychedelics.



**IN OUR WORK** in drug development, we seek psilocybin-based medical solutions for those who suffer from intractable anxiety or depression after receiving a difficult or life-limiting diagnosis. We're guided by remarkable breakthroughs in psychedelic research that include data from trials at NYU, UCLA, and Johns Hopkins, which demonstrate immediate and lasting symptom relief.

We are also guided by patient experiences and patient voices. In Canada, for example, stage IV cancer patients are now active advocates for psychedelic access at end of life. One patient, Thomas Hartl, has joined a legal challenge expected to go before that nation's highest court. In America, Erinn Baldeschwiler, a mother of two who suffers from end-stage metastatic breast cancer, joined the long tradition of peaceful civil disobedience in Washington, DC, by demonstrating at the headquarters of the Drug Enforcement Administration. On the Monday after Mother's Day, she was arrested for asserting her legal right to medicinal psilocybin under the federal "Right to Try" law.

These brave patients are advocating for access to safe and legal medicinal psychedelics to secure their own well-being and to help others facing the despair of similar mental health challenges. In working to improve access for themselves and others, they are educating both the public and policy makers. As recently as March 2023, a bipartisan group in the U.S. Senate reintroduced legislation to ensure that investigational psychedelic medicine is available for palliative care.

Yet one group of voices is missing—and that's our own. We are now asking ourselves why we so rarely hear the insights of the doctors, healers, and biopharma executives? Is it because our work is expected to speak for itself? Or is it because we have been trained as professionals to be quiet, and because our ecosystem discourages the sharing of our emotions?

What we have come to realize is that a code of professional silence is established early; even when—or perhaps especially when—our healing treatments fail. Indeed, the very definition of "professionalism" is defined in large part by what the Godfather would have called omertà: the code of silence. To break silence is to betray the field.

For one of us, Dr. Amza Ali, silence arrived early in his medical practice. As a newly minted MD, he felt personally invincible and certain that his degree and white coat would allow him to protect his patients. But a white coat is not a superhero cape, a hard lesson he learned at the bedside of his youngest patient, "LH," who was two years old.

LH was admitted to the pediatric surgical ward with an advanced aggressive tumor with brain metastases. Whenever Amza stopped by LH's crib, which he did often, LH would smile and even laugh through the terrible pain that was largely caused by the treatments.

One day Amza stopped by to find that LH wouldn't wake up; that night, he remained the same. The next night the crib was empty. Years later, Amza still experiences the anguish of seeing that empty crib. It's strange, says Amza, that he has no memory of the child's parents, nor can he recall if he even ever spoke with them again. He wonders whether his mind blocked the memory of the bereaved father and mother because the memory of their pain was too much to bear with his own.

Over decades of active clinical practice, other painful memories have seared his soul:

"A 54-year-old wife receiving a diagnosis of ALS and telling her significantly older husband, "See? After all, I am the one who will go first.""

"The 33-year-old physician dying of brain and lung metastases from breast cancers. As she struggled to breathe, partly unclothed as the doctors and nurses—including

S+H ILLUSTRATION: SOURCE IMAGES GETTYIMAGES.COM

me—worked around her, her last words were an unnecessary and almost unbearable apology, "This is so embarrassing.""

Professional silence can only add to the burden of such professional heartbreaks. And while the cost of silence may not be directly measurable, it is an obvious contributor to high rates of burnout, diagnosable anxiety, and depression among healthcare professionals. In findings presented by the American Psychiatric Association, it is reported that suicides among physicians are the highest of *any* profession.

What we have come to realize is that those of us developing the field of psychedelic palliative medicine should do no less than the courageous patients we are working to serve. We need to match the voices of those pioneering palliative patient-advocates. As a healing industry, we need to learn how to more openly share in both the doctor's and patient's emotional and spiritual journeys. We need a shift in how we express ourselves so that our own emotions are considered a strength for better medicine and better pharmaceutical development. Many studies decry the medical profession's loss of "bedside" manners, which might simply be a shorthand phrase for the medical field's discomfort with honest conversation.

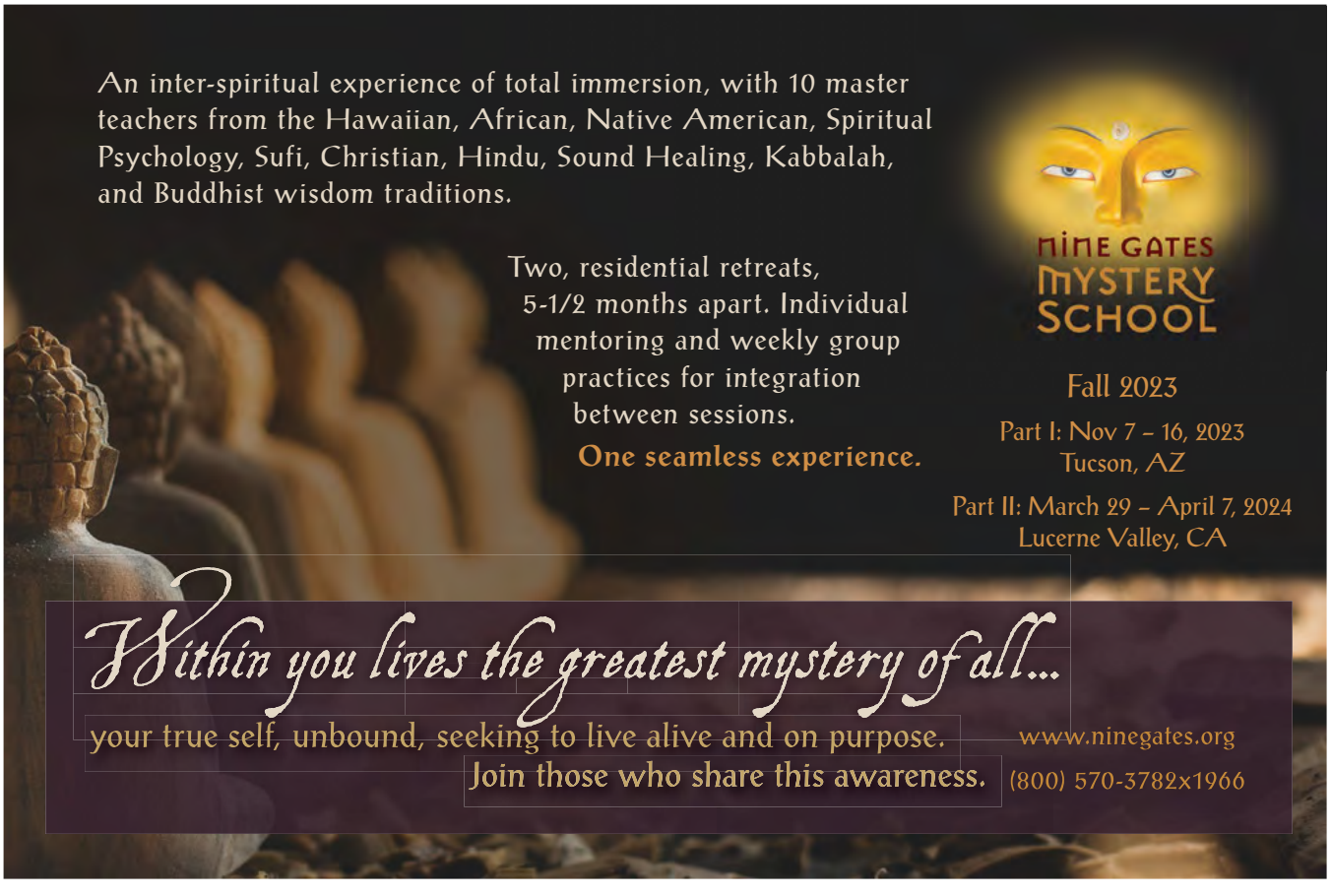
The head of palliative care at MD Anderson Cancer Center, Eduardo Bruera, MD, has written a guide for palliative care physicians urging the medical profession to remember that sometimes "the most important instrument" in medicine is "a chair." That chair, Dr. Bruera believes, holds the power to break professional silence simply because it puts the medical team member at eye-level with the patient—and this level of conversation, he says, can help achieve better outcomes.

Thomas Hartle, Erinn Baldeschwiler, and other brave psychedelic patient-activist leaders remind us what great healers know by heart: that openly and unashamedly engaging in dialogue and breaking the professional code of silence may not contribute to a cure, but it most certainly contributes to healing. S+H

**Amza Ali, MD**, is an internationally recognized neurologist with a career-long commitment to advocacy on behalf of people with epilepsy as well as research at the intersection of neurology and underserved populations with a focus on new therapies.

**Justin Grant, PhD**, has expertise in drug development at Canada's top research institutes and early-stage biotech companies.

**Mary-Elizabeth Gifford** is chair of the Global Wellness Institute's Psychedelics & Healing Initiative and executive vice president of Psyence Group, a biotechnology company developing nature-derived pharmaceutical psilocybin.



# Praying I Will Find

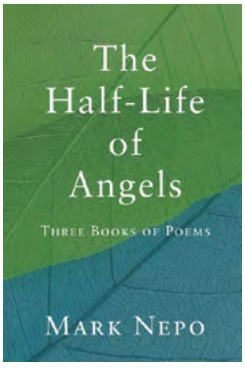
BY MARK NEPO

I used to have so many plans, good plans, grand plans. In the beginning, I would be annoyed by the calamities I'd meet along the way that would keep me from my plans.

I used to pride myself on how I could get back on track so quickly. But the more I loved and the more I suffered, the more my plans were interrupted by those in need.

Eventually, the call of life, unexpected and unrehearsed, made swiss cheese of my plans.

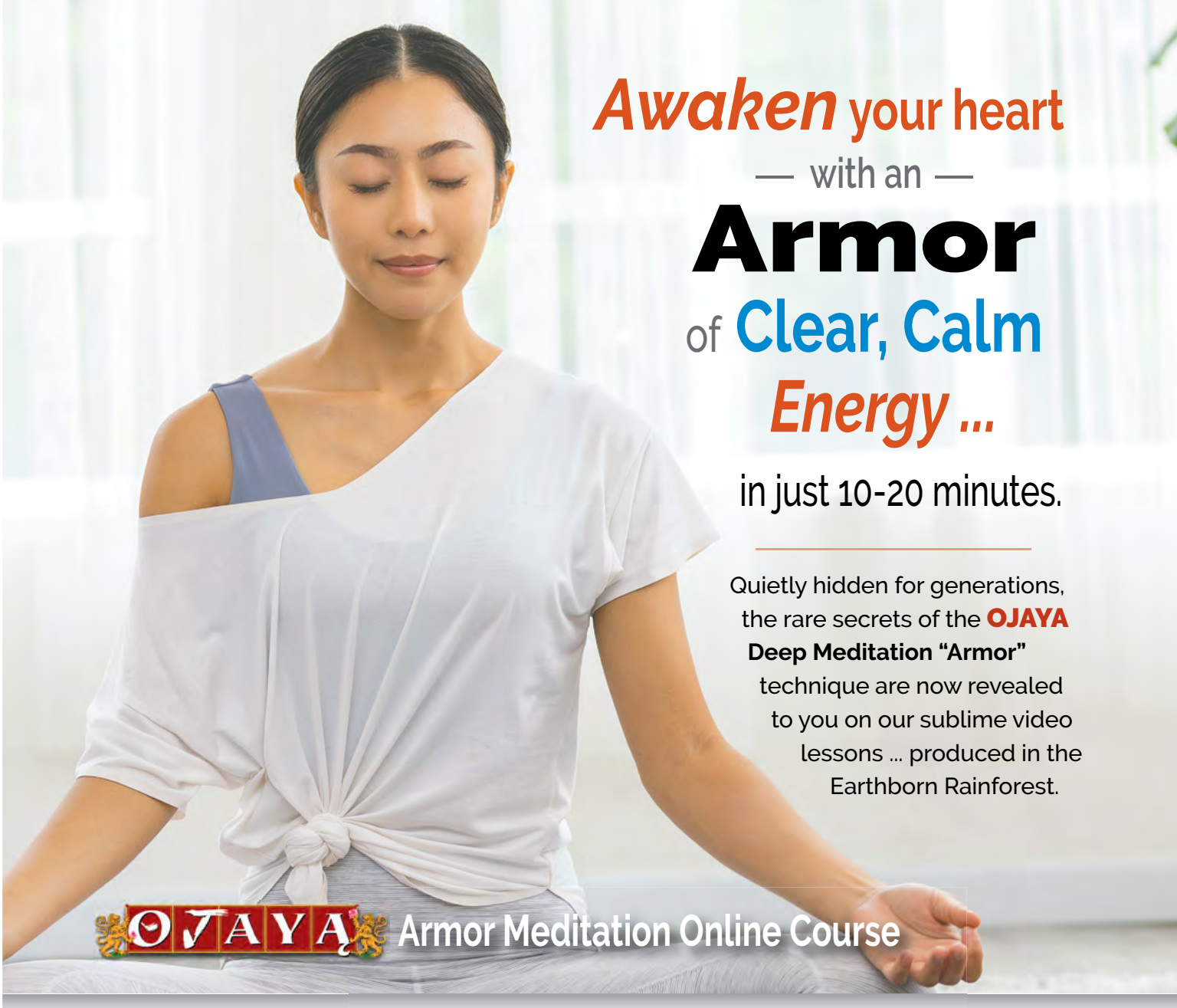
Now, like an emperor undressed by time, I wander the days naked of plans, praying that I will find love to give and suffering to heal before the sun goes down.




From *The Half-Life of Angels: Three Books of Poems* by Mark Nepo (Freefall Books, April 2023)



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# THE TIME OF OUR LIVES

AN INTERVIEW WITH
**CHIP CONLEY**
BY **STEPHEN KIESLING**

The Modern Elder Academy is where people learn to embrace their age, their gifts, their wisdom.

MEA's workshop cohorts offer a powerful sense of connection—a "collective effervescence"—that's growing into a new kind of worldwide web, led by a man who has lived some hugely successful corporate mantras for happiness and inclusion:

Joie de Vivre's "Create joy!"

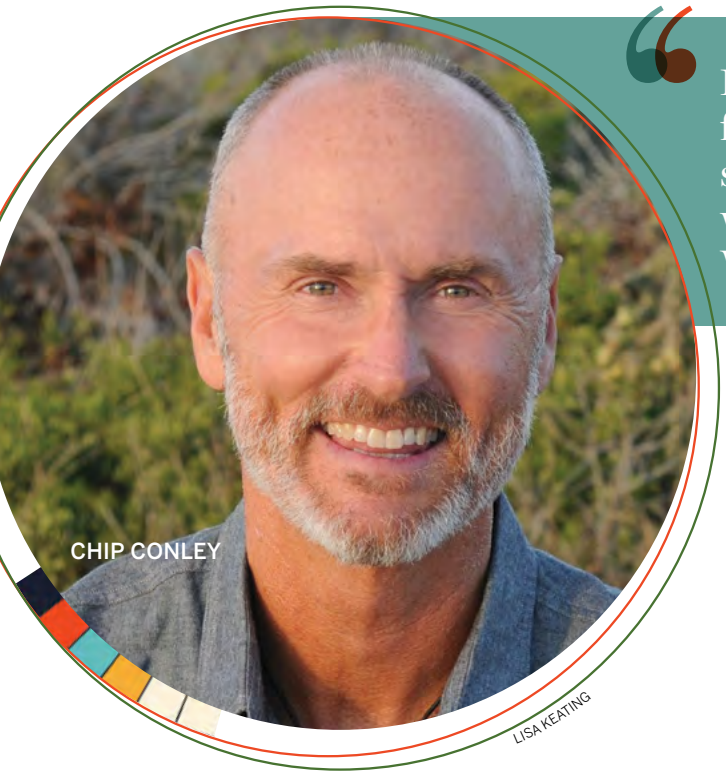
Airbnb's "Belong Anywhere!"

MEA's "Minting elders who are curious, wise, playful, audacious, and generous."

**THIS NEW PATH IS NOT TOWARD RETIREMENT, BUT RENEWAL.**



*Meet Your Maker*
Ryan Dean Sprague
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CHIP CONLEY

LISA KEATING

By midlife we tend to have figuratively piled on so many sweaters and coats that we're weighed down by our uniforms. We need some space to disrobe.

I realized I wasn't alone in that either.

**Having spent a week at your Modern Elder Academy in Baja, it struck me that a big step to becoming a modern elder happens when we stop resisting who we are and come out and embrace it. That's when the fun begins. And that got me thinking about two of my best friends from high school and college who are gay. They were in considerable discomfort for years because they were closeted. But there was a point when they came out—and then a point where I got jealous because they were having more fun than I was. I'm wondering how this analogy works for you? Coming out—and coming out as a modern elder.**

Good question. I think there's something to your analogy in the sense that there's a taboo, obviously, in society around being gay. There's also a taboo around being middle-aged or being in midlife. No one's ever brought this up to me before, but it may be part of the reason I'm so attracted to midlife. It's something that has a besmirched reputation that limits life or is painful for a lot of people—but it's the best time of my life.

I began coming out in 1983, when I was 22. It was the summer between my first and second year of Stanford Business School, and I was in New York. I was a hyper-achievement-oriented person. I was an All-American water polo player. I was in a fraternity. I had a girlfriend. I was the youngest person in my Stanford Business School class. And the best way to describe what happened the first time I walked into a gay bar was that my life went from black and white to Technicolor. I was like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* when her house landed on the Wicked Witch. The world suddenly got bright and new. What that moment meant more than anything was the realization that I wasn't alone.

The idea of coming out with a scarlet letter G wasn't advisable from my father's perspective. But I think what it did is that it allowed me to really sink into the depth of who I was. Some of it had nothing to do with my sexuality. Some of it had to do with my curiosity about spirituality. Some of it had to do with my fascination with the mystics. What was interesting, and I think is sort of weirdly ironic, is that my coming out process was also a coming out spiritually. I grew up in a conservative Episcopalian family that was basically non-religious, and I got really curious about spirituality right around the same time I came out. I think it had a lot to do with trying to understand the mystery of life, including the mystery of why someone is gay or not. Modern science still hasn't figured that out.

**And you felt a lot more joy?**

Yes. In many ways. I broke out of my straightjacket that had defined me. <laughs> Midlife can be like that in a way, too. By midlife we tend to have figuratively piled on so many sweaters and coats that we're weighed down by our uniforms. We need some space to disrobe—to re-embrace ourselves. I realized I wasn't alone in that either.

**Let's come back to that. Your big success early was a hotel company called Joie de Vivre that grew to 50 boutique hotels. But you started with one hotel that rented by the hour in the Tenderloin. That first hotel sounds like another besmirched reputation.**

That's true. My first hotel was called The Phoenix, and it did rent by the hour when I bought it—and it was failing. But I thought The Phoenix could rise from its own ashes as a rock 'n' roll hotel. I'm a Scorpio, and scorpions are very phoenix-like. And the phoenix is the official bird of San Francisco because the city came back to life from the 1906 earthquake and fire. I was 26 when I resurrected that hotel and launched Joie de Vivre. My experience coming out made the company name and the idea of embracing a joyous life visceral for me. It was our mission to create joy, first for our employees and then for our customers. That mission just kept growing.

**You were on the board of the Esalen Institute for 10 years. What got you there?**

The first time I went to Esalen was with my girlfriend in college, and we tried to sneak into the baths. But we couldn't. The second time was right after I'd come out. I was really curious about the Human Potential movement, about Abraham Maslow and all the great thinkers who had been there. I ended up going back over and over again. I learned to meditate there. I learned to love massage. Then I started teaching workshops once a year. And then I joined the board and became one of the biggest donors. The bookstore at Esalen is named after me.

**While we were in Baja, you spoke about the Great Recession. You lost a bunch of your friends to suicide. You sold your hotels.**

The Great Recession was punishing for all kinds of people. All five of those friends were men between ages 42 and 52. So they were in early midlife or midlife. Three of the five were entrepreneurs, and their businesses went belly up. Their sense of self-esteem was so attached to their business cards that the Great Recession revealed their lives as a house of business cards. It all crumbled.

I went through my own Dark Night of the Soul. So many things at once. A long-term relationship ending, not by my choice. An African-American foster son going to prison as an adult, wrongfully—I got him exonerated. My company was running out of money, and I didn't even want to run my company anymore. I also had some health stuff going on, and then I had an allergic reaction to an antibiotic and flatlined several times. That flatline experience turned out to be my wake-up call.

Looking back, I was 47 years old when I hit bottom. I had never heard of the U-shaped curve of happiness, which shows, as you know from the workshop, that the low point of life-happiness globally on average is 47 years old. That period of my life—from, say, 45 to 49—was definitely my darkest time. But it helped set the table for my curiosity about the period of life that we call midlife. That time has a bad brand attached to it—as if it has to be a crisis. I went into my fifties, and it was the best decade of my life.

**You went to work with Airbnb and became the elder mentor of a group of twenty-somethings. Airbnb's motto—"Belong Anywhere"—sounds like part of your story. Did that come from you?**

No. "Belong Anywhere" wasn't my idea. But it came out of a process that we used at Joie de Vivre and now at MEA. The process involves repeating the same question five times where you can't give the same answer twice. The question was, "What business are we in?" and the series of answers got us to realize that we weren't in the home-sharing business, we were in the "Belong Anywhere" business. That was our core, our soul, our essence as a business. That process led us to reorganizing the company around that two-word mantra, "Belong Anywhere." It's another way of saying you're not alone.

> Many successful people in midlife have been on the treadmill for so long and they've been running so fast that they feel that whatever they do, they have to do well.



> That makes it really hard to start something new.

*Panther Floral* »
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> Part of our job at MEA is to mint modern elders who are curious, wise, playful, audacious, and generous.



*Butterfly Motif*
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**Then you left Airbnb and built a magnificent beach house in Pescadero, Baja, that gave birth to the Modern Elder Academy. How did that happen?**

I'd come down here to southern Baja with a couple friends a dozen years ago. I was here for a week, and with each day I appreciated it more and more. There are some places you go that immediately give you a hit, but then it wears off. The experience here was something that built with each passing day. I think it was the magical nature of the nature here—as well as the culture I loved. And so, after coming down here a few times, I decided to buy a home and completely redo it.

Then I began writing the book, *Wisdom at Work: The Making of a Modern Elder*, based upon my Airbnb experience. And while I was writing the book, I was going for runs on the beach. That's when I had a Baja "Aha!" My epiphany was to realize that we don't have midlife wisdom schools. We don't have what Mary Catherine Bateson calls a "midlife atrium," a space for some light and some clarity. And it suddenly struck me that I could create something like that: a physical space that has a curriculum that helps people to reframe their relationship with aging and to cultivate their wisdom. My hotel experience, Airbnb, Esalen, mentoring—it all clicked together into what I dreamed of doing next. And I started MEA with my two co-founders, Christine Sperber and Jeff Hamaoui. And we started adding guest rooms and meeting rooms and a yoga platform to my beach house. I had to buy myself a new house down the beach.

**One of my friends is an Olympic gold medalist from Germany, and his coach would assess other athletes and say, "This guy has stopped learning. You can beat him." So my friend's program for winning the gold medal was based on continuous learning. MEA is also based on continuous learning. What's the difference?**

MEA's curriculum has multiple parts to it, but one key piece is the idea of moving from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. A fixed mindset is focused on proving yourself, and you define success as winning. So an Olympic gold medalist would be continuously learning their craft to win.

A growth mindset is not about proving yourself. It's about improving yourself. And it's not about winning. It's about learning. And when you take a growth mindset to your life, and especially to aging, it opens you up to becoming a beginner again, to being curious again, to really wanting to learn again.

Many successful people in midlife have been on the treadmill for so long and they've been running so fast that they feel that whatever they do, they have to do well. That makes it really hard to start something new. Either you are not patient enough to learn it. Or you're so self-critical that you get upset at yourself and quit. One of the things we love about MEA is that we create an environment where people learn how to be open to new experiences again. They learn to enjoy being beginners again. Openness to new experiences correlates with living a long, happy, healthy life, and I think MEA is the ultimate taproot for helping people to find that curiosity that opens them up to new experiences. That's one big reason we offer surfing lessons at the end of the week. We call this kind of midlife education "long-life learning," how to live a life that's as deep and meaningful as it is long. We have more than 3,000 alums from 42 countries and 26 regional chapters around the world. We appeal to a diverse demographic partly because we offer financial aid, which is unusual for retreat centers.

**One of the first things I noticed at MEA were the hot tubs and the wine.**

<laughs> Yes. Some retreat centers are great, but very Spartan, and there's a time and a place for that. If you're doing a Zen meditation retreat, there probably should not be any wine around. But we want to celebrate, we want to be playful, we want to have fun. There's some great learning to be done, but we don't want a person to feel like this is work. We want this to feel like a wellness vacation, and we really want to deepen connections, where almost every conversation is from what we call the third vault, a heart connection. So, if you do drink alcohol, you are probably going to want

a margarita while you're down here—but we also have some alcohol-free weeks, too. And most people do end up in the hot tubs.

There are five adjectives that define the brand of MEA: curious, wise, playful, audacious, and generous. That is what we try to create with the environment that is MEA. But those five adjectives also define the way we think a modern elder can be. Part of our job at MEA is to mint modern elders who are curious, wise, playful, audacious, and generous.

**I was intrigued by MEA's twist on name tags. Instead of being issued a name tag, we each chose tags that revealed something personal about ourselves. One of four tags I chose read, "I secretly believe in magical thinking and am embarrassed by that." Another tag I wrote for myself read, "I feel like I don't belong even when I do." Then we had an exercise that involved reading one another's tags. It was a little unnerving, but everyone did it, and it created a deep bond in the group within the first 24 hours.**

That first exercise is part of all of our workshops. Each person, no matter what the particular curriculum happens to be, is on a hero's journey—a journey that the entire group also goes on together. And one goal of the journey is to get to know people from the inside out. So, instead of sending every participant an email that says, "Here's a list of all the people who are coming to your workshop and their LinkedIn profiles," and then providing everyone a name tag on arrival, we do the opposite. We don't even want you to know each other's last names—not at first. We don't necessarily want you to know each other's careers. And if you want to use a different name, you're welcome to use a different name. As I said before, one of the beauties of MEA is the disrobing of identities. One goal is to let you try on a new identity and mindset for a few days and regain a sense of who you are without all of your habits.

**One fundamental issue in America—especially as people get older—is loneliness. Just the ability to meet that many new people and potentially make new friends is remarkable. I live out in the sticks in Oregon, and I think that made my group especially good fun.**

That is not something that we lead with, but that's certainly a part of MEA. A recent study found that two-thirds of Americans are in search of deeper, closer friends. The key words are "in search of." It's not just that they're open to closer friends; they're actively in search of closer friends—for very good reasons. An 85-year longitudinal study of adult development from Harvard found that having strong social relations and "emotional insurance" at 50 is the best predictor of happy and healthy living at age 80. The number one variable for having a good, long life is your relationship with community. And so we certainly help provide that—even to people who don't know they need it.

## JOIN US IN SANTA FE WHEN S+H GOES TO MEA...

In 2024, MEA will be opening a new campus outside Santa Fe, New Mexico, at a spectacular 2,600-acre regenerative horse ranch. MEA chose Santa Fe for their U.S. headquarters because of the long history of being a place for personal growth and connection, the history of indigenous eldership, and the opportunity to use nature as a teacher. Santa Fe is also home to lots of S+H subscribers, so we've decided to create a gathering called "Spirituality+Health in Midlife & Beyond" from March 24–31, 2024. The group will be facilitated by Chip Conley and Steve Kiesling, who created this interview. But we expect everyone to be teachers. We'll be gathering to learn, to share, to experiment with regenerativity, and to have a very fine time in a beautiful new place. We'll also practice interviews—including interviewing yourself on your own heroic journey. If you would like to stay updated on the upcoming details of this event, please go to modernelderacademy.com/santa-fe/spirituality-health-workshop.

**You also have a very active MEA alumni network. My group, my cohort, had its first post-workshop Zoom, and almost everyone showed up. And there's an ongoing group chat on WhatsApp.**

Most of our graduates feel a sense of community with their cohort—the people they were in a workshop with—but also with a broader collection of people in the MEA community. I think one of the reasons it works is because we have a common curriculum and MEA workbook, so there's a common ethos across all of our alumni. The week that you were there, Steve, the focus was on wisdom, but there's a core curriculum across all the workshops such that when you get two MEA alums together, there's a common language. There's even an MEA regenerative community of 26 alums living around a regenerative farm, and we'll be opening two larger campuses in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the next couple years, as well as more regenerative communities. It feels like MEA is creating a global movement of inspired and empowered midlifers who are learning from each other as they grow into modern elderhood.

**Stephen Kiesling** is editor in chief of S+H.



# I don't just take photos





**CHRISTOPHER BRISCOE** ALSO PRACTICES THE ART OF GIVING THEM AWAY

I'm a photographer, and sometimes my travels take me to places where people have so much less than I do. And while I don't believe that taking a person's photograph takes part of their soul, I do feel a pang of guilt knowing that the image I just took is now in my possession. I can post it on social media, use it in my portfolio, or even hang it in my home. The person in the photo is left with nothing more than a fleeting glimpse of the image on the back of my camera. This exchange has never seemed fair.

A decade ago, while planning a trip to the East and Southeast Asia, I came up with a solution to ease my guilt. Epson had just released a photo printer about the size of a shoebox. With a battery, some ink cartridges, paper, and a large backpack, I left home to become a modern-day Johnny Appleseed, ready to hand out snapshots wherever I went.

Near Mai Sot, Thailand, I walked into a city dump situated on the banks of the Moei River—a part of the Thailand-Myanmar border. Refugees from Myanmar had fled by raft, taking up residence in makeshift huts among the mountains of trash and smoking piles of ashes. During the day they picked through the heaps of refuse, looking for discarded clothes and recyclable materials that could be sold.

A family squatting in their open shelter watched me with apprehension, wondering why this stranger was there. I asked the father, through gestures, if I could take their photo. He shrugged, not completely sure why I wanted to. My printer, now resting in the ashes, whirred to life. The moment the first print appeared, I was surrounded. After that, it didn't take me long to make friends. Children tugged at my shirt wanting to be next. Old ladies tried to shoo them away so they could cut in line. Thin clouds of every insect imaginable buzzed around us through a stench that can only ooze from a sea of garbage. A dozen heads crowded over the printer. A cheer rang out every time a new photo appeared. I couldn't make the photos fast enough, so I showed a teenage boy how to run the machine.







As their enthusiasm grew, I noticed that many held their small photos with a reverence, like they were gazing at an image they'd never seen before. As the afternoon wore on, my makeshift photo lab became the main riverside event.

Photo printing technology has improved and evolved over the years. Gone are the days when printers were the size of a shoebox—now they fit in the palm of your hand. To make printing even easier, a technology called ZINK (Zero Ink) was invented, making ink cartridges obsolete. Now the "ink" is in the paper itself, activated by heat. Kodak came out with a small printer that makes a retro-looking 3x3 print by using a 4-step dye-sub process for more archival prints. All of it comes together with a Bluetooth-enabled editing app for your tablet or cell phone.

On a more recent trek around India, I filled my camera bag with ZINK photo paper. From the slums of Mumbai to a Buddhist monastery in Sikkim and later to visiting remote villages on a moped—photo ops were everywhere. People initially reacted with suspicion when I arrived, but as soon as I gave them a printed picture, it was like magic. The doors opened. People cheered and pushed each other to get the best view of the magic happening. I was invited into their homes for tea.

My final absolution from being a soul robber came when I took a picture of a roadside beggar in Darjeeling. As I handed him his print, he carefully inspected it from all angles. Then he smiled and kissed the back of my hand, offering a final blessing—a validation—that I was not a soul thief. Instead, I was simply a photographer who loves taking portraits and giving them away—one print at a time.



**Christopher Briscoe** is a photographer "driven to uncover the common threads that bind us all." His work has appeared in *The Times* (London), *USA Today, People, Time,* and *Paris Match.* He also photographs cultural icons including Steven Spielberg and Michael Douglas.

> People initially reacted with suspicion when I arrived, but as soon as I gave them a printed picture, it was like magic. The doors opened.









25 YEARS OF TOTAL ALIVENESS

**Christopher Briscoe** first wrote about this practice in S+H shortly after his first trip to Thailand. When we reconnected, he was back from three months of shooting (photographs!) in Ukraine, sharing photos mostly phone to phone. Nevertheless, he says, nothing beats being able to gift a person or family with an actual print on archival paper.



# *Practices for* Shattered Nights

March 11th was a normal day, filled with typical responsibilities and joys, concerns and endeavors, practices and distractions.

March 12th, I awoke to a *new* normal...

BY **ANDREA SHERMAN, PHD**
WITH **MARSHA WEINER, MA**

The change began with a menacing dream the night of the 11th:

> There are two women and a man.
>
> One of the women has a very domineering presence and is insisting, is forcing the other woman to get impregnated by the man.
>
> I'm standing between the two women, between the bully and the frightened woman, and scream — NO!!!

Then, not dreaming, I found myself on the floor of my bedroom covered with blood, so much blood that my husband wrapped me in towels and rushed me to the hospital.

Evidently, while dreaming, I physically waved my arms to protect the frightened woman, and flung myself to the bedroom floor with such force that I broke my nose.

« *lost 10*
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

Two weeks later, another dream:

> Am waiting for a friend at a school bus stop. He's supposed to drive the bus. He's late. The bus begins to move. There is no driver.

I woke up screaming!

There was a distinctive quality to the dreams. A vividness and a pervasiveness. A visceral, oozing terror. From my years of meditating and studying dharma, I had started to become familiar with the terrain of my mind. These dreams alerted me that the terrain of my mind had changed dramatically.

I needed help.

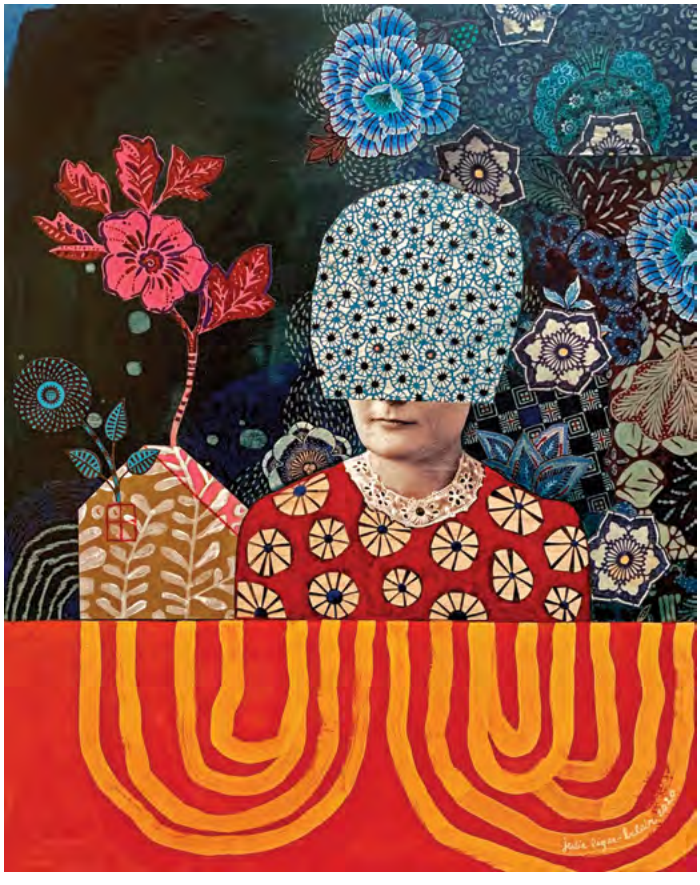
First, I met with a neurologist, and after a series of tests, I was given the diagnosis of Rapid Eye Movement Sleep Behavior Disorder. According to DSM-5 (edited):

> Rapid Eye Movement Sleep Behavior Disorder (RBD) is described as a parasomnia, or excessive motor activity during dreaming. The sufferer acts out their dreams and perhaps causes injury to themselves or a bed partner. Behaviors may manifest once or more during sleep and occur along a continuum of mild (muscle twitching) to severe (reaching, grabbing, and complex motor behaviors). It is thought that the latter are reactions to events that are occurring in the RBD patient's dream state. The disorder is rare; occurring in only 0.5 percent of the population. There is no exact cause of this disorder.

There was more:

> REM Sleep Behavior Disorder may be associated with other degenerative neurological conditions, such as Lewy body dementia, Parkinson's disease, or multiple system atrophy.
>
> It's been confirmed that 30 percent of individuals with RBD developed a Parkinsonian disorder or dementia within three years, and 66 percent did so within 7.5 years.

Okay! It's helpful to have a diagnosis, to be able to name it. But what was I supposed to do about it?



« *life lines*
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

**"The root of suffering is resisting the certainty that no matter what the circumstances, uncertainty is all we truly have."**

**—PEMA CHÖDRÖN**

My imagination became flooded with uncertainty and fear. I shuddered and panicked with images of mental decline and loss of control over basic bodily functions. What's going to happen? How am I to live with this? I had no idea. What ideas I did have only made it worse.

I'm a Buddhist, and a serious practitioner—the dharma name I was given is Discipline Warrior. I couldn't help but ponder how I might make use of this phenomenon occurring in my mind as I continued to practice dharma. For example, I'd often heard it said that it is helpful to observe how your mind is during a dream because doing so will familiarize the perception of the illusory nature of our minds. In dream states we can learn and practice letting go of grasping and instead remain open and curious when meditating as well as when encountering the dynamism of the bardo states, while dying. So perhaps my sleep disorder was a preparation



*parts (detail): number 4* »
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

for death, teaching me to be a fearless warrior during the bardos?

Honestly, such pondering didn't help. What happened instead is that the anxiety of not knowing what to expect became overwhelming.

More dreams occurred over the next couple of weeks. Here's one:

> I'm on retreat holding a bunch of handouts. They are out of order and need to be organized if they are to be useful. Am sitting in a chair in the back of the meditation hall and am unable to see or hear my teacher.
>
> A man with menacing behavior is standing nearby.
>
> Then I realize my sister's house is next to the retreat center. Her house is surrounded by a fence. It feels separate and private. There's a growing anxiety that I can't reach her.
>
> My frustration gains momentum, combining the disorder of the handouts, not being able to see or hear my teacher, the menacing presence of the man, and not being able to reach my sister.

I woke up trembling.

Given my heightened fear and anxiety, it was suggested I go for a more in-depth sleep test to get more information. I readily agreed.

At the sleep lab, I was hooked up to no less than 40 cables and nodes. Wired and tired, I went to sleep—and conveniently had a dream:

> I've finished the sleep test and there are two men in the room dismantling all the wires. It's 4:30 in the morning. I have my phone and want to call my husband to wake him up to come and get me.
>
> My phone is on, but I can't find the familiar green icon of the phone receiver on the screen. Instead of one, there are three different green phone icons.
>
> That throws me into great confusion and frustration.
>
> I notice another woman in the sleep lab. I want to ask her to help me, but she's busy; her friends are with her.
>
> My anxiety to reach my husband grows. The anxiety begins to morph into fear. The fear begins to expand.

The technician managing the sleep test was so alarmed by the level of anxiety registering on the machines that she woke me up. Diagnosis confirmed. Now what?

**"Taking refuge in the sangha means looking for support, comfort, security and guidance from those who already follow the Buddha and the dharma."**

**—A TEACHING**

I reached out to a long-time sangha friend, a medical doctor trained in both western and Tibetan medicine. She immediately sent me a series of herbs, with instructions.

She also introduced me to another process of working with dreams. First, I was to make a conscious distinction between when I was dreaming and when I was not; to ask throughout the day, "Am I dreaming or awake? How do I know when I am dreaming?"

She then introduced me to the process of retelling dreams. Twice a day I select a dream to bring to my conscious mind. While invoking the power of kindness and compassion, I retell the dream without the menacing force. So, rather than ruminate on dreams drenched in terror, I revise the narrative to dispel the fear and concentrate on that. It has proven to be an effective tool!



« *untitled 1 (room 24)*
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

Still, dreams came:

> I am in a large hall where everyone is doing dance yoga. I lift my leg to do a ballet move I'm very familiar with from my years as a dancer called a rond de jambe...

And I was suddenly awakened by the crash of my leg slamming against the window blinds.

It was 5:30 a.m.

Nevertheless, I was encouraged by the process of re-narrating the dreams and sought a Jungian therapist. While educating me about the language and dynamics of dreams, the therapist also suggested I keep a journal in the thick of it. The entries emerged scrawled like graffiti.

*My nerves are raw, feels like nerve endings are standing up! The wild roller coaster ride of REM Sleep Behavior Disorder. Will I have a good sleep???? Does terror await me!??!?! Sleep behavior disorder, it's a roller coaster. Getting ready to sleep is standing on the outside before taking the deep dive into the unconscious.*

*Nagging fear and uncertainty persist.*

*I am grateful for my dream team, for my loving family and friends, doctor and therapist, teacher and sangha, but the truth is I'm scared shitless. I'm scared that I will or already have Parkinson's or Lewy body dementia—that I'll get more panic attacks and my mind will degenerate.*

*I'm scared each night before getting into bed, afraid of what could happen; more broken bones!??!*

*And I'm scared of the terrifying dreams and their menacing atmosphere; the frightening chases, the bullying, the fights with guns pointed at me.*

*The truth is I'm afraid each day, am terrorized by the thought the disease will outrace me as I lose my mind—lose my marbles, my cognition, and all control. That I'll be alone in the shell of a disease, with no oxygen and no breath; no space, no place—just isolated and demented alone in a world of my own panic.*

*I don't know what's going to happen, what I can expect, and that uncertainty is terrifying.*

Finally, I get to tell my teacher, Phakchok Rinpoche, of the diagnosis.

His response: "Consider this a blessing."

My first reaction: "That's crazy!"

My second reaction: "@!*?"?!**#*@*!??!"

Over the ensuing weeks, as the wave of agitation passes, my mind naturally opened: What could he mean that I should consider this illness a blessing? That was when my orientation to the dharma and my practice changed.



## "Having developed some confidence and faith in the possibility of awakening, we are now faced with a very pragmatic question: "What do I do?"

**—JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN**

Here's what I did:

Since having a safe space to sleep was critical, my husband and I have dream-proofed the bedroom. I've also altered my lifestyle to limit travel only to places where I have control over my sleep environment.

I've put together my Dream Team: Tibetan and western doctors, my Jungian therapist, family, friends, sangha members, writing groups, and my teacher.

To monitor any progression of the condition, I've joined a five-year research project at Harvard and Massachusetts General Hospital with the hopes that the research may produce insights and treatments for living with the condition. Considering that the prevalence of neurodegenerative disorders, including Parkinson's disease, is increasing, and the number of cases of dementia in the developed world is projected to rise from 13.5 million in 2000 to 21.2 million in

2025, and to 36.7 million in 2050, finding the causes, treatments, and cures for these diseases is crucial. This study will hopefully be able to contribute some concrete insights.

While I already had a regular and disciplined practice, dharma practice is now the organizing principle of my life. Here's my new normal:

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddhism—one's own enlightened nature in Buddha, the dharma teachings, and the sangha community of practitioners—has a heightened meaning.

*It's a blessing.*

My meditation practice has increased to multiple times a day, with increased discipline, diligence, and devotion.

*It's a blessing.*

Practice now includes a purification sang (incense) practice to remove obstacles; to call in the protectors and beneficent deities; to focus on any karmic debts; and to cleanse them.

*It's a blessing.*

Gratitude practice is now part of my daily meditation. I thank my Dream Team for their support, guidance, love, wisdom, and friendship.

*It's a blessing.*

I acknowledge that I'm often anxious before sleep, worried about what could happen. So I perform a ritual each night where I raise a candle in each corner of the room and ask for a restorative, healthy, and safe sleep.

*It's a blessing.*

Tara practice has opened to me. Knowing that the fierce, feminine power in each of her 21 manifestations is ready to leap to my aid at any moment is a constant comfort as I meditate to steady my mind.

*It's a blessing.*

My teacher's basic instruction:

*Body on the cushion.*
*Mind in the body.*
*Mind at rest.*

It's always available whether I'm outside by the lake; at my home altar; or with sangha members. Having the REM Sleep Behavior Disorder diagnosis has focused my mind, realigned my priorities, and dissolved distractions—putting dharma practice foremost in my life more than ever.

*It's a blessing.*

I am learning to be more sensitive and patient with my new frailty and vulnerabilities, and to respond to them with love and compassion toward myself. This reveals new depths of Bodhicitta, the awakened heart and mind, with increased kindness and compassion to bring to others.

*It's a blessing.*



*she turned into a mountain*
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

Blessings are those tiny seeds of Buddha nature that purify obstacles, improve devotion, and clear the mind; a gentle sprinkle that ripens Buddha nature. You never know when and how they will find you. What I do know now is that learning to live with REM Sleep Behavior Disorder has deepened my dedication, devotion, enthusiasm, and gratitude for my practice.

But is the disorder a blessing?

I'll get back to you on that!

**Andrea Sherman, PhD**, is a teacher at the Westchester Meditation Center and a student of Phakchok Rinpoche. Her PhD is in Gerontology and she is an End-of Life Doula.

**Marsha Weiner, MA**, is a writer, producer and educator.

25 YEARS
*from the* **Archives**

Andrea Sherman and Marsha Weiner are expert at creating loving rituals and practices for aging. For a sample, read "When It's Time for Dad to Give up the Car Keys"

spiritualityhealth.com/timefordad





# WHY DANCE MAKES BRAINS BETTER

## HOW AN EFFORT TO HELP PEOPLE WITH PARKINSON'S DISEASE NOW HELPS EVERYONE KEEP A HEALTHIER BRAIN, MIND, AND BODY

BY **PEGGY LA CERRA, PHD**

Bathed in a romantic palette of light, shimmering tree branches rhythmically sway to a vibrant movement of Handel's L'Allegro, mesmerizing the audience at the Luminato Festival in Toronto. The branches are, in fact, the outstretched limbs of fifth and sixth graders from the Nelson Mandela Park Public School and Winchester Public School intertwined with the limbs of elder members of Dancing with Parkinson's Canada. The combined troupe is known as L'Allegro Movement Project.

« *Ballerina Prima*
Kyle Michel
**kolormore.com**



« *Pulpy Fiction*
Kyle Michel
**kolormore.com**

**“JUST THE SHARED EXPERIENCE OF OTHER PEOPLE MOVING AROUND—AND, I THINK, PRIMARILY THE MUSIC—JUST MAKES THINGS POSSIBLE THAT WERE DIFFICULT JUST 10 MINUTES BEFORE.”**

One of the elderly dancers describes herself as “old and cranky and creaky—and all the rest of it [that goes with Parkinson’s],” but she says this while grinning from ear to ear. Another elderly dancer recounts the “number of times I have this kind of epiphany where, at the end of the class, I catch myself doing something that I didn’t think I could really do. And yet, just the shared experience of other people moving around—and, I think, primarily the music—just makes things possible that were difficult just ten minutes before.”

These 50 dancers have come together to express John Milton’s poetic masterwork in movement—and the result is beautiful. It also turns out to be a powerful demonstration of the ability of dance to improve not just movement, but also memory and the ability to learn in both young and old.

## THE START OF A MOVEMENT

L’Allegro Movement Project is the result of a collaboration between Mark Morris, a world-renowned choreographer, dancer, and director, and Olie Westheimer, the Executive Director of the Brooklyn Parkinson’s Group. It all started in 2001 when the Mark Morris Dance Group moved into their new studio space in Brooklyn, and Westheimer had an epiphany: She realized that dancers and people with Parkinson’s disease (PD) exist on the same spectrum of conscious movement, just at opposite ends. In her mind’s eye, she saw them coming closer together.

Parkinson’s disease results from the degeneration of neurons in the substantia nigra, a midbrain nucleus that controls movement. The disease results in a complex of problems, including difficulty in the sequencing of movements required to complete a task. While listening to a PD client describe the series of visual, mental, and physical steps she had to focus on just to get up from the table, turn around in space, and move toward her kitchen to get a platter of food, Westheimer recognized the similarity between her client’s effort and that of a dancer consciously planning and executing a choreographed turn. At once, she knew that dance training with a professional could help people with PD move more fluidly.

Westheimer began to search for dance classes for people with PD. She found none. She searched for research to support her hunch that dance could transform her clients’ lives. She found none. Undaunted, Westheimer approached her new Brooklyn neighbors, the Mark Morris group, and proclaimed, “All I need is a dancer who is interested. We’ll develop the class together, and I know the classes will work.” The Morris group accepted the challenge, and they created a class with six PD participants. It worked spectacularly. Twenty years later, the Dance for PD program motivates more than 10,000 participants—located in more than 300 communities across 28 countries around the world—to dance.

## DANCE ENHANCES MOVEMENT, MOOD, AND COGNITION

The Dance for PD program has stimulated an impressive amount of scientific research designed to assess the effects of dance on the various motoric deficits of the disease. Now there is a wealth of evidence to support Westheimer's hypothesis that dancing helps people with PD move with more confidence, skill, and grace. It increases their muscle strength and tone, functional mobility, and agility; it improves their manual dexterity, dual task performance, posture, and balance; and it increases their gait speed and symmetry, giving them a more youthful stride.

Beyond the extensive range of movement benefits dance offers people with PD, it's also a tonic for their emotional challenges. The findings of numerous studies now confirm that regular participation in dance programs can alleviate the symptoms of anxiety and depression associated with the disease. This mood-elevating effect likely results from both the dance-induced motor stimulation of relevant brain circuitries, as well as the social-sensory aspects of participating in a dance program. Living with Parkinson's can be socially isolating, so it's not surprising that Dance for PD participants feel an elevated sense of wellbeing when they're moving with others who share their experience. After taking her first dance class, one participant exclaimed, "I was filled with great joy!"

Not surprisingly, the therapeutic benefits of dance aren't exclusive to Parkinson's patients. Dance acts as an effective remedy for people dealing with the symptoms of primary depression and anxiety, chronic fatigue syndrome, age-related dementia, and Alzheimer's. Some of the most exciting dance research findings are those that focus on the effects of dance on cognitive functions. The results of multiple studies provide evidence that participation in a regular program of dance enhances executive functions, spatial cognition, and episodic memory. Why would dancing improve mental processes? Because dance has dramatic effects on the brain itself.

## HOW DANCE GROWS OUR BRAINS

Dance is a boon to memory at any stage of life, but it's especially advantageous once we enter middle age. At around the age of 40, an important hub of memory, the hippocampus, begins to shrink at a rate of one to two percent per year. Various forms of physical activity have been found to hedge against age-related hippocampal shrinkage, but dance provides a specific advantage. In a study lead by Kathrin Rehfeld of the German Center for Neurodegenerative Diseases, healthy seniors between 63 and 80 years of age were assigned to one of two 90-minute activity groups: a dance group that learned constantly changing choreography, or a sports fitness group that engaged in endurance, strength, and flexibility training. Although both groups showed an overall increase in hippocampal volume, only the dance group showed an increase in the dentate gyrus, the hippocampal region critical for episodic memory and novel learning.

In another remarkable study, Irena Rektorová and her colleagues at Applied Neuroscience at the Central European Institute of Technology performed magnetic resonance imaging of subjects in their 60s (with no evidence of dementia or depression) both before and after a six-month course of dance. They found a significant dance-induced thickening of the cortex in areas associated with action observation, visual-motor integration, and action imitation (the right inferotemporal, fusiform, and lateral occipital regions)—all of which are important for learning and executing skilled movements. Not surprisingly, they also found that dance increased the diffusivity of white matter tracts, which proffers great cognitive advantage.

## THE DANCE OF NEURONS

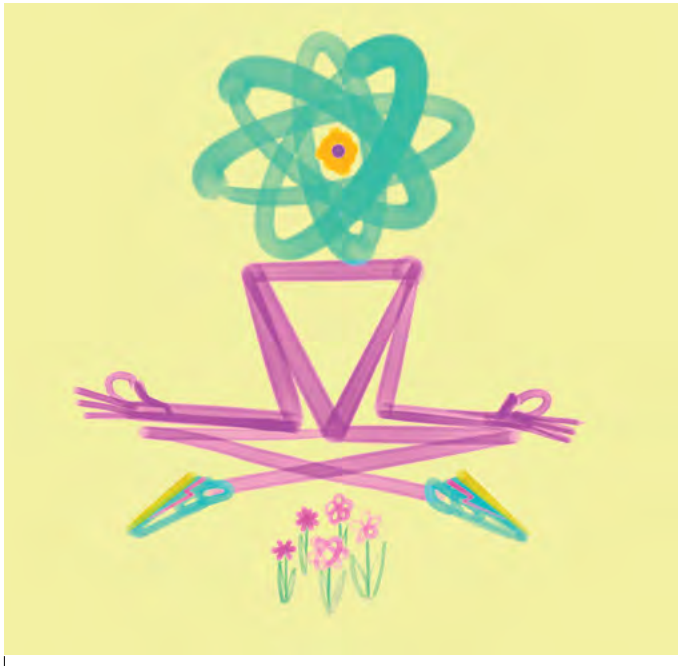
White matter (neurons insulated with myelin) link neurons both within and between gray matter (where most neuronal processing is done), forming ensembles. Noting that white matter joins all four lobes of the brain, as well as the limbic system—the brain's emotional center—and the hippocampal memory hub, behavioral neurologist Christopher Tilley asserts that "without functioning white matter, the brain would be like a group of people in proximity to each other, but unable to communicate." It appears that dance increases our brain's capacity for internal communication—essentially teaching neurons to "dance better" together—thereby increasing information integration across and between various areas of specialized function. In other words, physical dance improves the "dance" of our neurons and makes us comprehensively smarter.

### DANCE ON THE BRAIN

For an extensive archive of research on the benefits of dance for people with PD, as well the effects of music and dance on the brain, go to: danceforparkinsons.org/resources/research/

To watch a short documentary on L'Allegro Movement Project, go to: youtube.com/watch?v=69BBMkHc5_k

**MUSIC AND MOVEMENT CAN DRAMATICALLY ENHANCE YOUR STATE OF BEING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT.**



*Mind the Mind*
Kyle Michel
**kolormore.com**

## DANCE FOR BODY, MIND, AND SPIRIT

Even in silence, movement is life-enhancing. A brisk walk increases the circulation of nutrients throughout the body, stimulates the release and excretion of toxins, increases flexibility and strength, and initiates the production of synovial fluid, which lubricates and cushions the joints. Movement increases metabolism, which results in healthy weight loss and increases our energy levels. It melts tension, dissipates anxiety, and lifts depression. But put on music, and movement seems to happen of its own accord. Music stimulates the cerebellum, the "little brain" situated on top of the brainstem that controls balance and coordinates complex motor movements in response to the rhythm. Rich connections between the cerebellum and the limbic system light up emotional centers and activate neocortical memory networks. Effortlessly, music and movement evoke meaning.

Without any teacher modeling movement for us, and in the absence of any prescribed choreography, music lights up our neural intelligence system and moves us to express whatever feelings the melody, harmony, and rhythm evoke in us. The music awakens emotions archived in the neural networks of experience, often associated with muscular tensions, which our movements then release. Whether you're on the dance floor at a wedding reception and the DJ is playing a song that reminds you of an intense past romance, or you're at an ecstatic dance where the musical set has been arranged to take you on a tour of various emotions guaranteed to light up big swathes of your life history, music and movement can dramatically enhance your state of being in the present moment.

When we take a contemporary, modern, jazz, Latin, or hip-hop class with choreography that has us executing (and remembering) movements we've never done before, we're stimulating the formation of new neural networks, forever changing the foundational scaffolding of our neural "self."

With a healthier, stronger, more flexible body, a neuronally enhanced brain, a cognitively enhanced mind, and an expanded neural foundation of self, it's no wonder that people who dance feel joyous and want everyone, regardless of their age or current state of health, to dance. And, as Mark Morris says, "Dance isn't for anybody; it's for everybody."

**Peggy La Cerra, PhD,** is an evolutionary neuroscientist and editor-at-large of *S+H.* She is the co-author (with Roger Bingham) of *The Origin of Minds: Evolution, Uniqueness, and the New Science of the Self*. (peggy@spiritualityhealth.com)

25 YEARS

*from the* **Archives**




Peggy La Cerra, PhD, is known for her work in evolutionary neuroscience, but her passion for decades has been dance, which she calls "an ever-available source of joy." You'll also enjoy her piece: "Dance Ecstasy: The Art and Science of Dancing into Nirvana" from Jan/Feb 2012.

*spiritualityhealth.com/danceecstacy*

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# BEE THE CHANGE

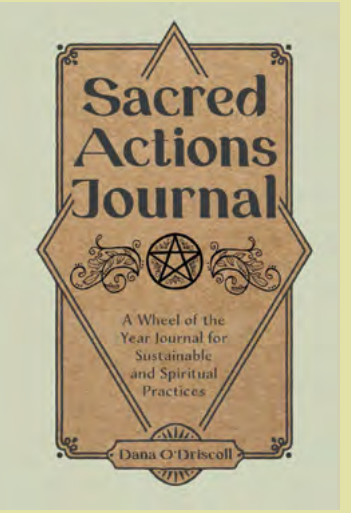
Welcome bees to your outdoor space and you'll create beauty in your life and neighborhood. Why? Because bees bring flowers, and flowers bring insects and birds, which restores our natural spaces. Even small gardens lift spirits; they show others that they are more than their troubles or worries. Establishing a supportive habitat for bees provides a sustainable and balanced environment for all our buzzworthy friends.

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## Seasonal Inspiration

Create a year-long garden practice with the *Sacred Actions Journal*. Commune with the natural world through the ritual of planting, growing, observing, and harvesting. Filled with activities to create blessings and make offerings to support a daily transformative practice. $17 **schifferbooks.com**




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## Happy Gardener

Cultivate the soil and soul with a Bee Happy Gardening Gift Basket. Each tote bag contains two gardening tools, gloves, kneeling pad, skin care kit, and an assortment of treats for the green gardener in your life. $99 **georgiagiftsandmore.com**




## Wildflowers Galore

Greeting cards with an added benefit. Each is handcrafted and embedded with wildflower seeds that can be planted in any garden. Includes Bird's Eye, Clarkia, Black-Eyed Susan, Sweet Alyssum, Catchfly, and Snapdragon, creating a colorful display of flowers to attract both bee and insect alike. Includes a recycled kraft envelope. $6 **thebowerstudio.com**

## GARDEN BLESSINGS

Hang this Bee Garden Prayer Flag to add a touch of peace and tranquility. Thought to also inspire luck, each of the nine flags bears a different bee-related theme and is perfect for the garden enthusiast. Custom made in Nepal. Hangs approx. 7-feet wide. $30 **beeweaver.com**



## THE ART OF REWILDING

Learn sustainable gardening with the illustrated *Wild Bee Handbook*. Whether rewilding a meadow or adding container gardens to a porch, you'll learn practical tips to develop a richer biodiversity for bees to thrive in year-round. $25 **shop.harvard.com**




"We need to protect biodiversity at all costs—many scientific studies have shown public and private gardens to be essential refuges for a rich tapestry of wildlife."

—Sarah Wyndham Lewis



## Bee Bevvy

Pollinators need accessible drinking water. Adding a Bee Drinking Garden Ball with a textured surface will allow bees to thrive and prevent them from drowning. Made of colorful glass, it is both decorative and useful. Handmade in Ontario, Canada. $55 **kitras.com**

# REVIEWS

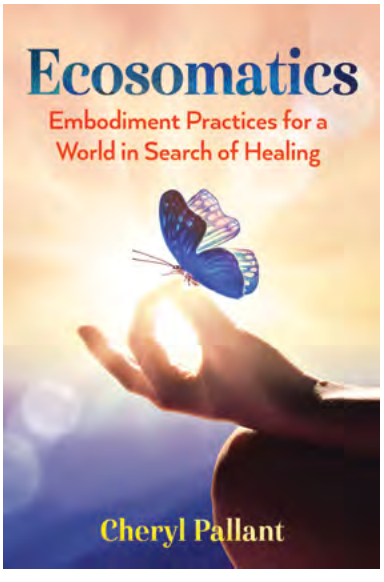
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by Cheryl Pallant
BEAR & CO




CULTURALLY, we are increasingly required to deliberately connect with nature—the "outdoors" has become an industry. How have we gotten so removed from the rhythms of the planet? Enter ecosomatics, an emergent field of study in which the body is in constant dialogue with the environment. After all, we are made up of the same elements as the Earth; the personal and the planetary are one. And the curse of modernity (or capitalism) is that, as author Cheryl Pallant writes, "we end up at odds with ourselves and our surroundings" far too often. How many of our modern plagues and social inequities can be linked to this fact?

Pallant is a gifted energy healer, writer, and dancer, and this book is a conduit for these gifts. Here, "body" is not just a noun, but also a verb and process: We *em*body. Sheer effusion of poetic grace guides this propulsive book; it feels more like an immersive experience than a cerebral exercise, and it is a delight to read.

Pallant's perspective: Self-care strengthens our relationships, which nurtures community, which stabilizes the planet's health. Without relying on prescriptive or alarmist advice, she guides us through dozens of practices that help us liberate our vital energy.

But where are the boundaries of ecosomatics? Ecosomatics encompasses psychology, energy healing, poetry, quantum physics, intuitive intelligence, the uniting of gender polarities, and environmental stewardship. When everything is connected, everything is included.

In Pallant's graceful hands, we are guided toward insights about how the mind, body, and spirit thrive when we develop responsiveness to both our inner and outer worlds. And we must pay attention: As Pallant writes, "There is no elsewhere. There is only the here and now." For both self and planet. —ROCHELLE BOURGAULT

Sheer effusion of poetic grace guides this propulsive book; it feels more like an immersive experience than a cerebral exercise, and it is a delight to read.

## A Future We Can Love

How We Can Reverse the Climate Crisis With the Power of Our Hearts & Minds
by Susan Bauer-Wu
SHAMBHALA PUBLICATIONS




**"IT'S A TENSE TIME TO BE ALIVE,"** says Susan Bauer-Wu in *A Future We Can Love.* We feel this tension because the climate is changing, and the future is uncertain. Yet, that's not the primary message of the book. It's actually just the opposite: *A Future We Can Love* is about hope and the power of humans working with nature to turn things around.

*A Future We Can Love* was inspired by a conversation between the Dalai Lama and Greta Thunberg centered around the climate crisis. The Dalai Lama emphasized peace and patience; Thunberg was adamant about the need for urgency. While these messages may seem to pull us in opposite directions, we are assured that, by combining these two philosophies, we can build a better future.

While the book never shies away from the reality that this is a tense time to be alive and that we need to act with urgency, it's also filled with optimism and guidance on how to create a future we can love.

The path to this future involves knowledge, capacity, will, and action, each discussed in separate sections of the book. After reading through these sections, it's easy to understand how the climate crisis can be both a threat and an opportunity to create a better world.

While the book never shies away from the reality that this is a tense time to be alive and that we need to act with urgency, it's also filled with optimism and guidance on how to create a future we can love. Before we can create such a future, however, we need to envision it.

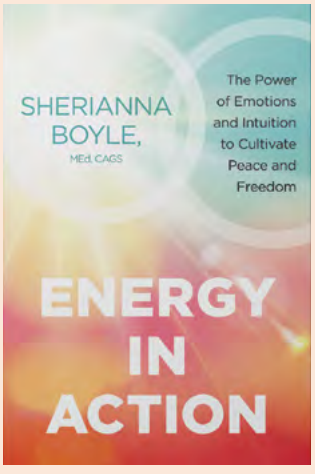
Just imagine: What would the future look like if altruism and simplicity were the norm, if an understanding of the interdependent web of existence would guide our decisions, and if we prioritized people and the planet over money and prestige? The Dalai Lama, Thunberg, and other contributors to the book assure us that these and other possibilities for a positive future are within our reach. —**RUTH WILSON**

## Energy in Action

The Power of Emotions and Intuition to Cultivate Peace and Freedom
by Sherianna Boyle
SOUNDS TRUE

**WHAT WOULD LIFE BE LIKE** if you could harness the energy of your emotions into a powerful force that enables you to manifest your most joyful and connected life? That's the question behind emotional detox coach Sherianna Boyle's Cleanse Method outlined in her latest book, *Energy in Action: The Power of Emotions and Intuition to Cultivate Peace and Freedom*.

"Cleanse" is an acronym for seven mindful tools for emotional processing: Clear, Look Inward, Emit, Activate, Nourish, Surrender, and Ease. Boyle has used this method with thousands of clients to help them tap into their full potential. This spiritual toolkit clearly draws on Boyle's background as a psychologist, yoga and meditation teacher, and life coach.




This book is divided into two easy-to-digest sections that incorporate conversational explanations, exercises, and anecdotes from Boyle's life and her clients' experiences. Part I lays a foundation for moving energy, exploring the benefits of the Cleanse Method, and transforming your emotions to align with the 13 Universal Spiritual Laws (including Oprah's favorite, the Law of Attraction). Boyle explains how she manifests in her daily life, and what can get in the way of harnessing the energy within and all around you.

Part II goes into greater detail, with a chapter devoted to accessing each law, as well as additional cleanses that aid in manifestation. The beauty of these chapters—and potentially a point of frustration—is that there are dozens of cleanses for the 13 Universal Laws. The wide variety of cleanses offer you actionable ways to change your frame of mind and redirect the energy of your thoughts. But some readers may find the cleanses repetitive.

If you are looking for a new way to approach harnessing energy that incorporates concepts of mindfulness, self-compassion, and expanded awareness, you may find this an uplifting and inspiring read. —**JENNIFER HAUPT**

## The Record

boygenius
INTERSCOPE RECORDS



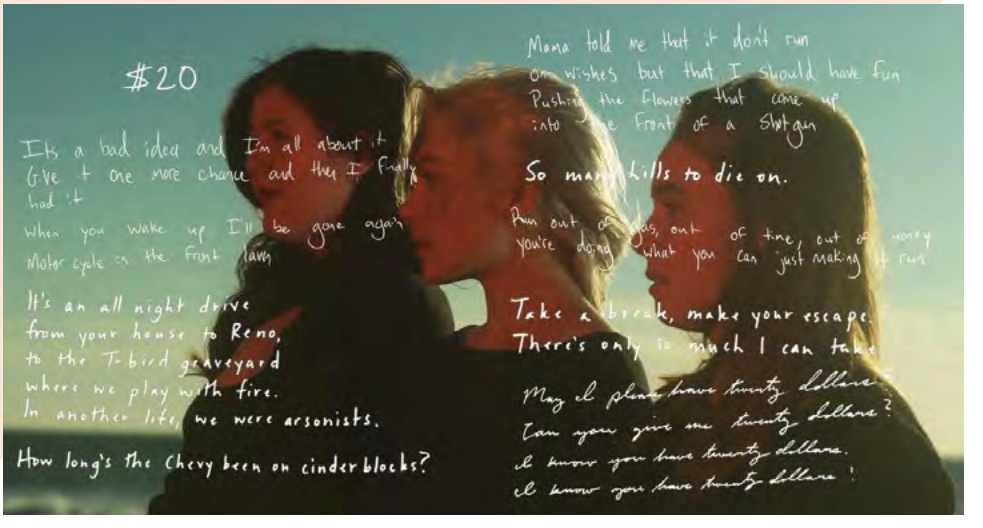
**WHEN A MUSICAL TRIO** like boygenius comes together, it's like the final pieces of a puzzle clicking decisively into place. *The Record* is their first full-length album and it continues the group's authentic lyrics and devastatingly delicious harmonies.

Julien Baker, Phoebe Bridgers, and Lucy Dacus formed boygenius in 2018 and released a self-titled debut EP. The three singer-songwriters are all in their late twenties and were firmly planted in the worlds of folk, rock, and punk before coming together out of mutual appreciation.

Lucy Dacus' debut album *No Burden* was released in 2016, and since then she's released two more and toured widely. Julien Baker has also released three solo albums, the most recent in 2021, *Little Oblivions*. Phoebe Bridgers began playing in bands in high school and has now collaborated with a long list of musicians including Taylor Swift, whom she's currently supporting on concert dates across the East Coast.

Punk rock was an early influence on Baker and Bridgers, and the latter performed in the band Sloppy Jane. The interconnected vocals on *The Record* exude an ease and confidence that brings to mind early Indigo Girls or Shawn Colvin, with sentiments that are immediately relatable. "$20" is a rocker that reminisces on misdirected choices: "It's a bad idea and I'm all about it / Give it one more chance and then I finally had it / When you wake up, I'll be gone again."

Another song shines new light on a beloved songwriter: "Leonard Cohen once said there's a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in / And I am not an old man having an existential crisis / In a Buddhist monastery writing horny poetry... But I agree." —JOHN MALKIN







## Anarchist Gospel

Sunny War
NEW WEST RECORDS

**SUNNY WAR'S THIRD ALBUM** *Anarchist Gospel* brings together Americana roots, Delta blues, ecstatic gospel, and electric folk with the energy and directness of punk rock. The eclectic singer, born Sydney Lyndella Ward, moves from despair to renewal with rhythmic guitars and banjo, forward-thinking lyrics, and an uplifting choir that includes Allison Russell, Jim James, David Rawlings, and Chris Pierce, with whom she also partners in the duo War & Pierce.

Front and center on *Anarchist Gospel* is Sunny War seeking balance. On the song "I Got No Fight" she wonders, "Will I survive the war inside my head?" In the Los Angeles punk scene, Sunny War overcame addiction, and music became her guiding light. She returned to Nashville to record *Anarchist Gospel*.

*Anarchist Gospel* is personal and political, sensitive and powerful. Sunny War sings of freedom: "Break the chains / Time to stop policing me" ("Love's Death Bed"); Mother Earth: "She is fighting for her life" ("Shelter and Storm"); and the prison-industrial complex: "Dead or rotting in prison / Exactly how they want us kept" ("Test Dummy").

*Anarchist Gospel* is personal and political, sensitive and powerful.



On "Sweet Nothing," she moves toward hope and resilience: "Let's make a dream of this tragedy / Something to live for." Wholeness arrives on the final song, "Whole," where she gives a shout-out to a pioneering British punk band while urging us to embrace life fully: "Don't you fake no smile if it ain't true / Crass said I am she, he is he, but you're the only you / Don't waste no time / Protect your heart and soul... Today could be the last you know / Happy's how you oughta go."

Yes, happy's how we all oughta go. —**JM**




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## More Than Ever

Directed by Emily Atef
THE MATCH FACTORY

**SINCE HER BREAKOUT ROLE** in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Phantom Thread*, Vicky Krieps has largely shunned Hollywood supporting parts in favor of leading roles in European dramas. *More Than Ever* sees her working with rising French filmmaker Emily Atef for a look at how one woman chooses to live out her final days.

Diagnosed with a rare lung condition, Hélène (Krieps) has grown uncomfortable with the way she's now treated by her overly doting husband, Matthieu (Gaspard Ulliel), and their friends. Online, Hélène connects with Bent (Bjørn Floberg), a Norwegian blogger who documents his life with a terminal illness. After communicating with Bent, Hélène decides to travel alone to his home in Norway, much to Matthieu's chagrin.

In Norway, Hélène is surprised to discover that Bent is an elderly gentleman who claims the handsome young man pictured on his blog was merely a hospital roommate. At this point we begin to wonder if Atef's film is about to warp into a thriller, but rather than feeling uncomfortable in Bent's presence, Hélène finds the peace she's been looking for. (It helps that Bent lives at the edge of a lake surrounded by snow-capped mountains.) When Matthieu follows Hélène to Norway, that peace is disrupted.

*More Than Ever* tackles a difficult subject in a nuanced manner. Hélène is a complicated protagonist, but through Krieps' quietly stunning performance, we come to understand her course of action. There's something tragically ironic in Matthieu's performance, as Ulliel's own life was cut short in 2022.




Is it better to risk passing away on an operating table or face certain death in surroundings that make you feel truly alive? Regardless of your stance, it's difficult to deny Hélène's desire to live her last days by the Norwegian fjords. May we all find such peace in our closing chapter. —ERIC HILLIS




## EO

Directed by Jerzy Skolimowski
JANUS FILMS

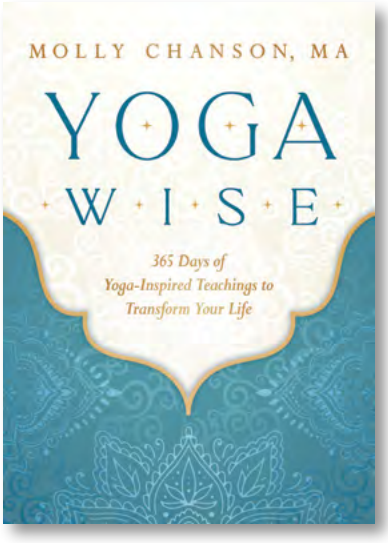
**ANYONE STILL SUFFERING NIGHTMARES** because of a childhood viewing of *Bambi* may wish to prepare themselves for *EO*, veteran Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski's tale of a donkey who experiences humanity at its kindest and cruelest while wandering Europe.

We initially find EO the donkey as part of a circus act, doted upon by his trainer Magda (Sandra Drzymalska). When the circus is forced to give up its animals on grounds of cruelty, EO and Magda are separated. After a drunken Magda sets him free from a petting zoo in the middle of the night, EO is left wandering aimlessly through forests and towns, getting into encounters that veer from the comic (disrupting a soccer match) to the cruel (fans of the losing team setting upon him with weapons).

Skolimowski appears to take cues from children's cinema, particularly early Disney. At times *EO* veers into the realm of magical realism. It's in the concrete realm of man that the film reminds us of our capacity for inhumanity as EO is beaten, sold, and kept captive.

Skolimowski doesn't offer any easy answers regarding our relationship with animals, but he does pose a central question regarding whether any human interference with nature can have a positive outcome. Ironically, EO's troubles are often the result of well-meaning actions: He's separated from his caretaker by animal rights protestors, while it's that caretaker who unintentionally leads him from the safety of the petting zoo.

The film is careful not to anthropomorphize its animal protagonist. While he may have adorably expressive features, EO has a notable lack of advanced intelligence, wandering aimlessly in search of his next meal. We shouldn't have to see ourselves in a creature to respect it, but in EO's eyes, we glimpse a vision of humanity, one that's not always complimentary to our species. —EH

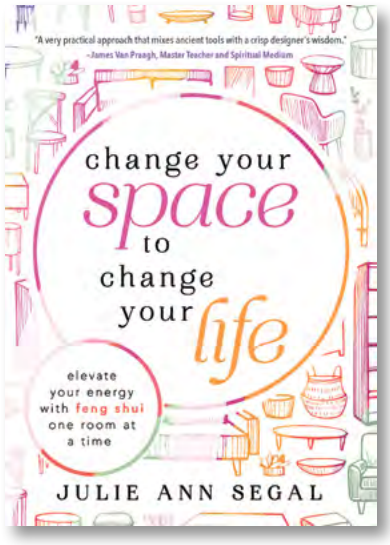



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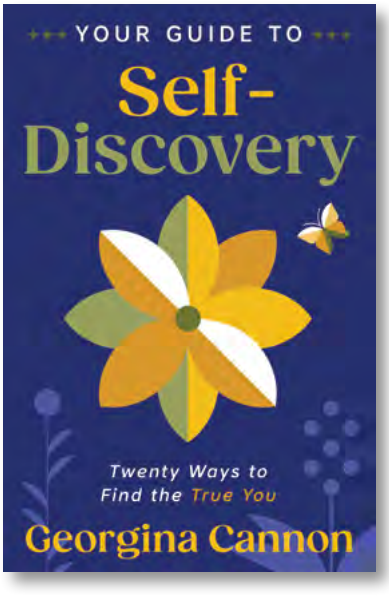

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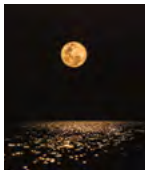
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# THE WORK OF FLOURISHING

## Being Opened

More than 30 years ago, I almost died from a rare form of lymphoma. One of the great lessons from that strident passage is that whatever opens us is never as important as what is opened in us. In truth, we often rail against the unfairness or injustice of what has brutally opened us, which can be true and legitimate. Yet, more than anything, our journey forward depends on how we meet and inhabit what has been opened in us. Like it or not, everyone and everything changes, and we are challenged to accept the change without being defined by the pain we encounter along the way. This doesn't mean that we minimize or deny our pain or stop working for justice, but that we meet our pain and move through it into the clearing that life has made within us. I know this is very difficult to take in and work with. All I can say is that being pried open by life has prepared me to keep a vow to stay open to life. And this has made a powerful and tender difference in the kind of life I have been able to live.



BRIAN BANKSTON

In July, **MARK** will be offering an online webinar (see live.marknepo.com) and in August, Mark will be teaching at Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York (marknepo.com).

## Being Broken

Being broken is never fun. No one seeks being broken. No one asks for it. But like erosion, being broken is a developmental phase of growth, not a deficiency. We have stigmatized being broken as a sign of damage or weakness. Yet, mysteriously, it is being broken open that leads to all transformation. Rather than deny or resist this phase of growth, we are called to focus our efforts on mapping the new terrain on the other side of the break. What new way of thinking, feeling, or being are we being led to?

Consider the Grand Canyon, one of the largest broken open spaces on Earth. We save our money in hopes of traveling vast distances to peer into its great emptiness. Yet this natural wonder came into being precisely because the Earth at its core couldn't hold together. The Earth's plates split and wonder was the lasting result. So too with us, though it is, of course, understandable that this developmental phase of being broken is painful and hard to endure. Another reason we need each other: to help each other endure the breaking, to help each other enter the vastness opened by the break, and to marvel together at the wonder revealed.

## Being Transparent

The question arises, "Is it a good thing to be transparent?" That this is a question at all demonstrates how indoctrinated we are in the art of hiding. When someone says, "I can see right through you" it has the connotation that we are being

## QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH

- In your journal, describe separate moments when you experienced being opened, being broken, being transparent, and being vulnerable. How did these moments differ in their impact on you? How has each helped you flourish or impeded your growth?
- In conversation with a friend or loved one, begin to tell the story of your life as a trail you discovered along the way. Where has the trail of your life led you? What lessons have you learned about the art of breaking trail?

exposed; that we are being revealed as a phony or a charlatan. But life has taught me quite the opposite—that there can be no growth or transformation or integrity of relationship unless we are transparent. In his poem, "Self-Protection," D.H. Lawrence poses the question, Is the best self-protection hiding who you are or being who you are? He goes on to point out that only the creatures wholly and colorfully themselves have survived the centuries. The ones who have been camouflaged have perished.

Of course, there are costs for being seen. We can be hurt, misunderstood, rejected, or fooled. But I have found that the cost of not being who I am, of staying hidden, is more corrosive and damaging to my soul and to my very life-force.

Being transparent allows us to be touched. It brings us closer. It deepens our relationships. When hidden or walled in, we can only reflect life. What approaches us bounces off. When open-hearted, we receive and absorb and are informed more thoroughly by life itself. When transparent, we are warmed and illumined.

All this to say that I would rather be fooled than not believe. The hurts and slights and even embarrassment for being fooled are not pleasant to go through. But when we don't stay open to being touched by the smallest detail of life—letting it in—we shun the touch of angels along the way.

## Being Vulnerable

Even if it takes years, it is important to heal the wounded places so we can recover the full use of our heart. For the parts of our heart that are left wounded and unresolved remain preoccupied and not available for us to use in living. If unprocessed, the wounded places become dark and hard. Being vulnerable allows us to recover our heart, because being vulnerable and tender allows our wounds to soften and heal.

Anger, even when legitimate, will harden if not processed and allowed to soften. Often, when I am angry, it is because I have been hurt. When I can let the anger subside, I discover a sadness beneath it that leads me to examine where I am hurt. When I stay angry, I never let the hurt place soften, and so, it can never heal. When stuck in the anger, I keep feeling the hurt, though I can't locate and tend the hurt. Untended, my heart becomes heavy where it is hard. Then, I walk around with a diminished heart that weighs me down with the wounded part unavailable to experience life. Staying vulnerable is both a cleansing and healing agent that allows us to become whole again. As the ancient sages all confirm, everything softens in time. If we want to soften while still alive, we have to bring our hurt places into the light.

## Breaking Trail

There are a thousand reasons to come and go, to hold and let go. But from our common depth of being, none of them matters. All that matters is that we live in the open so we can hold each other as long as possible.

For breaking trail is not going where no one has gone before, but taking our turn at finding the living center that we have in common with all life by being opened, being broken, being transparent, and being vulnerable. These are the daily practices that bring us alive and keep us alive.

These are the spiritual aerobics that each of us must personalize if we are to truly be here. Aristotle defined a virtue as anything that helps us flourish as a human being, while a vice is anything that impedes us from flourishing. Regardless of what others encourage or caution against, we must each discover what helps us flourish and what thwarts our growth, and then remain dedicated to the work of flourishing. S+H

This excerpt is from Mark's new book *Falling Down and Getting Up*, due out from St. Martins' Essentials, Sept 5, 2023. Available now for preorder.

**Even if it takes years, it is important to heal the wounded places so we can recover the full use of our heart.**

# THE PATH OF HAPPINESS

**I HAVE SPENT TIME WITH** both Sadhguru and the Dalai Lama, and what I find interesting is they are both simply happy, and see happiness, hope, and positivity as part of their message. For Sadhguru, it's an almost in-your-face, I-am-what-I-am kind of happy. For the Dalai Lama, it's like he's a kid who finds delight in breathing, having uncomfortable sandals, a pointed question, or seeing your face. Both men's happiness is contagious, and that's the point—or part of it.



**PAUL SUTHERLAND** lives in South Africa where he tries to see through the complexity to what could be if we start with happiness, curiosity, empathy, and love.

Sadhguru is a teacher and seems destined to spill wisdom wherever he walks. He dissects responsibility down to two words: "response" and "ability." His teachings about responsibility guide us to distill feeling compelled by compassion and empathy to help others as a natural state. We respond according to our ability to respond.

There's nothing difficult about any of this. At least philosophically, each person reading this column knows that we are all connected, and when we see a need, we should be guided by our innate wisdom to help. And when we help, we feel happy. I see it like the Stoic philosophers: We reflect on our life journey as our "education," preparing us for the next minute. That way, we accept our past and present and happily anticipate using our talents, time, and resources to help others as our next step. The Stoic sage Epictetus explained where this path leads: "The finest and most fitting fruits for those who have received a true philosophical education are peace of mind, fearlessness, and freedom."

While I am challenged by his absolute statement about education setting us free, it is not a stretch to assumes the education he speaks of results in a life of service causing contentment and happiness. It is also not a stretch to ask those that have read this far, "What has been the purpose of your education?" I'll go first. And I can answer that easily.

While so many of my classmates in high school were into proms, clothing, and acne treatments, I was fascinated by the Stoicism and Ecclesiastes. Stoicism championed a happy life through rational simplicity and loving service towards everything and everyone. He taught his followers to have simple wants and thus receive

their simple needs. Ecclesiastes famously declared that all is vanity anyway so why bother to worry about much more than your basic needs; especially not wealth, stuff, or ego-driven fame.

So, at age 18, I wrote a mission declaration to guide me and to be a touchstone to what I wanted my life to be about. It started out:

"My desire is to show humanity my love with loyal enthusiasm and faith in God. I will follow a path of service guided by virtue, honesty, and enthusiasm..."

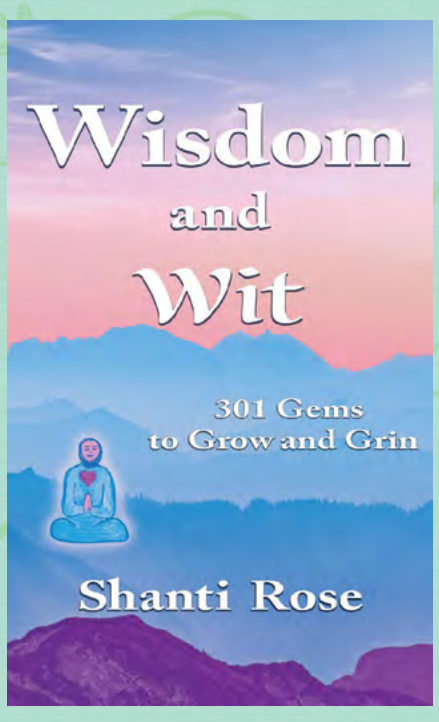
My original declaration was another three sentences long, but I changed it half my life ago to read:

"Direct my consciousness, my actions, and the very essence of my being to humbly and sincerely be the cause and the cause of the cause to bring love, happiness, joy, peace, magnanimity, equanimity, prosperity, justice, and the very essence of virtue, values, and character to all sentient beings in the north, south, east, and west, above and below, on all planes, both seen and unseen. Help me to see the best in each person."

This is not my complete "prayer," but I invite you to write your own "Stand for Prayer" as your own guide—that you may wish to share or not.

The result? I fail every day. I mess up. I get taken for rides by those who pretend to need help or promise to help others. I fall down and I get up. Thankfully, I have a good sense of humor. People are good. That said, those who wish to deceive and manipulate for their own benefit sometimes make me want to quit—to buy a home on Maui and just chill. But the world needs us to not retire, quit, hide, give up, or just chill.

Suffering exists, so we have work to do. And happiness is scarce, so we have work to do. I have six children and my 12-year-old wonders, "Why do I have to do that, my brother doesn't! It's not fair!" But we're not 12. If you're looking outside yourself and comparing your life to others to justify your lack of service, lack of giving, or inability to help your neighbor, then look in the mirror and think about what you want your life to stand for. Even if your own situation is difficult, there's a lot that can be done to help: simply cleaning up the messy toilet seat in the rest stop; moving over so the tired mom or kid can take your place on the bus; picking up someone else's litter on the street; or telling your alcoholic friend, bigoted neighbor, or abusive coworker what he or she needs to hear. Each is just the next small step on the happy path of peace of mind, fearlessness, and freedom. S+H


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# VISIONARY VIRGINS & MIRACULOUS MOTHERS

**"A GIBBON WHO LIVED ALONE in her cage had a baby. Japanese zookeepers finally know how,"** read the headline. Apparently, virgin births fascinate theologically minded folks and scientists alike. And motherhood is more complex than we humans could ever imagine.

## MIRACULOUS MOMO

It took years for staff at the Kujukushima Zoo & Botanical Garden in Nagasaki, Japan, to solve the gibbon paternity puzzle. After giving birth, Momo shielded her child from curious probing for two years. Eventually, the humans won. Testing her son's DNA against four possible males, they found a winner named Itoh. Zookeepers believe mating occurred through a perforated partition board between Momo's cage and an "exhibition space" where individual gibbons are rotated for human entertainment. To prevent further "unwanted" pregnancies, a solid barrier was placed between the enclosures.



**(REV) SARAH BOWEN** is author of the award-winning book *Sacred Sendoffs: An Animal Chaplain's Advice for Surviving Animal Loss, Making Life Meaningful, and Healing the Planet*. Learn more at sacredsendoffs.com

There's a lot to unpack here. Zoos are notorious for micromanaging the reproductive rights of animals, often citing noble endeavors, such as keeping a species from going extinct. But the topic begs deep inquiry: Who are we to manage others' sex lives? Or to characterize another's pregnancy as unwanted?

## VISIONARY SHARKS

While Momo's virgin birth was debunked, notable virgin births have been biologically substantiated. For example, in 2021, a wild-caught-but-now-captive hammerhead shark became a mother, even though she lived in a solitary tank. No hole-filled partition board here, of course. Scientists also ruled out long-term sperm storage since her pup had no evidence of paternal genetics. (Indeed, some animals can hold sperm until they choose to use it!)

The hammerhead likely experienced what scientists call *parthenogenesis*. In this process, an embryo develops from an unfertilized egg. Say what? A miracle! And yet, while it's not overwhelmingly common, she is not the only case of a shark envisioning a pregnancy into reality.

Defying influential Darwinian stereotypes, these reproductively rebellious sharks contradict the long-held assertion that reproduction is a dance between passionate male animals and passive females. Further, they (and Momo!) are among the planet's fiercest reproductive rights protestors, refusing to allow humans to decide whether or not they can become mothers.

## MAMAS' BOYS

Beyond declaring ourselves as agents of birth control, humans tend to meddle in animal sex lives in other ways. Especially when free-living



« *beasts of burden: whale*
Julie Liger-Belair
**julieligerbelair.net**

beings *don't* reproduce, and we think they should.

For example, here's a recent headline from NPR's *Morning Edition* to consider: "Killer whale moms are still supporting their adult sons—and it's costing them." Notably, this sentiment mirrors a modern human parenting theme: Adult kids aren't supposed to live at home in your basement. No! They should get out and make a living! Fly the coop. Leave the nest.

Admittedly, bird metaphors are absent from the orca's story in the *Current Biology* report titled, "Costly lifetime maternal investment in killer whales." Yet, researchers—writing in a language that would get any feminist's metaphorical hackles up—do suggest that by choosing a long-lasting relationship with her only son, her "parental time investment" was out of the ordinary and worth studying. The biologists ultimately decided care for her son was detrimental to her own "reproductive success." Then they went a step further, debating whether it is more beneficial for orcas to have female or male calves.

While I share conservationists' concern that less than a hundred southern resident orcas still exist in the wild, I'm bothered by the audacity to judge this mama's "success" based on the quantity and sex of her offspring. (Hence my prolific use of scare quotes!) Further, I'm troubled by the headlines we choose to report our findings. Upon listening to the news story, I found myself screaming at the radio, "Let her hang out with her kid. It's her choice. It's not your business. Leave her alone."

Astute readers by now have observed: I have unresolved issues about *mothering.*

## BREAKING OUT OF THE MOTHER BOX

It's not surprising that I do. For hundreds of years, beings of all genders and species have been observed, described, and classified by a very narrow category of humans who projected their views about reproduction and parenting onto all of us. The universal male and female roles Darwin codified in his 1871 theory of sexual selection buttressed a rigid argument for Genesis 1:27: "male and female He created them." Religion and science concurred.

Luckily, this rigid binary between male and female animal biology has been proven absurd by visionary scientists. Joan Roughgarden's *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* and Lucy Cooke's *Bitch: A Revolutionary Guide to Sex, Evolution & the Female Animal* offer us an awe-inspiring collection of diverse parenting styles that look nothing like a *Leave it to Beaver* episode. Likewise, Megan DeFranza's *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* effectively critiqued traditionalist interpretations of Genesis to reveal a long history of gender role fluidity and nontraditional families. Our world has always been awash with diversity.

## CELEBRATING "MOTHERS" OF ALL KINDS

Yet, each May, I am bewildered. As an agender-identifying person, married to a cis-gender man with a son from a previous marriage, *how the heck am I supposed to approach Mother's Day?*

We "bonus moms" are not alone in questioning whether the tradition of Mother's Day needs an overhaul. Gender-specific events have come under increased scrutiny. Attempts to expand beyond the holiday's rigid lexical box have generally failed. Just Google the controversy over changing *mothers* to *birthing people*. Of course, this attempt didn't fix all the issues anyway. It left out those who haven't physically birthed but still mother. Or people who have been pregnant but didn't give birth. And don't forget mothers with stillborn children.

Perhaps we must look to the pups, calves, and kids for inspiration. Auspiciously, last year a Toronto elementary school rebranded Mother's Day as "Grown-Ups Who Love Us Day." There is wisdom in their inclusiveness, which reminds me of words recorded long ago in Psalm 8 (and echoed in Matthew 21): *Out of the mouths of babes, they have perfected praise.* In the end, Mother's Day is not about *being* a mother. Instead, it's about acknowledging the opportunity to care *for* those we care *about* and celebrating the love they experience as a result. S+H

# SHOULD I BE DOING MORE?




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**BY MEERA LEE PATEL**
**meeralee.com**

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