

*"Claire's courage to share what so many others let fester
inside is awe-inspiring."* – Kara Martin Snyder, vital corps

Wild Zen



CLAIRE HIGGINS

“An excellent resource for anyone who would like to overcome a past that is inhibiting a life of joy and purpose. Claire’s personal, open, honest approach connects her with the reader from the first page and she introduces a new way of looking at life that could quite possibly be life-transforming for those that need it most.”

~ Jessica Al Andary, Holistic Health Coach

“An eye-opener that gives recognition to every aspect of one’s life and allows you to reflect and value your whole inner self through release, forgiveness, love and capturing its inner strength. This book acts as a guide to finding peace within.”

~ Dima Al Ayderous, Humanitarian, United Nations

“It is an intense read but in a positive way. It is probably a resource people could use to work through things on their own but ideally I think this book would be most effective if after reflections/notes in the workbook that the reader has a coach/counsellor to follow up and share with. I envision it being a fabulous tool in therapeutic support work. I can relate to the topic very well and it speaks to me very clearly, as a child, woman, development worker, coach/carer, writer, victim and the many other hats we wear as humans who care. Your perspective on healing which is present throughout the chapter is reassuring. In particular, as a humanitarian/development worker, I think readers from this background will find it very beneficial. Overall, a very honest and courageous piece of writing.”

~ Michelle Hennessy, Development Worker & Holistic Therapist

“A heart wrenching story, which awakens every single cell and feeling in your body, yet so inspiring and motivational for personal growth and development. Let the peace begin from the inside out!”

~ Nigora Normatova, Health Coach & Yogi, founder of Eat the Sun

“As an holistic health coach, but also a trained therapist, having worked with many clients who have experienced trauma, I am drawn to the way that Claire gently guides her readers with an integrity and authenticity that radiates compassion and understanding for such an emotive subject, that is only too often neglected. It is written with grace and one can only admire another who has the courage to share a part of their soul.”

~ Tracey White, Holistic Health Coach

“The authenticity, the naked honesty, with which Claire Higgins (who calls herself an “inner travel guide”) tells her story and that of others, is an invitation—even an unavoidable magnet—not only to look at your own truth in the face, but also, at all the ways in which we all resist looking at it, facing both the external an internal truth. People (we all) take for granted what we believe we are—our own truth. The mere daring to question if all you have done and been about is really true, is an outstanding endeavour that hardly anyone would be willing to take!”

~ Shulamit Lando, Body-Mind Psychotherapy, Strategic Intervention Medical & Life Coaching

“Claire’s words have touched not only my heart but also my soul. Her honesty and powerful words of the lessons she has learnt has shaken up the wounded orphan within me and has left me inspired, thank you. Through Claire’s words I am able to feel what so many of my clients will need to go through in order to get through to the other side. She sums up the healing process perfectly, especially how ‘the shininess of our new perspective can lose its allure’ and how we need to go through the motions of healing in order to learn and digest from our experiences.”

~ Heidi Jones, Health & Lifestyle Coach

“This is a book I’d recommend if you are interested in approaching healing and growth in a way that focuses on you, yourself, learning different ways to access and connect with your own inner reserves of strength, insight, and healing. Her work does not build dependency like many “self help” approaches do. Instead, it focuses on providing the tools for you to better realize your own agency. There are no quick fixes to the external and internal trials and tribulations we all face in life. There is plenty of ambiguity. Claire’s work is imbued with courage and insight that inspires one to embrace the ambiguity, and to work mindfully towards creating and living the life you want to live, every day.”

~ Anne Marie, Humanitarian Worker

“This book has it all. Claire has managed to capture difficult and heavy episodes of her personal life, her passion for what made her zen so wild, and years of work dedicated to others, all in one. We go through life defining moments without voyeurism or inappropriate emotions: the story for what it is, what it brings to Claire’s quest, but mostly what it brings to us. This book is an inspiration as much as it is a helping hand, but I choose to see it as the account of one unique individual, from whom I have much to learn. There is almost no need for a key word explanation, as those concepts we discover throughout the book take the meaning we want them to take. Thank you Claire for sharing...give us more!”

~ Mario Stephan, Founder & CEO, Arabian Perspectives

Wild Zen

An Inner Roadmap to Humanity

by Claire Higgins

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Disclaimer

Please note that all the stories presented in this book reflect how I have experienced them. With the exception of those who I interviewed, they are all reflections of my own truth. I have also withheld names of certain people and places in order to protect those involved, and that some of these people will naturally have other perspectives. Ultimately, this work is an inquiry into what it means to tell the truth and like any truth-telling venture, there is rarely just one version, even within ourselves.

Claire Higgins

For Walter.

*Because you left before you could tell your story, I had to
find a way to tell mine. In doing so, I hope I have created a space
in which others can one day do the same.*

And the Fourth Soldier.

*May the telling of your painful story ultimately set
many others free.*

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Orientation

*“Intellect is a guide; Love is a friend.
Mind is a river you travel; Love is the water of life.
Although there's no trace of the lover's journey in the heavens,
No one reaches there without the signs of journeying.”*

Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi: Quatrain 1098

The Invitation

Dear Reader,

The book you are holding carries some deep and powerful messages. It will take you on a journey like no other but first, I must ask you if you are willing to take part.

The people who have contributed to and read this book so far have found themselves changed and challenged in many ways. Some have had to stop reading part way through as it prompted them to reflect on their own wounds. Others have read it from finish to start in one go, saying “yes!” to every word.

This book has also tested me, the writer and the narrator. Yet I have consciously and willingly walked backwards in time to explain how it is that I reached the place where I am now. I did this first and foremost as a closure to my own journey as a woman and humanitarian who has experienced and witnessed violence, conflict, stress, trauma and adversity.

I wrote this book for the many people who having learned a little of my story asked, “How did you do it?” I wanted to point to a book or method but it was impossible. Then I remembered Toni Morrison, one of my favourite writers. She once said that if the book you want to read is not yet written, then you must write it. So I decided to write and self-publish my own. I’m a little stubborn and driven like that, as you’ll learn if you read on.

I also wrote this book for you, the reader. When my own life was turned upside down and inside out, I longed for real and human conversations about war, politics, love, loss, and desire. I wanted a place in which I could find my way back home and a writer who was brave enough and willing to take me there. My book does exactly that.

This book will take you to my darkest place and those of others I interviewed. You will learn how we were each challenged and how we chose to move on. You will also learn that the path of healing and growth is not a linear one. While others may inspire and inform us, the road we have each come here to travel is the one that each of us must create.

I have moved onwards with my life, into a life “beyond”, and while I

haven’t forgotten from where I came, these memories are fading with time. I wanted to capture all I had experienced and learned so that I too may look back one day, hopefully as an old and more wisened lady, and remember how it all began.

I hope reading this book will bring light to your darkest moments, and that the reflective questions I have included will spark the self-awareness you need to navigate your own darkest hours and turning points. I also hope they reassure you that life can and does go on, and that peace emerges as we circle closer to what is true.

From one traveler to another, I wish you much love, inspiration, reflection, and personal transformation in your journey ahead. May your way be your way and may you see that even in your darkness, you never truly walk alone.

Claire Higgins

Dubai, UAE

30 December, 2015

Key Words

Wild: All that is natural, innate, and uninhibited at birth.

Zen: All that lives in balance, harmony, and at peace.

Inner: The part of us that nobody sees or hears except ourselves.

Outer: That which is happening outside of us (e.g. family, work, politics)

Radmap: A rough plan that gets you from “A” to “B” (and you define these!)

Humanity: A belief that we are ultimately all One.

Way: A path that only we can chart for ourselves.

Journey: A pilgrimage to our soul, or deepest self.

War: The manifestation of fear, shame, and anger within and around us

Violence: The inability to accept things as they are and forcing change.

Conflict: A lack of inner alignment with our own instincts, values and principles.

Stress: An imbalance of any kind that has negative consequences.

Trauma: A lasting shock to our entire systems and senses.

Adversity: A test or trial that we think we may never overcome.

And, the most important word of all...

Beyond: The life that starts once we believe anything is possible.

Traveling Tips

(1) Slow down. Let go of whatever you’re doing or needs to be done. Set aside the time you need to make this journey beyond your daily routine. Bring your full attention to it. This isn’t the kind of book you want to be reading while thinking of something else.

(2) Breathe deeply. This could be a tough journey for some of you and the way I write and what I write about could prompt you to reflect on related memories and past events from your life. I want you to stay strong. Go at your own pace, take what speaks to you and leave the rest behind.

(3) Ask for the support you need. You may choose to share your journey with trusted friends, a coach, a teacher, a personal trainer, or a therapist. I recommend using this book as a reading, writing or discussion prompt in a book club or writing circle where members are interested in personal growth in a safe and trusted group setting.

(4) Let go of expectations. Try to cultivate a beginner’s mind, or not needing to know what will happen. We write and rewrite our stories every day and with each breath we start anew. Life changes, we change, and it is the freedom from rigid expectations that allows us to go with the flow.

(5) Do this your way. You may read this in one go or you may read only a few pages at a time. It could take you months and you may even abandon it part way through to pursue another path. It’s ok. There is no right or wrong way; there is only your way and as your guide, I trust you will see and hear what you need for now.

(6) Be proactive. Take note of or underline parts that stand out. I recommend using the accompanying self-discovery and advocacy toolkit, Wild Zen Journeys, to dig further or as an alternative to the chapter reflections. Record your answers in a journal or somewhere else that feels safe. Capture your insights and lessons learned so that you can remember your way home.

(7) Change this story forever. The sole purpose of sharing my story and those of my fellow travellers is to spark your own storytelling circle. Our truth-telling is out there in the open. We have chosen to speak up so that you know healing through truth, voice and sharing can be done.

(8) Take leadership of your journey. There will come a time when you will want to put this book down, take the lead, and tell your own story. This book is designed indirectly to encourage you to do exactly that. Know that there are so many ways to tell our stories. This is just the beginning!

My Journey

“The wound is the place where the light enters you.”

Rumi

The Awakening

The ancient Chinese Philosopher, Lao Tzu, once said, *“a good traveller has no fixed plans, and is not intent upon arriving.”* He also told us *“the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”*

These words have guided the past six years of my life. By nature and profession, I’m a serial emergency planner. Years of responding to and living in crisis mode have taught me to hold my plans lightly, knowing that the direction of the wind can change in any moment. And indeed it has, more times than I can possibly tell you.

I’ve taught myself to travel on my own terms through life. I no longer trust roadmaps that don’t speak to my soul. You know, those old and dusty maps that point you towards university, getting good grades, finding a good job, marrying your first love, being happy, and whatever you do, Not Rocking The Boat. The last part is particularly important for nice people who want to please and be liked by others, and those who try to control them.

The problem with living a life designed by others is that it often holds you back from living a life that is really yours. There are no universal sign posts or proven routes to inner peace. There are as many “roadmaps” as there are people and politically speaking, this is why global peacemaking so often falls short. How could we possibly represent an entire people in one document? And why do we listen to leaders who haven’t done or aren’t doing their inner work?

No. I don’t believe in imposing peace from without. The way to inner peace – or humanity, as I like to call it – starts from within. Only then can the outer systems work. When we have established a sense of inner peace, we can contribute more effectively to our families, our communities, our workplaces, and the wider world.

Such a peace agenda happens one person at a time. It is a laborious and grassroots process that strives for quality over quantity. We do not need to turn away from the suffering around us; rather, to learn how to turn inwards and tend to our inner fires so that we can stay present for it all. At first, we may wobble or fall but with practice, we learn to get back up and stand tall.

At the threshold of every great journey, we must first establish a direc-

tion and then, find the courage to take our first step, even when we don’t know where our foot will land, or where the step after will lead us. This way of travelling through life requires faith, which is the ability to feel, sense, and trust something larger than us that cannot yet or ever be seen.

Choosing to undertake an inner journey while our outer worlds are so busy or complex is not a decision to be made lightly. But sometimes, life gives us no alternative. For those of us living and working on the front lines of life, the wars and adversities that we experience, witness, and document may leave us forever changed. We may grapple with extraordinary circumstances outwardly for years on end, making one political statement or humanitarian intervention after the other. Intellectually, we may think we’re moving forwards but a time will come when we stop the doing and find the courage to ask if the life we are living is really true.

It is in such times of truth telling that things can fall apart. Truths can hurt, particularly if we have avoided them for a long time. If we haven’t yet done our “inner work,” we may face an emotional dam that risks flooding and destroying whatever we have made of our lives until that point. For example, our professional image, our social reputation, our financial status, our relationships. All of these can be swept away if this dam ever bursts. I know this not only because I’ve seen it happen to others but also, because it once happened to myself.

On my six-year journey that led me to write this book, I searched high and low for the answers to questions I was only just beginning to dare ask. Amidst the flood of emotions, I fought to keep my head above water. Treading water can get quite exhausting, especially when the waves keep coming, and eventually, I learned to swim and go with the flow. I’ve since gotten used to the water and changes in weather. I am a strong swimmer now. Sometimes I find land, sometimes I don’t, and somehow it matters less with time.

But as you will learn in this book, it wasn’t always so. Aside from being human, I am also a humanitarian. That means I care about taking action to serve others in need. In my case, it took me across the Middle East, a region where I have lived for over 30 years. I’ve borne witness to immense suffering like torture, imprisonment, war, disaster, displacement, and poverty. Although I haven’t experienced these directly, I do have a violent past of my

own that echoes much of what I've seen.

So often, I've wished for a simpler life – if only my life hadn't been so filled with chaos - but that clearly wasn't on the cards for me. You see, like you, my destiny was written before I was born, I just couldn't see it coming and even if I could have, I probably couldn't have changed a thing. My life has happened exactly as it was meant to and I've reached where I am now right on time. There is nowhere else I am meant to be and every bone of my body knows this to be true.

When my search for truth began, like most people I turned to self-help and personal development. I felt lost and liberated to explore far and wide. My curious intellect and spontaneous nature guided me down many trails, all of which I am grateful for now yet no longer need as I once thought I did.

First, I trained as a yoga and martial arts teacher. Later, I studied psychology, dance movement psychotherapy, and contemporary dance. As a client, I explored Somatic Experiencing, Jungian analysis, and life, health and mindfulness coaching. Towards the end of my journey, I retrained as both a Health and Life Coach with a mission to promote inner peace among people, organisations, and communities.

This is where I am now. I run a coaching practice that emphasises peace and everyday performance, mindset, and motivation. I'm also a dedicated black belt Karate practitioner and fitness enthusiast, and I moonlight as a writer and Arabic calligrapher. I live a quiet and spiritual inner life and yet I'm equally committed to living in the real world. I see things as they are and I do not turn away.

But where I am now is very different to the places I will share with you from my past. In this book, you will learn much about the person I have been. I share my memories, inner most thoughts, and insights to illustrate what it means to live towards a life of truth, awareness, forgiveness, and surrender. Perhaps the only thing that remains from my past is my ability to hold space for suffering. That part will probably never change; I believe it was imprinted on my heart before I was born.

In this book, I don't share extensive details of my humanitarian work or what it was like working for some of the world's largest humanitarian organisations. I also don't present or analyse history, politics, or theories of

violence. This is intentional. I've done this for many years as a professional and it has had value but here my focus is different.

My role as the writer and narrator of this book is to help you understand your inner world so that you may learn to navigate your outer world more effectively. You could call me an inner guide of some sorts, someone who understands the outer world and isn't afraid to address the messy aspects of life beneath the surface; the parts we tend to hide from each other.

The book you're holding is a personal narrative of what was happening within me as I was working outwardly as a humanitarian. My intention is not to seduce you with the goals I've achieved, the job titles I've collected, the exciting and sometimes frightening places I've been, or the so-called important people I've met.

Who I am and the fragments of my story are really irrelevant to both our inner journeys; rather, it is what I've learned that I wish to share and so I reference my outer world only insofar as it relates to the lessons I share. In other words, I try to make sure you have some details to follow but not so much that I lead you astray for no clear purpose.

As this book is first and foremost an enquiry into and modelling of truth-telling. I can only tell you what I know is true and naturally, this will always be subjective. To counter any bias or hidden agendas within myself, I chose to interview people I know. I invited their words to guide the flow of this book and prompt the lessons in me that I felt ready to share. You could say that their stories are the anchor and mine the vessel that paused momentarily to rest.

The Darkest Hour

To help you understand just how much of a shock I needed to grasp that life is short and start living my life from the inside out, allow me to share my darkest hour as it may help you to understand the stories I will share in the pages ahead. As you read its various threads, I ask you to keep in mind that our darkest hours are highly personal.

So often, the lessons we need to learn are obvious to those around us or those hearing the stories much later but when we're living them, the answers are less clear-cut. On the surface, they may not resemble in the slightest the potency of wisdom and potential for transformation that they bring. They can also provoke judgment, pity, shame, and horror in others and ourselves.

The reason why we may judge another's darkest hour is that usually, it illuminates our shadows and unspoken fears; perhaps our fear of being weak or not measuring up. And so I ask you to stay present and aware of your own reactions as I tell my tale, and should you have a similar story or relate to mine from another angle, please know that in some way I will be by your side. Our experiences are personal for each of us and yet ultimately, we are all the same.

My ex husband was not a cruel man, quite the contrary. He was a generous and well-intended partner most of the time. I had met him during his most dynamic years and quickly fallen in love. But he also had another side to him that became triggered under stress and unfortunately, there was plenty of stress in our relationship and parallel lives.

Over the years, our marriage became an unsafe place for both of us, and physically unsafe for me. It would me take years to heal from the damage I allowed it to cause. Ironically, this damage became my blessing - the "wound where the light enters" - and while I sometimes wish it had never happened (because then I might be "normal"), I am also thankful that it did because it contained many of the lessons my soul came here to learn.

When we failed to meet each other's expectations, which was so often the case as our personalities clashed in almost every way, his response was to externalise and accuse while mine was to go silent and disappear. Lacking the maturity and tools we needed to communicate effectively led us to speak

out in other ways. He turned to pinching, slapping, hitting, pushing, kicking, insulting, criticising, and threatening me in order to be heard. I shouted back, burst into tears, retreated into my shell, and banished him from my heart and everyday life.

Writing this many years later as a coach, I understand how unnecessary our behaviour was. If only we had understood that we wanted different things in life, and that we had different values and very different personality styles, we could have avoided causing each other years of pain.

But instead, we were in our 20s, a time of much pressure for so many young people today. It's the decade when social pressures and advertising expect us to do and achieve it all at once. The degree, the job, the perfect wedding, the marital bliss, the first child, and the first house. As the temperature rises, we may mistakenly assume that time is running out to complete this nigh impossible "to-do" list before we hit 30.

This unfortunate mindset tells us that if we haven't succeeded by 29, it means we've "failed". As the clock ticks, we may rush mindlessly on autopilot, fulfilling social norms. We may put increasing pressure on ourselves and each other. We may forget that humans can only do so much in a day. Humans get sick, they forget, flake out, give up and burn out. In this mindset we forget the importance of Love and this leads us to feel alone, lonely and unhappy.

Every person alive needs to love and be loved in order to function to the best of their ability. In the absence of Love, such stress and lack of self-awareness had led us both to accept the complicated dynamics of intimate partner violence as "normal" until one day, the violence escalated and we literally hit a wall. More specifically, my head hit a wall. The back of my head was planted squarely in the corner of our guest room, where the two walls met, and his left forearm was locking my chest in place. His right fist was centimetres from my face.

He had taken me by surprise, kicking me in the kitchen after a long day at work when he couldn't find what he wanted to eat in the fridge. Not working, I was responsible for all our household affairs, including the food shopping, but I rarely got it "right". He had physically lashed out at me in the past but this was his first kick and it seemed out of place. I felt nervous and wondered how to diffuse the situation before it spiralled out of control.

And so, without thinking of his male pride, I showed him how to do a proper roundhouse kick, tapping him lightly on his shoulder with full control. I had been practicing karate on and off since I was 12 and thought a little humour might help to relieve the tension. It sounds ridiculous so many years later but in the midst of our mutual stresses and depths of immaturity, it seemed like the right thing to do.

I left the kitchen, irritated that I had given into playground games. I was tired and unhappy within myself, and I needed space. I went upstairs to the guest bedroom to rest, assuming our fight was over. For myself it was but unfortunately, it wasn't for him. Stuck in my own thoughts, I hadn't heard him follow me up the stairs and into the guest bedroom. As a result, I was too slow to dodge his next move as I entered the room.

Out of nowhere, he pushed me forcefully from behind and I fell face-down on the bed. Although I was shocked, I realised I was in danger and quickly returned to my feet, shouting back in defense. I was too late again as he swiftly cornered me and that's how I ended up with my head against the wall.

"If you say one more word," he threatened, *"I will smash your face in!"*

I saw the rage in his eyes and knew in an instant that I was defeated. I knew that if I made one more move, he would punch my face hard at short range. As a fighter, I understood the impact of an angry fist on my brain, which was centimetres from the dense concrete wall. He was a strong man and most likely, I would be left with a head injury. At worst, I could end up brain dead and possibly even dead.

By then, I had held a black belt in Karate for almost a decade but never had my skills been tested so acutely. They were also rusty because frequent work travel had made it hard to keep up with my training. Gradually, I had lost the black belt mindset that is so critical to self-respect and survival. Thankfully, it was that mindset that stepped in and told me it was too late and that my only option for survival was to submit and surrender.

You may have seen submission in Mixed Martial Arts or MMA fights when the fight goes to the floor and eventually, one opponent taps the ground, signalling a defeat. It takes a real fighter to do this, to swallow his or her pride and admit that he or she can't take it anymore, and that staying alive is more important than making a point that can be delivered in a less

deadly or violent way.

For years, I had lived with the bruises, the slaps, and the frequent insults, which were actually the worst, but now he had taken the violence one step too far. I understood from controlled training what kicks and punches felt like. I could only imagine what full force would be like and it wasn't pretty.

Until that moment, my mind – or my head – had been my strongest ally. The thought of losing my mental faculties and becoming dependent on anyone filled me with dread. And so I did what I had never done before. I backed down and surrendered to my fate. I played dead. I didn't fight back. I looked down, not knowing if the tactic would work or if I was too late. In doing so, I surrendered to God's will.

I took responsibility for everything I had allowed to happen and the ways in which I had contributed to this moment, not knowing if I would make it out alive.

In those seconds, a miracle occurred. His mood changed and he suddenly dropped his fist and walked out the room without saying another word. I was left physically unhurt but alone and in a state of deep shock. You see, the attack and playing dead had simultaneously triggered a physical memory of teenage rape where I had been pinned down by an ex-boyfriend in my own bed. Being pinned up against the wall by another partner was more than my mind could handle. This was my darkest hour, when the two events merged into one.

Because playing dead so closely resembled being frozen in fear so many years ago, a repressed physical memory that I had been unable to acknowledge raced through me. I couldn't see straight anymore. I lost control of my legs and fell to the floor shaking.

The shaking didn't stop for a very long time but I couldn't cry. Instead, my eyes were wide open and my mind was fully present to what was happening. Some moments of truth can hit us too hard for tears to come. They literally call our soul forth and a moment of reckoning arrives, a time when we must choose who it is we will and will not be.

In my humanitarian work, where international law and protection standards prevailed, it was *not* ok for the prisoners to be physically, psychologically, or emotionally abused, not even by internationally agreed minimum sta-

standards. As a violence and conflict specialist, I also knew the difference between right and wrong yet somehow, none of what I knew professionally applied to me at home. I now know that such a paradox is more common than we may think.

Why doesn't she leave?

It's the question women in my situation are asked again and again. Unless you've been there, you may not find it easy to understand or accept the answer. The truth is that for many of us, the abuse unfolds gradually. We don't see how we isolate ourselves out of shame or how we enter a phase of denial where neither our partners or ourselves are willing to face the truth.

Whether they mean to or not, abusive partners are masterminds at eroding their partner's self-esteem. In my case, I was praised in public and torn to pieces behind closed doors. My work was wrong, my clothes were wrong, I wasn't happy or sociable enough. I embarrassed him in public by talking and smiling too much. There was no end to what I couldn't do "right".

The bullying and intimidation tactics had started early on in our relationship and at first, they took me by surprise. Instead of walking out when it first happened, I figured there had to be a reason. Perhaps he'd had a bad day. The first instance seemed out of character and so I let it go. Then, when it happened again, I confronted him and he denied it. Without a witness to confirm my anger, I thought it must be me. I was the mistaken one.

When I realised it wasn't just me doing things "wrong", I told myself I'd leave by Christmas if it didn't improve. But by the time Christmas came, I had endured so much criticism that my self-esteem and ability to share what was happening behind closed doors had plummeted. I thought the abuse was my fault and that I could somehow correct it. I assumed it was my responsibility to fix it alone. It was pretty much the same reaction I had had after the teenage rape. *This is my shame and responsibility, not his.*

When we are abused within the context of an intimate relationship, or one that has just ended, our emotional entanglement can make it difficult for us to see or want to see the truth. We may actually seek to protect the person who is abusing us. As a proud, intellectual and stubborn young woman, I also thought I could handle it. But clearly I missed something vital in my education.

He used to tell me that "A" led to "B" and that if I didn't do "A", then

"B" wouldn't happen. This led me to believe that I was responsible and could therefore "fix" the situation alone. Yet the definition of and benchmarks for "A" were so difficult to predict.

The more I tried to get things "right" as a preventative tactic, the worse things became as I usually got it "wrong".

Without noticing, I was travelling so far from my true self in order to become someone else. I wasn't sure who this someone else was but in hindsight, I see that she was a figment of his imagination and an outright rejection of the woman I was born to be. This woman was a threat to him. She knew her own mind and didn't hesitate to answer back, which meant he had to put her back in her place more than he would have liked.

It was a confusing cycle. I was strong and yet not strong. The less I felt safe to be myself, the worse I felt about who I was. I turned to work, caffeine, pasta and chocolate to deaden the pain that this inauthentic and abusive lifestyle was creating in myself. None of this helped me to love my broken body more.

It became a vicious circle within me that nobody could see. These feelings were echoed in my professional work to end violence. Without a stable, reliable and trustworthy partner, peace negotiations will often fail as the rules of the game will keep changing. Violence prevention tactics also don't work unless you also tackle their root causes, which may have taken place years before the actual crime.

And so, oblivious to the fact that I deserved better, I accepted several years of psychological turmoil and physical threats. I relied on poor lifestyle habits and choices to keep me going and deaden the pain of betraying my soul.

Sometimes he was nice and sometimes he wasn't. His behavioural patterns didn't fit the stereotypes of intimate partner violence that I had read about in books or seen in films. For example, he never apologised, he simply switched characters. And although he laid his hands on me, he never left me black and blue. I didn't feel like a victim because in my mind, I always fought back.

It was confusing to see the man I once loved caught between different dimensions of his personality and myself, lost in the haze of our collective dramas. Gradually, my zest for life lost its shine until one day, when my turning point came.

The Turning Point

An English theologian and historian, Thomas Fuller, once said that our “*darkest hour is just before dawn.*” My spiritual tests and enquiries have also told a similar tale.

I believe we all have a moment of personal adversity, or darkest hour, that can lead to a moment of such awakening. You could call these the turning points of our lives, the points at which everything changes forever and we see our personal circumstances from a different perspective. Perhaps yours was or will be the loss of a job, a home, or a loved one, or an opportunity that you had hoped for but didn’t materialise. Perhaps you came last or weren’t chosen, or you never got started. Maybe your health failed, you failed, or someone failed you.

I may not have walked your particular path of awakening but the sensitivity I have developed by walking boldly through mine – that moment when the full force of intimate partner violence collided with the memory of teenage rape – has taught me that we will all face a crisis of some kind at some point in our lives and sometimes several.

When we dig beneath the surface of these adversities, the details that appear to divide us matter less and less. What matters is the people we become as a result of standing up to them, and if we choose to allow them to transform us. From that point of humanity, we are all capable of forgiving and connecting with each other.

My inner journey really started the moment that I saw his fist. Two years after that, I stepped out of a busy courtroom on an early winter morning, dressed in my best and only suit. Our divorce had been the first case of the day and I felt elated. I thought the worst of everything was over. The worst of me and the worst of him. Before me I saw a clean slate and promised myself I would write on it anything I dreamed of. We hadn’t killed each other and my life was now my own.

In present day, I really want to fast forward to the more beautiful place where I am now, to be one of those “gurus” that prescribes X number of tips and steps to breaking free. That woman looks so much more appealing than the one I had to become during the divorce process; the one that had

to fall down seven times and stand up eight and whose knees and knuckles are scraped beyond repair.

This is how so many of us often feel when a long and difficult period has come to an end, be it a marriage, a job, a war, a field mission, a health adversity, or another trying situation. After our darkest hour is over, we may gain a sudden appreciation for the preciousness of life and this restores our hope. The future looks golden in comparison to where we’ve been and we feel unstoppable. But gradually, the shininess of our new perspective can lose its allure.

Without self-awareness or digestion of our lessons learned, that empty slate can quickly get muddy with the sweat and tears it may ask of us to walk through. And sometimes, no matter what we do, some things are already written on it for us. Only we can’t yet see the writing because we haven’t yet learned to read the signs.

I may have walked out of that courtroom empty-handed but unknown to me, I was not yet a free woman. I was still carrying invisible baggage that would need to be unpacked before I could step into my new life.

I didn’t yet know it but several years of tough inner work lay ahead. This work would test me in ways I could never have anticipated so perhaps it was a blessing that I had absolutely no idea what was coming next. All I knew was that I had to keep putting one foot after the other, not knowing where my foot would land or which direction the wind would blow.

Prior to the divorce, the superficial details of my life had seemed pretty good. I came from a loving family and my parents had given me plenty of support and guidance as I started out. I had worked with some of the world’s largest humanitarian organisations and made a small difference in forgotten places. I was well educated and married to a charming man. I was considered pretty, gentle, kind, organised, and smart, and while money was often tight, we had as much as we needed. I seemed to have everything a person could ever need but I was unhappy and I felt that way for a very good reason.

Because of my external achievements, those around me held me in high esteem while my inner world lay in tatters. You see, no matter how much I achieved, I couldn’t fill the void within or stop the anxious record playing in my head, the song that told me I was broken and unworthy of Love.

Outwardly, I functioned impeccably but inwardly, I bounced between acute anxiety and disappearing psychologically. I had been playing this game since I was 15, the year of the teenage rape. This is so often the case for survivors of post-traumatic stress who have yet to receive the support they need to heal and move on. Such stress can last for years. Our lives become frozen in time. We're neither here nor there and we think we can outrun it all but really, we're only running ourselves and others in circles.

My divorce and what came after would burn to ashes the multiple illusions I had created and held close in the mistaken assumption that they would keep me safe. Walking away from all the outer markings of "success" – the marriage, the perfect job, the beautiful home – meant that I could find out what that word really meant to me. As a woman, I would stop striving for perfection and become indifferent to other people's judgments and expectations. And as a humanitarian, I would come to redefine humanity on my terms and what it really means to be – and stay – human.

I would start doing things *my way* and on *my terms* but years before I learned to do that, I would have to make sense of my darkest hour and make a choice to do something different.

It happened a few months after my father's cancer diagnosis, a few weeks before I turned 30 and two years before we divorced. I was alone in my home office, hunched over a large and imposing brown desk that had become my daily refuge. My then husband was travelling for work. By now, the tables had turned and it was him who was always on the move, not me, and a part of me quietly resented that. I felt trapped and tied down, unable to travel to do the work that called me.

That night, I received two emails that would change the direction of my life. The first would offer me a short-term humanitarian consulting job; the second would open my heart.

After reading the first email and the attached contract and job description, I heaved a sigh of relief. Not only was the work relevant to my professional experience but also it was possible to do long distance. As the clock struck midnight, I felt the winds of change stirring deep within my bones. A new day was beginning. I wrote back and said I was available to start the following week.

I felt a surge of gratitude as by then, I hadn't worked for a few months. I had quit my last job on the spot. It was one he had pressurised me to take so we could live and work in the same country. My soul had repeatedly refused the job offer but when the employer asked for a third time, I relented and said yes.

One day, I snapped over something minor, fired off a resignation letter, packed up my desk, and quietly walked out of the office and into the late summer heat.

I couldn't take being criticised by angry men for one minute longer, which had become the norm in this job as well as in my home. It was perhaps my first act of freedom but it came at the price of no longer having the illusion of a purpose to fuel each day. I also no longer had my own income; all I had earned in the past months had gone into our joint savings.

I had also just started training as a Yoga teacher in my free time but after I quit, my practice and studies could only fill so many hours and the anxiety that so often haunts trauma survivors began to surface. In that space, I found out about my father's cancer and faced my husband's fist. My father had survived and so had I, at least for now.

A black cloud was looming and I knew it wasn't good news. This job held a promise to change that but I was yet to find out exactly how and why.

Just as I was about to retire to bed, a personal email popped up on my computer screen. The message contained forwarded images of snow-capped mountains, green fields, and crystal water lakes. They were the kind of photos that I would usually ignore as I'd be too busy but they were accompanied by a short personal note from someone I used to know. The photos were of a place where I could do YOGA, he told me, in capital letters.

Although I was tired, the message caught my attention. You see, the man who had sent the email had been at the back of my mind for well over a year, and I hadn't wanted to know why.

I didn't care much for what he had written or Yoga in that moment; instead, I found myself mesmerised by the images he had sent. As I scrolled through them, what I saw was a place in which I could finally be safe.

Something inside of me snapped and a terrible thought that I had been

suppressing for months arose out of nowhere. *“If I don’t leave my marriage now, I’ll end up dead and if I’m dead, I’ll never have the chance to see such beauty or know love like this again.”*

I knew that my physical death was just a question of time. I didn’t know when it would arrive but I could see it coming and I could no longer avoid the feeling that its date was getting closer. Things were calm at home but the stage was already set. The tension was escalating, my resentment at not working was making sure of that. I knew that next time, the outcome would be worse.

For a moment, the thought of being unfaithful, even just in my mind, filled me with horror. That kind of thing didn’t happen in my little world. People like me – the good kind that hold things together no matter what – did not fall in love with anyone other than their spouse. We were trustworthy and we did not fall from grace. Even if we no longer loved our spouse, we would forever stand by them.

The moment I saw the pattern of my thoughts, I knew what needed to be done. I needed an independent income to take my next step, even if it was a temporary one. The fact I could do the work long distance meant that I could leave at any time and finally, that time had come. By the grace of God, someone had sent me a lifeline and I wasn’t about to let go of it, no matter what it asked of me.

The Lesson

My humanitarian work in prisons was the one thing I lived for. Those were the spaces in which I breathed and felt safe. It was where I could forget my own pain and instead, focus on the world’s bigger gaping wounds. I had buried my heart in such prisons until the man who sparked the end of my marriage brought it back to life.

For years, I had worked long hours, driving myself to burnout. Yet no matter how many hours I worked, I could never reach all the prisoners I needed to or alleviate enough of their pain. This drove me to work even longer hours. To this day I have memories of myself at my desk at 11pm, calling the families of prisoners to tell them their sons were still alive and well. My takeaway meal would sit at the side of the phone and my back would ache from sitting in prison all day.

This is what it means to live in denial and suffer from an emotional blind spot that drives us to help others at the expense of ourselves. It happens frequently in the humanitarian and human rights sectors. We don’t think to share our own pain because we are regularly confronted by so much more. We may find it irrelevant or too selfish to mention ourselves. How can we possibly talk about our rights when we see just how gravely the rights of others are being abused, and how our efforts to protect them almost always fall short? Our silence is noble but without a deep inner spiritual reference to hold it, it can eventually drive us to despair.

Unfortunately, my humanitarian drive was fuelled and compounded by my own story of abuse. Because I had not made peace with the divided parts of myself, carrying the stories of others who had faced much got harder to bear over time.

In my humanitarian work, I’ve seen similar blind spots in armed groups, civilians, and politicians. Victims who remain unconscious can sometimes become unconscious perpetrators. After we, or the people we love, have been violated, so much anger can arise. When left to fester, we can get caught up in self-righteous thought patterns and behaviours, blaming the other person or party for issues that are now our responsibility to handle.

I also had no awareness how my unresolved teenage experience had led

me to sense other people's pain. It seemed like I could feel and understand everyone's pain. The prisoners', their families', my colleagues', and even my then husband's pain. It amplified my ability to empathise but I was missing the self-protection part when it came to how many hours I would work or what I would and would not accept in my marriage.

When I moved out of prison and violence work and into media, coaching and communications, I came to see how many situations of violence occur simply as we don't know how to communicate effectively with each other. It was certainly true at a personal level in my marriage and that made me more attuned to how prevalent it was around me and beyond the home.

I saw how often language was used to manipulate, threaten, exploit, and punish. While they are very different realities, the metaphorical veil between the torture and ill treatment of prisoners and the wider world began to lift. I saw how we could all become prisoners and interrogators of each other and how the way out of this terrible act was to turn inwards, to cultivate more mindfulness and awareness of what lay within. Only there could we understand how the ways in which we treated ourselves were mirrored in the ways we treated those around us and vice versa.

I was also aware personally and professionally of the debilitating effects of violence on individual and community health. At the time, I was supporting a United Nations primary health care programme that served over a million of Gaza's refugees. I saw the rates of malnutrition and increasing incidence of lifestyle diseases caused by war, living in overcrowded refugee camps with insufficient access to proper sanitation and other public services, and under a siege that had devastated the local economy and curtailed their freedom of movement.

I also saw exhausted colleagues – nurses, doctors, counsellors, project managers, teachers, engineers and sanitation workers – all doing the best they could while struggling inwardly.

I tried to change this by coaching a team of sixteen colleagues through a community health outreach strategy. One day, a clinic director exploded and said what was on everyone's minds. *"How can we make more of a difference when we're so stressed and burned out ourselves?"* His fingers were clutching a cigarette and mine a cup of strong coffee. I looked around the room and there was

silence.

It marked a turning point in how we worked. Regardless of the immense suffering around us, we had to put staff wellbeing at the centre of the strategy and with over a thousand overworked staff who were all refugees, that was nothing short of overwhelming.

On a personal level, I had started to sort myself out but there was still a long way to go. Like many who are seeking and can afford it, I began with yoga and then therapy. After, I began training as a health coach. During one of my early coach training courses, we were each assigned a personal mentor. Mine was a bubbly woman called Kara who I met on Skype every few weeks.

Towards the end of the course, she had asked me a series of open-ended questions. Sensing they may come in handy one day, I kept a copy of my answers, only to misplace them for the next four years. During this time I hunted high and low for them and yet, I couldn't find them. It was only when it came time to write this book that they fell out of an old journal, as if on cue.

Written almost four years ago, amidst the frequent political instability and wars that the people of Gaza face, I now see that my answers were hints at the life that lay before me. But back then they were simply ideas and concepts on paper. As I share them, I invite you to reflect on the answers you would give as a first step to joining me on this journey of self discovery.

Kara: When have you been most proud of yourself?

Me: Surviving my divorce – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially.

Kara: If you could leave an important message to the world, what would it be?

Me: Violence always begins on the inside but once it manifests outwardly, it needs both internal and external solutions.

Kara: In your opinion, what are your greatest successes so far?

Me: Coming out of an abusive relationship that lasted eight and a half years in one piece, and being able to face and process both this and a teenage experience of rape while supporting myself and continuing my humanitarian work.

Kara: What are the most important lessons you have learned in your life so far?

Me: It's up to us, nobody else. But that doesn't mean we must operate alone in isolation. We must learn how to ask for support when it is needed AND do our inner work on ourselves.

Kara: If you were certain it was the right choice, you would...

Me: I would invest all I have into building a coaching business.

Kara: If you had the freedom, you would...

Me: I would walk on the beach, then go swimming and float on my back under the sun.

(Note: at the time, this was not permitted for security reasons.)

Kara: What new insights do you have?

Me: Freedom is found in the present moment. It constantly redefines itself.

Kara: What are your talents and natural gifts?

Me: Seeing people for who they are, creating and transforming projects, spirituality and intuition.

Kara: What is your life's purpose?

Me: To use travel, adventure and intuition to help my coaching clients heal their wounds.

Although the paper on which these answers are printed is old and torn, they are like gold to my once wounded soul. They are a sign that I always knew where I was heading; it just took a personal crisis and the catastrophe of violence, divorce and traumatic flashbacks to remember.

So often on our journeys, we will doubt our innermost wisdom. We may think, feel, and say things that sound out of place at the time. It may seem like nothing is moving and that our efforts to heal or move on lie in vain. Years later, we will remember those moments as turning points that led to our current state of transformation.

We will also face many mirrors. For example, it was no coincidence that my calling to humanitarian work was with prisoners and refugees during my turbulent marital years; a time in my life where I longed for freedom, and after my marriage had ended, had lost my home. Of course we won't always have such dramatic examples but it pays to be aware of the situations in which we find ourselves and how they relate to our inner world.

When we withhold information, when we use information as a weapon, and when we fail to share vital information, peacemaking simply doesn't work. Communications within ourselves and with the other begin to break down. People get angry and afraid. They start doing things that they wouldn't usually do. Eventually, rage takes over and death, in its broadest terms, is the only way out.

So many of us think that the wars of our world are out there and yet my experience is that they can lie so much closer to home than we think. My belief is that we cannot build bridges to a shared humanity without first finding that state of peace within ourselves. Yet peace is not a destination. It is not a place at which we arrive and all our work is done. Rather, it is an inner roadmap that we navigate each and every day.

One day on my journey, I would quietly leave the muddy fields behind. There was no fanfare or major moment of transition. It simply happened and I let go, again and again. Each time I resisted less the load I was carrying got lighter.

Something inside of me had changed. I had become softer around the edges, kinder to others and myself. There was a glow around how I lived my life from the inside out that had been drawing others near for a couple of years, inviting them to trust me.

I had begun to try less and live more. I had let go of so much fear, anger, rage, shame, and pain. I had started to tell the truth, no matter what. I was finally living in alignment with my beliefs and values, and I would have to remain conscious to stay that way. By accepting my own darkness, I could more fully embrace humanity.

Humanity was no longer a principle I strived for at work while I kept my personal life separate; rather, it was who I had become from the inside out. This is what I mean by creating an "Inner Roadmap to Humanity." It's

about getting out of our own way and allowing ourselves to show up as the human beings we really are. Some of us can do this quite easily from a young age. Others who are more stubborn like myself will have to learn, unlearn, and let go many times over in order to find our way.

Living a life rooted in truth is a choice that I must make every single day. It isn't a destination that I reach; to me it is my journey and my ex-husband was one of my teachers. I am grateful for the role he played in my life as his fiery presence forced me to wake up. It is not easy to inflict pain on someone and live with it, and I have long forgiven both of us for what we did to each other. I've walked through this pain and evolved beyond it; it has only made me more human and I can only hope he has the ability to forgive me for any pains I once caused him.

Ultimately, this book is a testimony of what it means to be – and stay – human. I've written it out of a desire to show that healing is possible, even after multiple traumas. This part of my story may be over for me but it cannot be completed until it becomes one I share.

Because of my journey, I don't believe in quick fixes or cut and paste lessons. Although these days I focus on performance, mindset and motivation coaching, I never forget for one moment the significant obstacles some of my clients may need to first remove before they can step into a life of their choosing. I never once judge the time it takes as I know just how many years I took, and how rich and painful those years of healing were.

While there may be basic standards for a shared humanity, when it comes to our inner worlds only each of us can chart our way. We each have different lessons to learn and our paths will naturally differ. It is for this reason that I don't give you concrete advice or tell you what to do. Instead, I trust you can find your way.

My deepest desire is to take you beyond the inspiring and seductive world of “self-help” strategies and instead, turn you towards the wisdom that already lies within you. To do that, I will need to take you deeper into my inner world and show you how I, and the other travellers I met along the way, were able to let go and see our adversities as a part of a complete whole. On the other side, I will share eight practical life skills that have helped myself and my coaching clients live a life beyond.

Your Reflections

How are you feeling?

Do you have a darkest hour?

Where were your turning points?

What did they teach you?

How have they transformed you?

How could they be shared?

Navigation Tools

*“A good traveller has no fixed plans
and is not intent upon arriving.*

*A good artist lets his intuition
lead him wherever it wants.*

*A good scientist has freed himself of concepts
and keeps his mind open to what is.”*

Verse 27, Tao Te Ching

The 12 Guides

As we embark on this rich inner journey, the time has come to tell you exactly how it will unfold. From this point onwards, 12 guides will be called to take their seats at learning stations along the way. Each of these guides is an Archetype, a Greek word that describes an original set of characteristics. We will be drawing on their strengths as navigation tools to chart the terrain of our inner worlds.

Carl Jung, one of Sigmund Freud’s students, developed the concept of Archetypes in psychology in the 20th century. He believed that these mythical beings demonstrated qualities that each and every one of us has the potential to hold. He formed these qualities around twelve characters, giving each of them the following names:

1. The Creator
2. The Warrior (or Hero)
3. The Ruler
4. The Alchemist (or Magician)
5. The Orphan (or Regular Guy/Gal)
6. The Caregiver
7. The Sage
8. The Jester
9. The Explorer (or Adventurer)
10. The Innocent
11. The Lover (or Romantic)
12. The Revolutionary (or Destroyer/Rebel)

Archetypes can be used in almost any creative, spiritual or therapeutic setting. While Jungian analysts are renowned for being archetypal experts, many other professions also use them effectively in their work. For example, they are used in business branding, coaching, and creative platforms for expression.

As a coach, I sometimes bring archetypes into my client’s coaching journeys as a tool to help them tap into their conscious and subconscious behaviours. From there, they can more easily tap into a new mindset that will bet

ter position them to achieve their coaching goals and objectives, and live and work as they choose.

As a writer and teacher, I advocate that archetypes aren't rigid definitions but a living process that evolves naturally each day. They're always present to share their wisdom with us but first, we must turn inwards to listen.

At the heart of the archetypal journey lies the Orphan's Wound. That is the centre of our pain and suffering, whatever its cause. No matter how much inner work we do, our inner Orphan doesn't completely go away; we just get better at relating to him/her and helping it to feel safe.

I first came across the concept of archetypes when working with a Jungian trained therapist several years ago. It was shortly after my divorce, during my humanitarian mission to the Gaza Strip. By then, I had spent over a decade trying to juggle home, relationships, travel, and work and the outcome was mostly stress, unhappiness and violence, as you've already heard.

My divorce was a clear message that I had to change something but I wasn't yet sure what. What I did have was the willingness to try something new. Instead of crumbling and feeling sorry for myself, I saw my post-divorce life as an opportunity to explore and find my way back home. It was a much needed turning point and the start of my own transformation to being me.

During the week, I worked in Gaza's refugee camps and on weekends, I tended to my inner world. This way of living would mark the beginning of my understanding that we can have one foot rooted in our inner worlds and the other planted squarely in real life. There isn't a need to stop one so we can do the other. There is a middle way of doing both, side by side.

Like most people entering therapy for the first time, I hoped that the process would relieve some of my emotional pain and give me clarity on what to do next. I was expecting answers from my therapist, not realising that I would have to dig deep to find them for myself. Fortunately I embarked on a spiritual path at the same time, which helped me to navigate the unknown terrain of my inner world.

If truth be told, I was nervous about doing such inner spiritual and therapeutic work while my day job was so intense. I feared that I may break down and working in a war-stricken part of the world is not a good place to

do that. For a start, poor mental, physical and emotional health can compromise personal and team safety. It can create an unnecessary burden to the organisation if our health breaks down and we are unable to do our work.

As humanitarians, if we can no longer work effectively, the people on whose behalf we seek to protect ultimately pay the price. This is a harsh reality in this line of work and it can create endless guilt within the humanitarian who is doing his/her best to hold everything together.

I had also walked out of my marriage with almost nothing, not even a home, and work was all I had left. By then, I'd been working in and on Palestine for over a decade. My first humanitarian mission as a young 23-year old had taken me to the prisons of Gaza and ever since, I had felt called to return. Now, at 32, I had been asked to go back.

Ironically, the last threat my ex husband made to me was this: "If you go to Gaza, I will divorce you." He couldn't bear to see me return to places that he felt had broken me; in his defense, being married to a humanitarian isn't easy. Like the people of Gaza, he was also a refugee who had lived through war and I believe my work was a constant trigger for his own painful memories.

Exhausted by the threats and efforts to make my marriage work, I refused to back down and once more surrendered, not to his fist but to the course my life was taking. A few days later, I showed up in court, put my faith in something bigger than myself, and walked out empty handed. I had lost everything but now I was a woman who no longer had to justify why she did what she did or went where she needed to go. I had also changed as a humanitarian, my divorce made sure of that.

There was no question in my mind; if I couldn't give my best at work, I really shouldn't be there and so I chose to give my best both inwardly and outwardly. With a warrior spirit, I yanked up my inner socks and for two years, juggled my inner and outer work. I did so with much more ease and grace than I ever expected.

To do this, I had to keep a tight schedule and invest a significant part of my monthly salary in my personal growth. This meant that the money I earned as a humanitarian was helping me to heal and grow. I grappled with this concept at times, feeling guilty that I could afford this self-development

route while so many couldn't. But I came to accept it as a necessary health expense and investment for personal and professional development in the future.

Every Friday morning at 8am, I sat before my computer with my Jungian trained therapist, who was miles away. She was sitting in a comfortable home in Dubai, the city where I was raised, and I was in my apartment, overlooking Gaza's view of the Mediterranean Sea.

Friday mornings were always the quietest part of the week. Unless fighting had started on Thursday afternoon, which it sometimes did, there was little chance of us being interrupted.

Sometimes, the power would cut and with it, my Wi-Fi would go. If the generator didn't kick in, I'd have to call work for an armoured vehicle to take me to a nearby restaurant. There, I would continue the session through my inner world, even if people were sitting around me. By then, I had learned an important lesson that there are rarely good excuses not to turn inwards.

Occasionally, the local Hamas police conducted intense physical training workouts in the sandy area next to my block, which I could see and hear during sessions. I found them inspiring and interestingly, a few years later, similar fitness workouts would become an integral part of my ongoing journey to empower myself.

In the therapy sessions, we didn't discuss the concept of archetypes directly. It was only as I left therapy, almost two years later, that a book on archetypes would find me and my spiritual journey as a woman recovering from divorce would start to make sense.

It was my inner and fairly young revolutionary who clashed horns in my marriage. When it crumbled, my inner warrior stepped in to pick up the pieces. She helped me to dig my heels in, to survive the aftermath of the divorce, and to serve in Gaza for the next two years. She had repeatedly tried to save me from my marriage but for years, my wounded orphan, who you will meet later, would stop her. She preferred to stay in victim/survival-mode, rather than take responsibility and move on with her life.

After leaving Gaza, the archetypes provided a wonderful container in which to continue my inner work. I have since found that on some level, they speak to us all. Male or female, young or old, they provide anchors to

hold on to while we explore and extract meaning from our lives. For those of us who have experienced circumstances beyond the norm, such as war and trauma, they can help us to gain multiple perspectives. These new angles move us from feeling stuck to a state of possibility and from there, a better life can flourish.

The archetypes carry both light and shadow traits. When they are operating at their full potential, so are we. When they are triggered, especially by the wounded orphan or victim/survivor state of mind, we stop functioning well. We may be thrown back into old experiences and memories, which can fuel further negative experiences of life.

Learning to disentangle and make sense of our storylines is essential to both our psychological and emotional health and our ability to contribute positively to making a difference in the world. It is critical to pay attention to the quality of our thoughts as low quality thoughts can fuel painful emotions. Breaking this cycle begins with writing a new story, starting right here, right now.

If you are an avid researcher like myself, you may want to pause here and look up the work of one of the best contemporary sources on archetypes, Carol Pearson-Marr. She created the Pearson-Marr Archetype Instrument (PMAI), which is a personality test that highlights the archetypes most present in your life at the time of the test. You can take the test online at www.capt.org. It is available at a small fee and includes a summary of all Jung's twelve archetypes in a different arrangement to mine.

Ultimately, the archetypal guides are tools to help us make sense of where we are, where we have been, and where we are going. At first, they may seem an abstract concept to grasp but once you start experimenting with them, you will see how they can come alive within you in a way that is uniquely yours.

The way I have presented the archetypal journey in this book represents my way. This roadmap routing captures how I've lived and experienced each of their mythical strengths and your route will naturally differ. Today, I remember them as loving guides that helped me through some pretty rough patches of my life and I'm grateful for the lessons they brought.

What matters most for the purpose of this book is the permission and

power the archetypes can give us to direct and redirect our own narratives. From there, we gain the self-awareness needed to take leadership of our inner lives and create our outer lives in alignment. When this alignment happens, a sense of inner peace is the natural outcome, regardless of whether adversity happens or not. We have a bigger picture in which to locate ourselves and the storylines of our lives, and this provides endless perspectives for healing and moving on.

You don't need to be spiritually inclined to undertake this journey and in my view, such a journey does not clash with orthodox religious practices. While Jung took a spiritual approach to psychological inquiry, his work was also rooted in everyday reality and storytelling was one of his methods. He recommended writing down the stories of our lives in order to transform them. The answers you find on this journey may very well change your life, as my answers did mine.

The 14 Travellers

Alongside the 12 guides are 14 real life travelers who I met along my way. I have included their voices and stories and weaved my own around them as a way of demonstrating that in life, we never really walk alone.

Even in our darkest moments, there will always be someone who understands what we are going through. They may not be there at that very moment or they may not have walked our exact path but they do know what it's like to have to dig deep and choose to live life from the inside out.

There is a spiritual link between myself and each of these people and an understanding that life is greater than we will ever really know. It's an honour to include them with me in this story and I hope you, the reader, will learn just as much from their insights as you do from my own.

The Orphan's Wound | Mihaela, a Dance Movement Psychotherapist from Romania, and I discuss East vs West, therapy vs. coaching, and getting out of the victim/survival loop and into the "beyond".

The Caregiver's Heart | Christoph, a humanitarian, was shot in Chechnya. We discuss the long term effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the reality of bearing witness and recovery.

The Explorer's Quest | Yasmine, a Mountain Bike Rider from Cairo, explains what freedom feels like on the open trail. We look at solitude, loneliness, changing identities, and overcoming fear.

The Warrior's Spirit | Christina, a Health Coach from the Philippines, lives with chronic rheumatoid arthritis and cancer scares. We discuss health, food, fitness, violence, and the parallels between medical traumas and psychological traumas.

The Alchemist's Fire | Steve is a bowel cancer survivor from the UK. He's also a martial arts and yoga teacher who meditated and mantra'd his way to recovery. We talk about friends and global support networks on the journey "beyond".

The Innocent's Return | Kendra is an author on nonviolent communications from Germany. We discuss her concept of radical truth and what it means to deal with rejection and live from a place of trust and authenticity.

The Creator's Cave | Amy is a humanitarian filmmaker from Canada and Shireen* a humanitarian artist. We look at the healing effects of art and creation, and how destruction can wreak havoc on the creative healing process.

The Jester's Tale | Tori is a pharma expert and past life soul seeker from the UK. She's also my sister and book editor. We talk about spirituality and unhealed ancestry from the perspectives of past lives and cross-generational wounds.

The Lover's Gaze | Amber is a yoga teacher and widow from the States. She tells us what it was like to lose the love of her life while I talk about transforming an unrequited love into one of mystical meaning.

The Revolutionary's Voice | Hassan is former political prisoner and a big brother to me. We talk about life in and out of prison, about silence and neutrality and what it means to find faith in our darkest moments.

The Wise Sage | Nuran is a humanitarian and health coach from Australia. She shares how we can turn our personal adversities into our life's blessings. We also explore what it is like to support someone going through a hard time.

The Ruler's Palace | Agam is a journalist from India who suffered a brain injury and Sottoum a former street child from Cambodia. They share how their tough times have only made them stronger.

The Inner Roadmap

My Inner Roadmap to Humanity introduces each of the 12 Guides in four phases:

1. **Turning Inwards** | Orphan, Caregiver, Explorer
2. **Transforming Pain** | Warrior, Alchemist, Innocent
3. **Mining Wisdom** | Creator, Jester, Lover
4. **Living Truth** | Revolutionary, Sage, Ruler

This journey is told from the perspective of my present day and turning 36. The story is interspersed with flashbacks and memories from my past, and interviews with fellow travellers I have met along my way. I include their voices alongside my experiences and archetypal wisdom to help you reflect on your journey from different perspectives.

The order in which the archetypes appear is personal to me. In my experience, healing is not a linear process and there is no right and wrong way to use the archetypes as guides. It is a process that we can drift in and out of as our everyday life unfolds. We may choose to stay longer in one archetype over another. For example, I spend a lot of time in this book with the Orphan's Wound and the Jester's Tale and less time with some of the others.

Navigating an inner roadmap to humanity is also a spiralling up process. This means that inevitably, at some points on our way, we may recognise the terrain. We may have returned to familiar territory in order to re-learn, unlearn, or consolidate lessons learned previously. This is a necessary part of our healing process. You could liken it to taking two steps forwards and one step back. Examples of this from my own life include:

1. Quitting a miserable job, only to find that my dream job on the horizon wasn't quite what I expected it to be. Neither was the next one, or the one after that, even though it got a little better each time. Eventually, I learned that the pattern would not be transformed until I did the inner work to learn the lessons I needed. The obstacle was never the organisation but rather my choice of interpretation.

2. *Training as a yoga teacher, teaching happily for three years and then suddenly being unable to practice, let alone teach or relax for the next two years. This is a common lesson; we teach what we need to learn. In the end, my yoga practice was transformed when I let the idea of teaching burn to ashes. I deepened my understanding of a yogic path and choose to keep this quietly to myself.*

As the archetypes will reveal on our journey, neither of these experiences were “failures.” I am grateful I was exposed to so many different jobs over the years. At one point I experienced 14 job titles in 12 years and that taught me a lot about how people and organisations think and work. I also cherished being one of Gaza’s first yoga teachers . I taught discreetly from home and learned so much from the women who passed through my doors.

Both of these experiences called forth different archetypal energies. My restless career was driven by my younger inner explorer. As she matured, she began to appreciate the beauty of inner travel and became more stable in one place. My yoga teaching and practice was fuelled by my caregiver, who wanted to help others feel better about themselves. As she grew wiser, she realised just how much she needed to keep this medicine for herself.

This is how life works. We start things and we stop things. We grow attached to identities and concepts and then we grow beyond them. Life changes and if we choose the path of least resistance, so too will we. Change is perhaps the most potent quality of all the archetypes. When we learn to embrace it and drop the labels of “good” and “bad”, it becomes easier to flow through life and enjoy the journey instead of focusing on the destination.

Your Reflections

What is happening in your body right now?

Can you describe your thoughts and feelings in this moment?

What have you learned so far by reading this book?

Why do you want to keep reading this book?

Which environment will best support you while you are reading it?

What needs to be taken care of before you read further?

The Journey

*“There is no difference in the destination,
the only difference is in the Journey.”*

Pir Vilayat Khan

Turning Inwards

PHASE 1

The Orphan, Caregiver & Explorer

As we turn inwards, the Orphan, the Caregiver, and the Explorer will be the first guides to join us. These are essential archetypes for those of us in crisis mode. For many, our first reaction to disaster or adversity is to descend into victimhood. This is the Orphan's natural response to tragedy and we need to take extra care through our Caregiver not to shame or bully ourselves out of this very necessary and human response.

Yet we must also take care not to stay trapped in the victim cycle for too long. It can be a helpful cocoon and container for working with fear, anger, rage, and shame but it is not healthy place to stay in the long-term. The Explorer has many positive qualities that can help us move forwards and while we may need to try a few different routes out to find the ones that work, this adventurous energy can keep us light and curious as we do so.

Beware the shadow sides of the Caregiver and the Explorers! If left uncared for, Orphans - our own and others' - can easily ruin our relationships at home, work, in our communities and even beyond. We must work compassionately with them to transform their destructive emotions into a force for a greater good. Yet if our Caregivers become overly responsible, picking up too many pieces, they can burn out and self-destruct.

We must also be careful of the Explorer's tendency to intellectualise or externalise suffering as we flee emotionally and physically. Perhaps we may find solace in travel, work, or studies as a way of escaping the inner work that awaits us. Such travel and external enquiry can be healthy to a certain point but it needs to be balanced with an inner quest to ensure we are living and acting from a place of truth and authenticity.

“The path of love is a journey into the unknown, into the darkness and wonder that lie within us.”

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

The Orphan’s Wound

It’s late by the time we’re ready to speak. I’ve just finished coaching a client and my recent test results that I put to one side for the session float back into my vision. My pituitary gland is producing excess prolactin and my doctor has referred me for an MRI scan to rule out the possibility of a tumour.

Being programmed for emergencies and disasters, I’ve diligently researched the topic and understand that if there is a tumour, in the worst-case scenario it will be benign. Its removal will require medication, chemotherapy, and an operation where a tube is inserted up the nose and into the brain. I’m relieved there’s no need for any skull cracking but still, the treatment part unnerves me; I barely take panadol let alone anything stronger.

Although I’m well versed in somatic or body-oriented therapies, and am even a trained Yoga teacher, I also have a natural disposition towards living from the neck up. I’m a head-driven Aries; both my sun and moon signs are Aries which gives me a double dose of fire. In moments of crisis, my default is to seek refuge in my mind. There, I can deal with facts, seek further data, and process probabilities. I can also make multiple contingency plans that nobody else can see to ensure my survival and give me the illusion of control.

Living in our heads is also a common reaction to war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity. Being able to anticipate and plan for the worst is a necessary strategy in both warfare and humanitarian work. The social,

economic, and political aspects of our work demand that our minds are kept on constant alert and ready to process boatloads of information. We must always be ready for danger and either seek to protect or attack. We must see the enemy on the horizon and be ready for what she may bring.

Yet the body is a critical source of wisdom for intuitive strategies and survival tactics. Unfortunately, for those of us who have been physically or sexually assaulted, the mind can often feel like a much safer place in comparison to the body, the scene of the crime or multiple crimes. There, using our intellectual and imaginary faculties, we can create parallel lives where we need not fear the earth shattering moments that life inevitably brings to us all, albeit to different degrees.

I put the thought of my MRI scan to one side. There’s nothing I can do about it right now. Throughout the day, I’ve actually been wondering how I will approach this first interview with Mihaela. The Orphan’s journey can be hell; I know, because I lived it for far too long, 32 years, to be precise. So how do I break the news that this is to be our starting point?

And yet I know without a doubt that Mihaela is one of the few people I know who has dived most deeply into the Orphan’s Wound. As a Dance Movement Psychotherapist, she understands theoretically as well as experientially in her body, the pain-ridden journey down and through the underworld that this archetype demands and entails. She knows those dark smelly places that nobody wants to see or touch, including ourselves.

Most people I know will run at the sight of an Orphan coming. If their relationship with their own Orphan isn’t healed, they may subconsciously fear being provoked and therefore seek to avoid such energy. Not Mihaela. She is a fearless Warrior of the heart and will not hesitate to explore with me the vulnerability and child-like neediness that the Orphan carries. I know that she can take care of her and I trust her to undertake this part of the journey with me.

We had met several years earlier on a summer Dance Movement Psychotherapist course in the UK. I had flown in from my last mission to Gaza. War wasn’t far behind me, including my own. It was several months after my divorce and I was saving up to complete the conversion to becoming a registered Dance Movement Psychotherapist (DMP). My dream was to use

this skill in traumatic settings so that people who had experienced the worst of life could once again feel safe in their bodies.

Within this small and intimate group, we had connected through our willingness to explore the political and cultural aspects of healing through movement. We had both questioned the application of Western psychotherapy in diverse settings as well as within ourselves. Like myself, Mihaela was politically astute and able to bridge the connection between culture, politics, and the human body, and we didn't accept theories at face value.

In the years that followed, we connected sporadically through a blog I wrote on violence and traumatic flashbacks. Unknown to me at that time, my writings had inspired Mihaela to keep exploring and telling her truth during her DMP studies. I've since learned this has been the case for many women and some men I've met who were still finding and learning to express their voices. My commitment to compassionate truth-telling is one that has become impossible to hide and carries the energy others need to set themselves free, if they are ready for it.

After Gaza, life had diverted me back to my childhood home in Dubai to take care of my two family dogs. Mihaela went on to complete her studies and become a registered Dance Movement Psychotherapist. I knew her three-year journey to accomplish that had been a tough one. Changing careers can be a financial battle, especially when several years of studies are involved.

"I was in my 40s," she later told me. "I was studying in another culture and language, starting from below zero. Training as a therapist while being in a relationship is demanding. How can you allow yourself to be vulnerable and to protect your partner at the same time? Once I was certified, I suggested to my husband that he should write a book about his experience."

I too have gone through the same but my path took me elsewhere. Instead of becoming a Dance Movement Psychotherapist, as I once dreamed, I retrained as a Health Coach and Women's Yoga Teacher, and studied Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy. These experiences led me to write my first blog. Every week, I sat down and I let my Orphan speak while my Warrior stood by, protecting her as she carefully opened and reflected temporarily on each wound.

After our interview, Mihaela would share exactly what my blog had given her. Apparently, the sharing of my innermost stories of healing from war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity had shown her how to keep her faith. She came to access and embody her inner Warrior, to stay with him and to not be afraid of him. She stood up for her passion to become a Dance Movement Psychotherapist, humanising her Warrior and changing him (he is male to her) from a cruel and destructive force that fought against others into a gentle and lovable one.

As I centred myself for the deep conversation that I knew lay ahead, I let go of any fears about the MRI scan that awaited me the next morning. I saw that these fears were a result of catastrophic thinking, also known in professional terms as 'emergency planning.' Such thinking was an asset in my humanitarian fieldwork but didn't usually serve me in ordinary life. Rather, it left my mind and body in knots and I mindfully unraveled them so I could be present for the call.

In order to connect with Mihaela's Orphan, I had to know where mine was to ensure that we didn't become enmeshed in our collective fears and slip into an emotionally charged abyss or down the rabbit's hole that the Orphan can easily create for herself. She can so easily get lost in the darkness or create a fantasy world to which she can escape.

To avoid this happening, I clear my mind, centre myself in my body, and ask, *"Where is the Wounded Orphan inside of me?"*

I pause in silence, trusting that she was on her way. Soon, an image of her floated to the forefront of my mind. I see a younger version of myself, six months short of 32. Sitting on their double bed, she's looking out of the French windows, past the balcony that touches the glistening bay and myriad of glittery and worn towers around their building. She is alone. They are still married, against all odds, but in a calmer phase of their relationship, and she is questioning who she has become.

I see her clearly in my mind's eye. She is an expatriate housewife who shares a car with her husband. She drops him off at work all hours of the day as his shift work frequently rotates. During the day, she shops for food and teaches yoga. At night, she prepares numerous boxes of food for him to take on his 12-hour work shifts. In between food shopping, yoga, and cook-

ing, she tries to pass time as best as she can, sometimes meeting other expatriate wives or reading for hours in cafés. Mostly, she is waiting, but for what she does not yet know.

She has all the ingredients for a perfect life. There is no need to work as he can financially support them both. But rather than feeling grateful for the abundance of freedom, she dislikes the feeling of dependence on a man she is trying so hard to forgive and no longer loves in the same way. He mostly avoids her and work is always the excuse. He wants her back as the woman she once was yet each time he comes home, he finds another woman in her place. She wants to make it work because it's the right thing to do and she also clings on to the man she thought he once was. Neither will admit it's too late and neither will admit they are wrong.

As I look back on this memory from afar, I see both our Wounded Orphans feeling alone, unloved, rejected, and unwanted; yet living side by side. I see us hanging on to the final threads of a love we once shared, unable to let each other go. We are both weary from fighting one another for so long and now, there is more silence between us than words. A distant silence, an absence of sharing, and two lives put on hold. I've given up the fantasy of being rescued but I don't yet have the energy to spring into action and "save" myself like I used to in the past.

My Orphan is back in victim mode, believing that she is forgotten and that she'll never have a better life. She's stopped dreaming, as it is too painful to think of what she cannot have or what used to be her life before. She has stopped dreaming of humanitarian work. She has stopped dreaming full stop. She can't even drag herself to the gym on a good day and turns to chocolate and women's magazines to numb how painful it is to live without a dream.

After separating for a year, I had returned to try one last time. I had come back with a stubborn mindset that this was it and that I could make it work. I had thrown my entire self into this final battle between us, or so I thought. In reality, I had simply stopped working and tried to come home. But my soul was not yet ready to undertake that journey.

I thought that by being there in person, I could repair all the damage that had been done. The fact that I loved another man was irrelevant as that,

in my mind, was an impossible quest. By then, the man I had come 'home' to knew the story of how he had eventually lost me, or maybe driven me, to this other man. It had been my first and only betrayal, albeit mostly emotional. Yet for him, the emotional betrayal was the worst as it meant he had lost me.

Throughout our relationship I had feared that he would be the one to betray me and yet when he finally did, during our separation phase, I felt nothing. It was a classic example of a Wounded Orphan projecting her fears onto another. Until then, I had seen myself as a loyal partner to the end. I had barely noticed another man from the day we met and even when I was working far from home, the thought of another never crossed my mind.

The moment I first met this other man, I immediately heard a voice within me telling me my marriage was over. The thought was so horrifying that I banished it from my life for the next 2 years. The next time I heard it was the night he sent me the email with the message of YOGA.

Perhaps infidelity was to be my destiny, a point of reckoning on my spiritual path. You see, an Indian astrologist had once told me on my 16th birthday that as a married woman, I would one day be sensually attracted to another man. She said that if I followed this instinct, my marriage would surely end.

Classically trained astrologists would prove to know more about my life map than myself at times. I avoided daily horoscopes like the plague but the proven science of astrology fascinated me.

Years later, another Indian astrologist predicted the year I would marry. It was early 2006. I had just finished my second field mission to Tel Aviv, where I had been conducting humanitarian visits to Palestinian political prisoners. I had returned "home" laden with Palestinian pottery and tapestry works, full of enthusiasm for the life that lay ahead of us. We were in the midst of planning our late summer wedding and my family and I were in India on a much-needed family holiday celebrating my sister's milestone birthday.

Huddled in a dusty astrology office deep inside Rajasthan province, we waited for his next words in anticipation.

"*Congratulations,*" he beamed, poking his glasses up his nose to better see

me. *"You will be getting married - in 2009!"*

There was a surprised pause and then, a nervous giggle. I told him he was mistaken.

"No, no, no," he responded clearly. *"You are the one who is mistaken. The charts do not lie. You will marry in 2009."*

"But my wedding is planned for this year!" I burst out, feeling agitated. There was now an awkward silence. He closed his charts and looked away.

"Ok," he said, as he busied himself with another task, before he dismissed us. *"Maybe baby in 2009."*

2009 was the year I first walked out, after I received his email.

Infidelity is never right; it is never something to be proud of in a marriage and while it may have saved my life, I often wish I had woken up sooner, before I caused more pain.

A romantic betrayal is always a warning that something deeper lies under the surface. After the first and last real physical assault, everything had changed for me. Seeing his fist in front of my face had triggered the release of hidden traumas from my system and rearranged the feeling of truth in my body. Now, I could no longer repress or deny that against all my best intentions, my heart had betrayed us both. I also knew the violence was wrong and that by staying with my limited awareness, I was encouraging it to continue.

Not knowing what to say, I said I needed space; he gave me 24 hours to leave the country. And that's how I arrived back at my parents' home in Dubai with a haphazardly packed suitcase and rush of freedom that first accompanies the telling of truth, if only to myself.

Inwardly, I was trying to process the shock that the man who stood at the centre of all of this was the one who, several months earlier, had sent me the photos of mountains, lakes and rivers, and the message of YOGA.

We had met through work a couple of years earlier and often argued on the job. I had absolutely no conscious idea of how I really felt and this would come to be my downfall.

"Yoga will be good for you," the first astrologist had told me at 16. *"It will help to tame your anger. You are such an angry Pitta girl!"* What she didn't know was that I was angry because I had been sexually violated the year before.

Four years before that, I had fought off unwanted advances from a sailor on board a ship that was docked in town during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, stumbling off the deck with a little girl's lipstick smeared across my face.

Three years before that, I had almost lost my life in a horse-riding accident. I lost the ability to speak for two days due to the trauma and that pattern of not speaking up continued until I reached the other side of 30, after the divorce, when yoga really started to transform my life.

Wounded Orphans so often find themselves in relationship with one another. There is a magnetic pull or spark of attraction when we see another wounded soul. By reaching out to 'save' him or her, we are unknowingly seeking to repair a broken part of us. Yet those sparks can fly if we don't yet know how to take care of our own Orphan's needs. The outcome can be painful and even violent, as in my personal experience.

While survival is often touted as being better than victimhood, it has the shadow effect of keeping us on alert, exhausting our nervous systems, taxing our adrenals, and creating so much stress in our minds and bodies that we either shut down, go into anxious overdrive, or get lost in foggy haze of depression and adrenal fatigue.

Contrary to popular myth, survival mode keeps us stuck in a victim-like cycle. We feel unable to break the cycle, as fear prevents us from harnessing our sense of agency or power. While during emergency phases, our vision may be laser sharp, when such emergency-based being is prolonged, it can get harder and harder to think straight.

I release the memories and they float further into the background. They no longer hurt the way they used to. Instead, another memory takes its place. I see myself driving to teach yoga. It's after the separation, after the betrayal, after I have returned. I should feel happy but instead, I'm groggy from our late night arguments and feeling resentful that the class I was given to teach is so early in the morning. But without my voice, I don't dare ask for the class to be swapped.

I want to be the perky yoga teacher in hot pink spandex, like the ones on the cover of yoga magazines, but without caffeine I can't function, let alone stand on my head. The guy behind the counter at Costa café teases me as I pass by for my regular double shot espresso. He finds it funny that I'm

on the way to the gym, as I tell him. I'm too ashamed to admit that I'm off to teach yoga. I'm still feeling the pressure of what a yoga teacher should act. It's exactly the same trap I fell into with being a wife.

I know the scene that's coming next - the transformation into a caffeinated and bubblier version of me who can move mountains. I'm waiting to see what kind of a class I will teach as that's when the day gets more interesting but suddenly, the memory is cut in two. In the yoga teacher's place sits a 15-year old me. She calls me over and I follow, letting go of the other memory as that too has passed and no longer causes me any pain.

There I am, huddled over my desk which I've positioned in my overly large bathroom. I'm studying for my GCSE's, cradling my first cappuccino with shaky hands. Only I don't know they're shaking as I can't feel my body anymore.

Almost nine months have passed since that night, when I lay sleeping in my bed. I don't yet have the emotional awareness or understanding of what it means to be raped in the middle of the night by a former boyfriend, only the guilt and shame that somehow, I am responsible, just like I was with the sailor at 12. It is the same story I will repeat as a wife, the one where I'm not good enough. The one that says it's not his fault; it's mine. I'm responsible.

The caffeine jolts into my bloodstream and helps me to feel alive. It's a welcome discovery. Without it, I can't feel myself or stay present for my studies as my mind keeps numbing out. But what starts as a small habit to help me focus during my exams turns into a life-long battle to beat the addiction. It's a socially acceptable addiction but nonetheless, it will come to affect my nervous system and how I live my life and it will take another 2 decades before I finally curb it.

This is how you know you have an addiction. At first it feels great and then it starts to control your life. As an adult, I'll need more and more of it to feel myself and to stay present for my life. Being a caffeine addict for so many years will teach me how to relate to drug addiction and feel compassion for people who flee their lives through substance use. Perhaps coffee is less shocking but the desire to escape is the same.

The drive towards perfectionism was also born at that desk, alongside my other addiction. I'd never had an addiction before and now, I suddenly

have two: caffeine and a perfection-driving over-achieving mindset. They both help me to feel in control and much more grown up. They also fill the void that abuse had left me with.

In spite of my inner pain and emotional confusion, I would go on to score straight A's and A stars in my GCSE's, with the exception of Arabic, where I got a C. Years later, I would turn that C around in my undergraduate degree in Arabic, achieving a first class honours and receiving a best undergraduate finalist prize among hundreds of students. Later, in my humanitarian work, my superiors will appraise my efforts as 'excellent' and yet, I will always feel empty and undeserving. There was plenty of evidence in the sector to prove that my efforts always fell short.

Wounded Orphans often grow up to become overachieving individuals who lack an inner foundation on which to stand. Without a healthy self-esteem, the Inner Critic that exists within us will push the Orphan relentlessly towards perfection, creating the fantasy that if he can only get things 'right,' everything will be safe again. If he can be 'good enough', then nobody will hurt him again.

It was this kind of mindset that had kept me locked into the cycle of an abusive marriage. I thought I was being 'perfect' but it rarely translated to the action that my partner needed. His ideal of perfection differed so greatly from my own simply as "perfection" is so highly individualised and idealised within each of us. Meanwhile, his Orphan dynamics were driven to destroy. His shadow Revolutionary often turned on me, tearing my efforts to be perfect to pieces.

Overachieving can become a further burden that drives Wounded Orphans to excess, fatigue, and eventually burnout. Because they have not learned to value themselves, it doesn't matter how many times someone else tells them how great they are, or how much they achieve; inwardly, they will continue to feel alone, abandoned, rejected, and unworthy. They will focus on the negative. The times they failed, the times he said they were unworthy, the times she criticised them.

The Inner Critic will prompt an Orphan to do this not out of sabotage but because he's trying to protect her. He doesn't want her to be disappointed and so he takes preventive action. He will listen to the voices around her,

as my Inner Critic did with my partner's shadow Revolutionary. Learning not to listen to such a voice has been a practice and one I had to draw on when writing this book. I had to abandon any notion that my way was "wrong" and instead, present my truth exactly as I experienced and felt it.

In life, we will always fall short somewhere and failure is a precious lesson to learn. But the Orphan's sense of reality is so misplaced and she puts herself under such pressure, assuming that everyone but her has it figured out. Everyone else is sailing through life except her and so she beats herself more to go faster and further.

Somehow, she has been forgotten and so she must work harder to keep up, to be seen, to be safe. She doesn't deserve anything positive, good things don't happen to people like her. And so her mindset deteriorates into a battle that is at once a state of self-defeat. She perpetually sabotages herself and she's always the last to know.

I place my hand on my heart and breathe space between the painful wiry threads that used to weave their way through my life, electrocuting what should have been some of my happiest moments. I've managed to heal many of my inner Orphan's wounds but still, some remain and I know it will always be so. There will always be triggers and with each one, I mindfully work through the lesson I need to learn. One day I'll simply drop the painful stories but the Orphan will always be there.

We will never get rid of our Orphans; we need them to stay human, to keep in touch with the vulnerable parts of ourselves that help us to empathise with and reach out to others. My Orphan will never disappear and so I've learned to take care of her with the other parts of myself. Like the Caregiver, who soothes her fears, the Warrior, who creates clear boundaries, and the Jester, who tells her funny stories. I need her to stay present for this interview so that I can connect with Mihaela but she must sit quietly by my side and listen.

My Ruler – the part of me that holds me together – takes charge and finally, I'm ready.

Mihaela calls me on Skype, right on time. Holding my Inner Orphan close to my heart centre, I reach out to her Inner Orphan. Within moments, the communication is flowing deeply, just as I expected. She tells me about

her Dance Movement Psychotherapy training and how it taught her to find the free flow in her body and dance consciously with her life, and how ultimately Dance Movement Psychotherapy is about using symbolic movement as a tool to express creatively your inner life.

"The body is our container, Claire," she tells me, starting with the theoretical dimensions of healing our Wounded Orphans. *"It's where we can deconstruct and reconstruct, and allow ourselves to embody another way of being, of different emotions, feelings, and sensations."*

"Through movement, our healing happens from the inside-out. Both Authentic Movement and Dance Movement Psychotherapy allow the inner child more tools for expression than verbal therapy can provide. They allow him to be seen, to move, to speak loudly, to scream, to be alive, to move, to unstick the painful energy and feeling needed to let the pain move and speak."

"Moving from within allows us to bear witness to your Self and in the meantime, you can hold yourself and cuddle and rock your Inner Orphan. To honour him or her and how he or she feels as nobody has done before. And then letting them create their dance, their symbolic dance. Otherwise, it's just a dance, Claire, where is the change? The change is in the symbol!"

"You know," she continues, turning inwards to herself, *"during my Dance Movement Psychotherapy training, I had to re-programme my thinking and way of being. It was like being in a washing machine, full of water, twisting and turning, like the earth being turned upside down and changing poles, like Dante's inferno!"*

"I went deep and was so open. I was the archaeologist of my inner world, discovering layers and layers of myself, discovering gifts, gold and precious gems under my wounds. I felt the rawness of myself, abandoned, alone, without any mechanism of protection, without any mask. Just my Wounded Orphan, there, on the floor, screaming and crying. And me, the Healer, the Sage, the Caregiver, the Lover... supporting him, comforting her, understanding her gently and compassionately."

The conversation naturally drifts between Mihaela's Orphan, her communist upbringing, the healing 'industry', and her expertise as a professional therapist.

"In Romania, most of us are Wounded Orphans and we're used to speaking naturally and openly about our experiences. I haven't found such openness in Western Europe. Here, everything is about healing now but how many 'healers' are really able to

bear our stories?”

Her voice trails off here. She wants to say more on this but there isn't time. Instead, she tells me how at healing workshops, she was reluctant to talk about her Wounded Orphan because in the past, she had felt rejected.

“Who is interested in our Orphans, Claire?” she asks me, knowing that mine too has been rejected often. *“People don't want to bear our victim stories. It makes us feel marginalised and unwelcome. No one wants to bear the pain of a wounded nation either, or the wounds of communism. Are Western Europeans prepared to bear the wounds of their Eastern counterparts? In theory, yes, but not in practice. Theoretically we talk and learn about empathy, compassion but when we start to share our wounds you can see and feel the bodies of those in front of us shrinking.”*

I hear her loud and clear, not only as a Western European who has lived for over 30 years in the Middle East, but also as a humanitarian. For years, I have worked closely with personal and political wounds, bearing witness without turning away. I know exactly how much power for healing can be unleashed if witnessing without judgment is done when a person needs it most. I also know how very few beyond prison bars want to know what's really happening on the other side.

I drift off into another world. It's 2008 and I'm climbing down the black iron-winding staircase, into the depths of a real prison dungeon. There he is, sitting behind the bars of his own makeshift cell. He's asked to be held there for his own protection. His face is pale and drawn but he smiles to greet me as I step inside his world. He tells me how he murdered a relative in revenge for something he doesn't mention, and how the relative's brother is being held upstairs in the common prison cells.

“If he sees me, he will kill me.”

He tells me how his own family has abandoned him. They don't call or visit. He spends every day in this dark and tiny space. Sometimes, he dares to go out – the prison guards leave his cell door open at all times – but mostly, he chooses to stay hidden. Nobody has come down to speak to him in a long time and it's clear he's been unable to forgive himself for his own darkest moment.

Meeting him as a sister human being, there is no judgment in my heart. It helps that I don't know the man he murdered but this is not the only rea-

son why. In my own life, I have had to learn to forgive people who have wronged me and I have witnessed others who have forgiven things much greater. I know that unless I reflect back acceptance for who he is, he will never know what it is like to accept himself.

Witnessing is a key element of humanitarian work. It is also critical to healing the Wounded Orphan. Without gentle and compassionate witnessing, we cannot learn to do the same for ourselves and it is only when we learn this that the mess inside of us starts to clear up.

Ever since my teenage years, I've wanted to train as a therapist yet after completing two years of therapy as a client, and studying psychology, I began to change my mind. I realised that psychological theories didn't always translate to a happier life and that while therapy offers a beautiful container for expression and emotional depths, staying in it for too long can unwittingly keep some of us stuck. I turned to spiritual practice and practical coaching tools in order to live beyond trauma.

Although Mihaela is currently a registered Dance Movement Psychotherapist working in mental health settings and schools with emotionally disturbed children and children with special needs, she tells me that the future is in the therapist-coach, or 'thera-coach,' as one of my previous therapist-coach's prefers to call herself, being trained in both.

“Nowadays,” she tells me, *“therapy is not only about healing, it is more than healing. It is about becoming aware of the wounds, holding them, witnessing them on a body level, expressing them creatively, and then finding the self-agency to move forward, to embody a healthy way of being.”*

I hear what she's saying and I feel myself getting triggered by my own experience in therapy and earlier perception that therapy was *The Way* beyond violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity. I feel so narrow-minded as my own therapy experience could only take me so far in my healing process.

I tell her how getting stuck for too long in therapy and self-analysis was ultimately my motivation for breaking out and into the more practical world of coaching. Life had diverted me back home to Dubai for a reason. Although I had dreamed of becoming a Dance Movement Psychotherapist myself, and one who would run a future healing centre for torture and trau-

ma survivors, it wasn't to be my path, or at least not yet.

Instead, I had accepted and adapted to the path that had presented itself to me. It wasn't the one I had yearned for but perhaps, it was one that that the world I operated in needed more. I had returned home after twelve years of humanitarian work. In the early days, I had trained as a violence and conflict specialist, focusing on the protection of vulnerable people under international law. During the latter half of this period, I moved into media and communications, ultimately retraining first as a Health Coach, then, as a Professional Coach.

The other side of 30 and the aftermath of my divorce had taught me it is the area of communications where most of us struggle. We cannot communicate effectively with others because we don't know how to communicate properly with ourselves. When we repress, ignore, or seek to banish our Wounded Orphans, they become an invisible force guiding us to say and do all the 'right' things so we don't get hurt or left out.

Some of us spend many years turning away from our inner worlds, repressing our desires and trying to be someone we are not. Then, when we wake up, we stumble into the real darkness. From there, we begin to unlearn and shed the layers of the person we once thought would keep us safe. We shed the burden of being someone else and from that lighter space, we can more easily say what needs to be said and trust we can bear the consequences.

There has to be another way, I later thought to myself. We can't stay 'in therapy' for years, trying to heal a past that cannot be changed. Not only is it costly but also it's simply impractical. What we need are the life skills and tools to move on, I thought, and coaching provides exactly that. For me, it was the perfect bridge beyond therapy but admittedly, even though it is now my profession, it wasn't the only path I sought nor the only one I advocate for healing, as this book will tell.

"I wasn't a real Orphan, Claire," Mihaela continues. *"I could say that my parents loved me a lot and did their best to raise me up in a communist period, where there was nothing. But I had a feeling of being a Wounded Orphan and this is why it is important for other Wounded Orphans to find out when they started to feel abandoned, alone, without any support in their life and to have the courage to ask for help instead of*

trying to heal by themselves by reading self-help books. I used to read self-help books but they never helped.

"I also struggled with Western psychological explanations that say we need a secure base in order to live a good life where the secure base refers to a safe container provided by parents or the family. What happens when there is no secure base provided by society or the country, when the family needs are not met? I used to blame my parents thinking that they were not able to provide me with the ideal secure base, but not considering at the same time the lack of secure base provided by the state or society during a communist period. Some of us face overwhelming adversity and yet we manage to live beyond that."

The conversation has flowed effortlessly back to academic thinking. She's talking about child development theories similar to those of Jean Piaget and John Bowlby, where secure attachment is the foundation for a healthy adult life.

Without knowing, she's also touched on one of the fundamental questions of my book, which I anticipate many of my readers will relate to. In Abraham Maslow's triangle, the bottom layer is about shelter, food, and security. Spiritual development, or 'self-actualisation', is at the top. First, we must tend to our physiological needs, then our safety and security, followed by social connections, self-esteem, and self-actualisation or achieving one's full potential.

Such a progression makes sense to a Western mind, at least from a theoretical perspective, and yet my years as a humanitarian in non-Western settings have shown me the reverse.

First, there is self-actualisation, which often comes in the form of a spiritual commitment and practice, the interpretations of which naturally differ from context to context. From there, self-esteem and the ability to relate to oneself and others are nourished. As inner and social connections grow, safety and security stand a better chance of prevailing and in turn, food, shelter, and our other physiological needs are met as a group.

We talk about community and the concept of boundaries and individuation in the Western world, where the 'patient' sits with the therapist one on one to discuss his or her dilemmas or issues. I remember how 'secret' my therapy exchanges were. Confidentiality is key to creating a safe container and yet breaking out of that container was the result of my therapeutic pro-

cess. It was a beautiful but lengthy way of learning to tell the world my truth.

Although I've spent nearly my entire life in the Middle East, my formal education was Western. It wasn't until I came to explore Eastern philosophies as an adult that I finally understood the wider environment in which I had been raised. It was a point of tension between my former husband and myself. He came from a collective society and couldn't understand why I was capable of being so 'selfish'. He saw my independent streak and tendency to hide my inner world as threatening.

As a Wounded Orphan who was well versed in politics, he didn't hesitate to lash out and call me "White" in the political sense, insinuating a history of control and oppression. It tore me apart to hear those words and have the political dimensions of my family's English roots and England's military past thrown back in my face in the midst of a personal argument. There was nothing I could say to such accusations and I often went silent. The personal was always political for us.

What I didn't yet understand was that my family's own history was more complex than either of us realised. It wasn't simply a question of East versus West. There was also a class system in operation. Although I was raised as a middle class English expatriate in Dubai, my family origins are in both England and Ireland's working class, where community can be so much stronger. When we have so little, without one another, we cannot survive. Yet migration changed that way of life for us. We became more individualistic as we migrated away from our roots.

In my post-divorce, I have focused on seeing the human first and later, the political or social story they represent. Often, by then, that story is irrelevant. Once we know someone's heart, their nationality, political orientation and religion hardly matter. They are simply details and social markers of identity but they don't tell you the full story of who that person is and what their potential for learning and connection is. Even they may not yet know that themselves so it pays to keep an open mind.

I find myself reflecting on the power of community to address and resolve conflict, and how we need both the individual and the collective approaches in order to understand life. My mind winds its way back to the time I spent working with centres of reform and rehabilitation, where most

of the inmates were incarcerated for criminal offences, ranging from traffic violations and theft to murder and rape.

Parallel to the legal court system, there was often a tribal system called 'reconciliation committees.' In these committees, the elders and community leaders would gather together with the victim and defendant to resolve the violation in question. While they could be biased in terms of gender representation and lacked the diversity needed to truly represent all the colours of a community, their intention to serve justice as one community body spoke to the intention of staying human even in the most complicated of situations.

The flip side of always being in a community is that our own individual voices are rarely heard. Knowing just how painful this can also be, I keep one foot in the Western approach and the other in what could typically be referred to as a more Eastern approach.

In the discussion with Mihaela, it's clear that 'West' and 'East' are relative to the person in question. Her communist 'Eastern' upbringing required her to be more attuned to the political or collective situation around her.

"I was surrounded by trauma as a child," she tells me. "Other people's traumas then became my own. For example, members of my extended family endured much suffering (war trauma, domestic abuse, loss of loved ones) and without realising it, I merged with their stories. It wasn't until I got older and trained as a Dance Movement Psychotherapist, working with those who experienced trauma, and learning about trauma recovery, that I realised how this merging had occurred, and how this had impacted my life. In communist societies, there is a lived collective story that we carry in our bodies. This story arises from bearing witness and continues until we learn to de-merge."

I take a deep breath as another memory surfaces within me. It's after the separation; during the year I spent wandering. By now, I'm in London, at a yoga teacher-training workshop. I see the woman I was clearly. She's coming back to life after the shock of having to leave her marital home overnight and having no anchor to steady her. She's living out of a suitcase, travelling between family and friends, pursuing knowledge on how to heal the body through movement.

She's sitting in a room with around forty others, mostly women. The teacher breaks everyone up into pairs and she turns to the woman beside

her. The exercise is one in connection and trust. They have to sit in each others presence for about five minutes and read into the other person's life. The person being read is meant to drop her psychic boundaries and allow herself to be read.

The woman I was goes first, reading her partner. She sees a black dog, a balcony, and the beach. It seems like a happy life, which her partner confirms. In excitement, she allows herself to be read. It's a fun diversion to studying the technicalities of restorative practices and she's looking forward to hearing what the woman sees.

As the bell rings, she opens her eyes with a smile that stops on a sixpence. The woman's face is drained of colour. She knows nothing about the humanitarian woman sitting in front of her as they've only just met and yet, she has seen more than she can handle.

"I don't know how to say this," she relays to me, "but I've just seen the most painful images of torture beyond my imagination. A man was being hung, electrocuted, and whipped in a dark dungeon. It was like a scene out of the dark ages. It was agonising."

She begins to shake and raises her hand to share with the group what she has seen. I sit there in disbelief at the story she has read. It is not my own story but rather one of many that I have borne witness to in my humanitarian work. The teacher immediately comes over and positions her in a supported child's Yoga pose to calm her down. Meanwhile, I sit there frozen, feeling forgotten.

My Inner Orphan has appeared. I feel rejected, judged, forgotten, and deemed unworthy of any emotional support. I also feel like I have somehow 'failed.' How could it be that I carried stories that were not my own? How terrible of me to reduce this woman to such a state without even saying a word? What kind of energy was I carrying and who was I repelling away from me? Shame overwhelmed my senses and I wanted to run away and hide.

Much later in my journey, I will come to unravel and disentangle, or 'de-merge' as Mihaela would say, myself from many more stories I had witnessed. But in that moment, all I can feel is horror and shame. I had almost felt 'normal' in this ordinary environment and suddenly, the gulf between myself and the peaceful home that my exercise partner had seemed uncro-

ssable. I was the social misfit, the outsider looking in. I was every inch the rejected child that Mihaela and I had spoken of earlier.

The Wounded Orphan often looks from the outside in, feeling like he never belongs. Someone else is always having all the fun. He feels different and that feeling of being different leads to social isolation and, as Mihaela later added, a lack of hope for him to have a place in the world.

On the surface, he seems connected yet inwardly, his thoughts and feelings are elsewhere. He doesn't trust sharing his emotions with others as he doesn't want to be seen as vulnerable. Being vulnerable gets you in trouble, he's learned. And so, like him, the woman I once was sits there quietly, not wanting to draw further attention to herself.

Wrapped in shame, she feels that she doesn't belong to this ever so peaceful yoga workshop group. Only the unwillingness to express any visible weakness, in other words emotion, keeps her from running out the door, fleeing to a place where no one can find her.

And so, the old me flees inwardly. The teacher doesn't address me and the next day in training, the woman I partnered with is sitting far away. The experience leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. A few more years would pass before I'd learn that I could transform situations like this and prevent myself from falling unconsciously into victim-like behaviours, simply by using my voice and differentiating her storyline from those around her. The Orphan absorbs so many stories around her on top of her own because she lacks the awareness of Self, in particular, of True Self.

Life has never been safe enough for her to feel her way into who she really is and her mindset hasn't yet been freed to help her understand that she - or another part of her - is capable of saving herself. Mihaela and I talk about this and she shares her insights to the process of 'de-merging' from the collective story around her.

"At the end I was left asking, who am I? If I am not the stories I have carried, what is left? I had to reconstruct my identity. I found my professional identity at the end of my Dance Movement Psychotherapy training and called my performed dissertation 'Longing for Identity'. When I am talking about an identity I'm not talking about a branded one, a faked one but an authentic one, born from inside; one that fits me and that I feel comfortable with it."

I look back on the years that have passed since the workshop exercise. My process of separating my own experiences from those I had witnessed as a humanitarian was a messy and painful one, as my Warrior will later tell you. Then, when I was done with that, I reached the layer of ancestry and the story of my great uncle who lived before me. He was tortured badly as a prisoner of war by the Japanese army during World War 2 but this discovery came many years later.

At that point in the workshop, I didn't yet know that the suffering caused by torture ran through the veins of my own family and that perhaps, this was the image she had seen. My Jester would have to wait several years to tell this tale.

Our conversation turns to yoga and how it's an important step in healing but that often, it lacks the social container needed to transform a person. So few people are taught in a one-hour yoga class how to take their practice off their mats and into their lives and communities. Unless the student becomes a part of the wider Yoga community, he or she may never learn that physical poses or 'asana' are just one element of the yogic path.

It's hard in the early stages to figure all this out when you're just going for a one-hour class. Not everyone shows up to class looking for or needing something deeper. Sometimes, they just want to escape or slow down. A moment of peace rather than a lifetime of liberation is what they have come for and this is really all a one-hour class can offer.

I share my recent decision to stop teaching yoga some seven years after I first trained. My quest to understand healing through movement had driven me to this workshop and many more yoga trainings, all of which played a vital role in my development and healing of my Self. I had also taught yoga for a few years and found the privilege immensely rewarding.

Yoga had brought so much awareness to my life and a sense of being. The first Indian astrologist was right. It had absolutely healed my relationship with anger and to this day, I continue with my personal practice. But eventually, this healing led me back to my childhood training in karate. There, martial arts rather than yogic philosophy began to make more sense, even though they are not that far apart.

In stepping back from yoga, and by no longer identifying myself as yoga

teacher, I created space for the seeds that had already planted in my soul many years earlier to flourish and grow. It was to be yet another lesson that there is not one Way, there is only Our Way and as that naturally shifts and changes as we journey through life, far better to tread lightly on our path and be prepared to let anything go in order to travel further. Rigid mindsets don't work on this healing path. It's one of the reasons why I offer eleven other Ways to get you started.

Our conversation turns to the somatic processing of trauma and how it exits the body through shaking. Like myself, Mihaela is drawn to Somatic Experiencing, a process of trauma recovery pioneered by Peter Levine. I share my experience of releasing the frozen state of the traumatic experience my teenage rape had left me with and we share more insights on relaxation at the muscular level, and how hard relaxation can be for trauma survivors.

"It's important to (adapt) understand the political situation around us, Claire, and the way we have been shaped, influenced by it; we are political bodies," she interjects. "By training in a different culture, I become more and more aware of the impact of the political situation on my life. How I had to get rid of some old ways of being, recycle others and build new ones. In a word: to re-shape my Self. How we face the adversity, the trauma, is so important. Reading about Adversity Activated Development, a process and concept created by a refugee-oriented psychotherapist, Renos Papadopoulos, I found out that there are different ways to face the diversity – negative, positive and neutral ones. I have since given a positive meaning to my experience and connect to the strength inside myself. To my inner power."

The interview with Mihaela has brought up so many rich, meaningful, and technical insights to the Orphan's Wound. The Explorer in me wants to divert our journey to focus more on theory and I imagine some of you may also want to do this or have been doing this for years.

There are so many theories I have learned on trauma and somatic healing that I could share and yet the whole purpose of this book is to abandon our dependence on theory so that we can instead find our own. The book is a revolution in itself, an inward revolution of unlearning. I now believe less is more and that after we have learned all the rules, we need to carefully deconstruct them one by one. This has been my way and it is one I offer to you.

“Compassion is the emotional glue that keeps you rooted in the universality of the human experience, as it connects you to your essence and to the essence of those around you.”

Dr Cherie Carter Scott

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Orphan’s Wound in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Orphan’s Wound. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

The Caregiver’s Heart

A couple of days have passed since my interview with Mihaela. Someone beautiful, warm, and caring is trying to find me. She’s a health coach friend passing through town and wants to meet up. I’m finding it hard to respond, as I’m not yet clear within myself what I really need. I’m tired and my entire being is submerged in writing this book. It isn’t a good time to extract myself and leave this sacred space.

Over the past two days, I’ve also undergone and survived the open MRI brain and pituitary gland scan and I’m not ready to talk about this just yet. I also don’t trust myself to hide it around such a thoughtful person. Honestly, I’m feeling a bit shaken. It was worse than my skydiving experience, which I swore I’d never do again.

You see, I thought the ‘open’ part meant I’d be able to see all around me. Not so. Instead, my head was clamped in a cage that held the camera in place. The ‘open’ part simply meant that I could look up into a tiny mirror that reflected back to me the nurse at the end of the machine and the lady in the black box who was running the show.

As they were strapping my head down, my ears were covered with huge headphones and the nurse asked what I’d like to listen to, the radio or Kenny G. “Radio,” I responded, figuring that the banter would be good company as I lay there for 40 minutes. In an instant, Hozier’s latest song, “Take Me to Church,” blasted into my ears. Then, the cage was clamped over my head

and my body was being electronically moved into the MRI machine.

Panic set in. “*Stop, stop!*” I shouted, unable to move my head or hear myself. Images of my grandmother’s recent funeral and cremation had flashed through my mind. This had led to much older memories of preparing my other grandmother for her final resting place, and seeing bodies whose souls had departed lying on those morgue tables that get pushed in and out of the walls like drawers.

In my mind, my mother and I were in the staff section of the funeral parlour. My grandmother - my mother’s mother - was stretched out on a metal bed, clothed in a wedding dress we had chosen a few days earlier as one of my grandmother’s last wishes, and that had been held up against me for size. Around the corner was a little boy, or so they said.

As my mother puffed her mother’s mane with hairspray and scented her body with magnolia, I carefully painted my grandmother’s nails pink. Out of the three granddaughters, I was the one who was most easily available to help and I had willingly agreed. Days earlier, I had flown in from Egypt, where I was in the third year of my Arabic and Persian degree. Being a 21-year old student made my schedule much more flexible than my working sisters.

I was deep in the heartland of my family roots, in a small working class town in Manchester, near to where I was born. I myself had never lived there as I moved to Dubai a few weeks after my birth but we visited every summer. The industrial red bricks were a stark contrast to the sandy and serene environment in which I was raised, and many years would pass before I could really feel my ancestral roots and come to appreciate them as part of my wider story.

The funeral parlour was cold and frosty that morning, and my mother had put on the local radio station in the background to warm things up. There we sat, going about our rather unconventional family burial process the way my grandmother had wished. Jive Bunny and the Master Mixers and her other favourite tunes played in the background. In between, we listened to the banter of the Piccadilly radio broadcasters, Manchester’s first commercial station.

My mother’s mother had been an elegant and sophisticated woman who

had survived both war and intimate partner violence. We shared very similar facial features and personal trajectories. Like me, she had divorced at a young age. Unlike me, she also had three children to care for. Firmly rooted in working class ethics, she took on multiple jobs to support her children while her ex-husband, my grandfather, continued to drink and pursue his life elsewhere. He tragically died young from liver failure and we were never able to meet. As a result, I never learned his story or why he acted the way he apparently did.

My grandmother was one person in my younger years who truly got my sensitive and curious nature. We both loved reading, history, and travel. In her later years, she fell in love with Egypt, where I would one day study and live, and Turkey, where I would come to find traces of my mystical heart. She gave me my first book on the Israel-Palestine conflict for my 15th birthday, just months before the rape.

At the time, I remember setting the book to one side. Only after the violation of my Self would I pick it up again, declaring that I would one day work in Palestinian refugee camps when I grew up. This declaration replaced an earlier childhood dream of becoming a Physical Training Instructor, or PTI, in the army. It set my life on a very different track. Instead of being the one who conditioned soldiers to wage wars, I would become one of many who sought to end them and heal the broken pieces.

I spent over a decade working for Palestine and her people from Gaza, the West Bank, Israel, and Lebanon. There are so many Wounded Orphan stories I could tell about theirs’ and other people’s wars that I have witnessed. But I have told these many times before and I must keep reminding myself that this is an inner journey. Even though my Wounded Orphan feels guilty for keeping the focus on me, I must try to stay with myself because my inability to do this was once the impetus for my downfall.

It is only by taking us to my inner places that I can teach you to find your own. As you have no doubt learned by now, my inner world darts back and forth. Inside of me, there are no straight lines and linear time is irrelevant to who I am at my core. Some stories also have a habit of repeating and sometimes, they never end.

Back in present day, I’m still pinned to the MRI machine bed and all I

can think of is death and dying. I see my 15-year old self, pressed against the bed, unable to move her body as it had betrayed her in her hour of need. It had frozen, leaving my limbs lifeless as he did what he wanted with me. Only my eyes moved. They gravitated towards the dim light switch on the wall, where my soul took refuge. Afterwards, it became hard for her to trust that it was safe to return and she became more timid, often disappearing at the sight of any threat.

"I need to change the music," I gasped once the nurse unlocked my head and I sat up. She switched to Kenny G and turned the volume down. As the saxophone played, tears started rolling down my face. I felt utterly and completely alone. My family was on the other side of the world and since coming home from my last humanitarian mission, some two and a half years earlier, I had struggled to build the kind of close friendships where I felt comfortable asking someone to hold my hand.

Besides, I had handled so many other life events alone that I had many reference points for knowing I could manage it. Parts of me are so strong, even when I'm racked with fear. Life has also taught me that painful moments do eventually pass and that suffering is always a choice.

This streak of courage in me used to surprise people. It was only after my Warrior showed up and my body changed shape that people began to react differently. As I healed, my body took on more of a muscular shape that emerged through hours of karate and fitness training. It was as if the muscles gave way to my emotional strength.

My Wounded Orphan was out in full force and right now, in the midst of her tears, what she needed most was love, not war. Fortunately, years of inner work had led me to create what in Jungian terms is called the inner parent, or Caregiver. I had learned to take care of myself and despite the overwhelming panic, I was able to breathe deeply and lie back down.

With my head once again fixed, my body entered the scanner. For the first ten minutes or so, I was unable to close my eyes. I stared at the tiny mirror, photocopying the image of the nurse at the end of the bed into my mind. My breathing relaxed and the heavy building-like noises from the scanning machine set in. Then, when most people would probably switch off, I switched back on.

Even after so much healing, the memories never leave me. There are always new ones arising that need to be taken care of. This time, images of people caught up in earthquake rubble flashed out of nowhere through my conscious mind. As a violence and conflict specialist, I had worked mostly in prisons and refugee camps, and places of war and political instability. But as a communications manager, I had also covered natural disasters from afar.

At the time, the tragic accounts of the Bagh earthquake in Pakistan and many others that followed had seemed so far away in our press releases. For once, I wasn't the one on the front lines. I was tucked far away far behind the scenes, doing what I can only describe as mundane and routine work to get timely messages out to the public that people were in need. Yet despite my distance from the field, throughout the 40-minute scan, my mind turned repeatedly to the aftermath of earthquakes, wondering if this was what it felt like to be pinned down under the rubble.

Intellectually, I knew this was ridiculous as the sheer weight of the rubble and lack of oxygen alone are just two of many significant differences. But I couldn't stop my mind from wandering far and wide. It drifted in and out of death and destruction, and I realised that for all my spiritual practices, where death seems like such a natural transition, in that moment it felt like the least natural thing in my world. My story had become entangled in catastrophic thinking, my 'emergency planning' default. I wasn't ready to die or to be diagnosed with a tumour, even if the odds were it being benign. I still had so much life left in me to live. I hadn't yet completed what I came down here for.

I left the clinic feeling spaced out. I stumbled into the Starbucks cafe next door, legs shaking, and ordered a strong black coffee. There, I sat for a couple of hours in my own fire, looking and feeling dazed. Intellectually, I knew that my Orphan was terrified and that I had slipped back into an old way of soothing her through caffeine. This is also what it means to heal. Along the way, we will slip back into old and unhealthy coping strategies but with each time, we will become more present to the knots that are still unraveling. We will more mindfully repeat the mistakes of days gone by. I'd eventually quit coffee and tackle my health issues once and for all by the year's end but I had yet to know that then.

This is actually the only way I know to heal and move on; to take a few steps forwards and occasionally, one step back. I don't panic anymore, as I know the step back is simply a reaction to a bigger moment. If I stay present and witness what is happening, and allow it to happen instead of repressing it, I deal more effectively with any shadows that could arise later without my knowing.

The next day, my body had reacted dreadfully to the radioactive dye that had infiltrated my blood stream, taxing my kidneys. Barely able to move my body, my Caregiver stepped in. I canceled my work appointments and an interview with a journalist. I waited patiently for the results to come. As a coach who chooses to live beyond adversity, I was able to stop myself from dropping completely into catastrophic thinking, which is fairly typical of people who have had their resilience worn down by the adversities of life. The stopping part was easy but the absence of a human support network around me made it harder to step more fully into a more positive mindset.

Instead of cultivating a positive mindset from the start, I had chosen to go it alone and it therefore took me a good three days to feel positive from within. Alone, I can always handle it eventually but the lesson of drawing people near and accepting that I don't have to always go it alone is one that I am still learning. Having this self-awareness, I knew I could have opened up and asked for support but I had resisted, not wanting to trouble anyone.

The Orphan has a habit of creeping in silently through the back door, where we can't see her. She becomes a blind spot, quietly doing her work. In this instance, she was reminding me that I had always done everything alone and that if I troubled anyone too much, they might tire of me and then leave me. Separation, divorce, missions, moving countries. She had long learned not to bother anyone as that would bring too much attention to herself or the ghosts that haunt her.

Only later, from firm and solid ground, would I share with my family how afraid I had been. I wouldn't tell them about what I saw in the MRI machine, as beyond writing, there are no words for such memories. This is a typical reaction for many people, especially those of us for whom the Caregiver is so present. We understand what it is like to care for others and what it asks of us. Forgetting that those who love us will gladly show up for us if

we ask, we collaborate with the Orphan and keep our innermost fears hidden.

I may have spent 24 hours in limbo, preparing for the worst and hoping for the best, but I was fortunate. There was no tumour and although my health investigation remained inconclusive in medical terms, the probable explanation for the ongoing fatigue and sudden weight gain seemed much less severe than the t-word.

As I sat down to write about the Caregiver's Heart, I remembered how much we can take on in caregiving roles. Nurses, doctors, social workers and humanitarians are just some of the people who work on the front lines of human suffering, and we each will face different challenges along our way. I find myself thinking of Christoph, who had shared fragments of his humanitarian journey with me, and the day that changed his life forever.

Christoph and I had met in a virtual aid worker wellness group, a place where a small number of aid workers focused on wellness gather sporadically to meet. As I was to learn, on 17th December, 1996, he had been in Novye Atagi, a small countryside village in Chechnya, working as a delegate with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). His role was to lead a team operating in an ICRC field hospital installed a few months earlier. What I didn't know, and what many others probably don't know either - except those who bore witness in some way - is the atrocity that unfolded in Novye Atagi on that winter's day.

"That Tuesday morning," he wrote, "shortly after 3am, I was woken by loud noises in the building. While I was sitting up and pulling on a pair of trousers, contemplating what to do next, the door of my room opened and a figure stepped into the dim light that came through the blinds from outside. Without saying a word, the person pulled out his hand from a pocket, pointed a gun at me and fired a shot. I remember seeing an orange light flare up in the darkness, then a piercing pain, at the same time hot and cold, stabbing me in my chest. Going with the force of the impact of the bullet I let myself fall back onto the bed turning away towards the wall. Then I waited. Wondering what will be next."

That night, six of Christoph's colleagues had similar experiences but unlike him, they didn't survive. The tragedy left him questioning the point of the attack. *"Why deliberately target and kill aid workers who, driven by their passion for humanitarian values go to faraway and often dangerous places to help those who are suffering?"* he wrote to me.

I hadn't faced personally the tragedy that Christoph was forced to endure but my heart went out to him, even though many years had passed. The closest I came to such an incident was being held hostage for a few hours, and receiving an empty threat of kidnap and murder. I had also witnessed from afar the hostage taking of a human rights advocate in Gaza.

Vittorio Arrigoni was a 36-year old reporter, pacifist, and human rights activist. He had been advocating for the rights of Palestinians in Gaza for several years when he was tragically kidnapped on 14 April 2011. As news of his kidnap reached humanitarian and human rights organisations, most international staff were sent home from work and placed under curfew.

It wasn't yet known how serious this incident was and the agencies were taking extra precautions.

The next day, we received a security update. Like others, I was alone at home when news of his senseless murder by hanging came via SMS. My body was stiff from lack of movement and staring at four walls.

As I read the text, my blood ran cold and my body went very still. A heavy calm descended and then, minutes later, an internal stage of fireworks erupted. For the first time since I had faced my ex-husband's fist, fear raced through my veins. Intellectually, I knew I was safe but in an apartment with more windows than I needed, I suddenly raced round checking they were all locked.

In a war zone, it's best if windows are left slightly ajar to absorb the shock of air strikes and rocket launches. This apartment had been hit hard in the last war and many of the windows had been shattered. Although it was situated on the first floor, which is usually against UN security regulations, I had insisted on taking it for the view of the ocean that stretched out before it on the opposite side of the road. It was the perfect place to teach Yoga.

It also reminded me of happier days. As a child, I had grown up on Dubai's beaches and although I wasn't allowed to visit this Gazan beach here for security reasons, the sight of it was enough to help me feel safe. Now, because of this tragic murder, my mind was going crazy with potential scenarios of more kidnapping attempts. It took several days for me to re-establish a sense of inner safety.

Interestingly, while this incident happened during the time I was in ther-

apy, I never thought to mention it except in passing. Sometimes, when major adversity or shocks come our way, we don't find the words to express ourselves for years, perhaps never. There is an innate timing to the process of healing that cannot be rushed.

Vittorio's main message to the world was for us all to 'stay human' and it is one of the key messages of this book. He had a tremendous capacity to witness the worst of human rights violations and communicate these to the world in his parallel capacity as a journalist. It was a tragic loss that shocked the residents of Gaza, just as much as those of us who were guests working there.

Remembering tragedies and moments of intense adversity can bring forth other stories of suffering that we may have witnessed yet remained silent about. Vittorio was not the first man I knew of who had been hung. Another man, many years before, had also endured the same fate yet unlike Vittorio, who had lived for life and freedom, he had chosen to end his life because his freedom had been taken away.

I was in my mid-20s and an ICRC prison delegate visiting a man under interrogation. My role was to check whether he was being treated according to international humanitarian law. During the first visit, he had spoken freely of the ways in which he had been tortured.

"The worst thing is the sleep deprivation, Claire," he told me, "please tell them to let me sleep."

We agreed that in my later meeting with the interrogator, where I could present my findings, I would mention his name and the allegation of sleep deprivation, which is contrary to international law and standards. I was dubious as to whether this would have any impact but I also knew that this was both my role and what he wanted.

The interrogator smiled and took note, without saying a word. The next week, when I returned to visit the prisoner, he told me how he had been punished for speaking out.

"They kept me awake for 2 more days; you have to tell them to stop!" And so together, we discussed the potential consequences of intervening once more. As a politically astute man, he made the choice to press on with another humanitarian intervention, regardless of the retribution that would likely follow.

ow. He believed in speaking truth to power and for now, I was his only voice.

Again, I faced the same interrogator and presented the allegation. I was seething beneath the surface. This time, after I left, they made him 'disappear.' For three weeks, myself and other colleagues searched for him. Then, they called out of the blue and said I could visit him the next day.

Early the next morning, I jumped in the car and drove north for several hours. My insides racked with guilt over what he and his family had had to endure and a strong cappuccino at my side to ground me. I knew logically it was not my fault but still, the guilt was hard to shake off. I turned the car stereo up loud and the voice of Joss Stone boomed out of the speakers. There was nothing to say; I could only act.

As I entered his dark and dingy cell in the remote police station, he looked up in surprise. *"Where did you go?"* he asked me, *"I've been waiting for you to come."*

My heart and stomach sank as I broke into a smile. His face was pale, his hair was matted, and his eyes were glazed over. It was clear he hadn't seen sunlight or a shower in a long time. As the guards closed the cell door, the room went dark. I sat down on the dirty mattress next to him.

"They're hiding someone else," he whispered, *"you have to visit the guy next door. They tortured him too. Nobody knows that he's here!"* I started taking notes and information for his lawyer and family. A few minutes later, another set of guards burst through the door. *"Get up!"* they told him. *"You're being transferred!"*

Suddenly outraged, I stood up and intervened. This was a clear act of intimidation and they had used my visit as bait to show him just how helpless he was. The plot was clear. Bring me here, give him a false sense of security, and then shatter him further just as he let his guard down. They used his ability to trust me in order to break him further.

In that split second, I also knew his fate was far beyond my control. Even if I had thrown my body in front of him to protect him, it would not have stopped the guards from taking him away. Dignity and decisiveness were needed. I stopped arguing with the guards and stood back, remembering the man in the cell next door and that my role was ultimately one of diplomacy, not warfare.

I changed tactics as they removed the first prisoner and turned to the other set of guards, requesting that they open his neighbouring prisoner's cell door. Without seeking the interrogator's permission, they obliged and I was able to see him. Later, I would tell his family and lawyer where he was and that he was in good health.

After I was finally told to leave, I got in the car, called the first prisoner's family and lawyer, and then drove another hour to find him. I knew instinctively where they had taken him but when I got there, the guards denied him ever arriving. I arrived back at the office hours later, feeling defeated and like I hadn't done enough.

A week later, the news came that another man who had been held there at the time of my visit had hung himself. It was only then that I remembered being in the corridor, looking into a room adjacent to the showers, and seeing a pair of feet from under the door. I had forgotten to ask who they belonged to as I was in the midst of arguing with the second set of guards, then trying to get access to the prisoner next door. Days later, those feet would be hanging from the air.

As humanitarians and caregivers, there can be no end to our willingness to give and serve. Our calling is to alleviate suffering, wherever it may be, and given that suffering knows no end, our efforts will always fall short. There are moments when we all question whether we could have done more, when we will blame ourselves for our shortcomings.

Many of us who bear witness to the unthinkable will at some point, like Christoph, be forced to question the meaning of life at the very deepest level. Then, if grace does not befall us, in the years that follow, we will spiral in and out of this intense state of awareness, trying to make sense of what happened.

After reading Christoph's blog entry, I asked him what had happened in the seventeen years since he and his colleagues were tragically shot. I asked him who he was before, and who he had become. He found it a strange question as although he experiences the world and acts differently now, he remains the same person he once was at the very core.

He described his post-traumatic life as having gone through several stages. First, there was the event, which caused injury and threatened life.

“This stage is very short,” he wrote. “Moments. It seems to be a timeless space with a lot of experience crammed into it. It is that initial experience that needs resolution. It is the questions that are created by this initial event that need resolving. And it is the injuries, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual that need healing.”

He remembered the immediate aftermath of the event, when he alerted those around him, before he was aware of the extent of his injury. He counts the medical care as a positive experience and didn't feel alone. But the next day, he was separated from the people who 'understood' what he had just gone through. Due to the extent of his injuries, he was repatriated to Geneva for treatment where the bullet was extracted. Alone in the hospital, few people passed by.

“Eventually, I returned home to my parents. Due to complications, I had to go back to the hospital. The word at ICRC was to not contact me - subsequently very few did. In early January there was a big emergency meeting where the incident was discussed. I could have gone there, but wasn't encouraged to. Because I physically felt weak, I didn't want to push it. Then I decided not to go and almost immediately regretted it. It started an internal conflict which took years to resolve.”

The decisions we make in the midst of crisis are usually the best we can manage at the time. But they aren't always the best ones to serve us long term. Eventually our crisis strategy needs to give way to a phase beyond survival if we're to have a better life but so often we're ill equipped to navigate this terrain alone.

In my experience of being a Caregiver, I have found it difficult to reach out and ask for help. It alludes to a lifelong pattern of repressing my own pain out of fear that it may spill over into someone else. Not yet understanding that there are ways to safely release such pain, I stumbled through life, wondering why I so often felt alone.

Christoph's progression from near-death trauma to regaining control of his life was also a process for him. In the early days, he felt vulnerable and struggled to put things into perspective. In the process, he says he often lost perspective.

“Often my perspective of life was radically different from that of the people around me. The questions around life and death were raw. I could only deal with my own life; I couldn't deal with the loss of or mourn the lives of colleagues lost in the same incident.”

Although I once dreamt of needing to go and visit the families of my murdered colleagues who lived around the world, I never did it. Careful decision making was always part of my life, but the trauma caused a lot of self-doubt and indecision. It became a part of a growing feeling of victimhood, where I made excuses to protect myself.”

Reading Christoph's response touches a nerve within me. After my near fatal horse riding accident, I too became more hesitant. A naturally shy child, I became more reserved and physically stressed. I changed from a very athletic young girl who won numbers swimming medals and trophies into one who became startled when the whistle blew in races. Teenage rape and my ex-husband's fist made my reaction times even worse. I still came out tops most of the time but doing so on an empty tank would almost always wipe me out.

The accident had interfered with my nervous system and ability to react when I am personally threatened. Although I can quickly take action to protect others, when I am in the line of fire I can freeze. This is what happened during the teenage rape. I could easily have pushed him off me.

It's a pattern I've fought hard to rewire in karate. A sudden lunge from my sparring opponent can momentarily freeze me, allowing him or her to score a point, and when practicing katas, or my imaginary fights, so I need to relax and focus twice as hard as the slightest movement or sound from an observer can distract me. How I live outside the dojo is integral to how I fight in it. I had to consciously seek out a less stressful life in order to become a better fighter.

Post-traumatic stress can take time to rear its ugly head. For me, it took almost fifteen years. For Christoph, it waited until his next mission proposal to Peru was cancelled and he was reassigned to Colombia. Once he arrived in neighbouring Mexico, he read about the violence next door. He started to feel insecure. His body shook and his heartbeat would increase. He felt a general state of physical, mental, and emotional discomfort that is hard to describe.

“I felt a loss of control over my life. I felt that I could no longer clearly think and make grounded decisions. I felt weak and sick just from thinking about going to Columbia. That is when I grudgingly gave in and asked to go back home instead of onto a mission. That was also when, for the first time, I thought of and agreed to talk to a psychologist.”

Again, his experience reminds me of what happened in my life but for very different reasons. Once the post-traumatic stress began to show, or perhaps more correctly, once I began to feel fear again, I too was faced with a mission I came to refuse.

During my marital separation, the year before we divorced, I was asked to take on a mission with a medical NGO to the heart of Iraq. This was about seven years after the US and British-led invasion and the situation had become unpredictable and dangerous for aid workers. Years later, I would find myself being trained by one of the hostage release negotiators who had tried to save a kidnapped aid worker's life in Iraq. Her team's failure to do so had sadly taught her what needed to be done differently in aid organisations and such training had since become her life's purpose.

Although the mission I was being offered was one I had dreamed of - setting up a psychosocial programme for people affected by war - I was too afraid to take it. By then, news of aid worker beheadings had reached me, and a light threat from my earlier prisons days came to mind.

"If we see you there in Iraq, we won't hesitate to kill you," they said to my colleagues and me. Their issue wasn't with us, it was with our governments and so I didn't take them seriously at the time. I shrugged it off as an angry moment but later, it came to haunt me and psychologically, I couldn't drop it, which meant defeat before I had even begun as one of my basic criteria for any mission is the absence of fear. If I'm afraid and I know it, I cannot do my job. And so I said no to the mission, sharing my fears with the head of delegation.

He tried to persuade me, giving me every reason to believe that I would be safe. But for once, I couldn't go there. My somatic assessment of the mission was a clear 'no.' It was only after I wrote this book that I could finally say yes and visit the northern part of the country, where I met people who had fled the very violence I had feared would be my fate.

As Christoph experienced, the physical wounds are easy to treat. Like his bullet wound and my childhood broken bones. What people can't see are the invisible psychological injuries trauma can leave us with. Christoph's employer was unable to address his non-physical wounds, which left him in limbo for so many years. Although his physical injuries had been tended to,

the administrative response was cold and distant.

"Thus started a period of uncertainty and disorientation," he wrote. *"Employment counselling was deeply unsatisfactory. I could not connect to being unemployed, or looking for work. Lurking just beyond the confines of my clear thinking were questions for the meaning of life. I felt fractured. I was listless, aimless and uninspired. It took another three to four years to find direction and a way forward."*

Ironically, Christoph decided that the only way he could resolve anything was to "get back on the horse" again, to go back to ICRC and do another mission in a safe location, and complete it properly. He saw that he was still tied emotionally to his employer. Subsequently, he was sent to Iran in 2002 for six months, which turned out to be a real healing experience.

"I went into the field, and returned unharmed. I completed my employment relationship properly, and was able to let go. As a result I was suddenly able to look for work, apply and successfully get jobs. I decided to leave the world stage of aid work and concentrate on small scale local community development work."

Christoph's life thereafter has many rich twists and turns. In December 2007, he was awarded the Henry Dunant medal for his devotion to humanitarian work, both before and after the Novye Atagi tragedy. He felt like his experience had been turned into something positive and that he had been witnessed in his readiness to promote humanitarian principles at the deepest of levels, which is to put our lives on the line for others.

He went on to lead the Mandela Foundation, combining his management and humanitarian skills with his insights into trauma. He has started to ask, *"How can I best use my story as a resource? With that I mean the whole story, not just the seconds of the impact of the bullet. I don't like the label of 'survivor' - it sounds too much like victim."*

Later, in our follow up email exchange, Christoph tells me that my questions prompted him to review his story and write it down in much more detail than he has ever done before. He learned that he had focused a lot on the negative, not mentioning some of the positive things like his increased understanding of what it means to be human, and some of the questions he has since faced around life and death.

"There definitely has been good stuff since then, too, like starting a family, and having children," he tells me. *"And in fact, as I'm writing this I'm in Geneva, in-between"*

meetings with the Red Cross, I'm informing myself about what they do in terms of stress and psychosocial wellbeing, as well as scoping out options to work for ICRC again. After more than 18 years, the circle seems to be closing in on itself again once more."

His words leave me reflecting on how my life has come full circle, how in leaving humanitarian work I have come back home to the place where it all started. For two and a half long years, I have worked my way through the many lessons life has brought my way. Like Christoph and others I have interviewed for this book, I have brought a Warrior's Spirit into my healing process and finally, I am free.

It's late and I'm still wearing my karate suit from training that ended hours earlier. I get up from my chair and switch on the last song on YouTube that was playing. It's Ed Sheeran's song, Bloodstream. I begin to move, breathing deeply from the core of who I am. Spontaneously, I start to spin in circles and I enter another realm.

I know the image well; it's one I remember fondly every time I dance in circles. I'm two years old again, and I've just stepped out of the shower. I'm spinning around with a towel on my head, copying my elder sisters and feeling elated. "Be careful," my mother tells me but it's too late. The towel slips and I fall, cracking my head against the side of the drawers. Blood spills everywhere and soon, I'm in the emergency room at a nearby hospital.

As I spin in present day, I bring my left hand to the deep scar at the top of my forehead. It's still there. It was the first sign that no matter what came my way, I would always survive and recover from each fall. I've learned to take care of myself better but still, the scars remain.

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Caregiver's Heart in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Caregiver's Heart. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

"Bringing curiosity allows a kind of spaciousness to envelop even our most difficult experiences. We are no longer so caught up in "me and my difficulty," but more able to relate to the difficulty from a larger sense of what life is."

Ezra Bayda

The Explorer's Quest

The day after Christoph's email reaches me. I take a long trip to the other side of town to figure out one more piece in my elevated prolactin puzzle. My inner Explorer is out on another quest but unlike previous years where the goal was usually humanitarian or someone else's health and wellbeing, this time, it's my own.

Our family gynaecologist is a lovely Iraqi doctor who has known me since I was a little girl. I show her the results and explain my symptoms. Gaining a few kilos for no apparent reason, despite watching my food and exercise, frequent fatigue despite getting enough sleep, and a mind that gets a little fuzzy sometimes.

She listens to me reeling off the results of all my blood tests and the MRI scan. I must sound like a mini doctor in the making, assessing my results as I go. I finally reach my conclusion: while my current life is designed exactly how I want, I could be struggling with the aftermath of humanitarian work, perhaps parasites as I had told the first doctor, who wouldn't listen. The self-diagnosis continues.

"Perhaps I have chronic or adrenal fatigue," I wonder aloud, forgetting what kind of a doctor I'm sitting with.

At this point, she intervenes. *"I'm sorry to ask a personal question, Claire,"* she says, in her typically polite and thoughtful manner. *"But could it be that part of your fatigue is that you're not married and settled down yet?"*

The rather unscientific family-oriented question stops me in my tracks.

What she really means is, aren't I tired from having to do everything myself and, aren't I wondering why, as I approach my 36th birthday, I don't yet have a family of my own. The big D-word, divorce, remains unspoken.

"Of course I notice that," I admit, *"but it isn't the only thing on my mind."*

She then suggests taking up breathing exercises and yoga while we run other tests on my unexplained prolactin level. I respond that I already do that daily, reminding her that I used to be a yoga teacher.

"Ah yes," she smiles. *"Now I remember."*

I leave the clinic feeling out of sorts. She's touched on something and I can't quite put my finger on it. Coming from Iraq, she is well aware of what war can do to a person. Her entire family has been affected and surely she must understand the link to stress that I had mentioned. But she hadn't dwelt on it. Instead, she had asked a very simple and direct question, stripping away all the analyses and getting back to the basics of life, of what it means to be alive.

Later that day, I meet with an old coach friend from Poland who is like a dear sister to me. After sharing her news, she asks me how I really am. She isn't expecting a superficial 'fine' or 'good,' she actually cares and wants to know the truth.

I find myself recapping the past six months, setting up my coaching business, navigating the legalities, taking on clients, and making sure they get the support they need. I mention the ongoing health blip casually and her eyes widen with concern. She digs a little deeper and asks what the core feeling is. I answer without missing a beat. *"I just want to feel like I'm safe at home,"* I respond.

"What would help you get there right now, Claire?" she asks, intuitively sensing that my first answer is the right one.

I find my mind drifting to the large house in which I live that used to be my parents' home. Other than my home office and gym, which are beautiful places to be, the rest of the house feels like it is full of ghosts. I reassure her that I don't mean haunted, rather that I'm home but nobody's here anymore. Only the memories remain.

Two and a half years have passed since I left my last field mission to Gaza and still, I can't fully settle. I've been immersed in humanitarian work

and running a solo business makes me think I have to be on the ball at all hours and even when I don't, it's hard to switch off.

I love my coaching business and how I'm now serving the world but I'm so aware of the absence of feminine energy in my life. My masculine traits are amplified to the max to make sure I don't fall behind. Coaching is the ultimate journey for a seasoned Explorer like myself who loves to travel. But instead of taking off like I used to, I stay present and together, we explore what's going on for me.

I tell her about the new Karate student who just joined, a black belt more senior than myself who is so masculine in his decisiveness and timing. Last night he was teaching me footwork and I felt myself relaxing in class for a long time. I've been the most senior student and am often being trained alone. It has felt like holding a lot of masculine space and I've needed to lean into someone closer to my peer level. His presence or footwork lesson reassured me and she gets it.

"So, what you really want is to run your business in a feminine way?"

Like the Iraqi doctor, her question stops me in my tracks. She knows I've spent the past four years studying and living Jungian psychology, learning about the feminine and the masculine, living in harmony with the seasons, and practicing business in a feminine way. What she doesn't yet know is that a spiritual awakening I still can't get my head around led me to surrender my last yoga teaching certificate, just a few months after it was granted.

Rationally, it didn't make sense. My Explorer, who also loves to learn, had spent years training in different styles of Yoga, travelling far and wide to find the best teachers and learn what I could. I had invested so much time and money that the logical payback for my efforts would be teaching restorative yoga to recuperate some of my expenses, not to mention sharing some of my precious wisdom that so many women, and men, need. But it was never about money, it was always about love.

As a teacher, I had lovingly taught yoga to stressed out women on mission for two years in my free time, not charging for a single class. These women, like myself, had been exposed to war, many of them to much greater degrees. They were sister humanitarians and human rights advocates, students, and mothers. All of them were looking for a safe place to unwind and

let go. All of them came for a reason and yoga was simply a starting or ongoing point for their healing to occur.

I relished upturning every stone and exploring every nook and cranny of healing trauma through movement so that I could share it with others. But after the mission was over and after I had come back home to Dubai, the desire to teach had suddenly declined and for about two years; I had no longer felt called to lead classes or even engage actively in women's work.

For over a year, I could barely practice yoga and returned to my childhood passions for karate and fitness. As I continued to heal, I remembered that my dream was never to teach yoga. It was simply a vehicle for healing through movement and I myself had moved on. I had found smaller ways to practice yoga, like fifteen minutes of yin yoga in the morning and ten minutes of meditation at the end of a long day. I had loved the yoga community but eventually, my Martial Arts background began to make more sense.

There is another physical aspect to healing from violence that sometimes requires the expression of rage and anger. Creative therapies such as Dance Movement Psychotherapy and Dramatherapy can provide safe places in which these emotions can be explored both individually and in group settings.

In my view, Martial Arts practices take this process so much deeper. Nothing can ever replace the healing I found in facing a man's fist repeatedly after I had come home. In the dojo, or training hall, we learn to fight and defend ourselves. I have had to work incredibly hard to unprogramme my reaction to freeze or hesitate when a punch comes my way. I was fine with kicks but any sign of a fist before my face made me vulnerable to attack as I couldn't get out of the way or defend myself quickly enough.

For a while, we sparred in a squash court, which is a fairly small space in which to move. I was repeatedly cornered against the wall and forced to face a man's fist. Years had passed since my ex-husband's attack but my body had yet to heal from that moment. I needed to face it again and again until I learned to let it go.

Yoga is a beautiful practice but like any healing art, it is not a panacea for all ailments and conditions. It gave my students and myself a safe container in which we could all rest. My short but meaningful practice continues to bl-

ess me with a much-needed refuge. But the truth is that it no longer defines or directs me. It has joined the realms of sleep and brushing my teeth; activities that I need to do daily to support my general health.

I bring so much of what I learned through yoga into my karate training. For example, yoga taught me to build a daily practice at home. It taught me to take responsibility for my learning process, to make the time to read its rich philosophy and question how it related to my life. It taught me to show up even on bad days.

Because of this, my karate training is not only something I do with my teacher or in class. It is a life I choose to lead each and every day. I take responsibility for the fitness levels it requires. I take my practice outdoors and into my home gym. I make sure to educate myself on its philosophy and I continue to enquire what it means to be a black belt martial artist in my everyday life and work.

Physical training is one thing but as the founder of my karate style, Gichin Funakoshi, once said, *“Karate is about character and spirit, and not about the fight. It starts and ends with respect and is a life-long pursuit.”*

Because I reflect and ask these questions, I think twice about my romantic relationships, which have always been my Achilles heel. I have learned to tell when I am and am not safe. No amount of yogic enquiry could have ever given me that but it provided me with the pathway to find my way back home and once I was there, I could remember the girl I once was. The 12-year old who showed up for her first class and whose spirit was damaged three years later.

I continued sharing my innermost thoughts with my Polish friend. I needed the feminine in my life but my quest was to bring her energy back into the martial arts, not yoga, and it wasn't only about allowing myself to be taught footwork by a senior male student. It was also a practice in give and take.

During the same class, I had led us both through kata practice. My practice was more evolved than his, simply as he'd been out of training for a while due to an injury and physically, I was a lot fitter. This exchange of energy within the same space was deeply soothing and reassuring.

The dance of the feminine and masculine is really about the flow and

exchange of such energy. It isn't about being a male or female or really anything to do with gender. We all have elements of both, to very different degrees. There is a healthy feminine, who nurtures and a less healthy feminine, who drives herself to burnout. There is a healthy masculine, who holds space and protects and a less healthy masculine, who seeks to control.

Since my divorce, I've had to mindfully cultivate the healthy versions of both so that I can better show up for myself. And right now, I needed my Polish friend's gentle reminder that I may be falling into the traps of the unhealthy masculine, which in this case, means having a rigid and linear mindset of how my business and life should be run. What I need is to exhale into the space around me, to release some of the knotted tension I have been carrying deep down in my muscles and bones.

Feminine energy is the essence of the Caregiver's Heart. It is the part of us that knows how to ebb and flow with the seasons. It reminds us to take rest while navigating stormy waters. It is the part of us that reaches out to connect with others and share our innermost stories. It takes a Warrior's Spirit to allow a Caregiver's Heart to open and ripen into maturity.

I know deep down that my seemingly haphazard decision making processes aren't making sense on the surface. It looks like I'm rejecting the medicine I have been trained to teach and yet, I'm living every ounce of it wholeheartedly. I practice the dance of the feminine and masculine daily but sometimes the footwork is a little more than I can handle, even as a black belt martial artist.

My friend sees this and invites me to open my heart. *“What would take the ghosts away, Claire?”*

I pause and explore my inner world further. In my mind I see how I'm living only on the ground floor of my home. Upstairs is so empty. In Jungian dream work the rooms of a house represent the different rooms of our psyche. I've been grounding myself through my business and fitness practices. They've been essential anchors after the divorce and decade of fieldwork was over. But upstairs has been empty and for the past month, my bathroom has been ripped to shreds due to a burst pipe.

As I learned to live without the domestic and global explosions I had experienced in my past, I also needed to continue to earn a living. Like so

many humanitarians, there was no immediate family unit of my own to welcome me when I returned home. I accepted this was the way it had to be, rolled up my sleeves, and got on with it. People and places had changed and deep down, all I could feel was the empty shell of a life that once was.

Yet it isn't just the house I live in now; Dubai, my childhood city, has become a ghost town to me. My old house that I grew up in, and was eventually violated in, was torn down. New buildings have grown up around it. The pace of life has quickened. I'm here in person but my soul is hiding out somewhere in the distant past. Sometimes I go to the land where my old home once stood as the few minutes of pain I endured there can never take away all the happy memories that came before it.

I see my 9-year old self, stood at the side of the road. She's carrying two little dogs, one under each arm, and is walking barefoot across the road to the beach on the other side. One dog is slipping down past her hip. It's hot and she's burning her feet but she doesn't care. On the other side, she lets them both down and together, they run towards the waves. This was before the horse riding accident, when she still felt safe in her world.

I tell my friend that I need to create new rooms. I have to bring something back to life; I need to "energise" my space. *"Why don't you turn upstairs into an art gallery where you could display all your own works,"* she suggests gently, knowing my passion for painting Arabic calligraphy.

I smile and inhale deeply. I see how bare the upstairs has become since my parents left. I see the possibility to change my immediate circumstances by bringing more of 'me' into my environment.

Then I exhale and let go. The words of the first man I loved echo in my ears. I was 17 and he was 23. A boxing teacher outside of work, his footwork was impeccable. As a young boy, he had danced between life and death on the battlefield of Iran's civil war. Unlike the man who had violated me at 15, who was also born to war not too far away, he understood and lived a code of honour.

"Don't let your environment change you, Claire," he would tell me often. *"You change your environment."*

That night, my mind wanders to an earlier interview with an old prison colleague friend. Like myself, Yasmine has spent years working in tough and

complex areas. For her, mountain biking, or MTB as she corrects me with a smile (I keep calling it MBT), has provided an open road, not to mention life lessons. Although she's worked in some of the toughest places in the world, including prison systems, she tells me that her biggest share of trials were actually in her interpersonal life.

"I dealt with a very abusive father, my parents' divorce and drama, a generally difficult family environment and having been enrolled in an ultra-conservative, rigid, middle class Egyptian schooling system."

MTB was to be the trail that brought her home to herself. *"I started riding almost two years ago,"* she writes to me, *"for pretty much the same reasons many people start a sport in their thirties; to get fitter and shed a few pounds."*

Like many people, she had endured a difficult childhood and intense adolescence. She didn't have the chance to engage in sports as much as she wanted and it was only in her late twenties that she became a regular at the gym. She gravitated towards the weights section, feeling proud of the amount she could lift and squat. It gave her an adrenaline rush.

But some years later, her gym routine felt monotonous and after working all day in a stressful job, she felt reluctant to enter another closed space. The eerie trance music and often alienating social attitudes of gym-goers didn't help. Her body needed much more than an hour on the treadmill or resistance training.

"So a friend suggested we go mountain biking at Wadi Degla protectorate," she continued. *"It's a canyon in the South of Cairo only a ten minute drive from home. We would usually ride a few kilometres of flat off-road gravel during the weekend and take pictures. It grew on me and a few months later, I was waking up every day at 5am to hit cold winter desert trails at 6am sharp."*

Yasmine tells me how by following this one venture her enthusiasm for life and living increased. She came into contact with other readers who were also passionate about MTB and found herself a training partner.

"Riding in the desert was really magical, every day the trails looked different. The clouds would reflect different shapes and shades against the sand and stones. Some days the blazing yellows and browns were more prominent under the scorching sun. . On cloudy or foggy days, tints of grey made me feel like I was riding on the moon with the wind cold and cunning and other times fresh and liberating."

She continues, explaining how her body started to adapt to waking up earlier and being outdoors. “Every day was different; everyday my body was different. I was faster, slower, in tune, tired, on an adrenaline rush or just serene. It was the only time of the day when I felt I was most true; true to myself, true to what is real which, for me, is nature. My lifestyle slowly changed, with friends and family knowing they wouldn’t find me awake after 8.30pm in the evening. Soon, the nonsensical nature of my work mattered less.”

She began to see how nine years of working on project management and healthcare for a development organisation had worn her down over time. Writing reports that nobody would read, working for a noble cause within an organisation that endured poor management, and living with perpetual job insecurity above and beyond the hours that she was paid for, with very little appreciation, had skewed her take on what mattered in life. Outdoors, on the trail, she grasped that there was more to life than work.

“On my bike, I noticed the turquoises, lilacs and pinks of dawn silhouetting on the light beige curves and turns of the mighty desert, the magnanimity of time and the infinitesimal insignificance of the average human life as you could catch shells lying on what used to be the bed of a lake millennia ago. In the natural world, countries don’t exist; there are no ceilings, no borders, no boundaries, just flow.”

“Humans created constructs like governments, institutions, and humanitarian organisations to exert pressure to control the flow in one direction or the other, to alter the natural order of things, to control others, to manage life. Mountain biking allowed me to have this intimate contact with nature and all I had to do was go with the natural flow of the terrain, of my environment, to simply enjoy my ride without any pretensions or big expectations.”

Reading her words afresh after inviting the feminine back into my daily life made me breathe a little deeper. I remembered my own experience of working my knuckle bones to the grind. Much as I was grateful to have had the opportunity to contribute 12 years of my life to humanitarian work, the fact that humanitarian organisations are superficial constructs for giving that are often riddled with inefficiency had not bypassed me.

Somehow, as a planet, we’ve lost touch with what it means to give and receive in harmony with nature. Nature never gives or takes more than what is needed. It isn’t greedy, nor does it rush. Like the Tao, it allows life to take

its natural course. And yet so many of us spend our lives clocking hours, creating and feeding into rigid systems that have a habit of breaking down over time, rarely questioning where all this is going and the deeper meaning of life.

Sooner or later, if we work hard and long enough, we too break down. I remembered my periods of semi-burnout years earlier, times when I had shown up and delivered when I was not present to myself, let alone to those I loved. Only my stubborn mindedness and the ability to explore had saved me from tipping over my breaking point.

Like Yasmine, I too had found freedom in exploring movement. Exploration had also prompted me to go beyond political borders, stepping out of my comfort zone and into the lives of others.

While I worked with Gaza’s refugee populations and taught Yoga in my free time during the week, on allocated weekends I would journey out of the enclosed territory and into Israel. As UN staff members, we weren’t allowed to walk freely on the streets of Gaza or come and go as we please. Every movement had to be radioed in for our ‘security’ and we travelled in armoured vehicles with tinted windows. I despised the formalities but there was very little I could do.

Israel was not an alien territory for me. I had lived in Tel Aviv for a couple of years while conducting humanitarian visits to Palestinian political prisoners held by Israel. I had also lived and worked in Occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank for a couple of years, and been an international human rights campaigner on Israel-Palestine in my mid-twenties. Politically, my mindset was clear and yet this time, the journey of inner exploration through movement had invited me to open my heart and go where I had never gone before.

My first foray led me to a Zen workshop at the Integral Dojo on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Two months after my divorce and arriving in Gaza, I walked through the doors of this simple and spacious Aikido studio. In those months, I had moved house three times and endured my first experience of Israeli air strikes in years.

I was feeling ungrounded, unsettled, and unsure of myself. I hadn’t yet found the courage to tell my new colleagues that I was divorced and had thr-

own myself into teaching Yoga to both hide and pass the time. Being a Yoga teacher saved me the dilemma of having to explain who I was outside of work. It was a convenient title and placed me neatly in a box of seeming self-awareness.

To my peers, I was the one who had ‘awakened’ and learned to live life differently. Indeed I had woken up but to practice that awakening day in day out took every ounce of strength I had left in me. There was also the reality that one month prior to my arrival in Gaza, I had been a married woman. Then, in the space of a week, I was suddenly divorced and homeless. I didn’t actually know how to break this news to anyone and so, for three months, I lived in a no-man’s land, unable to acknowledge my newfound status in life.

A stressful New Year’s holiday had led my then husband and I to finally call it quits after almost nine years together. On our return, he pursued the divorce with a renewed sense of purpose when I refused to abandon my quest to return to Gaza and I followed, nodding my head in all the right places. We finally found a Sheikh willing to divorce us but first, we had had to endure an hour of marital counselling. For once, we were united in our desire to set each other free and together, we worked on the Sheikh’s conscience to allow us both our freedom.

The Sheikh was an older man, seemingly wiser and with a compassionate heart. He took an interest in my frustration that I couldn’t find work in this tiny town, and that my passion and purpose was to make a difference to others. He understood my ex-husband’s temper and how it affected me. I began to relax, seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Just before he agreed to divorce us the following morning in court, he turned to me with a final question.

“You realise that if I grant the divorce, Claire, there is a good chance you will end up a very lonely woman. You won’t have children to take care of you; you may very well die alone.” He didn’t mention anything of the sorts to the man sitting next to me, the man I had just shared a large part of my life with and who would remarry in less than a year.

Mustering all the pride I could manage in that moment, I reached into the depths of my being and looked him squarely in the eye. *“I’ll be just fine,”* I told him. *“Don’t worry about me.”*

Early the next morning, I walked out of a busy courtroom with freedom – my blank canvas – on the horizon. Several days later, I arrived at my parents’ home with two suitcases in tow. Three weeks after that, I arrived in Gaza and began a new work function. Six weeks later, just as I had begun to settle into my new home, an unforeseeable set of circumstances meant that a group of us were forced to leave the building in which we lived.

I passed through three homes in less than three months and it had left me feeling uprooted. Other than what was necessary, I was unable to communicate a word. I worked hard, slept, ate, and taught yoga. That was all my fragile state of mind and heart could handle.

Deep down, I was afraid of being judged as a divorced woman. I was only 31 and while my state of freedom elated me at times, it also tested me. It had come with a price that would haunt me for years. I would have to unravel and release my judgments of what a divorced woman was, overcome my fears to rebuild all that my marriage had shattered in me, and rebuild my identity. It would echo the de-merging process Mihaela and I had spoken of.

One day, not long after I had arrived, I found myself sitting on an upturned bucket in what the aid sector typically refers to as a ‘female-headed household.’ The woman had divorced the same month as myself but that’s where our stories took very different turns. She lived in war-induced poverty with her nine children while her abusive husband had taken off to marry another woman. The windows in her tiny home had been blown out in the last war, which had long ended.

Winter was coming and she was afraid for her children’s health. Yet that was not her only concern. I only had to look into her eyes and see how her body was sitting to know that she was both shocked and shattered from within. The kitchen was bare and her fridge contained only a small bag of flour. No doubt, her and her children lived off flour and contaminated water.

Her eldest daughter, a 12-year old, came to sit beside her mother. Something about her body language told me that she was no longer innocent. I saw in her mother fragments of my adult self and in her, pieces of my broken child. I paused long enough to let that realisation sink in before my colleague and I added up the assistance our organisation could offer.

Later, on my yoga mat, long after my class had ended, I lay in savasana, a relaxing pose. The electricity had cut as it often did and the room was dark. I remembered the woman and the young girl and allowed myself to cry for them. As a humanitarian, it can be hell to realise that we cannot change everything; we can only alleviate suffering for a while. Alone, we cannot change the political systems that create the turmoil and destruction but we can choose to change the wiring of our hearts to help us find another way.

Feeling self-conscious, I did my best to blend into the group of Zen workshop participants. I sat on a cushion in the middle row, pulled my notebook out, and figured I could spend the next two days meditating and taking notes. I dreaded someone talking to me, asking me who I was and where I came from. I planned to come and go quietly and maybe, just maybe, take a little inspiration out the door with me. At best, nobody would notice me.

The opening talks by the two visiting presenters, Thomas Huebl, a contemporary spiritual teacher, and Diane Musho Hamilton, a gifted mediator, facilitator and Zen teacher, reeled me in. I was captivated as they shared their individual and complementary philosophies on living in this world. Both were fully aware of the violence that surrounded us and yet their message to me was one of peace.

I was so accustomed to violence in my personal and professional lives that the very thought of peace seemed like a fantasy island I would never reach. I felt alienated from the group, as if I was on the outside looking in, remembering my last workshop experience.

Later that day, Thomas led us through a walking exercise. We were to walk around the room and notice another person walking, then look deeply into their eyes for a longer period than usual. I stood up and fled to the outer edges of the group, planning to bypass everyone. My mind was suddenly in chaos and my body was resisting. I felt like a robot walking and could barely breathe.

Out of nowhere, my eyes met a young man with the largest eyes I had ever seen. As we had been instructed, he paused to look into my eyes. It was the most intimate moment I had experienced in years and something inside of me broke. I forced myself to look back, holding back the tears that were starting to form behind my brow as my unknown partner held space for us

both.

The thought that he most likely had served in the Israeli army flashed across my mind. I saw the army prison camps where I had visited so many political prisoners who had been mistreated. I remembered my colleagues and friends in Gaza whose lives had been devastated by the frequent wars and attacks. I remembered the air strike that had landed near my building at midnight a few weeks earlier, shaking me out of bed.

My mind raced through scenes of violence until I found my former husband's fist staring me in the eye, and the flashback to the teenage rape it had triggered. It was as if someone had shown me on rewind all the moments of my life and work that had broken peace, my own and that of others.

After the exercise, Thomas asked for feedback and I bravely raised my hand. Shaking and yet to develop my stem of resilience that Mihaela and I spoke of in relation to the Wounded Orphan, I shared my insights on the violence I had just seen. *"I'm filled with violence,"* was all I could say. It was the first time I had voiced myself in years.

Remembering this moment, several years later, I now believe that something critical shifted inside of me that day. I awoke to the possibility that I could experience the hell of violence in a group, to share how afraid it left me, and to not be taken advantage of, pitied, or rejected. Instead, my reaction was welcomed by the acknowledgment that I existed, along with my feelings and thoughts. There was no judgment or rush to 'fix' me and by allowing myself to be witnessed, I completed a necessary act of healing for a small part of my journey.

While in the years that have passed, my experience of releasing fear and finding strength has come through meditation and spiritual group practice, and later through Karate, Yasmine's experience has differed. Her freedom from fear and discovery of inner strength, or power, came on the mountain bike trail.

"Mountain biking made me realise my potentials and my limitations, both mental and physical. I learned how far I could push my body, how resilient it actually is to crashing, how far I could push to become stronger and when I needed to rest. It forced me to be in touch with my body and my muscles to feel how my body moved together with the trail

as I cornered and absorbed rocks. I learned to manage things that scare me and to focus on the flow of the ride as opposed to seeking speed.

“The sport also taught me how to manage fear. When I first attempted to ride ‘the balcony’ at Wadi Degla I froze in the middle of the slim ridge overlooking quite a steep cliff, and was unable to move. Having a natural fear of heights and exposures, I panicked and froze. Some fellow riders had to come to pick up me and my bike. As I practiced I mentally broke down the segment into parts, identifying the easy versus difficult sections. I gave myself time and started looking into the parts I found difficult, ‘do I lack the skill or am I just afraid?’”

The practicality of her question speaks to me. As a veteran Explorer of both my inner and outer worlds, I have undertaken many quests and learned that often, it's fear that holds us back and the absence of connecting with fear that can push us too far. For many years, I searched the world around me, seeking knowledge and experience in order to grasp the meaning of life. Then, I journeyed inwards, exploring the realm of my inner world.

At times, these adventures have taken me far from my centre. Often, I abandoned the trail, getting lost and repeatedly having to find my way back home. Random moments from my travels flash through my mind. Being mugged, having my house broken into, and coming home to find my room turned upside down were just some of the experiences that found me.

There were so many times that I appeared to lack safety but being numb to life stopped me from feeling the fear. I simply got on with all that life sent my way. When I started to journey inwards, exploring my emotions through psychotherapy and later, coaching, I discovered a hotbed of fears. As I started to face them one by one, I discovered the power of questions to change my relationship with them. To transform fear, we must first listen and bear witness to what it is saying and then, we must ask ourselves a very different question to turn the situation around.

I stand up from the desk where I am writing to take my dogs for a walk. It's mid-afternoon and I'm still wearing my swimsuit and beach dress from earlier in the day. A dear childhood friend and I celebrate our birthdays one day apart and we had spent the morning on the beach, followed by a long and relaxed café lunch outdoors.

For hours, we journeyed through each other's lives, catching up in all

the disconnected places. Both of us are stripping back our lives to the bare essentials. Partly out of financial necessity, and partly to make space in which curiosity and spontaneity can arise. There is a feeling that we have both done and seen so much in our three decades and that at times, both our lives have gotten more complicated than was necessary.

We've learned our lessons and now, as we see the big 4-0 looming somewhere on the horizon, we realise that the essence of life is simplicity. It's about being with people we love, making time for good friendships, not letting life slide into autopilot, and staying open to the possibility of exploring life without a purpose, and without an agenda.

I tell her how I deleted every email in my inbox this morning. I released over 10,000 emails that had accumulated over the past few years. I share how I've left my yoga teaching path to allow more time and energy for my spiritual and karate practices. I explain how instead of taking life outwards, I'm drawing life inwards, recapturing the feminine and inviting her rhythm back into my life. We agree to set a date to meet again, this time in an art exhibition. There is no expectation. No purpose for our journey there other than to experience the beauty of the moment. This is the ultimate gift of adventure.

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Explorer's Quest in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Explorer's Quest. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

Transforming Pain

PHASE 2

The Warrior, Alchemist & Innocent

As we dive deeper into the underworld of our pain, the Warrior, Alchemist, and Innocent guides will join us. Together, they will teach us how to confront and stay present to the emotions, physical sensations, and psychological disorientations that can happen when we decide to more consciously face our moments of adversity. We will learn how to begin spinning and transforming our greatest suffering into our greatest life lessons.

For some, adversity comes once in a while. For others, it seems to visit more often than we'd like. Developing a Warrior's mindset is essential to unblocking stuck emotions and memories that have collected at a cellular level. We will learn how fitness, Martial Arts, and other mindful movement practices may help some of us to access, release, and express hidden pain that may be holding us back from living the lives we want.

Alchemy – or the fire of transformation – may be a subtle process or it may burst into flames before us. What we are left with are the ashes of a way of living that once caused us immense pain. Out of these ashes, a new Self emerges. It is one that we have always known from birth. It is the Innocent, the soul stripped bare of unhelpful conditioning and knots that violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity may have left us with.

Along the way we must take care of these archetypal shadows. We must learn to walk away from battles that aren't worth fighting. We must avoid being fooled by a superficial spiritual process that merely decorates our pain. And we must be careful not to dive back under the covers, pretending that it never happened. If anything, it is courage we need to move through this phase and prepare ourselves for the fruits of this heavy inner labour.

"Our bodies archive our life experiences and often tell stories of our deepest fears."

Ana Forrest, Fierce Medicine

The Warrior's Spirit

The following morning, I sit down at my desk. My two desert dogs are sleeping nearby and the weather is still cool enough to leave the side door open.

I live in a quiet and sleepy neighbourhood. Not much happens here and that's exactly how I like it. Throughout the day, I can hear birds singing. There are no loud and sudden bangs. The beach and park are down the road and two supermarkets are within walking distance. Karate classes are a half hour drive away and there are plenty of cafes where I can go to read and work. Life is simple and spacious now, but it wasn't always that way. It also came at a price. To be here, I have had to turn away from where the other parts of me would like to be. Especially my Warrior.

This time last year, I was battling the final stages of my own journey through war. I lived in the same peaceful house yet I was rarely here. Instead, I was working in the capital, Abu Dhabi, and like many commuters, battling the death-defying road that links the capital to Dubai. Almost daily, I saw accidents, people's lives turned upside down on the spot. It sobered me into driving at the speed limit, and not being tempted to try to get anywhere quicker than I could, including death.

It takes a Warrior's Spirit to wake up each morning and face a two hour commute to work, knowing that the ride home could be even longer and that sometimes, it's the last journey a fellow commuter will ever make. At first, I loved the wide-open space that being on the road brings but soon, it

became a tiring four-hour round trip that my Warrior was forced to make.

But the commute was just the tip of an iceberg. The entire year was just the tip of an iceberg. The entire year was a full-on battle and one I never expected. After leaving humanitarian fieldwork, I had assumed that life would only get easier. It was to be the same illusion I saw after my divorce. Because of my stubborn survival mindset, I had ploughed through one obstacle after the other, never really savouring each lesson. It would take the physical exhaustion of my body to teach me the art of surrender.

Although I worked hard and commuted long hours, outside of work I lived for Karate. When I started to get dizzy and nauseous in training, and experience post-traumatic flashbacks at night, I knew I had to take action. It was either time to return to psychotherapy or pursue my own healing path. When the only Jungian analyst in town was unavailable, I took it as a sign that I was ready to take an alternative route. And so I hired a personal trainer and for ten long months, showed up weekly to consciously re-pattern my movements and develop more stamina for the path in life that I had chosen.

At first, I presented him with a list of movements that I wanted to master, like a free handstand and jumping as high as my hips. I needed straight-arm strength for my punching and explosive power in my leg muscles for my kicks. Very quickly, we discovered just how tired my body was. For months, I stripped my concept of fitness back to basics, starting with food. I kept a food diary that he could also access online and began lifting heavy weights to rebuild my strength.

Within days, he realised I was dehydrated. I upped my water intake and the lightheadedness and nausea at karate disappeared for good. It was also impossible to deny that food had become a very emotional topic for me. In between my food notes were long entries on the flashbacks I was experiencing late at night. I was unable to separate food and the wars I had lived and witnessed, even when logging a day's worth of 'good' food entries. As soon as I started to type, other memories would surface.

Although my trainer was not familiar with the physical or psychological effects of trauma, he did understand chronic stress. He stood by silently, picking out the food and showing up week after week to hold space for my training sessions. He taught me to hang from bars and as I did, the memor-

ies of the men who had been hung and beaten, and sometimes killed, flashed through my mind. I would freeze momentarily mid-air, reminding myself to grip tightly. They were never my own stories, rather those of the men I had witnessed in my work and once, in my personal life.

My first relationship after my divorce was with a man whose life had been defined by war. I didn't yet understand why, since the age of 12, when the sailor incident happened, I had crossed paths with so many men of war. When I first came across them, everything would seem ordinary on the surface and yet, sooner or later, their other stories would emerge. Like the ex-boyfriend who attacked me. He was also a product of civil war. Or the ex-husband, who was born into war.

The older I got, and the better I came to understand war and violence, the quicker these stories flowed. My professional life later brought me into contact with so many men who had lived through and waged war. Men who the headlines would label as 'terrorists' and 'criminals' and yet I came to know their other sides. This would teach me that we can never be reduced to one thing.

If there is anything I have come to understand well in life, it is how to relate to and in some way, heal, people who have experienced and perpetrated the worst atrocities of mankind. My Jester will tell you much later why this was to be one of my life's callings and why it appeared and continues to appear wherever I turn.

Fortunately, the man I met after my divorce was not a violent man. He was both a seasoned Warrior and Revolutionary who didn't hesitate to embrace his inner Lover. Because of this beautiful combination, he would become the first man who broke my pattern of choosing partners who didn't respect me. In relationship to him, I became another woman; a woman I liked, a woman I could actually start to love. It was a vital step in my own healing process.

But before all that, I would first witness his story to meet his darker side.

Early into the relationship, he sat me down and told me that he had something important to say. "*I killed four men, Claire,*" he said frankly. "*I was fourteen years old. They were raping a young girl and I was already armed and on patrol.*"

I didn't have a choice, I had to do it."

I took a deep breath and said nothing. Being around men who had raped and murdered girls and women was not a new phenomenon for me. My prison days had required me to sit with such criminals, as well as families who had lost their loved ones to crime and war. I already knew that the man I loved had been dragged into war as a ten-year old, that his father had been in and out of prison for political reasons, that a gun had been held to his head by interrogators as a child, and that the world in which he lived at that time offered little else for a teenage boy.

Intellectually, I disagreed with the murder and at the same time, acknowledged that unless I was in the same situation, I couldn't really judge. What would I do if I was a child soldier on foot patrol and desensitised to suffering to the extent that he was? He had grown up with war and as a man, he had had to find a way to accept that he couldn't go back and change what had happened. He could only live with what was.

Our relationship continued with compassion. At night, I would trace my fingers over his back, feeling the long and deep horizontal and vertical scars etched forever in time and place. Intuitively, I never asked where they came from. I had documented so many cases of torture and my subconscious knew that this time, it was not my role to ask. This time, I was dealing with a man I loved, not a prisoner whom an organisation had entrusted me to protect.

Several months later, in a dark hotel room somewhere in Eastern Europe, he pulled away to the other side of the room and sat down in the black leather armchair. "*I need to tell you what happened. I will tell you once but please, never ask me about it again.*"

Quietly, I sat on the bed before him, curling my knees up to my chest. I was fully present yet barely moving. Stillness had descended all around me. I knew the story of his later political arrests was coming. I also knew the authorities that had detained him and understood through my professional work what they were capable of.

He told me where the whip marks on his back came from and what else they had done to him. Of the many barbaric things they did, one of them was hanging his body, the body that I lovingly cared for, until his arm sock-

ets were almost displaced. Then, they simultaneously beat and threatened him until he was present no more.

It had happened almost two decades ago and like most torture survivors, he hadn't received any therapy or professional post-traumatic support. Instead, he had just gotten on with his life, as there was no alternative. War was all around him and his story wasn't unique. Now, he had developed multiple lifestyle ailments, perhaps caused by years of chronic stress.

When his story ended, I said nothing. I gave him space to breathe and then we went to bed. It was another moment of witnessing, not one of judgment or fixing but rather, accepting every inch of who he is. We never spoke of it again until I came to write this book and asked for his permission to share it. "Go ahead," he told me. "*You're half my soul and my voice to the world.*"

The following week, after I witnessed his story, I returned home and walked into the room where all my books on trauma were stored. I had accumulated so many over the years as I tried to understand my life and the lives I witnessed in my work. Most of them were about the trauma of refugees and political prisoners.

Quietly, I shut the door so nobody could find me and then I began to cry. One by one, I threw them to one side. I didn't believe in them anymore and I no longer needed to read what they had to tell me. I already knew it in my bones.

I was angry at how an entire industry had labeled us. Just as we felt so isolated and cut off from the norm, along came these people in white coats who categorised us, splitting us into symptoms and phases as if we weren't living people capable of being whole. So many of those people in white coats or wearing the 'specialist' cap are trauma survivors themselves and I couldn't believe that they were doing this to us.

I refused to look at trauma literature for several years after that. It marked a turning point where I stopped labelling others and myself and it hurtled me full-force into more mainstream approaches like fitness and coaching. It shook me out of the victim/survivor or Orphan-like mentality that I unknowingly had adopted and perpetuated. It was a trap in the endless search for answers beyond myself.

Painfully, and consciously, I began to deconstruct all of my personal and professional experiences and theories until eventually, this man and myself became human again. Eventually, once the period of rage, anger, and disappointment with the professional trauma sector was over, I came to appreciate once more the importance of awareness and specialised and timely treatment. But I would remain steadfast in my belief that trauma healing does not always require an "expert" on board.

More than that, it requires love, and love is the very essence of what it means to witness someone without trying to save him or her. Because he loved me unconditionally, no matter how I looked or felt, or what I wore or did for a living, he opened up the inner pathways for healing from all the wounds I had experienced as a woman. I was able to release the fear that there would always be something 'wrong' with me. I learned to trust a man for the first time and know that I was safe.

To him, there was no judgment about me being raped or caught in a less than peaceful marriage. He understood the wounds those experiences had left me with and was careful not to throw salty words or actions on them. Accepted and left alone, they began to heal.

To the outside world, he had murdered four men. As a child soldier, he had made bombs and explosives for the older fighters. And yet, he was the most peaceful and loving man that had entered my life until that point. He is a sensitive soul and passionate poet of life who longs to tell his story but for many reasons, cannot do so yet.

As I sit in present time, writing down these memories, the clock strikes 9.30am. I've been writing for several hours. I take a few moments to breathe deeply as I remember. It ended for other reasons but the lessons I learned will remain with me for a lifetime. Mostly, that I am still human.

Eventually, his love helped make me a whole person again. I became less judgmental and more open in his presence. I discovered parts of myself that I actually liked and appreciated, like my body, which I had mostly abandoned in thought. Sometimes, he had to point out my beauty before I could see it myself. Gradually, the inner voice of my ex-husband's Wounded Orphan, who frequently put me down, was put to rest.

My Warrior self is not only the one who tackles the open road head on,

or who fights in Karate with honour and respect. She isn't only the woman who has been willing to dive to the depths of her consciousness in order to understand the life she has come here to lead and share with others. First and foremost, she is the witness to atrocity and adversity, and she knows that wars come in many shapes and forms.

The battlefields of war lie all around and within us; they aren't just the headlines or the breaking news. And sometimes, they pass quietly through our immediate circles.

A couple of months earlier, I had sat with Christina, a sister health coach who works with patients battling chronic disease. Warming my hands with the cup of green tea her maid has prepared for us, I ask her about her experience of bearing witness to medical adversities.

It's long before the doctor refers me for an MRI scan but something inside of me is saying I need to include these other stories. So often, war is treated as a category in itself yet I know from simply living that we are all in this together. We are all travellers and we all have something worth sharing. And besides, cancer and other lifestyle diseases happen at war. People don't only get injured physically and psychologically; they also wind up with the side effects of chronic stress.

"It's hard for some people to open up their old wounds, Claire," she tells me. "Some of my friends won't talk about their cancer and some will share their stories as they find helps others. There are two ways. You either forget it happened or you share. The people who share tend to have more awareness. The difference is that they've accepted. But really it depends on the severity of their diagnosis and the amount of physical pain and trauma they experienced."

"For example," she continues, "some people going through medical adversity spend a lot of time alone during their illness. Having a support system around you is critical. I personally went through so much with my health adversities," she said. "I got through so much because I had friends, family, and church. In the end, it's a choice."

I think of the man I had loved and know he has been able to share his pain with others who have passed through the same fate. I reflect on my conversation with Mihaela and how community is so integral to healing us all.

Christina's health conditions are not over and yet she coaches others th-

rough their various health challenges. Her own challenges have included cancer and rheumatoid arthritis. She has spent several years in and out of hospital, going through painful procedures. She's learned to deal with the triggers that being back in hospital can lead to.

"Will I allow it to control me? No! I made a choice on the day of my diagnosis that I wouldn't. I kept an inspirational calendar and one of the quotes said, "Don't let fear or past disappointments hold you back." I implanted this phrase on my mind and made the same choice every day. It isn't like you make the choice once and that's it. No, you have to keep doing it each day."

A pause descends on her beautifully decorated coaching office. I feel so welcome and at home here, despite the tough topic we are mindfully ploughing through. I'm wearing both my coaching and communications hats, staying present to her energy levels and making sure not to take this interview too fast too soon. We've dived right in and I want to be sure she's pacing herself.

"You know, Claire," she tells me after a long sigh. "There's more judgment about people whose illnesses can't be seen. If you look at me, you don't know I'm handicapped because of my rheumatoid arthritis."

I look at Christina and see before me an elegant middle-aged Filipino woman who looks ten years younger than she really is. Her first profession was in fashion design and it shows. Her style in both dress and living space is impeccable and her face is flawlessly made up. Yet at the same time, she has a warm and caring presence that makes me feel at ease. I feel like I can be myself around her.

"It's a compliment when people say I look good. They don't believe that I've been sick, that I struggle to walk and I need a stick. People don't get this because of how healthy I look. For example, when I use the disabled car parking spaces at our local supermarket, some people try to tell me off."

"Once, an Australian man challenged me. He told me off, saying that his mother was really handicapped and that those spaces are for people like her. He was so upset but encountering this often, I was able to explain calmly that my disability is not visible and I showed him my permit for using the disabled spaces. The conversation took a turn and he told me about his arthritis. In the end, I ended up giving him advice!"

This often happens to Christina. While she is in the midst of her own

suffering she is able to reach out to others. Her compassionate Caregiver's Heart beats strongly. Her Wounded Orphan is long taken care of. Her Inner Explorer has gone the full breadth of her healing quest. She carries a true Warrior Spirit and a code of honour and respect never leaves her, even in her darkest moments.

She finds the courage to do things that ordinary people take for granted. To even drive a car has been a massive achievement yet she does such things with grace as she chooses to confront life with positivity. As I relate to her situation I can't help but think of post traumatic stress, how nobody sees what lies beneath the veneer of everyday life.

"It's painful though," she remarks. "Nobody can see my pain. Even you, sitting here, you can't see that I feel like someone is crushing my bones. My arthritis medication has suppressed my immune system so much. The most I can hope for is to stay in remission as the doctor tells me there is no cure."

She tells me frankly about the pain without a trace of self-pity and then, in her typical way, she tells me a joke. *"You know, after my diagnosis, I went out and got a manicure and pedicure!"*

She hooted with laughter and so did I. I confessed that I had also done the same many years ago after telling my then husband that I needed a break, just days after I received the images of mountains and the message of YOGA.

Expecting us to talk it out, he had surprised me by saying I had 24 hours to leave the country. With a sudden crisis on my hands, I went calm, sorted out my air ticket, quickly packed my case, told my yoga teacher I was leaving, met my therapist, did another long-distance job interview (I was always on the lookout!), and went to get my nails painted bright red. The nail appointment was already booked and I figured it was better than sitting at home waiting for my flight.

We laughed at our similar reactions to sudden and very different setbacks. On the surface, medical adversities seem so different from war, trauma and conflict, and so far apart from domestic and sexual violence, and divorce. But losing one's sense of identity and the image of how our lives once were carries a familiar note that we recognise. We both have had to create a post crisis identity for ourselves and a new way of relating to the past.

War and significant health adversities also bring us face to face with our own mortality and that of those we love. They can force us to re-evaluate the meaning of life and summon the courage to fight our way through and beyond it. I remember how news of my father's cancer shook me up and how it was most probably a contributing factor to why I left my marriage when I did.

"The side effects of my medication were so shocking. One night, I woke up with my mouth full of sores, like cold sores. Another night I felt as if someone was sticking a knife in my thighs. My skin became scaly and I had continuous migraines. I went from having a healthy body to an entire onslaught."

At this point, I ask about leadership and what needs to happen before we can take leadership of our lives and be ready for those moments that will test us. Christina believes it's about the everyday choices we make along the way. *"I became a vegetarian 20 years ago because I had severe asthma. It helped tremendously and I adapted to the new lifestyle. If I hadn't, for sure I would be sicker now. I studied food in depth and trained to be a vegetarian chef. Eventually, I trained as a health coach."*

Knowing just how much she likes to laugh, I ask about humour and friendship, and how these have helped her to make sense of her ongoing health challenges. She laughs again and her eyes light up as she tells me the story of when blood clots appeared in her lungs. She had actually driven herself to hospital and was enjoying a pizza with her friends around her bedside when the doctor appeared and whisked her to intensive care unit. She had no idea her oxygen levels were dropping so fast or that she was hours from dying on entry to the emergency room.

My mind wanders to times of severe stress when my colleagues and myself have made light of the danger around us. At the office, when we heard the airstrikes nearby, myself and the lady who worked at the desk opposite me would smile. *"Firecrackers again,"* she would remark lightheartedly as our eyes met for longer than usual. Then we would continue writing our field reports on various aspects of the refugee camps, all the while on standby for the order to return home and remain under curfew.

We wouldn't speculate just yet if anyone had been killed as there was little we could do at the personal level but I know we both thought of the

family's home or land that had just been hit. Sometimes our work involved visiting such sites and together with engineers, assessing the damage. The news would come later about the target and whose lives were changed forever. I personally would feel haunted by knowing just how suddenly life can change.

Expressing outrage at what was happening around us wasn't going to stop the bombs from falling; it's a sad fact of war that change happens in governmental decision-making circles as well on the ground. Throwing yourself in the line of fire is a heroic act but it doesn't usually stop war and ultimately, it will wear you out or leave you dead.

A few years later, I had found myself in hostage negotiation training with a group of surgeons who had flown in from the front lines of war. They too had found a way to process dangerous and extraordinary circumstances of their work.

"What is this," they had joked with me as we queued up for coffee. *"Our work in theatre is far more serious than getting kidnapped. We get the patients' enemies bursting into the operating theatres with weapons. Bullets are fired around us on a regular basis. We don't have time to get kidnapped or negotiate a release as we're too busy saving lives, including our own!"*

Black humour is sometimes all we can revert to when we're in the midst of overwhelming crisis. It is in many ways a healthy coping mechanism that bonds us and prepares us for the battles of our lives. It's only after the bombs have stopped falling, when the blood clots are removed, and the enemies are no longer firing bullets at us that the Warrior must learn to lay down this black weapon.

Separating myself from the cynicism of war has also been a challenge for me. Although I was sensitive and present in my fieldwork, in my private moments I had to make sense of the rest of my life. If I didn't find humour in the absurdity of being a divorced and homeless woman working with refugees in a war zone, I would have cried and to cry would have diminished my ability to cope in that moment. I rarely shed any tears back then and even when I did, once I dried my eyes my circumstances were still the same. It was a fire I needed to sit in for a while longer.

After this mission, when I came back to my childhood home in Dubai,

the nightly flashbacks of war made sure that I got to re-experience all I had witnessed in my years as a humanitarian so that I could continue what Mihaela refers to as the process of 'de-merging,' or separating my own story from those around me. It's a process very few humanitarians speak of probably as it seems so insignificant compared to the places we've been and what we have seen.

It can also be an intensely lonely and depressing phase to be in as most likely, nobody around us can relate to our experiences. How do we explain to "ordinary" people who haven't faced such death, misery, and destruction the tremendous guilt and anguish it can later provoke?

In the gym, I learned to face both my fear and anger through hanging and lifting heavy weights. At karate, my instructor took my training out of the dojo and onto the beach. The purpose was to train our muscles using the resistance of deep sand and water. We started during Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, training late at night, long after the fast was over.

One night, I stood blindfolded in the dark, not too far from the sea's edge. He was standing at a distance and I was the only student that night. My senses were being conditioned to practice kata correctly without my eyesight. Being outdoors and in the dark made the exercise even harder. It was a white belt kata, one that is so easy for me to perform, but as I turned to block to the left, my feet hesitated and I found my voice.

"What if I step on them?" The voice appeared out of nowhere. In my mind's eye I could see them all hunched up, blindfolded and crouched over on the sand. One of them was far away to my right, watching the scene unfold. He was the Warrior witness who would later tell me what happened. A fifteen-year-old boy, the youngest, had made it into the sea and was trying to swim away.

The soldiers lined up behind them, telling them to get in line. And then, one by one, they executed them all, including the young boy who was trying to get away. The Warrior witness ran and ran until he was arrested and taken to prison, where I later found him and where he told me the details of what happened that night. Later, I saw the beach with my own eyes. It had been a moment in time that I hadn't dwelt on, a story I had heard almost 6 years ago. I hadn't thought of it since, I had suppressed it into my sub conscious

mind until it decided to appear in this very moment.

It wasn't the kind of memory that I could ever take lightly. I still remembered the suffering of the man who had shared it with me. I remembered too much of his story and the many others who were arrested that night and the nights that followed. I had spent months documenting their truth. It was the mission I didn't want to leave, the one when my then husband threatened to divorce me if I didn't come home. They were the men I never wanted to leave behind.

I ripped my blindfold off, gasping for air.

"What happened?" my teacher asked.

"They shot them all," I replied in a daze. *"They lined them up on the beach, forced them to kneel and then shot them all in cold blood. In the back of their heads."*

Like my personal trainer, he held space for me to breathe. He didn't question nor did he reject me. I didn't need him to say anything. There was nothing he could have said that would have changed the outcome. What I needed was a witness in the same way I had once borne witness to others. Such witnessing allowed me to feel human.

I bring my attention back to Christina and her lovely room. I ask her how she feels telling me her story, what it's like for me to witness what she has gone through. *"I feel elated, Claire,"* she says. *"You know, I have a t-shirt hung up on a coat hanger in my bathroom, just behind the door. The front of it says, 'Never give up'. The back of it says, 'Take your time'. I never hang it with the back facing me; it's always turned to the front. I got it in my twenties and some mornings, I have to punch my fist into it to remind me."*

The conversation takes a lighter turn into the mindset of a Warrior and we find ourselves talking about sports and how to support loved ones going through crisis and adversity. *"I was competitive in sports as a child,"* she continues. *"I played tennis and I bring that same discipline into my life today. As for advising loved ones, I would say it's best you don't show you're upset for them. For example, if you need to cry, cry when you're showering so they can't hear you. Smile in front of them, as your happy vibes will rub off on them. We can always be a source of strength to someone and it's selfish to show what's inside."*

I ask Christina what keeps her strong and able to deal with the fear of the unknown, in addition to punching her t-shirt. She tells me about the po-

wer of prayer and her faith. She reads the bible and believes that overcoming fear is a mindset issue. Courage is the only way to face it.

We talk about how I have dealt with my experience of teenage rape and how sharing my story through blogging has been a great source of healing. The virtual witnessing provided a container in which I could express myself in writing and from there, I found my real voice. I was able to peel back the layers and explore rather than get stuck in victim mode. I learned a lot about courage in telling the truth, and in doing so, inspired many others to do the same.

I rarely share my rape story in person but in this case, I'm absolutely certain that Christina has the strength to hold space for it and not pity me. The absence of pity is critical. It takes a Warrior's spirit to hold space for a big story and not feel sorry for its teller. It's something I learned how to do as a humanitarian. Fancy pitying everyone; it's far better to honour the reserves they still have.

There is also an art to sharing traumatic memories. First, unless it is a therapeutic setting, we must check in and ask ourselves if we feel grounded. Then, we must ask why we are sharing this story now and with this person, and if they can handle it. It's essential to prepare ourselves to avoid being misunderstood or for our heartfelt words to be met with silence.

I have learned the hard way that people can go silent for many reasons. Usually, they feel overwhelmed by what we have to say. They may not have the reference points needed to grasp the points we are making. They may also feel triggered if they have had a similar experience and not yet healed. That is the main reason why we need to check in, build up slowly, and stay on alert for any adverse reactions. It's one of the responsibilities we adopt when we are stronger.

"There is a cultural dimension to sharing sexual trauma," she tells me. *"Sometimes my clients have faced this too. I also run a support group for homosexuals at church. They find it so hard to open up as usually, the abuser was someone in their families. They still feel the need to protect their families all these years later. I often refer them to the pastor so they can get the support they need."*

Her words touch me deeply. For years, my silence protected the former boyfriend and husband who mistreated me. When abuse of any kind happens

within intimate spaces such as a romantic relationship (existing or former), a friendship, workplace, or family, it can feel very confusing. Obviously, this confusion differs depending on the nature of the abuse. Incest, for example, is very different to bullying in the workplace. They both require action to stop the abuse and unless the victim has the means to speak up, it's unlikely that someone else will do that for them.

And yet when healing from such abuse, there is a time to fall silent and allow the nightmares of the past to fade away. For me, that moment came after I had broken the silence in the most public of ways. It was only through sharing my story through my blog to family and friends that I was able to receive the powerful medicine of being witnessed. Contrary to the fears I had held for all those years, I wasn't judged. Instead, I was held gently as I worked my way through the pain and confusion, learning as I went what needed to be said and when.

It was to become another layer of balm to heal my Wounded Orphan to reassure her that it was ok. Just because she had once experienced shame it didn't mean that it had to be a life sentence placed upon her. She was now a free woman who could stand up and say exactly what she pleased. One of those words was no.

No, you cannot violate me!

No, you cannot shame me!

Reclaiming our voice and learning to say "no" is part of the Warrior's path. When we have experienced so much we can either, as Christina said, "shut down or share." A Warrior learns how to share mindfully, setting boundaries and choosing when and when not to share. She knows how to set boundaries and defy social taboos that no longer make any sense and at worst, keep her Wounded Orphan in victim mode.

A Warrior sets herself free first and then she tends to those around her. She understands that it simply isn't sustainable for her Caregiver's Heart to respond repeatedly to cries for help. She knows she must first hear her own before she can tune in to others.

Before leaving, I ask Christina to share some more words of wisdom on staying resilient. I love being around her and taking in her hard-won life experience. I don't know why but I sense that one day, either myself or my

readers may need it.

"First, count your blessings. If you want to make it in life, no matter what your situation is; you need to start from this standpoint. You must tell yourself not to give up and that you'll always be better off than others. I live beyond myself; I don't lose myself in self-pity or depression.

"Years ago, on a beach vacation with my family, I said, I want to be treated as normal. I want to finish well in life. I have a half a century behind me. I'm in the latter half of my life. Life is the same as a race; you give your best in the last few yards. It's a marathon and as you reach the finishing line, you have to keep moving forwards."

She ends our time together with a question that bears testimony to her Warrior spirit. *"I believe we are equipped for everything that will happen in our lives. It's our choice. Are we going to grab hold of those things we've been given to survive or are we going to lie down and die?"*

As I drive away, I turn the music up loud. Her last question is echoing in my ears and heart. I feel full of life despite the treacherous journey we have just made together through the parallels and intersections of medical and war-related trauma. My body begins to move and dance behind the wheel and the line between life and death seems definite. I am alive. I won't always be. This, the one wonderful life I have been given, and my Warrior isn't going to waste a single moment of it.

A week later, Christina sends me a follow-up note. She wants to add one last point to her story. *"All this time, I never heard anything from my family about how they felt about my struggles with my arthritis. My father had been a fighter pilot in the Air Force and we grew up military style, signs of weakness were frowned on. Since I was diagnosed, my dad would always make the remark "you have become so weak" to me.*

"Anyway, right after we met for my interview, I rushed off to lunch to see my friend who is a cervical cancer survivor! She had just come from Manila where she had seen my parents. As they talked, my father told her that he really admires my fighting spirit!! Wow, when she told me that it made my day and I remembered everything we discussed. Though he has never told me to my face those words, it made me proud to know that he feels that way about me. Finally, recognition of the Warrior has arrived."

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Warrior's Spirit in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Warrior's Spirit. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

"Loss strips away so much. Yet it can leave us with the understanding that the art of living passionately means learning to engage both the risk to reach as well as the grace of surrender."

Dawna Markova

The Alchemist's Fire

I take a coffee break after writing up Christina's Warrior story. I need space before stepping into the Alchemist's Fire. The workmen are still rebuilding my bathroom upstairs and the house is filled with loud bangs and other noises. They're breaking down the final bits of concrete, transforming the room into a safer location. Before, it was at risk of flooding from the burst pipe and because it is located in my bedroom, there was a risk of flooding into the area in which I slept.

I've now spent a week sleeping in the room next door, on the "ghost's floor" that I told my Polish friend about the other day. What I didn't tell her as I sensed it would be too much is that the room in which I'm now sleeping is home to the bed I once had as a teenager. As children, my middle sister and I had matching single beds that are now pushed to make a large double. But underneath the sheets, they are really two singles.

For the first two weeks of building works, I had insisted on sleeping in my own adult bed but then, the dust and inconvenience of strange men wandering in and out my room during the day made me move. Not willing to take my parents' old room, for no reason I can explain, I moved into my sisters' room next door, which she left long ago. The move had pushed me right out of my Warrior and once again, into my Alchemist's fire. Such fire burns and transforms us if we don't turn away.

For the first time in so long, I remembered that half the bed was really

my teenage bed. I knew which one used to be mine because I can remember the layout of my teenage room and where the headrest of the bed was. As I climb into bed on my first night, I take a deep breath and consciously relax. I tell myself that I may have been raped in this bed once many years ago but that now, 21 years later, I'm safe.

But a part of me wants to set fire to it, to banish this bed from the house. To drive its evil spirit out into the world and away from me. But life has taught me that we can only transform our suffering, we cannot banish it from our kingdom or queendom. We can only face it head on and welcome it into our lives without fear. Besides, another fire was once again burning inside of me.

The man I loved, who had sent the YOGA message, had just come home from war and was once again in touch. My heart, which I thought had long healed, was caught between the past and present. I'm emotional and angry and trying to be polite. He's just endured the worst fate of his life, how could I possibly give him a piece of my mind?

As the banging continues, I centre myself and remember Steve. We met during a Martial Arts and Yoga teacher training course several years ago and ironically, being a grade higher, I was appointed as his 'big sister.' The idea was that I'd mentor him through his training and being a lot younger than him, it felt odd. In all honesty, it was Steve who would come to mentor me in life.

Although I eventually left this teaching system, known as Budokon, a unique fusion of martial arts and yoga, Steve and I remained in touch via email and social media. When news of his bowel cancer reached me I felt devastated for him. Yet like Christina, he had responded with a Warrior's spirit. I asked him to describe the moment he was diagnosed.

"I'll always remember this," he said. "I was diagnosed at midday on the last Friday of May. I'd gone to the appointment alone as I had no idea I had a cancer diagnosis pending, I knew something wasn't right as they'd found something during the colonoscopy a few days before but anticipated this as being something like Crohn's Disease or Ulcerative Colitis. When the consultant told me the biopsy had confirmed a 'moderately differentiated carcinoma' initially I didn't know what that meant, was it that they weren't sure? He explained that it was a fairly fast growing cancer and then it hit me – I had cancer, my response to this was really fast – I went from 'oh no I'm dying' to 'I can beat this' in seconds."

What Steve heard next challenged his Warrior instinct and yet, he didn't waver. *"Unfortunately, the consultant then told me that the scan confirmed it had already spread to my liver and both lungs. That was a real body blow and I just thought 'that's it then!' At the time I was 49 years old, a well-educated person who had spent over 20 years working in healthcare and as far as I was concerned, when you have metastatic cancer (a cancer that has already spread), your days are numbered."*

While Steve tried to process the density of this information, the consultant tried to reassure him that he was one of the fittest cancer patients he had ever seen. He explained the aggressive treatment that Steve would undergo to give him the best chance of coming through it and told him that if anyone could do this, he could.

"It's odd, at the time his words felt quite peripheral but they filtered into my core and really set me on a road of handling my diagnosis and treatment positively. That wasn't immediate of course but I honestly believe that the doctor who gave me my diagnosis also set me on the path to success! After a discussion on what would happen next I then had to head home. Now that was a challenge! I had to drive 20 minutes through some unfamiliar roads having just been told I had stage 4 cancer! It was an exercise in control and focus, I don't think I've ever been so mindful of driving. I was focused intently on every aspect within the car and around me and thankfully I got home without any incidents."

As I read through Steve's interview weeks later, I not only remember Christina's fighting instincts but I also remember that space in-between, after my own MRI scan to check if I had a tumour in my brain or pituitary gland. Like Steve, I was alone and although I wasn't diagnosed with a tumour, in that moment, my results weren't out and my body was trying to process the unknown. It took two hours before I could drag myself out of the Starbucks next door and make my way back home, where I could fall apart and then pull myself back together.

And yet it is in the unknown and those places of not knowing where the Alchemist does his work. What first seems like tragedy can turn into our greatest triumph.

"When I got home," Steve continued, "it all washed over me. I sat in my lounge and suddenly confronted the fact that I had cancer. I had nowhere to hide. I sat there and started to cry and then wailed. It was primal, deep and angst-ridden. I'd never allowed my feelings out like that before, it was a real wrench."

“I then heard my very English and reserved self talking to me. “Don’t be silly non, pull yourself together, crying won’t help”, it was literally a stereotypical but deep-rooted approach trying to get myself to wrap my feelings up and stuff them away where they couldn’t hurt me. Then, I heard my more enlightened, yogic voice saying “you have a lot to cope with, it’s important to let these feelings out, be honest with yourself”!

“Without thinking I went into a form of observer status that I’d done in meditation before. I found I was looking at myself from across the room and could see two caricatures on my shoulders, two parts of who I was telling me very different things. And I found it funny and started laughing. Can you believe it, less than an hour from receiving the most devastating news of my life and I was sitting there laughing at myself! I can’t say that I was past the trauma but it was a first step and I knew I had the tools to handle it.”

I find myself wondering if Steve’s years of training in yoga and the martial arts had made a difference to his ability to cope with setbacks. For sure, his practice of meditation had given him the observer status he needed in that moment to avoid descending into the chaos generated by uncertainty and the gravity of his diagnosis. I asked him what the moment of choosing to survive was like, and what happened next.

“I’m not aware of consciously making a decision to survive as such; it was more subtle than that. I think I became aware that I wasn’t going to roll over and become a victim, that I didn’t want to be ‘Steve with cancer.’ At around the time of my operation, I wrote my first ever affirmation: “my life will move beyond cancer, it will be defined by my actions and my friends.”

“This really helped me and shaped my approach. So it wasn’t so much a case of thinking that I’ll beat cancer, rather I was going to take it on, be on my front foot and be positive. I honestly believe positivity has been a major tool for me and my chemo nurse thinks that 50% of the great results have been due to my positive attitude.”

Steve began telling people about it. With only five days between diagnosis and surgery, he knew he had to rally the troops! Like Christina, he knew a support network was critical to his recovery yet the telling of his situation required care. He was mindful to ensure that his friends were in a place where they could chat, as he knew he was about to hit them with unexpected news. Sharing the pain of his diagnosis and having to endure surgery so soon after made him face his change in circumstances quickly.

Learning to accept his friends showing up for him brought up initial re-

resistance. Being British, I know our people have a way of sweeping things under the rug and keeping a stiff upper lip. As Steve told me, we don’t like to trouble or put people out which in his words, is ‘rubbish.’ He realised that his diagnosis wasn’t only about him. This wasn’t a solo journey; he had other people willing to travel with him.

“It became clear that I had a responsibility to involve my friends and family as much as they wanted to, and that I also had to take care of them through the journey. It was an exchange of love and energy that would sustain each of us. This totally changed my approach not just with handling cancer but to how I lived my life.”

Steve began to share his story in many ways. All the way in Dubai, I received monthly emails, along with his many other global friends, on how the cancer treatment was going. I looked forward to his positive and uplifting updates, despite the adversity that underpinned them. Steve was lighthearted but he didn’t take his situation any less seriously than it required. I asked him what it was like to share his story as it unfolded, in real time, and if it made a difference to his journey.

“Sharing my story came to me in stages,” he responded. Initially it was a case of being willing to talk to people about what I was going through and letting them help me. This was so simple at first – I had major surgery and spent almost a week in hospital recovering.

“A good friend took on the role of coordinator (or as she put it ‘Steve’s PA’), letting people know how I was doing and scheduling visits so that I had 2-3 visitors per day while I was in hospital so that I didn’t get swamped with visitors one day and then no-one the next day. I literally had to be willing to give up control of my life for a while.”

Gradually, the number of friends passing through his home increased. Several friends showed up to move in and take care of him temporarily as he had lost so much energy from the surgery. Steve had to learn to surrender control of his home and pride, and allow others in to give him the support he needed, like cooking and cleaning. He says he will always treasure that support, as he knows it was given freely out of love, with no anticipation of reciprocity.

Six weeks later, chemotherapy began. Every fortnight, he was in hospital for over six hours of infusions that continued for a further two days at home. Randomly, he started sending emails to friends to let them know he

was going to be ok as he knew they were worried. He took advantage of electronic communications and the emails turned into the regular updates that I came to receive.

“The main aim for me was to reassure my friends that I was ok whilst still sharing any issues I was facing. I soon learned that writing the emails was therapeutic for me as I was able to see all that I was achieving. And the replies and feedback I received were such a boost every time. The unexpected part was the ripple effect.”

Steve found that his positive attitude was having a direct effect on his friends, several of whom had re-evaluated their priorities and approach to life. Some of them changed jobs, relocated, took up new hobbies, and embarked on big adventures. He was amazed that something so negative such as a cancer diagnosis could generate so much goodness and further positivity.

As I read through his interview weeks later, while writing this chapter, I remember Mihaela’s words about how my weekly blog writing on violence and trauma made a difference in her life. When I found the courage to share my pain and voice, I sparked many others to reflect on their own and what they would like to do about it. I received many messages from people I knew and didn’t yet know. I too marvelled at the power of storytelling to change the lives of others and it was the main impetus for writing this book.

“I’m still overwhelmed by the second aspect of the ripple,” Steve wrote. *“My emails were being forwarded on to people who were either facing their own cancer diagnosis or had friends or family facing cancer. I had several people make contact with me directly having been forwarded my emails third or even fourth hand and telling me how my positive approach had uplifted them and helped them handle their own situations. I’m still humbled by this.”*

Steve’s humility was the first thing I noticed about him, long before the bowel cancer arrived. I remember being seated in a Shaolin training centre, somewhere in London. It was cold and sunny outside and we were waiting for training to start. Seated by the boxing ring, and flanked by many punching bags, he told me about his work as a consultant and how he had been drawn to train as a Budokon teacher.

During the interview, I asked him what role Budokon, yoga, and advocacy had played in supporting him through and beyond his diagnosis.

“Oh wow,” he says. *“I really don’t know how I’d have handled this physically, emotionally or spiritually if it wasn’t for my fitness training, yoga and meditation! It’s become a joke amongst my friends that I had spent the previous eight years preparing for cancer!”*

“At the time of diagnosis and the operation, I was in great physical shape. I had a wonderful personal trainer, ran cross country and trail races, practiced yoga up to eight hours per week and did some martial arts as part of my Budokon training. I also practiced meditation several hours a week on my own, with a great teacher and in group practice. Each aspect of this was so important in how I got through cancer.”

“On a simple level, my fitness allowed me to recover quickly and strongly from the operation and to handle the effects of the chemo. In practical terms this showed in several ways, firstly, during my immediate post-op recovery. Because of the breathing techniques in yoga I was able to clear the anaesthetic from my system quickly. This meant I was moved out of the High Dependency Unit after 8 hours instead of the traditional 24 hours.

“Then, I became mobile very quickly, which was so important for my general wellbeing. The scars healed fast too. I went to a ‘healthy living after cancer’ course and the trainer was shocked to see my scar, which he said wasn’t a seven week scar but one that was fully healed. He then concluded I wasn’t going to learn much from the course!”

“Meanwhile Budokon, which is a combination of yoga, martial arts and the living arts, made such a difference. The benefits I’ve gained from this training while going through cancer have been immense, not just from the physical conditioning but also through the community of students – a really supportive and positive group of people – and through my attitude towards interactions with others.”

Through Budokon, Steve came to understand different parts of his own psychology. Referring to one of the training reference books, “The Dance of the Lion and the Unicorn,” he explains how he saw his reaction was to be a unicorn, or to withdraw from conflict and stress as a form of self-defense. This informed his initial reaction to withdraw into his shell and not accept the support from others around him.

Luckily, because of his Budokon training, he was able to identify his pattern and change the direction of his healing journey. He also wrote two simple mantras, or affirmations, that have since stayed with him.

“During my first cycle of chemotherapy I was struggling a lot and one morning, I woke up and faced my first bout of nausea. I felt terrible and was scared. I’d heard so much about nausea and vomiting on chemotherapy and here it was! I sat in my armchair

and heard myself thinking ‘well here it is, this is what you’ve been waiting for’ and realised that I was actually making myself feel more ill.

“I know it sounds crazy but I think I was actually manifesting the nausea or at least I was making it worse than it needed to be. I gave myself a kick up the butt and decided to see what else I could do as well as taking the anti-nausea drugs. The booklet from the charity Beating Bowel Cancer gave some simple tips that worked – staying upright (not lying down), eating some toast and going for a short walk. It worked and I felt better. I then resolved that I was going to handle my chemo differently and composed two mantras.

“The first mantra was, “Only good days”. Originally this was, “no more bad days, only good days” until a friend pointed out the negative phrasing. I changed it and a few times, caught myself smiling and feeling particularly good. I wondered why, only to find this mantra rolling around at the back of my mind!

“The second mantra was, “It’s not my cancer but it is my chemo”. This was an important one on two levels. Firstly the fact that the cancer was something alien that shouldn’t be in my body and this helped me to stop it becoming a part of my identity. Secondly, I’ve seen many cancer patients resenting the chemotherapy drugs and even the nurses who give it. This is because the drugs can make them feel so bad, worse than the original problem on many occasions. By identifying it as ‘my chemo’ I believe I was welcoming it into my body rather than fighting with it and this in turn helped to maximise the positive effects.”

Steve’s mantra reminds me of Christina’s Warrior t-shirt phrase that hangs in her bathroom. “Never give up,” it reminds her, as she sometimes swings her fist into its centre.

I recognise the Warrior that Steve embodies and I see the transformational power of the Alchemist that he has also summoned to tell his story with the world. The Alchemist plays with the chemistry of our lives and reorders its components to create a different outcome, sometimes for a greater good. The greater the transformation, the greater the fire that burns beneath us.

Since his treatment ended, Steve has raised money for a charity, Beating Bowel Cancer, and given interviews to the local media. He has become an advocate for bowel cancer and proudly speaks out to support others. Where he was once wounded, he now seeks to help others heal.

Christina too is an Alchemist. Both Steve and Christina have used the tragedy of their suffering and taken its energy as life force to transform not

only their own lives but also those around them. This is what the alchemy of healing actually does. It changes one state to another. When we do it to each other, we have the power to change the world.

The Alchemist’s Fire is the blazing ordeal of sitting and sometimes dancing on the edge of life, not knowing if we will fall off or if we will survive to tell the tale. To paraphrase the founder of the nutrition school where I once studied, Joshua Rosenthal, it’s like swinging from one trapeze part to the next. There will always be that moment when our hands can’t grip the bar and we’re hurtling at lightning speed through space and time.

There are also Alchemists, other than our own, that find us when we’re in the depths of our deepest despair. If we allow them in, they hold the power to transform our world. But so often, they do not remain. They appear and disappear as if by magic, like this man who I have loved for six years, the man who sent me the images of mountains and the message of YOGA. He was the Alchemist that broke me down so I could go on to set myself free and eventually, find the courage to create my own business and write this book.

While my Wounded Orphan would have loved him to rescue me, he didn’t. This wasn’t to be his role or purpose of being in my life. Rather, he would become a witness to my own transformation from afar, forcing me to rescue myself.

My inner Caregiver and Revolutionary, who you will meet much later, loved him as both the man he was and the man I knew he could be. Together, in our previous work, we had faced the fires of others, standing in solidarity in the worst of times and places. Part of me saw him as my mirror while another part saw him as my other half. He was the one I longed to come home to, which caused me much personal suffering, longing, and grief.

Many years later, I would watch him sit in his own fire of suffering and transformation. Not able to reach him, my heart would bleed for him. I would witness his personal war from afar, longing to take action and do something in return and yet, like he did with me, I would have to stand apart and watch him save himself. The pain of witnessing from afar someone I love go through their darkest moments was in many ways worse than going

through my own painful transformation.

Again, the lesson of letting go and letting nature do its work arrived. Things aren't always what they seem on the surface, my inner Alchemist forever reminds me. When I learned to embrace the Alchemist within me, I began to let go and accept. From that place, I also let go of the judgments and shame that surround loving someone while being married to another. So many years had passed and I had to forgive myself and move on.

Unrequited love isn't a cancer diagnosis by any means but it had shattered my human heart. After I learned how to speak my truth, I could no longer hide how I felt and I sent a message to him, right into the heart of one of his darkest moments.

"I love you," I finally confessed, after years of going back and forth in confusion.

"I love you too," he responded, and then reaffirmed his plan to marry his fiancée.

That summer, when I finally heard those words reflected back, my inner world crashed. I sat in the fire of my broken heart. I called on my Warrior to protect me, to keep me safe from my Wounded Orphan who had resurfaced. The rejection had torn her apart and I needed time to carefully piece her back together.

Reluctantly, I began the process of grieving something I would never experience. I invited the tears to come but they wouldn't. I didn't understand how he could love me too but love and marry another, but my Alchemist told me to trust what was unfolding. She taught me to stay present, to not run from the fire of my emotions, to not bury them or stuff them back down with food, caffeine or distractions. Even if I wasn't yet ready to cry, I knew the tears would one day come to cool my flames.

Like Steve, meditation brought me some relief from the pain this suffering had silently brought me. I had allowed it to continue for years in uncertainty. The two occasions he had opened up to the possibility of us, I had fled, like the unicorn I am hardwired to be, just like Steve had mentioned.

I eventually did the same with my Budokon teaching status. Unlike the women's teaching group that I would leave mindfully years later, I walked away from this system on the spot. On discovering something that caused

an ethical dilemma within me, I prodded with my unicorn horn, said what I had to say, and then, with my mind already made up, I left, never to return. I did the right thing for myself at the time, but I didn't do it in the best of ways. I didn't pause to listen and I didn't allow space for respect.

I was training to be a teacher. While grappling on the mat with my partner, a more senior teacher was trying to intervene. Her attempts weren't working and unaware of this tendency not to listen, I ignored her and continued trying to figure the next move out on my own. I was later yelled at for disrespecting a senior and stormed out of the class to lunch, with the intention of never returning.

But an hour later, I did return to try for a further two years. I committed myself wholeheartedly to listening, only to take another step backwards and fail to listen during a moment when I felt emotionally triggered. It was a pattern I had been running from my entire life, the unwillingness to stay present and hear someone else's truth, and it stunned me that after so much inner work, I could still repeat the same mistake.

This is what unicorn personalities do. We talk to ourselves. We come to conclusions in isolation. We don't share our pain yet we expect others to get it, to read our minds and act accordingly. Unlike their counterparts, the lions, who will fire off in every direction and provide a partner with whom to engage, us unicorns will hide out in the depths of our own inner forests. Life will teach us to come out and stay out as long as we need in order to face the lion's fire and understand that we too are made of precious strength.

Ironically, Budokon taught me how to fight when I was on my back. Learning how to fight back when someone was pinned on top of me was critical for my mindset and emotional recovery from teenage rape. Had I known how to do this at fifteen, I may have had the nervous wiring needed to fight back in my own bed. Had I known how to do this at twenty-nine, I may have been able to react quicker when my then husband threw me to the bed and then pinned me up against the wall.

The alchemy of adversity has made me strong in all my broken places and a broken heart seems paltry in comparison to beating cancer or surviving war. Yet for so many of us, it can feel like the greatest adversity we will ever endure. To love someone and not have that love returned the way we

want can cause us to question who we are and why we're here. In my experience, those are some of the best questions we can ever take to heart.

Now, much later, I see how much I've grown in strength and dignity. I see how I've learned to love without needing to possess the object of my love. I've learned how to let go and move on. If I could, I would go back and do things differently but on our journey through war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity, there is no reverse gear. We can only keep moving forwards, hopefully in good company.

I ask Steve what advice he would give to people whose loved ones are beating cancer. *"This is really not easy to answer,"* he says, *"as there is no 'one size fits all' to talking to people who have cancer. It's very important to let that person know that you are there for them and I would recommend simply asking what support they'd like. For example, I participate in a patient forum and I've learned on there that what one person finds supportive and positive another may find irritating and patronising! So therefore please just try to be yourself with them."*

"Making regular, but not necessarily frequent, contact is also very helpful. That could be a text or email if it's not an actual visit. Sometimes the person with cancer just needs to know that someone is thinking of them. Possibly one of my most important tips here is to be 'you' with them! They're still the same person, they're still your friend, and they're still interested in your life."

"Many of my friends didn't want to talk about what was happening to them as they didn't want to bother me when I was going through so much; conversely I really wanted to hear what was happening as I didn't want my whole life to be about cancer!"

"There is also a new resource online from Macmillan Cancer Support Called 'The Source' which is designed to help people who have friends or relatives going through cancer. I wish I'd known of this in my early days (please see resources for link). I'd also recommend going onto the patient forums for the charities supporting cancer. These are often great places to share experience and receive valuable advice. However, do be careful online as there's a lot of rubbish and scary stories out there when it comes to medical information!"

I love Steve's upbeat and honest advice. I have immense respect for the kind of hard won wisdom Warriors bring back home for Alchemists to transform. I ask him a final question, if he is different from the person he was before the diagnosis. It's the same one I asked Christoph in the Caregi-

ver's Heart about who he was before and after being shot.

Like Christoph, Steve acknowledges the changes while recognising he is still the man he was. He takes time for Yoga and meditation as mindfulness practices. He slows down to watch the sunrise when out walking his dog in the early morning hours. He notices if someone is doing something simple or kind and enjoys what is going on around him.

"I'd like to say I'm grabbing hold of life and making the most of every minute, but in truth, I'm not in the 'normal' way of filling every waking hour. I am enjoying my time even if that is sitting watching TV with the dog on my lap."

I smile as I read those words. It's just gone midday here in Dubai and the birds are still tweeting. One of my dogs has left the room to sunbathe outside and the other is passed out in what I like to call, 'side savasana,' or relaxing on his side. They both teach me the power of doing nothing. I haven't experienced cancer but after my own experiences with different wars, I too see time differently. Days are no longer 24 hours that I seek to burn to the max. Experiences no longer have to produce results. Expansiveness gives way for spontaneity and spontaneity gives rise to my True Self.

I wonder about Steve's positive attitude, whether he was always that way and how others could react in a similar way. What if we don't have the support network around us? What if all the people we used to know have moved on, either geographically or to another plane of existence. What if we are all surrounded by our ghosts? What if we have a choice in how to cope? What if we could all take responsibility to reach out and create something that isn't there? Can we find the strength within us to move from reacting to a more optimistic mindset?

Here, I'm thinking about my current health fears, and my once again broken heart. Emotionally and psychologically, I am robust and I know why. I have invested so much already in being resilient. Now, coaching, Karate, Yoga, meditation, my dogs, and writing are all anchors in my life. So too are the people I hold dear and my ever supportive family from afar.

Learning not to react to life and to live more mindfully hasn't been easy by any regards. It is a choice I have to make each day and sometimes in each moment. It's the same with being positive. Life can give us so many reasons to slip down a negative slope and it's up to us to change that direction.

As if by cue, Steve's next words answer my question.

"I've always been classed by my friends as being positive but now, I'm much more positive in all aspects of life. I have to rein it in sometimes when I'm speaking with people! Being positive and seeing the positive in things is such an easy and empowering way to live life. I see my family a lot more than I used to before diagnosis and am delighted to say that the closeness that developed with so many of my friends during those difficult times has been maintained now things are more normal."

He maintains his positive mindset in the absence of being able to control his circumstances. "I still have cancer," he says frankly. "I'm on lifetime chemotherapy to keep it under control so I don't have the option to ignore it or pretend it never happened. However, I can honestly say that although cancer is a part of my life it isn't who I am and doesn't govern everything I do. Be positive. Try to see the good in all things – it's there! You don't know how STRONG you are until STRONG is the only option."

I break out in a smile. That, I can relate to! I give myself a break; it doesn't have to be perfect the whole time. It gets messy in places and I can forgive myself for that. Like Christina said, each day we have a choice about how we're going to live our days, and for her, that is to never give up.

My Warrior Spirit has done the same, she has never given up, and my Alchemist has learned to transform that suffering into wisdom that I can share with others. Yet unlike the Hollywood scenes where the hero or heroine is suddenly enlightened and life moves perfectly onwards, I am willing to admit that some days are harder than others. It's on those very days that I need to hear the kind of words that Steve and Christina shared. It's on those days when I reach out to the travellers walking, fighting and surrendering alongside me.

We need to hear stories like those of Steve and Christina. We need to hear how survival is not always a straightforward affair. We need to know the truth that healing takes time and that it is also a choice we make each day, to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

We're all in this world together and until we learn to surrender our weapons of fear and anger, we do not stand a chance of transforming our individual or collective suffering into a cause for greater good. Love is the anchor for this transformation but it is still too soon in our journey to tell you why. First, I must tell you what happens after we surrender, when our

state of innocence is restored and we remember why we are here.

“The soul wants truth, not trivia. So if the space between us is to welcome the soul, it must be a space in which truth can be told.”

Parker Palmer

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Alchemist’s Fire in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Alchemist’s Fire. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

The Innocent’s Return

At this point in our journey. I want to tell you that surrender and self-awareness makes it easier to live beyond war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity. But I’m an honest narrator and I can only tell you the truth. It isn’t always so. Quite often, we need to hang in a little longer.

In many ways, self-awareness helps but in the early stages, it can feel like hell. We see what is happening, we notice old habits re-appearing, and we feel helpless to intervene and change the story. In order to change our story, we must first witness it in its entirety. In those painful moments, we learn how to go with the flow and drop the unrealistic expectation that our healing process will ever be perfect or complete.

No, it doesn’t work like this; life will continue to test us in unexpected ways and we must live wholeheartedly in the space in between.

After completing my enquiry into the Alchemist’s Fire, I met a friend for coffee and then came home to walk the dogs. Full of enthusiasm for the lessons of the Innocent that I will shortly share, I walked happily around the block. After fifteen minutes, we crossed paths with a Labrador hiding out in his garden. He was visible behind the gate and in an instant, both my dogs went wild.

First, the brown desert dog set off, yanking at the lead and foaming at the mouth. Then, the white desert dog joined in. I yanked them away and kept walking. I’m used to such antics and usually, a swift turn calms them

down but today is not that day. Today is the day my brown dog loses it and my white dog reacts. They start fighting viciously with each other and I'm caught in between. It's my last day of being 35 and once again, violence has erupted out of nowhere.

The brown dog is a rescue dog and was badly abused in his early years. He has been with us for almost a decade and a few years ago, was caught in a car accident. He had escaped from the house and was hit by a passing car. Since then, his aggression towards other animals has only increased. Friends only with the white dog, we had to be careful to keep him separate from other dogs. At his age, rebuilding trust has proven a long and laborious battle.

I sprang into action immediately. Holding both leads, I was caught between them. I shouted and threw my flip-flop in an attempt to startle them but it was too late. They were gnashing and tumbling over one another.

As their 'parent', I was devastated to see my 'children' fighting. A sea of hormones had temporarily and uncharacteristically pitted them as enemies and I feared for the white dog, who is smaller and has bad legs. He can be equally aggressive when provoked but he's getting older and more vulnerable.

Now they were yanking my arms and I stumbled, falling to the floor. Panic began to set in as I realised how little control I have over the situation. I kicked out with my legs but all my efforts to separate them were failing. Remembering my Budokon grappling training, I fought back and swiftly returned to my feet. There are moments when it simply isn't safe to pause and rethink our strategy; we have to let our bodies do all the work.

The white dog broke free from his lead and I let him go. At that moment, the owner of the Labrador came out to my rescue. Well over a minute had passed since the fight broke out and it had quickly gotten nasty. My legs were covered in blood but that was the least of my concern. All three of us were traumatised by the sudden outbreak of violence.

The Labrador's owner helped me to collect the white dog and together, we walked home. I was in a very present state of shock. I understood that I had been terrified that my dogs would kill each other. They had never turned so aggressively on each other like that. I was also devastated that I hadn't

handled the situation quicker but my fight was against their wild instincts.

We arrived home and I thanked my temporary knight in shining armour for his valour, inwardly thanking him for his lack of verbal judgment of the sight that had just unfolded on his doorstep. I separated my two dogs, leaving one outdoors, and then checked them one by one to make sure I hadn't missed any injuries.

Only at the end, did I tend to myself and see that years of practice had prepared me for this moment. Several years ago, my reaction to sudden physical violence would have been to shut down and freeze. When my ex-husband used to move suddenly next to me, I would flinch, expecting to be hit, pushed, or pinched. It wasn't only his hands that made me jump. The reaction to jump or freeze had been there since the near fatal horse riding accident that left me without words and unable to express my emotions.

Through my pursuit of Martial Arts and emotional awareness practices, I have trained hard to prepare my reflexes to kick in during times of danger. While today's incident was traumatising, the fact that I was able to physically react on the spot and do the best I could to control the situation was a testimony to the depth of my healing process.

So too was my ability to tell the man who intervened that first, I was in shock and then, communicate that I was scared. Fear is a healthy reaction to immediate violence and by harnessing its full breadth of potential, we can take action and transform the descent into something less deadly. Sometimes we can also use it for a greater good.

Others may carry different scars from their exposure to trauma yet it is at the most physical level that unresolved trauma often roots itself. My 11-year old self who thought she was going to die as she tumbled from the horse and later lost consciousness, along with her voice, was the same little girl that grew up overly sensitive to the outside world and completely oblivious to the fire that was burning deep within her.

If we don't educate children on their emotional complexities and teach them how to process difficult emotions, we breed a generation of people who lack the awareness to heal themselves, and we cannot heal the world around us before turning inwards.

Our journey together began with the Wounded Orphan. We learned

how she protects herself with other methods of self-defense. We saw how easily she can feel defeated and wounded by life, and how quickly her self-esteem can be pummelled to pieces. She's unable to problem solve and save herself as she's so caught up in victim-like thoughts and afraid of being abandoned.

My Orphan was with me in the dogfight, appearing as I fell to the floor. *"Why am I always alone when crises happen!"* she had screamed. I heard her but I chose to let my Warrior respond in silence, as it's she who knows how to fight back. Later, I accessed my Caregiver's heart, bathing my bloody knees in water and breathing through the aftermath of the senseless violence that had just erupted.

The Alchemist in me gave the dogs time apart. She knew they needed time to cool off and transform their energy to something much calmer. They also needed to forget the scent of the dog they had just detected and mistakenly identified on each other. Meanwhile, my Explorer thought it could have been a case of mistaken identity. In the animal kingdom, we don't refer to each other by name, rather by scent. It is only the human form that has put labels on the meaning of life.

I sit back at my desk with the same intention to write. All the while, my Innocent has been standing patiently by. By explaining to her what has just happened, I am reassuring her that we are all safe. She knows that back in the house, with the scent of the other dog lifted and time for the aggressive hormones to calm down, the dogs will be fine with each other. I take her with me to feed them separately, knowing that a full stomach will quicken the process of reconciliation. When we are hungry, we are less likely to make peace.

Upstairs, the banging in my bathroom is ongoing. Sometimes it feels like the renovation will never end. I separate myself from the chaos around me, de-merging between the stories that have just passed and allowing space for the story that will now emerge, which is one of radical truth.

Radical truth is a concept that my German friend, Kendra, works with in her peace building outreach. We met many years ago in Egypt. Both of us were studying Arabic and soon after, we shared an apartment together. While I went about my daily life living in my head and achieving more than was necessary, Kendra had a deeper wisdom emerging.

For example, if she got sick, she spent time in bed or on the sofa rest-

ing. She invited friends over when she was well and accepted their support. I, on the other hand, never dared admit if I was feeling anything less than on top of my game. To skip a day of classes because my body was unwell was simply unthinkable. I didn't dare speak my truth because life had taught me that it wasn't safe. My Innocent had fled the scene and surrendered all control to the Orphan.

And so, many years later, and after much healing had taken place, I ask my friend about radical truth and rediscovered innocence in its purest form. When we've seen and experienced the worst of life, can we really forget it ever happened?

Kendra explains that radical truth means to no longer hide any of our feelings, thoughts, or intentions from another person. "It is based on the knowing that to show yourself and what is going on inside you fully allows any issues and conflicts to disserve quickly and leads to a maximum of trust, openness and intimacy in a relationship."

Reading her words weeks later, I cast my mind back over the dogfight incident that had just unraveled. Sometimes, there is not hiding that we're afraid of being witnessed in our worst moments, which can be liberating, but what about those times when we're more easily able to hide? Can it really work, I wonder.

As if on cue with my thought process, Kendra continues.

"Of course, in the beginning, when you start being more truthful with others, you do not 'know' and trust the benefits yet because you haven't experienced them. At first, you will have to jump into the cold water and do it anyway, although it will bring up all your fears of rejection and relationship breakups."

I breathe her words in and remember how keeping what is known in Zen as a "beginner's mind" has been instrumental in opening up to and expressing my version of a truth. It has helped me to see that there are as many truths as there are people, and then some. My version of the truth has often come in layers, at first, depending on how I feel and later, as I stripped it back to its very core, a deeper truth emerged.

Before that deeper truth emerged, I found myself entangled in a semi-relationship with a fellow martial artist. As an Aikido practitioner, the way he lived his life was rooted in peace and yet he also came with a liberal mind-

set that I couldn't yet fathom. Our vision of peace was so very different on the surface yet underneath, we seemed to seek the same things.

"Marry me," he would say. *"We're the perfect match for each other."* With so many interests in common, not to mention our shared ancestry and our easy way of being around each other, there was every reason to say, why not. But the fact he didn't believe in monogamy was a significant obstacle and a roadblock that I wasn't willing to travel over or around. I simply wanted him to remove it and resisted going further into the relationship unless he agreed.

"Ok," he said, "I'll commit to monogamy for a year and then let's see if it is working."

Horrified, I told him where to go and refused to listen to his well-researched arguments that polygamy is a healthy norm. I haven't yet changed my opinion but I have embraced the power of honesty in any relationship. Imagine if he had held back on his truth. It would have been so easy to pull the wool over my eyes and hide his 'other life'. Instead, he had had the courage to come clean and show up as exactly who he was. This gave me the option of choosing if that was the kind of man I wanted to share my life with. His honesty was his greatest gift to me.

And yet, I can relate to the fears of rejection that Kendra mentioned in her concept of radical truth. By practicing radical truth with me, this man was also triggering a break up. He knew that his way of living was unconventional and no doubt he had experienced rejections because of it in the past. But being a resilient soul, he had long learned that the only way he could live in this world was by being exactly who he was, he simply couldn't lie and that made him more vulnerable to attack by people like myself who held other beliefs.

The extreme honesty he lived was like a shockwave to my system. I was used to people denying the truth - governments, partners, others I've met on my journey - and at the deepest level, covering up my own truths. As they started to emerge in my failing marriage, life got rockier but it also got a lot easier. There was less to carry now that everything was out in the open.

"It is crucial to have loving and reliable support from others," Kendra adds. *"People who encourage you to go for your truth although it is scary, and to help you when things get rough."*

When I started speaking my truth publicly, I was fortunate to have a loving circle of women around me. It was the spiritual and yoga teaching group that I would later leave yet for over two years, it held me safely at the centre. We were all committed to telling the truth from the place of non-victimhood and exploring the depths of our inner world. Without these women who repeatedly listened to and witnessed me, as I did for them, I could never have made it through that part of my journey.

It was the part of my journey that sent me feet first into my own underworld and unraveled parallel to the gym workouts, Karate classes, daily long-distance drives, and nightly flashbacks. It was a long-distance community that I met in person every now and then and while I longed to have the community with me on my doorstep at all times, it simply wasn't possible.

I was to learn just how few people are able to hold space for us when we're going through the toughest times of our lives. When we come back home and everything has changed, or when we move to a new city, it takes time to build the networks we need to feel supported.

The Internet has revolutionised the notion of connection and while I often feel disgruntled that it has driven us further apart, I can't deny the many positive aspects it has to offer. While I was on my last mission to Gaza and later, when I came home, virtual connections were essential to my studies and spiritual growth. Over time, they became a way to keep in touch more easily with people I had left behind.

Curious about her path to truth, I asked Kendra how she had found the concept of radical truth.

"After many years of trying all kinds of practices to fix my relationships, I was finally recommended a book called "Radical Honesty" by Brad Blanton, a psychotherapist. This book makes it painfully clear how much we lie to each other on a daily basis. It has become our way of life! We don't speak up for ourselves. Instead, we deny our feelings and needs, and we don't address things that are clearly going wrong because we are afraid."

I remember the old me who denied her feelings and needs for years. Although I have moved beyond that, the memory of who I used to be and all I hid for no good reason from those around me still haunts me. It is one of the reasons why as a coaching professional, I focus so much on communications. We are all drawn to teach not only what we need to learn but also

what we have already learned. I am by no means an ‘expert’ but I do know firsthand and in theory the pitfalls and ramifications of dishonest communications.

Kendra continues to clarify Blanton’s theory. “By remaining quiet and focusing on people pleasing instead of raising our voice, we are bringing sheer disaster to ourselves, our families and the world. Just look around yourself. Who do you know who does not have relationship issues? What state is our society and our world in?”

After reading this book, Kendra saw how much she had bottled up inside of her and knew she had to start expressing herself.

“Reading ‘Radical Honesty’ hurt me. It was devastating to become aware of how much we have shut down towards each other and where it has led to. But Blanton also shows the way out. He describes in detail how to become more truthful and more authentic, how to stop relationship drama and help to create a world that is worth living in for everyone. The focus is on how to express and thereby dissolve anger – for many of us this is the biggest issue.”

She started right away with the two people with whom she currently had issues: her partner and her ex-husband. She described the changes in both relationships since then as “stunning.”

I asked her if she faced any challenges in unearthing and telling her radical truth. *“The biggest challenge was and still is the fear of how the other person will react. What if he or she gets really mad at me? What if I am ridiculed? What if the person really never wants anything to do with me again? What if they start telling everyone I was having mental issues? I have to say though, that until now that has hardly ever happened. The fears are mostly just that: fears. In every circumstance until now my honesty was received a lot better than I imagined, and the relationship improved.”*

“I did have one case where the other one started to get very defensive and rude towards me. That was extremely difficult, and I wouldn’t have had the courage to face it if I didn’t have someone else there with me to support me and coach me through it. But in the end we were fine. You can get very intense reactions at first, but if you don’t let yourself be discouraged by them and stick with the process, you will get amazing results.”

Knowing Kendra as I do, I also know she lives her truth in each moment. She is committed to the process of honouring her Innocent child and welcoming her back home. Just as I’m reflecting on how fear can drive us

apart, to attack each other, or to shut down, she says she’d like to add another crucial aspect about expressing truth.

“One reason why so many of us have shut down and given up on doing it is that we have never been taught how to. Growing up, the messages most of us get are feeling something else other than being happy is inappropriate. Sadness upsets others. Anger is rude! And when others express emotions like sadness and anger, it is indeed scary. We might hear our father shouting at our mother and see her crying afterwards. We see depression. We see conflicts and wars. So we conclude that these feelings must be avoided at all costs.”

I find myself thinking of the absence of the full range of emotions during war. Survival situations have a way of shrinking our capacity to fear and from there, we experience shame, anger, and hate. We travel so far from love and remain undernourished for so long by the Caregiver’s heart that fear becomes the norm. Eventually, many of us numb out, mentally, physically, and/or emotionally, simply as the truth seems complicated and can bring further chaos and strife.

“But there are ways to express yourself without being destructive,” she reassures us. *“The first and most important thing is, if you want to express anger, judgments or something else potentially difficult for another person to hear, tell them beforehand that you want to clear something up to make the relationship better. Tell them that you care and you are willing to listen and go through everything with them that might come up for them. Tell them you will express some of your feelings, thoughts, or other things to work through the issue and get over it.”*

“Let them also know that you are speaking about your thoughts and feelings, but that they do not necessarily represent the absolute truth about the other one. For example, if you have a thought like: ‘You don’t care about me!’ it doesn’t mean you are insisting on it being a fact. The other one might care, but may just be stressed and not able to express it in the way you need to hear it.”

What she’s saying is making perfect sense. I can apply it both to the rhetoric of war and sexual and domestic violence. Such truth resonates in my teenage bones as the ability to say to my parents the morning after my ex-boyfriend raped me, *“I’m hurt and confused and I don’t know what happened or why I froze and couldn’t push him away. I think it’s my fault and that if I tell you, you’ll stop loving me or worse, think that it’s your fault.”* Had I known how to find and express those words, perhaps the rest of my life would have been different.

I try to connect with radical truth in my adult bones and imagine myself saying to my ex husband, *"Your actions scare me and your words hurt me more than you think. I don't want us to live like this, how can we find another way, one that lies beyond control?"* But it doesn't work. I said those words over and over and nothing changed.

No doubt in the first example, my very loving parents, who knew nothing about my being raped for fifteen years, would have welcomed me into their arms and reassured me that it would be ok. I'm not so sure about radical truth with my ex-husband. We tried very hard to be truthful towards the end but it was too little too late and in the early days, he was simply too angry. I remember trying to tell the truth but so often, it got me in trouble. When a person doesn't want to hear what we have to say, it's better to walk away rather than to assume that what we have to say isn't true or that somehow, everything is our fault.

Kendra continues to share her insights and experiences of radical truth telling. She recommends that we stay present within ourselves and notice the facts that are triggering our reactions, and to avoid judgments, criticisms and belittling of each other. That was where my ex-husband and I went wrong. We were constantly judging each other, him overtly and myself, silently, when in reality, the lack of ease was really within us.

"When we stick to what is going on for us and what events triggered it, other people do tend to react a lot less defensive and aggressive. It helps to feel what happens in your body when you talk about it, because the way to get over what happened and dissolve the emotion that stands between both of you is to fully allow it to move through your body. Notice what is going on: Is there a beat in your chest? A stabbing pain in your heart? A knot in your stomach? Does your breath get shallow?"

Here, I remember where my story started to change. Through yoga and Dance Movement Psychotherapy, I learned to pay attention to my physical or somatic reactions to confrontation, conflict, situations of stress and adversity, and even everyday life. I learned how to communicate truthfully at work and in my private life.

Throughout my Karate training as an adult, I have practiced truth. I share briefly my thoughts and feelings as they arise and they are always welcomed and valued. Sometimes on days when stress has gotten the better of

me, my mind gets fuzzy. It's been a little worse recently with the added stress of my health enquiry and I can forget entire chunks of katas without any reason other than my mind has shut down its communication to my body due to the psychological stress.

My instructor welcomes both my outstanding and fuzzier moments as one. Often, he stands there and tells me to keep trying until my body remembers. Sometimes, I have stood in the same position for an hour on end trying to remember a sequence of five moves as he looks on, without judgment, simply holding space while my mind and body reunite.

"You can also tell the other person about what you are experiencing," Kendra says, although she means this in the midst of a confrontation, not a Karate class session. *"This helps to emphasise the message that your intention is to process and get over something and not to attack the other. After a few minutes you will notice how the feeling recedes and the air between the both of you clears. Then, give the other person the same opportunity to express and feel through what is going on for him in reaction to what you said. Stay with him, until you are both fine. This mostly includes several rounds of mutually expressing and feeling through reactions. Finally, try not to only speak about what upsets you, but also let the other one know what you appreciate about her and what you are grateful for."*

Gratitude is one of the spontaneous gifts of the Innocent child. Unlike the Orphan, he doesn't question whether he is good enough to receive such gifts. His self-esteem is healthy and intact. He believes in goodness and doesn't judge things as 'good' or 'bad.' He doesn't fear telling the truth because to him, it is a natural way of living. When someone doesn't want to hear our truth, it can be so easy for our Wounded Orphans to show up and take over, shutting us down. I ask what happens when we don't tell our radical truth.

"Let's imagine a couple. The man makes a comment to his wife that she finds hurtful. Following her conditioning and not knowing how to deal with the hurt she feels, she does not let him know what is going on for her, or she makes one attempt, and when he gets defensive, she gives up, telling herself that it has no use and things only get worse when she speaks up. But the feeling is still there. The frustration, the anger, the pain is all still there, and she will do something to make it go away or numb it down."

"She might call one of her friends and bitterly complain about her husband. She

might binge on ice cream in front of her favourite daily soap. She might buy a whole bunch of stuff she doesn't need. She might go out and take revenge by flirting with other men. She might resort to drugs. She might take it out on her kids. She might divert her anger at someone else and get hateful towards certain groups of people. She might drive faster than she should and cause an accident.

“We so often think that it is better to restrain ourselves and be nice and agreeable. We think we cause pain and upset in others by expressing ourselves. But seriously – how much pain and trouble are we causing by not doing it? Because, as I said, our feelings don't disappear by themselves and will come out one way or the other! Wouldn't life be a lot easier, if we knew a way how to get over our upsets and solve relationship issues the moment they appear?”

I smile at the irony of what she has just shared. Having walked the path of the ‘radical lie’, where I felt unsafe to share the truth even to myself, I see the power this lesson has to transform lives. But first, safety and security is needed. In the midst of some wars, the truth can get you killed. In a fiery marriage or relationship, it can get you hit. Having paid a heavy price for telling my truth at times, I feel a little triggered for myself and others who have been wounded in battle with other Wounded Orphans and Orphan states. Isn't it better to engage in strategy to protect ourselves from further attack?

Kendra is fully aware of the times when radical truth cannot be practiced. She understands how the threat of physical violence can prevent a person from sharing his or her truth openly. What she is advocating for is the healthy expression of truth in situations where the only threat is the fear that arises from within. As a mother, she believes a critical part in radical truth as a measure of peacekeeping begins with how we raise our children.

“Are we giving our children a safe space for their feelings and thoughts? Do we show them how to handle their emotions with care? Or do we judge and punish them for being themselves? Do we allow our sons and daughters to be sad and angry, or do we force them into being “strong” and “nice”?”

Kendra has a dream that one day, humanity will understand that nobody can threaten or attack us when we speak our truth, but instead enrich us by sharing what is going on for them. As a woman who has lived through many wars of the heart and mind, I foster a similar dream of peace. In the meantime, I let my Innocent run free but I do so only with the protection

of all my other selves. This is what it means for the Innocent to return. She doesn't, cannot, and should not return alone.

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Innocent's Return in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Innocent's Return. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

Mining Wisdom

PHASE 3

The Creator, Jester & Lover

As we prepare to leave our underworld behind us, and make our ascent back to the surface of our lives, the Creator, Jester, and Lover will join us. The last two phases may have demanded much of us, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and physically. We may have found ourselves tested again and again, having to learn and re-learn the deeply transformative lessons each of the first six archetypes offer.

In this phase, it is not the intellect or even the body that leads but rather, our hearts. Rediscovering our innocence invites us to connect with strengths we may have had before our lives were turned upside down. A healthy child trusts the impulse to create whatever his or her heart desires. He or she is the opposite of the Wounded Orphan, whose heart has been broken, and finds much healing in flow and connection.

This phase is about softening the parts of ourselves that may have become overly hardened by life's tests and trials. The Creator teaches us that it's safe to express ourselves without words. Later, the Jester helps us to find the stories that tell our tale. Some of us may need to travel backwards through our family trees to understand how we came to be where we are now. At the end of this phase, the Lover steps in to remind us that love is the ultimate healer of all.

Beware the shadow side of these three archetypes! During times of imbalance, the Creator can become isolated and/or egotistical. She is particularly prone to the forces of the Inner Critic. The Jester can over indulge, get stuck in telling the same stories, or fail to take disciplined action steps that serve our long term health. The Lover can become attached to theories of love and so called "gurus", instead of experiencing love as a state of being.

“Healing is a lifelong process that endeavours to unearth the issues clouding your soul and to repair the metaphorical holes in your heart.”

Dr Cherie Carter-Scott

The Creator’s Cave

Several hours after the public fiasco with the dogs. I realise I’m still on edge. It’s a happy edge, but an edge, nonetheless. I turn 36 tomorrow and I feel an odd sensation of exuberance and loss. The Alchemist’s Fire stripped away so much until only the truth of the Innocent remained. The illusions that once protected me are no longer there and I feel raw and exposed, much like my scraped knees.

After we have been violated or tested in other ways, it’s impossible to get back the state of innocence with which we started life. However, the return of the Innocent has nothing to do with such purity. Rather, he is a reminder of the bare bones that carry us through life. He connects us with the heartfelt essence of who we are and the healthy child who existed before our Wounded Orphan stepped in and took over.

In order to journey well, we must accept that our wounded parts will never completely go away. Those that remain will weave themselves into the fabric of our lives and those of us who have consciously healed them will come to see them as beauty spots, like I do with the deep scar on my forehead caused by spinning, the scars on my left hand from the horse riding accident, and my growing affinity for my dogfight scraped knees.

The return of the Innocent gives us a chance to rebuild our relationship with these wounds. He dissipates the heavy cloud so we can see more clearly the other parts of our lives, when things may not have been so bad. He poi-

nts us towards the light that lies within, the light that was always there and will never go out.

As the Creator takes the lead, I reflect on the lessons my inner Innocent has taught me. It was only after I healed my Orphan’s deepest wounds that she felt safe to return and tell my destroyer – the part of me that self-sabotaged and kept me stuck for years in Phase 2, fighting one battle after the other and transforming myself more times than I could count - that it was time for her to leave.

The creativity-destruction cycle that is so common to artists and intellectuals whose children are wounded was finally over. In its place I cultivated peace and beauty, like others I have met along the way. But before I share how they have used creativity to heal themselves, allow me to go back in time and tell you about my teenage and early 20-something self. She is a powerful Creator and one who has stood the test of time to stand by me today.

It took years for me to find her and recognise her creative gifts as a potent force for healing and happiness in my adult life. As I tell you about the search and rescue mission to unearth her, you may begin to remember parts of your creative self. Perhaps this small diversion will help you to find some precious seeds in your past that could once again spring to life, if you choose to water them.

About 18 months after I left my final field mission, while I was still driving over four hours a day for work, I felt an inner calling to my teenage practice of Arabic calligraphy. I had first been drawn to calligraphy at the age of 14 when my best friend from Yemen helped me to tidy up my childish script.

As a soul-driven 20-year old, I studied calligraphy at a university in Egypt, where I set up a small business painting Arabic words on cards and candles. I called it “Kalimat Arabiya”, which means “Arabic Words”, and sold my work back home in Dubai. It never made any money but it brought my customers and myself immense joy.

I had always been a creative, curious, and athletic child but at the age of 15, when sexual violence shook my world, I began to create more and move less. What I couldn’t share in words came through in abstract messages. Art provided a safe haven from the confusion in and around me. It was to be an early healing mechanism that unfolded naturally, as it is for many young

people and children who need another outlet for expression.

In my second year of Art GCSE, a new teacher arrived from England and asked me why I wasn't painting nudes. She considered it to be a fundamental lesson of every serious art student and had yet to grasp that in our Islamic school environment, painting nudes wasn't the norm. But as a curious and diligent student, I followed her suggestion. I declined her rather liberal offer to pose for me and instead, locked myself in my bathroom where I undressed in front of the full-length mirror.

Using an easel and set of pastel colours, I began to observe my violated self from an artist's view point. No longer was my body an object to be violated but rather an object of beauty. At the time, I wasn't conscious that this was a healing process; I simply followed one detail of my body after the other until the painting was done. Then, I painted an oil version without a head, hands or feet and took them both into school. The oil painting was exhibited but only the older A-level students were allowed to see it.

My paintings said loud and clear what I personally could not, that my body had been violated and objectified. That I had dared to paint a nude at my age also sent mini shockwaves amongst my peers. Sadly, it wasn't an environment in which a young girl was encouraged to talk about her relationship with her body.

My questions were coming too hard and too fast for the cultural norms I had to respect. This only reinforced my school time silence, which had started several years before.

As a young girl, I was known for having the courage to speak out and ask questions. But at 12, this impulse ground to a halt. I was threatened with expulsion for the possession of a heavy metal video intended for 18 years and above, and told I was a bad influence on the other girls.

In reality, it was a petty incident blown out of proportion yet the way in which it was handled by the school management scarred me for years to come. It would add to the anger that the first Indian astrologist mentioned.

I had already temporarily lost my voice after the horse riding accident at 11 and just as it was starting to re-emerge, it was like I had been told to be quiet. This is the message young girls are so often given. "Be quiet." What it really means is, "When you speak, only say something nice. If it isn't nice,

make it sound nice and say it with a smile." Such ways of communicating can really get us into trouble, especially in relationships with one another.

As I navigated my way through those complex teenage years, where my boundaries were trespassed, my love for creativity gave me a safe space in which I could feel at home. Outside of school, I began to limit my social activities, spending more and more time in my bedroom, which was also home to my karate punch bag, bookshelf, art desk, and piano. Instinctively, I was fighting back, trying to fill the painful void with which I had been left when the words were taken away.

Music was also my refuge. As a piano player, I wrote elaborate songs for all kinds of voices, instruments and genres. My compositions were too difficult for me to play and so my teacher would have to record them for me. It was as if my skill for writing music came from another world. It was quite possibly one of the first signs that a mystical path awaited me.

But I knew all the words to the music by heart. I had written some and taken other from poetry. My favourite song was based on Maya Angelou's poem, "Still I Rise." I adopted the plural 'we' instead of 'I'. Instinctively, music was helping me to reach out to others who may have been feeling a similar pain, even if my physical reaction had been to isolate myself from my peer group.

My young heart could relate to the defiant nature of Maya's words. This led me to include a solo female voice to express one of her most questioning stanzas.

*"Did you want to see (us) broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by our soulful cries..."*

My favourite part of the song was when it modulated, which in musical terms means to change key. This often happens when the music becomes more emotional and intense. When writing it, I made sure to increase the number of voices in the backing choir.

"Out of the butts of history's shame

(We) rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
(We) rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
(We) rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
(We) rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
(We are) the dream and the hope of the slave.
(We) rise
(We) rise
(We) rise"

Years would pass before I would grasp the full meaning of what it means to be a woman and marginalised by society. Yet the seeds were there in Maya's song and sown deep within my heart. They would blossom so many years later, not long before her death.

Pain came to be one of my greatest teachers and my creative outlets soon led me to a political threshold over which I would eventually cross. On weekends, I created and punched for hours on end, often forgetting to eat. Then, I would lie down on my bed and read until late in the night. My small bookshelf, which would turn into a library in later years, held so many books on revolutions and prisons.

The book, "Wild Swans," by Jung Lee took me deep into the history of China and what it meant to be a woman with her feet bound. From there, I found my way to communist China, devouring book after book on Mao's revolution. Having grown up in a royal totalitarian state, that followed a capitalist system, communism fascinated me.

After, I discovered the Iranian revolution, which started a month before I was born. I was drawn repeatedly to the image of Ayatollah Khomeini and his journey back home, after the Shah and Queen Farah had fled.

"How do you feel about going home," a journalist on his flight asked. *"Hichi,"*

he responded. Nothing.

Those words spoke loud and clear to me but back then, I couldn't explain why. Now, I can easily see the parallels of being banished from one's homeland or body, and making the hard journey back. There are times on our return when we feel absolutely nothing because the pain of exile has been so great.

My karate training offset my fascination with Iran's revolution and early systems of social work. One of my teachers was an Iranian Sufi or mystic and as students, we whispered behind his back, wondering what that really meant. The little I knew of mystical practice lured me and I tried to find out more. But in those days, when the Internet had just started, it wasn't easy to find out. Every road I tried to follow drew a blank.

In the midst of my search for inner peace, I fell for the spiritual life. I recognised it and yet my immediate surroundings couldn't have been more different. I was a privileged child; I studied alongside the royal family and wanted for nothing. I knew that despite my middle class upbringing, my family's roots were really working class yet that world seemed so far away. So many years would pass before the Jester came to tell me the stories of which I'm really made.

Back then, following only my natural instincts, I had found fragments of my lost self in art, politics, prisons, revolutions, martial arts, music, and calligraphy. They would all come to shape my life in the years ahead. First, the politics, prisons, and revolutions and then, once all the wars were over, my love of art, calligraphy, mysticism, and karate would carry me home.

Because of adversity, I lost my footing and myself and in the process, I 'accidentally' discovered my true nature. I believe it is often that way. We are sent here for a purpose and yet part of the test is figuring that out. As Christoph pointed out, the essence of who we are never really changes, no matter what trials we face. At our core, we remain the same.

On my return home, creativity would come to nourish my broken heart. It would help me to step out of my mind and rest my weary body. My mind and body fight so hard, they struggle to relax and often, if I don't watch out, they can wage war on one another. Creativity is the healing thread that leads me back to my soul and spiritual centre, and the passage is through my heart.

And so, 18 months after returning home from my last mission, when I felt this inner calling to return to calligraphy, I decided the time had come to bring back the young woman I once was. Soon after, I saw an advert for an Arabic calligraphy workshop. I set aside my weekend plans and rolled up my art sleeves for the first time in fifteen years.

I was trembling inwardly as the class began. The teacher had seated us next to large easels and I had chatted briefly to the woman beside me, who was an art teacher in another town. Seated next to her, I felt like the biggest fraud. Who was I to have time to be artistic? There hadn't been any time, space, or energy in years. And besides, humanitarian work was much more pressing.

By week, I was officer in charge of a regional UN office, managing humanitarian affairs. The work itself was engaging but my impact was much reduced compared to being in the field. This made it less meaningful on a personal level and more mechanical.

My body was also exhausted from driving and trying to keep up with my Karate and fitness schedules, and my sleep had been so long off track that I couldn't remember what it felt like to feel rested. I was on edge, and it was a nervous edge of not knowing what would happen next.

After the teacher finished his presentation, the entire class leaped into action. As seasoned artists, they began preparing their canvases. Very few of them could write Arabic but this didn't matter. They planned to use the teacher's wooden stencils as outlines on their perfect backdrops. But as someone who has spent her life being fiercely independent, I refused to use the teacher's designs. Instead, I sat down and tried to remember my old designs.

The word 'dream' or 'Hulm' came into my mind and I decided to start there. I sketched an outline and as soon as I had finished, the teacher was standing over me.

"Why don't you try lifting your 'L' all the way up to the top of the canvas," he asked me.

It was quite possibly the most interesting question anyone had asked me in months and quite possibly, in years. Although my hand was shaking and my breathing was all over the place, I took him up on his suggestion and a burst of creativity shot forth. I began to paint in the colours of the Palestinian and Emirati flags and when the class was done, walked out proudly with

the first art piece I had created since I was 21 years old. I dedicated it to prisoners worldwide and anyone who had been deprived or unwittingly given up their right to freedom.

Shortly after, I left my work in the formal humanitarian sector to set up my own humanitarian coaching and communications business. In my new office, I dedicated a corner to my artwork and both my work and creativity flourished in those early months. I updated my modern calligraphy designs and I started studying traditional Arabic calligraphy once more.

Soon, friends and other people began to ask me for commissions. Delighted, I continued painting and writing in my free time. My old teenage self started to return. She was the sensitive and spiritual woman I was becoming before the war of my work took over. As I returned to my early spiritual path, my first business, "Kalimat Arabiya", was reborn.

By then, I had rescued all the broken parts of me. My teenage self was the last to return and finally, my life felt complete. There was no more longing to be anywhere other than where I was.

Creativity as a path to expression, stress alleviation, and healing is a common feature in humanitarian psychosocial programs, especially those that target women and children. It is also widely used in prisoner rehabilitation to help them find their way back home. It therefore came as no surprise to discover that two of my humanitarian friends had also found their way through art.

Amy and I met much like Christoph and myself, through a virtual aid worker wellness group. She had just finished creating a documentary called, *Kick at the Darkness*, which is an exploration of the psychosocial implications of humanitarian aid work. The title was inspired by the lyrics of a Canadian songwriter, Bruce Cockburn, who said, *"You've got to kick at the darkness till it bleeds daylight."*

Her impetus for creating this documentary was her last posting as a humanitarian and development worker in Haiti, during the earthquake response. She had returned home feeling depleted and burned out.

"As I started to think about leaving Haiti, I didn't feel I had the emotional, spiritual or physical energy to go to another emergency response right away. I was also starting a post-graduate program about humanitarian psycho-social consultation in the UK and

ften-spoken about the implications of burn-out, organisational dysfunctions, chronic stress, anxiety and depression, etc. among the aid community.”

Like myself, Amy had come home with more questions than she had left with. She had spent several years in aid work and because of her experience, recognised the need for better mental health support for humanitarians on the front lines. It is such a tricky topic to advocate for, given that those we serve are in such dire circumstances. To speak of our needs can sound very inappropriate. It's not as if anyone has forced us into this work.

Yet the truth is that so many humanitarians, development workers, and others who work in caregiving professions are there because they feel called to make a difference. Their work isn't a 9 to 5 job and those on the front lines are at high risk of burnout. During my twelve years in formal humanitarian work, I witnessed two colleagues descend into nervous breakdowns, one due to the accumulation of witnessing war and the second, due to office bullying.

What many people don't realise is that the situations of adversity that we choose to bear witness to often come with a maze of bureaucracy. We may find ourselves surrounded by institutional dysfunctions, the absence of clear support networks and proper management, and the distance from loved ones that can drive us to the brink of despair. Add an earthquake to the situation and responding day in day out to massive waves of death, suffering and displacement, it's easy to understand why some of us burn out and struggle to readjust once we've come home.

Amy's idea to create a documentary that highlighted such issues was facilitated by a conversation with her cousin who works as a photographer. *“He encouraged me to think about a new creative path and to catch my breath,”* Amy told me. *“I always used photography as a means of expression, but this would be taking a direct step ‘out’ of my beloved aid work. I felt that removing myself from the environment enabled me to thaw out, let the adrenaline go and recognise that I had healing to do.*

“Over time, I decided that I wanted to tell this story through a photo essay. I created a crowd-funding campaign and in twenty six days, raised the money needed to finance the project. I was emboldened by the support I got from friends but also aid workers and strangers who resonated with my experience. What started as a photo-essay transpired into a short documentary and incorporated the voices and experiences of my fellow aid wo-

rkers and friends.”

Amy's intuitive and heart-felt initiative was eventually screened in 26 cities around the world, and on every continent except South America. She was amazed at the support she received when she reached out and the awareness her film was able to raise.

“From large presentations to living room discussions, friends and strangers alike have helped me. I continue to learn and shed and heal, and I now see that the process of creating the film was my own journey towards healing. Before the film, I was much angrier, I felt more disconnected from my Canadian community and also from my aid community.

“Initially, I felt anxious and quiet about sharing my journey. I don't know if I could have imagined what the end product would be or the response and connections that have since come. I am healthier on all levels - physically, spiritually, and emotionally. I feel more grounded and connected to my sense of self, to my community, and I believe this film and its message are part of a growing movement towards authenticity and healing in the aid community.”

Her words touch me at a deep level. My reaction to leaving humanitarian field mission work was somewhat delayed as I then took two regional positions based at home. Neither of the roles spoke to my soul yet I took them, as I felt so alienated from non-aid work. By then, my key skills were protecting vulnerable people, documenting torture, and communicating atrocities. They weren't exactly skills that companies in Dubai were looking for.

When I finally left the formal aid sector, I left with the intention of furthering humanity in another shape and form. It's not that I gave up on the formal sector but rather, accepted that my time on the inside and against the front lines of aid work was over. A new generation had arrived and their work would continue. My purpose was to bring the lessons home and start making a difference in the world as a coach and communicator, one person, organisation, and community at a time.

Amy too has found her purpose and calling through following her instincts and creative expression. *“I realised that this film has been a caveat for my healing journey and now I want to take the lessons from it and be of service to help others heal. I've come a long way and the process has taught me a lot. For example, when I feel stagnant, restless or anxious, I know I need to move, write or create. I feel it in my body,*

energy and movement when I do practice and I feel it when it's been absent and know to act on it, which has improved over time. I've gotten closer to recognising the connection between stress and the body and acknowledge what helps move that through my body."

Smiling to myself, I remember in my own journey the power of movement and creativity to heal. I ask her what else soothes the memories or brings her alive, and how she knows that she is healed.

"Dancing helps me feel free, elevated, soulful and grounded. Especially when I connect to music from the places I've lived. Haitian music especially allows this joyfulness and soulful connection. Writing helps me purge what needs to come out. I maintain strong connections with my 'soul friends' - particularly my community from the Haitian response. It was one of the most intense and impactful responses I participated in and I believe it's reflected in the friendships that continue to this day. My 'ports in the storm' are always a source of support, empathy and the ability to relate.

"I know I'm healed and yet I continue to heal," she tells me, "as I feel it in my body and soul and my heart; I see the change in my writing and the change from what was reflected when I first left Haiti; my diminished anger and increased peace; my ability to create and vulnerably to share my documentary; my shift in how I approach relationships with greater worthiness, honesty and authenticity (even if that means relationships coming apart) and my ability to release, let go and be content where I am at."

As I read through Amy's interview, weeks later, with my scraped knees throbbing from the aftermath of the dogfight, I feel a sense of peace descending. I see myself giving her a huge virtual high-five. I know her journey hasn't been an easy one and I feel a great sense of respect for her willingness to hang in and keep speaking and sharing her truth. In doing so, she is sparking shifts in the mindset of others and quite possibly changing lives.

Like Amy, I agree that we can be both healed and continue healing. Healing isn't always a destination; it can also be a journey that comes in waves and there are stations through which we will all pass. At those stations, we integrate our lessons, rest and appreciate how far we've come. Sometimes we can even be lulled into thinking we've made it, but sooner or later reality trips us up and reminds us that we've still some way to go, or it could even send us back to revisit some of the stations if we forget one of its lessons.

When I sat down to write this book, in early January 2015, I thought I

had a clear road ahead of me. I'd complete a huge chunk of healing work over the past few years and finally found some happiness. After working intensely during the first three months of my business, I had some extra time in my schedule to get this book out. I sat down at my desk on January 3rd, thinking I'd take a week to ease myself back in after the holidays.

Just as I thought life was getting back 'on track', I lost my composure. Sadly, on January 11th, my paternal grandmother passed away and my personal plans lost their grounding. The month that followed was full of inner turmoil as I witnessed the impact of death on my family. At a deep level I recognised that her time had come to move on but it was nonetheless painful to see my family in pain and to feel the depths of my own pain. I share the same birthday as my grandmother and through that we have shared a special bond. Hers was the one birthday I could never forget.

My newly found business focus took a hit and in all honesty, it took several months to regain my footing. As a solo practitioner, I had nobody to whom I could delegate while I processed my feelings. During that time, I felt lost inwardly and returned to the practice of taking one step at a time. That meant taking each day at a time and doing my best to stay present as I continued working outwardly in the world and inwardly through my grief.

The following month, I received another setback. The man I had loved for six years and who had finally told me that he loved me too came home from war, but not to me. It was the same week as my grandmother's cremation where I stood up to read a poem for her departure to the world beyond. I felt myself spinning inwardly for the second time that year. Knowing I could only surrender to what was unfolding, I allowed myself to spin, consciously taking smaller steps.

I would be lying if I said my Wounded Orphan didn't rear her head. She came to me late at night with questions like, *"Why me, why this, why now?"* She reminded me how hard the previous year had been on top of so many more. She worried constantly about how I would keep my new business afloat and if I would have the energy to make it financially viable. She told me how tired she was as yet she stole my sleep and added to my burden.

It took the strength of my inner Lover, who you will meet much later, to hold her fears close to my heart and reassure her that these tests were ha-

ppening for a bigger reason than I could imagine. My Lover told her meaningful spiritual stories beyond adversity and reminded her that all great things take time and energy to evolve. She called on my Caregiver to hold space. She reminded me to open my heart and not turn away but rather, to feel my way into the pain because the only way out for good is to travel through and beyond.

During that period of loss, I took the time I needed inwardly to grieve while also scaling back on my work. It wasn't a time for creating. Instead, I took long hot baths where I soaked my weary soul, ate as healthily as I could manage, kept going to Karate and working out, and focused on the essential components of my business. I let the rest go for a while, including my book.

At first, I struggled to let go of the book. Creating it was on my agenda and not following through would affect my entire business plans for the year. I fought the desire to surrender and wrote the first two drafts. Both of them died to the dust; neither reflected accurately what I wanted to say and unable to tell a lie, I had to let them both go.

Amidst my grief and various losses, my Inner Critic still reared her head. *"You're lazy! You're not creating! You're going to fall behind!"* she would taunt me. It was hard to keep her at bay as her words highlighted the fears of my Wounded Orphan. Together, they were like unstoppable duo and eventually, the only practice that worked to alleviate the damage they caused within me was meditation.

Sitting quietly for twenty minutes each day, sometimes more or less, I gave them permission to run riot and watched them try to destroy and sabotage me. This was the most helpful thing I could have done as the alternative – to try to silence or ignore them – would have only led to further pain. This way, I could see them coming from afar and swiftly step out of the way.

Finally, in the third month of the year, the month of mine and my late grandmother's birthday, I sat down to work on the third and final draft. I completed it the following month, working diligently, and writing directly from my heart.

When I think of how the Inner Critic can sabotage and destroy acts of creation, my mind winds its way back to a very different interview I had conducted on creativity and healing.

Shireen is a former colleague and friend who I bonded with over our shared histories of divorce and violence. Not only is she a dedicated humanitarian, but she is also a very talented artist. The challenge is that she doesn't always see that. She comes from an art family and growing up, one of her family members criticised her drawings with no consideration for the impact his words had on her.

"I never had the experience of translating my feelings onto a canvas as I feared being judged harshly by him, or revealing my mental or emotional status, which I knew he would detect. Over time, I started fearing the judgments of other people about my paintings and so with time, I kept a journal of my art. I kept my feelings made through art for my eyes only, but then I started destroying them in case maybe, he would find them one day."

Reading Shireen's response to my questions struck a primal chord within me. Not only did I feel for my friend and the criticisms she had endured, but it also triggered memories of hiding my journals from my ex-husband. They were the only place I had felt safe enough to share my feelings during my frozen and unaware years. But after he found and read one of them, I started drawing stick figures as they were less likely to trigger his anger.

There were always two figures standing side by side. The one on the left was me in present day. She was tired, burned out, feeling lacklustre, and looking unhappy. The one on the right was the woman I wanted to become. She was bright, positive, full of life, and most importantly, happy.

Although I hung in long enough to become the woman on the right, during times of fatigue, I remember what it feels like to be the woman on the left. She's the woman who feels put down and is running on empty; the woman who is told over and over that she's not good enough. It takes the strongest of mindsets not to be fooled into thinking that just because I'm tired, I'm back where I started.

Shireen too had to learn the lesson of feeling good enough. *"Recently,"* she continues, *"I started standing up to him and saying 'it doesn't matter as long as I like it' because before, without a word, he would just correct my painting and ask me to do it all over again, not telling me where the mistake was. He was always criticising my work but he never said why!"*

"My current job is pretty demanding and so these days, I don't paint much. During my former marriage, I pursued art as a therapy but my ex-husband belittled my talent. I

I guess my dad just wanted me to be the best but didn't know how to teach me, and my ex-husband was an asshole who never wanted me to be good at anything. Luckily I have my amazing husband now, who doesn't give a damn about what others say and he loves what I produce no matter what. He actually gives my paintings as gifts to his friends, which tells me how proud he is of who I am."

I feel happy for Shireen that she has seen that the problem was not within her. These days, when work allows, she paints mostly women. This too has resulted in criticism from her father, mother, and others yet she has continued.

"The truth is I find it easy to convey their beauty, elegance and balance. I also feel a piece of me in each one of them. Before I paint I feel this rush and the image or feeling I want to paint keeps appearing to me, as if I'm actually seeing it in front of me. It gets stuck in my head and sometimes I dream about it. The rush gets to a point where I need to release it on a canvas or paper and sometimes, the feelings get so overwhelming that all I can think of is how can I release it. But most of the time the pieces come together to form a full painting in my imagination and that's when I try to find the time to paint it, trying to make it close to what I'm imagining or feeling."

She notices how different these creative urges are from when she was in an unhappy marriage. Back then, she tells me, her paintings were more a call for help as she tried to tell the world how hard her life was without speaking a word. She painted mostly with bright red, black and blue, always sad women in pain that reflected her own. But those paintings are long gone now.

Shireen still feels the fear at times but paints in spite of it. Sometimes it harnesses her and sometimes she overrides it. *"After I paint, I feel a mixture of accomplishment and fear. Is it good enough? Will he correct it? Will people criticise it? Then the painting gets shelved and not many people see it."*

I guess art takes me to a perfect world of mine, something or someone I want to be, look like, feel and art mostly expresses my pain or lack of something. Like if I miss nature or want to be connected with it; if I'm disappointed and hope for a better world for myself and those who have so little. I guess it's my own personal space in which I can create what I want and hope that this feeling will continue. It's kind of like documenting the moment forever."

Back in present time, it's just gone midnight and I've officially entered

my first day of being 36 years old. I feel like I have celebrated my first moments with two beautiful, strong, and empowered women who have seen the darkness of life and like Amy's documentary says, kicked back until their darkness bleeds daylight. I'm reminded of the healing powers of the Creator's Cave. The cave is a place that we find within us. Like any cave, we must wander off the beaten track to find it. It doesn't exist in urban settings or known destinations. We each must locate our own.

Once we enter this cave of creation, the medicine we need to heal will await us. For each of us, the medicine will be different. For myself, it was Arabic calligraphy and writing that gave the final remedy to my soul. For Amy, it was reaching out and documenting the lives of others who had endured humanitarian trauma. For Shireen, it was continuing to paint what she desired, regardless of who was watching.

Spending time in our Creator's Cave after meeting our Innocent child provides a restorative stop on our journey. It is one that I come back to again and again in order to replenish my soul's work. I know that it doesn't provide me with measurable outcomes.

What I create in my cave is ultimately my gift to the world. Like this book, it is the legacy I leave behind, and the fruits of my inner labour. Like Shireen and Amy, it is overcoming adversity that drives me there. By capturing those feelings in an art piece, book, or blog entry, I too document my moments of aliveness forever and make a conscious decision to choose beauty over pain.

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Creator's Cave in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Creator's Cave. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

"Our country of birth may influence how we feel and see ourselves today but our ancient ancestors lived in many different lands. In our sub-conscious we remember these places and, should we ever go back, they trigger some long-forgotten memory in us. It feels as though we have been there before."

Natalia O'Sullivan & Nicola Graydon

The Jester's Tale

The alarm rings and my eyes blink open into a smile. I'm officially waking up as a 36-year-old woman for the first time. As I stretch in bed, I feel my scraped knees. The blood has dried and scabs are beginning to form. Just as I'm about to sigh, my inner Jester picks me up. "Fall down seven times, get up eight," she whispers with a smile. She knows I know she's pinched that saying from one of my favourite Japanese proverbs.

I slide out of bed and wander to the mirror where I study my reflection. I see a swollen red bump above my right eyebrow and a gash on the left side of my neck. I was lucky neither of the dogs bit me yesterday in their attempt to kill each other. A smile forms and I notice light crinkly lines forming in the outer corners of my eyes.

Instead of fixating on the passing of another year, my Jester points out the story that my face now carries. There is a strength in my eyes that acts as a stark contrast to the blonde colour of my hair. There is also a light that shines regardless of what is happening now. It's the light of self-love that has become a baseline for how I allow and invite myself to be treated.

Last night, on the dog walk, my Warrior hadn't hesitated to leap into the flames of the fight. I want to cry tears of joy as I know that nobody will ever again take the first shot with me or stun me into silence. My Jester's gift has been my voice and she's been present for several years now, first through my blog that Mihaela once followed and now in my role as a coach. There is

lightness to how I now live but it has been a very long time coming.

In a burst of happiness, I race downstairs and wake up the dogs. The brown dog has been limping slightly but it looks like he's made peace with the white one. They're lying side by side when I find them and spontaneously, I wish them both a happy birthday. I decide that not knowing their actual dates of birth, we can all celebrate together today.

I make a strong cup of Lavazza coffee, leave it to steep at my desk, and go to shower. The house is empty as usual, except for the ghosts of days gone by. I tear off my pajamas, throw them onto my teenage bed, and jump into the shower. As the hot water washes over me, I start singing, busting out tunes I haven't heard in years. It's as if I'm driving the ghosts out, laying them to rest, letting them know that whatever has happened between us, it's ok now and they can go.

Waves of joy and gratitude ripple through me as I dress and head downstairs for breakfast. Usually, morning anxiety hits so hard that I'm unable to move or eat for several hours. This morning, I'm hungrier than usual. Instinctively, I make the birthday breakfast that my body needs; eggs, sweet potatoes, roasted fennel, and hommous. At the last moment, I throw in vermicelli. My appetite for life and living is well and truly back.

I sit down on the outdoors porch and reflect on how I cleared space for my life to return. Creativity was my doorway. It has a way of reconfiguring our minds to make space for new energetic linkages to be made. After my first Arabic calligraphy workshop in years, where I created the painting 'dream,' I moved to Thailand where I underwent further professional training as a coach with a bestselling author and Master Coach.

This move was anything but random. Several months earlier, a book written by this coach had found its way into my life. Late at night, I had started to read it to take my mind off the nightly flashbacks that had appeared out of nowhere. The book covers the concept of being human and each word spoke loud and clear to me. I had underlined so many pages, wishing I had found this book much earlier but already knowing that there is a divine timing to everything in our lives. Teachers appear when we are ready, not when we want them.

This book prompted me to leave my job and set up a humanitarian coa-

ching and communications business. But in order to do that, I needed to update my coaching skills. I wanted to become certified with the International Coach Federation (ICF) and at this stage in my life, given all I had explored and the many other trainings I had achieved, I was looking for something outstanding. And so I did what anyone I know would do; I turned to Google.

There, on the third page, I found this author's coach training course. I knew in my heart that this was the right one for me. On the spot, I applied and was accepted. Because it started one month before my contract ended, I was able to take the rest of my holiday leave and arrive on time. One day I was finishing up my role as a regional UN officer and the next, I was on my way to Bangkok. The following day, I showed up for training in a burned out daze. I knew I was in the right place at the right time. I felt it in my bones.

What stands out for my Jester is that my family had been asking me for years to join them on trips to South East Asia, including Thailand, and every time I had said no. The region simply didn't appeal to me and as I had travelled too much for work, I didn't want to stray far from home, not even for a short holiday. Yet when the coach-training course came up, making a choice to move to Thailand for three months was easy. Little did I know that it would change my life.

Days before I reached Thailand, the country encountered a military coup, and the moment I set foot on Thai soil, the earth beneath me began to shake. No sooner had I landed did war break out in Gaza. We were also under nightly curfews in Bangkok and remembering the curfews of years gone by, my entire being went on full alert.

I had left my last field mission to Gaza just as the last war had broken out. After spending nine months preparing carefully for my departure, my final moments there involved a mad dash to the border to make it out in time. I didn't get to say goodbye in person to all the friends and colleagues I loved. As the border shut behind me, I knew it wouldn't be easy to return.

Several days later in Dubai, I opened the newspaper to find a photo of five children crammed onto one morgue table on the front page. They were the small relatives of one of my friends and colleagues and just five of her nine relatives who had been killed in an airstrike the night before. I sat frozen at the breakfast table. It was moments like these that I could never expl-

ain to people who hadn't seen war; they were the times when I questioned if humanity really existed.

I also felt isolated from the peaceful community to which I had returned. I could go through the motions of meeting someone for a friendly coffee and hearing about their daily lives but really, it was a struggle to actually listen and stay present. I couldn't relate to their everyday concerns or achievements and so, it was easier to not try most of the time. Instead, I focused on my studies and trying to find a degree of peace within me, all the while grieving for the people I had left behind.

Later, I made friends with people who worked out or did martial arts. A joint activity made it easier to connect and from there, I re-learned how to make small talk. After, I remembered how to go with the flow, to resist the urge to judge people who seemed to be living happy and peaceful lives. By then, I knew enough to understand that we each have our own wars. Not all of them make the front-page news but still, people in seemingly peaceful places do suffer and carry pain that we can't always see.

But back then, days out of my last mission, when my then coach asked if I could take longer than a week to rest, I had said it wasn't necessary. My dream plan on leaving Gaza had been to set up a restorative health coaching business to help people recover from stress and burnout. I had spent months working out the details. Yet when I returned and saw I couldn't connect with people or trust that life would be ok if I took another route, I returned to humanitarian work.

Emotionally, I couldn't make the jump to fulfil the vision I had in mind; I could remember no other way of living. Deep down it bothered me greatly. I had spent several years training in various areas so that I could rebuild my own life after my divorce and here I was, unable to make the next move.

Now, as a coach, I see some of my clients going through the same dilemma. They want to change careers but their commitment to making a difference in the world and their inability to trust the unknown keeps them stuck in a no-man's land. They know it's time to move on but they can't. So together, we take the journey through their inner world to uncover what needs to happen. What first needs to be expressed, released, and transformed? Which lessons remain to be learned?

Back then, I clearly had more lessons to learn. One of these was continuing to listen to and trust myself, no matter how odd that seemed to others. The next two years took me back to the front lines of war, although this time from afar. First, I covered the bloodshed of Iraq, Yemen, and Syrian refugees in Jordan. When my next job asked me to go to the North West province of Pakistan for a field trip, I refused to go. Even after my visa was issued, I pulled out, sensing danger on the horizon. The team went ahead and on the day they were meant to visit a remote refugee camp, a suicide attack there killed dozens of people.

I visited a refugee camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border, where the organisation I was working for had set up a makeshift hospital. Walking around parts of the camp left me further devastated by the aftermath of war. I felt outraged to be part of a system that worked so hard to put people of war back together and yet it always fell short. I had long repeated the common belief that political problems require political solutions. I also knew that transforming pain was a long and drawn out process.

Now, as I tried once more to start my coaching business, news of eleven former colleagues being amongst the more than 2000 people killed in this war reached me. I didn't know them personally as the UN agency I worked for in Gaza was so large that it was impossible to know everyone, but still, my heart bled for them and their families and everyone under attack across the Gaza Strip.

That summer, like so many of my friends and others around the world, I saw images of toddlers with their heads partially blown off. I saw the frozen corpses of women whose lives had been taken from their very own homes. Inwardly, I was screaming with injustice, feeling helpless and useless as there was so little I could do from afar.

It was also the summer that re-uprooted my inner world and prompted me to tell the man I had loved for six years the truth about how I really felt. My letter reached him as he was fighting his own war. It seemed that no matter where I turned, there would never be peace. The fragrant and relaxing summer I had pictured in Thailand charting the waters of my new life had turned to rivers of blood. Why was it that each time I tried to build my business something big got in the way?

Divorce had shaken my first attempt many years ago. I had laid the groundwork for a Yoga and Martial Arts teaching business that was obliterated in the process of losing my marital home. That business concept turned into the free classes that I later taught on mission for two years in Gaza. When my second health coaching business attempt crumbled, and I returned to formal humanitarian work, I took the spirit of both my first and second business concepts into blogging for the next two years.

Although I didn't tell anybody, I kept the fire burning deep within me. The Alchemist continued to do her work as the rest of me began to burn out. Weary and nearing the edge of despair, I saw in Bangkok that life had given me a choice. I could either back down and give up on my dream to fly solo once more, or I could trail blaze my own way through this fire.

I had nothing more to lose. The man I loved wasn't available to me and I had no job to return home to. I had invested nearly all my life savings into retraining and the business set up fees. For once, I really didn't have a Plan B.

The supportive container of the coach-training course helped me to stay on track. In between the training and news, I hit the gym; first a Cross Fit gym on the other side of town, where we hung from bars on top of the roof, just beneath the BTS Sky Train. Then, when my body became too tired to travel in the heat and humidity, I started working out at a tiny boutique gym next door to my hotel. There, I focused on weights and skipping, eventually achieving my goal of 1000 rounds in seven minutes.

For a kid who grew up with asthma and who had always struggled to run fast and jump, it was an amazing achievement. Fitness also helped to focus my mind. I began to implement once more everything I had learned during my Warrior months. I felt grounded and strong on all levels and yet, something was missing. I was making great progress in my coach training but my trainers refused to give me a 'brilliant' session until almost the last hour. It was a requirement for passing the course and an essential step in setting up my new business. Without becoming certified, I couldn't operate as an ICF coach.

I couldn't figure out what the missing link was. I was doing all the right things, participating actively in the training, doing my homework, doing my inner work, and communicating mindfully. It wasn't until our last intensive

weekend that the energy well and truly shifted. By then, I had received news that my coaching business application in Dubai had been accepted and now, all I needed was the green light from my trainers!

As I prepared myself inwardly for the last training intensive, I saw what needed to arise. Several weeks earlier, my elder sister, Victoria, who is also the editor of this book, had sent the family an image of our great uncle Walter's death certificate. She had found it while going through our maternal grandmother's old paperwork, the same grandmother we had buried in a wedding dress.

Being innately curious, Victoria had done some additional research and found out by chance that Walter had been a Prisoner of War, or PoW, held by the Japanese forces during World War 2. He had been held for several years and tortured so badly that he was left infertile. On his return to England, like many former PoWs held by Japan, he went silent and never told his story.

The day this news reached me was the day that changed my life once more. Suddenly, my adult descent into prison work and my years of fighting to reunite families that had been separated by war and prison made sense. It became clear why the men I loved were all prisoners in one way or another, and products of war. I understood why I had gravitated towards prison and war memoirs and I understood why, after my near fatal horse riding accident, I had quit riding horses to take up the Japanese fighting art of Karate.

I have never felt so at one with myself and in alignment with my soul's purpose as when I have been working with and for political prisoners and their families. Although in those days I had yet to heal my own wounds, I was completely present to theirs. I had an uncanny way of gaining trust and extracting truth from men who wouldn't usually share with a foreigner the details of their darkest moments.

Some stories can never be told, especially when we come home. It may take several lifetimes for a future family member to discover the shattered pieces that we, in our lifetime, were unable to put back together. It is all part of the soul's quest to pick up on these messages and carry them into our hearts, asking our True Selves what it is that we must do with the different pieces. What needs to shift and change before the story can be completed?

I carried these messages and pieces into my coach-training weekend. For weeks, I had been struggling to write my daily acknowledgements. It was a required homework for our course, meaning that we had to write down at the end of each day what went well or what we were grateful for. The practice is one that rebuilds self-esteem and yet the absence of self-esteem can make it very hard to get started.

As a humanitarian whose efforts had always fallen short, and as a perfectionist who drove herself harder and harder, self-beat-ups had become my norm. On the outside, I looked so well-accomplished. People often told me that they envied my vast trail of work experience, my skills and multiple talents on the job, my ability to discipline myself and achieve whatever I set out to achieve. I followed through on all the promises I made myself.

I survived and succeeded where others may have stumbled and given up. Yet as I've mentioned earlier, the absence of self-esteem made it so hard for me to acknowledge any of my efforts or moments of personal glory. They were never enough as nothing could fill the bottomless pit of despair where teenage rape and the ghosts it brought had driven my soul out. I had looked towards the men I had loved to help me harness this empty space and yet it so often ended with rejection.

Walking into the final coach-training weekend intensive, I knew that my missing piece in the puzzle of Walter's life and mine was celebration. I knew in my soul that he had not fully celebrated his return home from war and neither had I. According to my mother, he returned a compassionate man who often intervened peacefully in situations of family violence that erupted. He was a peacemaker, just like me.

On the surface, wounded peacemakers appear calm, compassionate, and full of love. Yet if they are not healed, the pain that compels them to do the work they do will eventually consume them. It may take a lifetime, it may appear in the form of chronic or lifestyle diseases, or it may result in further adversity like divorce and death.

People wonder why bad things happen to good people and a part of me believes it is because good people can also carry deep wounds that one day will get the better of them. Left uncared for, those wounds may later lead them to make poor decisions and yet those very wounds hold the potent

medicine they need to truly heal themselves and others.

Celebration had been missing in my life for so long. As a shy and introverted child, I had dreaded birthday parties where lots of children would gatecrash the house. As an adult on mission, I was reluctant to tell people I had only just met that it was my birthday. I spent many birthdays in prisons, interrogation centres, and refugee camps.

I also hesitated to celebrate Christmas and New Year's Eve. My first Christmas as a married woman resulted in my first slap. The New Year that followed gave me another. After that, I decided not to celebrate. It was too much hassle and I didn't trust that there was ever a good moment to mark the turning of the seasons and years.

As the coach-training weekend got underway, I sent invitations to all the trainees to attend my celebration party on the final day. These intensive weekends provided a space in which we could complete any unfinished inner work that could hamper our performance as coaches. We can't work effectively with clients' inner worlds unless we truly understand our own.

Working through our inner worlds is not a linear or clear-cut venture. Sometimes what we need to do to shift stagnant energy or gain a new insight may sound a little odd to others. But in this trusted circle, any format we proposed was welcome. So, feeling completely uninhibited, I went out that evening to the local supermarket and bought candles for the cake. As I passed the children's toy section, I spotted a packet of plastic soldiers and instinctively placed them in my basket. They were coming with me, although I wasn't yet sure why.

The final day of the intensive was filled to the max with everyone's inner journeys and it was only in the last ten minutes that I was able to start my party. In a fluster, I accepted help in setting the room up. One trainee was lighting the candles, another was sorting out the music I had chosen. I pulled the soldiers out of the bag and arranged them around the cake. Suddenly, it all made sense. This party was for them and I was simply their host.

The drums of war began to roll and tears welled up in my eyes. It was no longer 2014; it was 1945. Walter was coming home from war but it wasn't only him. There were three others returning with him. I saw them in my mind's eye. First, I saw my paternal grandfather, my father's father, Edward,

who had been a communications specialist in war. As an electrician, they had sent him to the front lines to lay down the radio lines. He had been a radio operator, carrying out one of the riskiest jobs of war as he passed secret messages on strategy back and forth.

Then, I saw my maternal uncle, Andrew, who was sent to another kind of war. He had been a British soldier based in Northern Ireland at the peak of Britain's occupation and this had been a part of our ancestral land. On both sides of my family, we are both English and Irish. His own father, my other grandfather, had come from a large Irish Catholic family. His mother, my grandmother who we buried in a wedding dress, had been an English Protestant.

They had married during the days when Catholic-Protestant tensions were at an all-time high and no doubt this added to their marital stress. They later divorced and I often wondered about their wedding, and why my grandmother wanted to be buried in her dress.

I too have a wedding dress story. Like my teenage rape, the actual moment lasted only minutes and yet its impact devastated me. It is too painful to share the details, even now after all these years. I've shared them a few times but still, they break my heart. What happened next led to my ex-husband's first threat to divorce me and later, an angry car-ride at breakneck speed around small country lanes to reach the hotel. I spent my wedding night in tears removing my own dress and diamond-like shoes and hairpins. It had taken several painstaking months to choose them.

The memory of hanging my dress alone up in the hotel bathroom and putting on my old pyjamas is still raw. I then spent our honeymoon sick with the flu; my body gave up where my mind would not. Later, with the exception of one we had framed, I refused to look at our wedding photos or acknowledge the dress that hung for years in my parents' home, until my mother gave it to charity.

My wedding was so traumatising that I avoided attending those of others for years. It definitely cast a black cloud on our marriage and stopped me feeling anything but beautiful on what should have been one of the happiest days of our lives. The feeling of not being beautiful lingered until long after our divorce. It is perhaps one of the most painful experiences a woman can

endure and yet, we rarely speak of it in mainstream media. Instead, we remind women of everything they are not.

On the surface, the wounding of physical beauty can seem so trivial and yet deep down, it is a wound that can bleed profusely. It is the equivalent of stealing a man's manhood and sense of power in his world. Both can be soul-destroying. As my women's yoga teacher taught me, a woman's body is her spiritual container. While men may seek the divine in battles beyond themselves, a woman's pathway is in and down. Without a healthy connection within our bodies we cannot pass through the self-love needed to embrace divine love.

This has nothing to do with looking good in contemporary terms. Such a concept of beauty is a state and our perception of our physical appearance is a part of it.

There have been so many wars in my own family that we have never spoken of, from divorce, migration, and occupation to war, our relationship with our bodies, and cancer. I feel like I have spent so much of my post-divorce life trying to unravel and make sense of it all. So often, my Jester wishes that they could all come back to tell me what really happened and why a part of their lives continues to live on in mine.

On the surface, it seemed out of place that a privileged English girl raised in a wealthy Gulf state would one day find herself visiting dungeon-like prisons and fighting for the rights of people oppressed by war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity. It really wasn't the kind of thing my peer group did. Even my sisters chose much more peaceful paths. And yet, if you know my personal history, my family tree and my ancestry, it all makes perfect sense.

I've found this so often to be the case with other humanitarians and human rights advocates who physically look out of place. A part of them knows intimately or remembers at a cellular level what it feels like to be oppressed and this is what motivates them to take action.

The drum roll of my homecoming party turned into a song of celebration. Jive Bunny and the Master Mixers' song, "Rock Around the Clock", burst into the room and everyone got up to dance; Cherie, her sister Lynn, the other coach trainers and my fellow and sister coach trainees. We were all

jiving as if it was the end of summer 1945, when Japan surrendered and the PoWs they had held were sent home.

I later found out that the atomic bombs of Nagasaki and Hiroshima had prompted Japan to back down. Before those tragedies, the plan had been to execute all the PoWs at the end of the war. Yet the atomic bombs changed the course of history. Walter's family never heard the details of what he endured while he was away. He wasn't the only one. There simply wasn't the awareness about torture that exists today.

It would take many years for the PoWs held by Japan to speak and in the absence of Walter's own words, I had tried to find out from others what I could. That summer, when I came across the true story of the "Railway Man", the true life story of a British PoW Eric Lomax put to work on the Thai-Burma train system, I headed north to the border town of Kanchanaburi.

There, I spent hours in the war cemetery where the PoWs who hadn't survived the end of the war had been laid to rest. I wondered what their lives had been like and soon found out in the railway museum next door. The scenes reminded me of those I had documented in my work as a humanitarian prison delegate with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Although I understood war, I still felt sick.

At the end of the museum tour, I asked the lady behind the desk if Walter had ever been there. Japan had held their PoWs across several territories and as the ICRC hadn't been able to access his records, nobody knew where he had been held. The lady checked and soon said no. Knowing the hard labour that the railway men had been subjected to made me thankful but I still felt unsettled that we didn't know his whole story.

The music moved into the 80s and my childhood years. Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" began to boom. It was also one of my yoga and spiritual teacher's favourite songs. As we moved from jiving to waving our arms in the air, my eye caught the last soldier. There were four of them and I had only brought back three. In an instant, I knew who he was. He was the soldier I had loved for six years, the one who was never coming home from war to me but rather, to someone else.

My heart stopped beating for a moment and I wanted to stop dancing

but I couldn't. My feet wouldn't let me. There's always going to be a reason to stop dancing and for once, I literally put my foot down. As I danced through the pain that had torn my heart apart, a voice emerged from within. *"He isn't coming back. You won't always be safe. And yet, you must dance your way through life regardless."*

When we live beyond adversity, our moments of celebration will always bear a darkened hue of sadness. Perhaps we will remember the people who couldn't be there, who are no longer with us, or the people who will never come. And yet, we must find the strength within us to keep celebrating the lives we do have and the lives that go on with each breath.

Life is ultimately a passage of trials and tribulations that we share together and endure alone. In our darkest moments, it's up to us to choose whether or not to look for the light. The choice is always there, the difference is whether we take it.

This is the lesson the Jester has to share. He is more commonly known for being the life and soul of the party, or the entertainer. We assume that because he smiles and jokes and laughs, that he must carry no pain or sorrow. Yet this is never true. All too often, it is because he has seen and experienced so much pain that he can fully embrace the lighter side of life. He is a wise soul who carries us towards our heart centre. He reminds us of the meaning of life and why we are all here. He comes out during times of ritual like healing and coming home from war; he's the storyteller that exists within us all. He's always existed in every culture and civilisation, ready to share his wisdom.

Back in present day, I am 36 years and half a day old. I am halfway through my birthday celebration and almost, if I'm lucky, halfway through my life. I understand what it means to live in and out of alignment with my soul and the rest of my journey hangs beautifully in the air. I have long understood that beauty entails both the highs and lows of life. Rather than perfection or a blank canvas, it is moments of humanity that I now seek.

I cast my mind towards my sister, who volunteered to edit my book. Like our other sister, she has been there for me every step of the way. So too have our parents. Despite all we have been through, we are a close family and we stand by each other when times get tough.

I believe families and soul groups come down here together for a purpose. I believe we are all travellers and teachers to teach one another. Sometimes, we may walk side by side for a lifetime. Other times, we may pass each other like ships in the night. I remember the many teachers who have dealt me hard lessons in the years that have passed. I dare to ask myself without an ounce of self-blame, bitterness, self-pity, or judgment if the two men who abused me were actually souls who had volunteered to deliver me my toughest blows in life.

In human life, where the ego rules, there are clear black and whites in places. Rape and violence against anyone is always wrong, please don't misunderstand me. But like all adversities, when we dig deeper, they may also lead us to find strengths and lessons we have never known. We may not have asked for these lessons but they were the ones we were given.

Knowing that my sister's outlook on life complements my own, I ask her about her theory of past lives, about how she came to adopt this and what insights it has given her on her own journey beyond stress and adversity. Unlike me, she hasn't been exposed to war, violence, conflict, and trauma but she has encountered her own wars that have shaped her way of being and viewing the world.

My sister is seven years older than myself and works in respiratory and diabetes medical research, in addition to skydiving for charity in her spare time. I grew up very much in awe of her and our other sister, who is three years older than myself and specialises in cancer treatment and research. Both of them are well-accomplished women in their chosen fields.

Perhaps what surprised me most as we got older was discovering Victoria's stress in the corporate sector sounded very similar to mine in the humanitarian sector. We've both been driven by circumstances beyond our control to seek out our inner worlds and make sense of this journey we're on. Knowing Victoria follows the teachings of Brian Weiss, a psychotherapist and past life regression expert, I ask her to explain past life theory to someone who has never heard of it.

"Have you ever felt a sense of déjà vu before? Like when you meet a person for the first time and you feel an inexplicable connection or pull towards them? It's like you already know them. Have you ever visited a place and sensed you've been there before? Have

you ever lived a moment in your life and thought to yourself, I've been here before, it feels familiar? Or have you ever met a younger person, often a child, whom everyone claims 'they have an old soul you know, they've been here before?' What does all that mean? Why do you get those feelings?

"In past life theory, the belief is we have all actually been here before; that our souls have already lived many lifetimes and will go on to live many more. That the people who impact our lives in this lifetime, our souls will regroup with theirs and will meet up with us again in the next lifetime, and the one after that, as they have done in so many before. Any challenges we have with others, or our own inner turmoil in this lifetime, offer lessons our soul must learn, journeys we must take, people with whom we must cross paths for both positive and negative reasons."

I think of the people who may one day read this book, and I think of myself. I first heard of Brian Weiss in my late teens, when I was first exploring spirituality. Alongside Sufism, like many people I was drawn to the work of psychics and mediums as I searched for answers on the meaning of life. Our own family tree is dotted with highly intuitive women and even a couple of clairvoyants.

My own name, Claire, speaks to the clear-sightedness that I have at a soul level, when my ego is at peace. But the challenge has always been to keep that inner peace. When war and violence repeatedly shake our worlds, it's difficult to find the stable ground on which to develop a spiritual philosophy. Such philosophies can be so abstract. They don't come with the prescriptions of religion; rather, they ask that we find our answers within.

The year before and the year after my teenage rape were poignant times in my spiritual growth. During the year before, our house was affected by a restless spirit. My room seemed to bear the brunt of its restlessness and eventually, an exorcist was called in to release its energy. I wasn't there but I later heard that when she got to my room, her words were, *"This is the room of the troubled child."* It didn't do much for my self-confidence at the time.

The year after shook my inner world to pieces. Following the death of a friend's boyfriend, we became involved with the spiritual world. We hadn't meant to wake the dead but like many young people who lose those they love, my friend was searching for signs that he was ok. This trespassing cracked open my third eye and I started to channel odd things like Arabic,

algebra, and chess. At the time, my Arabic was limited and yet I could read newspapers with ease. I had also never played chess and cared little for maths but suddenly, both seemed very important.

I started to lose more weight and look pale. I was barely sleeping and when a doctor suggested I see a counsellor, it was decided that I should instead speak with our local priest. By then, I was studying in England. The priest came over to our home, confirmed that I was “possessed” and exorcised the spirit out of my body on the spot.

I realise that this may sound a little alarming to some of you reading this and I don't wish to put you off but rather tell you exactly how my spiritual opening didn't get off to the greatest start. I no longer dabble in such practices but because I have taken a few wrong turns here, I'm quite open to the fact that we can all take strange turns when looking for answers. It's left me a lot less judgmental of other people's early spiritual experiences.

My dear sister Victoria, who is quite a grounded person, was a witness to all these unusual events, much to her confusion and perhaps horror. For me, it was just another event alongside studying for my A-levels and getting good grades. Like the morning after the rape, I woke up and went about my day as usual. Years later, I came to understand that we all have the ability to develop intuition and ‘clear-sightedness’. A lot of this depends on our ability to first get still and quiet from within and not everybody wants to go there.

Growing up in a Muslim culture had sensitised me to the lower *Djinn*, or imp-like spirits, at an early age and so I had a reference and existing framework within which to make sense of my experience. The unfortunate part was that I couldn't talk about my spiritual connections; it really wasn't polite or appropriate to tell people what I had seen of their lives and how. I also lacked the spiritual and emotional maturity to hold space for these experiences and soon, they became a burden.

I gradually disengaged and silenced my intuition, a move that I would come to regret later in the early days of the relationship that became my marriage, when my inner voice screamed out late at night, “*leave, leave!*” I subsequently spent several years in spiritual turmoil and it wasn't until after I left that my connection to my own spirit was restored and I finally felt safe and grounded once more, and able to hold space for my spiritual side.

I often wonder about these bigger and odder moments that we all pass through on our own way. What is the purpose? Why do we get stuck? Why do we not listen to our deeper selves when we already know the answers? As if reading my mind, Victoria continued.

“Every experience and every person we meet has a lesson to teach us and a purpose for our soul's bigger destiny. It is quite often our toughest life events or hostile, confrontational people who cross our paths that on reflection are actually some of our greatest teachers. Whilst tragic and confusing at the time, they are a blessing in disguise as they force us to look inwards, to confront why something is happening or fix a behaviour we cannot see, that invariably can propel us to a better place if we chose to embrace the lesson with wisdom.”

“You see,” she says, “we are all spiritual beings simply down here having a human experience. Somehow, we got amnesia and forgot that, instead getting wrapped up in materialistic, egotistical and superficial chaos in life, losing the true meaning and lessons of our soul's journey.”

I can relate wholeheartedly to her words and yet the skeptic in me – perhaps it's my Inner Critic – wonders if this is just a case of spiritual bypassing. Perhaps after life's greatest adversities, some of us, including myself, grasp at whatever we can believe in order to make sense of what has happened. Maybe we do this to bypass the pain of actually walking through the hellish parts of our lives on earth. Isn't it just another form of escape?

Apparently, not in this case, as Victoria explains. She tells me that Dr Brian Weiss, a Cornell-trained psychiatrist and one of the leading authors on past life theory, speaks of discovering this concept of the same soul in many lifetimes via a patient from over twenty years ago. Catherine, the patient, came to Dr Weiss riddled with severe anxiety and paralysing phobias that were ruining her life, and which traditional psychotherapy had failed to heal.

Dr Weiss hypnotised Catherine in an effort to ‘unlock’ the trauma linked to such anxieties. Back then, he believed they would lie trapped in forgotten events contained in her childhood years. To his surprise, and severe skepticism, Catherine regressed beyond her childhood into multiple former lifetimes. It was in these lifetimes, where in her hypnotic state she unravelled events that mirrored her present day anxieties, which Dr Weiss managed to unlock and eradicate her trauma.

“He was a doctor and his training didn’t allow for such superficial thoughts,” Victoria highlighted. “He needed scientific evidence. However, over a series of many therapy sessions, Catherine’s fears and anxieties completely disappeared. She had no memory of what she spoke of during her regressions with Dr Weiss, but the link to unlocking these events in previous lifetimes seemed to eradicate her current day fears.

“Coupled with compelling therapeutic benefit to her anxiety and phobias, Catherine also revealed messages highly personal to Dr Weiss concerning his deceased son that no-one else could have possibly known. Science could not explain what was happening. Here was a clinical situation where even a Western trained physician took a leap of faith into the unknown with the ‘evidence’ lay before him.

“Life, the universe, and even each of our existences, are bigger than us. When you take a step back from a situation, and have faith our souls are on a journey of learning and growing over multiple lifetimes, it really does provide you with a very different perspective of life and a powerful tool to heal, repair and sometimes try and understand those challenging moments in life.”

I find myself warming to the idea of past life theory. At heart, I’m open-minded and welcome other beliefs. After my early spiritual forays, I found myself drawn to Shamanism and Pagan practices. Nature has provided us with such rich and abundant avenues through which we can travel to understand ourselves. During my first trip to Ireland, our hosts took us Newgrange, a Celtic prehistoric site where Pagans worshipped. Its inner chamber is flooded with the light of the rising sun during the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year.

It was by being in nature and exploring women’s spiritual practices that led me to follow a Sufi calling home to the greater heart. For sure, it was my life’s challenges that prompted me to listen. I certainly didn’t feel restless when life was going well.

I ask Victoria what piqued her spiritual curiosity about past lives, and why she feels there is something bigger than all of us out there. *“It was through the experience of a good friend of mine who had endured severe trauma in a near-death car crash and an extremely turbulent and irrational marriage breakdown. Her husband had prevented her access to their children and through her soul-searching of ‘Why me?’ she found Dr Weiss’ books. I was in my mid-20s when she passed them on to me.*

“When you are faced with adversity of such magnitude, you have to dig deep to find

a reason why it’s all happening. At the time, when I first heard her talk of past lives and how it had offered her solace and meaning to a life greater than the here-and-now during her hour of need, I couldn’t grasp the concept at all. The idea that her current-day husband had been her wife in another lifetime was beyond me, and the fact that both their souls were returning to this lifetime to address unresolved issues sounded too far-fetched.

“Whilst intrigued and open to the idea, I struggled to take it seriously. I moved on and muddled through my 20s in my own haphazard way. As the years rolled on and life passed me by, I experienced various crises in my life as we all invariably will, but nothing I couldn’t surf through. In the back of my mind, I always remembered my friend’s talk on past lives and curiously applied the thought that everything happens for a bigger universal reason. I embraced the thought that my soul was on a monumental journey and each step, every blip, all the smiles and every other soul I met, was an opportunity to learn and grow and had a bigger purpose.”

Seven years behind my sister, I wonder where I was when she was going through all these insights. While I worked as a humanitarian on field missions, far from my family, Victoria was getting on with her life in New York. There wasn’t always time to connect and I feel we missed out on so much of what happened in our relative 20s.

I feel like I’m getting to know another side of my sister through this interview. She has often felt the same when editing my book. It’s like this book is giving us a chance to say what we never had time for before as our lives were always too far away and too busy. I feel both relief and sadness that I wasn’t there, even though I accept that my life had to unfold in the way it did.

Victoria continued sharing one of the turning points for her moving towards past life theory as a spiritual anchor.

“My maternal grandmother had recently passed away around this time and it brought me great comfort to think our souls would meet up again. Whilst final in this lifetime, our journey together was not finite and we would connect in another place, another realm, another time. Whilst it certainly doesn’t take the pain away from losing someone you love so dearly, it provides another layer of meaning to the greater mystery of life.

“Past life theory, in the absence of tragedy in my young life, also gave me insight to a bigger picture and purpose that our time here in this lifetime is not eternal but our journey is. When you look at life that way, it certainly changes priorities. I became a lot less mat-

erialistic and put more emphasis on love, people, feelings and humanity. What footprint was I leaving behind on this soul's journey?"

I smile as I remember myself at 21 years old, painting the nails of our recently parted grandmother in the staff section of the funeral parlour. It was because of my connection with the spiritual world that I didn't find what my mother and I were doing as odd as I knew my grandmother was standing by. But in a selfish kind of way, I find myself hoping that past life theory doesn't really exist. I quite like the idea of my grandmother being "up there" whenever I feel like a chat. If she's reincarnated, that could get weird.

But like I said, I'm open-minded. I don't believe I have all the answers and who's to say the answers I do have are correct? What if everything on spirituality is subjective? What if we need lots of different paths and interpretations so that our many different personality types can relate?

The coach in me starts linking spiritual practice to the Myers Briggs. The Myers Briggs is made up of four layers of personality traits that determine how we manage our energy, how we process thoughts, sensations, and feelings, and how we plan and design our lives or days. The profile is summarised in four letters, for example, an INFP, which is my personality type and one that I believe is very much drawn to spiritual practice.

Introverts, or "I's" are more widely known for adopting a more visible spiritual life. Those of us who are Intuitive, or "N's", and Feeling types, or "F's", usually feel quite at home in abstract spiritual concepts. Add to that a "P", or the ability to see the big picture and lesser ability to commit to detail, you can probably get why someone like me won't worry about the finer detail.

Victoria and I share the Intuitive and Feeling traits yet she is an Extrovert and Judger, a "J" who likes to see and know the finer details of life, including past lives. I ask her about her life "before past life theory" and "after past life theory", and if there was any difference to how she saw the world.

"Before learning of past lives, I very much saw a black and white world. Very monotone, one-dimensional and I took everything and everyone literally and at face value. With no coping mechanism for how to survive adversity, I would quite often play the victim role of 'why is this happening to me' or act from a self-entitled place from within. Through my younger self, I believed the world owed me something and that's how it all worked.

"Reading Dr Weiss' book changed the way I looked at the world, people, situations and life forever. It gave my life even deeper meaning, purpose and greater empathy. Don't get me wrong, I still struggled at times with life events as we all do, and others would look at me bemused as I tried to explain my past life beliefs. But it worked for me, and that's what mattered."

I love that my sister has been able to find her own spiritual path through life. We all need to make sense of the tough times in whatever way we can. The freedom to explore and choose how we wish to interpret what happens to us and our role in it is critical to healing and moving on.

Victoria continues to share at a deeper and more personal level how past life theory has kept her grounded in the face of her own adversities. She may not have experienced the violence to which I was subjected and witnessed but she has experienced her own trials and personal pains along the way.

"When I look back now, I truly believe life has a greater way of serving you things it knows you will need for later on. Whilst past lives resonated with me but held little first-hand experience in my 20s, all that was to change once I reached my 40s.

"Trauma of a monumental proportion entered my own life, totally unexpected and inconveniently uninvited. Life was going well and the rug was pulled right from under me. It was during this time, through circumstances and other's negative reactions towards my situation, I truly grasped the reality and the power of what past (and future) life concepts were really all about.

"Past life theory provided me with a coping mechanism, a tool, to survive adversity in a way I had never experienced in my life before. It helped me keep sane, rise above the turmoil and look for the positives and the growth spurts amidst absolute mayhem. I knew there had to be a lesson around every corner, and whilst the event itself was excruciatingly painful, I put my faith in a greater purpose that I couldn't see at that point.

"The moment was so much bigger than judgmental words thrown my way, of others projecting their own fears and insecurities onto my crisis. In trying to help, they inadvertently were involved in controlling and manipulating the situation, things that did not sit well with my ego and pride. They were not capable of holding a space for me to be heard and allow me to figure out my own turmoil; what did that say about them?"

"Taking a step back (or up, if you like), with my support network in tatters, I had to turn inwards and rely on my own inner beliefs. It was by no means easy. Why was this

happening to me? What was the bigger meaning? Why had my world turned upside down totally out of the blue? I knew each of our souls were at different stages of learning and awareness, that each friend who I felt ill-treated me in my hour of need was really a soul that had been sent to teach me a valuable lesson, about life and about my own weaknesses. And in turn, maybe my situation also taught them something.

“With some of those souls, we solved it together and both came out stronger and more enlightened; other souls who were not capable of holding that compassionate space or just weren’t ready for such lessons, I sadly learnt had to fall by the wayside and were only meant to be in my life to teach us both that particular lesson. I believe we will meet up again, here or in the next lifetime, to carry on that learning together.”

Given the earlier theme of our great uncle Walter in this chapter, and Victoria’s pivotal role in discovering his death certificate and questioning how he had lived, what she says next makes me think for a very long time. *“The unknowing connection between your life’s work, Claire, and our great uncle Walter’s life of imprisonment and trauma is also no coincidence. Your souls have been here together and they will meet up again. The lessons you have learned and the footprints you leave on this earth in this lifetime sow the seeds for the continued journey of your soul beyond this lifetime.*

“Claire,” she tells me, “I truly believe yours and Walter’s souls will connect in the next lifetime, or maybe, you are Walter’s soul? He died in 1976 and you were born in 1979. It may seem a far-fetched thought but remember; our journey here on earth is bigger than any of us can comprehend in the human form. When you listen to your inner intuition, are coincidences really just coincidences? Or are they something more giving us a deeper sense of purpose and understanding if we are open to listening?”

Victoria’s final words echo those of Steve, who we met in the Alchemist’s Fire. I’ve asked for her final words of wisdom and this is what she says. *“You really don’t know how strong your soul is, until being strong is the only option you have.”*

I take an extra-long exhale and remember Steve, who experienced bowel cancer and earlier shared the same lesson. I wonder who I might have become had I not been exposed to the adversities I have personally faced. Would I still have felt called to humanitarian service? Would I have had the strength to witness disaster, torture, war, and poverty? Would I have been able to write this book? Would I have forgiven myself for the betrayal of my

heart? Would I ever have understood what it really means to be, and more importantly, stay human, no matter what?

They’re tough questions and occasionally, I fantasise about that other life I never lived. The one where I wouldn’t have put my insides through the incredible stress that can come with a life after trauma. I would have become an accomplished Arabic calligrapher and attempted to be a devout spiritual practitioner. Only my spiritual transformation would probably never have occurred, as I would have lacked the fire needed to walk through it.

I think back to one of the health coaching questions my former mentor, Kara, asked me while I was living in Gaza.

Kara: If you had nine lives, what would you do in each of them?

Me: I would do all the things that scare me over and over. Like scuba diving, sky diving, parachuting, deep sea diving, running with lions, getting to know animals in the wild. Then I would undertake a spiritual pilgrimage for as long as it takes to find my centre and stay there.

Kara: Which one excites you the most?

Me: Adventure and spirit are common themes. The spiritual pilgrimage is the one that most excites me, although excite probably isn’t the right word. It pulls me as I get older.

Kara: At the end of your life, a bestselling biographer wants to write the story of your life. What would the title be? Who would write those little blurbs on the back cover? What would they say?

Me: I don’t know the title but the blurb would say, *“She lived with adventure and spirit, walking a path of peace off the beaten track. She stood up to injustice, oppression, cruelty, and inhumanity with compassion and commitment. She changed the lives of people in places where others are reluctant to go. Her path was to heal, forgive, transform, and let go. Happiness and humour were her closest companions. She leaves behind two strong daughters who are continuing their mother’s work to join her husband who was (probably) killed covering a recent civil war.”* I’m not sure who I would like to write this. I think the ordinary people whose lives I will have touched whose names nobody will ever know.

Sometimes, despite all my inner work, evolved insights, and spiritual aspirations, I still curse the adversities I have been through. For example, I'd rather not be a divorced woman and yet I'm torn because had I stayed in my marriage, I could have died before my time was up.

Occasionally, I wish teenage sexual had not destroyed my ability to be vulnerable and intimate with myself and those I loved. The pain this caused destroyed one relationship after the other and I missed out on so many years of feeling safe and knowing I could be loved rather than objectified by men or admired and therefore valued through my achievements at school and work.

It was a flickering flame of my own humanity that saved me and a heartfelt belief that maybe, just maybe, I deserved more. Eventually I came to realise that I was enough. Like you, dear reader, I had always been enough. The spark that set that flame alight was nothing less than Love.

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Jester's Tale in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Jester's Tale. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

*"Love is the primal music of life, the song of creation,
the fabric of being human."*

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

The Lover's Gaze

The Jester has been a close friend throughout my book writing process. He has stood by me, reminding me that it's ok to tell tough stories. So often in the past, I have held back not wanting to overwhelm those around me and especially, those I have just met. But the problem with this is that by living constantly on the surface of life, I can never really relate or enjoy a meaningful connection.

All too often, we may hesitate to tell each other the dark parts of our lives as we fear that we will be pitied, shamed, judged, or ignored. As a coach, I often meet people who have experienced the unthinkable and hesitate to share how that makes them feel. They are also very intelligent people who are driven to make a difference in the world. Many of them are stressed and burned out, wounded by one war after the other, and deep down, feeling quite negative.

Therapeutically, there are times when a complete separation between our wounded selves and the suffering of others is necessary. I think here of two colleagues I once knew who experienced nervous breakdowns. They needed to rest; they needed time away from war and space to reconnect with themselves and their families. They needed to remember what could be good about life.

It is nothing to feel ashamed of. I myself have chosen to retreat from the front lines of outer wars so that I can better support the recovery from the wars that lie within. I cannot do this if I'm out there every day, battling

one political quagmire after the other. To do what I do, I have had to make tough choices and one of those has been to accept that I no longer do humanitarian fieldwork. This is because I cannot work deeply to transform individuals if I myself am not anchored and settled. One of us has to hold the fort while the other finds her way home.

The typical advice of wellness coaches working with clients who carry a lot of negativity is to suggest they try a news detox and limit their exposure to further negativity. The news has almost become a source of 'entertainment' today that focuses on the next breaking headline, the next sensational story which is often distorted from reality. When you're actually living the news itself on the front lines, it is not a story, it's very much reality, and this itself can become extremely toxic and draining.

A news detox doesn't work for most of my clients who, for personal, professional, geographical, and/or political reasons, cannot turn away or retreat from war. They are the ones who are called to work in the trenches of humanity and there, they have most likely walked through fire.

Having walked in their shoes for long enough, I know how hard it is to turn away from the suffering of the world. Once we've seen and experienced the world's greater wounds, can we ever really forget?

I believe the answer is, no, we can never forget. Instead, we must find a way to live with what has happened and we choose to stay human regardless. For those of us who have a spiritual container, transitioning beyond such pain may be a little less intense. For those of us who don't, or who are still building such a container, it can be a rough inner ride.

It wasn't until I turned towards my spiritual self that my ride began to slow down. About half way through my last field mission, I heard an inner voice that wouldn't let up. "*Claire,*" it whispered and later roared. "*It's time to go home.*" And so, I made plans to depart and nine months later, returned home to Dubai, the city in which I was raised.

There, I continued my inner work. As I slowed down, my Creator showed up and it was through her beauty that my inner Lover finally found her way back home.

When life has broken us into so many pieces, it is love that brings us home. Love is the invisible thread that keeps us whole. Without love, I could

not have made it this far. Without love, I could not have stayed human. It took the experience of romantic love to give me a hint of what divine love can feel like. But before divine love, there was only a feeling of being ‘too much.’

When we feel overwhelmed by the personal tragedies and trials of our lives, it becomes very difficult to stay present to the suffering of another. Those are the times when their cries fall on deaf ears. We see the news headlines of war, we hear that a friend has cancer; we learn of someone going bankrupt and we turn away. Such news is terrifying and could steal our peace of mind so we don't allow it in.

On my spiritual path, I met people who reacted in these ways. They were learning that withdrawal was the first step to preserving their mental and emotional health. I once tried to do the same as intellectually, it sounded like a good plan. But having been exposed to war since the age of 11, when Iraq invaded neighbouring Kuwait, not to mention my personal and professional ordeals, I found the quest to be hollow boned. It was not the path set out for me. I needed to find a way to live with war, not to turn away from it.

In the summer of 2014, as the war on Gaza raged on, I could not turn away from those I loved whose homes had been bombed. Some of my friends were left homeless with large families and young children. How could I go on a news detox when such atrocity was unfolding? This was not the question. Rather, the question was, *“How can I stay present to what is happening there and within myself at the same time, without breaking down?”*

I realised that war and adversity happened each time I tried to set up my coaching business as the backbone of my business and calling in life was to guide people and communities through and beyond tragedy. In order to do that, I had to complete the process myself. I had to live this path in every cell of my body before I could call it my own and offer myself in service to others around me. I could not offer anyone something that I had not already lived.

Whereas before I used to stand on shaky ground, this time, I stood firm. Where romantic love had failed me, I learned to feel a greater love. He wasn't coming home to me and I started to accept that the waiting game within me had to end. I had to give up control. But rather than turn away, I had to surrender to this love.

As the man with whip marks across his back had loved me uncondition-

ally, I too was being called to love unconditionally the man I couldn't bring home. I couldn't offer my love with the agenda that he must return it to me. I had to offer it from a deeper place. Surrender was the tipping point that allowed me to go there.

Soon, the ability to love him without fearing there would be no love left for myself lifted and I began to experience greater ease in life. I remembered my ability to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. I remembered laying down all my Warrior weapons of war, stepping into the Alchemist's fire, welcoming my Innocent child home, diving into my Creator's cave, and inviting the Jester in me to tell my tale. Now, the Lover had arrived to finally hold me safe.

We will find our own ways of stepping under the Lover's Gaze. It is a benevolent, forgiving, and all-encompassing gaze that feels like the warmest of rays on a clear winter's day. It is the brush of a feather against our cheeks and a reassuring hand on our shoulder, telling us that we can make it, reminding us that we are not alone.

In mystical experiences, the Lover is characterised an intense longing that burns like a fire. When he first arrived in my life, around the age of 20, he created and then set fire to my Arabic calligraphy business. My designs blossomed and then burned to ashes. No sooner had I found my heart's deepest longing was it gone. In expressing my desire to join the mystical path, I was banished from its kingdom.

This is one of the Sufi ways, to throw the travellers into their own fire to see what becomes of them. It is a long and painful process called ‘fanaa’ in Arabic, or the destruction of the ego.

Much of my journey has been about the wounding of my personality or the ego's construct and conditioning of who I think I am. René Descartes, a 17th century French philosopher, expressed *“I think, therefore I am”*, which is absolutely true in my experience. Our thoughts have the power to lock us in boxes if we don't watch out. But if we can breathe space into the areas around our thoughts, and slow them down, we see that something else exists. Another dimension, another world.

When we try to attach ourselves to love and hold on too tightly out of fear, becoming overly identified with its source, it is only natural that we will

be rejected. For love is something that we cannot own. It is not something that is given or bestowed, or that we give or bestow to another, it is simply something that lives regardless. Like a burning flame that never dies, it is always there but our ability to feel it depends on how far we wander from the truth of who we are.

There is the temptation in many cultures to romanticise the meaning of love. We understand there is a parent's love for his or her child and perhaps the love we have for a friend. But all too often, it is the love we have for a romantic partner of either gender that can consume nearly all our heart's efforts and desires. We may think that we have awakened to love and in many ways, we have. But so long as the love remains romantic, it is simply one step of many towards a love that is much greater.

On my journey through love, one of the hardest steps was learning to peel back the layers of myself and my intentions behind receiving love. Amidst the pain of unrequited love, and after the non-starter relationship and marriage proposal from the polygamous martial artist, another martial artist came my way. He was to turn my expression of romantic love upside down yet at the time, I didn't see this coming. I thought we were just hanging out.

We met on the beach, a place where both of us love to train. As a devoted ninjutsu practitioner, he led me crawling and jumping through the deep sand. In our minds, or at least in mine, we balanced off rooftops and high walls. We flipped over in handstands and cartwheels. Ninjas are agile and adaptable fighters. Unlike karate, where we stay mostly on our feet, they will fight from any position and I loved the new challenges this new fighting art brought.

As we dragged our bodies through deep sand, I sought to keep up. I'm a determined fighter and I've long seen beyond the illusion that men can do a better job here. Sometimes we have to use every weapon and tactic on hand in order to keep up, including on the rare occasion dishonesty. I wasn't meant to use my feet but my arms were so tired I decided to bend the rules a little. In a flash, he looked behind him.

"Are you cheating?" he asked.

Caught red-handed, I nodded. I had dared to be dishonest but still, I

could never lie. My cheeks flushed with embarrassment and I suddenly felt awkward.

"That's ok," he responded. *"You're allowed to cheat in ninjutsu. That's a part of how we fight but we only use it as a last option."*

Unlike the samurai warriors who have a high and lofty concept of honour, ninjas won't hesitate to draw on all their skills in order to survive, even if that means cheating their opponent. I had spent so many years trying to do things perfectly that to be told it was ok to cut corners sometimes filled me with relief. I smiled back and from that moment on, I started falling in love.

Our relationship was an unusual one; just as unusual as my teacher's way of thinking and communicating. He was born with a slightly different psychological wiring which meant that he told the truth when many of us would rather lie, and that his ability to identify and express emotion was limited. He also valued freedom more than anything, not so that he could have multiple relationships but so that he could have the time he need to pursue all his passions in life.

"Why would you start your day with work, Claire?" he would ask me. In his world, he started his days doing what he loved most and then, at the end of the day, work followed. He was lucky his remote IT work allowed that but in reality, he has also designed his life and chosen such a career path so that he could spend time doing the things he loved first.

I found myself reflecting on my days. I would wake up with a groan and think of the four-hour commute ahead of me. En route, I'd get caught up in planning the workday ahead. By the time I arrived at the office, I was so mentally and physically drained that I felt like it was time to come home. But I pushed myself through each day and then, through my karate training each evening, before the flashbacks appeared at night.

Being with my ninjutsu teacher taught me that I was the one calling the shots in my life. I was the one who had constructed my life this way. Lacking empathy, my Wounded Orphan found no sparring partner. She couldn't manipulate him into doing things she thought he should so that she could feel safe. He simply met her with a blank gaze.

Without the complex web of manipulation and coercion that exists

in so many romantic relationships, I experienced for the first time what it meant to be free. Because I didn't have to fear his ego trying to control mine, I could simply tell him the truth.

"I'm tired this weekend, I can't see you. Sorry."

"Ok," he would answer pragmatically, *"how about next?"*

"Sure," I'd respond. *"Perfect. See you then."*

It was an effortless exchange in so many ways. I told him the truth that I was tired, he accepted it and asked about an alternative. I would commit, take care of myself, sort out my energy, and follow through the next time we met. End of story. Nobody got hurt, nobody got hit, nobody got threatened or insulted, and nobody got put down. With him, there was never any space or need to play victim. I learned how to express how I really felt and respect his need for space when it arose. It was the ultimate lesson in radical truth that Kendra later told me about, and which we shared in the Innocent's Return.

In return, I gave him all the freedom he needed and asked for. For example, his days were upside down as work always came last, and he would find himself working into the early hours. This meant we had different sleeping times, something that usually irks most couples. But to me it didn't matter, I felt safe in the kind of love we shared and sleeping alone was fine. I learned to be in partnership and intimacy while enjoying the solitude and quiet mornings to myself.

Because we always told each other the truth, and because - due to his need for practicalities - I always came clean on what I needed from him, our relationship was very different from any other I had experienced. There was no need to hide or twist the facts. We both could handle the truth and I learned to hold his truth as much as he held mine. Sometimes, we spent days on end together. Other times, we went for long stretches immersed in our own worlds. There was an ebb and flow and eventually, the relationship ended.

In romance, when a relationship ends there is the tendency among some of us to either shut down or fall apart, especially if we weren't the ones to make such a decision. But even if we do it amicably, or at least in agreement, it can still be painful. It can feel like a big hole has erupted in our lives and

we can find that empty space disconcerting or upsetting. At least I know I did, in the past.

When this relationship ended, we naturally transitioned into a friendship. We see each other every now and then to train and it's always a delight to train alongside a man I love. It is no longer a romantic love but rather one that has evolved into a soul love. He's a traveller on my path who has helped guide me home and in some small way, I have offered something of myself to him that has most likely affected his path in life. This is how love flows; it is the exchange of energy at the soul level. Exactly as my sister Victoria spoke of in the Jester's Tale.

But what about when our love is flowing and the other person's has shut down or isn't forthcoming? Or when we love someone who leaves us, perhaps not by choice but because they have left this world for another? What do we do in the absence of a happy ending? I find myself questioning not only for you, my dear reader, but also for myself. Somehow I have to accept that the fourth soldier is never coming home.

In search of the answers, I turn to Amber, a strong and rooted mother of three. We met during my spiritual journey and we came to bond as sisters. Although the details of our lives differed in so many ways, I felt completely at ease in her presence and the wisdom of love that lives in her. She married her childhood sweetheart, they built a beautiful life and family together and then, sadly, he left her too soon.

She now writes a heartfelt blog called "One Moment At A Time". This has been her way through grief and she tells many powerful stories from that place, and it isn't only widows who can relate to what she says. One of her entries was on the anger she felt towards God, after her husband, Karsten, was taken from her. She talks about the powerful shock of anger and how it can descend.

What I love about this entry is how honestly she speaks to the waves of anger that can hit when we've lost someone or something dear. I've chosen to share her entry in full, as it is one of the most powerful and moving descriptions of anger that I have yet read and I don't wish to interrupt it with my words or reflections. I want you to hear it directly from her.

"It hit around the middle of the eighth month, after he died. Yep, that beautiful God

that I loved so very much, who I served with all my heart, might, mind and strength and gave great gratitude to for all my many blessings in life, well, yes Him, He became my enemy. He became - not so Great! Not so perfect. I saw into His weakness. See, He made a plan where my husband died at the age of 38 and was leaving three young children behind to not have a father. What kind of plan was that? A completely stupid one. My plan was so much better, and I knew it. And I knew He knew it. I was going to make sure He knew it, by telling Him so! Rather loudly, forcibly, and ever so ANGRILY.

"Yes, I stood in my shower, a place of refuge from the storm, and I let it all pour out. I yelled so loud it echoed, shook, and steamed up the whole bathroom. This was a far cry from my normal silent morning ritual. It might sound very strange (and I am) but I would write notes on the steamed-up glass. I would write notes to my deceased husband, and to God, just in case he/He couldn't read my thoughts or hear my cries aloud. I wrote a message every morning from the shower (...I still write them often.) But this particular morning, I was tired and I was ANGRY.

"I wrote: 'I dare you!'"

"Yes, Amber just dared God.

"Did I tell you I am feisty? Well, just don't get me angry, because it turns UGLY. And that is exactly how I was with God. (Not with Karsten, although that eventually happened too.) But with God, I loudly dared Him to bring him back. And then, I had my evil villain laugh ripe and ready to go, from the depth of my pain, and I laughed AT Him. Laughed that He wouldn't, because He COULDN'T. How would that look if God all of a sudden, changed the plan, and made a dead man appear 8 to 9 months after the fact! I realised, in my very powerful anger, that HE didn't have the power, and that in this anger, I possessed great dark horrible power. I reigned. Even if I couldn't get what I wanted, I took great power in my anger over the fact that NO ONE and NOTHING could give me what I wanted, not even God. So why did I need Him and His weakness?

"Sorry, you might be feeling like you will be struck by lightning just by reading this right now, right!? In one way, I hope you do. I hope you hear the thundering and feel the shocking power of anger.

"Anger is a "stage" of grief.

"I am angry. Again, today, over six years later.

"Yes, that stage of grief. Obviously, this is not my first rodeo. I have ridden this wild horse before. I have been up and down, back and forth, and around and around all the stages of grief. If it didn't annoy me so much, , I could laugh at the "Stages of Grief"

as if they were something we all just got to go from grade to grade, and then graduate from grief. Wouldn't that be so much easier?

"Something you bravely and determinedly worked through and reached the glorious end. Wrapped nicely and tied into a nice little diploma.

"You did it! Congratulations!

"Sorry, nope, not true!

"My anger will tell you it sucks, and that is true. And that nothing will make it better. But, because I have swirled through and glided across and delved deep into all the other stages of grief, it does get better. Yet, it also can be worse. The pain...the pain is worse than the anger. But that is why the anger exists, to save you from the uncontrollable amount of pain. So, in this way, anger ain't so bad you see. It is a break from not being in control of the pain.

"Anger switches us to being somewhat in control. Anger allows you to take the reins of the rodeo horse that is trying to buck you off, and probably would succeed if you weren't tied down to it. Although the horse will still buck uncontrollably, tightening your grip and whipping the poor sucker and yelling at it, makes you feel in control, or at least the possibility of gaining control.

"So I feel my anger. I ride my anger. I decide to grip that damn horse named grief, and let it know I am stronger than it. That it won't be putting me through the pain, at this moment. That for just this moment in time, chaos, pain, and sadness will all be subject to my anger. It is louder and stronger than all three, for this moment.

"Embody. In body. Move. Exercise. Dance. Movement!

"For this One Moment, I feel it. I want to feel the power of anger and not the pain of sadness, for this One Moment. By feeling it and seeing it and breathing it, it is One Moment, the bucking horse becomes a "stage." Stages of grief are not really like a bucking horse, but more accurately they are like waves. Ones that we will not be graduating from, but ones that we will ride, and ones that will come crashing back, but we will know how to ride each wave better, each and every time.

"Breathe. Yoga. Shifts. Listen. Soften.

"The Anger I feel today will pass as waves do. And although the waves usually come crashing down on us unexpectedly, even when we anticipate the approaching waves, we can choose how long and how well we ride each wave. And now, with some experience and perspective of riding this particular wave before, we can actually choose where the angry ride lets us off: to catch the next wave of denial? Pain? Or hopefully the more peaceful waves

of acceptance?

“Meditate. Pray. Journal. Connect.

“Being more aware, One Moment at a time, that the stages of life and of death are ever changing waves, we can more fully ride the waves of life.”

Love isn't always the bed of roses that we hope for. And even when we have found the love of our lives, as Amber told me Karsten was, we may not always have them by our side, at least in this realm.

Her story reminds me that the stages of grief come in waves. When we've travelled through violence, conflict, stress, and/or adversity, there is a good chance that along the way, we have lost something dear. Whatever or whomever we've lost, and whatever or whomever has been taken from us, there will come a time when we will all need to grieve. Our ability to complete this grieving process requires us to ride through and beyond the waves of anger and perhaps accept that the grief will never leave us. Instead, it just gets easier to carry.

In my experience, finding inner peace when love has torn our worlds apart cannot arrive through any other means. We may have our own ways of expressing anger but at some point, we will need to lay down our weapons and surrender to what is. This is a critical step on the spiritual path and if we don't go there willingly, we run the risk of trying to bypass the pain. This may help in the short-term but eventually, the pain will catch up and we will find ourselves back in the fire of love.

I'm aware that I still have some love grieving left in me but still, the full extent of my anger won't come. It's impossible to force so I get up from my desk and take my brown dog to the vet's. Although it's my birthday, and I had planned a free run to write, I'm worried about my brown dog's limp. After waiting for what feels like ages in the vet's garden, in case my dog attacks any of the others inside, the vet ushers us in.

He's a strong and lean looking man around the same age with deep blue eyes and jet-black hair. From his accent, I know he's from Eastern Europe. I bombard him with details of the dogfight from the day before, and explain that I'm worried about my dog's limp. I'm playing the role of the anxious mother, arms flailing and speaking ninety to the dozen.

He reaches out and lifts my large dog onto the metal table. It takes two

of us to pin and calm him down. Then, he takes my dog's legs and one by one, starts to push, pull, and bend them, testing his spine and joint mobility. I'm holding the top half of his body down, on alert for any moment of pain when I know he will lash out at either one of us. But he doesn't. Instead, he goes very calm and trusts the vet to do his job. I remind myself to do the same.

Suddenly, I start to feel self-conscious. I'm wearing my teenage khaki shorts that I've refused to throw away, even though I'm now 36 years old. My mother despairs yet she respects my sentimental attachment to them. I've had them since I was 14 and despite being much more athletically built these days, they still fit. I've worn them today, even though it is my birthday, as I know the vet's visit will leave me covered in dog hair.

Along with an old t-shirt and flip flops, and badly scraped legs, not to mention the bump on my head and scratches down my neck, I'm hardly feeling feminine or womanly and suddenly, out of nowhere, it matters very much.

“He'll be ok,” the vet tells me. *“There are no broken bones. Perhaps it's soft tissue damage. I'll give him some anti-inflammatories for a few days to alleviate his pain.”* We take him for a walk in the corridor for one last check. The vet is looking at us both. *“You know, he's beautiful, he looks just like a wolf,”* he tells me.

It is only then that it hits me that he's been handling my dog from a place of love. Of course, he's a vet, why wouldn't he? It was the presence of this love and his acceptance for my wild and angry dog that had caught my attention. He hadn't turned away from either of us, neither myself in my teenage shorts or my dog, who you could say has an “anger management” issue. He hadn't judged either of us for our lingering state of shock from the day before; he'd simply received us in his stride and made us both feel welcome.

The potency of his last message and wolf analogy lingers for it was the book, “Women Who Run With The Wolves,” that accompanied me back home to Dubai and preceded my departure from therapy. Written by the Jungian analyst and storyteller, Clarissa Pinkola-Estes, the book is a classic in women's and Jungian literature. It taught me how, as women, we have a wild spirited nature that needs to be owned and lived if we are ever to live whole.

It is one of the reasons why the first half of this book's title is called "Wild."

I walk out of the vet's with my dog and back into the sunny day. The moment is over and life goes on. This is what love does. It carries us back and forth, holding us in awareness. There are moments of intensity and moments when we can simply be without striving to be anything else.

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Lover's Gaze in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Lover's Gaze. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

Living Truth

PHASE 4

The Revolutionary, Sage & Ruler

As we prepare to step back into the outer world, the Revolutionary, the Sage, and the Ruler will finally join us. When all the previous phases have been completed, this trio holds the potent power needed to change, first ourselves and then the world. The lessons of the mind, body, and heart that we have extracted are all checkpoints on the way to entering the territory of the soul. This is where we get clear on why we are here and what we have come here to do.

When war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity show up in our lives, it can look and feel like we're spinning way off track. Plans may derail and our dreams may turn to dust by the wayside. We may even feel like we've been hit by a speeding train. But from the soul's perspective, we are never off track or defeated. We are simply finding new ways to learn the lessons that we came here for and once that is complete, we can progress to the next level.

The Revolutionary teaches us not to fear change but rather, to demand it when change is needed. The Sage teaches us to trust that all the answers we will ever need already lie within. When our inner work becomes a way of being, the Ruler steps in and resumes leadership of our lives. Harmony is restored to our inner world. Living from such a place transforms how we perceive and relate to the outer world. Finally, our inner roadmap is complete.

These three powerful archetypes also carry shadow traits! The unseasoned Revolutionary can get stuck pointing fingers at people in high places, never daring to engage in the trying work of changing systems from within. The self-centred Sage can become overly intellectual and judgmental of other people's shortcomings. And an egocentric Ruler can become blind to those she serves and drive a family, company or country further into chaos.

"Independent, whole people are often perceived as rule breakers, as standing apart. In fact, they may simply be guilty of detached, creative thinking. They look at things in fresh, unconventional ways."

Marsha Sinetar

The Revolutionary's Voice

So often, we associate revolutions with passion and love. Oh, how a younger version of me once romanticised from afar the Iranian and Chinese revolutions! This is because at the very heart of every revolution is the passionate Lover's cry for her homeland to be restored. But without the awareness of a seasoned Lover, who had learned to see that ultimately, we are all one, the fight of the Revolutionary can quickly descend into chaos, bickering, conflict, violence, and war.

Revolutions aren't only the events that are covered in news headlines or breaking news. They happen all around us, in homes, in our workplaces, in our community institutions and even, from within. The spark for every revolution is really a quest to restore power and dignity. It is a wakeup call for those who have become complacent with the status quo. This can be just as true for individuals as it can be at the institutional or national levels.

Gloria Steinam, a renowned feminist, breaks down the mechanisms of power in her book on self-esteem, entitled, "Revolution From Within." Written in the 90s, it is just as relevant today as it was back then. She draws parallels between battered women, prisoners, and other people deprived of self-expression, explaining that keeping a journal and sharing it with others in similar situations is the first step to believing our own voices. But to hear our own voices, we must first know our own minds.

Although I was a shy and introverted kid, I always knew my own mind.

Intelligent, disciplined, self-directed, headstrong and independently minded were just some of the adjectives people have often used to describe me. I go about my ways quietly, not forcing my opinions on others but also never giving in to peer pressure. As a teenager, I sidestepped drugs, alcohol, and other temptations. As an adult, I didn't hesitate to leave jobs that crossed my ethical lines, even if unemployment was my only other option.

Being so black and white in my opinions and mindset from a young age did not always win me friends, nor did it draw colleagues close in my later years. I was well-liked and respected from a distance, even admired at times, but my inability to go with the flow made it hard for some people to reach out to me, especially those who just needed to switch off and relax. I in turn struggled to find common ground with people who weren't motivated by change.

In my early 20s, I quit my first humanitarian mission because I disagreed politically with the concept of neutrality. I couldn't fathom the link between theory and practice and was outraged by the violations of prisoners that I was witnessing. How could we stand by silently in the face of such treatment? My struggle felt more intense because as the organisation's interpreter, it was from my mouth that the silence fled.

Ironically, it was on that first mission that I came face to face with the impact of Che Guevara's revolutionary work. As a teenager, I had been drawn to the paradox of communist and spiritual revolutions and now, I was discovering socialist ideals. While I do not subscribe to any formal political ideology, I do believe in putting people at the heart of every puzzle. This is what it means to be human, to put people before power.

I returned to London on fire, dodging an attempt by MI5 to recruit me to instead pursue a Masters degree in Violence, Conflict, and Development. I wrote my dissertation on the politics of silence and neutrality. To fund this degree, I used all my first mission savings and worked two days a week at a luxury candle shop in Knightsbridge. In between classes and selling to wealthy customers, I volunteered at a human rights organisation, tracking violations in Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and neighbouring countries.

It was the year that photos from Abu Ghraib of US-tortured prisoners in Iraq hit the headlines worldwide. By then, I was looking for post-graduation work and receiving one rejection letter after the other. My passion for

working for the rights of political prisoners and eradicating torture wasn't a very attractive trait to many employers, no matter how many A-grades or best undergraduate finalist prizes I had listed on my CV. I desperately wanted to stay in London so I could be with the man I later married but eventually, lack of work forced me to leave.

Often, this is the way of the Revolutionary. Life gives us no choice but to do what we must. My passion for truth and justice took me back to humanitarian work, visiting political prisoners in conflict settings.

Looking back, this was the point at which I chose work over love. My second mission was to be the one that my ex-husband would say changed me forever. *"You went there as the sweet woman I had met and thought I was marrying,"* he later told me, *"and you returned another person."*

This mission became the fault line in our relationship. It aggravated my inner quest for justice and our relationship came last. And yet, it was also in complete alignment with my soul's purpose and a necessary part of my contribution to humanity. Ironically, in his calling, our relationship also came last. If the price we had to pay was our romantic love then, for my Lover and Revolutionary who both strived towards something greater, it will always be worth it. My only regret was that I hesitated to fully own my Revolutionary spirit and because of that, I gave us both hopes that I could never fulfil.

To this day, I remember the names and faces of so many men, women, and children I was able to reach out to on that mission. I often forgot details of my own life, like people's birthdays and when it was time to take a rest. The work was never done and I was always ready and willing to take action until my divorce turned my own life upside down. It was the call to the inner revolution that you have been reading about.

While I bore witness to many tragic moments, perhaps the worst moment I experienced was having to tell a prisoner that his mother had died. He had been under interrogation for over a month. His body was weary and disoriented from the torture, poor food, lack of sunlight and prolonged exposure to bright lights, orange lights, or darkness. He was his mother's favourite son and for weeks, as a Red Cross delegate, I had been passing messages of love back and forth. News from his mother always put a smile on his face, no matter what was happening behind bars.

When the family called me to break the news, his sister begged me to tell him during my next visit. When I heard his lawyer was visiting him before me, we agreed that he would tell him first. I spoke with the lawyer and he told me not to worry, that he would find a culturally appropriate way to share this very sad news.

A few days later, I arrived at the police station where he was held. There, I met weekly with prisoners under interrogation. As I wasn't allowed to enter their cells, we sat in a tiny room on metal stools fixed to a metal table. There was barely enough room to stand up, let alone move, and yet I would sit here for hours on end, documenting one case after the other without taking a break.

There were so many men to see and I could only see one at a time. Because of security procedures, the men were shackled and blindfolded, then accompanied to the room by two guards. Only when they were inside the room were the handcuffs and blindfold removed. It took time to execute all this and each prisoner would need up to forty-five minutes, sometimes an hour.

I made sure to take my time, arriving early and leaving late so I could give more of the prisoners a chance to leave their cell. Rushing and distracting people who are going through trauma is one of the worst things you can do. When you are sent to document their story, taking time to build trust is critical.

I learned quickly that the men became nervous if I shifted my body position and so I trained myself to sit very still and breathe slowly. This pattern of voluntary freezing would eventually leave me with muscular pain in my one of my shoulders that would never go away.

He was the fifth prisoner I saw that day. As they removed his shackles, he beamed at me, asking how I was. His face said it all. I saw that he didn't know, that the lawyer hadn't told him. After the guards left, he asked me how his mother was. He knew that she was sick and had been asking me every week. He'd asked his lawyer the other day and had heard she was still unwell.

In that moment, I wasn't sure whether to lie or not. His sister had wanted him to know the news but she had no idea how badly he had been treated. I also wasn't sure if he could handle it. He had a heart condition and his health was already a cause for concern. He was going through one of the

worst times of his life and here we were, locked in a tiny room the size of a broom cupboard. How could I tell him the truth? How could I not?

"Did something happen?" he asked when I didn't respond.

"I'm so sorry," I said, looking him in the eyes.

There was a deafening silence and then, a thud as he began to fall apart. Behind him was a small bulletproof window through which the guards could observe us. He jumped up and began to pound the window with his fists, screaming and crying at the top of his lungs to be let out. They were primal screams that shook the tiny room we were both locked in.

I bit my tongue hard to stop myself from crying. In that moment, I hated myself for being unable to lie. I knew that in his culture, the lie would have been the better option and this is what the lawyer had chosen when he had visited. For cultural reasons I couldn't reach out to him either, to make any physical gesture would have been inappropriate and offensive. All I could do was stand there and hold space for the grief that had erupted before me.

As the guards took him away, he couldn't look at me. Later, the other prisoners also struggled to do the same. Not only had my inability to lie shattered one man's life but it had also shaken the lives of all the other prisoners who were held in cells around him and heard his descent into grief.

No doubt his pain and loss increased their own anxiety about their loved ones. Political prisoners are frequently threatened with the loss or violation of their family members. Interrogators know that this is often their weakest pressure point. Revolutionaries will love to the depths of their being and beyond, even the so-called 'terrorists' that the news headlines and governments would like to convince us are inhuman, and even if they choose to fight for their cause over love.

Despite this heart-wrenching incident, I remained a popular presence among the prisoners. Most political prisoners are highly intellectual and emotional characters and we easily connected on topics that had nothing to do with their situation. Alongside my work, I made sure to give space to the human part of the visit, the part where they could just be themselves. Every Revolutionary needs a space where they can rest and return to their core.

My inability to lie also earned me their trust. Because I know what a lie

feels like in my body, I can sense it in another person. I have always been able to read people and situations and it was often an asset in my work. Perhaps it's because I grew up as an introvert, honing my observational skills of others. Or maybe it's my training in Martial Arts. We sense fear and danger in an instant and our strategic mindset kicks in. We find it easy to make tough decisions in a heartbeat if needed.

During this mission, I also met Hassan, a man whom I would come to regard as my older brother. A former political prisoner himself, he had spent his post-release time working for the rights of other prisoners still behind bars. The humanitarian organisation he worked for would send my organisation information on prisoners; usually health and legal points conveyed by the family that required urgent follow up. The information was always spot on.

A week before this mission ended, I travelled to Hassan's hometown to meet with him and his boss. I crossed multiple checkpoints to get there as they sat waiting for me on a chilly winter's day. Their town had been covered in snow and my journey had subsequently taken longer than expected. I sat down in the office next to them, close to the tiny heater, still wearing my coat and scarf.

We went through the formalities of what it had been like to work in coordination with each other for the past year. I expressed my gratitude for their efforts to provide timely and accurate information. Together, I knew we had made a difference to many men's lives. At the end of the meeting, they presented me with a box containing 2 pens.

"What are they for?" I had asked.

"They are so you can tell the world our story," Hassan had responded.

I had once mentioned my dream of becoming a journalist who was able to tell the whole truth and Hassan had remembered. Because my organisation abided by confidentiality, I had been obliged to stay silent on all the abuses I had documented. Like my former colleagues, I will never be able to mention the names of the men I once visited or what was done to them, at least until their files are made public and that will take many years.

Confidentiality - or silence - was the price we paid for access in order to ensure that these men were still alive, and that they could exchange news

with their families. We still intervened behind closed doors but our efforts were always too little too late. It was impossible to measure the impact of what we did and yet we refused to give up. Interestingly, this took place alongside my marital silence, when I was also unable to speak of my pain beyond our closed doors.

I'm sitting in front of Skype. Almost a decade has passed since I received those pens and so much has happened. It has been two years since Hassan and I last saw each other or spoke. His beautiful family has grown. His wife is like a sister to me and being in their company feels so natural. They are a happy and emotionally stable family, which is incredible, given what they have had to endure together.

I find myself going back in time, remembering what happened that night, after the pen meeting. I had tried to leave the town but fighting had broken out at the checkpoint. Our car was turned back and I had to stay the night at a colleague's house. A week later, I left that mission feeling unsettled but I never knew why.

Back in London, I started looking for work. I was due to get married eight months later and wanted to be settled before then. I had no idea of the fight that lay before me, let alone the fight I had left behind. After a few weeks, I dropped Hassan and his team a line. The job hunting could only take up so many hours of my day and I needed another outlet. I offered to volunteer as an Arabic-English translator for their organisation, thinking that I could at least be more useful that way. There was no response and I didn't have a number to call as I had left all my contacts behind.

I continued looking for work, trying out different jobs and volunteer roles. I volunteered to visit asylum seekers held in British prisons in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention. I translated for a refugee therapy centre, later working as the director's personal assistant, but I left soon after as I couldn't focus on the administrative parts of the job. My Revolutionary felt she wasn't making much of a difference; she saw herself more in the therapist's role rather than the administrator's.

Later, I took a job coordinating grants for refugee academics, only to leave it once I was offered a position as a human rights campaigner. Again, I was fleeing the mundane yet vital roles that underpin revolutionary systems

to be closer to the front lines. I wasn't willing to settle and this feeling of restlessness cast a heavy shadow on my wedding. This was the different Claire that my ex-husband had said came home, the one who was never there.

A few hours into my first day on the campaigning job, I found the political prisoner files. I carried them back to my desk, meticulously going through them one by one. Unexpectedly, Hassan's photo stood out, alongside his name. Unknown to me, he had been arrested for political reasons the week after the pen meeting and nine months later, he was still behind bars. That was why he had never responded to my email, almost eight months before.

I felt devastated that I hadn't known and sprang into action, calling his wife. But like before, there was nothing that I personally could do. I couldn't even visit, being so far away. Being an international human rights campaigner was much more difficult than being a humanitarian on the ground. I needed to see and know the people whose cause I was fighting for and those around them. I've always needed that bridge to humanity.

It's critical to understand that in any kind of revolution, there are multiple roles and hats to be worn. There are those who will hang out in the trenches, working alongside the people, and there are those who move in the upper echelons of power, where the decisions are made. Without a link between the two, the outer revolutions will fail. It's the same for the revolutions within. Without a link to our Ruler, who you will meet later, our inner quests for change will also fail.

The arrests came to be a pattern over the coming years. Hassan would be arrested and imprisoned and at some point, released, not always in one piece. Their whole family life was constantly being turned upside down. Wherever I was working, I tried to keep up with their news and when I was nearby, I would visit, sleeping in their children's room.

I took a deep breath before our call began and made a point of remembering the happier moments I had shared with his family. It's so important to remember that we are all whole and integral beings, no matter what we have been through. We are not just the sum of our darker moments. There are so many other variables in our lives that we mustn't forget.

After we had caught up on family news via Skype, the interview for this book begins. I ask him about the pen and why he and his boss had given it to me. It seems the right question to start with, given the purpose of this book.

He smiles as he remembers and responds. *"We wanted you to remember the lives of prisoners and people who live under military occupation. We thought you supported us and that you could tell people the stories you had witnessed in prison."*

Although I know the answer, I ask him why prison is so important to him. I want him to tell you his story in his own words, not mine.

"You know, I've spent a third of my life behind bars, Claire," he told me. *"From the age of 18 to 27, I was in prison for political reasons. My best years were spent in prison. There, I started to read newspapers and books. I met people and I saw the bad side of life. Before 18, I didn't know anything. Together, behind bars, we laughed and cried together."*

"When I was released, I came home but my city was under curfew and attack for the next 3 months. I had dreamed of being free and doing ordinary things but in reality, I was less safe as a free man than I was locked up. There was fighting in front of our house and my wife often cried. They continued to arrest people amidst shooting that hit our building. I also didn't know my city, it had changed so much. There were new buildings and while some people welcomed me back, others I had known had been killed or arrested. Some people became strangers and others forgot me. And so I started my life again, working to defend the rights of prisoners."

Remembering my past efforts to do the same, I ask him what is the most important thing in being able to make a difference to prisoners. He tells me that it's important to have a background in prison. 'Normal' people won't understand what a prisoner goes through. For example, being told that you cannot receive family visits, which are fundamental to their well-being. Hassan also knows the prison buildings inside out, having passed through so many of them. Because of this, he could more easily construct an idea of what was happening to the prisoners, even though he himself was unable to visit directly.

When I told Hassan that his accuracy enabled me to do my work inside the prisons more effectively, he began to cry. I asked him if he was ready to hear my prison story, and why it was that I cared so much. I've found myself in prison so many times; only mine was called fear and the inability to fully

claim my freedom from within.

He nodded and listened with dry eyes as I told him about my great uncle Walter, who had been a PoW held by the Japanese army during World War 2. I explained how he had been tortured so badly that it left him infertile. I told him about the man I had once loved who had been affected by prison, torture, and war. Then I told him the story of the fourth soldier, the man who came home from war but not to me. At that point, I drifted off into the past, remembering how our mutual concern for the plight of political prisoners had first caused us to cross paths.

There we were in my mind's eye, the fourth soldier and myself, sitting in a Starbucks cafe. It was days after I had first walked out on my marriage and I was fast approaching 30. Before him were the names of hundreds of prisoners we had once visited together. Months earlier, he had asked me to go public with him and share with the media what had happened to these men. This was before he sent me the images of mountains, lakes and rivers, and before I found myself confronted with my ex-husband's fist.

I had said yes and then no, believing that our story would entertain the world for a moment before it was forgotten. A media intervention would never impact the broken judicial system in which they were suspended and public pressure could even make things worse. If it pushed the judicial system into action, some of these men would surely be sentenced to death.

By then, I had stopped believing that telling the truth would lead to justice. I was weary of fighting for the rights of others and those efforts falling on deaf ears. Angry and passionate outbursts have a habit of turning polite people away and I was trying to find another way to use the pen that Hassan and his boss had given me.

"Write a book with me instead," I asked him, sharing my dream to write this book you are now holding. It was the first time I told anyone about it. This book would be like no other. It would include our personal histories of violence, what we had seen and witnessed in our work, and our family histories. I knew instinctively that our combined skills, experiences, and outlooks on life could be the kind of revolutionary act that people needed to hear and see.

I also loved him and needed his fiery presence beside me. Together

we were two parts of the same whole. I saw myself in him and yet I also saw the complete opposite. We worked well together, complimenting each other's skills. I knew a part of him loved me too but years would pass before I could put this card on the table and hear that I was too late. The revolution for freedom and justice would always come first, whether it was the prisoners', my own, or his.

After he sidestepped the invitation to co-author the book with me, I left the meeting feeling crushed and confused. I felt that I couldn't write this book without him. I was also in a state of shock knowing that I had just instigated my own personal revolution. I was still processing my sudden departure from my marital home. At that point, he had no idea that his randomly forwarded email of mountains, lakes and rivers had been the tipping point, or quite possibly the master plan that had redirected my life.

After this meeting, my revolution turned inwards, demanding change within myself. But before I could do this necessary inner work, I first had to pick up the pieces of my broken marriage and get myself back to work. After my short-term consulting contract was over, I returned to humanitarian fieldwork, this time working with criminal prison management systems and rehabilitation programs in conflict settings.

I put my pens back in their boxes and didn't pull them out until a few years later, when I started to blog. As a divorced woman, I began to tell the world what had happened, running my first writings through him. He witnessed my early transformation from a woman who stayed silent to one who didn't hold back. I later understood that it was a necessary part of his Alchemist role, to set my life on fire and then stand back, until all the illusions I had held burned to ashes and all that was left was the final mirage; the love I thought we could one day share.

I brought myself back to present moment where Hassan was listening intently without judgment. As my adopted elder brother, he was worried when I got divorced. He knew there had been some violence but until now, he hadn't heard the whole story.

It was important for this interview that he understood why I cared so much about the plight of prisoners and their families, and how that had changed the trajectory of my life. Perhaps not behind bars or in an interrog-

ation room but I too had been hit and threatened and once, feared for my life.

It was a conscious decision to lead the interview in this way, allowing us both to lead and witness each other. When we stand up for the rights of others, it is essential to see where our own lives meet theirs. It is also vital that in between our fights for justice, we meet each other as ordinary human beings. To be human means that we can sometimes get things wrong.

All of us have stories to share and in my experience, those of us who are drawn to alleviate the suffering of war have endured in our own lives or our family trees similar stories that make us reach out. Like myself and my great uncle Walter's story, we may be operating unconsciously until the truths within our own families are told.

Hassan's fight for peace isn't over. Just five months ago, they came for him again. *"This time it affected me more than my ten years in prison,"* he shared. *"They tortured me so badly, hanging me by my wrists, forcing my body into painful positions, threatening my family and telling me that I would never see light of day again. I don't know why this time was different. They had arrested me while I was with my family and kids, saying it would only take five minutes."*

"Seven days later, another authority came to my apartment to question why I had been arrested. They put my wife and kids in the children's room and locked me in my bedroom. They questioned me there and then searched the entire house and car, saying they wouldn't arrest me this time but that they would follow me. "Expect another visit from us," they warned me. For a few months after this, I couldn't sleep. I was always checking the windows and on edge if big cars pulled up in front of our apartment."

I hadn't heard the news of this latest arrest and I felt so saddened that he and his family were still being exposed to such violence, abuse, and intimidation. Knowing how resilient and strong he is made it more painful to hear how this time had been worse than before.

I asked him about his spiritual practice and how this had helped him cope. In my own life and the lives I have witnessed of other prisoners, I've notice that so often, spirituality is the only place left to go. *"Belief is so personal, Claire,"* he tells me. *"We have to be honest with ourselves first and foremost. My faith has gone up and down over the years. Like the Prophet said, sometimes we feel it is small, and sometimes it is very high. Here in my hometown, there are lots of foreigners*

and this can create a kind of cultural shock. They come with other questions, for example.

"I pray and believe in God," he continues. *"It was in the worst situations that I found God and He held me."*

Hassan's mind drifts back to his earlier prison days, perhaps to his darker moments. He tells me how he was the head of a prison wing, representing the prisoners before the prison authorities. This meant that he was able to take action for his fellow men. The most difficult part of this job was handling so many requests at once.

"I am very sensitive," he admits. *"If I get more than one question or if more than one person speaks at a time, I get stressed. But 4 or 5 prisoners would be talking to me at the same time. Then the prison authorities would be coming at me from the other side. One day, it got so bad that I returned to my cell and started to cry. I told God that I couldn't do this anymore. That He had to release me now! I still had five months left of my sentence and yet another prisoner came to me and said to pack my bags, I was going home. He told me that my early release was due to a change in law that helped the authorities clear space as the prisons had become so overcrowded."*

"That was one example of my faith pulling me through. Another time was just a few months ago, when they were hanging me from my wrists. Suspended in mid-air, my hands swelled up and went numb. My legs and back hurt and at one point, I said to God, no, I can't do this. Then, an interrogator came and asked me to talk. I told him there was nothing more to say, I had no new answers. He decided to send me back to my cell to think. This gave me a moment of rest and soon after, I was released."

"There are signs for us to believe, Claire," he continues. *"When we believe we feel that God exists and that we should follow his orders. At the same time, I am open in my person. I try to understand everyone. I don't like telling people they are wrong. I don't impose my beliefs on anyone or say that my way is the right way. My faith has taught me that it is only later that I can see the times when God has given me things. For example, in prison I felt moved to study English. At first, it was like Chinese but I persevered. Knowing English led me to other jobs related to human rights, including the one I have now."*

Hassan dreams of moving overseas to do his Masters degree. He has been told that he's forbidden to travel but he refuses to give up on his dream. His goal is to study human rights as he believes this is the key to outer freedom.

Out of nowhere, I ask him what makes him smile these days. I know

the interview is coming to a close. We have mindfully worked our way through the toughest moments of our own revolutions and I'm conscious that we haven't left time for the other parts of who we are.

"I try to be simple and easy going. I don't want to be a complicated person with a strong personality." His response reaches my older revolutionary self, the one who is much less stubborn, the one who understands that life isn't always what it seems. The one who isn't fooled by mirages on the horizon. The words reinforce my own hope and faith, which has been so tried and tested over the years. I know that I wouldn't be the person I now am without having paused on my journey to see that life is so much bigger than myself.

As I healed from the small adversities of my life, I came to be less judgmental, less black and white. I allowed more colour and shades of grey to enter my vision. I developed a compassionate heart that held space for both myself and those around me. It now has a two-way valve; it is no longer a one-way street.

As a wiser Revolutionary, I have learned to choose my battles wisely and peace is always my objective. I focus on the arts of inner and outer communications in my revolutionary work as that is where the first wars lie. Until we see each other and ourselves as the human beings that we all are, there will never be peace within and between us.

I'm grateful for this friendship that has endured the test of time, and for Hassan's generous and open heart that allows me into his family home. There is a connection between us that goes beyond this world. Perhaps it is my great uncle Walter who enjoys being in his company, or maybe, as my sister believes, we shared a past life in another time. It could also be the kind of bonding that occurs between people who have touched the depths of despair and risen up to live in spite of and beyond them.

Tearing the interview notes to shreds, I remember once more the man who helped set this book in motion, the fourth soldier. We too have a connection that I cannot explain and I'm so angry with him. Fragmented memories from the first moment we met until present day flash through my mind. I see myself at 28, arriving on a new mission. Just as I had hauled my suitcase into my new home, there he stood behind me.

"I heard you're the new interpreter. Can you really speak Arabic?" He was test-

ing me from the very first moment we met. He never stopped testing me. My love for him forced me to stand up for myself and engage in a very painful and necessary process of healing. It turned me into the woman who would one day write this book.

At the level of my soul, I understand that we all need that one person who will wear down the illusion of our self to pieces. Sometimes, our spiritual teachers come in many guises; they don't always show up in flowing robes. Sometimes, they are the ordinary people we end up loving who never truly love us back.

Although I have a spiritual understanding of our connection, my romantic heart was devastated that he could never become my co-creator in life. The very human part of me longed to build and share my life and my life's work with him and yet he always held me at arm's length. He would disappear long enough for me to think that my love for him was an illusion, only to return, say a few words, and turn my inner world back upside down.

As I enter my 37th year, I see that the past six years of loving him have been about scaling the mountains and finding the lakes by and for myself. Because of his fire, I have climbed to the highest peaks and dived to the deepest depths. I have seen from the hilltops the valleys in which I once lived. I have climbed back down to swim in their lakes and rivers. Along the way, I found other travellers with whom I could share the richer and more mundane moments of my life.

Life has taught me how to survive a broken heart and overcome my life's adversities, but that was only the beginning. Later, I saw the immense beauty that lies within and around me. I have infused this beauty into my life's work, weaving it through the pages of this book and the works of Arabic calligraphy that I produce. I wear it on my body and I hold it close to my heart.

I have accepted that the greatest journey of my life was ultimately one that I had to take without him and that this revolution of love was one that I had to fulfil alone by uniting my inner selves.

The young Revolutionary is the part of us that calls the cry to battle. Representing the Wounded Orphan, she raises the alarm, speaking up and saying, no more! She calls forth our Warrior spirits, sending them out to fig-

ht the war that will end all wars. There, if we are lucky, the Alchemist will find us, burning all we think we know to be true to ashes, stripping us back to basics, and returning us to the essence of who we truly are.

From that place, the mature Revolutionary will co-create and reconstruct our inner lives, together with the Creator. She will teach us to recognise our own voice and with the Jester and Lover, help us to stand up alone and tell our tale in community. Alongside the Lover, she teaches us to live and speak from a place of love and oneness.

Understanding and accepting that we are all in this “war” together, and that ultimately there are no sides, our Revolutionaries will help us live our deepest truth and from there become the force for humanity that deep down, every Warrior and Lover longs for.

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Revolutionary’s Voice in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Revolutionary’s Voice. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

“A dojo is a space of commitment in which people engage in a collective practice for learning and transformation.”

Richard Strozzi-Heckler

The Wise Sage

My younger Revolutionary lingers. as that's her way. She doesn't like to be told it's time to go and so I take her out for lunch to get some fresh air. In an outdoor café, I feel the gentle heat of Dubai's early spring descend. We're on the right side of the season, before it gets hot and sticky. My Warrior's body aches from karate training the night before and she needs time to rest before my Sage shows up and my Revolutionary puts her back to work.

I had brought with me a book written by a Western psychotherapist and meditation teacher. It was about gaining freedom from self-defeating emotional habits. I'd bought it on impulse months earlier but hadn't yet gotten around to reading it. I wonder if that in itself is the very definition of a self-defeating behaviour. Given my emotional stability, I toss the idea out on the spot. I've simply been busy writing a book, there's barely been time to do anything else.

I stretch out in my seat and finally open the book. A few pages in, I throw it down on the table with a sigh. The cover is a lovely pastel pink and grey and the title is catchy in a mass media kind of way. Same old, same old, I catch myself saying to myself.

I've read such a book a hundred times. I'm one of the most well-read people I know in my immediate circle, at least when it comes to topics of the mind, body, and heart, and I can't fathom why I chose to buy this book. I'm hoping that the book I'm writing will be nothing like it. I hope instead it

tells truths that readers can take and feel inspired to write their own.

It's a joke in my family that I have any money to buy clothes, given the amount I've spent on learning. I went from reading dictionaries as a teenager to memorising the location of books in bookstores across the world. I have an unusual ability to walk into any bookstore, size it up in a heartbeat based on how it makes me feel, and find my way around in an instant.

Once, on mission, I attended the launch of a new political bookstore. When an old acquaintance asked me to recommend which book to read, I ended up giving him a summary of nearly every book on the shelf. By then, I had read them all.

My pattern of searching outside of myself for answers to the bigger questions I had on life and work was relentless. It didn't stop until the day I learned that all the answers I needed already lay within me. The answers to the kind of questions I was asking didn't come with a certificate, cover, or receipt; they came from the depths of my soul.

I put the book back in my back, knowing that I wouldn't be picking it up again. Deep down, I felt irritated and asked myself why I was being so judgmental about such a globally acclaimed book that sought to enlighten.

“The mass marketing of Eastern philosophies irritates me. Being seduced to buy books with pretty covers and obvious content makes me feel stupid.”

I continued digging deeper, questioning my judgments, until I found the apparent source of my current state of dis-ease. “The US government.”

“Please no,” I thought. “How will I ever explain this one without offending some of my readers?” I check for another part of me willing to speak up but instead, there is silence.

Throughout my years of humanitarian work, it has been US foreign policy and its allies that have provoked my Revolutionary the most. Perhaps it's a result of spending most of my life in the Middle East where I've experienced both US military and imperial power at play. Or maybe it's my Revolutionary's shadow fear; she's afraid of being bought off by capitalist ideals.

Our wounded selves will always search for an outward enemy to fight; they cannot accept that their greatest enemy will always lie within. My inner battle has never been with the US, just like it never was with the interrogators or the perpetrators of global injustice. It was only when my Revolution

ary grew up that my Sage could step in to teach her that peace would only come when she cultivated it within herself.

As a British citizen with English-Irish ancestry, I used to carry an internal struggle between our vast military history and what it means to be an ordinary English person, separated from the politics of our elected leaders that can directly and indirectly ruin lives far and wide. Lives like my big brother Hassan's, and the men I have loved. Our actions are never cast in isolation. What ripples in one part of the world is most certainly felt elsewhere.

Ironically, in all my spiritual quests, I have bumped into Americans repeatedly. All my spiritual teachers to date have either been American or hold a connection to the US. While in the depths of my political judgments, I have always remembered that people are different from the systems they create. It's the same for workplaces. Wonderful people can become shadows of themselves when forced into roles that do not reflect their highest values.

The Sage in me has held on to this, refusing to sign off an entire person, party, country, or body, even when the fires are burning all around. If we don't welcome home all the complex parts of ourselves, we will continue to judge and reject those around us. Without integrating our inner worlds, we cannot strive towards peace in our outer world.

Nowhere was this belief more challenged than when I was based in Gaza, looking for a karate class. As international staff, we were not allowed to move freely for security reasons and therefore I couldn't attend local classes. Instead, my only option was to search within Israel, where we were allowed to move freely on weekends. This search came after I had found the Zen meditation workshop, and by then, I was in a more peaceful phase of my own healing journey.

Searching online for a class in Tel Aviv, I came across the group, Budo for Peace (BFP). Founded by a former coach of the national Karate team, BFP brings together karate teachers of all styles and their students in an effort to train for peace. They apply Budo values and philosophy to their curriculum, and welcome all members of the community, regardless of race and religion.

I had never heard of using martial arts as a platform for peace building but it sounded familiar. Several years earlier, not too long after I had had to

break the news to the prisoner that his mother had died, I also had another encounter that lingered. Before me sat a prisoner whose centre of gravity was so clear and certain that I asked him how it was so. He had endured the worst of treatments and yet his mind was sharp and alert.

One day, I asked him how he did it. *"It's because I practice karate in my cell,"* he told me.

He was a karate teacher in his regular life and came from a family tradition of practicing the art. Even in a tiny cell space, he was able to perform his katas both physically and in his mind. The combination of his spiritual practices and karate training had kept him in one piece, despite the violent arrest, torture, and family separation that he had endured.

At the time, I remember seeing myself in his words. Years later, after I learned about my great uncle Walter's PoW years at the hands of the Japanese army, I would catch myself wondering if he too had learned or seen a Japanese martial art.

It seemed a ridiculous thought and yet I know only too well that lives do go on in captivity. There is so much waiting and psychological time to kill, even if one is put to hard labour. Eventually, the prisoner will become curious about his captors and an odd cultural exchange will take place. It may be the guards who let down their guard and share a personal story with a prisoner. It may be the prisoner who takes it upon himself to learn his captor's language.

When left alone together to fight things out, people at war will eventually give up. They will realise that with limited resources, they can only stay violent with each other for so long. War is tiring and expensive and when we refuse to fuel it, it eventually dies out. Sadly, such a theory doesn't translate to real life, as there will always be interference by others who seek for various reasons to broker "peace" deals that interrupt the natural flow of life.

At the time, agreeing to train with BFP was like stepping into the unknown. Gaza was under frequent Israeli bombardments and intimidation tactics, and often, it ended in death. But by then, I had come to accept that no single way was the right or only way. Until now, I had chosen the way of international law and I had seen how often it had fallen short. I had also seen how revenge didn't work either and so off I went, with an open mind

and heart.

I travelled north by train to Netanya, where the seminar was held. I journeyed alongside Israeli soldiers going home for the weekend. Squeezed in alongside their rifles, I breathed in deeply. I refused to let stress get the better of me and arrived ready to join the group. I threw my suit on and stood in line. I was tired from a day's work and the journey to get there but it didn't matter. My presence was about showing up in solidarity and nothing more.

The next morning, we rose early for a run through the woods. I hadn't thought to bring my trainers and was caught in a dilemma. It was either my office heels or running barefoot. Much as I wanted to be the fearless Warrior, I didn't want to be left with bloodied feet and unable to train later on. I was also worried about leaving my valuables in the hostel room, having been trained to keep them on me at all times.

I threw my heels on, slung my handbag over my karate suit, and showed up for the run. The rest of the teachers looked at me in surprise. This British black belt who had just shown up looked a little different but rather than laugh, they took my appearance in their stride. One of them even insisted on carrying my bag as we ran so I could better balance in my heels. It was a moment of imperfection that came to break the ice.

After the run, we practiced the graceful art of Tai Chi and then stood in a circle to create a new kata, or simulated fight scene. There were about fifteen of us, and everyone except myself was a karate teacher. One by one, the teachers introduced a movement from their style of karate training. Around the circle we went, linking the movements together, practicing each other's contributed technique as one group. Palestinian, Arab, Israeli, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, male, female, young, old, and every shade you can imagine were present.

Later, we attended a kendo or sword fighting class. It certainly wasn't the usual recipe for peace but it felt right. Instead of swords, we trained as beginners with sticks. Side by side, we cheered each other on. The class was taught mostly in Hebrew and an Arabic speaking teacher translated for me. He came from an unrecognised Bedouin village in the south that had no electricity or running water. There were so many reasons for him not to be here and yet, here he was.

Until then, I had only met non-violent communications groups working towards peace. While I had found their work fascinating, it always felt like something was missing. A fundamental piece of my understanding, based on what I have witnessed and experienced directly, is that we cannot bring peace without first accepting the fight within each of us.

To foster peace, I believe we need to confront fear and anger head on at every level; psychological, physical, emotional, and spiritual. We need to practice working with these difficult emotions in ourselves and within groups more than we need to memorise the articles of international law.

I used to think this was an idealistic vision and impossible to translate to the policy level. But when I saw global mechanisms fail repeatedly, I realised that there is more than one way to humanity. Perhaps it doesn't matter which one we choose but rather, the means we use to pursue it. If integrity, respect, and harmony are among our drives for action, then there will always be places we can meet along the way.

We didn't solve all the problems of the world with one shared kata but what we did do was take a step closer to each other and move together as one.

This practice turned my perception of peace building upside down and inside out. It reignited my childhood passion for Karate. It wasn't the fighting that brought me to class; it was the sense of order and harmony in all we did. The focus and commitment to respect with people with whom we trained, regardless of whether we liked them personally or not.

In such a space, my Wounded Orphan had been accepted. I knew it could be the case for other Wounded Orphans who go on to wage war. If we can teach Orphans to fight fairly from a young age, perhaps we can better eliminate the need for full-blown wars.

It seemed a naïve thought on the surface and yet, it refused to leave me. Later, in Dubai, it haunted me in each karate class. Although I was supposed to be training for my next belt, it wasn't the belt that drew me in. Rather, it was the understanding that this was my way to peace and that one day, something greater would come of it.

I understand that I will never become a national champion but neither is that my aim. There is no medal or standard for using the fruits of my practice to inform and transform lives.

Two years after coming home from my last field mission, I could no longer operate in the international system in which I had been functioning for so long. I could no longer teach Yoga as a pathway to inner peace. Once I saw at my soul level my way to humanity, I chose to leave the others behind.

The Sage's Wisdom is the wisdom of the soul that lives within and beyond our body. It is a kind of wisdom that comes when we take information, knowledge, and life experience together. When we tear them apart to break them down, we can more easily digest and assimilate the pieces to embody a new state of living and breathing. We cannot transform through books alone, we must bring to the table everything we know in order to see what is missing.

Becoming a Sage requires stepping outside of the packs to which we may have become so accustomed and it is the power of daily or regular practice in transforming us into this wisdom that cannot be underestimated.

It is through the blows and falls of life and making sense of them that we become wise. In my life, as in the dojo, it is because of the blood, sweat, and tears, the scraped knuckles and weary body that I have learned to fight with honour and respect, and sit quietly in reflection.

A sister humanitarian and health coach friend knows this lesson well. She too has stepped off the beaten track to blaze her own trail through life, which is very different from mine. Nuran and I met much like Amy and Christoph, through the virtual aid worker wellness group. But unlike the others, we have also met in person. Passing through Dubai en route to Somalia for a mission, she joined me in one of my beach Karate classes and lived to tell the tale.

Nuran and I are both intrinsically driven and health-conscious people. We've reached a stage in our lives and work where we know that our own health is even more important than that of those whom we serve. We understand that we cannot make a difference in the lives of others if we end up burning out. And so we pace ourselves, practicing the art of patience and timing in all we endeavour to do.

I ask her by email what she has learned from her own journey beyond war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity. With her warm and positive outlook, she begins to tell her story. She masters the ability to hold

space for the light and darkness that have come her way.

“For me the shades of darkness I have experienced in my life have also brought with it rays of lightness and what I like to call my beauty spots. They're a little rough around the edges, but they have left a beautiful marking on me that today embody the very essence of my mind, body, and spirit.

“In my early childhood I was blessed to be born into a family where joy, love and protection were foundational. At the age of 11 my inner temple was violated by a man my mother was having an affair with, shortly after my parents separated. For a while things were ok but that soon changed. As time progressed things got worse, the man my mother had the affair with returned and the presence of violence soon become the norm. Being the eldest of four there were many times I felt a sense of helplessness trying to create that space of protection we once knew.

“At the age of 15 my mother threw me out onto the streets with only the clothes on my back for trying to protect myself and sisters from the daily violence. Living on the streets became my new home. During this period I was exposed to a new kind of violence and drugs. After several years of darkness a ray of light shined though. While I was living on the streets, I had the opportunity to try a thing called yoga and meditation by a local organisation. This was the first stage of my personal healing journey and it was where I learned the importance of body mind connection. Something shifted in me during this period and before I knew it, a new path and direction in my life journey opened up.”

Although I know her compassionate nature well, I'm amazed at the absence of self-pity and the depths of compassion from which Nuran speaks. It takes a strong mind and heart to tell one's story with truth and dignity. In the early stages of finding our voice, we can so easily get lost in the details. One of the reasons why I hesitated to find my voice and my way for so long was simply that I didn't know where to start. I used to look towards more eloquent speakers on pain and tragedy and wonder why they missed all the measly parts out.

Feeling my own immense pain, I couldn't relate to a story well told. I thought the person must be afraid to tell the whole truth, just like me. It was an odd reaction to truth-telling, one I have never shared until now, and it isolated me for many years.

But as my Jester taught me, storytelling comes in layers that ripple outwards and get softer with each ripple. The best way to start is in a small and

closed group. There, in the safety of those we trust, we practice sharing our voice. We may need to go through many many layers of shame, anger, rage, disgust, and disappointment before we can reach the layers of our own truth.

When we have found our truth, it gets easier to hold space for all that has happened. We then tell our truths in bites and chunks, choosing how much we want to share according to the audience before us. Trusting ourselves, and turning inwards for answer, we learn what to say and when.

“For a couple of years, things seemed to be going well,” Nuran continued. “I thought I had finally made it, living a normal life. But it was short lived. At the age of 17, a close friend of mine committed suicide. He was 16. This loss brought with it a heavy dark cloud over me, so much so that I had planned my own suicide. It was in this moment that a ray of light shined through again and the second stage of my personal healing journey arose; the last piece of the puzzle, the spiritual connection to my inner self.

“By the age of 18, I was married and navigating through the stresses of cultural adaptation and adversity of challenging cultural norms. As things settled once again that deep inner calling arose bringing me back to my connection to humanity. I eventually went back to school graduating as a mature student with a degree in international and community development studies, one step closer to my calling in life.”

“Having worked in the humanitarian sector for over fifteen years has brought me many joys and many sorrows, which are etched on my heart forever. Having lived with and experienced war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity throughout my journey in life I developed my own coping mechanisms and level of resilience which I thought would have prepared me when entering the humanitarian sector. How I was wrong. Well to some extent it did, but in other areas I soon learned as a humanitarian, there were limitations to what was in my circle of control and what was not when serving humanity. A lesson often learned the hard way I feel by many in the sector.”

Nuran is the kind of humanitarian who lives her life from the inside out. Humble to the core, when you first meet her, you don't realise the hardships that she has been exposed to. It takes time to understand the depths of one's humanity and yet I believe that the hint of such depth shows in the slightest of human behaviours. As a Sage, she has found her own lessons through the very act of life itself.

“Reflecting back over my life journey, I can honestly say that I have been truly blessed. I learned from a very early age important lessons that I have carried with me thro-

ugh life. One of those lessons I learned is that the lens through which you choose to look really does shape the direction your life journey will take.

“Standing firm and honouring your authentic journey and all of its beautiful imperfections really is where the hidden gem to life lies. The other lesson that has given me strength throughout my journey has been the importance of remembering to love yourself more, not in a narcissistic way, but in one that is centred around the intimate relationship you have with your inner spirit.

“As my life journey has continued and I have embraced my feminine essence as a woman. Some of the few lessons I hold close include choosing to live life with intention and facing your fears with curiosity as you step into the unknown. Learn to trust in the universe and the plan it has in place for your life journey. Be patient and gentle with the self, practice more kindness, less judgment and allow time for your imagination to run free alongside your inner creative child.”

I ask her how her humanitarian work has informed her understanding of life. *“Bearing witness to the best and worst of humanity as a humanitarian brings with it an experience that can never fully be captured in words, but I will try my best. It often takes us to a place we have developed over time that is protected by a compound wall, which in moments in time, opens up to reveal much more than we can ever imagine about our witnessed experience and ourselves.*

“Where is this place? It's within us, and when we give ourselves permission to explore it, to feel, to allow our emotions and thoughts to co-exist alongside this deep inner sensation of light and darkness, amazing things happen. In that moment in time, we witness our inner self, with all of its beautiful imperfections and our unique expression, bearing witness to all our vulnerability alongside human suffering. It's an interesting dichotomy,” she points out, “because it's the very act of self-preservation, numbing ourselves from feeling what we bear witness to as a coping mechanism so that we can function, that is at the same time the very drug that binds us mission after mission.”

Here, she is alluding to the trap that so many of us humanitarians fall into. We are overwhelmed and simultaneously compelled to do what we do. Instead of seeing the human face of overwhelm and sitting with it, we run to defeat it. The chronic lack of job security in the sector can be so inappropriate to talk of. When your work depends on saving lives or alleviating the suffering of others, your ultimate goal should be unemployment

Yet the human part of us can stumble at the very thought of no longer.

being needed. Our inner Orphans stand with others and together with our Explorers and Warriors, we stand ready to beat the evils of our times.

Without the presence of the Caregiver, the transformative fire of the Alchemist, the retreat of the Creator, the lightheartedness of the Jester and oneness of the Lover, our Revolutionary can sound the call to act above and beyond what one person can do. Such chaos can mar our long-term efforts to make a difference in the world, getting us caught up in institutional cycles that maintain the status quo at best.

Yet like an evolved Sage, Nuran sees that there is a lesson to be learned in everything and she doesn't hesitate to share more.

"There are so many lessons I have learned over the years of which I am incredibly grateful for as they have all contributed to shaping me into the person I am today. The first would have to be valuing the preciousness of life and its fragility. We often say to 'live each day as if it's your last'; an easy concept to say but it is often very far removed from how we live our lives. From my life journey, this is something I really try to make a concerted effort to remind myself about and in doing so I feel that it has really impacted in many ways the direction my life journey has gone."

She touches on the paradoxical nature of oneness and uniqueness that lies in each of us.

"When you peel back every layer of who we are what we are left with is a human being. Each and every one of us has our own unique life journey, our story. This has always fascinated me and working in the field I have been blessed to listen to the very heartbeat of beautiful souls often caught on the frontline of human tragedy, and yet have displayed great courage with dignity, integrity and respect. For me the second lesson and indeed blessing, I have learned from this is to take time out even amidst the chaos to just listen. Listen to their heartbeat, their stories and where possible find ways within your creative means to share such inspiration with others for it's the echo of these voices that bring a beautiful breeze to life."

I ask her what advice she would give to someone supporting a loved one through war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity. While writing this book, it has been one of the questions that has appeared most often among those who wish to help loved ones but aren't sure where to start as in their minds, they haven't descended to the same depths of despair and suffering. Like any humanitarian, they fear that their efforts to support will

fall short.

"This, I think, can often be the most challenging space to be in because as humans, our automatic instinct that is triggered when we see someone we love suffering is to want to make everything better as quickly as possible. But in fact, time is often the very thing that someone going through such adversity needs. Having been on both sides of this, there are two key areas that I would divide my advice into; the first is related to providing support and the second is self-care."

"When taking that courageous step into the unknown to support a loved one, the most valuable contribution you can make is to simply just be there for them in each and every moment, with an open heart, unconditional love and compassion. The other aspect I would most definitely say would be to offer a listening ear without judgment or expectation. Being heard in such a state can often be a very powerful experience for the person speaking and for the person listening."

She continues, elaborating her point on self-care.

"When our attention is diverted to someone we love going through hard times, it is very easy to find our own practice of self-care falling through the cracks. But in fact it's during this time that you need to up the ante. You can't provide support to anyone if you are running on an empty tank. So fill her up with loving kindness, remembering the importance of being gentle with yourself and celebrating the small things."

"But most importantly," Nuran reminds us, "don't forget to bring with you a sense of humour because the ride will often take some time, leading you both down weird and wonderful alleys, so you will need some laughter to break up some of the more serious stuff along the way to help you throughout the journey."

Re-reading her responses weeks later, I smile and remember my own journey to understand and practice self-care. As a teenager, it came so naturally yet with the passage of time and increase in responsibilities, not to mention the complexities of life that I was facing, my self-care disappeared into the darkness. It was only on the other side of 30 that I realised I could only run for so long on empty.

The Sage understands that self-esteem is the foundation of self-care. Without a healthy sense of self-worth, no matter how many self-care practices we are taught - from Yoga and meditation to massage and being in nature - without filling up our self-esteem tank the practices won't have a lasting impact. At best, they will alleviate our stress in the short-term. In

themselves, they don't have the power to rewire our behaviours.

As a coach, I deal frequently with the need for behavioural change. Often, my clients arrive full of wisdom yet unable to translate this into a higher evolution of themselves. So often, like I used to, they have existed on thin air without a solid ground beneath them. They have flipped Maslow's triangle upside down and are in the phases of self-actualisation without the fertile soil to keep them rooted. It makes it very hard for them to evolve into the wise Sages that I know they are. They find themselves grasping outwardly, wondering why it always feels so hard and why no matter what they do, they don't ever feel it's good enough.

Through inner voice dialogue, we unravel the layers of 'shoulds' and 'coulds' until we reach the layer of truth that is theirs and theirs alone. In this space we come to understand what is needed for them to feel valued and from there, how they can practice that for themselves.

We nourish our self-esteem by first setting and adjusting healthy boundaries. This could be at work if we are expected to be on call all hours. Unless our jobs are specifically emergency roles, or necessitate us to be on call, there must be regular times during which we can switch off and explore to feed the other parts of who we are.

When we pursue our interests, we start generating a sense of curiosity, which distances us from the barrage of self-judgment that may have become the norm.

In my experience, low self-esteem is chronic in the humanitarian and human right sectors. There is never enough time or money; we are always too little too late. Our objectives are lofty and noble, even if we try to break them down to SMART and tangible goals. Like the corporate and other sectors, we deal with intense levels of stress but these also include the threats to our lives. Here, we may have more in common with the military than we'd like to think, even though we aren't the ones pulling the triggers.

The Sage understands that the absence of self-esteem can drive us to do and do until one day, there is nothing left. We've either burned or checked out and all our efforts lie in vain. Recovering from burnout is a process that can take years. It is painful to experience in ourselves and witness in another but if we allow it, it can also become the fire that transforms us into another

way of being, a more compassionate and grounded state of being.

I ask Nuran what advice she would give to people who feel called to engage in humanitarian work. She also believes that mindfulness and staying centred are keys to avoiding the erosion of our inner essence. She refers to some aspects of this work as 'superhero culture,' which makes me smile as I imagine us all flying around like Supermen and Superwomen. Perhaps then we would be more immune to attack, I can't help saying to myself. It's my way of escaping from the intensity of where I've been and what I've seen, my own version of light humour to keep my feet firmly on the ground.

"Working in a superhero culture there is little recognition of stepping away from everything to re-centre the self; instead many humanitarians move from one difficult post to the next. I learnt the hard way like many but am grateful that in being self-aware, I picked up the warning signs sooner rather than later. So this would be the most important piece of advice I would suggest to a humanitarian and anyone witnessing war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity.

"Unfortunately there is no shortage of humanitarian crises, however there is only one of you. Love yourself enough to step away from everything for a while. Give yourself permission to reclaim back the most important relationship in your life with your inner self and trust in the universe that it will lead in the direction you're meant to be heading."

Love. Permission. Inner Self. Trust. Direction.

I find myself reflecting on Nuran's last words long after the interview has ended. She is a wise soul who has fought hard to digest and assimilate her wisdom. Her way of being is her way; it isn't one that can be duplicated. There can only ever be one Nuran just as there can only ever be one of you and one of me.

We are all in this together but our purpose naturally entails unlocking our individual codes of existence so that we can step more fully into, and contribute effectively towards, the healing spaces of our collective realm.

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Wise Sage in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Wise Sage. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

“All human beings long to return to the core truth of self. We just haven’t been encouraged or shown how to do it. That’s why we need to surround ourselves with inspired individuals who are seeking true self.”

Eileen R. Hannegan

The Ruler’s Palace

I decide on the spot to change my Facebook profile photo as I want an image of me at 36 not 35 and something. I snap several images on my computer, select one, edit it to a deeper contrast as I like clean edges, and up it goes. It took less than five minutes.

The photo isn’t perfect, it shows dogfight scratches on my neck; I haven’t brushed my hair since the morning and I’m not wearing any make up. It’s exactly the kind of photo of myself that I have come to appreciate. My Ruler likes to see reality reflected back, whatever that happens to be in any moment. She’s always aware of what’s happening in her palace, there isn’t an area she leaves hidden.

Social media is also impossible to avoid these days and some, including myself, may question whether ‘real’ Rulers will really waste their time on it. Aren’t they busy doing something greater? Sometimes, yes, and sometimes, no. But moreover, it’s difficult to avoid if we want to keep a foot in the outer as well as inner worlds. It’s the Ruler who pivots herself between both.

Within each of us is a palace of dreams, hopes, desires, and gifts to share with the world. In life, we must use whatever communication channels we have and it is more important to tap into the channels that speak to us and the people we are trying to reach rather than adopt the assumption one channel is better than another. The Ruler doesn’t judge; she leads.

As a coach and traveler, I’ve learned to value all communications chan-

nels in different ways yet the one I always start with and come back to is the inner channel for that is where I believe most of our communications issues lie. When we do not understand what is happening in our inner worlds – our palaces – then chaos can rule our lives.

In order to live well, or pursue the lives we are destined for, we must learn to track and understand our thoughts, sensations, feelings, and existential questions. When we can rule sovereign over our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual terrain, and choose mindfully how we wish to decorate our inner lives, peace and power are restored to our inner worlds. The palace becomes a symbol of refuge to which we can retreat and hang out in as long or as little as we need to feel recharged.

The extroverts and activists among us may prefer to keep things streamlined, minimalistic and tidy so that they can spend most of their time outside of the palace. But should their palace be in chaos, they may feel out of sorts, overstuffed with information, food, and belongings that they haven't been given sufficient time to assimilate.

The introverts and pacifists among us may prefer staying closer to home base. Every nook and cranny may be filled with so much comfort and warmth that it becomes hard to leave the palace as Siddhartha, or the Buddha, once did and explore the world beyond. They may spend so much time looking inwards that they don't see what is really happening in the world.

Whether we are introverts or extroverts, activists or pacifists, or even a combination of all four, is irrelevant. What matters most to the effective Ruler is that she keeps her palace in order in a way that makes sense to her so that she can do what she came here for.

As an introverted activist, my way has been to draw close my inner Revolutionary and Sage. Both provide me with valuable counsel that links my inner and outer worlds. When it comes to managing my inner world, I draw on intuition as well as fact. Is it true? Can I be absolutely sure it's true? What does my heart tell me? What does my gut say?

I also keep watch over my Wounded Orphan. I know that she will never completely go away and besides, to stay human I need her. On her good days, she is my link to humanity. She understands what it is like to suffer and feel pain and because of that, she doesn't like to see others feeling that way.

When she is well cared for, she can be a powerful partner for change.

For example, when I am coaching clients who are in emotional pain, it is the wisdom of my Orphan that I draw on in order to connect and create a pathway for them to explore. In such a setting, my Caregiver needs to be present and depending on the topic, my Warrior. My Explorer leads the session but it is my Ruler who is in charge. She's the one who holds the space in which all of them can act.

"Can you say this in another way, Claire?" I hear some of you asking.

Of course, it does sound a little odd if you haven't taken such an inner journey to relate to the number of archetypes that can be present in any given moment. Remember that archetypes are simple groups of characteristics and traits. They are mythical tools that facilitate depth and understanding. Another way of putting the above example is, I am able to coach clients in emotional pain because I have been there myself. It is my ability to empathise and connect that helps them to feel safe. I'm able to hold space for tough topics and my curiosity about their feelings helps us both to understand what is going on. I remain professional at all times.

This is what it means to integrate different aspects of our lives and draw forth our skills and talents as needed. We may do this instinctively but it tends to be done with more care and consciousness after we have undertaken an inner journey. Such a journey gives way to self-awareness and such awareness can lead to greater acts of humanity.

As someone who has lived through war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma and adversity, making sure my Inner Orphan feels safe has been and still is critical to living a life beyond. This life beyond is a place where I no longer feel defined by all that has passed. Rather, I can see it from a distance like a movie that has feel good moments and a few tearjerkers.

Like most moviegoers, I walk away with the essence of the film and carry its impact and lessons in my heart. I do not have to remember every single line, remember all the characters, or repeat it over and over. In my life, I've already learned and spoken so many lines that now it is about unlearning and saying only what is necessary. That way, I can stay open to something new. Like a fresh insight, a new relationship, a different job, another solution.

The return of my Innocent child has been key to cultivating this begin-

ner's mind. My Ruler knows that she cannot run her life effectively if there is clutter in each of the rooms. She knows that in order to travel well she must travel lightly. She must let go of everything she thinks she is in order to show up for the woman she was meant to be. Then, she summons the guides within her that will help her navigate the next part of her journey.

Last year, she found herself passing through old and broken terrain. As the plane from Bangkok approached the land of her former marital home, she heard the bugle sound and the war drums roll. The Revolutionary called forth her Warrior for battle, knowing just how hard the hours ahead could be. All of them had been preparing for years for the moment when she would be forced to once again set foot on the soil she had twice left in pain.

As the plane prepared to touch down, hundreds of women were gathering in her mind's eye. They began to bang their bare feet against the ground beneath them. The war dance within her began, and she sat up taller, slowing down her breath.

"It's ok now," my inner Ruler whispered, *"he can't hurt us anymore."*

Shortly before the divorce was granted, he had made her Wounded Orphan hand over her passport. It was a moment of surrender that passed without violence. She knew that if she didn't comply, the unpredictable would surely follow and she didn't want to go from the frying pan into the fire. He was on edge and in the midst of exceptional stress. She had seen what could happen when she didn't take that seriously.

Being her sponsor on her residence visa, he threatened that she couldn't leave the country unless the divorce was granted. He would keep her passport until that moment. It was then that her Ruler finally showed up for the biggest battle of her life. Nothing provokes her more than the loss of freedom. She silenced all the other parts of herself and engaged in the strategy of personal warfare.

The Ruler swallowed her Orphan's pride when the Sheikh told her that without him, she'd die an old and lonely woman. She couldn't risk one wrong move that could set them back in no-man's land. She needed her passport back. Not only wasn't it safe to stay any longer but she was needed elsewhere, in Gaza. Her mission was due to begin in three weeks' time and she couldn't afford to be without her travel documents.

As usual, work and safety was first and foremost on her mind. Her Ruler couldn't see another way out. It had all happened so suddenly and to call on reserves for support could have put his back up further. Although she was completely unprepared for this sudden end, she knew that the end had come. They couldn't keep driving each other to insanity any more. They had to let each other go.

But the price she paid for her sudden freedom was her voice, and the years that have since passed have been about reclaiming it. It makes me think of prisoners who are told that their release is up before their time. I remember Hassan and his sentence being shortened to make space for new prisoners coming through, how he couldn't quite believe it until it had happened.

When the plane from Bangkok hit the runway, several other passengers broke out in a loud cheer. While they were glad to be home, she heaved a sigh of relief that she was not. Her inner world was still safe. As the war dance within her died down and faded into the depths of her imagination, she stood up as the Ruler she had become and walked confidently off the plane. It may have only been a four-hour stopover but it was nonetheless a testimony to the person she had become and the fear that no longer ruled her life.

For several years, I couldn't bear the thought of going back to the country I had been forced to flee twice over. It was the place where I had lost two of my physical homes almost overnight. Each time, I had found myself back on mission, working first in prisons and then in refugee camps. Those intensely stressful years passed without much happiness due to unresolved fear and anger. Because of the fears I carried, I couldn't access my anger and so I stumbled forwards as best as I knew how, numbing the pain and burying myself in work.

When I learned to address and better manage my fears, I could feel the healthy outrage of all that happened in my life. I went through so much anger release, especially in my Warrior days at the gym and during Karate training. Because of this processing, I was able to accept my role in our marriage and how I had contributed to our pain. This allowed me to forgive both of us and because of that forgiveness, wipe the slate clean and take leadership of my life once more.

It is the evolved Ruler in all of us that makes such decisions. Like all the archetypes, she needs time and experience to really get to grips with her work. She makes the best decisions she can with what she knows, and takes action based on what she thinks is needed. In my experience, this is why it is essential to keep our inner Sage nearby to advise, and our Revolutionary at hand to make wise calls for action.

When we are no longer afraid of what has passed we regain the peace and power necessary to run our lives the way we want. That doesn't mean that the perfect lives are sat waiting for us to claim them, rather, that we have the tools necessary to bend with the wind and to get up more gracefully when we fall down.

Unlike many Hollywood films, the prize we receive as we spiral through healing is not always the happy ever after we may desire. Instead, it could be getting to live our lives on our terms and trusting that regardless of whether we get what we want, we will always get what we came here for.

On the inner journey, as we open up our minds and hearts, the reason for why we are here becomes clearer and sharper. We notice the moments on our trail where we can hang out and rest and the moments that require us to take action.

Stepping out into the Ruler's light when we've been exposed to so much darkness can feel pretty scary at first. It takes immense courage to stand up and reclaim your life, especially when it is not yet the kind of life you wish it to be. You may well have to assume leadership of a broken terrain before you can put the rest of your life in order.

Designing and then living the kind of lives we want for ourselves requires the clarity of our inner Rulers. They are the visionaries, the ones that are removed enough from the chaos to reflect strategically on why we are here. They send the Sage to talk to the Lover and the Revolutionary to the Jester. They ask for input from the Creator and the Innocent.

Where something feels amiss, they call on the Explorer to stake out the dilemma, keeping the Caregiver close at hand. Then, should battle be necessary, they signal the Revolutionary to call the Warrior forth, sending him to war. The Alchemist stands nearby, waiting for the moment to transform the inevitable suffering that will arise. If she has to, she will burn everything to

flames.

Our Rulers are pragmatic. They don't live with their heads in the clouds, rather with their feet firmly rooted on solid ground. They want their palaces and terrains to be happy places yet they are pragmatic and know that part of being human means to experience adversity in all its degrees. While they pick and choose their battles carefully, they do not retreat from war when it arrives or is the only option. They make the tough decisions and make sure our job gets done.

Becoming the Ruler of our own lives and destiny has everything to do with understanding our character, purpose, and vision for life, and nothing to do with age. For example, my meditation teacher, Sottoum, is 19 years old and he is one of the wisest people I have ever met. On the surface, he is very much a teenage boy set to enter his next decade. Although he works hard, he likes to have fun and sometimes, he wears his hair a little longer than others would like.

When people first meet him, they think he is a happy go lucky kid with the world at his feet and not a care in the world. Even a short exchange may not hint at what lies beneath the surface if he does not wish for them to see it, or if they are not yet open enough to seeing.

You see, unlike most 19 year olds in Dubai who live a fairly privileged life, he was raised as a street kid in Cambodia. At the age of 11, he travelled with his brother to the closest town, six hours away from his village, to find a better life. By accident - or was it fate? - they stumbled across a street children's charity, The Green Gecko Project, which reaches out to both the kids and their parents. The charity provided education and other support to the kids and tried to help get the parents into work so that the family unit could stay together.

For the next few years, he studied the ancient Cambodian martial art, bokator, alongside his regular studies. As part of the bokator training, the children were required to learn meditation. By the time he reached Dubai to work as an intern at a music centre, he was already meditating for up to 90 minutes each day. He had a daily practice that grounded him and helped him to sleep well.

"A good morning always starts with a good night, Claire," he would tell me,

“and meditation is the best way to a good night!”

What is special about this young man is that he lives and teaches from his own practice. Nearly twice his age, I see in him something that many of us spend our lives searching for. He has touched the essence of inner peace regardless of the many adversities that life has sent his way. He also understands what it feels like to have to sit in the fire and to take action when he may have wished someone would have saved him instead, or done the work for him. Yet such a way of thinking has never occurred to him.

What also impresses me about him is his ability to see through facades very quickly. In Dubai, he has seen a rich life and yet he isn't fooled by it. *“So many people seem unhappy, Claire,”* he once told me. *“They fight so hard at work in jobs they don't like to buy things they don't really need in order to feel better. Why don't they just work on feeling better from the start?”*

At 19, I remember having lofty ideas but I don't remember having thoughts as grounded as this. It has taken me a little longer and I've needed a little extra help to peel back the layers of illusion and get to what really matters. As coaches, this is what we do in conversation with our clients. We listen to what they say and, just as importantly, don't say. We notice their body language. We spot immediately if something sounds or looks or feels out of place.

For example, in certain social circles it is a prestige to work with the UN. No doubt, it is a difficult institution to get in to and that speaks to something. But if the UN agency you are working with isn't the kind of entity that represents your values in practice, you have three options: leave, change, or stay. These are the basic options we have in all aspects of our lives. Neither one is better than the other; it really depends on what you prioritise in life and what it is that you need and value most.

For example, a dedicated family man may value staying in a UN job that may not be his first choice simply as it offers his family a steady income and him, a small way to try to change the world. This may well be the best choice for him as right now in his life, the lesson of compromise is needed. Later, it may be possible to shift this but for now, he must stay present. Another person may need to grow in another way by attempting to change by negotiating a change in duties. And yet another person may need to leave because

her destiny lies elsewhere.

The last person was of course me. I've been fortunate to work with some of the world's best known humanitarian organisations and through them, try to make a difference in the outer world. It's easy to divide my “career” in two. The first half was about prisons and the Red Cross/Crescent; the second half was about communications and the United Nations (UN).

It's not that one half was better than the other; it's that the shift in direction came as I first left my marital home. After getting the short-term consulting contract, I was offered three jobs; to manage Middle Eastern communications from Tunisia for a Red Cross entity, to communicate in Sudan for another Red Cross entity, and to manage prison leadership trainings in Jerusalem for the UN.

I remember taking long walks with my father around a nearby park, discussing which option to choose. A former colleague had made it clear that the Red Cross system thinks with its heart while the UN system, with its mind. My teenage years came flooding back to me. It was my Arabic calligraphy teacher in Egypt who had first introduced me to the Red Cross/Red Crescent. My first cooking book as a child was from UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, and my first book in French was on the very complicated UN system.

In those days, I hadn't heard of coaching and it was before I entered therapy. My self-awareness was so limited. Inwardly, I was feeling stressed about the marital separation and confused about my love for the soldier who would never come home. As a result, it was so hard to make a different choice. Prisons and Palestine were the story I knew best. I had never travelled to Tunisia or Sudan and in my uncertain emotional state I wasn't willing to take a new risk.

And so, I left my Revolutionary's voice and Caregiver's heart behind and joined the UN. Five long years followed as I encountered another way of “doing aid.” I entered the world of drugs, crime, policies, conventions, institutional capacity building, partnerships, and government. I had to learn a new way of working and my inner world struggled to adapt.

I was effective in my work, outstanding at times, but inwardly, I missed being on the front lines and professionally, I was unfulfilled. I missed the he-

art to heart contact with people that systems like the Red Cross allow for. But everything really does happen for a reason. While I thought I was taking the easier and more familiar route, instead, I was entering another outer world where I would be tested again and again. This testing would come to polish my heart, not destroy it.

Because of the shift in my outer world, my inner world lessons changed. I came to understand the link between political action at the level of the heart and community to the greater actions of institutions and governments. Those were the years in which my social and political awareness, not to mention my ability to communicate, matured. I may not have been having the revolutionary impact I sought but I did come to understand people and power.

I share this story to illustrate how the choices we make in our outer worlds can affect our inner growth and vice versa. I also share it to highlight how one choice made in the midst of suffering can come to define the years that follow. For once I was in this new system, it became easier to move around.

In truth, what prompted me to leave the UN and set up my coaching business had nothing to do with the institution itself or the wider humanitarian systems. Rather, it was a growing sense of awareness that I needed to return to the heart connections that my early working years had been made of. But I was not to return as if the following years had not passed. No, I needed to return with the clarity and understanding of humanity that I had since gained.

Because of this clarity, it was easier to leave. I knew the time had come to embrace the fact that I was needed elsewhere. From a rational perspective, that wasn't such an impressive starting point on my new business plan. I was unable to predict if the move to set up my coaching business would ever be successful by society's standards. You see I'm not a smart businesswoman. I'm a humanitarian who believes that change happens one person at a time and that is hardly a profit-making venture.

As a result, I've had to redefine what success really means to me. I can't base my impact on numbers; I can only measure it by the feeling I get in my heart. Is this work bringing me joy? Is it making a difference to someone's inner world? Is what I'm doing in alignment with my soul?

These are really tough questions to ask when you've been used to the formal system of checks, balances, appraisals, letters, grades, and promotions. But the older I get, the more necessary it becomes to get to the heart of what really matters in life and that to me is Love because Love in its greatest sense is really the only remedy for War.

What all this means is that only we can set the standards for our lives. Only we can determine what is good enough in each moment and phase of our journey. We cannot keep measuring ourselves by benchmarks set in place by others who do not know us like we know ourselves. The Ruler understands that he must set his own standards and criteria for living. It isn't the right or role of others to do that for him.

Sometimes, setting those standards can feel pretty tough. Adjusting those standards when the road gets bumpy is even tougher, as Agam found out when he faced his biggest adversity. We met virtually when he started following my first blog on traumatic flashbacks. As a martial artist himself, he found the link I made between trauma and martial arts as a recovery tool interesting. Although I was speaking more of war, and he of a brain injury, we managed to cross neuropaths and connect.

He told me about the moment when his carefully planned road got a little bumpier. *"Everyone has their own challenges; mine was two brain surgeries in 2007. The brain surgery came after a sustained injury, which led to seizures. The first surgery was invasive to install circuits and check activity in my brain for 28 days. That confirmed the culprit, a lesion in the left side of my head, which was removed in the second surgery, using a technique called a temporal lobectomy. The lesion unfortunately was in the left side of the brain, which was partly responsible for language, motor, vision, number crunching etcetera."*

I asked him who he was before the injury and who he has since become.

"Before the surgery, I was a journalist with a strong vocabulary and a strong grasp of world affairs and multiple languages. I was able to multiply three-digit numbers without referencing the calculator (that was a special talent). I was a conversationalist with a sense of humour; I didn't have to think twice before saying anything. But once the seizures came on, my confidence was shaken. I had periods of blank outs, was forgetting words. My writing suffered, which is unacceptable being a full-time journalist. My future was at stake. It was time to take action, so I went to the doctors and surgery was performed."

“After surgery,” he told me, “I lost a good chunk of my vocabulary. My speech came down to basic words, I couldn’t do the mental math and multiplications the way I was able to. My short-term memory suffered as I couldn’t remember things that were said just a few minutes ago. That was because a part of my brain that handled a lot of that was gone, and also, connections from other parts of the brain that led to that particular part were broken. As my doctor explained, I was reduced to being a child, and I’d have to relearn everything I’d lost.”

Agam chose to rise to his adversity but that doesn’t mean it has been an easy ride. *“So I started to relearn everything, like I was back in school. The progress was slow; I didn’t realise just how much I lost after the surgery. Frustration crept in, I was snapping at my friends and family members, my conversations were mostly full of brain surgery this, brain surgery that. I started falling back at work, and one day my boss wrote to me saying “stop using your brain surgery as a crutch.”*

“My friend, a psychologist, asked me to visit a psychologist, and I got angry at her. In India, visiting a psychologist is frowned upon; it’s a sign that a person is crazy. And I really thought that people perceived me as crazy because something’s wrong with my brain and to some point that’s true. Telling a person “I’ve had a brain surgery” sends the wrong message, and many people misconstrued brain surgery as something being wrong.”

Agam has also learned to view his adversity through different eyes and eventually, change arrived.

“My hand-eye coordination and balance with the left hand and left leg remain lost until this day, but I’m now a better person for all the struggles I went through. I did see a psychologist, and was told that I could drown myself in self-pity, or take life by the horns and solve the issues I face, in effect, taking charge of my own destiny. Change didn’t happen immediately, frustration still crept into a lot of what I did, but I maintained a positive mindset and kept plugging at it. Slowly, results were showing. The writing got better; I learned new words and my speech got smoother. My motor remains in limbo, but I do physical training with the hope to resolve the issue one day.”

I asked him what has been the single most important lesson he’s learned from this massive setback. In his typically humorous way, he responds with both wisdom and honesty.

“My hair’s gotten grey in stressing and obsessing over recovery, but adversity taught me to be realistic and honest with myself. I’m extremely self-critical in my own writing, which drives my bosses nuts. But I have to realise my weaknesses and work within my co-

mpetencies. I can be ambitious, but I’m still scared that something may go wrong. It’s a slow recovery process and I learn of new weaknesses every day, so I’d rather not work within that context of being too bombastic.

He recognises that he has many resources to aid his recovery, which many people don’t have. While volunteering for special-needs people, he’s seen a common theme with people who face adversity; many are always willing to adapt and step up that extra notch.

What Agam finds more important is the need for more empathy. When people find out that he can be forgetful, they assume it’s just like their forgetfulness and that they’ve been in his shoes. To him, they don’t know what it’s like. While he has adapted as best as he can, he feels sad when people dismiss his issue as being ordinary.

As the interview draws to a close, I remember Christina and her invisible rheumatoid arthritis. I know that before I began to heal, I often assumed that I knew the answers for others or that I could understand what they were going through. As I developed more self-awareness, I accepted that we can never truly understand what it’s like to walk in another person’s shoes, even if we may try to follow their footsteps. We can only try to listen and understand what we can.

The Ruler in me tries hard to be a benevolent and humble one. I disregard popular notions of standards, success, and even mental health. I peel back the layers in whatever I do to ask what is really happening and what is really true. I don’t shy away from that truth; rather, I stand up and look it squarely in the eye.

On the journey to heal from war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity, we will all have to find our own paths and make choices about which direction we will go and with whom we will travel. At times, those we want to travel with may turn away from us to follow a path that we cannot see and will never cross paths with. We must find the strength and wisdom within us to let them go while staying in touch with the impact that act of letting go is having on us.

The journey is also one that spirals in and out and the Ruler recognises this. She takes counsel from both her Sage and Revolutionary before putting her palace or garden in order. She trusts each of them to delegate as neces-

necessary and relies on them equally to make a difference in the world. She also takes note of lessons learned so that she can continue to improve her strategy for living.

My lessons learned from love and war, and all their associations, have been to fight when needed to protect my terrain, to surrender my ego again and again, to stand up and speak my truth without the fear that I will be rejected for it, and to sit, sit, and sit in the fire of adversity like a pot in a kiln, only getting stronger with each flame.

Patience has been key to my survival and transformation. There was a time when, sat on my marital bed, looking out over the bay, I thought I'd lost my identity. Before that, I was expecting to lose my life. The loss of everything I thought I loved and knew, including my home and belongings, was to become the fuel that set my world alight and the man who never returned home to me from war, the catalyst for birthing my True Self.

I put my writing notes to one side. It's almost midnight and it's time for me to turn in for the night but first, I notice a quote from one of my interviewees. She's a young woman who has already seen the darker side of life. In her early 20s, she reminds me of my younger self; smart, driven, bright, idealistic, and committed to justice. It's a powerful combination and a part of me worries what will become of her. I mentor her from time to time, wishing that someone had been able to do the same for me.

Like my meditation teacher, she is wise beyond her years. She understands already that no matter what question she asks, I will always give an answer and then expect her to find her own way. She knows that learning from me is a two-way process. Just because I seem further along the path than she is, it doesn't mean I can't learn something from her. It's critical that she knows her voice is worth sharing. It's imperative that nobody ever takes it away.

I asked her to share some words of wisdom about what she has learned and wishes to share, and this is what she said.

"Never let anything move your roots from the ground. Explore the universe within you to find strength and comfort with your solitude. We're only here on this earth for a limited time. Don't drown in it, as it will not linger with you for a lifetime. Seek what you love and dive into it."

I happily stand to one side as she speaks. I ask that you listen to her wisdom and then, go on to find, tell, and live your own.

Your Reflections

Group Discussion Question: Which parts of this chapter stand out most for you and why?

Solo Writing Challenge: How would you describe your Ruler's Palace in 2,000 words or less?

Partner Witnessing Exercise (30 minutes): In a safe and trusted setting, ask someone about their Ruler's Palace. Ideally, this will be a member of your book club or writing circle, or someone who has read this chapter. The person must be willing to share their experience. Set the timer for 10 minutes and allow him/her to speak freely, giving time for both expression and if necessary, silence. Resist any urges to comment; listen with respect and practice holding the space their truth to emerge. At the end, thank them for sharing their story. If it feels right, and you both agree, share briefly what it was like for you to bear witness. What did their story provoke or prompt in you? Then, exchange roles.

Home

“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.”

Nelson Mandela

“First know yourself, and then know others.””

Gichin Funakoshi

Afterword

“Now, ladies, I want you to bend your knees, and jump!”

Weeeek! My horizontal body zooms like a flying pencil to the other end of the machine and then, gracefully, I recoil back into a plié. We’re flat on our backs, practicing ballet moves while lying down, something I could probably never do standing up.

My weekly Pilates reformer classes are meant to give me extra muscle conditioning to support my karate training. While I get that, it’s really the machines that I come for. I love fiddling with the springs, straps and boxes in between the exercises. Being busy with mundane tasks helps me to stay present.

There’s another reason why I come here; it’s to continue to make peace with my past. Next door to the studio lies the land on which I was raised. The house in which I spent most of my years growing up has long gone. Years after being torn down, it still looks like deserted building site.

This is the home in which I lived when my early experiences of adversity happened, like the horse riding accident and the teenage rape. It is the home in which my childhood friend I unconsciously woke the dead. But these days, that’s not what I come back to remember.

You see, the house was also home to so many happy memories. Trauma and adversity made those years easy to forget and it has taken so much inner mine clearing to bring those positive years back.

My love for art, Arabic calligraphy, music, Karate, and writing practices

were born in that house. I had many happy birthday parties, Christmas celebrations, family occasions, and hours when I simply did nothing. My childhood dogs who both died while I was away were raised there too.

War makes it easy to forget the good things in life. The bigger our wars are, the harder it can be to remember what happened before. But really, it isn’t about size; rather, it’s about the personal circumstances that all of us face and those are beyond compare.

After class is over, I pick up a salad from the Japanese restaurant downstairs and head to the beach. It’s late and the sea is dark. I sit down in the cool sand and eat my dinner out in the open air. I live for moments like these and I try to make sure they happen every single day.

Living beyond war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity is ultimately a choice. Once the worst of our ordeals is over, it’s up to us to decide how we’re going to move on and live our lives. Nobody can do that for us and even if they tried, they could never do it half as well.

But at some point along our way, we will need a little support. Perhaps it will take a long time to recognise, or maybe we’ll have to learn to ask for it. Quite possibly at times, we may even need to pay for it to ensure we get the quality of support we need.

When I came to write this book for the third and final time, I realised that I could not write it without the voices of some of the many inspiring people I have met along my way. My story would always be incomplete without reflecting theirs. Thankfully, all of them were gracious enough to accept my request for them to be interviewed.

I’ve always dreamed of writing a book, ever since I was a young girl. My first attempt at 7 years old was a murder mystery. I called it “The Man with the Briefcase.” Goodness knows why, I’m sure a child psychologist would have a field day analysing that and it certainly raised my teacher’s eyebrow! Since then, I have written so many words on war, violence, conflict, and crime but this was always in a professional capacity.

About three years ago, I decided to change this and start my first blog. Flow & Restore was born in the winter of 2012/13 and ran for almost two years. It captured post-traumatic flashbacks and was later renamed and re-launched as Heal+Restore. Those two blogs gave me a safe and fertile space

in which to explore my voice.

When I came to write this book, I naively assumed that I could draw on many of their ideas and content. This is precisely why my first two drafts failed. I saw that something new had to be born. It was alive and kicking inside of me but I could not see the whole picture until the work was done. I could only trust I knew the way and catch one thread of insight at a time, weaving them into the book you have just read.

It was an unorthodox way to write a book. I didn't even know my chapters until two months into the writing process, let alone a bigger plan. Sometimes people asked me outright why I would write such a book without a publishing deal in hand. I could never find the right words to tell them that it simply wasn't the kind of book that I could pitch to a buyer. How can you sell a book idea when you don't know what it's about until after it has been written?

Inwardly, so many fears and judgments arose on how I was going about this. What if people don't get what I have to say? What if in drawing on my life experiences and disregarding mainstream methods and research I sound unprofessional?

What if I can't express myself eloquently enough because of remembering my former pain? What if I discredit my professional humanitarian reputation of over twelve years by talking about spirituality? What if I spend all this time writing it and nobody reads it? What if I terrify my coaching clients and my new business goes bust before it's had a chance to grow because people are uncomfortable by what I have to say?

I consciously listened to each and every one of those fears and judgments and then lovingly, put them to one side. I had to do this repeatedly, not just once, as my Inner Critic stood close by, ready to limit me with the good intention of keeping me safe, protected, and sure.

The truth was, I didn't know what would happen. I could be writing one of the best or worst books ever written and going about it in all the right or wrong ways but I would honestly never know until after the deed was done. And even then, it depended on how I chose to interpret the outcome.

Deep down, I knew that there was no other way in which I could write this book; it had to be an intuitive process without a clear roadmap as that's

simply how our inner roadmaps work. There is no magic formula. I also knew that the time had come for this book to be born. There was a sense of certainty that now was my time to tell the truth and now was the time to be seen more widely.

All of this meant showing the reader exactly what it means to undertake an inner enquiry to integrate the many parts and fragments of ourselves that can become disconnected as a result of war, violence, conflict, stress, trauma, and adversity. For example, I couldn't leave you with a stream of unexplained flashbacks and expect you to find your way; I had to give you some content and guidance so that you didn't get completely lost as I moved around in time and space.

At the same time, I also had to hold back from turning this book into a piece of entertainment or political questioning that would draw us back into global "right" vs "wrong" debates and stop us from tending to our inner world. As a former human rights campaigner and someone who has advised on the political aspects of communications, I'm well versed in human rights and politics. I could have easily written this book from that perspective but this wasn't the point.

The point was to prompt you to turn inwards so that you could better make sense of your life's purpose and the events happening around you. The outer world and its solutions can look very different when seen from an inner world perspective. There, in the depths of who we really are, far beyond the egos that keep us safe, we often gain a more human perspective. That transforms the next step we take and a series of such steps hold the potential to change a small part of our world for the better.

At the very least, living from the inside out gives us a wider perspective on our everyday life. We come to understand that what is happening all around us is not always what it seems. We start to question if life as we know it is the only life there is. Such questioning leads to possibility and possibility can make way for positive and lasting social change.

No matter how many to-do lists or plans we make to keep ourselves "safe", life will always have a bigger plan at work. Some days, we'll get lucky and everything will go as we expect. Other days, trials will continue to come our way. Sometimes big, sometimes small. Occasionally, they will devastate

everything we have built and force us to rebuild once more.

No matter what happens in our lives, or how many adversities we face, the secret to being “successful” lies in being willing and ready to give up who we think we are in order to be the person we can become. That means evolving through and beyond the stories we tell ourselves, no matter how illuminating or entertaining they may become.

Turn inwards.

Transform your pain.

Mine your wisdom.

Live your truth.

This is what it really means to make the journey “beyond”; to what destination, you will never know until you’re actually there.

Gratitude

In life, we never achieve anything alone and this book is no exception. Without my family’s support, it would never have seen the light of day. I have the kind of parents and sisters who believe wholeheartedly in everything I do and for that I will be forever grateful. Mom, Dad, Victoria and Jane, your love and ability to accept and support my life’s work makes it possible to write and do what I do.

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8 Ways to Heal & Move On

A final note for those of you who have been patiently waiting since the start of the book for me to share the practical life skills that have helped me, the travellers I interviewed for this book and many of my coaching clients heal and live a life "beyond".

No doubt you've gathered ideas of your own along the way and I want to encourage you to stay with what works for YOU, not to blindly adopt what has worked for me. So please take or leave these ideas as your inner self deems fit.

1. Practice the art of thinking clearly

First, you may need to study how the mind and emotions work. Once you understand that your thoughts and emotions are always changing, you'll notice how many stories you can tell and retell about the same incident. When you release any attachment to what was or what could be, you return to the present moment. There, clear thinking returns and from that vantage point, possibility ensues.

Tried & Tested

- Psychotherapy can help you to address unresolved emotions. It's important to find a therapist who can help you tackle your needs. Feeling comfortable and safe in their presence and having the financial means to invest in what may be a long process is essential. Some of you may only need a few sessions but others experiencing significant emotional pain or numbing (like myself) may benefit from a much longer stretch. Make sure your therapist is licensed to practice in your area.

- MMS Coaching* can help you to untangle your thoughts so you can tap into your own inner knowing and life compass. Other styles of coaching

work well too. For example, I tried Mindfulness Coaching with a clinical psychologist which was interesting as it helped me uncover an unhelpful thought pattern that was present each morning and therefore affecting my days.

- Meditation can help you to still your mind long enough to find out what is and isn't real. Sitting quietly for 5 minutes a day is a great start to building a regular practice. If you feel drawn to a group practice, there are plenty of meditation teachers out there. I combine my group meditation practice with spirituality and have practiced with both Tibetan Buddhist, Burmese Vipassana trained and Sufi teachers.

- You may also want to carry forwards from your meditation practice a mindful approach to everyday living. Any books on this by the Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who has dedicated his life to non-violence, is an excellent resource to start with. A simple way to start with mindfulness is to consistently draw your mind back to the present moment. Your habitual thoughts will lead you astray if you follow them. If you stay in the present moment, this is where insightful thoughts can more easily find you and hold the potential to better your everyday life.

- Slowing down and doing less each day can help you to unclutter your mind and focus on what is most important. This is particularly important for Type A (aka very driven) personalities experiencing traumatic aftermath or chronic stress (like myself). As trauma and stress can leave their mark, you may find it takes several years to recover and that your resilience to stress is lowered during this time. This can happen even if you're doing everything "right" as your system just needs time to reset itself. Going slow and doing less can help you to avoid overwhelm. It also encourages you to focus on what matters most and this can help you to improve your overall quality of life.

- De-cluttering your home environment and (if relevant) office space can release plenty of toxic energy. I love Marie Kondo's book, *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying up*. My family and loved ones tease me as I often re-arrange the furniture in my home and even theirs' if I happen to be

staying more than a few days. I've also been known to move hotel room furniture around if the energy doesn't feel right and once had a passion for the Bagua layout of rooms in Feng Shui philosophy. I also prefer little furniture and tend to hold onto pieces that have a special meaning to me. This brings me more comfort than having a perfectly styled home or work space.

- Silence. It is my bedrock for sanity. An hour or so may be enough to help you distress but personally I go through phases when I need long stretches of silence. For example, 9pm to 9am or an entire 1-2 weeks where I say very little and prioritize natural sounds. Silence (or the absence of artificial noise and talking) helps my body readjust to its natural frequency, particularly after stressful periods. I liken it to a glass of muddy water, where the mud symbolizes my thoughts. If I leave it as it is, without interfering, the mud settles and I can see clearly. It's still there at the bottom and I may or may not need to tackle that. From a place of clearness I'll be better able to see what kind of a response is needed.

- Yoga has been an essential part of my healing process, as you've read. This is because it emphasizes the breath, the cornerstone of the nervous system which is so easily messed up by stress and trauma. Perhaps the most useful takeaway I can offer is the wise words of Pattabhi Jois, who founded Ashtanga Yoga. I first trained as a teacher in this style with Valerie Jeremijenko. Jois once said, "Do your practice and all is coming." It took several years of practice, training and teaching to understand what he really meant by this. I now liken it to one of the principles of the Naqshbandi Sufi path, "nazar bar qadam", which means to keep your eyes turned down (or inwards). We may need to go window-shopping for a while, as my current Sufi meditation teacher likes to joke, but eventually it helps to select our practice and just do it (no Nike pun intended!). With Yoga, find a style or teacher that works for you and do your practice – be that daily or infrequently – and all will be coming.

2. Eliminate any addictions

If a stressful lifestyle or trauma has made you turn to pills, drugs, alcohol, sugar, caffeine and other stimulants in order to function, be aware that they will have a detrimental effect on your health, work, wellbeing and relationships in the long run. Take back your power by removing any dependencies that do not serve you. If you need professional help to kick your habits, invest what you can. You'll also find the first and other life skills a lot easier to practice.

Tried & Tested

- A specially trained therapist or clinical social worker who focuses on addiction recovery is one of the better routes to choose if you're going through a significant substance addiction such as drugs or alcohol. They will be able to recommend individual and group counselling approaches that best fit your needs. I personally haven't experienced such substance addiction but have seen friends benefit from this approach.

- Health Coaching** is a great way to find out about how food and lifestyle are driving your addictions to substances such as coffee, sugar, and specific foods that are unhealthy to your personal constitution. A health coach will emphasise biodiversity, which means that each of us has a different body and life and therefore one size does not fit all. They will encourage you to explore ways to beat your addiction by emphasizing healthier food alternatives and lifestyle practices for a happier and healthier life.

- Most of the clear thinking approaches can be of immense support to overcoming addictions (see 1)

3. Spend time in nature & spiritual places

Fresh air and natural scenery boost circulation and creativity. The more we spend time in nature, the more we come to appreciate its healing frequencies. Forests, mountains, lakes, beaches, and boundless green fields void of advertising, artificial lighting and man made sounds can still the mind and heart back to their natural states. Much healing can also happen in spiritual places. The key to making this last is to capture some of that nature within and take it back home.

Below are some of my favourite places. No doubt you will have plenty of your own. If travel is not an option right now, a garden, a park, a local beach, a bunch of flowers or a few potted plants on a balcony can do wonders. Having a sacred space in your home such as a prayer room or altar, depending on your spiritual orientation, can also provide much comfort, especially during difficult times.

Tried & Tested

- Hatta, United Arab Emirates
- Cheshire, United Kingdom
- Tulum, Mexico
- Koh Samui, Thailand
- Surrey, United Kingdom
- Boulder, United States
- Newgrange, Ireland
- Konya, Turkey (Rumi's mausoleum)
- Esfahan, Iran
- Alexandria, Egypt
- Jerusalem, Palestine/Israel

4. *Get a good night's sleep*

If you're regularly getting less than 7 hours of sleep a night, be aware that over time, your mind and body may feel worse for wear. Your sleep may be interrupted by stimulants, worrying, flashbacks and physiological imbalances. If this is the case, it may not help to tackle sleep head on. It isn't as simple as going to bed at a certain hour although it may help to reduce any evening screen time such as TV, social media, email, and other computer work.

For those of us who have been overly stressed or traumatised, we often need a significant lifestyle shift which is why the "tried & tested" does not include quick fixes. First, we need to be safe (I say this for those who are living in active war zones – it's not easy to get a good night's sleep there although we can adapt). Then, we need to consciously look at how we're living our days and see which habits we may need to change.

Tried & Tested

- Most of the approaches mentioned in the other 7 ways to heal will support you in getting a good night's sleep.

- You can also try downloading any worries or thoughts in a nighttime journal. I like to balance this out with a list of things that I'm grateful for or personal efforts from my day that I'd like to acknowledge. These can be big or small and they're mostly small things that make a big difference to my overall health and happiness. I learned the powerful effects of daily journaling from my women's yoga and spiritual practice teacher, Sara Avant Stover, and my coach trainer, Dr Cherie Carter Scott.

- Engage in a spiritual practice that is meaningful to you. I tend to devote the hour before sleeping to reading a few pages of wisdom from my spiritual path.

- Develop an evening ritual that helps you de-stress. If you have children or other family members to take care of, work out some time to give yourself space to unwind. Even a 5 minute prayer or breathing practice done at the same time each night can remind your system it's time to wind down. If you have the luxury of more time and resources, you could try a hot bath or a restorative yoga sequence. I recommend Judith Hanson Lasater's work, with whom I trained, and Bobbie Clennell. Both are Iyengar yoga teachers and Judith is also a Physical Therapist.

- Unless you have to be on call for work or you are expecting an emergency call/email/text, consider keeping your phone and other digital devices out of reach. If you are going to read close to bedtime, choose an actual book with pages you can feel as the screen of an iPad, tablet or Kindle can stimulate your nervous system.

- Consider using herbs and aromatherapy to help you wind down. I recommend chamomile tea and any of the following essential oils: lavender, ylang ylang, marjoram, geranium. I also burn sandalwood and frankincense incense sticks for deep relaxation and camphor for clearing the air.

5. *Find meaningful work*

When we don't engage in work that means something to us, we may find ourselves going through the motions each day. At worst, we may dread going to work and that feeling can affect the rest of our daily lives, including our health and ability to set and achieve positive goals. Your work may sound meaningful to others but if it isn't or no longer is to you, don't be afraid to question what else. It's very possible to improve your life by simply changing your work.

Tried & Tested

- Life Coaching*** can help you to figure out where you are profession-

ally, where you have been, and where you would like to go next. Along with mentoring****, it was an important step for me in transitioning beyond humanitarian fieldwork and combining my desire to make a difference in the world with some of my other skills.

- Ask friends and people you know who are doing work they love (paid or unpaid) how they got into it. Don't be afraid to ask questions!

- If you're still stuck, consider doing a Myers Briggs test to find out your overall personality type and some of the typical professions for your. You'll find the link to this in the Resources section. Also keep in mind that you're much more richer and deeper than a personality test so please use this as either inspiration or affirmation of a track you already considering or are on.

6. Eat nutrient dense foods

No one body is the same and no one eating method works for everyone. Having said that, we all need to eat quality protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins and minerals each day. Educate yourself if you haven't already about the healing properties of nourishing food but keep your research simple. Do not overwhelm yourself unless nutrition is a clear passion. Experiment with eating different kinds of food combinations, taking note of the physical, emotional, and psychological effect of each. Then select the way that works best for you for optimal health.

Tried & Tested

- Online resources. There are so many out there so please be selective and use your common sense!

- Nutrition books. Again, there are plenty of resources here. If you're starting out, focus on those that explain the basics of nutrition and what a human being needs to stay alive. From there you can explore whatever inter-

ests you and your lifestyle.

- I have explored Ayurvedic approaches to food as well as the Paleo and Eat Clean approaches that are so common among fitness enthusiasts and pros. I now prefer to stick to the basics, which I consider to be: Balance carbs-proteins-fats in every meal; Eat dark green and colourful vegetables with each meal; Prioritize locally produced and then organic foods; Avoid anything processed, in a box or tin; Minimise added sugar intake; Avoid caffeine and other stimulants; Practice portion control; Eat 2 full meals and 2 smaller meals daily – I exercise almost daily so find this works for me; Take appropriate supplements with advice; Don't forget to hydrate with water!

- If any of this is too complicated, or you simply want to speed up time, consider working with a health coach who can help you navigate the sea of nutrition and healing.

7. Exercise smartly

The amount of exercise we each need on a daily basis will also differ. A healthy exercise regime will increase the likelihood of a positive and clear mindset. It will help you to sleep better and provide you with more energy to do the work you love. Ideally, you want to move daily for set amounts of time in ways that leave you feeling like you've pushed yourself a little but not so much that you need days to recover.

Tried & Tested

- Investing in 1:1 time on a weekly basis with a personal trainer was essential to my healing process. It was just as expensive as therapy and I did this for 10 whole months. While it didn't magically transform my body it did transform my relationship to my body. Through fitness I understood just how much body memory I was carrying and how what I had personally experienced and witnessed through the testimonies of others was weighing

me down. The 1:1 approach gave me a safe space in which to test my power and strength, two things that trauma had knocked out of me. I also learned plenty of fitness theory and how to exercise safely.

- Karate has been an integral part of my healing process. This is mostly because it was a practice I took up as a child and therefore one that my body remembers and heart relates to with comfort and fondness. I have plenty of good childhood memories from karate training and am grateful now as an adult that I can still practice. Karate is a tough martial art to take on but it also depends on the teacher you train with and their particular method. I train in Shotokan style and draw much inspiration from the teachings of its philosophical founder, Gichin Funakoshi.

- Other martial arts I have tried out over the years include aikido, ninjutsu, muay thai, muay boran, kendo, kickboxing and tai chi. Some are softer practices than others and I have benefited from them all. If martial arts attract you, do a little window shopping and find a teacher and style you like. If you used to practice martial arts as a kid but like myself stopped due to work or other commitments, really consider returning if it was a practice that once brought you joy.

- Investing in a home gym over other furniture was one of the best decisions I made. At the time I was driving up to 4.5 hours a day for work and karate training and didn't have time or extra energy to go to the gym. I also didn't feel comfortable in a gym as due to my anxiety, I was often distracted by noises and what other people were doing. I now have an Olympic barbell set, hand weights, bench press, bar to hang from, Bosu ball, Pilates ball, and plenty of yoga props like blocks, mats, bolsters, blankets, straps and eye bags. All my fitness, yoga and martial arts training comes out full force at home and it's a delight now to train myself each day!

8. Focus on positive experiences & connections

Our environments and the people we know are in many ways mirrors of the person we are inside. We may not always be able to control our environments and those we meet but we can limit our exposure to situations and people who drain us of our energy. It's ok for things and people to be negative for a short while. We all go through rough patches. But if something or someone is sucking the life out of you, and it goes on for too long, find a way to exit and move on.

- Interestingly, this was the hardest practice for me to learn. It took a long time to realise and then accept that there were negative people in my life. As you learned, my former marriage didn't bring out the best in me and neither did some of my other friendships. It isn't easy to say goodbye to people but change is an inevitable part of life. To grow, sometimes we need to move on and meet new people who better reflect where we have reached on our life's journey.

- Sometimes, we need to exit a job or situation that is causing us immense stress. If our inner wisdom says, "leave", then it's really time to go. This can apply to getting divorced, quitting a job, moving countries, or travelling. If you're deeply unhappy and you've learned to trust your inner voice and the messages it brings, consider too that leaving may bring you a more positive life in the long run. Perhaps not immediately but one day on the horizon. If you're confused, go back to the practices in clear thinking (1) to help you unravel and figure out what's really going on. Whatever you do, don't keep flogging a dead horse if your situation has gone beyond its sell-by date. You will only cause yourself and other people more pain.

- Another hard practice I learned was how to approach life with a positive spirit. When we've been through so much, negativity can become a default without us realising it. It took a while for me to understand that a positive mindset is not something I can trick myself into or enforce as a way of being. It isn't a question of adopting positive affirmations or even positive psychology.

• For me, being and staying positive goes back to clear thinking. Much of what I have learned here has been inspired by personal experience and the philosophy of Garrett Kramer, a performance coach and author of the book, Stillpower.

**MMS Coaching – I trained as an MMS Coach with Dr Cherie Carter Scott and the MMS Institute Worldwide (accredited by the International Coach Federation). I recommend this coaching approach for clear thinking as it is the purest approach to coaching I have come across. It encourages the client to look inwards for answers rather than imposing any external frameworks. MMS coaches are based across the world. You can find out more at www.themmsinstitute.com*

***Health Coaching – I trained as a Health Coach with the Institute for Integrative Nutrition. I recommend working with a health coach if you have food or substance related addictions that are compromising your overall health and you would like personalized health information and suggestions to help you get back on track. Make sure to find a health coach who is specialized in your area as health is such a vast topic. You can find out more at www.integrativenutrition.com*

****Life Coaching – There are plenty of life coaches out there. I recommend those trained with institutions accredited by the International Coach Federation as there is a code of ethics to which all of their coaches must adhere. Having said that, there are plenty of good life coaches trained via other systems and bodies. Use your intuition and common sense to figure out if a particular coach is right for you. Credentials don't always mean it's a good fit.*

*****Mentoring – Mentors can be role models who are further along a path you are on or looking to take on. They should be directly accessible to you (in person, by phone or virtually) and willing to invest time guiding you on your path. It's worth paying experienced mentors for their time and expertise as often, they have invested the same in their growth. But there are also circumstances where there is no financial exchange. Again, trust your instincts and common sense and keep in mind that mentoring is not a regulated profession.*

Resources

Websites

Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) www.capt.org

Pearson-Marr Archetype Indicator (PMAI) www.capt.org

Branding Archetype Quiz www.cerriesmooney.com/how-to-complete-the-test/

Christina: Enrich Your Life www.enrichyourlife.me

Steve: Macmillan Cancer Support: The Source source.macmillan.org.uk

Amy: Kick at the Darkness (documentary) www.amybrathwaite.com/kick-at-the-darkness/

Amber: One Moment at a Time www.omatlife.com

Nuran: The Healthy Nomad www.thehealthynomad.org

Sottoum: The Green Gecko Project www.greengeckoproject.org

Papers

Maslow, Abraham, “A Theory of Human Motivation” (1943)

Papadopolous, Renee, “A Psychosocial Framework for Refugees” (2011)

Books

Bayda, Ezra, *Zen Heart*

Carter-Scott, Cherie, PhD, *If Life is a Game, These Are the Rules*

Carter-Scott, Cherie, PhD, *Negabolics*

Clennell, Bobbie, *The Woman's Yoga Book*

Forrest, Ana, *Fierce Medicine*
Gettel, Kendra, *The Traps of Nonviolent Communications*
Hannegan, Eileen, R, *Know Your Truth, Speak Your Truth, Live Your Truth*
Khan, Pir Vilayat, *Awakening*
Kondo, Marie, *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*
Kramer, Garrett, *Stillpower*
Lastater, Judith Hanson, *Relax & Renew: Yoga for Stressful Times*
Markova, Dawna, *I Will Not Die An Unlived Life*
O'Sullivan, Nathalie and Graydon, Nicola, *The Ancestral Continuum*
Palmer, Parker, *A Hidden Wholeness*
Sinetar, Marsha, *Ordinary People as Monks & Mystics*
Steinam, Gloria, *Revolution from Within: A Book on Self-Esteem*
Stover, Sara Avant, *Way of the Happy Woman*
Strozzi-Heckler, Richard, *Leadership Dojo*
Tweedie, Irina, *Daughter of Fire*
Tzu, Lao, *Tao Te Ching*
Vaughan-Lee, Llewellyn, *Love is a Fire*
Weiss, Brian, *Many Lives, Many Masters*

About Claire



Claire Higgins is a Performance, Mindset & Motivation Coach, Trainer and Consultant. She is a certified Professional Coach (ACC) and Health Coach, and has spent 13 years working with the world's largest humanitarian organisations in areas of conflict and war. She is also the author of Wild Zen, a black belt Martial Artist, former Yoga teacher and fitness enthusiast. She loves nature, travel, writing and all things fresh and Zen!

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*"Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull
of what you really love. It will not lead you astray."*

- Rumi

What happens when violence, conflict, stress,
trauma, and adversity turn your life upside down?
What do you do?

What happens when everything you thought you knew turned
out to be a lie, including who you thought you were?
Where do you go next?

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worker, but the story and reflections of a journey that will
resonate with anyone who has faced adversity. If you have
ever questioned how to have a more meaningful life, use
this as a tool to guide you through your own inner work."*

Neha Jamani, The Sacred Kitchen

