

LOVE
YOUR
HEART

Also by Diana von Welanetz Wentworth:

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The Art of Buffet Entertaining

Celebrations

LOVE YOUR HEART

**FOLLOW THE RED THREAD
TO A HEART-CENTERED LIFE**



DIANA VON WELANETZ WENTWORTH



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*With love to
The American Heart Association.
Thank-you for saving so many lives, including mine.*

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INTRODUCTION



FOLLOW THE RED THREAD TO A HEART-CENTERED LIFE

Please join me in a moment of thankfulness, and place your hand over your heart. Ahhh, yes! Thank you, heart!

This magnificent organ is something wondrous within our being. The heart represents the source of love, caring, and gratitude within our physical bodies, yet do we ever truly thank it for how perfectly it works on our behalf? It weighs less than a pound, yet in our lifetime it'll pump about one million barrels of blood! Our heart will beat roughly two and a half billion times. No larger than our fist, it pushes blood through about sixty thousand miles of blood vessels—a continuous red thread, if you will, that is long enough to encircle the earth two and a half times.

Don't our hearts deserve our profound care and appreciation? All that pumping takes a huge amount of energy.

Why is it we do all kinds of things to communicate to our hearts that we don't really care, that we're too busy to look after them? And such neglect even comes from women, who, regardless of culture, are drawn to nurture. As women, don't we naturally connect with others, cultivate community, and embrace worthy causes? We care, but not necessarily about the most vital member of our cellular team.

What if we were to pay attention? How much more vibrant and on-purpose could our lives become?

I am speaking to you as a woman who now does pay attention. I survived a heart attack. It didn't need to happen. It certainly wouldn't have if I had paid attention to my family history, or if I had visited a cardiologist as my doctor recommended.

But it did. It gave me a wake-up call two weeks before I was to board a cruise ship in Europe from which I may have been disembarked in a box. Thanks to hard-earned medical advances, many funded by the American Heart Association, I spent only thirty-six hours in the hospital

and actually sailed away on that cruise two weeks later. I am humbly grateful that I was so lucky!

I want you to be lucky too!

To help ensure such good fortune, we must be mindful that the strength and vibrancy of our physical hearts provide the quality of our lives on earth. And so, let's embark on our journey to a heart-filled life by first learning to love and care for our physical hearts.

From this starting point, each chapter of this book will elaborate on one or more emotional and spiritual practices that speak to the healthy heart advice of the American Heart Association. For this second element of our journey, let's use an ancient archetype of human consciousness as our lodestar. In traditions and cultures around the world, a red thread, rope, or string, is a metaphor for love and connection. An ancient Chinese proverb relates that an invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet. It is said the thread may stretch or tangle, but will never break regardless of circumstances. In Inuit culture, the red thread weaves together the tapestry of meaning in our lives. In Hinduism, knots are tied into the thread while reciting mantras in meditation and prayer. Similar metaphors exist in the Americas,

Japan, Tibet, and mystical Judaism, and often a red thread is worn around the wrist or neck as part of sacred ceremony.

The mystical psychologist Carl Jung said the red thread is rooted in our memory as our connection to our mothers by a “red cord.” Isn’t this why red is associated with life and fertility, and is considered the most auspicious color in many cultures? Isn’t this why Buddhists tie a red thread around a new bride’s wrist as a sign of hope for a happy and fruitful future?

This red thread is the perfect symbol of our inner and outer connectedness, for our hearts sit at the very intersection of our body and our soul. Through our veins and capillaries, the red thread of blood connects our physical heart with every other part of our body, and the ineffable red thread of love connects our emotional heart, the center of our feelings of well-being, with the spiritual thread of similarity and connection with every other living being.

The path of the red thread can keep us ever-present to the well-being of our physical, emotional, and spiritual hearts. Join me in taking the first step.



FIND OUT WHO YOU ARE

*May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven
around the heart of wonder.*

—John O’Donohue

Within our profoundly complex and beautiful body, our physical heart is the central system—not only vital, but a true miracle in its function! Imagine—when we are exercising, it takes our blood about ten seconds to get from our heart to our big toe and back. In under a minute, our heart pumps blood to our every cell.

But we don’t really appreciate our hearts, or even recognize that as women, heart disease is our greatest health risk! One in three women will die of heart disease as compared to one in thirty-one of breast cancer. Isn’t that shocking? Considering all that is known about

heart dangers, and all the great choices we can make to strengthen our hearts every day, heart disease kills half a million American women each year, topping the rate for men by fifty thousand people! This does not have to be. Heart disease is curable.

There is so much that is known thanks to thorough and impeccable research, and so much that is being newly discovered about how the organ itself works—what makes it tick, and what keeps it healthy. The basics, the American Heart Association’s “Simple 7,” are key to our physical care of our heart. I’ll be touching on some those elements throughout the book. One key piece of advice from the AHA is that we understand our risk, and this involves our family history of heart disease.

WHO I AM: MY FAMILY HISTORY

Though my own parents, Eugene and Marguerite Webb, lived long lives (my father until eighty-three, and my mother until ninety-three), they both succumbed to heart disease. Mom had bypass surgery when she was seventy-four, and my dad died of atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), yet I overlooked these clues within my family.

In addition to being susceptible to heart disease, my parents’ lifestyle did not lend itself to excellent heart health. Having lived through the Great Depression, they were deeply focused on providing a good, safe life for their family, and building financial security. As a result, there was a deep sense of appreciation for being able to provide groceries and hearty home cooking, and also the adventure and luxury of going out for dinner once a week to restaurants. I would even describe my parents as “early foodies.” We all loved to eat. My mom, Mimi, was a talented cook, and I loved being in the kitchen with her when she would prepare our nightly dinners.

My childhood years were unenlightened times, with little information in magazines or on television about nutrition and wellness. Reflecting on my mom’s meals, they were heart disease waiting to happen. We ate the same foods over and over on a semi-regular rotation: pot roast with mashed potatoes and gravy, tamale pie, fried chicken with mashed potatoes and pan gravy, roast leg of lamb with mint sauce and pan-roasted potatoes (lamb curry was for leftovers the next day), chicken fried steak, pork chops with homemade apple sauce and potato pancakes. Fat was considered hearty—and it was

certainly delicious! We felt lucky to have such delicious and “nourishing” food. Hmmm.

Of course, I carried both my family’s genes and dietary predilections with me when I married and left home. And while we have no choice about our genetics, most of us seem to have family habits “in our blood” so to speak. Is that your experience too? Are there a few dishes that just feel like home to you? I’ve since learned to rethink my family’s traditional menu (as a cookbook author and television chef, I have a lot to say about food, but I’ll get to that later on).

WHO I AM: AT MY CORE

Although there are all sorts of influences that make us the person we develop into, we often look to our early experiences and the lessons that we learned from our families. My parents were not only poorly informed about healthy eating, but also about their emotions. Both were ruled by external values, conventional ideas of being socially accepted and admired, about how things appeared. “Looking good” was everything.

Children were “meant to be seen and not heard,” and so it was that in the fourth grade, at the age of eight, my

older brother and I were sent away during the week to separate boarding schools only a few minutes from our home. At my girls’ school there were few other boarders, so after the day’s classes, I wandered the school grounds feeling deeply lonely. I pretended to myself that it was okay, but disturbing feelings of being unacceptable ran deep. My brother didn’t suffer those feelings, but I longed to feel loved and dutifully incorporated my parents’ “ideals” into my image of myself. Reflecting later on in life about my parents’ home and how they admired and took such pride in physical appearances, I realized how much my self-esteem was based on gaining approval by attracting admiring glances.

I now remember my parents with love, and have warm feelings about being their daughter. I also realize, however, that my mother Mimi was a role model to me of a defended heart. This is a heart that dismisses its own feelings and deflects those of others, always keeping at bay anything that might cause it pain. A heart can react like a camera lens, snapping shut when facing something that may threaten it. Women, historically, have been known to deny and turn away from what might scare us, but these more enlightened times have proven that true

power comes from emotional awareness, from accepting and awakening to our innermost being.

In his best-selling book, *The Seat of the Soul*, Gary Zukav writes about the heart, the exploration of our truest emotions, and how they work together to speak to who we are at our core:

When you fear that your ability to love or to be loved is threatened, when you fear, for example, expressing your own love or receiving love from another, you experience physical discomfort or pain in the region of your chest, near your heart...literally, as heartache...

The road to authentic power is always through what you feel, through your heart. The way of the heart is one of compassion and emotional perception. Therefore, it is never appropriate to suppress an emotion, or to disregard what you feel.

I learned over time that I needed, like Zukav says, to stop suppressing my emotions and disregarding what I felt. I needed to find and to mend my little girl's broken heart.

Maturity shifted my perspective of who I am, and the meaning of my life. I began to understand the concept of the invisible red thread, and I realized that the red

thread that invisibly ties me to all of nature is so much stronger, and resonates so much more passionately, than my previous ideas of myself. I created a personal affirmation that reflects my life of spiritual beauty and grace: "I *am connected* at all times to all there is, and that contagious connection radiates through me." My adult sense of self has the web of all of life at its core, and I sense and feel the beauty of life's web itself.

This web of life is supported by science, and contemporary physicists recognize that everything is connected at the quantum level. Lynne McTaggart, an award-winning journalist and author of the seminal book *The Bond*, assures us that "although we classify everything in the universe as separate and individual, individuality, at the most rudimentary, does not exist."

That said, the vast majority of our experiences nonetheless occur at an individual, subjective level. At that level, we think of ourselves as mothers, teachers, wives, executives, caretakers. These definitions are serviceable for our everyday "use," but they don't speak to the role we play in the greater cosmos, nor do they truly touch upon the boundless, awesome essence of who we are on the inside.

I found that the following techniques helped me to gain an awareness of that inside of myself, the place where my heart and soul intersect.

**FIND OUT WHO YOU ARE:
PRACTICE THE RED THREAD MEDITATION**

1. Sit comfortably in a quiet place where you will not be interrupted, perhaps wrapping a soft red shawl around you. Take three or more deep breaths into the depths of your physical heart. Lengthen your exhale to be much longer than your inhale.
2. Feel your magnificent physical heart beating steadily, pulsing bright red blood and wellness through your miraculous circulatory system into your radiantly healthy body, nourishing your whole system with a sense of warmth and ease.
3. Feel your heart pulsating and connecting with the red thread of inclusiveness as you bring to mind someone, some treasured object, or some beautiful memory you genuinely and unconditionally love. Breathing slowly, bask in the love you feel, notice love expanding from your heart—beyond your lips as a smile of appreciation and gratitude for all the beautiful qualities of life you love.
4. Now sense your heart energy—your love—radiating beyond your physical body as a continuous red thread and connecting with the room you are in, the neighborhood and the city, the businesses, the social groups you love and enjoy, and the county and state and region you live in. Bask in this ever-increasing love and expanding presence.
5. Extend the red thread of love to include and embrace and nourish all countries and oceans until it encircles and blesses all of our magnificent planet Earth. Radiate your love to every living being. Bask in that feeling. Envision the red thread of inclusiveness expanding beyond our planet, to include the entire expanding universe.
6. All the love you radiate is blessing all existence. Rest in this divinely heart-centered space as long as you wish, confident that the essence of who you are is completely one with All.
7. When you feel complete, and are ready to reenter your everyday world, radiate your gratitude for the experience of connection. Gradually feel this divine

energy returning to your radiant physical heart and physical body, blessing you and your physical world a thousandfold. Invite the feeling of fullness and expansiveness to stay with you throughout your day.

8. Centered, blissful, calm, you reenter your day as the very essence of blessing to life itself. Your world is lit from within! Everyone you meet notices how your heart shines through your eyes, that you light up everything you see.

**FIND OUT WHO YOU ARE:
KEEP A “LOVE YOUR HEART JOURNAL”**

The most exciting and creative way we can journey together is for you to have a place where you will be able to tell the absolute truth, a safe place where you can be vulnerable and completely open to your deepest emotions. It will become your traveling companion and confidante, a place where you can choose to listen deeply to your heart and to decide to make changes.

For this purpose I'd like to suggest that you begin what I call your *Love Your Heart Journal*. I promise you it will be worth it! You and your heart are worth it! As my very dear friend, the late Susan Jeffers said, “You deserve

the best life has to offer. And it's reassuring to know that you don't have to go outside yourself to find the best; it lies within your very being.”

Do you already keep a journal and have a system for journaling that you love? Mine began with an automatic pencil and lined spiral notebook at a class at UCLA in 1979. *At a Journal Workshop*, a book by Ira Progoff, gave me all the options that developed gradually into my own method. I was taught that writing by hand is key to the journaling experience. That may still be true for some; many women are attracted to decorative, handcrafted journals. To be honest, I find them intimidating—as if only really “perfect” sentences can be written there. There is an old saying, “Perfection leads to procrastination, which in turn leads to paralysis.” Truly, *perfection sucks!* when it comes to journals—and to living life!

In my journal-writing classes women always expressed concern about privacy. Thanks to technology, I now love writing in my journal on my computer or iPad (for which I use a portable Bluetooth keyboard so I can journal as a passenger in a car, in a restaurant, anywhere). My favorite journal-writing app so far is called Day One—I love how it makes it so easy and password private.

Whatever method you choose, I encourage you to commit to a practice of writing in your journal as your most trusted friend, feeling safe and connected to your deepest self as you write, taking time to read over the entries and savor their discoveries.

Would you be willing to consider making this a daily or weekly practice? I understand if this is something you aren't ready to do. If you feel you will never want to do it, it just isn't "you," that is fine. Just skip over this journal section and read on. I don't want you to miss all the empowerment and good news you will find in *Love Your Heart*. I want you to always follow your heart in the way only you know best.

I nonetheless hope that you can you feel yourself loving keeping a journal as your new best friend, a place to simply go within and listen to your inner voice. So, I am making a heartfelt request: that you begin a heart journal in which you will trace the red thread of your physical history and begin to explore practices of self-care. It will be the place to meet your truest self. It will lead you into deeper understanding of who you are in all the intellectual-emotional-spiritual dimensions of your heart.

To start off your *Love Your Heart Journal*, write answers to the following questions about your upbringing and your family history:

- What heart-related illnesses or maladies did your ancestors experience?
- What is your family history of food?
- What were your favorite foods as a child?
- How do those particular foods show up today as your "comfort foods?"

Create a dialogue with your body:

- What are my basic physical needs right now?
- What gradual and easy changes might begin today?
- What foods best serve me?
- What habits best serve me?

Ask your emotional heart:

- What do I truly love?
- In what ways can I let go of chasing love, and cultivate the love that is right here in this moment now, in my very own heart?

Finally, journal with your heart in response to these questions:

- What life qualities does my heart yearn for?
- When do I feel the most present?
- What is the personal affirmation for my life?

Asking the right questions makes all the difference! Where do the answers and the sudden clarity come from? Some say it is the subconscious mind—our inborn servant that slaves diligently to solve problems. Some say angels are standing by, but they won't act unless we ask. What really matters is that the process works. A sudden insight reveals answers that feel natural and right.

Once you've started your *Love Your Heart* journal, or perhaps as an alternative to the above exercise, I recommend another journaling tool for self-exploration. This valuable practice taught me about my own heart values. It was the result of a one-hour telephone coaching session with Sheva Carr. (In addition to running her own private coaching program, Heart Ambassadors, at her company Fyeral, Sheva is a licensed physician of Oriental Medicine who speaks to people all over the world about the heart in her capacity as the founding director of HeartMath's HeartMastery Program.)

Clearly well-versed in matters of the heart, Sheva suggested I create a list on the left-hand side of the page of the people who most inspire me, who I would consider “my mentors.” I felt stumped at first, and it took a few minutes for my mind to begin identifying them. Then it began to be fun, and when my list was made up of about ten, I was intrigued to find that it was almost completely made up of women. They were mostly writers I knew through their books, one political leader, one film star, my best friend Mary Olsen Kelly, one television host, and Helen Keller.

She then guided me in listing next to their names the “core values each embodies/radiates.” As I tuned into the essence of each of these great women, I noticed how my heart seemed to be filled with their admirable qualities: expansiveness, inclusivity, reinvention, eloquence, transcendence, devotion, enlightenment, presence, warmth, care for others, graciousness, beauty, elegance, vulnerability, depth, surrender, wonder, enthusiasm, exuberance. Sheva explained that I had just discovered my own core values through this exercise.

The word that reoccurred most was reinvention. I had chosen women, who, in finding themselves blindsided by

difficult circumstances, had discovered ways to become someone entirely new. And I could see the truth of that in my own life. My mother and my grandmother had modeled for me the old adage, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” I structured the theme of my book, *Send Me Someone*, a romantic memoir, on how the pivotal times of my life were opportunities to transform adversity into new beginnings.

Sheva explained that in Inuit culture, it would be said that reinvention is my personal red thread that pulls together the tapestry of my life. I have kept this process alive in my own heart journal by making a new list every year or so. Perhaps you too will find that identifying your core values provides a keystone on which you can build your concept of who you really are inside.

Both the journaling and the red thread meditation are effective and soothing methods of tapping into who you are inside. And getting to know yourself—both the history of your physical heart, and the heart that is at the center of your being—is your important introduction to living a heart-centered life.



REDISCOVER PLAY

*As children, didn't we love to scare ourselves?
The game of "Boo!" was more fun than we could stand.
When did we decide to take it all so seriously?*

—Paul von Welanetz

As children we viewed running around as fun, and we played with abandon. We didn't censor our choices in how we spent our time and simply did what we enjoyed. Running as fast as I could along the sidewalks felt amazing! Skipping! Jumping off walls, climbing trees, swinging on the jungle gym at school. Hopscotch. My very favorite was jump rope, its rhythm and the recitation of so many fun jump-rope rhymes. Yes, this is a diversion, but here's an absolutely socks-knocking-off rhyme based on the Sanskrit mantra, *Tat tvam asi* (Thou art that) I discovered a while back:

JUMP ROPE RHYME*Tat tvam asi:*

thou art that—
 that leaf, that tree,
 that cow, that cat,
 that cloud, that sky,
 that moon, that sun,
 that you, that I—
 for all are one.

So here you are
 and there you go
 and who you were
 you hardly know.
 I think this I

is only me:
 a drip, a drop,
 but not the sea.
 Yet when I wake
 from all these dreams,

then, like the snake,
 I'll shed what seems:
 this mask, this skin,
 this ball and chain.
 I will begin
 to fall like rain.

Our heart's last home:
 the wind-whipped foam,
 the sweet, deep sea.

Tat tvam asi.

—Tom Hansen

Isn't that lovely? I'm always astounded by it, so much power in such a childlike cadence. I know that you agree, and I suspect that now you're likely thinking: "Great intro, Diana, but here it comes, the lecture on exercise." The importance of working out—getting our heart rates to climb and our blood moving—is something we're all aware of, but wow, what a hurdle for so many of us. Do you, like me, overthink it until it gradually turns into something you dread on your to-do list? Do you picture other women doing it perfectly? When we do this our perfectionism turns into procrastination and then spirals rapidly into exercise paralysis. Then we join the cartoon cat Garfield on the couch. He basks in his avoidance, but we don't, do we? We feel bad about ourselves, resolve to start on Monday, and then on Monday find ourselves too busy. When it comes to exercise, the more we think about it and tell ourselves we *must* do it, the more daunting the idea becomes.

So, how can we stop overthinking exercise and banish the shoulds? Is it possible for us to reframe the concept of *exercise* into *play*? A little more evidence that play is good for us: research has shown that laughter—the kind that gets our eyes to water—can actually cause the lining of our blood vessel walls to relax, and in turn increase our blood flow for up to forty-five minutes. Damage to these walls can lead to the narrowing of the blood vessels and eventually to cardiovascular disease. So start playing and laughing again!

In this chapter, let's follow the thread of our lightheartedness and find all those tiny, loose threads that want to merge into a pattern of fun. I smile when I remember asking myself one time, "What would you have changed about your life?" The answer: "I would have been more physically adventurous. I spent *way* too much time worrying about my hair." I now know that the child at play is joy in action. And joy in action is an expression of the spiritual heart.

REDISCOVERING PLAY: MY OWN EXPERIENCE

I wasn't raised by a particularly active family. My parents liked to read newspapers or cookbooks for fun. They

and their friends' generation perceived physical activity as "work," and I adopted the same attitude. We didn't see ourselves as "lazy;" we simply *were* lazy.

I discovered later that I wasn't actually as lazy as I was used to being sedentary. As an adult, there was simply no time for sitting around. The best way to get my baby daughter quiet was to dance around as I held her. I had a profession teaching cooking classes and writing cookbooks, and this required a lot of physical preparation and cleanup. There was no one to delegate these tasks to. Years later, my late husband Paul and I started an organization with weekly breakfast meetings. I was up at 4 a.m. on many mornings and on the road shortly thereafter. As the person in charge, I had to have everything ready to go when the crowds (and yes, these meetings drew up to two hundred people, so I couldn't just make a stop at Faster Donuts and show up) arrived. Yes, I grew into a more active person, but no, I didn't really make it a point to deliberately exercise. That came a bit later when it became clear to me that I'd be a much stronger, happier person if I started to intentionally look after my body.

I decided to start the New Year with a new program. "Hello body," I wrote in my journal and listened inwardly

for an answer. My body growled back, “It’s about time you paid some attention to me!”

How did my body and I lose rapport? I continued writing and realized it had begun in sixth grade when I grew eight inches in one year. Truly, I couldn’t guess what size my feet would be when my awkward form climbed out of bed in the morning. “My body,” I thought, “is *way* out of control.” So I began to pretend that it didn’t exist in any meaningful way. I fed and clothed it, but hoped if I otherwise ignored it, I could escape its surprises. But it hadn’t stopped existing, and years later, following the untimely death of my husband and my eventual remarriage, I grew determined to heal my mind/body rift. So I mustered my courage and marched into a gym near my home, looking for a personal trainer. I had never done any deliberate exercise other than walking, so this was going to be a *big* stretch.

The bronzed, sculpted woman at the desk could have been a model in a muscle magazine. Gathering my courage, I took a breath and on the exhale, said I’d like a trial session. Clearly bored by the prospect of a midlife client, she put me through an extraordinary number of impossible-for-me exercises, all the while pursing her lips and stealing admiring glances at herself in the mirror.

She could have the mirror. Feeling frumpy, I hated every minute on the torture machines, but pride kept me in the game. Muttering “This is good for me,” like a mantra, I signed up for twelve sessions, and paid in advance.

Buyer’s remorse descended like a dark cloud when I got home, but I vowed to do it for one month no matter what. The next day I could hardly move; every muscle in my body ached. I canceled my appointment. Still sore two days later, I called and asked for my money back. No one returned my call; the contract’s fine print told me no refunds. I’d gotten myself into this and I would have to live with it.

For the next few months I vented my anger doing exercise videos at home. “It’s too much trouble to go to a gym,” I told myself. “I like the privacy of working alone.” But these solo sessions at home were inconsistent, and though my husband Ted and I loved our daily two-mile walks around our local Balboa Island, I knew I needed weight training to get results.

One day my psychologist/daughter Lexi told me over lunch that she had begun working out at a gym. She raved about the improvement in her own body tone,

energy level, and stamina. Meanwhile, I recounted my hard luck story, getting tired of my whining litany.

Lexi agreed that the teacher had been way off in working me so hard on a first visit. She offered to drive across town to join me at “my” gym, so I bit the bullet and made an appointment with a different trainer—Randy. He and Lexi had me laughing all through the session. We clarified my goals and set a workout schedule of three times a week.

I attended every session, worked at a moderate pace, and never suffered the soreness of the original workout again. Sure enough, I began to love the surge of energy and satisfaction that came after each session. When the month was up, I signed up for three more. Then three more months after that. At the end of the first year I found a trainer/cheerleader named Mike Krpan (www.Udofit.com) who came right to my house for the same price as the gym, and I’ve stayed with twice-weekly workouts for almost fifteen years. I realize that not everyone can afford or needs to hire a personal trainer, but that’s what worked for me.

I’m amazed at how much my formerly ignored body changed. Even though I now weigh what I did when I

began, weight is no longer an issue. Muscle weighs more than fat, and when I look in a mirror, I am greeted by firm arms and shoulders, a slimmer waist and flatter tummy, and strong, toned legs. I see straighter posture. Best of all, I feel full of energy and younger than my years.

The time and effort it took to train were some of the best investments of my life. Now when I ask my body what it would like me to do, it tells me I’m doing just fine. In the place of anger and frustration is a new sense of teamwork and partnership, my body and soul.

Another resolution I made was to learn an uplifting poem by heart every week. Motivated by a book I happened to pick up, *Saved by a Poem* by Kim Rosen, I simply thought it would be fun to be able to tap into inspiring words, and that it would be good exercise for my brain cells. This I could do on my morning walks through our hilly neighborhood. Stepping through our front gate, paper with poem clutched in hand, I practiced lines over and over for the twenty minutes it took to hike my hilly mile. I began to notice that I returned home with feelings of expansion and well-being. “This is very good,” I thought.

The poetry I've memorized has become my most uplifting joy, and I can recite from deep in my bones. I've started inserting appropriate poems in my lectures—I find that the words just flow from me, and I am invited to speak more and more often. I've learned that the greatest gift of poetry is that it puts the mind to sleep and allows us to have a mystical experience in which our heart expands. The very first poem I memorized (and this is perfect place to share it) follows:

LOVE AFTER LOVE

The time will come
 when, with elation
 you will greet yourself arriving
 at your own door, in your own mirror
 and each will smile at the other's welcome,
 and say, sit here. Eat.
 You will love again the stranger who was your self.
 Give wine. Give bread.
 Give back your heart to itself,
 to the stranger who has loved you
 all your life, whom you ignored
 for another, who knows you by heart.
 Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
 peel your own image from the mirror.
 Sit. Feast on your life.

—Derek Walcott

And of course, I've having such a good time hiking (a daily “joint effort of the body and soul”), I can't imagine having something “more important” to do.

REDISCOVER PLAY: CONNECT WITH THE LIGHTHEARTED YOU

The five-year-old you—what games did she play when she was alone? What games did she invent for herself? What was she drawn to? I believe in the theory that we are drawn at a very young age toward what our hearts love.

Dolls didn't really interest me as they did most girls. My favorite toy was the kind of order pad from the dime store that waitresses used in the restaurants we visited. I'd move a bookcase into the center of my room, stand on one side and pretend to take a customer's order. I'd tear it off, slap it on top of a bookcase, then, slip behind it into my “kitchen” and pretend to fry eggs on a griddle and

do a fancy flip of some fantasy hash browns. I'd plop the plate atop the bookshelf, dash to the other side and step into my role as waitress. I loved to make up conversations with my customers. They were always appreciative, and bringing enjoyment and homemade nourishment to others felt really good to me—and it still does!

Can you remember what was the most fun for you to play when you were very young? What filled you with laughter and excitement? What still feels good to you? Did you love jokes and riddles as I did? They sparked lighthearted connection, even with people I was meeting for the first time. That thread of connection became my life theme.

Use your *Love Your Heart Journal* as a portal to your emotional heart. In your journal, what will you begin to see as you write out answers to the following questions?

- What was your favorite outdoor game? How did you feel when you played it?
- What did you love to do?
- What were your favorite role-plays when no one was looking?
- What did you fantasize about being?

- How did your play affect what you created as an adult?
- Did it relate to your career choice?
- Did it reflect a certain value that you hold?
- What is your life theme?

Or, perhaps you'd like to have a conversation with yourself as a five-year-old, or, like I did, with my body. When I began the aforementioned journal entry, I began my dialogue with my body by making a list of ten major bodily events. They included a childhood mishap, puberty issues, childbirth, menopause, and the like. In creating the focusing statement with which I began, I wrote that I had decided to listen to it, and invited my body to communicate what it had to say. I was open to whatever that might be, and thus could be receptive to the frustration with which it answered.

REDISCOVER PLAY: START PLAYING!

Connect with your ego-free self/inner child and play: do something—anything—that requires movement. Try an activity that you loved as a child; get involved in a group exercise class. Water yoga and other water classes are easy

on the joints, great for the body, and a fabulously fun way to connect with others and feel a sense of community and oneness. No one really cares how you look in a swimsuit—let’s face it, they’re probably thinking much more intently about themselves! Isn’t that what you do? Try something new, make it a practice to think only thoughts that make you feel good.

Why not make your playtime a feast of the senses? Treat your eyes to beauty, smell deliciousness, taste freedom, feel the sun, listen to music that makes you want to move! Adding music to an activity can turn it into an uplifting and transcendent experience. Think about the many ways in which music creates a mood. Certainly you’ve noticed the music that retailers play: I find that the music in department stores makes me want to spend money!

I use music as a muse at home and turn work into play. Rock and roll is great for inspired housework, and I like to play Bach when I’m writing and doing other mental work—it provides an orderly feeling. I used to dread cleaning my office, but now, fifteen minutes before the end of my workday I set a kitchen timer, and put on some music. The song, “I Will Survive” by Gloria

Gaynor always makes me want to hop around, so I turn on my radio station of that name (Do you know about the app called Pandora? You can create your own radio stations by choosing a favorite song or instrumental piece.), set the timer for fifteen minutes, and see how much I can sort and get done toward creating order and beauty. The music is “on” and so am I. The “rule” of this practice is you can’t extend the fifteen minutes no matter what. I have to stop when the buzzer rings. And, you know what? I often don’t want to stop! I make myself stop anyway because that is the rule of the game. What used to bore me to distraction is now fun.

Music also inspires movement at the kirtan concerts that I go to with my husband Ted. At these uplifting events, sacred mantras are sung, and the attendees move and sing with the group. (We never miss the occasions when Krishna Das, the rock star of kirtan, performs with his group at a theater nearby.) I recognize that the activity is unconventional to Westerners and requires us to let go of our self-consciousness to a degree that may feel uncomfortable. I confess, I’m not big on getting up and dancing with some of the participants—those boarding school days left their mark—I’m still working

on letting go and just moving with the music, letting my defended heart fall away. But I do love just being present and singing along. The pure joy of the group members is so contagious, you can almost see the red thread in the room.

You don't need me to tell you how much your heart will benefit from exercise. But what you might not realize, until you try it, is just how uplifting movement can be for your soul—especially when you're with a group. The depth of the change you'll experience will amaze you.

CHAPTER 3



TAME YOUR STRESS

Make no comparisons,

Make no judgments,

Delete the need to understand.

—W. Brugh Joy

Like the patterns created when we weave, light and dark, life is made up of joy and sorrow, ease and challenge. Weaving in a red thread is something weavers do to make the pattern in the fabric emerge all the more distinctly. Having been through great joy and great sorrow, I have experienced many moments of dark beauty. I told of one during my tribute commemorating my friend Susan Jeffers. At the time, my husband Paul von Welanetz was living his last few days. Susan arrived with a gift for me—a laughing jade Buddha. The Buddha was a reminder that no matter what we were going through, there is great beauty in the divine

design. It was a very thoughtful gift, and I greatly appreciated this strong reminder. We are human, and in our difficulties, we often lose sight of this design. But we can find great solace when we simply accept what is and, as Brugh Joy said, “delete the need to understand.”

And while it may be too much for us to see the good in challenging situations and to sense their hidden gifts, it’s not too much to see the good in the everyday lives that we live. Things, we think, should be different. We find ourselves blaming and caught up in the frustration of wanting to change things we cannot change. And these things, sadly for us, are where we put our attention.

This focus on difficulties and what is wrong is a sort of addiction to intensity. In a recent article in *O* magazine, my favorite life coach Martha Beck described it like this: “It’s human nature,” she said:

Any high school English teacher will tell you that a story needs conflict to hold our attention. If you don’t believe it, consider what’s on TV: conflict in relationships, business, sports, politics—even, for God’s sake, cooking. Turmoil draws and holds our attention. But any Zen master will tell you that where our attention goes, so go our lives.

Not to belabor the point, but it is enormously important that we recognize the pattern of worry and blame that so much of our attention goes to. Do you ever wake up in the night and begin thinking? Soon we are overthinking and making up crazy consequences of the story in our heads. Where does that take us usually? Tossing and turning, captivated by the drama in our unwelcome thoughts, we begin to make up what my husband Ted calls the “parade of horrors.” This constant state of worry, fretting over past wrongs and future “disasters,” is, in a nutshell, stress.

Dr. Richard S. Lazarus was a pioneer in the analysis of stress who set forth the most commonly accepted definition: stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person *perceives* (emphasis is mine) that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.

So, we feel stress when we perceive that “we can’t handle the demands” put upon us. This situation is actually pretty broad—it not only encompasses worry over such things as paying all of our bills today, but it also includes revisiting past events, like feeling angry over losing our job (we’re now required to start our own busi-

ness or take a job that we don't care for, it feels like too much to handle) and imagining unpleasant future events, like experiencing poor health (getting sick is too scary, I don't want to suffer, it feels like too much to handle). It's so easy to allow ourselves to get overwhelmed by these habitual thoughts. To reverse this type of pattern, my very wise friend Susan Jeffers advised: "When the worries about the future take away the pleasure of the now, put your mind to rest with the thought, 'No matter what happens, I can handle it.' Keep repeating this affirmation over and over again until it becomes automatic in your mind." I use this as my personal antidote to worrisome thoughts, and always sense that in that future moment I will have all the wisdom and experience I will need to "handle it."

We may not be able to control the stressors around us, but we can control how we take them in, worry about them, and let them run our lives. Stress is caused by our perceptions, and by our thoughts about our perceptions. These are things that we *can* change. I love this poem by Robert Bly about thinking:

THINGS TO THINK

Think in ways you've never thought before.
If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message
Larger than anything you've ever heard,
Vaster than a hundred lines of Yeats.

Think that someone may bring a bear to your door,
Maybe wounded and deranged; or think that a moose
Has risen out of the lake,
and he's carrying on his antlers
A child of your own whom you've never seen.

When someone knocks on the door,
Think that he's about
To give you something large: tell you you're forgiven,
Or that it's not necessary to work all the time,
Or that it's been decided that if you lie down no one
will die.

It's a big change for most of us to think more expansively than the way we usually do. And today, in all candor, I get a chance to teach what I need to learn. Here I sit at my computer on Thanksgiving morning, our plans to be with family cancelled because my husband, who has just been through what he in hindsight calls the most stressful time

of his life, has a virus called shingles. He is stoic about it, but he is truly suffering. I struggle with the choice to dwell on: “This is all wrong in so many ways! I’m missing my favorite holiday! My husband’s in pain and I can’t do anything about it!” or I can practice thankfulness for our many blessings and think: “Life happens, plans change.” My beautiful friend Susan Jeffers would say to me, “It is all happening perfectly.”

“Really?” I ask myself. “Even now?”

Yes, really. Even now.

When we’re in upsetting situations, we’re challenged to not fall into the trap of getting angry, deciding that we’re victims, and thinking negatively—in short, experiencing stress. While we’re all aware that stress wears on our physical bodies, we should know that there is a very real, direct, and serious connection between stress and heart health. Sheva Carr, the physician and coach I mentioned earlier in the book, writes in her online book *Being the Source of Love, Being the Source of Value* (www.beingthesourceoflove.com):

Being under stress is like trying to drive our car with one foot on the gas and the other on the brakes—it produces tremendous wear and tear on our systems and makes us ineffective at the same time.

Researchers from The Institute of HeartMath (www.heartmath.org), where Sheva is a consultant, have brought forward some startling and exciting news about stress, our emotions, and the heart. They’ve found that old adages like “follow your heart” or “two hearts that beat as one” turn out to be relevant in the laboratory. Research shows that the heart has its own “brain,” which sends out intuitive guidance via signals to the frontal lobes of our actual brains. This communication pathway, and the health and fulfillment it guides us to, is accessible to us only when the static of stress is tuned and quieted by emotions like love, care, and appreciation. Such heartfelt feelings, those that embody core values, create a uniquely ordered pattern in the heart’s rhythm, which harmonizes and reverses the damage caused by the physiological cascade of 1400 changes that happen in the body in a stress reaction. (They even have a technology that allows you to watch your heart rhythm change in real time as you change your attitudes and emotions! www.emwave.com.) Would you rather change 1400 things to generate a feeling of peace, or make one change that changes everything? HeartMath’s tagline says it all: “A Change of

Heart Changes Everything.” The heart acts like the conductor of a grand orchestra—all the organs in the body follow its lead. This “physiological coherence” as HeartMath calls it, from the heart conductor cascades to the whole orchestra of our being, creating system-wide order and well being that broadcasts beyond us—up to three feet as measured by crude instruments! In contrast, when the heart is chaotic (as in a stress reaction), the leadership is lost, and we create disharmony in the body, something like the sound of an orchestra warming up rather than the symphony.

What does this mean? It means that when we are in touch with what we truly care about, consciously activating appreciation or acting in alignment with our values, it actually produces order in the heart itself, which makes the heart function more efficiently and brings benefit to every other aspect of our body and our psyche. We have yet to realize that we can purposely generate emotions that are harmonious with our core values.

Most of us take for granted our ability to activate the care, the passion, joy, and love of our favorite memory or movie or value by thinking about it. If we

really knew the impact of our emotional state on our own bodies, minds, and even the world, we would not take this power for granted. The idea that emotions just happen to us as a result of circumstances is a popular misconception in which we make ourselves the victims of circumstances rather than the creators of them.

Because the stress we experience is generated by our own response to, or fantasy about, a particular circumstance, we are always at choice. The mastery of this choice is extremely powerful.

Sheva and I developed an exercise that is designed to help you take charge of your emotional state whenever you’re feeling that your emotions are “taking over.” It works anywhere and at anytime. On a spiritual level, this practice also allows you to connect to your red thread, through listening to and loving your heart:

1. Take a moment to pause and connect with whatever you are feeling. Emotions are a gateway to connecting with your heart, even if they seem like negative or harmful feelings. Often we disconnect from ourselves by trying to feel “good” instead of listening to what we really feel.

2. As if these feelings belong to a friend you care about, listen to them. Connect to them. Listen for what your feelings are telling you that you need. Listen for what your feelings are telling you matters to you.
3. See if you can pick one word or phrase that captures what matters to you and what you need. That is what you value.
4. Ask yourself how you might act in alignment with that value, today, or if you can, right now. What's one thing you can do that expresses this value through you or that brings it to you?

Sheva reminds us that it may seem silent and silly at first, a pale and impotent move in the face of frustrations like government fraud, war, and the destruction of our earth. But the results will speak for themselves, at first for your own health, your own life, and ultimately for our world. Try it and see. Revive the importance of core heart values in your life. It works. It will empower you as the master of what you are feeling and in turn will bring your heart into a coherent, ordered pattern, your body into an optimal peak performance state, your brain into full gear, and ripple out measurably into your world.

One of the most important skills we can cultivate for ourselves physically is a spiritual one—find peace. If we learn to master our stress, and find silence, we can experience the expansiveness in which the eye and the heart can take it *all* in and see how each story is just a thread in the weave of the divine design.

TAMING STRESS: MY OWN EXPERIENCE

I've learned that making meditation a daily practice is the most dependable technique for moving beyond my thoughts. I cannot urge you strongly enough to learn some form of systematic meditation. If you have never meditated, or have tried and “failed,” I'll bet you are holding an ideal picture in your head of a saint or deity with a facial expression of a beatific bliss. You can erase that picture right now. There is no such thing as meditating perfectly, and it may feel clumsy when you begin. Using various meditation techniques, the one that feels most right, will lead you gradually into silence. Buddhist, Transcendental Meditation (TM), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, mala, or rosary methods are all equally valuable. Be patient with yourself as you feel your way into what is natural and right for you.

My personal meditation practice begins just before dawn. I enter my private sacred space, light a candle, and place a fresh flower on my small altar. I settle comfortably into my meditation chair and wrap myself in a very long length of smooth silk I purchased in a fabric store and then hemmed to use only for this purpose. Holding a mala of clear crystal beads strung on red thread given to me by a beloved spiritual master and moving the beads between my thumb and middle finger, I inwardly recite a mantra of sacred Sanskrit syllables that carries the power to lead me to absolute silence within. Usually, after twenty to thirty minutes, meditation has gently led me into a transcendent state beyond all thought. I'm no longer running over anything in my mind, not wishing for anything, not even thinking about meditating. From that clear place I live in my personal affirmation, the one I use in all challenging events: "I am open and receptive to my highest good." Understanding this, absolutely, how could I feel anything but utter peace?

When I arise, I can choose to either go back to bed (where it would now be easy to fall into a deep and restful slumber for several more hours), or to begin my writing day.

When I decide to work, I settle into my chair at my computer. I light another candle, and invite my highest self, the part that always sees the divine design of what I am doing and why, to write through me. Firmly established in a state of peace and surrender, I ask expansive questions knowing that their answers come whenever they come—perhaps now, perhaps later, in the shower.

And as for the stress of work and the blank page, I am learning that working "hard" is not only stressful, but it isn't effective. So many of us try to create our dreams out of anxiety and neediness. But I am truly learning that working smart is only possible when we let our desires originate from a place of peace, then set our intentions without attachments. I get to that place by meditating.

The practice of meditation for me, and many of us in the Western world, all began with the Beatles. Their association with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and his technique of TM brought meditation to the West as a scientific and replicable stress-reduction technique. Philip Goldberg gives a great overview of this tradition in his book *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation—How Indian Spirituality Changed the West*. He recently wrote in *Enlightenment Lifestyle Magazine* (www.EnlightenmentLifestyleMagazine.com):

The Beatles' place in musical and cultural history will no doubt be commemorated forever, like that of Mozart, Gershwin, Louis Armstrong, and other emblematic musicians. They also deserve a place of honor in the great transmission of spiritual teachings from India to the West. In the long run, their role as unlikely gurus may impact the collective psyche even more than the music itself.

For those who are attracted to delving into meditation as a spiritual practice, my personal favorite book is *Meditation for the Love of It: Enjoying Your Own Deepest Experience* by Sally Kempton. A former *New York Times* journalist, Kempton has spent over forty years practicing, studying, and teaching meditation and spiritual philosophy. Of this book and Sally Kempton's work, Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Love, Pray*, says: "She is an encyclopedia of utter wisdom. *Meditation for the Love of It* is like a precious road map, generously handed over from a seasoned and experienced pilgrim. Think of this book as the most important travel guide you'll ever encounter, written by a true nomad of the mind—one who has faced down every demon, investigated every trick door, unburied every mystical hidden village that Consciousness has to

offer—and who now offers to show you the way." You can study with Sally online through her website at www.SallyKempton.com.

TAME YOUR STRESS: PRACTICE MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a style of meditation practice, is supported by the American Heart Association. MBSR was established by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and it is a structured complementary medicine program. Beth Mulligan, an MBSR teacher at the Susan Samueli Center for Integrative Medicine at UC Irvine and elsewhere, describes the practice on her website: "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is a program designed to teach people dealing with a wide range of conditions, including illness, chronic pain, or stress from their busy lives, how to take care of themselves." www.mindful-way.com.

While based on Buddhist practices, MBSR is not spiritually based and it is associated with no particular religion or belief system. Anyone can do it. "Mindfulness" is a nonjudgmental awareness that is experienced moment by moment. The practitioner spends the time in simply

viewing her thoughts and feelings dispassionately; simply watching them in the present moment. She practices being in the here and now without contemplating the events of the past or fantasizing about the future. This is a practice that can help us permanently change the way we handle stress.

Beth related her own experience as a teacher and practitioner of MBSR:

The way I begin my period of sitting meditation in the morning is with a simple technique called the “look, listen, feel, breathe” practice. I developed this to help my students enter the present moment more fully at the beginning of class when we are still arriving and transitioning from the busy “doing mode.” This practice helps me ground myself in the moment many times throughout my day and particularly before I practice meditation.

It goes like this; first we take in the visual aspects of our present moment, taking in the sights around us in an open, nonjudgmental way. Many times we enter a room or place without really seeing it. This can be helpful on a practical level, like noticing where the exits are and other safety issues. It can also help

us become more present to the richness of life right around us.

Next, we shift the attention to the ears and hearing, asking, “What are the sounds in this present moment?” Not needing to wish they were gone, but simply opening up to them and noticing them as a way to experience this moment.

Then we shift to the sense of feeling, of touch, by bringing our attention to all the places our body is making contact with the chair or cushion, or if we are standing, to our feet on the floor, or if driving, our hands on the steering wheel. We feel the sensations of pressure or support in our bodies. Another way to experience the present moment is through temperature, feeling the air on our skin, noticing the places on our body that feel the coldest and then the warmer parts.

From here we go to feeling our breath; not thinking about breathing or controlling the breath, but actually feeling what movement happens in our chest or belly as we inhale and as we exhale. Or we may focus on the place the breath enters the body—the nose or mouth—and where it leaves the body, feeling the

rush of air past the nostrils, noting the coolness of the inhale and the warmer air as we exhale.

Beth continued:

Many people have heard phrases like “just live in the moment” or “all we have is the here and now”. . . . These are very fine ideas, but without a practice they may remain a concept and not a way to actually live. That was how it was for me. I wanted to be more present, but the pull of my mind was quite strong, very habitual, familiar, and sometimes painful. Mindfulness practice gave me a way to actually enter the present moment through the body and the senses. My students report that this simple step-by-step practice helps them in all sorts of situations in their lives when they notice that their minds are running away with them.

What could be simpler than this practice of attending to exactly where we are and what we are experiencing right now? And how empowering—in no time flat, we take charge of the thoughts we’re having and the feelings we’re feeling. We are not the “victim” of the circumstances we are in. Beth also shared a few more ideas for experiencing mindfulness:

1. Practice mindful moments; feel the hot water of your shower, taste the flavor of your breakfast; listen to a friend with your full attention. It’s restful to your body and mind to focus on the pleasant moments of everyday living.
2. While in the car (especially in traffic), focus on your breath. Feel your hands on the steering wheel; listen to the sounds around you.
3. When standing in line, instead of getting impatient, practice standing yoga. Feel your feet, stand tall; breathe deeply, and stretch your spine from side to side. Look at the people around you and quietly send good wishes to them and their families.
4. Take a break from the radio, TV, computer, and cell phone for half an hour at the end of the day before dinner.
5. Take small breaks throughout the day. Three to five mindful breaths or a five-minute stretch can change your attitude completely.

TAME YOUR STRESS: TRY RESTORATIVE YOGA

Another stress-relief practice that strengthens the body and eases the mind is yoga. In 2006 I decided that yoga

was a path for me to explore more deeply. I had taken my first class in the small town of San Miguel de Allende in Mexico in my early thirties. My beautiful teacher, Christina (Kiki) Johnson, became my lifelong friend and helped me develop a home practice that I have enjoyed over the years. But the time came when I wanted to truly immerse myself in yoga for its physical benefits of refreshing and relaxing the body and the best way for me to do that was to enroll in a teacher training. Attending many classes during a four-month certification was truly a powerful process for my body and my stress level.

With the growing popularity of yoga, many new forms have emerged. Recently, my closest friend Mary Olsen Kelly raved about a class in restorative yoga she had taken in Hawaii. I went online and looked for one near me in California. Wow! This is yoga even Garfield would love. Fully supported floor poses that you stay in for fifteen minutes or more allow the body to rest even more deeply than during sleep because cortisol, the stress hormone, is not being produced as it is during dreams. Once again, I decided to immerse myself and learn as much as I could. Last year I became certified by Judith Lasater, PhD, as a trained instructor of restorative yoga,

and the results have been amazing. My husband tells everyone that only twenty minutes in the first pose I put him in permanently eased his chronic back pain.

I cannot urge you strongly enough to find a restorative yoga class in your area—a trained teacher can help assure that you receive the maximum benefit from the practice, and as with any group movement experience, one receives an enhanced sense of community. If no classes are available, an excellent resource is the book by the woman with whom I studied, Judith Lasater. Her *Relax and Renew* is the first book devoted exclusively to restorative yoga. Judith shows through photos and precise directions how to use props such as folded blankets or bolsters to support the correct sequence of poses—what are their specific benefits, how long they should be held, and the like.

Remember, as you begin meditating and engaging in yoga poses (or whatever stress-reduction technique works for you—take a walk in the park, and do nothing but admire the leaves on the trees!), be gentle with yourself. There's no “wrong” or “bad” way to do it. The point is to find yourself centered, peaceful, and calm. While life offers us darkness and light, challenge and joy,

we can learn to create an internal peace that holds steady during all times. Our hearts, and every other organ in our bodies, will thank us.



TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Don't think you're being selfish—far from it! When you love and take care of yourself, you'll find it inevitably serves everyone. And isn't a world filled with love the kind we all want to live in?

—Marci Shimoff

As I mentioned in the Introduction, I may have avoided having a heart attack had I visited a cardiologist and taken care of my heart. Seeing my doctor regularly is now part of my routine. Of course regular check-ups are a must for women; we must take care of ourselves—we have such heart-filled lives to live!

When it comes to caring for ourselves, Marci Shimoff (author of one of my favorite books, *Love for No Reason: 7 Steps to Creating a Life of Unconditional Love*), asks:

Are you a loving person? Are you kind, friendly, and encouraging? For most of us, the answer to these questions is yes—at least to some degree.

But here's the true litmus test of unconditional love: Are you a loving person *to yourself*? Are you kind, friendly, and encouraging *to yourself*? Chances are it's harder to answer yes to these questions.

Yet loving yourself is absolutely vital. Studies show it's the basis for success, happiness, and healthy relationships. So how do you do it?

It's easy to love yourself for your “good” qualities: your talents and successes. The trick is in learning to love your less-than-perfect qualities. The most direct way you can love the unlovable in yourself is to bring the feeling of love to whatever it is you're feeling or experiencing—even it's challenging or unpleasant. If you're having a hard time loving yourself, begin by simply loving the fact that you *are unable* to love yourself in this moment.

Try this little experiment: Think of something that you really don't like about yourself—you're too fat or too thin, you can't balance your checkbook, for example. Now close your eyes, and remember a time

when you felt love in your heart for someone or something. Notice if you feel a warmth or expansion in the area of your heart. Now direct that same feeling of love toward yourself—just as you are, flaws and all.

Let's be clear here, I'm not asking you to love your excess flab or your boniness or your lameness in the bean-counting department. What I'm suggesting is that you beam love, compassion, and understanding to that person who's experiencing the challenge: you! When you do this, you'll probably feel a physical shift in your body—you'll be more relaxed and you may even find yourself smiling.

When you can love yourself in every situation—whether you've succeeded or failed, whether you feel good or bad, whether you're enjoying life or hating it—you've taken self-love to the unconditional level.

This one small act can have big and measurable effects. A team of British researchers led by Dr. Paul Gilbert showed that training people to be loving and compassionate toward every aspect of themselves—even toward their tendency to be self-critical—significantly reduced mental suffering,

depression, anxiety, self-criticism, shame, inferiority, and submissive behavior, while upping their ability to soothe and reassure themselves.

So, it seems like a good idea to start just accepting and nurturing who we are, doesn't it? Not only do self-nurturers experience greater ease in their hearts emotionally; they experience greater ease in their hearts physically, as well. In fact, when we're feeling cared for and at one with ourselves and with others (here's that red thread again), our bodies directly benefit. In *The Way of the Happy Woman*, Sara Avant Stover writes:

Our bodies find their innate equilibrium when they're in the parasympathetic mode and feel-good hormones such as oxytocin (most often associated with inducing uterine contractions, the letdown of milk, and mother-infant bonding during the birth process) flood through us.

Nicknamed "the love hormone," oxytocin offers benefits that extend far beyond childbirth. Many of the health benefits we associate with everyday pleasurable experiences and strong social connections start with oxytocin for it decreases stress hormones and helps lower blood pressure. ...

Every day, as much as possible, encourage the release of oxytocin in your body through connecting with others and doing things that bring you pleasure, for embodied delight is one of the most potent medicines you can give yourself.

Yes, "everyday pleasurable experiences," the things that make us smile and feel peaceful and warm inside, are actually good for our hearts. In addition to meditation and exercise, there are many easy and wonderful ways to nurture and celebrate ourselves, and to increase the number of everyday pleasurable experiences that we have. I'm going to look at two variations on the theme of self-care. We hear all the time about how we must take care of ourselves before we can really care for others. I'd like to affirm that yes, we must take care of ourselves, and that means really cherishing the awesomeness that is who we are. And I'd like to shift part two of the discussion to caring for others—a super way to take care of ourselves is to just plain care for others. Just care, without attachment to an outcome, or to get something back, or to solidify a relationship, or because it's expected of us. Love for the sake of loving—it seems to be something you do for others, but no one benefits more than you do. Both

of these activities go to the health of our physical and spiritual hearts.

SELF-CARE: MY OWN EXPERIENCE

Both my mother and grandmother had a deep appreciation of beauty, and the divine, restorative energy of beauty is a feeling that is engrained in me. I've always felt that the half hour I spend each morning on grooming and dressing is more than a habit, but a meditative ritual—a way of reminding myself (and the world!) that I am a manifestation of the divine. And so I was delighted to read an article by Shannon Schneider in *Yoga Journal* that deepened and validated my understanding of self-care and self-adornment. She writes that while traveling with a group in India, they decided together to wear only Indian clothing while they were there:

As I devoted myself to the ritual of beautification in the Indian dawn, I began to see this nurturing of appearance as a sacred act, as though I were dressing and adorning a goddess. It was as if, by treating my outer self as sacred, I was celebrating my embodiment, and honoring the Divine within me.

Inspired by our study of Tantra on the trip, I began to think of this process as “sri-ification,” connecting with the *sri*—the beauty and abundance inherent in the universe. Adorning myself became a way of acknowledging not just my own divinity, but all the beneficent qualities of the world around me. Feeling radiantly beautiful allowed me to slip into a sincere, sweet participation with the beauty of my surroundings, to feel worthy of all the sites and blessings I was taking in.

In another article in the same issue, Christopher Wallis writes of how:

in classical Tantric philosophy, the yogi seeks to perceive all things as they really are: a manifestation of the Divine Light of consciousness...to see all things as equally beautiful. ...You can cultivate your capacity to see yourself and all reality in this way by holding the awareness of innate beauty shining through all that you do. As you go about your day, silently repeat to yourself with everything you see, “Beauty is greeting beauty;” with everything you touch, “Beauty is touching beauty;” and so on. In this way, you will expand your capacity to see all things as beautiful.

These passages affirmed for me my idea that by acknowledging and celebrating my own beauty, I have another moment to experience my oneness with all that is. I *feel* beautiful because I am!

If you're now asking yourself, "Wow, who does she think she is, God's gift to the world?" The answer is yes! Just like every single creature on the planet, every person, every insect, every plant, they're *all* God's beautiful, unique gift. And with that in mind, I urge you to adopt my self-celebration secret—if you want the gift that you are to be enjoyed at the utmost, create your own best birthday party! Why leave your birthday up to others? When we do we create expectations in ourselves, and sheer dread in those around us.

Really? Ask people to celebrate you? Yes! Do you remember being an outsider in your youth? The times in the schoolyard when you felt excluded? Didn't you wish to be included? Don't you like to be included now?

It has taken me all these years to learn a tough lesson—I now know that the path to feeling included is to simply *include!* Invite people to join you. Not all will accept your invitation (their loss, *next!*), but most people

you want to know will surprise you by saying yes. Most will feel honored you asked.

Last year, on my birthday, (March fourth!—March forth! The only command in the year!), I realized I wanted to do something truly memorable. My husband Ted and I would be in the Bay Area, and I began to consider who I knew there. The first who came to mind was one of my writer heroes Kim Rosen, author of *Saved by a Poem*. "Wouldn't it be great if she would join us for lunch?" I wondered. So, I sent her an e-mail, and she said "Yes, what fun!"

That success spurred me to remember what a great fan I am of Roger Housden, author of many of my favorite books, who lives in Sausalito. Kim had mentioned once that she knows him, so I asked for his e-mail and invited him to join us as well. He said (guess what?), *yes!* For the next week, I had the best birthday lunch imaginable to look forward to! And I now have a fun memory of an exceptional day.

The poem excerpt I memorized to recite for my birthday-gift-to-the-world-self is from *Happy Birthday to You!* by Dr. Seuss:

Today you are you! That is truer than true!
 There is no one alive who is you-er than you!
 Shout loud, "I am lucky to be what I am!"
 Thank goodness I'm not just a clam or a ham
 Or a dusty old jar of sour gooseberry jam!
 I am what I am! That's a great thing to be!
 If I say so myself, happy birthday to me!

Sometimes I even embarrass my friends by reciting this for strangers celebrating at other tables in restaurants. It always brings hoots of laughter and good feelings.

In fact, making *others* happy is part of my self-care agenda. Loving other people for absolutely no reason, with no expectation, without exception, is probably one of the most gratifying things I do—for myself! This kind of loving is very different from that described in the following passage by the thirteenth-century poet Hafiz:

Admit something:
 Everyone you see, you say to them,
 "Love me."
 Of course you do not do this out loud:
 Otherwise,
 Someone would call the cops.

Hafiz understood how our emotional hearts long to be loved.

And our society never stops sending us the message that that is the thing we need above all; especially the love of a partner, the love of one someone special. We "celebrate" this idea with Valentine's Day. But have you noticed how men at the very mention of this holiday look like a deer in the headlights? "It's just a marketing ploy," they protest, dreading the occasion because they feel they must do something *special*, something *just right*—my husband Ted included. Who can blame them? My married women friends spend the day vacillating between agreeing with the men and wondering why their husbands never manage to read their minds about what they'd really like. My single women friends feel pressured to have a date or romantic plans that day. They feel excluded if they don't. *Enough!* I believe there is a secret to filling a life with love. And so does our poet Hafiz as he continues...

Why not become the one
 Who lives with a full moon in each eye
 That is always saying
 With that sweet moon
 Language
 What every other eye in this world
 Is dying to hear.

No matter how much love comes our way, unless we ourselves cultivate a capacity to openly give others the very feelings we seek, no amount of obligated fawning or admiration can satisfy. I've learned that to be a happy, healthy human being, I must be the source of my own buoyancy and joyful feelings, and if I love others unabashedly, my need for love is fulfilled. So here is what I love doing for Valentine's Day. I set aside an afternoon in my kitchen to make a double batch of my Divine Fudge. I stir my best wishes into the rich, molten mixture while my favorite love songs play in the background. Then I pour it into a pan. When cool, I cut the fudge into pieces and place two squares in each of many little clear, cellophane treat bags available at craft stores. I tie them with a ribbon and give these to everyone I meet on Valentine's Day—even the postman and the woman who rings me up at the market. I put some in my all of my neighbors' mailboxes. I love this ritual, every year it makes me abundantly happy to spread around some random love. The best part of all is that loving everyone at random, on any day, is something that doesn't require a holiday. I can do it ceaselessly. And it never fails to lift my heart.

**TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF:
YOU ARE DIVINE—ACT LIKE IT**

You are a precious piece of the grand design. You are unique, gifted, creative, and worthy. So nurture yourself like you're God's gift to the world. You are! Try out some of the following ways to treat yourself:

- Take the time to cook yourself a really nice (and healthful!) meal. Serve yourself as you would an honored guest, with a lovely place setting, a flower or two.
- Put on makeup and freshen your hair just to go to the supermarket.
- Connect with nature by standing outdoors for a few minutes whenever possible. (Before I begin my writing in the early mornings I step outside to stand barefooted in the grass.)
- Cultivate an outdoor or indoor herb garden. Begin with just a few different plants. Tarragon, my favorite herb, is at its peak in the summer, but always returns in the spring, reminding me of the flow of the seasons. Parsley and chives and rosemary are perennials and so, so easy. The flowers of all are edible and make a colorful delicious

garnish for salads, omelettes, and soups. (More on growing your own food in the next chapter!)

- Decorate your workspace with your favorite flowers.
- Curl up with a pet to reduce blood pressure. Animals are so, so emotionally responsive and easy to love because they have no agenda, offering just pure affection. They're always practicing loving for no reason.
- Doodle happy shapes. I draw hearts in the mist on my shower door and am amazed how creative they become—never two doodles alike.
- Take a long bubble bath with candles.
- For a special treat, schedule an hour massage and enjoy every moment.
- Catnap, even ten minutes. You awaken refreshed and renewed.
- Make a gratitude list.
- Write a long, newsy personal e-mail or letter to an old friend to freshen up a friendship.

- Watch a tearjerker and have a good cry. (You might do this one with a friend so you can cry and laugh at yourselves at the same time.)
- Spend a whole afternoon reading a book.
- Watch your favorite comedian on YouTube. Researchers at Loma Linda University say laughter reduces cortisol, the stress hormone, and causes an increase in the release of endorphins and human growth hormone—slowing down the heart rate and reducing blood pressure. So laugh a lot!
- In your car or your shower, tune up those pipes with some solitary singing. Really belt. Or while driving, listen to life-affirming CDs, or meditation music.
- Chant “ommm,” the primal sound of the universe. Or hum. Humming has been shown to quiet the mind and relieve stress.
- Add to this list anything that allows you to revel in your divine you-ness.
- Now do the thing you just added to the list.

You deserve the very best. Whatever the very best is for you, accept it as yours.

**TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF:
FILL YOUR LIFE WITH LOVE**

A life *filled with love* can be yours right now. I spoke earlier of loving everyone around you just for the sheer joy of it. Joy comes from immersing yourself in others; the word itself, from the Old French *enjoier*, means “give joy to.” We can practice silently wishing everyone we see, “May you be peaceful, may you be happy.” We can send everyone in our address book an uplifting message every week. We can take a neighbor to the doctor, feed the squirrels in the backyard, smile at the person next to us on the bus, greet a homeless person while looking him or her in the eye, tutor a child struggling with English, serve meals at a shelter, let a friend go on too long about her knee surgery, this list could go on forever.

All this validates what I consider the most important lesson I’ve learned in my life—being loved is not nearly so satisfying as being loving. When we love and share ourselves, we function as a pipe for a great force. An energy of grace and abundance flows through us into

everything we do and touch. We make a huge profit on every bit of love we give away, because whatever we give we end up with more. The payoff is in loving, not in being loved.

When we love expansively with the spiritual heart, there are no distinctions about who is worthy of love, and we don’t evaluate how much love to give. To simply emit love as part of our daily lives both lifts our hearts and creates a quiet yet powerful experience of our red thread connectedness.



NOURISH YOUR BODY *AND* SOUL

If we can trust that we are good and whole, if we trust that our hearts, minds, and bodies know how to find and recognize life, always life, how can we possibly doubt that there still remains in our hand at this moment the very same thread that guided us safely here?

—Wayne Muller

What nourishment do our beautiful bodies need? What do they need to thrive? So many of us are blessed to have been born into natural, radiant health—it is something we take for granted. Over the course of our lives, most of us have chosen food for our bodies based on our habits and our taste buds. We’ve simply followed a thread of physical pleasure until eventually, over time, our bodies begin giving signals that there are wiser choices to make.

Indeed, whether we are still in optimal health, or whether we find ourselves responding to a wake-up call from our physical hearts, we can now recognize that there are wonderful, life-enhancing choices ahead of us. In *A Life of Being, Having, and Doing Enough*, my friend and spiritual teacher Wayne Muller writes:

Every day of our lives we face a series of choice points...the only real authority we ever have over the course, direction, and trajectory of our lives is how we listen whenever we are met with one of these relentless choice points, how we listen for what feels, in this moment, to be the most clear, true, next right thing. In the same way, the following moment will offer its own new and unexpected choice, which helps create the next moment, and our moments shape our days, as our days become our lives. In short, we find the path through our own life by following the thread.

How do we do such a thing? How do we follow some invisible, intangible thread that runs through our life? How can we even know it exists? The most honest answer I can give is to simply turn around and look back at the story of how your own life has emerged and unfolded. Can you not see the thread that, per-

haps unseen or unavailable at the time, helped you choose...?

We have the power, as Muller says so eloquently in this passage, to decide what we will do in any given moment. If we follow the thread of the next right thing, we need to ask ourselves, “What is the next right nourishment for our bodies?”

There is no dearth of excellent information available about reversing heart disease. The bottom line of all of the research on having a healthy heart is that our lifestyle choices make all the difference. But we tend to avoid the books and websites and the pamphlets in our doctor’s office because we make a judgment that they may be full of “shoulds”—“shoulds” that are just too hard and cause us to lose heart. Don’t “shoulds” often feel like they will require some sort of perfection on our part that we simply will be unable to carry out?

So, how can we make the “shoulds” and better lifestyle choices less daunting? What if we can *reframe* our attitude? By reframe, I mean look at something in a new way, tell ourselves a new story. What if every step we make in the new direction of taking care of our physical hearts becomes a lighter step, even an enlightening

step? Might the sensual experience of discovering and preparing real, plant-based, life-enhancing foods become an exciting new adventure? What will open in our hearts if we begin to venture out to farmers markets and revel in the earth-to-table feelings of connecting with vendors and growers, and celebrating what is seasonal and wholesome?

Now is a great time to begin reframing our approach to food. In fact, the current “best restaurant in the world” is Noma in Copenhagen, where the celebrated chef, René Redzepi, is leading a whole new approach to plant-based cooking. Redzepi has heightened the culinary philosophy of using seasonally and regionally sourced sustainable ingredients to an unprecedented level by showing how to coax great things out of humble products. In a January 2013 article by Adam Sachs in *Bon Appetit* magazine, he is praised for being able to make any vegetable impossibly delicious.

Here, gleaned from that article, are some of Redzepi’s rules and practices:

1. Think of meat as a condiment. The dimension of flavors you find in roots and fruits and berries and

mushrooms is so much more diverse and exciting than the three or four animals we eat all the time.

2. To cook vegetables at home, start by simply putting a pot of boiling water on, plopping a vegetable in it, and lifting it out when it’s perfectly cooked. Then add a fistful of any herb you’re in love with, some oil or butter, and taste it. Ask yourself: “How does this taste? What else can I do with it?”
3. The key is to take a vegetable and just start cooking it—boil it, sauté it, roast it, until it has developed maximum flavor intensity (but no more), then deepen the complexity with a complimentary flavoring agent, and dress in the binding, unifying fat of your choice.
4. Have a well-stocked pantry with items that work with whatever you find at the market: a homemade pesto, good anchovies, miso, soy, preserved lemons.
5. “If you have an appetite for flavors...” Redzepi says, “you’re naturally going to seek the best of seasonal offerings, and so there’s a kind of healthy sense to it. Feeling good is a happy by-product of eating well.”

**NOURISHING BODY AND SOUL:
MY SHIFT TO THE FARMERS MARKET**

The most important discovery I made following heart surgery is that I could naturally lower my cholesterol by giving my heart the finest fuel attainable. I began to ask my heart “How shall I choose to live?” It was only then that I decided to make deep lifestyle changes. It feels like no coincidence that about the same time, the inspiring documentary film, *Forks Over Knives*, came to our local theater. I was spellbound watching the documented effects that a new thirteen-week lifestyle program had on patients. Some participants eliminated diabetes, all dramatically lowered their cholesterol—everyone’s health improved and they all felt energetically restored and so much better than before they made the shift.

In just one viewing, the film changed completely how I think about my food and lifestyle. Something just fell into place that led me to a new interest in, and to gradually fall in love with, the flavors and high-energy nutrition of plant-based foods. The old axiom of “eat to live, not live to eat” became my mealtime mantra. Our changes began immediately, just one next right choice at a time. My husband and I now eat many more raw foods, and

we enjoy our lightest meal of sumptuous fruit plates or homemade vegetable soups for dinner at night, depending on the season. We sleep so much better, and we feel so much more energy throughout the day.

It was in shifting my attitude toward food and eating that I discovered (again!) how the benefits of making life-changing decisions in favor of our health extend way beyond our expectations. For instance, years ago when my daughter Lexi was born, I realized overnight (as all mothers do), that my previous life would be just a memory. I’d truly had no warning what a major life change new motherhood would be. As I held my little girl in my arms it just wouldn’t do to be smoking a cigarette. It was an “AHA!” (American Heart Association!) moment! I quit on the spot. It was terribly hard—the hardest thing I’d ever done. Waves of elation that I might succeed alternated with extreme irritability and cravings. Desperate to conquer the habit and to keep my no-longer-lighting-and-holding-a-cigarette hands busy, I rode waves of excess energy. Instead of resting while Lexi was napping, I began using some of my newfound power to make crêpes to store in the freezer for future meals. Three French pans heated on gas burners as

I poured batter into one pan, flipped the crêpe in the second and slid a crêpe out of the third onto the top of a stack and brushed it with butter—a rhythm that left no time to light, or even want, a cigarette.

A more far-reaching consequence occurred when a friend dropped by and became fascinated. She asked me to teach her. And that, quite simply, was how my cooking career began. It took three weeks for the nicotine cravings to subside and to realize that not only was I filled with new confidence and vitality—“If I can do that, I thought, I can do anything!”—but that I could express my passion for cooking and entertaining as an entrepreneurial business.

Thanks to Julia Child, there was at the time a tremendous interest in home entertaining and in French cooking, my natural passions. I had studied briefly in Paris, and had taken evening classes for years with Gregoire Le Balch, the chef at the renowned Escoffier Room in Los Angeles. I had spent years reading cookbooks like novels, and felt a great passion for creating menus and gathering friends.

Now I had new energy to put all that to use, and in those early days of my budding career in my home

kitchen, I blossomed. Having students clustered in my kitchen, sharing ideas for making food more delicious, chatting about relationships, life challenges, or the latest books, fed and nourished my soul. Over time I became more and more enthralled not only with all the delicious foods, but with how communal meals are a thread in the fabric of culture and how communities are formed around shared feasts. At home, mealtime is when we stop our various pursuits and gather around the table to eat and just be a family. At conferences, and networking and philanthropic gatherings, we dine together to connect and bond.

By reframing food, and telling myself the story that it is here to provide us with energy and strength, and to serve as a catalyst, in a way, for us to come together, I’ve come to have a relationship with food that I find to be positive and stress-free.

**NOURISH YOUR BODY AND SOUL:
MAKE MEALTIME A SACRAMENT**

Yes, making mealtime a sacrament might sound a little over the top—so bear with me here. What I’m suggesting is an attitude shift in the way we cook and eat. For me, this

perspective on food preparation and sharing occurred organically. As I began to teach cooking in earnest, it became natural as I cooked to imagine the meal being consumed and enjoyed by people I cared for, and how delighted they would be with the tastes and with each other. By doing so, wasn't I was stirring blessings into every bite? Certainly, the mindful preparation of food for others can be viewed as a sacred act.

I'm not the first to have this idea. You might recall seeing the popular 1992 film *Like Water for Chocolate*, from the novel by Laura Esquivel, in which cooking is portrayed as a magical act. In the movie, as food is prepared it becomes so imbued with the feelings and longings and desires of the cook that it affects everyone who eats it. And in *Chocolat*, a 2000 film based on Joanne Harris's novel of the same name, the mysterious candymaker in a small French village pours wisdom and magic into her chocolates that result in all kinds of enchantments. Both films have a magical realism element, but I have always sensed the effect of such blessings is not just magical thinking. Dr. Masaru Emoto's research regarding the response of water molecules to positive thoughts supports my inner knowing. In his 2005 book,

The Hidden Messages in Water, Dr. Emoto demonstrates how, by exposing water to a particular word or piece of music, freezing it, and then photographing the ice crystals formed, such crystals were transformed. He found that "water that has been exposed to loving words shows brilliant, complex, and colorful snowflake patterns. In contrast...water exposed to negative thoughts form incomplete, asymmetrical patterns with dull colors." It is fascinating research well worth studying.

Infusing food with love and gratitude is a lovely way to bring meaning to your relationship with food and to make whatever you prepare all the more delicious. And don't be intimidated by the perfectionism of upscale lifestyle magazines—a simple sandwich can be as full of love as any soufflé. Here are four techniques for cooking and eating with your highest self:

1. Grow Your Own!

Have you ever dreamed of walking out your kitchen door to pick fresh herbs straight from the garden? Eating food that you've grown yourself is a fabulous way to turn every meal into a personal sacrament.

You don't have to have a green thumb to cultivate the pleasure of your own herb garden. My patio herb garden

is alive and thriving, though I'm hardly an experienced gardener. During the summer when most herbs are at their peak, I am bathed in the fragrances of tarragon, mint, basil, sage, lemon verbena, oregano, and cilantro when I step out on our patio to watch Ted spread birdseed along our wall so we will have feathered company. In the winter I still enjoy hardy favorites like parsley, chives, rosemary, and English thyme. These are *perennials*, meaning they burst into new bloom every year. Some herbs, like fresh basil, are *annuals*, which means you have to plant them anew every year. You can buy the plants at farmers markets or a nursery.

My most educational and impactful restaurant experience ever was a nine-course meal at the Herbfarm near Seattle in Washington. Every artful course starred herbs. Our evening began with one of the owners leading us on a tour of the fragrant, lush herb gardens along paths strewn with a thick layer of hazelnut shells. While we sniffed all the herbs to be used in the evening's menu she showed us how to remove the stem from a spiky purple chive blossom, and break apart the florets to sprinkle over entrées or into salads. "All herb flowers are edible," she told us, "so use them with abandon!"

That evening completely changed the way I feel about cooking. My modest herb garden is now much more expansive and appreciated, and I look forward to many new herbal experiences. I've fallen in love with chervil, for instance. Have you heard of it? An aromatic herb with feathery leaves and a delicate anise flavor, chervil is used as commonly in France as a garnish as parsley is used in the U.S. It's one of the four ingredients of the classic *fines herbes* (the others are parsley, chives and tarragon), and its name means "rejoicing."

My most trusted, go-to guide for every herb is the *Herbfarm Cookbook*. This book has two hundred herb-inspired recipes, plus a complete guide to growing, handling, and cooking with fresh herbs. My old friend and colleague Marion Cunningham, author of the *Fannie Farmer Cookbook* says that it's "not only a collection of sparkling recipes, it is also the best herb reference book I've ever seen."

It has taken many seasons of setting out plants and inserting seeds to discover where each herb feels most at home and flourishes. Investing just a small amount of time and nurturing has paid off with such an abundance of herbs that I even make bouquets of mixed herb

branches, tie them with a bright ribbon, and take these no-cost nosegays along as gifts when I visit friends.

I've found that growing my own herbs makes me feel connected to the earth, and in truth, to all of life, in a way that I would never have imagined. If you have even just a tiny space in which to start your own garden, I'm sure you'll find the experience resonates in the same way.

2. Be Present with Your Food Preparation

Being present in the kitchen is another way to apply the mindfulness practice discussed in chapter 3. As Tama Kieves, my favorite motivational success coach would say, the day when everything changes is the day “we realize that we're not doing our work to *get* somewhere, as much as to *be* somewhere right now.” The next time you enter your kitchen, slow down for a moment; decide to really *be* there. Breathe deeply: a short, full inhale followed by a long exhale. You might do this several times to become quiet in your center.

Decide to enjoy every single aspect of the food preparation process. Use all your senses to fully practice presence with the ingredients. Notice and appreciate their feel, their fragrances, and their textures. When your mind

drifts to other thoughts, observe them, breathe deeply, and let them go. Just be with the food before you.

3. Express Your Gratitude

To ease our hearts, there is no more potent practice than remembering what we are grateful for. (It was no surprise to me that water crystals exposed to the words *thank-you* produced the most exquisite snowflake pattern of all.) Preparing food becomes so much more pleasurable and powerful when we envelope it with thankfulness. As you rinse, chop, and stir, extend gratitude to everything and everyone involved in providing the food. Be grateful for the natural components—the earth itself, the rain, the sunshine, the worms that turned the soil and perfected it for growing. Be grateful for the farmers—the men and women who arose at dawn every day and tended to the crops, think of their devotion, their prayers, the hopes and dreams they felt as they planted the seeds. Be grateful for the packagers—the engineers who designed the packaging, the workers who fabricated it and placed the food inside. Be grateful for the transporters—think of the many truck drivers and pilots who brought the food to your market, be grateful for the workers who loaded

and unloaded it. Be grateful for the employees where you purchased each item—in your heart, thank the managers and stock clerks and those who rang up your purchases. You'll find that an awareness of the personal devotion and natural wonders that came together to nourish you and your family will take your mealtime experience to a whole new level.

There is so much to be grateful for, isn't there? One of the poems I've learned by heart is by Anne Sexton, from her book *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. The words carry me into a transcendent appreciation, and everything I touch seems to burst with an extra dimension of beauty.

WELCOME MORNING

There is joy in all:
 in the hair I brush each morning,
 in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
 that I rub my body with each morning,
 in the chapel of eggs I cook
 each morning,
 in the outcry from the kettle
 that heats my coffee
 each morning,

in the spoon and the chair
 that cry "hello there, Anne"
 each morning,
 in the godhead of the table
 that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
 each morning.

All this is God,
 Right here in my pea-green house
 each morning
 and I mean,
 though often forget,
 to give thanks,
 to faint down by the kitchen table
 in a prayer of rejoicing
 as the holy birds at the kitchen window
 peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,
 let me paint a thank-you on my palm
 for this God, this laughter of the morning,
 lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
 dies young.

How can we hear such contagious joy without pouring meaning into our daily routines, stirring up poetry of our own? When we do this, when we recite our own appreciation, we transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Our lives overflow with gratitude.

This morning, my personal poetry would sound something like this:

There is beauty all over my bed
 this morning,
 in gentle rain on the roof
 this morning,
 in soft cat kisses on my cheek as Maya kneads a
 memory of her mother into my neck
 this morning,
 in the sizzling of my tomato and goat cheese omelette
 this morning,
 in the hummingbirds around their feeder
 seeking an early spring
 this morning.

Heaven on earth in my hillside home
 this morning,
 in having one more day to love my life.

I forget to be anywhere but now
 offering wholehearted praise

for such bountiful waves of bliss
 this morning.

4. Savor the Experience of Eating

Oh, I know from experience that many heart patients despair at the thought of “giving up” their favorite comfort foods. And when they succumb to temptation, they feel guilty and find themselves thinking, “I shouldn’t be eating this. I’m being so bad.” Self-scolding simply magnifies the problem. Wouldn’t it make more sense to at least enjoy whatever it is we’re eating and to simply bless “forbidden” food?

This inquiry led to an eating epiphany. By treating myself kindly, I soon realized it truly is the first bite that tastes the best. AHA! Almost magically, I found an easy way to still indulge in my favorite treats and not deny myself. Because I am still a food journalist and write often about recipes and restaurant experiences, I chose to ask myself, “How can I eat that [favorite food] and make it healthy for my heart?” The light went on, and the solution that came is for me to choose consciously to enjoy *only three bites* of that food, the three best bites available, and slowly savor each one. It makes no sense

to overindulge because the palate becomes bored after a few bites anyway. Thus I learned from heart-centered eating to not just operate from memory and fill up on what I can't really taste. It is quality, not quantity, that satisfies.

Indeed, our desire to consume certain foods is really not connected to the actual experience of eating them. Sheva Carr reminds us that when we consciously look at what we love about our old comfort foods, it is the soothing feeling they bring. We can perpetuate the value of comfort as a red thread in our life while not relying on those particular foods for comfort. We can release the form (which has become detrimental) in favor of the true feeling of comfort. Sheva suggests that perhaps a few moments of mindfulness, a warm bath, or a massage instead of a huge serving of mac and cheese can both nourish and comfort us.

The realization that I can find comfort outside of comfort food has made all the difference in my own heart health. My cardiologist is impressed with my numbers, and I am impressed with how my weight has stabilized and how lighthearted I feel about being able to change old habits.

NOURISH YOUR BODY AND SOUL: GATHER AROUND THE TABLE

I don't need to tell you that leisurely meals are becoming a thing of the past. This is heartrending—literally! Dr. Dean Ornish, known for his lifestyle-driven approach to the reversal and control of coronary artery disease, has also published extensive research on the effect of supportive community on our bodies. He has shown that our feelings of being a part of a loving, supportive group serve to strengthen our immune systems, and create longer life expectancies. So it makes sense to make mealtime an opportunity to connect, gather around the table, and weave a red thread of inclusivity.

“The art of gracious invitation,” write Denise and Meadow Linn in their *Mystic Cookbook*, “is in our collective ancestry and resides in our ancestral soul.” In getting in touch with my five-year-old and what kind of games she created for herself to play when she was alone, they always included serving up food that others would love. By doing so, I would give them not just nourishment and pleasure, but also the gift of including them in an experience of connection with each other. Perhaps, as the Linns suggest, I was drawing from my ancestral wisdom.

And perhaps I was also trying to reinforce my own sense of self-worth. The Linns continue: “At its core, hospitality...can change you and it can heal you. When you extend a generous welcome to another, you’re also activating positive qualities within yourself. As you accept others with grace, so you accept yourself.”

One “tradition” I recommend is a post-Thanksgiving party. The day after the big feast, refrigerators are packed full of leftovers that may or may not be eaten. Our homes and dining tables still sparkle with the bounty of fall décor. Why not make the most of this food-focused holiday by creating a second party the next day? Plan a “Day After Thanksgiving” banquet for your best friends, your “inner circle,” those who graced you throughout the year with support and encouragement. They will bask in your acknowledgment! Many years ago just after my late husband Paul von Welanetz and I founded the Inside Edge (www.Edge.org), a motivational breakfast forum that has been meeting weekly now for twenty-seven years, we started this tradition, and it continues to this day. We list all those people who make up our “family of choice” and invite them to bring their favorite leftovers to an open house. What a heartwarming gath-

ering! Conversation evolves easily as people share their family’s traditional foods along with stories of the recipes and where they came from. Communion among the guests deepens and grows richer as the evening goes on, especially when we invite each guest in turn to tell everyone assembled what they are feeling particularly thankful for that year. (If your guests are shy and you think this might put them on the spot, take turns welcoming each guest and telling them specifically the reasons you appreciate them.)

Of course, fun as it is, the après-Thanksgiving get-together can only happen one day a year. So to get your community-building mealtime program into gear on a daily basis, I’ve got the following ideas:

1. Celebrate birthdays by preparing someone’s favorite food and inviting those gathered to speak their appreciation of the honoree. Or for younger people, invite the elders to share what they were doing at their age.
2. For a holiday open house, set out finger food and self-serve beverages and provide a lit but yet undecorated tree. Invite guests to bring an ornament that represents their intentions for the New Year, and to

tell those gathered about them. The most outgoing guests will begin happily, and you will all share both laughter and tears.

3. Create a theme of a country or a season or a rite of passage. Enjoy the research of finding just the right foods and décor and watch it all evolve into a memory that will last forever.
4. Learn and recite a blessing, or invite someone dining with you to offer words of gratitude. There are some wonderful books on this subject, such as *A Grateful Heart: Daily Blessings for the Evening Meal from Buddha to the Beatles*, edited by J. Ryan.
5. Get a copy of the Linns' *Mystic Cookbook*, which I mentioned earlier. It's a fabulous compendium of all kinds of imaginative and conscious ways to cook and savor and share the food we make: from the art of slowing down, to freeing up energy by clearing our kitchen clutter, to setting a beautiful table and inviting others to join us in a meal.

There you have just a few ideas for gathering community around the table. You will have innovative ideas of your own, and I'm hoping you will be moved to share your stories and ideas with me on my website

(www.DianaWentworth.com) or on my blog at www.loveyourheartfollowtheredthread.blogspot.com. I would love to credit you with them in my heart-health talks around the country.

I know how challenging it can be to reframe our attitude toward food and eating. It seems like our culture is forever sending us the message that we'll all be happy if we just have that chocolate cheesecake for dessert. And I'm all about delicious sweets, don't get me wrong! I'm not called "The Fudge Lady" for nothing. (You can find my award-winning Diana's Divine Fudge recipe on the same websites.)

But I've also found that I feel so much better, in every way, when I make the entire experience of cooking, eating, and sharing food about nourishment—nourishing our bodies, our loved ones, our community, and our connection to all of life. Food now brings me a very different, and much deeper, joy. I hope that you too can discover the way in which the red thread of connection can be woven through every meal.

CONCLUSION



...here is the deepest secret nobody knows...

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

—e.e. cummings

As I stand barefooted in the grass before dawn this morning I am heartened to see a rare earthshine surrounding the slender sliver of new moon that reveals its part in the wholeness of the moon's orb. I feel immersed in the promise of a new beginning and my place within the grace of the grand design.

So often, I'm caught up in my day-to-day doingness, like a spider entwined in the minutiae of the mundane. I've little sense of wholeness in the greater fabric of which we are all a part. But then, in an unbidden moment of perspective, like the earthshine that shows me the entire moon against the darkness, the web of life reveals itself in light and shadows as a magnificent whole—a pattern

much more expansive and intricate than we could have planned or imagined.

Reflecting on the shock of 2009—the heart attack and surgery—and on the amazing grace of a rapid recovery that found me trekking through the ancient city of Ephesus in Turkey only three weeks later, I am filled with wonder and appreciation for the beauty that year brought. There was no randomness in my heart attack. It led me here, to contemplate new ways in which to love my heart, and to write this book for you.

I’ve learned so much about what our physical hearts need to remain strong—managing stress is so much more important to heart health than I ever imagined. I’ve also learned that depression expands the risk of heart disease. Yes, being physically active, eating healthful foods in the right amounts, and not smoking are all extremely effective in keeping our hearts healthy. And living with a positive attitude, feeling connected and peaceful, are also crucial to our hearts’ happiness and well-being.

All the vitality and strength that I’ve gained as a result of my lifestyle changes offer me new opportunities to live long and leave a legacy. Because of that heart attack, I became all the more determined to celebrate

every moment, and all the more determined to share this commitment with others. What is holding you back from embracing manageable changes to give birth to new ways of being? What if we develop a whole new attitude toward the aging process and celebrate every month the new ways we have improved our path?

Ask yourself, “What is my optimal future? How can I define and move fully into it?” Even more importantly, “What does the world need from me right now?” Might you presence radical new ideas to cultivate connection, community, collaboration, continuity, and contribution?

Will you join me in picking up this bright thread that promises to lead us together into a future full of reinvention and new beginnings?

Steeping ourselves in spiritual practices strengthens the red thread that courses through us by mitigating heart-damaging stress, while allowing us to more strongly sense the red thread that weaves our lives together. As our awareness and sense of connection heighten, our lives become increasingly joyous “works of heart.”

...here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than the soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart
i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

—e.e. cummings

LOVE NOTES FROM A GRATEFUL HEART



Following the thread of writing *Love Your Heart* I have had the full-hearted support of so many. They deserve so much more than my gratitude.

A bright red ribbon around the first copy off the press to the American Heart Association. Thank-you for saving so many lives, including mine.

Red Velvet Cake to my husband and my dearest heart's companion, my own Teddy Bear, Ted Wentworth. Tears of gratitude spill over at the attempt to thank-you for all you are to me.

A huge bouquet of red roses to my beautiful editor Amanda Pisani who sorted through reams of my heart writings and worked with me to create a theme based on guidelines of the American Heart Association. This book would not exist without your brilliance, your enthusiasm, and your great heart.

Heart-shaped red anthuriums flown directly from Hawaii to my best friend Mary Olsen Kelly, author of numerous books of her own, and her husband Don Kelly, my muse. Thank-you for always uplifting, encouraging, applauding, and spurring me on during the thirty years of best-friendship, and for standing loving vigil with Ted during my 2009 heart surgery.

A bright red badge of honor to Dr. Babek Pezeshki. Thank-you for performing what turned out to be very tricky stent surgery while assuring me that you and I would grow old together.

A knockout pair of magical Christian Louboutin red-soled shoes to Victoria Felton-Collins for recommending me as the Honorary Chair of the Orange County *Go Red For Women* Luncheon in March 2013. You opened the doors that led to writing this book, and to many more wonderful reasons to live a long, healthy life.

Bright red lipstick to my emergency book club, my inner circle: Trish/Pat Pearson, Deb Silverberg Gaal, Mary Fletcher, and again, my best bud Mary Kelly. You rock!

A soft red cashmere meditation shawl (to match your hair!) to the best heart-centering coach of all, Sheva

Carr. Thank-you for all you so generously shared with this book!

Mountains of red jellybeans to marketing genius David T. Fagan, CEO of Icon Media. Your friendship, support, and ideas have made a huge difference in our lives. Thank-you especially for the game-changing brilliance of creating *Enlightenment Lifestyle Magazine* (www.EnlightenmentLifestyleMagazine.com), a really cool playground for so many of us.

A case of the very best red wine to my very wonderful brother Eugene Webb. All my life you have modeled for me how loving and supportive men are capable of being. I am proud to be your sister.

A sleek red rocket-fired spaceship to my best man pal Tim Piering. I love how we laugh and spark entirely new concepts together, and I am eager to move ahead with you in creating “Act 3” as a movement for elders that will give new meaning to “bonus years!” You have been there for me in so many pivotal moments.

Bunches of bright red balloons to our immediate family in appreciation for including us so closely. My daughter Lexi Welanetz Bursin, husband Dave, and our grandchildren Peyton and Faith. Stepdaughter/precious

friend Kathy Purdy and her husband Court, and our granddaughters Aidan and Caitlin. Red forget-me-nots to our grandchildren Lauren and Brian Coyne.

Red iPad covers to all the members of Inside Edge (www.Edge.org), my extended “family of choice.”

Red tulips to my circle of encouraging supporters: Alice Blair Simmons, Jodi Olsen, Pat and Alan Rypinski, Peter McGugan, Tom Sewell, Barbara DeAngelis, Mark Victor Hansen and Crystal Dwyer Hansen, Tama Kieves, Janet Conner, Daniel Ladinsky, Nancy Barton, Neale Lundgren, Rama Vernon, Carol Michaels, Marj Britt, Carolyne Maithlin, Sandy and Kirk Moore, Mike Krpan, and Jo Vogelbacher. I cherish you.

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Red and gold altar candles to Shree Maa, Swami Satyananda Saraswati, and our Devi Mandir family.

And finally, a vintage red velvet candy box filled with our love letters to my late husband, Paul von Welanetz.

You live forever here in my heart. Ted joins me in thanking you over and over for answering my prayer to you, “Send me someone!”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Diana von Welanetz Wentworth is the author of seven award-winning books and the coauthor of two *Chicken Soup for the Soul* titles. Film rights to her romantic memoir, *Send Me Someone*, were purchased by the Lifetime Network. With her late husband Paul von Welanetz, she hosted a long-running television series and founded the Inside Edge (www.Edge.org), a weekly breakfast forum in Southern California. The organization helped launch the careers of many of the most celebrated authors and speakers of our day, and business leaders still gather at Inside Edge meetings to hear cutting-edge speakers on the topics of psychology, scientific breakthroughs, global issues, success strategies, spiritual awareness, and the arts.

Today, Diana speaks nationally on this newest book, *Love Your Heart: Follow the Red Thread to a Heart-Centered Life*, at all kinds of health and fund-raising events. She also speaks on breakthrough ways to write and publish books. Diana lives in Corona del Mar, California, with

her husband Ted (Theodore S.) Wentworth, Editor in Chief of *Enlightenment Lifestyle Magazine* (www.EnlightenmentLifestyleMagazine.com).

Diana would love to hear from you. Please contact her through her website www.DianaWentworth.com. You will find a link to her blog along with information about connecting with her and booking her as a speaker.