

Fifty Steps Towards Yourself

Your Guide to Designing the Life of Your Dreams



By Sheila Ellison

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Introduction

These steps are based on conversations I had with my best friend, Julia, as we hiked once a week over the period of five years. I would come to her distraught over the emails I was receiving from moms who were overwhelmed and under prepared for the challenges of raising teens, failing marriages, career challenges (I'm just skimming the surface of an extensive list). Julia would tell me I had to detach and not get too drained by the stories. I reminded her that I didn't know how to do that, which is why I decided *not* to be a therapist!

However lighthearted or unattached we tried to be, we were both troubled.

Together we began to discuss what it was that held women back from becoming the powerful, self confident creatures we were all meant to be. The solution seemed easy on those hikes when we were solving everyone else's problems—enjoying the dirt under our feet and the wind blowing through each season—until we were back in our everyday lives and reality set in!

Discussing these issues with Julia helped me to uncover and write about the steps on this path. Like the founding fathers who signed the *Declaration of Independence* and then fought to defend it. We too, made our declarations to each other in small and big ways and have struggled to make these insights a reality in our lives.

I've personally taken these steps. They work. I'm not done, some of them still challenge me, but then who wants a life where there's nothing new to learn! I have grown, my relationships have grown, I have discovered my strengths and weaknesses and am confident that within these steps there are at least five that you, individually, *must* hear in order to have the puzzle pieces of your life fall into place. I'm not sure what those will be for you, but I promise that if these steps do not help you in a big way, you can email me and I'll return your money on the spot.



For some of you my conclusions may feel harsh. Others might think I've hit the nail on the head. We live different lives with various challenges. We are all strong in some areas and weak in others. The individual experiences that have made up our lives influence how we feel about ourselves, the life we choose and the actions we take.

But at a core level, the struggles we face *are* the same. They may be smaller, larger, more important or less important depending where you are right now in your life—but I'm willing to bet that you'll find a ring of truth in my words.

That said, take from these steps what you need to build the life you want. Try to listen to your inner voice so you'll know which word, sentence or idea is meant for you. Leave the concepts behind that do not have an immediate 'yes' reaction within you. I don't want you to waste your time attempting every exercise when there are some that you personally do not need.

My only regret is that all of you, who have shared your lives with me, have not talked with each other so that you would *know* how much the same we are. I have grown immeasurably from your stories. They have guided me, made me question my choices and kept me talking instead of huffing and puffing through many a long uphill hike! Thank you for your inspiration.

I wish you courage on this journey.

Sheila



Part One: Programming

Step One



Where do our Expectations Come From?

I've spoken to hundreds of women, from all walks of life. The one thing that is constant for all of us is that in small and large ways we've been brainwashed by our families, society, friends and even our kids to believe that it is our job to live up to what others expect, need and want from us.

The thing that I've noticed with women in general is that we don't question why it should be US who fill everyone's needs. As a mother, yes, it is our job to fill our children's needs to a certain point--but have you taken a moment to notice how broad reaching this response of ours is--from volunteering in the classroom, to being the first up from the table to clean the dishes.

Where do these expectations come from, the ones that benefit everyone else, but seem to leave us tired and overwhelmed? None of us wants to appear selfish, or bitchy, or 'god forbid' manipulative or controlling by asking for what we want, so we often leave our thoughts, resentment, dreams and fear locked inside.

The fifty steps we take towards ourselves will help us to recognize patterns, notice personal responses and then with the new tools you'll gain, find the courage to change in a way that allows you to value yourself and set your own expectations.

So, what are some of the expectations you have?

- To be available (whenever) for anyone who needs you
- To be skilled at cooking, housekeeping and child raising
- To volunteer with a smile, contribute to the community, and be knowledgeable in all areas
- To be polite, not too demanding, to be pleasant while being assertive
- To be attractive
- To be good at problem solving, conflict resolution and family mediation
- To be a great listener, even when the subject matter bores you to death

OK, your list may be much *longer* or shorter than this. No matter what

is on your list, take some time to really think whether or not you want to continue with this list. Go back to your childhood or wherever the messages began that made you believe that to be 'liked' or 'nice' (unfortunate goals that keep most of us stuck for our whole lives) was important. Maybe even the most important thing for a girl/woman. If you are thinking now that you are someone who doesn't care if people like you or if they think you're nice--ask yourself this--in the last 72 hours did you do anything you really did not want to do? Why?

You may have reasons other than being liked or seeming nice, however whatever those reasons are you still need to questions if the expectations you have come to accept as your own help or hurt you? Do they lead you to where you want to go? Do they help you grow stronger, more yourself, more independent and able to create the life you want? Or do they hold you in place? Are you treading water indefinitely, waiting for some event to happen in your life that will allow you

the chance to swim freely away to the island in the distance?

The point of all these questions is to get you thinking. To get you wondering what it would be like if you re-thought some of the expectations that have grown as attached as your own skin. Rest assured; I understand you have responsibilities. The path we are on is not about shirking them or running away. It is about noticing why you feel the way you do and how you can learn to value yourself while you live up to your responsibilities.

Take Action

For the next 5 days notice each time you say *yes* to someone's expectations when you really want to say *NO*. Note where the idea, that filling this expectation is your job, came from to begin with. Then ask yourself if saying *yes* when you are really feeling *no* is helping you become who you want to be.

Make a list of the things you feel are expected of you as a women

a mother

a sister

a wife

Do these expectations help you or hurt you?

Me Selfish?

To take step two, we need to discuss the word sacrifice as it relates to our role as mothers. We all get it when the airlines tell us to put the oxygen mask on ourselves before we save our children, but how many of us would actually do that? How many of us know how to do that in our daily lives? It's not usually a life or death matter so you may not notice all the small choices that add up to create what I call 'a lifestyle of sacrifice'.

All the times you wanted to read a magazine, but instead typed or corrected a paper, the restaurant you wanted to dine at gets pushed aside for a pizza place (again), the yoga class you had to miss because your child needed poster board or forgot to tell about the three dozen cookies for the bake sale.

This idea of sacrifice is compounded for mothers who work outside the home. Guilt sets in and working moms feel their kids are missing out, they aren't doing enough when they can't be on the field trip or are too tired to play Legos--so when they arrive home all they can think to do is sacrifice whatever it takes to 'make up' (for what, we're not sure--we'd have to go back to step one and think about the E word.)

There is another S word that is a close relative of sacrifice, and that word is selfish. We don't want to be seen as selfish (this also goes along with Step One's wanting to be liked!). One way to be sure that nobody will call us selfish is to live the 'lifestyle of sacrifice.' Then we know for sure that when community gossip turns to us, all will proclaim with certainty, "she does so much for those kids!"

There's a big difference between pausing to put the oxygen mask on yourself first (reading that magazine or going to your class and allowing your kids to experience the consequences of bad planning which may mean no report or cookies) and getting in the car and driving away never to return (turning away from your most basic responsibility).



I guess I should address the idea of basic responsibilities. If you are loving your children, available to them emotionally and physically, providing food, shelter and education--you are meeting your responsibility. The problem is that the definition of these simple things has been expanded to such a degree that most of us feel we need to sacrifice anything we might want or need to meet whatever it is we believe our kids need. And kids these days believe they *need* X, Y, and Z to be happy, liked, attractive--you name it, our kids need it (you can thank the media for that!). Unfortunately, this entitlement is supported by the self-sacrifice of mothers. Yes, we are part of the problem.

We all believe we are helping our kids by filling their every need, but we aren't--not in the long run. Women in general are taught and expected to care for others above themselves (sacrifice). Children learn by what we do, not by what we say. So, by valuing ourselves (being selfish) and putting ourselves first once in a while, we teach our children to value themselves and respect other people's boundaries and needs. By reading that magazine and explaining to your child that you need some time to yourself and can't help him, you are modeling life skills that we all want our children to possess. If you step back and think of a mother as being a life guide, it appears that being a little selfish will guide our kids towards self esteem far better than our practice of sacrifice. Interesting!

Take Action

Your assignment is to make at least one very selfish decision every day. Say 'no' to sacrifices you are tempted to make for your children and 'yes' to what you want. Just think, "me first, me first."

What selfish decision did you make today?

Step Three

Deleting Old Files

In step three we continue on the path by examining how we are programmed. Like hard drives our brains have been packed with information; expectations of who and what we should be and how we should act. What I'd like to suggest is that you consider deleting some of your files. The files I'm talking about are memories, ideas, rules, family ways, experiences and patterns you keep repeating as if they were the only way to respond to any given stimuli.

So how do you press delete and clear some space in your life for new information? How do you determine which memories, ideas, rules to keep and which are bound for the trash bin? The answer is simple if you can embrace and celebrate the fact that you are the *adult* now. You get to decide everything. You don't have to listen to the voices of others telling you what to do or who to be. You are in charge.

Transformative idea, isn't it?

This means that you can look closely at rules you've accepted in the past, ideas of what was expected of you as a mother, a woman and a spouse, and decide if you believe them or if

they were given to you by someone else. More importantly, you get to determine if the patterns that fill the hard drive of your life help or hurt you. Do they move you forward, allow you space to grow into yourself, or do they hold you back?

Only you can push the delete button. It's fun to experiment. Move some things to the trash for a few days and see how your life feels without them before deleting them forever. Or maybe you have the soul of an adventurer and are ready to shove a whole truckload of 'stuff' off the edge of a cliff and dance all the way back to your new life! Whatever way you choose to get rid of them the old files that no longer serve you belong in the trash--push delete now.

Take Action

Take the time to look at patterns in your life.

If you're not sure where patterns are hiding fill in the following

As a mother I should (be, do, have)

In relationship I should (be, do, have)

When I'm angry I

When I'm scared I

As a woman I should (be, do, have)

*"Be who you are and say what you feel
because those who mind don't matter and
those who matter don't mind."*

Dr. Seuss

What We do For Love

So what's love got to do with it? Everything. Women know how to love. We know how to set ourselves completely aside for the good of our children, our families, our communities--but few of us know how to set our children, our families and our communities aside for ourselves. Love is unconditional; to do it correctly you have to give it without expecting anything back, isn't that right? Love is when two become one. Love means never having to say you're sorry. Love has as many definitions as there are people.

Love is what we are all searching for; it is the joy of holding your child in the middle of a dark night, the laughter at sharing the first snow of winter, the intertwining of limbs when making love. It is the searching for goodness, connection and purpose. All of these good things love offers us, but love also ties us up if we let it. Since mothers are so good at loving, so ready to give whatever it takes; throughout our lives we stand the risk of *being taken advantage of*. I know that the words, unfair, unequal and servant are not supposed to be in the same sentence with the word love, yet I hear them from overwhelmed moms all the time.

Valuing ourselves means we have to learn to find more balance in our lives, more opportunities to allow the giving and TAKING of love to be practiced. We need to set up a more equal 'love system.' We need to teach our daughters and sons about partnership by modeling loving ourselves. What does this partnership look like? In your family it may mean that you distribute household chores more equally, you challenge the idea that mom cooks and kids eat, mom shops, does the laundry and works while kids/spouses have an unequal amount of free time to relax. This idea of what love is 'supposed to be' and the failure you feel if you don't do X, Y, and Z is burning you out. It's burning us all out!

I like the idea of unconditional love, but you need to love yourself unconditionally too. Love is good and love is nurturing, which is why we need to pay attention to how we nurture ourselves. Only you can create the balance in your life between the giving and taking of love.



Take Action

Make a list of everyone and everything you love.

Now close your eyes and use your imagination. See each one of your loves as a rope of responsibility that is wrapped around you. Then unwind each rope and lay it on the ground. Make pretty designs with the rope, play with it, jump over it, climb under it, but keep it separate from you. Imagine your life with an unlimited number of ropes to interact with as *you choose*.

What would it be like?

Step Five

"Being powerful is like being a lady. If you have to tell people you are, you aren't."
Margaret Thatcher

A Media Snapshot

No discussion on the topic of how our lives have been programmed would be complete without taking a close look at the myths the media (and all of us) support. The thing is that *we* have to buy into the system for this to work. Women buy the magazines, we write the checks *and* 80% or more of the ads on TV are directed at us.

Being aware is the first step. Notice how movies, TV, magazines and cultural trends affect how you feel about yourself. Yes, it is wonderful to dress up, feel good and look pretty. But sometimes the whole thing goes too far. We tell ourselves that when we lose 20 pounds we'll be loved, of value or worthy. Of what, we may wonder. We think that if only we were more X, or less Y, we'd have the perfect life. In fact we waste a lot of time and energy focused on this. Time and energy that could be devoted to learning something new, enjoying a hobby or celebrating ourselves.

Our social values have effectively set up a system

of competition that pits women against women as we all try to get noticed. We'd like to not care, but we do. I tried a little experiment at the last hotel I stayed at. One morning I went downstairs in an old sweatshirt with no make-up on. I stood at the concierge desk with nobody in line in front of me and waited four minutes before the concierge asked if I needed help. The next morning I went down to the desk looking good--and I was still five feet away from his desk when he started talking to me. That is how society works, and most of us know how to play *the game*.

The trick is to have fun with *the game* when you want to, enjoy the effect you achieve and delight in decorating yourself. But don't fall into the bottomless pit of judgment, comparison, wishing you were X, Y, and Z. If you do this the media wins. Your life cannot be airbrushed and unfortunately a personal stylist isn't lounging in your closet. Celebrate the woman you are right now and refuse to watch or read anything that makes you feel 'less than.'

Take Action

Make a list of the women you admire. Next to each name write down a compliment you could give them.

to yourself instead, "What a (pretty, successful, powerful) woman, I'm so happy the earth is populated with powerful women."

Give lots of compliments to the women you know. Don't forget your kid's teachers, grocery clerks, all the women you come into contact with. Women need to support each other instead of feeling threatened or jealous. As you begin to notice the small positives in others you will begin to value yourself more.

What positive thoughts and words do you have for yourself?

Every time you see a (pretty, successful, powerful) woman, instead of comparing yourself, or wishing you looked like her--say

"There are always flowers for those who want to see them."

Henri Matisse

Getting Stuck

We all know what it's like to feel stuck.

Let's examine how the programming we receive works to keep us from moving forward. Just imagine if all the women in the world were focused on reaching personal goals instead of spending much of their energy taking care of everyone else? The result would be happy women and a more self-reliant, competent world!

Move that idea into your own life. Look at the times you feel stuck. What are the circumstances of your life at that time? What are you doing for other people that they could easily be doing for themselves?

In my experience I feel stuck when my *to do* list far outweighs the time I have in my day especially if few things on that list are things I enjoy doing. My feeling of responsibility, or the thought that I can do something better and faster, or that my poor child has been dealing with enough lately so I'll do it for them, infiltrates my thinking and all of a sudden I feel stuck because it appears I'm not accomplishing anything. When in reality I'm moving forward in so many directions (for other people), just not in any direction that brings me fulfillment.

Once, when I was telling my doctor that I was beginning to feel depressed and stuck, we went through all the determiners of depression and figured out that I woke up excited (not depressed) when my kids were out of town. If I were truly depressed I'd feel depressed regardless of circumstances. So I had to figure out what allowed me to feel so good when the responsibility was removed and so stuck in my life when all my kids were home.

I tried an experiment. I made a list of all the things I like to do when I'm not being responsible for someone else. For example, when the kids aren't there I get to make a cup of tea in the morning and then sit to enjoy it without organizing breakfast or answering any questions. I decided to re-distribute a bit of the morning responsibilities two mornings a week and asked my kids to pretend I



wasn't there. They would make their own breakfast, get organized for school and give me a kiss on the cheek when they left. I shifted my expectation and everyone else shifted accordingly.

It was no problem. I'm going to repeat that, because I was shocked that it didn't have a bigger impact. It was no problem. The kids enjoy their independent mornings. It was my 'idea' of what I 'should' be doing for my kids that was weighing me down.

Realizing you have choices to make and that some of the choices you're making right now are determined by the programming you've received will help you to re-assess and re-organize your life. You can choose to re-distribute the responsibilities and expectations in your home so that you have more space to move in your own life. Voila--unstuck!

Take Action

Write down all the things you like to do when you don't have to be responsible for someone else.

Pick one or two of those things and commit to doing it today.

Take a close look at all the things you do in your home that other people are perfectly capable of doing for themselves. List them here.

Shift household responsibilities to those capable people.



Step Seven



Hope vs Action

Have you ever fallen into the trap of believing that someone or something else is going to get you where you really *hope* to be in life? We hope that one day we won't have financial troubles; that our relationship will improve when our kids are out of diapers, that someday we'll get a stimulating job. We hope to find time to exercise, that our teenager's behavior will go away when the hormones stop, or that someday we'll be able to hire a cook.

We're taught that hope is a good thing because it keeps us from feeling despair when life seems to be dissolving around us. But hope can also keep us from action. If, instead of hoping for something better down the road, we took reality by the horns and started fighting for our lives, we might get all those things we're hoping for much sooner.

When I was growing up we had an intercom system in our house that allowed my mother to put a record on in the kitchen and we'd hear it over a crackling intercom in our bedrooms while we fell asleep. Most of the time she played Disney stories (Bambi scarred me for life, "Your mother is dead Bambi, run for the thicket!") However, sometimes she played mellow music. There was an old Burt Bacharach and Dionne Warwick song I remember hearing. I didn't understand it then, but I do now. The words went like this:

*Wishing and hoping and thinking and
praying
Planning and dreaming each night of
his charms
That won't get you into his arms
So if you're looking to find love you
can share
All you got to do is hold him and kiss
him and love him
And show him that you care*

We've always known at some level that all the wishing, hoping, thinking and praying is nothing without action. But, hope is much easier than action because hope is an idea that keeps you *surviving* your life, whereas action is hard work. Action means you admit to yourself (and others) that you *want* something and you're going to work to get it. When you move from hope to action you also leave yourself open to the possibility that you might fail. None of us wants to fail, so we choose to keep the internal hope going instead of taking *action*.

I know it is scary to be bold, to put yourself out there and project confidence in what you plan to achieve, to switch from private hope to public action. Hope is a starting place, but action is the end game. So dare to take action, you may get exactly what you want.

Take Action

Make a list of all the things you've been hoping for.

Circle one of them and write down three steps you will take this week that will be a step towards action.

No Longer a Victim

No discussion on a woman's social programming would be complete without a mention of the role of victim or the "life is happening to me," idea. Unfortunately, we become powerless when we start to believe that we have no control over what is happening in our lives. Some things are out of our control, but how we see them and how we respond to them is within our control and can make a huge difference. For example, your husband has an affair, asks for divorce, and then hires a big wig attorney that appears to screw you out of all the money.

The "bad things keep happening to me (victim)" response might produce the following scenario; you'll feel too emotionally damaged by the affair to respond to the attack of the attorney. Emotionally battered and barely holding on to your life and managing your kids you settle for less than you deserve just to stop all the conflict. Then after a year or so you'll get your energy back and feel rage over what was done to you. By then it is too late, documents are signed and you get to spend the next few years thinking about how these unfair and bad things happened to you. This is just an exaggerated example of how women's emotions get in the way and can shift our beliefs and responses to circumstances into being a victim.

So how do we change this? First, we recognize the patterns in our lives that cause us to respond with a victim mentality. We notice what we do when something not so great happens; something hard, hurtful, or overwhelming occurs. Do we retreat into ourselves, try to shoulder the burden alone, cry ourselves to sleep, get depressed, and accept it as inevitable--or do we call a friend who will listen to our problem but ultimately give us a kick in the butt and tell us we are capable of taking this on? Do we have a support system in place that allows us to step back and look at the problem clearly without falling into the "poor me" mind set?

Second, recognize that most of us have been programmed to take on the problems of life; our own problems and others. We are comfortable with our emotional responses and have been taught that women who fight back are *aggressive* and *manipulative*. Neither paints a pretty picture. Women who are unemotional are often labeled cold, masculine, uncaring. You see how we've gotten where we are?



Third, the truth of the matter is that life (both good and bad) does happen to everyone. If you expect that only good (easy) things are going to happen, then when a bad (hard) thing sneaks in you aren't prepared. If you have the tendency to feel like more bad things happen to you, and if you are the kind of person who responds with an onslaught of emotions that leave you feeling overwhelmed and stuck then you need a plan you can put into action as soon as your victim mentality rears its head. Spend some time during the 'good times' to decide on steps you will take at the first sign of this "victim" feeling. Things like calling a friend who knows about your plan, having someone in place who can watch your kids for a few hours so you can think and plan, or reading a letter you've written in advance to remind yourself that you've triumphed in the past and can do it again now.

The goal is to flow with the punches and not get knocked out!

Take Action

Spend some time getting your 'bad times' plan in place. Write up the steps you will take to keep yourself on track.

Give a copy to a good friend. Write down the name of someone you can give your plan to.

Start using this plan on the small hard things that happen so that you are prepared when the big things hit.

Make a list of all the hard things you've already been through and survived. Take each individually and note what personal strengths you used to get you through.

Step Nine

Living in Survival Mode (what it looks like and why it doesn't work)

Some people live their whole lives in survival mode. I made it through the years following my divorce by shifting into survival mode. For me that meant believing that I would survive the downsizing, find a way to support my kids, adjust to the change of lifestyle, the added responsibilities and everything that came with my new life as a single mother.

What is shocking to me is that I remained in survival mode until just recently—it took me ten years! When I was finally able to define for myself what survival mode looked like, admit that I was still stuck in the same place, and see why it wasn't working anymore, then I was able to change. Most of us when confronted with a life change of any kind (death of a loved one, job shift, move, divorce, child off to college) switch into survival mode in order to weather the storm.

"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."

Charles Darwin

This is a good thing, it gets us through the challenge and allows us to hold on until some point or event in the future that we've outlined in our minds.

For me, there were different survival goals. The first was that I would survive having no money and no place to live. I met that challenge by moving in with another single mother and her four kids. Once there, I set a new goal of moving out within a year and buying a small place of my own. During all of these steps (and there were hundreds I had to take over the last ten years since my divorce) I hunkered down, put my needs aside and carried on the best I could.

So you might be thinking, "this all sounds positive, why doesn't it work?" **Because all of your energy and focus is going into just getting by, which leaves no room for growth.** You don't take the time to think about what you really want, or outline what you do incredibly well, or figure out how you could re-arrange your life and responsibilities so that



you feel happy. Instead, you are in the survival spiral; trapped in your own fears of what might happen if you stop and go in a new direction. You don't allow yourself the freedom of choice because you are so sure there is **no** choice when the goal is to survive.

There are times in your life when survival mode is necessary, but it is supposed to be a short term thing. It took a friend's comment for me to realize that I'd been living in survival mode for ten years and it was time to stop. She told me that I was amazing and I responded, "I'm surviving." She said, "You are more than surviving you've succeeded--so when are you going to take some time for yourself?"

So this is my challenge in turn to you. Decide if you are living in survival mode; are you just getting by and not allowing yourself the freedom to change and make different choices for your life? Do you feel ultimately responsible for everything all the time? Do you constantly make

sacrifices for everyone else without taking your own needs into account? Are you terrified of not making it (whatever that means to you)? Have you been living with this mind set for more than two years?

If you answered most of the above questions with a yes, it is time to re-assess. Survival mode is keeping you from creating the life you want. It is keeping you from knowing, loving and growing yourself into the person you want to be.

Take Action

Make a list of all the things you think you have to do right now to keep your life on track.

Write the list again and put the words, "I choose to" in front of each item. If something in your heart responds with an angry, "No I wouldn't choose this, circle that item.

Take each item that you circled above (all the things you don't choose) and write it on the top of its own page in your journal. Over the next week or so, write down every idea you can think of that would allow you to stop doing whatever it is you circled. This will help you see the choices you do have. Pick one of your ideas and begin to act on it.

Value Your Time and Energy

You've spent a little time contemplating and working through the idea of social programming. How you, as a woman, have shaped your life and made choices based on standards and expectations that you did not create.

I hope you are agitated, angry, filled with hope, motivated, empowered and wondering how it happened that **you** accepted your many life roles without question. What made you buy into the programming? That's a great place to be, because as long as you're questioning, searching, and noticing, change will find its way into your life.

So, here we are at step ten—learning how to value your time and energy. Whether you stay at home with your kids or go to work every day, statistics show that the work you do is less valued by society than the work of the men around you. Cases in point; in the business arena—48% of all U.S. businesses are owned by women but they don't share equally in the economic benefits, only 3.2 percent of corporate contracts and 2.9 percent of federal contracts go to women. On the home front—even when both parents work full time jobs, women do 70% of the housework. When asked why the household chores were not divided equally many women responded that they got paid less in their jobs. Which I guess means the women are supposed to work three to five hours extra each day just to make up the monetary difference in pay?

You may object to my position, believing that society does value the role mothers play in their families. Do they? What do you say when you go to a social function and someone asks what you do? Even if you enthusiastically reply that you are a household executive, there is a feeling in the air that somehow your days/life/purpose isn't as grand as theirs. If you work away from the home, I bet that *at least* once you were passed up for a promotion you deserved because you couldn't work the same overtime hours as a male co-worker.

This is how it is. Some little piece of what I've written above probably rings true to you. Partly this is due to *us* not valuing our *own time* and efforts as much as we value other people's time and effort.



You can't single-handedly change the whole system but you certainly can reclaim the realm that is your individual life.

Begin by noticing all the ways you give your time away without question and without weighing whether or not what is being asked of you is a fair request (given what you are responsible for and already 'doing' compared with the person who is asking). Next, schedule your own life to include classes, walks with a friend, or other events that you value and **don't** erase the event when something comes up for someone else. You may feel guilty the first few times you can't drive on a field trip or make some meeting, but you will get over it **and** you'll be changing the pattern that communicates to everyone around you that their needs are more important than yours.

I don't care if your idea of fun is painting your toe nails while watching Oprah; that can be your scheduled event! The point is to let yourself and others know that you are of value, what you want to do with your time and energy is your choice and it is **as** important and equal to the desires and needs of those you care for.

Take Action

Draw a big circle on a piece of paper. Make marks on the outside to represent the hours in your day from waking up to going to sleep. Fill in the circle, using pie like wedges, the activities you do during the day. One color might be all work related things, one color kids, one color your personal time.

Now, on a different sheet of paper draw another circle. On this circle fill in the wedges of how you would like your life to be—we'll call this your dream wheel.

While looking at both wheels, write three things down that you want to change to make reality look more like your dream wheel.



Part Two: Getting to Know Yourself

Step Eleven



Words are very powerful. The words we use to describe ourselves, our lives, our successes and our challenges shape our beliefs and actions. They've been shaping who we are since we could hear and speak. So, the goal is to learn how to use your words for your own personal empowerment and to create the life you want.

The Irony of Description

The next ten steps will focus on getting to know yourself. You may have realized after the first ten steps that the "you" that you've spent a lifetime with, may not really be the "you" that is inside. That person might have been influenced by societal and family programming--so here's your big chance to open your mind and embrace (or meet for the first time) the woman inside your body.

Take a moment, close your eyes and describe yourself to me as you've been describing yourself over the years. Say it out loud. Give me a physical description; tell me about the things that interest you; your strengths, weaknesses, goals--anything that comes to mind.

Most of us were taught to be humble. Even when we're doing something amazingly well, we are tempted to play down our successes with words we hope will make "less amazing" people feel better. We don't want to toot our own horn, be the tallest poppy in the field, stand out, stick out, be conceited, etc.

We might put on a wonderful dinner party, but when the stream of complements start coming in we must add a description of the one thing that went wrong--the appetizer that burnt that morning--or something else we did that was less than perfect. When we've been dieting for months and look great, and people

start noticing, we say something like -we'll I got the flu (meaning of course that you on your own wouldn't have the will power to pass up a piece of chocolate cake!). When we kick butt on some business deal, we use words like "lucky."

The problem with this pattern is that we may start out with words and descriptions, but over time they become the picture of who we think we are. They start to define us in ways that aren't always so positive. They may even convince us, simply by repeating them over the course of a lifetime, that they are true.

The good news is that it's not too late to create new words; a brand new description of yourself. The first step is noticing how you use words in your life. Start listening to yourself, the descriptions, the excuses, the way you explain to the world who you are. You may giggle as you catch yourself in these 'aha' moments. You might even say, "Oh, I get it, that's why I'm that way. First I described it and *then* I became it."

Take Action

Make a list of the 'labels' you received as a child.

How would your family describe you?

How would your high school or friends of today describe you?

Have any of their words stayed with you and shaped your idea of who you are?

For the next week every time you hear that 'word' or label, replace it with a strong, powerful, word that represents the woman you are right now.

Whenever you get a chance to describe yourself (even if it is inside your head) describe the woman you want to be and leave off all the disclaimers.

How many cares one loses when one decides not to be something, but to be someone. Coco Chanel



Step Twelve

Who is that Woman?

All of us have things we don't like about ourselves. Things we've done in our lives that we aren't proud of. Regret about missed opportunities that we can't seem to get out of our thoughts. Fear of all kinds; about everything from losing a child to not being able to provide for our kids to growing old. Too often we let who we were in the past and who we think we should be (see steps one through ten) get in the way of the empowered woman inside of us who is dying to be freed.

Who is that woman? How do we work through the insecurity, self-doubt, self-criticism and fear related behaviors that may be old friends to us? How can we gracefully invite the old self to stand aside and let the new self emerge? How will our family and friends react if we take the time to get to know the woman we want to be and then change our life accordingly? They might be uncomfortable, they might not like us anymore, they may judge us, they may analyze us behind our backs or assume we've hit a mid life crisis. Yes, these things may happen. Remember the saying, "What does it profit a woman if she gain the whole world and suffer the loss of her own soul"?

You may think I'm being dramatic, but I'm not really. I'm convinced that many of us, after marriage and having children have lost sight of the person we are. We've gotten caught up in the 'ideas' we hold close to our heart; what a mother is, what a wife is, what a responsible adult is—even if those ideas make us miserable. Along the way someplace we've lost our playful, fun-loving, adventurous, sensuous, self absorbed, risk-taking souls.

I can't tell you how to get to know yourself. All I can do is suggest that maybe, just maybe you've left a part of yourself that you really liked—somewhere in your past. I can promise you that if you take the time to question, to journal, to meditate and commune with yourself in whatever way you do it, that you will hear yourself speak loud and clear. I can also guarantee that **it is** the full figured, go for it, I deserve to be happy, girlfriend rich, I can do it, open to learning, this is my life I'm going to grab it by the horns right now **self** that you **want** to spend the rest of your life with. Your challenge is to find her.



Take Action

Spend an uninterrupted two hours completely by yourself. No kids, no work (tell your boss you have a doctor's appointment and go to a park).

Bring a notebook. Open the notebook and write "Who am I right now? Think, talk to yourself, dream, brainstorm, write the first thing that comes to your mind.

Put your pen to the paper and don't take it off.

When another question comes up for you write it down and then ***listen to yourself***. Listen to your answer and write it down.



Step Thirteen

Memory Lane

Sometimes it is the journey of a lifetime to figure out who we are, and sometimes that definition changes as new experiences, relationships, challenges and triumphs come our way. Life re-defines us. Unless we take the time to look backwards, forwards, inside and out, we may not discover the secrets we hold within our hearts. Some of those secrets can be found in the memories of who we were before school, kids, marriage, expectations and disappointment introduced themselves.

Yes, I'm talking about the child within, your inner child, the one you most likely left behind when some event or idea marched in and stole you. There was a time in your life when you were not jaded by the ideas of others. There was a time when you stood up for exactly what you wanted

Seize the moment. Remember all those women on the Titanic who waved off the dessert cart.

Erma Brombeck

and didn't define it as selfish, there was a time you were naked in the mud and you didn't know your thighs were too big. There was a time your imagination and creative impulses were all you knew. Now that you are grown up, you are going to reclaim that spirit that remains somewhere within you.

You may be wondering where to look. Or you might be feeling grief over what you've lost or can't remember. Never fear, you are not alone and life still offers you many opportunities to find yourself if you have an open mind and adventurous spirit. Make time each day to do one of the following; paint, dance, go barefoot, look at the moon, laugh, eat with your hands, break a rule, eat only dessert for dinner, say no, disappoint someone and let it be OK, have a fit (on the bed kicking and screaming is fun), jump on a bed, sneak food, save your quarters, go for a horseback ride, sign up for a sailing class. I think you get the picture. Step out of your

life and do something you haven't done and always wanted to do—and see how it makes you feel.

In order to really know yourself, you have to be willing to build from scratch. There has to be a moment when you scream out loud with realization, "I am an adult now! I set the rules for myself. Nobody gets to tell me who I am, nobody will define me." And to those forces that picked you out of the mud and told you how a good little girl was supposed to behave, you will scream, "No more, you can't tell me who I am, or what I need to do to be loved anymore!"

You **will** be able to do this when YOU decide with your whole being that you **no longer care what people think of you**. In this moment you will stop living to please others and begin the adventure of pleasing yourself.

Take Action

Step out of your ordinary pattern and do something today that was taboo in your house when you were a child. If you had to eat all the food on your plate, leave it; if you had to look friendly even when you were sad, mad or tired, then let it be OK to show your emotions.

What are you going to do today?

Make a list of the friends you currently have.

Which ones are you most yourself with?

Which ones do you feel you need to impress?

Who are you comfortable telling your secrets to?

Cross off everyone on that list who you feel you need to impress in order to keep their friendship. You don't need them. They will keep you exactly where you are. Be on the lookout for new friends to enter your life, in places you never expected to find them.



Finding Spirit in Your Life

There is a part of yourself that can sometimes get ignored in the hustle bustle responsibility laden life of a mom—your spirit. I don't mean spirit in a religious way because to me a religion is a system of beliefs set up for a community of like-minded people to follow. The communities and beliefs differ depending on what culture and religion you are born into.

I'm talking about spirit as the part of your curious, feminine, nature conscious, wise questioning mind that allows you to want to learn, grow and love. It is the part of you that keeps exploring, wondering and questioning your inner and outer world. It is the place within you that you are able to understand life, connect with it, forgive it and have faith in it.

Too often our spirituality gets lumped into the category of religion. For some women, the religions available to us, many that are based in a large part on patriarchal ideas, leave us searching for more 'spirit' in our lives. Yet, we aren't that familiar with what that would mean. That's why I've included spirit in the getting to know yourself section of our fifty steps. Some of us just don't know what spirituality vs. religion would mean in our lives. We may have stopped listening to our own spiritual guidance many years ago when we were hooked into a set of beliefs that may not even belong to us.

I've also encountered a degree of fear whenever this discussion comes up, because there is this feeling that doing, being or believing anything outside the dogma of whatever religion you've been raised in is somehow a blasphemy to your God. I'm speaking of something that goes far beyond what any doctrine might dictate. You can embrace your religious beliefs and still take the bigger step of getting in touch with what moves your spirit.

Maybe it will be sitting in your garden on a full moon in your pajamas singing a song your mother sang to you as a child, it could be participating in a drum circle of women where the sound you make becomes a meditation that carries you to a place of spirit, or maybe it will be dancing alone in your room while you cry or laugh, having a conversation with the wind, or lying still and inviting your spirit to talk to you.

Again, I must challenge you to go within and find what moves your spirit. It is a personal preference, different for every woman. What allows you to feel connected to yourself, the earth, the whole that is life? Do you have little rituals in your life that are yours, ones you don't feel you have to explain to anyone? Actions that bring light, love, and hope to your soul? It is time to free yourself from ideas, beliefs and actions that don't work for you anymore. It's time to try something new, maybe even something you thought was weird or unacceptable in the past.

I'm going to share some of my favorite rituals just to get you thinking.

Every morning when I get up to my office I say the following:

"I arise today through the strength of heaven: light of sun, radiance of moon, splendor of fire, speed of lightning, swiftness of wind, depth of sea, stability of earth, firmness of rock." (The Deer's Cry, Irish, 7th century)

What I do that makes it my own is that I act it out. I say it loud and with passion. I make fists in the air on the word strength, expand with my fingers to become the light of sun, and sink inside to reflect on the radiance of the moon. I light a candle for fire and remember the last lightning storm I saw. I also like to put on African drum music and dance, especially when I'm feeling upset, angry or frustrated. I use my arms while I'm dancing to push the feeling away from me. I tell it to get out of me as I jump, stomp and laugh. I close my eyes and dance like I imagine wild animals might move. I do this until the feeling is gone and I'm filled with energy.

Welcome back to kindergarten! Spirit lies somewhere in that time frame of your life before you were told what to believe and how your beliefs were supposed to be expressed. It is still there, alive and calling out to you.

Take Action

Create a new ritual.

Write a belief you don't hold anymore on a piece of paper and burn it or wrip it up.

Do something you've never done before.



Step Fifteen

The Body Battle

Haven't we all wasted enough time wanting what we don't have? I know very few women who love their bodies. Most of us complain about being too big or too small, having freckles, moles, we're too hairy, not tall enough, too tall, we don't like our voice, or our hands, or the color of our hair, the texture of our hair, our nose is too big and our eyes too small. Listen to yourself! Listen to the voices of millions of woman who all want what they will never have.

It's time to come to terms with this obsession about body. All of us need to take a deep collective breath and then have a good long laugh at ourselves.

It is hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head.

Sally Kempton

We talked about how society and the media programs us to think about ourselves in step five, so I'm not going to dwell on that here. However, it should be of note to all of us that the magazines we read, the movies, TV shows, and all the ads we view do have an affect on how we feel about ourselves.

There is this comparative, competitive undercurrent that runs through women's lives. It isn't healthy, it doesn't help our self esteem or confidence to grow and it certainly is **not** a good example for our daughters—but it is there none the less. So the question becomes, what are you willing to do about it in your own life?

It is true that nothing can influence us unless we give it value. Society can make weighing 100 pounds the 'in thing,' but if you don't buy into it, the idea will have no influence on how you think or act (unfortunately it can have an influence on how the men in

your life think and act, so some re-training might be necessary!).

So where do we begin to battle our body image? In my experience the only way to win is through acceptance. Take a good look in the mirror at the body you have today and decide you are going to love it. Decide you are going to stop judging it. Decide that you have wasted enough of your energy and life worrying about what you look like. Only you can take this step.

The perfect world would be if all women could do this and then the comparative, competitive river would disappear. Since we know that is not going to happen, and since you pretty much know by now that you may not have been blessed with the body of your dreams—the big question is—are you brave enough to let it all go and celebrate the body you have?

Take Action

Take a realistic look at your 'body' goals. Write them down, all the things you've been working towards for the last five years.

Are they reachable?

Is the price you are paying to achieve them worth the emotional cost?



Embrace your Sexuality

The word sexuality has so many meanings for each of us; memories both good and bad, do's and don'ts and labels that can cause us to shy away from exploring this important part of ourselves. I'm going to jump in and try to over-ride some of the past messages you might have received, so that your new found sexuality will be created solely by you.

What were the messages you received when you first noticed your body. Were you told that touching yourself was a sin? When your period arrived was it celebrated or were you handed a pad and shoved into a bathroom? What was your first sexual experience like? Did you feel honored or like you wanted to hide in shame? When you wore something 'sexy' did those around you react with the good girl, bad girl mantra?

All of these things whether positive or negative have become a part of your sexual programming code. Now that you're an adult woman, you get to re-think these things. You get to explore what you think, how you want to act and what is important to you.

Where sexuality is concerned, this may take a little time. The first step is what we talked about in step 15. You have to learn to love your body. It is not possible to be sensual or sexually expressive if you feel embarrassed by or disgusted with your body. Sexuality is not just something that happens when you're having sex; it is a way of being in your body that embraces all of you, all of the time. It is in the way you move, the way you feel your clothes against your body, the smell of your favorite tea, the candles you light in the evening, the way you look at the night sky. It is a new openness to the sensuality of life all around you. It includes your willingness to re-define all those messages you might have received throughout your life.

Step two is to experiment with running your sexual energy. This is hard to explain so I'm just going to encourage you to take a few minutes at different times in your day to think about how the thoughts and ideas that flow through your mind affect how you act. Sink into your woman energy; the creative, juicy, joyful, sensual you and bring that energy into whatever it is you are doing. Some women find themselves standing straighter, they feel their hips moving freely as they walk, they



report that the colors and smells around them become stronger and that time seems to slow down. These things happen when we are in our bodies, feeling alive in our bodies, paying attention to our bodies. By paying attention to that 'woman energy' you will find the spark of a new sexual understanding and then expression of yourself. An integrated joyful woman is one who can bring all the pieces of herself wherever she goes. She is the luckiest of women because she gets to show up as herself in all areas of her life. Don't leave your sensual, sexual self behind!

Take Action

Notice the women around you who feel comfortable in their own bodies.
How do they act?

They can be good teachers for you.

Write a description of yourself as the sensual woman you want to be.



Step Seventeen

Play Time

This week we're going to focus on having fun. Play time. Yes, you--the adult, responsible mom with too much to do already. You're going to make time to play. Why is this so important? Because there is so much you can learn about yourself through play.

Play is usually creative, energetic, without worry, fun, engaging, physical and stimulating. Most of our lives as moms we've been creating this play space for our children. Sometimes we participate, but the activities we set up for our kids are not exactly the play we'd plan for ourselves. They take our energy instead of giving us more energy; which is what play can do for you.

There are two challenges I've found when creating play time; the first is making the time and the second is figuring out what would be fun. To address the first I suggest that you start by scheduling two hours minimum each week, same day same time.

I think of life itself now as a wonderful play that I've written for myself, and so my purpose is to have the utmost fun playing my part.

Shirley MacLaine

Otherwise the weeks fly by and you'll never get around to playing.

If you're not sure what would be fun for you, pick up a community college or recreation center class schedule and notice when you read through it what class descriptions sound like fun. These should be creative, interactive classes--not the history of something. Look in the art, dance, drama, film, cooking, craft, music sections. Many communities also offer coed adult sports teams, sailing classes, martial arts, jazz dance, hiking clubs or others.

Or maybe figuring out a class, no matter how fun the class might be, immediately makes more work for you. Then just do something childlike; bounce on your bed, run after leaves, finger paint with pudding, anything that allows you space away from the routine of your life.

The idea is to feel what it is like to be completely engaged in something fun, when time passes without you thinking about the duties of your life or the problems that are yours to solve. This is your time to be free to express and experience life.



Take Action

Make a list of all the activities you've done throughout your life that were fun.

Circle the ones you'd like to try again.

Do some research to find out which activities are available in your community.

Make a date with yourself to do one of the available activities.



Step Eighteen

Money Matters

This is a topic I generally avoid. In the past I've had a feast or famine relationship with money. I either avoid thinking about it altogether which results in bills not being paid, or I obsess about it which results in sleepless nights! Only recently did I decide to consult a finance book. I read half of it, but by then the point was already clear and the basic message had sunken in--my relationship with money was established a long time ago, it isn't a healthy relationship and I've never questioned it.

So you may be wondering; why is understanding your relationship with money important? Because money is involved in many aspects of our lives, in a social sense it can define our accomplishments, on the personal level it is something we have to manage (or struggle with) on a daily basis, and it is listed as a top issue in failing relationships.

Take a look at your money patterns. Do you pile your bills up and avoid them until the last minute or do you pay them as soon as they arrive? Do you overspend? When and why? Do you shop to make yourself feel better? Are you the type who buys clothes and then returns them the next week out of guilt? Are you completely on top of your finances? Do you judge your success in life based on the money you make? Answer these questions and any others that come to your mind and try to go back and figure out why you act/think/feel this way and when in your life this behavior or idea originated.

I've always thought, "What is the use in saving money?" So throughout my life I've spent all the money I make. Why do I think that? Because it seems to me that no matter how much money I make it barely covers the bills, or something comes up like paying for a college education, that sucks it all up. With this knowledge, I decide I might as well get something for myself (since most of my money goes to supporting my kids) and then I overspend. I reason that I already have to dip into the home equity loan so a little more won't matter. It may be easy to see this pattern from the outside (my husband has mentioned it!) but while your in it, the whole thing makes perfect sense.

Once I could see how this pattern was defeating my goal of financial security, I decided to look into my personal history and figure out why I have this out of control relationship with money when the rest of my life is pretty orderly. What I learned is that I value the things money can buy more than I value money which is a pretty clear pattern in my family of origin. I was never exposed to the idea

of having an active, nurturing relationship with my money; one where I could set financial goals and reach them.

The path we are taking towards ourselves is about freeing ourselves to be ourselves. This requires a close examination of what holds us captive. If your relationship to money is holding you captive, if it is adding stress to your life, making you feel like things are out of control, forcing you to make choices you don't want to make, then it's time to take a closer look at the steps you could take to build a positive, nurturing *relationship* with your money.

Take Action

Write down your financial goals for the next year.

What steps are you willing to take to reach them?

Who taught you about money?

Take a look at that person's life? Would you be happy if yours turned out the same? If not, what do you need to do to change your path?



Step Nineteen

The Search is On

What do you want to learn? What do you hope to experience in your lifetime? When do you feel most yourself? These are the questions you need to answer when choosing your path in life, a path that stimulates your imagination, utilizes your talents, gives you confidence and helps you to grow into the woman you want to be.

My daughter called this morning and asked me to record my voice, reading cards that I've sent to her over the past few years for a project she's working on.

When she was at college thousands of miles away from me and things weren't going exactly as she hoped. Here's the advice I gave her.

"I just want you to know how proud I am of you. I know things have been really hard but you keep brainstorming for solutions, asking for help and putting one foot in front of the other walking towards the goals of your life. We learn the most from these difficult times, often they end up defining us in so many ways. Then someplace down the road you realize that what you're meant

to do and be in life depended on getting the piece of information about yourself you received when you were going through hell."

When she felt discouraged after changing her major mid stream to design, having no art background (which she decided after considering the questions in paragraph one) I said;

"I've been thinking about you working hard to cut metal and carve wood. It does make me smile to know you are always willing to stretch yourself, to learn, grow, and follow your heart. Laugh with yourself and be in each moment. This may be an opportunity to come face to face with your perfectionism and see it for what it is; a prison that keeps you judging yourself. Don't worry about grades or starting on the water polo team. All of that matters only for a moment. Who you become lasts through eternity and that is an internal journey that does not receive grades, awards, or require acceptance from others."

I'm sharing these with you because as mothers we give the most amazing advice. We want for our children what we sometimes fail to give to ourselves. To them we say go for it, live your dreams, love yourself, be all you can be, and to ourselves, what do we give? Many of us don't even ask the questions, we don't know what we're passionate about, what we want to learn or what we hope to experience. We give our energy and inspiration away freely with an unconditional love that we reserve for others, without ever learning how to turn it inward towards ourselves.

This is your call. Your life is yours to determine. Once you do the work and truly take the time to know yourself, the unconditional self love will follow and you will become open to discover the paths **you** most want to follow.



Take Action

Answer the following:

What do you want to learn?

What do you hope to experience in your lifetime?

When do you feel most yourself?

Read your answers every day for a week.



Step Twenty

Use Your Intuition

This is the last step in our section on getting to know ourselves. We started out taking a look at how the words we use to describe ourselves shape who we become. We discovered that it is possible to reprogram negative beliefs about ourselves. We took a glimpse into our childhoods to remember who we were before *life* set in. We got in touch with what inspires us spiritually, how silly the body battle is, how to celebrate our sexuality and why we need to have more fun. We discussed our relationships with money, how to love ourselves unconditionally and to embrace the fact that goals are ours to determine. That's a lot to digest!

We're going to end with the most important of all—your intuition. This is a precious, invaluable gift that is often shoved aside by us and made fun of by our society. We have this inkling inside, a very clear thought, but we doubt it because we've been taught to consult others for our answers or have little experience listening to our own voice. We worry that our intuition might lead us astray—especially if our past is splattered with bad choices. But, I promise you that if you start listening to your own inner voice, if you learn how to check 'you' first before soliciting advice from others, that you will have a much greater chance of reaching your goals and creating a life that will make *you* happy.

So how does intuition work? Should we listen to those fear based intuitive hits that tell us our 16 year old (who is fifteen minutes) late has surely crashed his car on the roadside? What happens if we follow our intuition and it leads us down the wrong path? Your intuition will grow as you learn to practice listening. You'll soon discover that your normal 'mother fears' are not your intuition giving you advance warning but rather your love in 'worry' mode.

Listening to your intuitive voice requires that you take a moment to go inward so that you can hear it. In the beginning you may want to play with your intuition by writing your inner answers in a notebook as if it were a dialogue in a book. Let's say you are trying to decide if you should switch jobs. You write the question in your notebook, then close your eyes for a moment and write the first answer that comes to your mind. If the answer is "yes, you're not happy here," then you might write,



“Why am I so unhappy here?” Too often we bring these important questions to others, we discuss our life choices with everyone in the hope that we will get some validation that the direction we want to go is OK with everyone else.

Trusting your intuition and learning to hear your own inner voice is the only way you can truly get to know yourself. You have learned many things about yourself in our previous steps, but until you can trust and hear your own voice as director of your life and choices—you will still be floating on the surface. You’ll know a lot about yourself but miss the deeper step of learning to trust yourself.

Take Action

Play intuition games:

Before you leave the house ask yourself if you have everything you need. If something pops into your head, go and get whatever you thought of and bring it with you—chances are you’re going to need it. Ask yourself if you really need to rush, or does your intuition tell you the person you’re meeting is running late.

When you meet someone new, listen to what your inner voice has to say about him or her. If you immediately do not trust the person, don’t doubt it—that feeling you have is a true warning—one that may not become clear until years down the road.

Can you think of something that happened over the last week where you had an inkling about something and it turned out to be true?



Part Three: The Courage to be Yourself

Step Twenty One

Discover Your Personal Power

We're now on my favorite ten steps, how to find the courage to be yourself!

The first topic—personal power—is something I discovered after my divorce. What I learned is that personal power trumps everything, it gives you confidence to be exactly who you are, do what you want and speak your mind. The most interesting thing about finding personal power is that other people would prefer that you didn't find this part of yourself! A weak, doubting, self-critical, under paid, overly responsible woman is much easier to deal with than one who goes after what she wants. If you find the courage to dig out that power and use it, you'll know exactly what I'm talking about, and you may even find humor in watching how your family and friends react.

You may hear words like; you've changed, you're so controlling, difficult to deal with and are no longer a team player. In other words you are *not* doing what they want you to do. You are standing up for yourself and getting what *you* want instead of giving them what *they* want!

We've all grown up hearing the words *personal power* beginning with the women's rights

movement to our current day efforts to get equal pay and more political say. I'd like to challenge you to move away from the idea of what **we** (the group of us) as women deserve and are capable of (because that is removed from our here and now lives), to the question "What do **I** deserve and what am **I** capable of?" Because, everything starts with you, using your personal power requires a difficult and challenging switch in the way you think, live and act. It requires your belief on the deepest level that you are strong, capable, talented, and of great value. That is much more difficult to do than making the statement that women in general are powerful.

If you could do the following four things—you'd have your power without having to go through the self searching and practice required:

1. Stop caring what people think
2. Stop trying to get people to like you
3. Value your own goals, dreams and desires as highly as you

value others

4. Don't shy away from conflict

Not easy, but possible if you set your mind to it. Here's what you need to know and believe in order to accomplish the four things.

- Other people, even those you love, are going to stand in your way. Over time, they will get used to it and stop complaining.
- Once you start using your strengths and standing up for what you want, the self confidence you gain along with the results (getting what you most desire) will inspire you to be even more daring.
- Caring too much about what others think of you and trying to get others to like you is the single biggest waste of time in a woman's life. This time could be spent becoming the woman you *want* to be; learning new things and discovering yourself—instead of constantly seeking approval.

Using your power can only be learned through practice. That means you will

need to start noticing when you give your power away. When you care too much what someone thinks, when you do things you don't want to do hoping someone will think highly of you, when you put your goals on hold to further someone else's goals, when you feel angry, used and overlooked but don't say anything just to avoid the conflict.

Once you notice the behavior, you can use your intuition notebook (review step 20) and dialogue with your inner voice until you come up with what you are going to DO differently next time this situation arises. Then all that is left is to have the courage to use your personal power and ACT differently.

Take Action

Make a list of all of your strengths. Read them every night before you go to bed and again when you wake up for the next week.

Write down the names of the two people you currently try the hardest to impress.

Under the names write the word, WHY? Then write down every answer that comes to you. Then ask yourself if those are good enough reasons for you to waste your time trying so hard to please them instead of devoting time to developing yourself.



Step Twenty Two

A Gift to Yourself

In our last step we talked about personal power, what it looks like and why others would prefer you didn't have it. One of the ways to gain this personal power is learning how **not** to care what people think. Since this is a very difficult thing to make a reality in your life, I want to share with you *why* this is the single best gift you can give yourself.

I call it a gift to yourself because it is something you can emotionally give yourself each day that will bring you joy, hope, and excitement for life. Why? Think about it. If every choice you made was made from *your* inner voice, if each goal you set came from *your* own desires, if you could organize *your* home, kids, relationships in a way that you determine solely because you want it that way—imagine what it would feel like to be you.

This is what would happen if you didn't care what people thought of you, if you didn't have an old tape running in your head that said what you were supposed to be, feel, believe, and do. It isn't that you stop caring *at all* about what others think, that may be an impossible feat, but rather that you see their opinions or impressions as a fleeting thought that drifts through your mind, but doesn't have the power to influence your choice.

How do we make this very difficult shift when most of us have spent much of our lives caring what others think, trying to fit in, doing the right thing, being nice, presentable and likeable? Since each of our lives have been formed by different experiences as well as familial and social patterns, all that I can offer you is a method that will help you become aware of how you think and why you act the way you do.

You need to become a detective; looking for clues in your life that will point you in a new direction, one that will be determined more by what you think and want and less by what others think and want from you. Write the following questions on a note card and carry them with you until the practice of gathering clues becomes second nature.

Am I doing this because I want to or because I think I should? Why do I think I should? Why am I doing this? Is this my responsibility? Is there a more fair division of labor here? Am I being taken advantage of? What do I hope to gain? What would I do if I didn't care what this person thought of me?

At least three times each day, in any situation you want, pull the card out and answer the questions for yourself. Often this simple act will be so enlightening that a small shift will occur naturally. The thing about patterns and ideas we hold without questioning them; is that we act on them without thinking, out of habit. What I'm challenging you to do is to stop and question, which will automatically move your action out of pattern mode and into a place where there is a possibility for change to occur.

Once you experience this gift, once you hold it in your heart and live it, you will realize that it is almost like Aladdin's magic lamp allowing you to get from your life what you most want.

Take Action

Make a card with the questions listed below and read it three times a day.

Am I doing this because I want to or because I think I should?

Why do I think I should?

Why am I doing this?

Is this my responsibility?

Is there a more fair division of labor here?

Am I being taken advantage of?

What do I hope to gain?

What would I do if I didn't care what this person thought of me?

Notice the strong, confident women you respect most. Pick one behavior they have and copy it.

Practice this behavior in your own life and notice the results.



Step Twenty Three

Building Boundaries

It takes great courage to draw a line in the sand and set personal boundaries. Women, especially mothers, are all about building bridges; drawing people in, taking care of others and making sure everyone is happy. But sometimes it is more important to build a fence than a bridge.

In fact, you can't find the courage to be yourself without knowing first how to create boundaries which allow you to be independent and free from responsibilities that aren't yours. The boundary that is hardest to draw is usually with our children. We want so much for them, we feel it is our job to create the life they want, and we love them so much that we don't notice they are living inside our personal circle.

Here's an example from my life. All of my kids have homework every night. Since I'm a writer, I am most often asked to proof read English papers (they can even email them to you from college!). In the beginning, when my oldest started high school I felt so sorry for her, for all the homework she had, that I would wait until she was done writing, put whatever I was doing on hold (or stay up much later than I wanted to) in order to "help"

her. Over time, I began to resent this invasion of my time. I was more than willing to proof read papers but not at midnight or before school. So, I decided to draw a line in the sand and told everyone that I would help with homework before 9pm and that after that I was off duty. The reaction was mutinous. There were moans about how I didn't care about their education, was selfish and didn't understand how much stress they were under. It was hard, I admit, because they had some valid points. But I needed to build a fence that gave me the space I needed.

Other boundaries I've had to set include, not rescuing them from the consequences of their choices, not paying for things that I don't believe in (like diet soda and violent video games).

This boundary setting is not easy. When you've had lots of people living within the circle of your personal space and they are comfortable there, getting them out sometimes

requires a loving shove. For teens it might mean that when they complain to you about a recurring problem—which is not your job to solve—that you tell them you are confident in their ability to solve the problem themselves. They may stare at you at first and wonder what happened to the woman who was always willing to rescue them no matter what! But in the long run, your ability to set boundaries and build your own fences can empower them to set healthy boundaries in their own lives.

There are boundaries to be set in all areas of your life, all you have to do is look for places where you feel irritated or resentful. We all need to learn how to say *no*, to draw a line in the sand. Setting boundaries is not selfish, it is self preserving. It is a model of self-respect for your children and will allow you the space you need to live your own life while still loving those you care about. It's time to get out the hammer and nails and take a good long look at where in your life you need to erect some fences.

Take Action

Write down three things that you are irritated about; areas of your life where you feel resentment.

Brainstorm ways you could set new boundaries in these areas.

Make a list of everything you do each day for the people in your family. Circle the things that they could do for themselves. What is your plan to give these jobs back to the people who should be doing them for themselves?

Pick a time each day that you are off duty. Maybe it is an hour in the afternoon or after dinner when you are unavailable to others, or maybe it is a time at night so that you can relax before bedtime. Announce this time to your family and stick to it.

Say “no” to at least one thing this week that you are asked to do that you don't want to do. This could be giving your child a ride to a friend's house, volunteering your time for something, or doing an emergency load of laundry.



Step Twenty Four

Earn a Label

I learned a few years ago how to embrace all the labels I was given by others; bitch, feminist, controlling, selfish, aggressive, demanding—just to name a few. The embrace happened the moment I fully understood that I was actually earning these labels whenever I stepped out of line, had a strong opinion, went for what I knew was right or told an inconvenient truth.

I decided that I could either slink back and feel ashamed or wear them proudly as I had those hard earned Girl Scout patches of old. I laughed when I visualized a sash hanging across my chest with the embroidered emblem to represent standing up for myself, being selfish, saying no, following my dreams, setting boundaries or not caring what others thought of me.

Women who are not afraid of others, who don't care what they are called or what labels others place on them are scary creatures indeed. Why? Because it is very hard to knock them off track; they know what they want and how to get it. They can't be swayed off course by obstacles thrown in their way. This group of women also knows, that only strong, powerful, self confident women pose a threat to the 'way things have always been done.'

The ordinary, timid, fearful types will never earn a label because they are afraid to step out of line, to express an opinion or stand up for a cause—especially if that cause is themselves!.

All women at their core have an undeniable power within them, a kind of creator, healer energy that lies waiting to be called upon. But we aren't sure how to pull it out of ourselves or we are afraid to unleash it, because this kind of power is not rewarded in our families or our society. It is labeled as bad; unfeminine, too aggressive, too outspoken, too, too, too, too. . . .

I'm here to challenge you to earn a label. Be proud when you hear someone say, "I heard she always gets what she wants," or "she's so aggressive," or "she's a feminist," or "what a bitch." Know that you have accomplished something major. You have pushed someone out of their comfort zone, stood

up for something you believe in, made your voice heard. You have moved from silence to the woman wearing the sash of labels.

You know exactly who you are.

Take Action

Think about and then list all the women you know who have earned labels.

Take a close look at their lives, what choices have they made that threatens others to the point that others find it necessary to give them names.

Next time you are having a conversation with a group of women, have the courage to say exactly what you think or feel. Be honest with who you are, even if your opinion doesn't match those around you.

Write down something you might say.

Practice being *clear* without being mean or judgmental. Use 'I' statements instead of 'you' statements. For example "I feel the division of labor on this committee is not quite equal," or "I feel very upset when everyone's junk is lying all over the house," or "I feel disappointed when a date is planned and it doesn't happen." Notice how the 'you' has been intentionally dropped from each statement. If you say "I feel very upset when *you* leave your junk lying around the house," it *feels* very different and a defensive debate will most likely follow.



Step Twenty Five

Be a Revolutionary

Stop complaining about all the things you don't like about your family, your community, your world and commit to doing something about it. Pick a cause. Step out of the circle of your old dance with life and decide to make a difference.

After learning who you are, a big part of having the confidence to be that person is figuring out how to live true to who you are. Most of us are not blissfully happy with the way things are. On a world level; we wish that our education system were stronger, that our environment was protected, that our political leaders would have some integrity, that taxes be spent on social improvements instead of war. Yet, we don't think that our little contribution could ever make a difference.

We think too small, like the frog at the bottom of the well. He thinks the sky is only as big as the top of the well. If he surfaced, he would have an entirely different view.

Mao Tse-Tung

It may not make the difference you hope, however, feeling strongly about something and acting on it will make a big difference in your self confidence. Sometimes it is through the causes *outside of ourselves*, that we are able to find our voices. We easily fight for others even when we find it hard to fight for ourselves. When we become involved in a cause, we surround ourselves with others who have learned how to stand up. We learn from them, we get to experience the feeling of purpose and are then able to translate that into other areas of our lives.

On a personal level there are also things that are out of balance. Maybe it is a failing marriage, or a teen who is out of control, or a work schedule that is killing you. Whatever it is, revolution can begin with one thought—*I want this to change*. It then can grow into a commitment to yourself to become the change you want to see in *your* world.

That means action, you take some action in your life. You do one thing, no matter how small, in the direction of the revolution you want to see.

The tiny steps you take matter. All a revolutionary has to do is throw the pebble into the pond. The ripples are not your responsibility to control. So stop holding the pebbles so tightly in your fist and start throwing them into the pond that matters most to you.

If mothers cannot make a difference than nobody can.



Take Action

Write down one change you'd like to see in each of these areas.

Self

Family

Community

Work

World

Pick one area that you feel most passionate about and think of one small thing you might do.

Self

Family

Community

Work

World

Now throw the pebble!



Never Explain or Defend Yourself

Are you in the habit of thinking that everyone deserves an explanation for your life, choices, ideas and beliefs? It just comes out of your mouth without thinking. Your husband asks if you're wearing a new dress, and you respond, "No, I've had it for years," (when the tag is still hanging inside) or your teenager makes a comment about how you're always late, and you go into a detailed explanation about how you get there as fast as you can given all the things you have to do.

Your son's teacher calls and asks if you can come to school that morning because one of the other mothers is ill. You make up some elaborate story of how you are doing charity work and can't make it, because you are afraid to say, "No, I can't make it, I was planning to relax today." We spend too much time and energy explaining ourselves; our decisions, how we spend our time, what careers we choose, how we parent our children, why we can't attend a function, when an explanation isn't really required.

Some of us are also in the habit of thinking we have to defend ourselves at all costs. I discovered a solution for this while reading the book, "Feeling Good" by David Burns. I immediately tried it out with my husband and my kids and the result were amazing. Whenever you feel the need to defend yourself, you do one of two things.

1. Ask a question about it.
2. Agree with the person.

Here's an example. Your teenager says, "You're so critical of everything." Old response would be to defend, "No I'm not, I think I'm pretty positive." Then an argument ensues where you defend yourself with numerous examples that your teen shoots down. Instead try asking a question. "You think I'm critical?" Your teenager then is forced to give her explanation. You listen and either ask another question or agree with the part of what she is saying that is true. If you use the agree method, you would respond, "You're right I am critical sometimes."

The conversation would end. You would have admitted to being a human being with the possibility of

having a few flaws. Or, if you use the question method, you would have gotten a clearer picture of what your teen, who you feel is attacking or criticizing you, is thinking. The benefit of this approach is that something will shift inside of you when you decide you don't need to defend yourself; you don't need to win, or be maddened by criticism—because you no longer have to prove that you are perfect.

This may seem a small thing, but if your goal is to find the courage to be yourself, the ability to embrace your faults is a positive move. Switching to a mind set that says, "I'm an adult, I'm not going to explain or defend myself anymore—I am who I am," is a good place to be.

Take Action

Write down the last situation you can remember when you defended yourself.

Re-write the dialogue so that you are either asking a question or agreeing.

Read over your created dialogue a few times and notice how you feel.

The next time someone makes a critical or aggressive comment; ask a question or agree with some true part of what they have said and see what happens.

Ask yourself the following questions:

What do I hope to gain when I explain myself to others?

What do I want to achieve when I defend myself?



Step Twenty Seven

Embrace Failure

One of the hardest things, for mothers to learn, is how to allow the good things (your successes) and the bad things (failures, disappointments) to be present, alive, and acknowledged in your life. We want so badly for everyone to see the good we do so we work hard to hide the darker sides of ourselves. We forget to embrace the fact that both good and bad together created the women we are right now.

There are some real benefits to failure. The pain of failure digs out a well inside, creating a space that wasn't there before. And you get to decide what you want to fill that space with. It can be the clean start, fresh slate or eye-opener that propels you into a whole new way of looking at your life and goals. Here are a few things I've learned from my own failures that I'd like to share with you.

1. Failure invites us to change direction. We've been taught throughout our lives that the strong of character keep plugging along no matter what, and the weak give up. But sometimes failure in some area of your life is the wake-up call that a new direction is what you need. Sometimes the best thing is to give up,

turn around, start again and be open minded about all options.

2. Failure allows us to learn about ourselves. Ask yourself, why didn't this work for me? Failure becomes an opportunity for growth if you are willing to learn about yourself in the process.

3. Failure teaches us how to ask for support. You are less likely to fail if you have the support you need to succeed. Put your goals out there, tell your friends and family what you are trying to accomplish. Ask for their help. This support team then becomes part of your process, invisibly holding you accountable for whatever goal you've set.

4. Failure forces us to take a closer look and be realistic with our goals. Failure often happens when we have too many goals we are reaching for at the same time (or too many responsibilities). We take on too much; over schedule our lives, which diminishes the focus necessary to

succeed. On the one hand there are all the things we think we should be able to accomplish, and on the other hand is the real world complete with kids and their list of needs that we have to attend to. We need to be more realistic in accessing how to balance our lives.

5. Failure allows us to help others. Failure makes you more accessible to others. When something goes wrong in a person's life, their immediate feeling is one of embarrassment and worry that they won't be valued by others the way they once were, when they were a success. What we all forget is that every person has a failure they are hiding from view. Don't hide yours! Those who have processed their personal failure have a depth of compassion, understanding, and hope to give others. Offer your insight to others and let them see your struggle. This simple act will forever change the way you relate to failure in your own life.

Embrace and use your failures to build the new you!

Take Action

Look closely at your life. Write down one thing that you are willing to give up, something you are doing that is causing you stress instead of joy.

Think of one thing in your life that you consider a great failure. What did you learn from that experience?

How did it help you grow?

Are you different because of this experience?

Make a list of the people who love you and who want you to be happy and successful in your life.

Pick a personal goal and tell them about it. (PS. Your girlfriends should be on that list, if you can't trust them to want the best for you, then you need to take them off your friend list).

Make an unbreakable contract with yourself to devote a block of time *each* day to whatever it is you *most* want to succeed at in your life. This time is non-negotiable.



Step Twenty Eight

Finding Your Voice

I've learned from years of writing, editing and coaching that voice is something you cannot teach. It is a skill each person has or doesn't have. Those who haven't found it are usually the ones who are afraid to take a risk and allow the writing to flow from their unconscious. They think too much, try too hard, follow all the writing rules, stand on their grammatical skills, and imitate the style of the moment. Their true voice is blocked by their fear of getting it wrong.

We as women also have a personal voice. By voice I mean the words, beliefs, world view, experiences and ideas that are uniquely yours. We, too, keep our true voices from being heard for fear of getting it wrong, being misunderstood and feeling judged. We think too hard, try to follow all the rules, stand by societal mores and imitate the style of the moment.

As a mother, the challenge to discover and use your voice is even greater. We spend so much of our time helping our children to become themselves, trying to set the best example, sometimes not saying what we really need to say just to keep peace in the home or to keep a job.

Finding the courage to be yourself requires that you discover your voice and use it. That means you need to carve out a space in your life where you have the opportunity to say what you really feel. A girlfriend can be the greatest gift in this area. Think of someone you love and respect who would love you no matter what. Someone you trust not to repeat one thing you say, who can listen and celebrate with you, a woman who is interested in finding her own voice.

This is a journey you can take together. Make a pact to risk being completely yourself. All those things you're afraid to admit, afraid to say because 'then they become real', that is the voice you have been blocking. It doesn't have to be bad things either; some of us have blocked our greatest gifts because we've been taught that 'bragging' is a bad thing. We often feel most comfortable talking about the struggles and less comfortable being out there and passionate about our goals and the life we are creating. We don't want anyone to feel bad, or that their life is unexciting compared to ours.



So you see there are all sorts of sneaky ways we hold our voices back, so that we don't stick out, make waves or draw attention. Sometimes the problem lies deeper. We don't use our voice because we've forgotten how to listen to ourselves. We haven't taken the time to get to know ourselves at each new stage/age of our lives. The 18 year old who decided that all girls would betray her the way her best friend did in days past, has grown into a 40 year old who doesn't trust her women friends because she hasn't taken the time to meet or question the mature woman she's become.

Who are you now? What do you think, believe, want, value, know about yourself right now? What has life taught you? What is it that you uniquely have to say?

Find your words and be that person. Don't be afraid to take a risk, don't think too much before you act on something you believe in, stop trying so hard, throw out the rules, forget social limitations, and imitate nobody.

You're a grown up it's time to stop worrying that you're going to get it wrong.

Take Action

List one friend you can trust to practice using your true voice.

What would you most like to tell her?

The next time you are with a group of people who are discussing a topic and you hear a small voice in your head negating what they are saying—have the courage to say what you're thinking!

Start using I statements when you communicate with your family. This is a very clear way to express how you feel without falling into old patterns of blame.

When you _____ I feel _____ example: When you skip dinner without calling me, I feel I've wasted my time preparing dinner when I could have been doing something I wanted to do.



Step Twenty Nine

Question Everything

We aren't *supposed* to question authority. Social ideas, religious upbringing as well as our family structure has taught us that to *question* is disrespectful. We are supposed to trust that our public institutions have our best interest in mind, the FDA, CDC, Congress and Senate are looking out for our health and safety. We're supposed to buy into the idea of war as defeating terrorism and agree that it makes perfect sense when women get paid less than men for doing the same job.

Women who question everything are annoying 'know it alls' who just want to hear themselves talk. They are activists and feminists. Their questions scare us, depress us and create hopelessness.

The thing they forget to mention is that the world is not in a great state at this point. Part of the reason we are in the mess we are in, is that we question too little and trust in authority too much. We see ourselves as a speck in a huge world, incapable of changing the direction we are headed.

What I've just said may make you very uncomfortable. But I have to say it, because as mothers we have power to change the direction the world is heading. In fact, as a group, I believe we have more power to create a better world than any government or institution. Our children need to see us questioning. They need to see us take a stand. They need to know that there are ways to disagree and to make a difference that do not involve violence, prejudice or greedy use of resources that we are supposed to share.

Remember that every human being has a mother. That mother has the opportunity to teach fairness, equality and respect for everyone regardless of race, color or religion. We can choose to run our households based on what we believe and teach our children to question so that they learn how to discover solutions.

However, in order for a mother to do this, she has to be strong enough to hold on to what she knows is true;

regardless of what is going on around her. She has to have a vision of the path her family is on, she has to know how to listen, to solve and to guide with an open minded love that is a challenge to achieve.

When you are contemplating what it means to have the courage to be yourself, don't forget that being yourself means standing up for what you believe and what you want to create in your family. Don't forget that who *you* are is what your children learn from, not the words you say. This does not mean you have to *do* more, all it means is that you have to *be* true. Your life choices show them what you believe.

One person can make a difference!



Take Action

Make a list of the authority figures you've had in your life

Next to each name write one thing you disagreed with.

What did you do about it then?

What would you do about it now?

Is there some authority that you question now? Find a time to have a discussion with someone about this topic.

Discover Forgiveness

Life offers multiple opportunities to forgive. Forgiveness is talked about in every spiritual practice as one of the keys to enlightenment. There is good reason for this. Forgiveness is all about letting go instead of holding on; to an idea, a person, an event, a regret, a life decision. So many things in life can become like a ball and chain around our ankles holding us back.

I used to think that by forgiving someone, in a way you were condoning what they did. But I learned that idea isn't true at all. Forgiving another person for something they've done, frees *you* from the hold that person has on you. It's hard to explain how or why this happens but it does. The same thing is true when you need to forgive yourself. We all make mistakes, we all have a dark or shadow side to our personalities, we all have a list of experiences and choices that we regret. Can you forgive yourself for these things? Are you ready to let go of the hold that experience, action or event holds over you?

Do you want to be free? Sounds like a silly question, but some people need to hold on to the bad, hurtful, disappointing experiences of their lives so they have an excuse to be miserable. They need to point at something or someone as the cause for whatever direction their lives have taken. Or maybe they do want to be free, but they don't know how—so much of who they are has been shaped by this event.

I can't, in a page, tell you how to begin the journey towards forgiveness, because each of you has a different story to tell. But I can tell you that you know how to begin. You know what you have been unable to let go of, you know what holds you back, you know who has hurt you, you know what you regret. Start there.

It takes work to forgive. It takes courage to ask to be forgiven. Part of accepting all of yourself is embracing the darkness, exposing it, and letting the light in. Forgiveness is the light. It is the only key that can unlock the ball and chain you are dragging with you. Having the courage to be yourself means you have to look at these things and be willing to move past them.



You have to know yourself in order to gain the courage to be yourself. The not so great parts of your life need to be acknowledged and forgiven.

Take Action

Think of all the situations, people, choices that have caused you pain in your life. Make a list.

Take one of them at a time. Write it individually on a piece of paper.

Ask yourself what it would take for you to forgive and let this go. Think about it. Carry the paper with you.

When an answer comes to you, do it. This may take time.

Do not work on more than one at a time. Give yourself a forgiveness break after you complete one, and pat yourself on the back!



Part Three: Designing the Life you Want

Step Thirty One



Fantasy Remodel

You've spent the last ten steps learning how to have the courage to be yourself, now it's time to design the life you want. Think of it as a fantasy remodel, one where you get to choose everything from the foundation on up. Anything you want to think, be, believe, value and dream is within range.

What do you want your life to look like? What do you want your life to feel like?

And the biggest question . . . What are *you* willing to do to make that happen? Are you willing to change the way you think about yourself and what you deserve? Are you willing to take old patterns by the horns and wrestle them to the ground?

We're talking about a remodel of the self. Just like you'd look at your old kitchen and decide to take

this or that out add a wooden floor or ceramic tiles. You are going to take a look at your inner thoughts and decide what you want to upgrade, change, cover up, or rip out. Now that you have been getting to know yourself and learning to courageously be yourself, this job should be incredibly fun!

The foundation of who you are is built on the way you decode the world and how you see yourself within the world of your family, friends, and society at large. If you see the world as a place that is a struggle, where you aren't as good as you wish you were, where bad things happen to you and dreams are impossible to grasp, then you have built your life on a foundation that will not support designing the life you want.

Nip that one in the bud right now and repeat after me, "I am a strong, capable, creative, intelligent, amazing *adult* woman who deserves to design the life I want. I will no longer listen to any negative self talk on any

subject. I will love, embrace and celebrate myself by giving myself the freedom to make choices from my heart each day. I will release my past, forgive what needs to be forgiven and move on knowing that by letting go I create empty space within myself that can be filled with new ideas and beliefs.”

The above is to be printed out and repeated every day if you have been plagued by negativity in the past.

Start day dreaming about your fantasy remodel. Don't be afraid to look outside yourself at women you admire and learn from them. Copy their confidence, the way they think, the power they project. Let them be your role models. As you start paying attention you will notice your own attitude transform. Behavior is learned. Patterns are taught.

On this remodel, the goal is to keep *only* the parts of yourself you want, the parts that will allow you to design the life of your dreams.

Take Action

Write down the behaviors, thoughts, patterns you notice in yourself that you want to get rid of.

Write down the behaviors, beliefs and ideas you *want* to have.

Brainstorm ideas of how could might gain the behavior you seek.

Make a list of the women you admire. Under each name, write the quality you like about that woman.

Whenever you see or interact with that woman, watch and learn.



Step Thirty Two

Create a Space in Your Life that you Want to Step Into

To design or build anything, you need space. Some things need to be cleared away to make room. New skills learned, design concepts investigated and materials might have to be found or purchased. Mother's have an especially difficult time finding the kind of space I'm talking about, because it seems that whenever we move something around so that there is some space for us to build, some responsibility knocks at our door and we invite it into the newly cleared space.

I'm using the analogy of building a structure because I know that is something we can all visually see. We know that first you lay the foundation then the walls go up followed by a roof, until there is a shell that gets decorated. I'm challenging you to look at the building that is your life and decide if there is enough space in it for you to create the life you want. Just for the moment, I'd like you to consider only yourself, not your kids or your partner or your extended family. I want to be sure that the needs and expectations of others are not blocking your ability to dream, envision and create. So although others will ultimately exist in whatever new structures you build, I'd like you to embrace the idea that you are the designer of your life.

So let's talk about the space you're going to create. It isn't enough to just find an empty room it has to be space that you want to step into. Something you really want to do or be or experience. Something your heart is craving, your mind is searching for, your spirit seeking, or your body yearning to feel. This new space you're going to create is designated space. Scheduled, on the calendar, every week kind of space for yourself, to do the kind of intentional building required if you intend to create the life you truly want.

So what kind of space would you yearn to step into? For many of us this question hasn't been asked for years, if it was ever asked at all. Ask yourself and take the time to listen to your answer. Allow yourself the opportunity to dream and envision what might be missing from the life you want to create for yourself. Once you have an inkling of the possibilities, play with moving that vision into the space you've created.



Take Action

What hobbies/interests did you have growing up?

Commit to trying one new thing each week until you find something that calls out to you.

Take the time to research what kind of classes, events are going on in your area that might interest you. Write down the contact information here.

Circle one that you are going to attend this week.

Get out your calendar and block of time for yourself each week to discover what might be missing from your life. In the beginning that time may be spent researching possible options, as time goes on the time might be attending a class or event.



Step Thirty Three

Passion is the Key

What are you passionate about? Is there a cause, an experience, a hobby or a belief that inspires you to get up and get moving? Do you like what you do for a living? It's impossible to do the work necessary to design the life you want unless you are passionate about that life. Passion doesn't mean you have to be an expert at something, or even good at it, all it requires is that whatever it is gets you excited and allows you to feel truly alive in that moment.

Too often as adults we have this belief that we're past our prime, that somehow lessons are meant for the young, our children, or those who have a lifetime to develop a talent. In our society there is the unfortunate idea that unless you have real talent, why bother?

*Limitations live only in our minds.
But if we use our imaginations, our
possibilities become limitless.*

Jamie Paolinetti

What's the use of learning to read music when you're 80, or cooking, dancing, knitting or anything? We don't have the time to devote hours and hours to something, yet many of us feel that we are watching life instead of participating in it. We are resigned to spending our time and energy on the mundane because that is what responsible adults do.

Another roadblock that may keep us from discovering our passion is that sometimes we are seen and known as being a certain way, even if that way is no longer the person we feel we are inside. The things that sound of interest to you may not be on the list of activities that the woman your family and friends *know*, would want to participate in. Don't let the look on their faces scare you back into the mundane when you explain that you've joined a woman's drumming group, have decided to take tap dancing lessons, or have gone back to school to study archeology. "What are you crazy?" is a good response!

The thing is that only you know what you might be passionate about. That feeling is different for each person. But, what is important is that you allow yourself the time to participate in things that give you energy no matter what others might think. If you can't remember feeling passionate about anything, then it's time you embark on the exciting journey of finding out what really makes you tick.



Take Action

Take some time to answer these questions

How would those I love describe me?

In what ways am I different from the woman they describe?

When was the last time you felt passionate about something?

Describe how you felt?



Step Thirty Four

Girlfriends Matter

One of the biggest mistakes women make as we move into marriage and motherhood is leaving our girlfriends behind. Marriage is a fine thing, but a good girlfriend who you can trust no matter what will be the glue that holds you together when all else seems to be falling apart. So, if you don't have a girlfriend who holds your secrets, loves you no matter what, and will be there for you when you need her, it's time you start looking for one.

Girlfriends are better at supporting dreams than most family members. They listen to your goals and help you in reach them without trying to control or direct your vision. Partners have a difficult time doing this because they are tied to the outcome of your life. Your dreams may lead you in a direction that isn't convenient for them. Often, unintentionally, partners and family squelch our dreams simply because they are comfortable with things exactly as they are. A friend can see your passion and get excited. A partner might see your passion and become afraid of where it might lead you.

You can tell a girlfriend the truth about your fears, doubts, sadness, disappointments, or mistakes and she is still going to love you. She is not going to feel it is her job to fix your life in the same way a partner might feel threatened by your sadness. I promise you, it is worth the time and energy it might take for you to build a friendship or two with women who love you.

That said, it makes me sad how often women are afraid to reach out and trust other women because of past experiences where they were betrayed or let down. Our societal structure is set up in a way that encourages us to see other women as competitors. Instead of reaching out to each other as allies, we distance ourselves and judge each other.

If that is how you've felt in the past you aren't alone. Challenge yourself to shift the way you view and talk about other women. Decide that no matter what your relationships with women have been in the past, it is time to try again. Be discerning of the women you choose to make your 'best' friends. Make sure that you choose a woman who is on the path to learning about herself, not one who needs



to dump her troubles on you and then expects you to fix them. Choose a friend who likes to share interesting things about herself (not only her kids and partner), one who takes chances and likes to try new things.

Having a friend like that will help you design the life you dream of.

Take Action

Have you ever had a woman betray you?

Describe what happened?

Can you be trusted to keep a secret?

Make a list of the women in your life right now who are good friends. Circle one or two that you would like to develop a deeper friendship with. Talk to that woman about scheduling a walk, hike, activity once a week.



Step Thirty Five

Build a Support Team

We all need support and encouragement in our lives. A support team includes all sorts of people; family, friends, teachers, neighbors, medical professionals, a spiritual community and others in areas of interest to you. As mothers sometimes it is easy to become isolated in our world of caretaking for our families. There doesn't seem to be enough time for us to establish these support relationships for ourselves. So, when we really need support we find ourselves alone and overwhelmed.

The time to start thinking about and building your support team is when things are going well. However, if you are already in a space where you find yourself alone, it is never too late to begin this building process. How do you build a support team?

You begin with a list of people you already know who you're interested in building a stronger relationship. If you're a single mother, it would help to make a list of the other single moms you know in your community and begin with them. If you have no community of any sort (yet); book club, school organization, church, dance class,

then it's time to start thinking where you would most like to begin this community building. Then when you do join the group, make an effort to introduce yourself to one person and keep talking to that person each week. Instead of attending the group with the idea of just being there, you are going to go with a goal in mind—building your support community.

Part of having a support team is being a good support team member for other women. Offer your help when you can, if you are already driving to a sports practice call one of the other moms on the team (one that you feel drawn to and would like to be friends with) and ask if her son or daughter would like a ride. Sometimes it amazes me how little we as moms depend on each other. We all get in our cars, sit there and read a book while our kids are practicing, when one mom could have done the driving that week and the rest of us could have been doing yoga or something fun.

This support team idea demands that you shift your view a bit. We don't like to ask for help, we don't look for ways to make our lives easier and more fulfilling; instead most of us just push on. It doesn't have to be that way. Once you put it in your mind that you want and need a team of people you can turn to, you'll be amazed at all the opportunities you've been missing. You'll hear about someone's mom who has been sick and instead of feeling like you don't know that woman well enough to offer help, you'll have the confidence to ask her if you might take her child for the afternoon to give her some time with her mom. From there something magical happens—a new relationship and understanding is born.

It is easier than you think. There are so many things you are already doing, adding a few extra kids or cooking a bigger meal, driving five minutes out of your way, making it a point to talk to your child's teachers and tell them all the great things you appreciate about them, introducing

yourself to the librarian, your grocer, the crossing guard, all the people who surround you in your daily life. Start now and *think support* and you'll be surprised by the joy and relief that will enter your life.

Take Action

Make a list of the people who are currently on your support team.

What could you do that would support them?

Make a list of those you'd like to add to your support team.

Pick one and coordinate some supportive activity like starting a car pool or offering help.

Take a look at your life. Where do you need help?

What steps could you take to receive that help?



Step Thirty Six

The Journey of Change

Change is a scary prospect for most of us. It means things might be different than what we're used to. We may have to learn new skills, make different decisions or open our mind to a challenging relationship.

The greatest opportunity for change comes with life altering events—the kinds we would like to avoid at all costs—divorce, job loss, illness, a move, death.

Of course change is possible without earth shattering events, sometimes we just decide that something's got to give, or we hear of a class that sounds interesting and then are so passionate about the new interest that we want to make a major change in our lives. Sometimes we read a book, or meet a person, or travel someplace and the experience is so profound that we decide we want to integrate a concept or experience into our lives.

In any case, making a change to an established pattern or belief takes effort. It is much more fun when we decide to make a change, but even if change is forced upon us we can use this as an opportunity to reassess where we are and what we want.

The positive thing I've found about forced change is that it shakes up our lives in a way that allows us to behave differently without anybody questioning our new beliefs or ideas. People give us time to 'pull ourselves back together' when some difficult life event occurs. This can be an amazing opportunity because expectations are lowered and you're left alone for a bit, which buys you some time to contemplate what matters to you and plot a new plan of action for your life.

Take this opportunity. I'm going to repeat that. Take this opportunity. Let it be OK that it takes a while for you to pull yourself back together. And once you have pulled yourself back together don't let anyone know, so that you have more time! Be easy on yourself, you need this space.

If the change you are considering is simply an exciting fun new direction for you, embrace it. Value your right to have these experiences and don't feel guilty if it means that others in your family may have to take a back seat to your needs once in a while.

Change is the excitement in life that keeps us setting new goals and challenging ourselves to grow. You might as well embrace it and jump in with both feet—especially if it is going to happen anyway!

Take Action

What scares you most about a change you are facing.

Why does it scare you?

What is the worst that could happen?

Take the list of the worst that could happen and for each point, make up an action plan. What would you do?

Fill in the blank

Today I'm going to embrace (the change) and allow myself to dream of the life I want to create.



Step Thirty Seven

In Search of Talent

I've often heard women say, "I love to do that, but I'm not very good," or "I'm good at it, but not good enough that someone would hire me." We also have this idea in our society that in order to admit that we 'do' something we have to be at a professional level, or at least good enough that others would take note. Whether it be a job, or admitting to a hobby we're passionate about few of us want to toot our own horn unless we can play a symphony! Some of us have heard our teachers, family or friends tell us what we should do and what career would be good 'for us'.

Whatever the case, the good news is that now that you're a grown up, *you* get to re-define those messages and reach deep inside to dig out the myriad of talents you possess. Yes you. What are you good at?

Here's my start at a list, all the talents you think don't matter, but if added to a resume would put you in the ranks with a company CEO!

Professional party, caterer and event planner
 Manages a staff of 100 (have to include your kids, their friends, the coaches, teachers, doctors).

Personal shopper, Financial planner, Interior designer, Psychologist, Teacher, Artist (don't forget all the class projects, Halloween costumes and holiday decorating)

And that is just a start to the list of all the *expertise* we have as mothers. But since these aren't *real* jobs that we've been *paid* for we push our many experiences and talents to the side and simply say we're moms. But it takes a great deal of talent to multi task, to hold a group together and inspire them, especially on the days when the caretaker is not inspired!

Here are other statements I hear regularly from moms who are not thrilled with their careers. "We need the money, I can't quit my job to go back to school or be retrained, *this* is what I do." Or "It's just that I feel so stifled, there is no creativity here. I want to stay in the job, but I just wish I could grow with it and find a space to do some things I'm passionate about."

The thing is that in order to design the

life you want you have to discover how you enjoy spending your time. If you aren't sure because you've stuffed your life so full of all the *have to dos*, then it is time that you think about where your talents lie and find a way to integrate them into your daily life. A few questions to get you started:

Do you really like cooking, but your family doesn't like 'weird' food so you make the same thing each week and bore yourself to death?

Do you wish that instead of being in charge of 'A' on a particular project at work that you would be the one implementing 'B'?

What I'd like to challenge you to do is bring the best part of yourself, the fun, excited, engaged part, to areas of your life where you haven't been able to express this. Think about where this might be for you.

The next thing I want you to do is to start tooting your horn even if it is a small barely heard sound rather than a symphony of accomplishment. It's OK to say that you make jewelry even

if you're only able to make one kind of earring. It is OK to take a drum or dance class even if you have no rhythm. It is OK to approach your boss and suggest ways your talents could be better utilized. It is important that in the design of your life your time is spent engaged in activities that interest you and allow you to grow.

You owe yourself this gift.

Take Action

Make a list of all the things you do each day. Circle the ones you really enjoy, the ones where you feel your true self and talents shine.

Take a look at all those things that are not circled and write one thing next to them that would make them more fun. If you can't think of anything, then figure out a way to get them crossed off your list.

Take one of these at a time and try adding the fun thing you've written that would make this task more interesting. Once that one thing becomes a pattern in your life then add another.



Step Thirty Eight

Communicate What you Want

This sounds like a simple idea—you want something so you communicate it—right? For me that wasn't the case. Until one day when I decided that I deserve to get what I want and I deserve to *want* things in my life. I could fill this page with the list of sacrifices I've made for things that my kids want, yet I felt the things that I wanted could be pushed to the side for a time. However, when you push things to the side, often they stay there and whatever is in front of you is what you deal with. That is how you can go through an entire life living for others and *not* getting what you want!

To be able to communicate what you want, whether that be more time to yourself, a vacation, to take a class, to get more help around the house, better family relationships, or whatever is on your mind—you have to know what it is you want.

Once you know, you have to believe that you deserve to get it, and be willing to take a stand, profess your desire, make a plan and in general be as demanding as the rest of your family and friends!

I want to bring up a point I made earlier in these steps just one more time. Women are taught to hold things together, to make peace, avoid conflict, to be selfless and nurturing. That is our accepted job. Maybe not all women, but mothers fall easily into this role. So here we stand as servant and friend, making sure that everyone we love is getting exactly what they want from their lives. We devote our time and energy to the *life building* of others so effortlessly we hardly notice that we're doing this. Until we sink into a chair and feel drained, overwhelmed and under satisfied with our own lives.

The good news is that getting into the habit of knowing what you want, saying what you want, and putting a plan into action, is easy and fun once you practice it a few times. Sometimes all it takes is stopping to notice how often you say yes to others without going inward to check in with yourself. Just the act of waking up in the morning and spending ten minutes with yourself asking the question, "What do I want today?" can shift your entire attitude and create colossal changes. Once you answer that question, start expressing this in your words and actions. Soon you'll be confident communicating what you want in your life.



Take Action

Take ten minutes right now to be alone with your thoughts. Ask yourself, "What do I want today?"

List the things you've said *yes* to in the last week for your family.

List the things you've said *yes* to for yourself.

Today, each time you say *yes* to something someone in your life wants, check in with yourself and note what you are giving up and why you feel it is necessary to do this.

At the end of the day write here how you felt.

Decide on one thing you are going to communicate clearly today, in a tone that signals to those around you that you intend to make this a reality.



Step Thirty Nine

There are No Problems only Situations

I first heard this phrase, “there are no problems only situations,” at an African Drumming and Dance retreat I attended. There was something in the word *situation* that made me smile instead of furl my brows. Maybe it was the anticipation of a good story or piece of gossip rather than the dropping of a bomb! Yes, we all have problems, but I learned that day how one word could change the way I processed those problems.

As we shared our lives that weekend we began discussing our situations. We’d be sitting around the table eating dinner and someone would say the word problem. “I’m having a problem with my son and his teacher.” Or “I have this problem neighbor,” or “My boss is a problem.”

The ultimate measure of a woman is not where she stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where she stands at times of challenge and controversy.

Martin Luther King

We’d all smile and correct the word. “You mean you have a situation!” And the plotting would begin. I watched and listened at the way the group responded to each other. With the word *problem*, there came serious advice, help with solving the problem. With the word *situation* I watched as everyone leaned forward as if they were being let in on a grand secret. Then the creative brainstorming began. I decided then that the word *situation* implies that something is solvable whereas problem feels bigger.

When a problem gets imbedded in my mind, it drains my energy, makes me grouchy, stressed and emotionally unavailable. When I started thinking of problems as situations that were standing in my way to creating the life I wanted, I felt more inclined to deal with the situation and move on to the next situation on my way to the goal I could see ahead of me.

This all comes back to the words we use to define ourselves and our lives. If we let ideas, thoughts and words, wander around in our heads unchecked sometimes they take over. When those thoughts are filled with problems, we can get stuck going round and round, with the problem getting packed down like a snowball that becomes the boulder that causes the avalanche. If we see our lives as being filled with situations that appear daily, situations that can be solved, situations that require creative brainstorming, we are on the road to re-programming our minds. Instead of furrowed brows, we learn to lean forward with anticipation of the life we are creating for ourselves thought by thought.



Take Action

What problems do you have right now?

Describe them as if you were telling a friend, but replace the word problem with the word situation.

Lean forward with anticipation and brainstorm your situation.

Notice how often you use the word problem this next week. Replace the word with situation and see if you feel differently. When sharing your problems with friends and family, try using the word situation and notice the response.

Create Intimacy

We talked about sexuality in step 16, loving your body, being comfortable in it and running what I called *sexual energy*. If you are going to live a passion filled life, you also have to address how intimacy is played out in your relationships. Do you have confidence in your intimate communication, a confidence of word and action that goes beyond feeling open in your sexuality?

If you have a solid intimate relationship sex will be good. If you don't, there is no way for sex to be truly open or satisfying. This is one thing that many men don't fully understand. They think it is the other way around, good sex leads to intimacy, whereas, women need the intimacy to experience good sex. We can't bare your souls, strip naked and cry out with pleasure in bed and feel completely unheard in our daily lives. If we feel ignored in our daily life, there's a good chance we will get our partner's back (maybe not meaning to) in bed by closing down.

So what does intimacy really mean? It is what I call knowing and telling. First you have to know what you think and feel and then you have to find the courage to tell your partner your inner thoughts, fears, dreams, experiences, disappointment, frustrations, successes and failures. It takes guts to say, "I don't feel like you're listening to me or care about things that are really important to me when you open the newspaper and start reading while I'm talking." It may throw the relationship off balance if you admit that you are unhappy in your job and need to make a change. When we say what we feel and think, often there is some conflict to overcome or an established pattern to reverse. This can take time and energy. It may also put the other person on the defensive, since most people want things to go along as they've always gone along.

However, most men perk up with the suggestion of a better sex life. If they only knew how easy it would be to have a willing partner if they gained a few skills. It will be up to you to teach them these skills. It starts with little steps. First, you have to get in touch with how you feel and what you think so you can share this part of yourself. Second, explain that you want to have a better sex life and you want to try an experiment that you believe will improve your sex life. It goes like this; your partner sets aside fifteen minutes each day to listen to you, focus on what you're saying, become more involved in your life and supportive of your dreams. Third, you have to be bold and decide that



no matter what his response, you are still going to speak your truth during those 15 minutes. Try to erase past responses from your memory and go for it. If he rolls his eyes, point out how this makes you feel. Fourth, when you feel close to him, when you are connecting with each other, tell him you want to make love. Explain that when he is open to hearing and communicating with you, it makes you want to open yourself up sexually to him. When you're close in the daily things it allows you to trust and be available sexually.

Intimacy is a way of being with each other that respects everything about the other person. It gives each person space to have thoughts, ideas, dreams and life goals. It doesn't adhere to the idea that a partnership should be directed by one person or the other, but instead that each person directs his or her own life so that each person's interests, activities, and passions can be shared within the relationship.

Take Action

Was there a time when you felt annoyed, resentful or hurt by your partner?

What were you feeling in that moment.

Write the situation down.

During your 15 minute talk time you're going to tell your partner how you felt. Practice by writing down what you'd say.

This week, whenever you feel defensive try doing one of two things; ask a question or agree with your partner.



Part Four: Living Your Life with Passion

Step Forty One



Live all Out—No Fear Allowed

There is a brown crinkled piece of paper on my refrigerator that sparked an intense conversation with my husband the day that I taped the bold lettered 18 point statement to a prime position on the door.

It says, "Make no decisions based on security. There is none. The safety net is an illusion. The only net you will ever have is the internal one you make for yourself. It is woven of goals, grit, determination, will, planning, resilience, creativity and optimism. Most important is the belief that if you fall, you have what it takes to get back up!"

People filled with fear, who constantly strive to get all their ducks in a row and who worry over what may happen to them if they don't do the

"reasonable, predictable, acceptable" thing cannot live a life of passion. They won't (or don't know how to) take the risks this kind of life requires. They believe that security is the goal.

You can't live your life moment by moment, following your intuition, talents and passion, if you make every decision based on security.

That is why I love my brown crinkled paper and refuse to take it off the frig. My husband completely disagrees—he believes in security. I scare him sometimes because I refuse to live that way. There have been periods of my life when he's convinced me that the idea of a safety net is a good one. But, then I notice that I lose the best parts of myself. The risk taker that lives free of fear within me disappears. I lose my confidence and start to make decisions based on what will bring me security instead of trusting myself and listening to the passion that is

boiling up within me. My creative flow stops, I feel depressed and stifled.

Of course we all have responsibilities in our lives that need to be addressed. But within these responsibilities there may be more room to move around than you've led yourself to believe. Imagine how it might feel to see yourself as the safety net, to believe that you are your own security because of all the talent, skill and creativity you have within you. How would you live your life if you were certain that you have what it takes to get back up if you fall (or fail)? What would you do? What would you choose? How would you live? What is the passion of your life that you've exchanged for security?

You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face . . . You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.

Eleanor Roosevelt

Take Action

Make a list of all the things you would do with your life if you weren't focused on security.

Pick one thing out of that list and brainstorm ways that it can be added to your current life without changing everything.

What are you most afraid of? Write all your fears down, then next to each one write how you would get back up if what you fear really happened.



Say Goodbye to Resentment

Resentment comes in all shapes and sizes. There are big issues that have taken a lifetime to build up and smaller ones that might have to do with a repeated behavior that hurts or upsets you. In all of its forms, resentment keeps you angry and focused on a person, situation or experience that you have little control over. In many spiritual traditions they tell you to pray or send positive energy towards the person, situation or experience you resent. The idea behind this is that if you can make a decision to be content and choose not to let the behavior of others bring you down then you are the one creating your life and feelings day to day rather than someone else. So as you send them this positive, non-judgmental, forgiving energy you are actually cutting yourself off from the pain this resentment causes you. It's like you are creating this wall around yourself that protects you from the negative behavior of others.

Easier said than done you might say. Especially with the big resentments that are ongoing. It could be a family member, your partner, a child, a co-worker, or a situation you have to interact with on a daily basis? How do you deal with that kind of daily passion stealer? I call it a passion stealer because all resentment directs power and energy away from you. Whatever would have been your goal for that day, the resentment takes a little of it, gets your mind ruminating on this bad or unfair thing that happened or is happening to you, then you spiral with that thought until you have little energy left to pursue what really matters to you.

So what can you do with the resentments you've built up in your life if you're ready to be free of them? Start with your list. Here are two small ones from my week to use as examples: my husband did his laundry at 6am on Saturday morning waking me up, whoever did the evening dishes did not wipe off the counters leaving them hard and crusty. The first step is to be able to identify that you resent a particular behavior, that there is something going on that makes you feel bad or angry. Then you need to address the behavior in a calm, respectful way (no screaming or blaming). If you've already done this and the behavior continues then you need to let the person know what the consequence for this behavior will be in the future. For example; the consequence for the dish person not wiping off the counter is that they have to do the morning dishes, the consequence for waking

me up is that I'm too tired that night to have sex.

It all comes down to you. If you want to live a life where your passions have access to all of your energy, then you have to become aware of the areas that steal your energy. Resentment is a downer. Better to be aware of these feelings and nip them in the bud in whatever ingenious ways you can come up with!

Take action

Make a daily list of things that cause resentment in you.

Pick one and re-write the scene the way you want it to go.

The next time this same situation occurs, in a calm respectful way write what you're going to say to that person. Using the following sentence helps to keep the blame/accusation out. "When you (do your laundry at 6am on the only morning I get to sleep in) I feel like you don't care about me. I'd appreciate it if you didn't do that again.



Step Forty Three

Surround Yourself with Positive People

There are people in your life that you're stuck with, but others you get to choose. Just because someone wants to be your friend doesn't mean that you want them in your life. As you become stronger and more self-confident you'll notice that more people are drawn to you. They want that positive energy, that light, happiness and confidence you radiate. We all like to be around women who know who they are and where they want to go.

Be careful. You could fall into the trap of attracting very needy people who will not be able to give back to you the kind of support that you give to them. Friendships are meant to be give and take. If you find yourself surrounded by takers, those who drain your energy to the point you feel emotionally exhausted when they leave, start working on a plan to streamline your life.

You're going to need to move past these relationships. I know this may sound like you aren't being a very compassionate, loving human being, but you have to give so much compassion

and unconditional love (to those you are stuck with or blessed with 😊) just by being a mom and caring for your immediate and extended family. Where you have a chance to choose, **choose well**. Having a few good girlfriends who can truly support you is worth a hundred casual acquaintances. Surround yourself with women who are on your same path, who don't want to wallow in what is going wrong in their lives, but instead are ready to take action, learn about themselves, be happy and create the lives they dream of.

That said, you want to be one of those positive people yourself. In these steps we've learned to know ourselves, be ourselves and create the lives we want. If you've taken these steps seriously, your life has changed. You have become that positive, self-confident woman who leads by example. You've worked hard to make the changes necessary to live a passionate life—so don't sell yourself short. Surround yourself with positive, vibrant women!

Take Action

Make a list of the friends you have that drain your energy.

Next to each write down what they do/say that causes this energy drain.

Be completely honest with yourself and circle the women you want as friends. You don't have to drop the others but you may need to limit the time you spend with them.

Next time you are with one of these people, see if you can shift the negative focus to talk about something more positive. Write how that conversation might go.

Or, you can try this, instead of listening on and on about some negative thing just say you are sorry that happened to them and move on to another topic.

Each person grows not only by her own talents and development of her inner beliefs, but also by what she receives from the persons around her. Iris Haberli



Step Forty Four

Feeling is the Key, Saying or Thinking is Not Enough

For years I've believed that the things a person thinks and says come true. It makes sense that if you focus on what you want instead of what you don't want that you would have a much better chance at getting it. I do believe that the thoughts that control our minds control our future. All of that said, I now know that it isn't enough just to think, say, write it down, or want it. You have to feel it in your body.

I've taken some time to access my life, looking at all the times I've consciously repeated positive thoughts in order to create what I've wanted. I know how to rid myself of negative ideas or fears that creep in, and still there were times when this concept of positive energy wasn't working. *Shit* was still happening! Even though I'd written the best book in the world, put my heart and soul into it, thought nothing but positive things, banished fear from my brain and believed whole heartedly that it would be successful and make me money, it would not happen.

However, the book would be successful in a very different way than what I was *saying, thinking, believing*. I would get email upon email from women who said that my words had changed their lives. When I wrote back to ask, out of curiosity, where they got the book, inevitably it was from the library. No wonder my equation wasn't falling into place! Fifty women sharing one book was not going to bring financial reward.

However, what I learned, through numerous projects is that the only part of this *package* that was real to me, the part I was able to **feel** in my body with every word I wrote, was my message to the women. Funny, they got it loud and clear.

Once I understood this I was able to make the shift. It couldn't just say or believe something (have positive thoughts) I had to feel it—feel it as if it had already happened. You see, when I write, I cry, I laugh, I am in these words completely. I listen and the words come without any effort. I ask, "What do my women need to know about this?" and I hear the answer. I am feeling all of this in my body. In my writing this is easy.



So, I thought, how do I do this in every area of my life to design the life I want? How can I use the knowledge that *feeling something is what creates reality* to make things happen?

Here's a first step. We all know what it feels like to be excited, to hear great news, to be doing something we love, to be with someone when the relationship is working, to get what we want. We know what it feels like because our bodies have memory.

Use that memory, that feeling, the next time you want something. Pretend you have it, feel it in your body, let your cells tingle and your heart lighten. Then, let that be the feeling you **have** every time you think or act on that one thing you want. Whenever doubt or fear creeps in, go back to that feeling. Use your body's memory to help you create exactly what you want.

Take Action

Make a list of the times you can remember great things happening in your life; when you felt successful, happy, loved, surprised.

Go through each of these situations, close your eyes and try to recreate the feeling in your body.

Make a list of your top three goals right now.

Pair one of the feelings with each goal. You need to think of the goal and then remember the feeling you had in your body when a great thing actually happened. Put that feeling in your body now.

Whenever you think of that goal or are working on it, stop for a moment and train yourself to *feel* that you've achieved it already.



Step Forty Five

Accept Chaos

If you are going to live your life with passion it means taking risks, going after what you want, learning, growing and changing. A path like that will shake up your life! It may cause problems to rise to the surface. For example, lets say that instead of putting everyone else first, you've decided that you have a right to dream big and design the life you want. Or maybe the relationships you were in when you began this journey have shifted (hopefully in a very positive way for you) but sometimes in a negative way for those who wanted things to remain the same. All of the shifts in you will be reflected in the lives of those who liked things the way they were. This shifting is a good thing. As women, we've allowed too many people to depend on us to solve and run their lives. This movement toward yourself will give your kids, spouse and family a chance to take responsibility for themselves.

However, even if all this shifting is good and positive, life is going to get chaotic during your life design process. Imagine all the decisions, choices and work to be done during a house remodel! So how do you stay on your path when the chaos arrives?

The most important thing you can do is to pick something that is at the top of your goal list or something that has great meaning to you and use it as an anchor. Hold onto it. Focus on that one thing and throw your positive energy and attention into that instead of the problem (situation) or chaos. Tap into your creativity, use the skills we've worked on to validate your process, remember where you've been and where you're going. This will in turn free you from the feeling that the chaos is going to overpower you.

If we are to accept, embrace and work with this chaos, we have to learn to focus on the solution instead of the problem. How do we do that? The problem is obvious and the solution is somewhere in the distant future.

It's easy, you shift completely—you no longer allow a problem or the feeling of chaos to weigh you down. Instead, you observe it—as if you

were standing outside of it, outside the chaos that it creates—and you accept that this ‘problem’ is part of the journey. It may even be one of the foundation pieces that your life design will be built upon. Maybe it’s the cornerstone. Maybe how you open to this problem, how you listen internally without panic, will point you clearly in the direction you need to go. When we observe without emotional attachment, when we see it as a part of our path instead of a big roadblock to where we want to go, somehow the solution slips into our consciousness without the stress or anxiety that chaos can bring.

It’s like magic. Once we shift our thoughts from: “*I’m stuck in this smelly, mudhole (judgment) I have to get out (panic)*”, to observing the journey, “*This mud is soft, my foot is slipping deeper, the walls are smooth (observation) lets see maybe I’m supposed to learn something here, I’ll go investigating (growth).*” Everything changes.

It mostly changes because we aren’t afraid of it anymore. We know where we’re going, who we are and what we want to create so we anchor to that when chaos threatens to overturn our good work. We hold fast to our design.

Take Action

Make a list of three things that are at the top of your goal list or have great meaning in you. Write out a game plan, something you can pick up and follow the next time your life feels overrun with chaos and problems.

- What will you do first?
- How are you going to anchor to one of the things you listed?

Play the observation vs. panic game. The next time you feel your anxiety or fear rise, try to observe it as you would a science experiment. Say to yourself each little part you are observing. Talk to yourself, describe what is happening instead of jumping to a negative overwhelming conclusion. While you’re doing this descriptive talking try to smile or even laugh a few times. Keep this self talk describing up until a solution pops into your head.



Step Forty Six

Day by Day

When you choose a new path for your life it can feel overwhelming, even confusing, because so many ideas, instructions, newfound beliefs and discovered strengths are all floating around in your head. Imagine walking into a house you've lived in your entire life, you know exactly where everything is, how it works and what is valuable to you—then one day you walk in and everything is different. Nothing is where you thought it was, things look and feel odd, there are new places to sit, views from windows you weren't aware existed. There might be an excitement building within you about exploring this new frontier or maybe not. Although you know you really need a change and you're sure that the new design will be just great—it is still overwhelming.

That is why we have to take our lives one day at a time, especially when we're forging a new path. Yes, we need to have vision, dream big and know where we're going—which takes some overall planning and goal setting, however, while we're taking each step it has to be in the moment. This is especially true if you've decided to do more than a small remodel of your life. If you're in the process of a tear down and starting from scratch, then you'll be much more successful and happy if you concern yourself with one board at a time. Focus on that one board, then the next. To see all the walls at the same time may drive you to excessive napping! Or perhaps you'd procrastinate and think about it tomorrow, or in a week or year.

Since we can't have you napping your life away, or worse, running yourself ragged by managing everyone else's life, the ability to build every aspect of your life day by day, thought by thought, action by action is essential. It means that you will need to keep focused on your goals every day. Not just sometimes or when it is convenient. Wake up in the morning and decide on at least one thing you can do today that will bring you closer to your life design.

Remember the song *Day by Day* from the musical *Godspell*—here's my rewrite of the words to sing as a reminder.

Day by day
Day by day
Oh for ME

*Three things today!
To see Me more clearly
Love Me more dearly
Follow Me more nearly
Day by day*

You are re-arranging the furniture of your mind, so you need to take an active role in being the interior designer of this new environment. All of our steps have led you in this direction so that you will have the confidence and clear sightedness to be the designer of your own life. Day by day you can choose to move closer to your vision.

Take Action

Make a list of your goals for this week that would lead you step by step to the life design you desire.

Break them up into daily goals.

Write a commitment to yourself that you are going to make those daily goals a priority in your schedule.

Write a mission statement for your life design. It can be a few lines. Read it aloud every morning and every night. At the end of your morning reading say the goal you will achieve that day, at the end of your night reading acknowledge yourself for taking a step on your path towards yourself.

Each week, take 30 minutes to go over your goals for the next week.



Step Forty Seven

Share What you Learn

Passion filled people share their excitement with others. You know how it feels to be in the presence of a woman on fire with purpose, who knows what she wants and exactly where she's going. It doesn't matter what she looks like—she could be a wreck, in old jeans, no make-up and hair undone—but still the energy of life circles around her, it pours from her eyes, so much that you are drawn to her. She's excited about her life.

I want this for you. I want you to be that woman who is so in touch with the power within you that you can't contain it.

Part of keeping that internal energy shining outward is sharing what you're doing. Most of us spend a lot of time talking to other women, about kids, our husbands and job—all the run of the mill kind of things that basically keep all of us in the same place. Of course it's important to have friends you can discuss the everyday stuff with, but it is essential that you find a place where your dreams, hopes, accomplishments, and passion have an opportunity to be heard.

What you share about your life is always your

choice. Redirecting a conversation is pretty simple if you know what you really want to say.

Say it.

Let others know what you are passionate about, let your energy fill the room. Take the time to explain to another woman what you've found out about yourself, how you've begun to create exactly the life you want and what it feels like to be the new you.

OK, so you may not want to come out with all of that in your first conversation or they may think you're a little wacky—however, putting voice to the journey you're on and letting your passion show will help you to make it *real* in your life. It's why you always learn more about a topic when you have to teach it. In the explaining, you begin to fully understand. In the voicing of your passions, in the telling of your story, everything becomes clearer to you.

When you talk to someone else you have to explain what you mean, to put into words what may have, even minutes before, just been a concept in your mind.

Some of us are afraid to let others know about our new passions. We don't want to be held accountable, or we're afraid that we might not be able to see our plan through to the end. Maybe we've started *new ideas* and life plans in the past and haven't been able to finish what we've started. Put all of that aside. Throw it away. Clear your mind. It's time to stop hiding from yourself and from others.

Tell the women you trust. Let it be OK if you change your mind, change direction or adjust your beliefs along the way. The point is that you are **on** your way, you are on a journey. Share that, it is a gift you can give to other women who need to know it is possible to create the life they want. You are proof that it's worth the risk. You are that woman full of power and energy.

Take Action

Pick one woman you know and make it a goal to share something about your personal journey.

Who is it and what are you going to tell her?

Make a list of three women you know who you believe want more from their lives, who might be ready to claim their independence.

Invite these three women to lunch or coffee and if it goes well, suggest that you start a once a month group. The only rule for the get together is that you have to talk only about yourself and what you are working on personally. No stories of kids, no spouse problems, no recounting a belligerent boss or a teacher who gives too much homework.

Practice redirecting conversations that bore you. For example, if a friend is talking about a problem with one of her children, instead of focusing on the child's problem ask a personal question, "how is that effecting you," or "did anything like that ever happen to you?" something that would get the person talking on a more personal self growth level.

Write a sample dialogue.



Step Forty Eight

Break Free

Five years ago during a friend's party, I sat down to have a Tarot Card reading. The images on the cards fascinated me. They so intrigued me that I researched the history of Tarot and found that the deck of cards contain symbols that begin with the Fool and end with the World. The cards are a pictorial representation of the mythological journey human's face from the beginning (birth or fool when we know nothing) to the end (the world card, where we have experienced all). The cards in-between represent all the challenges and triumphs a human being is likely to encounter. Each card is full of symbols and archetypal images that have existed in the stories of every culture from the beginning of time.

I admit that I was afraid to get a reading. Having heard that Tarot was a form of occult, sacrilege to many organized religions, I wasn't sure what to expect. My curiosity trumped my fear, so I sat down. It was nothing like I'd expected and I immediately recognized that these cards were not religious in any way. I felt like I was looking at the most basic of shared human experience as if the images might have been drawn on a wall thousands of years ago, yet, they could still be read and understood by any person living a human existence at any point in history. They spoke to me of the connection that life offers all of us through our journeys.

The woman shuffled and then put three cards on the table. The card in the middle, the one that was to represent me in the present moment was of a woman with a blindfold on, her hands tied at her sides, surrounded by eight swords stuck into the ground.



This image did not look too promising for me! The reader tapped her finger on this card and said, "You know there are no knots in that blindfold or on the cloth wrapped around her. She stands free to go if she wishes. The swords surround her in a semi-circle, but she is not trapped." Then she looked at me and said, "You are tying yourself up right now with imaginary boundaries, you can break free simply by moving."

I could barely breathe. I hadn't said one word to this woman. And yet, she spoke to the core of my struggle at that time. I felt that my life had hemmed me in and that my responsibilities were keeping me from moving where I wanted to go. In that moment, I knew that I had tied myself up and I started to laugh. The woman nodded her head and I got up to leave.

It was a profound experience for me. Since then I've begun collecting Tarot Cards. The various paintings on each deck are beautiful and enchanting, and I've learned that it is because these images represent the complete range of human experiences, from birth to death, that they can speak to us. It isn't that the card predicts the future, more so that we have all lived to some degree within that moment represented in the image so that our archetypal human brain, which is full of human experiences, picks out the message that most speaks to where we are at that moment.

Whatever it was that allowed the Tarot reader to say what she said to me, it changed me. I found myself walking along and repeating to myself, "You can break free simply by moving."

It might be time to cut the ropes that are holding you back. Or maybe you are like me and you've tied yourself up and all you have to do is move to break free.

Take Action

What is holding you back from creating the life you want?

Pretend you are in a dance with what is holding you back. What would happen if you stepped out of the dance, if you moved away?

Draw a stick figure of yourself. Across your eyes write a word, draw straps that are holding your body in place and write on those straps what it is that is keeping you stuck where you are.



Step Forty Nine

You see things; and you say, "Why?" But I dream things that never were: and I say, "Why not?"

George Bernard Shaw

Dream Big

When you're in the business of dreaming big, it isn't enough to just *think* of what you want and decide *that* is going to be your new dream. You have to take steps toward the dream, set goals and then pay attention to how you *feel*. For example, you may decide that you want to move to another community, or switch jobs, or go back to school. So, you set your goals and begin to move in that direction. But what if you start moving down the path towards what you thought was your dream and it doesn't *feel* right, something is off.

When you come up against something that takes all your physical and emotional energy just to get a little bit closer, or barely chip away at one of your goals, then you have to be willing to step back and LISTEN to your own internal warning system—your voice that knows. It might mean that the path you've chosen to take (in order to reach your dream or design the life you want)

needs a slight shift in direction. Don't beat your head against a wall. Be flexible. Hold your dream in your heart, mind and actions, but when a wrench is thrown into the mix—look at the wrench, shake your head, smile at the *sign* you've received, and look to your own intuitive voice to know what to do next.

Instead of feeling down or discouraged when things don't go exactly as you wish, consider the idea that perhaps this change in the journey is actually a sign of the change in direction you need to go. Sort of like the scarecrow pointing Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. Look at the things you do that unfold easily and effortlessly. Pay very close attention to these. You want to do more of these. When roadblocks occur, they may just be signs from within you that you've come up against a physical or emotional wall and you need to climb over, turn around or shift your direction to avoid the wall.



To dream big you have to be flexible. You set your sights on the journey but you keep your ears and heart open to your own intuitive voice. Let it guide you.

Living a life filled with passion requires that you experience life--all aspects of life (good and bad)--even those challenges that scare you. It requires you to fail many times before you succeed. It may mean that you have to risk making a mistake or running full speed in the wrong direction before you figure out what it is that makes you feel alive. How can you know what you're passionate about or what to dream, if you never stop to ask what do I want? What am I willing to do to get it?

Whatever you do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius and power and magic in it.

Goethe

Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others.

Jonathan Swift

Take Action

The word dream is elusive. Most of us think that a dream is something that is unreachable, something only the very lucky achieve. Write your dreams down, everything you want from your life. They can be big or small, silly, easy to reach or seemingly unreachable. Get them all on paper right here.

Read through your list at least once a week.

Create a vision board. Take a large piece of paper and as you see pictures or words in magazines or newspapers, cut them out and glue them to the board. Hang this where you can see it often but other people don't see it. This is your vision board. You do not have to explain it to anyone.

It's ALL up to You

The last step is the most transformative realization that anybody can make.

It is all up to you.

Nobody else can understand you, be you, create or live your life for you. This is your life's journey, your quest. It is a mistake to think that a different partner, a house, a particular job, a few less pounds, more money, this or that is going to make your life perfect. Beliefs like these keep you focused outside yourself on the idea that other people or things are responsible for the direction your life will take. You give your power away whenever you do this.

Don't give your power away.

Knowing who you are and having the courage to be that person will change your life. Owning the fact that this is *your* life to create (and live) will allow you to break free from past beliefs, patterns, disappointments and what ifs. Bad things may have happened to you in the past, but you can't carry them with you, they are too heavy for this journey. All they will do is weigh you down and keep you from creating what you want.

Blaming someone or something is not going to help you get what you want either. If you are still stuck in an ocean of anger and resentment or pain—whoever or whatever got you there is **STILL** winning. Only you can break free of all that holds you back from what you truly want. Only you can determine what you want from your life.

The journey towards yourself is the best adventure of all. Take it seriously, honor yourself, nurture your talents, choose your friends well, **LISTEN** to your inner voice, discover the real you and what you want.

And don't forget that creativity is freedom. It has no limits.

We're at the end of our journey. You've taken 50 steps closer to yourself—toward creating the life you want and being the powerful woman that you are! It is my hope that you have grown, changed, and become bold in ways you've never had the courage to reach for in the past. I wish you blessings, adventure and discovery on your continued journey. The magical thing about the journey inward is that it is never done. You cannot be bored because there is layer upon layer to discover and celebrate within yourself. Please use the tools I've given you to step completely into your body, your life and your passion. And don't forget to invite other women to join you. We all need support from each other if we are ever going to create a world where every woman can be fully herself.

Take Action

Celebrate yourself today. Take a few minutes to write down three important, life changing things you've learned over the course of doing these 50 steps.

Send these comments to me! I need support and direction on my journey too. I often choose what to write next based on your input. (sheila.ellison@yahoo.com)

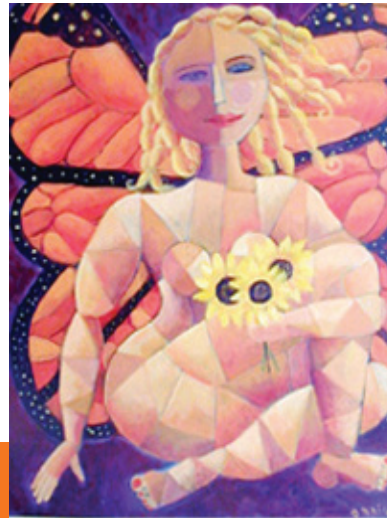
Do something special for yourself as a reward for all your hard work!

Write down the names of three women you admire.

Walk up to the three women sometime this week and tell them what you admire about them. Your words may remind them who they are.

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