



Master Your Own Destiny

*YOUR JOURNEY OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION
& SPIRITUAL DISCOVERY*

WITH SHEILA STEPTOE

MODULE FIVE – APPRECIATING LIFE

Illustrations by Geoff Holdsworth

*Lots of people pursue personal growth
but when you combine it with spiritual growth
you unleash your full potential.
Suddenly, there are no limits any more. . .*

Appreciating life



Sheila Steptoe



APPRECIATING LIFE

A man is free at the moment he wishes to be.

— Voltaire

I have written a good deal about learning life's lessons. Sometimes I wonder whether you can ever know them all, or the reason why, until you go back to where you came from before you were born and agreed to come to the School of the Universe. Some lessons are simple for you; others have a major impact.

In this module, we will explore some important questions about how to appreciate all that life has to offer. For many people, daily life consists of the grind of surviving in the modern world, earning enough to pay bills and provide food, dealing with personal problems and overcoming challenges. Moments of peace and joy can often be few and far between.

But to master your own destiny, you need to learn how to overcome the difficult aspects of life, and then embrace the joyful. Dealing with difficulties is never easy but with the right approach can be seen in a new light which makes them easier to overcome. This is especially true when it comes to living, loving and working with other people.

YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES

Note down what you consider to be the biggest challenges you face in life at the present time? You can list as many as you wish but for simplicity you could perhaps limit the exercise to 3 or 4.



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Now I want you to review your list and decide, for each item, if this a PROBLEM that I am trying to overcome, or a GOAL I want to achieve but have not yet worked out how to do it? Just jot down the word PROBLEM or GOAL.

If your list consists entirely of GOALS then you are already beginning to master your own destiny, because you are seeking to find new ways to contribute positively for yourself and the world.

If your list contains (or is entirely) PROBLEMS then perhaps it's time to take fresh look at how you can understand and appreciate more of life, so that you gain more and achieve more. Everybody has problems – but those who are most successful find simple easy of dealing with then and instead focus on their goals (something we'll be doing later in this programme.)

In many cases, there is a simple philosophy for overcoming problem and difficulties and it is this:

'Go with the flow of life...'

In this module you'll learn why that philosophy is the right one and learn a few techniques for making it part of YOUR life.

THE WONDER OF LIFE

Take a moment at some point today to step outside and look around. Take in the buildings, roads and other man-made structures of our human society. But also look beyond – how much of the natural world can you see? Up in the sky? On the ground? Under the ground?

Isn't this an amazing world we live in? Consider these facts:

The Earth is one of eight 'planets' – significant bodies of rock and gas – that orbit the sun, which itself is one of hundreds of millions of stars in our galaxy. And yet, our tiny 'rock' is the only place in the universe that we know of which has the perfect balance of light, heat, water, land and other features, to support *life*.

We are the product of more than 3.5 billion years of evolution, a process which, according to conventional science, has taken place through a combination of tiny random changes in creatures over millions of years at a time, which has produced an incredible diversity of living creatures....and, of course, us!

Scientists have estimated that there are 8.7 million separate species of plants, fish and animals (not including bacteria). If they were all separated that would be just 50 square kilometres (19 square miles) each of space on land or in water. And that's not for each individual creature – that's *per species*!

Of course there may be more living creatures in our galaxy and beyond that in the greater universe, but it is humbling to think that one scientist, Professor Andrew Watson at the University of East Anglia, has suggested that the mathematical probability of intelligent life evolving on Earth is possibly as low as 0.01% (that's a 1 in 10,000 chance). We are indeed perhaps, lucky to be alive!

Survival itself is an amazingly complex series of connections between the billions of living creatures on our planet. There's the *food chain* which ensures that every creature has other creatures upon which it can feed for energy. Plus virtually every creature is dependent on other living things for protection from weather, predators and other life-threatening situations. Even simple changes to this balance such as the eradication of an annoying species of insect, or the hunting to extinction of a bird or animal, can have far-reaching effects on hundreds or thousands of other species.

We can be moved with awe and wonder at this amazingly diverse and beautiful world, and if we consider the delicate balance of life across our planet, it puts our own individual worries and woes into some perspective.

And yet, it seems, most of spend our lives fretting over these worries instead of embracing the abundance that life brings us.

APPRECIATING THE NATURAL WORLD

Look out of the nearest window. You'll probably be able to see both natural and man-made things. Which do you consider the most beautiful?



This isn't a trick question – some people will genuinely say 'the man-made world'. And why not? We are the architects and builders of incredible structures which give us more comfort, greater security, are efficient, functional and often creative as well.

Many will argue that the natural world is more beautiful – and yet, the world would be a dangerous and difficult place to live without housing, transport, communications and so on. Would you know which wild plants to eat safely, or how capture, kill and cook something for lunch in the great outdoors?

Perhaps a better question would be '...how much more beautiful could the world be?' If we better understood, and included, the natural WITHIN the man-made world we create for ourselves, what would we achieve?

List three ideas for improving the world around you (your home, town or country) by allowing for a more natural way of life. Can you think of some simple ways in which you can live which is more in tune with the natural world?

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Here are some thoughts on how you might appreciate the natural world more.

- Eat fresher foods – either by growing your own, or by selecting foods that have been grown locally and are ‘in season’ and grown in natural conditions.
- Spend more time outdoors. Whatever the weather is like, it is possible to enjoy time outdoors, from long walks in country parks, to boats on the river or relaxing by the sea.
- Find the ‘rhythm’ of nature in your part of world and see if you can tune in to it. For example, by getting up when the sun rises and going to bed earlier once it has set. After a while you’ll find sleeping more natural and restful, you’ll have more energy during the day, and you’ll save on electric lighting! Almost every other living creature takes its daily cycle from the sun.
- Get involved with projects or charities that support the natural world. There are many projects and organisations around the globe that promote conservation and the protection of life. The more we understand the world, the better we can appreciate it.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT...

There are many differences between humans and other living creatures. You might think of our intelligence, language or creative abilities, which certainly stand out in humans. But consider this – every species of life on planet of Earth accepts and lives by what it is given by nature. They '*go with the flow of life*'. We are the only species that deliberately attempts to modify the world to suit our needs – often destroying its delicate balance in the process and, some would say, causing more damage than good.

Perhaps there is a lesson here – if we can learn to *go with the flow* more often, perhaps we can find the same harmony and peace that other creatures experience.



ARE YOU MANIFESTING YOUR OWN SUFFERING?

In the last few decades new ideas have come to the fore, suggesting that we are each creating our own diseases by our thoughts and even our habits. More and more evidence is emerging that not only does our attitude to illness, disease and suffering affect how well we cope with it, but that it may even have created it in the first place!

When I was in my thirties I was diagnosed with a Malignant Melanoma, the most dangerous form of skin cancer. My doctor believed this stemmed from my years of travelling and lying in the sun all day, as I am fair haired and have a lot of moles. I'd noticed that a mole on my left arm had turned 'funny' and I was sent to a specialist who immediately did a biopsy and then told me it was cancerous and I needed an operation.

I can't begin to describe the feeling you have when someone tells you that you have cancer. It's so scary, and I think it is the fear of the unknown which is the most daunting. I could not bear to consider the thoughts that came to me at the time: *will I die? will I survive? will it hurt? how big will the scar be? has it spread elsewhere, to*

give me secondary cancer, as it can travel especially to the lymph nodes? how will my family manage without me, such young children to lose their Mummy?

Although my initial cancer was diagnosed more than 23 years ago, I can still remember this feeling. What on earth do you do, at a time like that?

Well, you *can* sit and cry all day from the shock; to respond in this way is perfectly understandable. Or you can steel your mind to overcome these thoughts — and that is the route I chose. Hard to do, I agree, but I couldn't let myself wallow in self-pity. This may seem a heartless thing for me to say — and indeed, I could write another book on my feelings and thoughts at that time, although I don't feel it's appropriate to go into details here — but it's the message that is important. We all deal with this situation differently ... and you do have a choice. My heart goes out to anyone reading this who is at that stage right now.

This brings me back to my question: *Did I create this?* Is my condition purely the result of biology and chance, or do my thoughts and actions have bearing on my illness?

I have two theories. The first is that when I was travelling, sunning myself and splashing olive oil all over my skin, perhaps a fear did creep in. Skin cancer was unheard of when I was a child but was beginning to be recognised a few years later.

The second is that, when I was aged twelve to fifteen, I hated my moles and wished I had never had them. My Dad did say he would pay for them to be removed. However, that would have cost a fortune so I said no and learned to live with them. I never loved them but I did accept them — but deep down, did I really?

Earlier in this programme we have examined how our *beliefs* can have a significant impact on our emotional state and well-being. Understanding our core conditioning, removing limiting beliefs and overcoming fears can lead to freedom of mind and soul. But what most people do not realise is that these mental states will directly affect your physical body AS WELL. My hatred of my skin combined with growing fears about cancer will have been part of the cause, just as much as spending too much time in the sun.

And I am not just talking about diseases and illnesses. Your beliefs will have a direct impact on every aspect of your body's health and well-being — possibly even contributing to events such as accidents, which you might otherwise have simply put down to bad luck.

ILLNESS OR BLESSING?

But this brings up another theory I have: *Do we know that we are going to suffer a serious illness before we come into this life?* Because to some people, it can be a blessing.

This may sound strange but often a serious illness helps you grow and will change your life. I know from my own experience that it helped me appreciate everything and everybody in my life as it puts life in perspective.

Some of those who find themselves given a short lifespan after a terminal diagnosis say that it gives them peace, after they have come to terms with it. They go on to live out their lives to the full, doing things they would never normally have done or even believed they could. Families may create a closer bond, making contact with each other for the first time in years.

Many paraplegic athletes do amazing things. Some are born disabled, others have had to adjust to a new life and find a determination they never knew they had. Sadly, there are also those who can never adjust.

These are only *my* thoughts and I know it is a delicate subject. I have been through cancer, and I still have it — but my mind cannot accept that it will ever get the better of me. I just won't let it! Do not imagine I have forgotten what it feels like; I haven't. But this is a difficult message and it can apply to anybody.

The thoughts I had as an early teenager, when I loathed my moles and wanted them removed, materialised many years later into the removal of them because of cancer. So my wishes and thoughts became true — but never as I expected. I now call it *the* cancer, not *my* cancer. A friend pointed this out to me recently: what you say in your speech is just as important as what you think because it is still in your mindset.

Cancer is one of many serious illnesses, and I hope I can give hope to many people who are living with any of those. You can get through a fatal disease — but how the mind processes the emotions is extremely important. I was in my mid-thirties when first diagnosed; I wasn't at all spiritual but I always had a deep inner knowing that I would be all right because I set my mind to say that to myself.

Louise Hay has written extensively on this subject, including *You Can Heal Your Life*. Her books are insightful and she has even turned this particular book into a film.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Have you ever dealt with something serious? (An illness, medical condition or serious accident.)



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Can you think of any reason why your thoughts, fears or attitude might have contributed to the condition at that time?

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How did you handle the situation? Did you take a positive or negative attitude towards it, and whichever it was do you think it helped or hindered your ability to deal with it?

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How do you feel about this subject now? Has it made you think? Do you believe that we create our own illnesses, accidents and suffering?

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If this is true, would it affect the way you think about yourself in the future?

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BODY CONNECTIONS

I believe that the concept that we manifest our own suffering is true — not just illnesses but other types of suffering too. But it leads me to question why I went through a couple of other things.

One day I fell over in the garden and knocked my two front teeth out; what is *that* telling me? A lady with no front teeth is not a pretty sight!

I received third degree burns on my neck and chest when a bottle of 98 per cent sulphuric acid fell over and splashed me, leaving a horrible scar. People ask me if I've have ever had open heart surgery, because the scar runs down in a line. I did have plastic surgery to correct it but that went wrong and I had to hide indoors for six weeks until it healed. So I wonder ... are accidents different?

This brings up yet another question. Some people, meeting me for the first time, instantly notice my scar and react in one of two ways: either they ask me about it, or they look at it and then turn away for a few seconds after which they say nothing. Yet friends I have known for years have never even noticed it! They see beyond my scar to the beauty within.

How do *you* react when you see someone with a disability? My scar is very minor compared to some disfigurements that people live with. Do you see beyond that?

Many people, including Louise Hay, say that where a particular illness is located on your body tells you what it is connected to. For example, if you are having problems with your eyes, is there something you are not seeing? Do you get car sickness from a fear of being trapped? I can see the logic in this idea but I will leave this debate open for the time being, while I ponder more about what all my ailments were telling me!

One thing I do know is that, by acknowledging what is probably the root cause and going deep within to find that out, I have removed it. This is why I know my cancer will always be under control, and I know it won't come back.

In 2004 I watched a television documentary called *The Boy Whose Skin Fell Off*. The boy's name was Jonny Kennedy, and aged 36 he knew he was going to die. He had a terrible genetic condition called Dystrophic Epidermolysis Bullosa (EB) which meant that his skin literally fell off at the slightest touch, leaving his body covered in agonising sores and leading to his final fight with skin cancer.

This film touched millions of people. He made it to raise funds for the charities DeBRA and EB but his message was his philosophy that death is part of life. He knew that he had come to what he called 'Earth is a classroom'; that he had been born, for whatever reason, to understand and feel suffering. He did not know why and it didn't matter — but his spiritual beliefs helped him come to terms with EB. His body was broken but his spirit was not. He even went to 10 Downing Street as he was dying to raise awareness.

Jonny's message is powerful. He and his family knew that he would be free from pain once his soul was released. I am sure he smiled, wherever he was, when he saw the reaction his film caused.

Identifying connections between your life and the way your body acts or reacts is not easy, but learning to do could be a valuable skill. Your body is often sending messages to you. The most obvious is pain — *'I am in pain..!'* says your body, which will usually (and quickly) result in you dropping that hot pan. But there are more subtle messages, which may be warnings or may be reassurance, and so listening to your body is a powerful tool in your quest to master your own destiny.

Here are a few examples of the kinds of messages you may receive:

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| Chest pain or discomfort. | Close to the heart – are you having relationship problems? |
| Weariness in the legs. Foot problems. | Is your body telling you to avoid going somewhere? Fear of the future and of not stepping forward in life. |
| Spots, warts, temporary blemishes (especially on the face or neck). | Are you worrying about your appearance too much, or about ageing in general? Tell yourself that you are unattractive and your body will do its best to fulfil your command! Louise Hay says that warts are little expressions of hate. Belief in ugliness! |

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| Eye(s) | Represents the capacity to see clearly – past, present and future. New thought patterns – see life with love and joy. |
| Asthma | Smother love. Inability to breathe for oneself. Feeling stifled. Suppressed crying. New thought pattern – it is safe for me to take charge of my own life. I choose to be free. |
| Throat | Avenue of expression. Channel of creativity. New thought pattern – I open my heart and sing the joys of love. |

You may like to read ‘Heal Your Body A-Z – The Mental Causes for Physical Illness and the Way to Overcome Them’ by Louise Hay. This book includes a new thought pattern / affirmation by each illness.

A word of warning here. It’s important to take any physical symptoms seriously. Pain, persistent discomfort and anything unusual should, of course, be referred to doctor. But alongside any medical treatment you may receive, take a moment to consider how your mental states, attitudes and beliefs might be contributing to your welfare.



DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

How do you deal with some of the challenges that life throws at you? You often create your own challenges and we all deal with them in a different way. Some want too much, some think everyone around them has to be perfect. We all need to chill out.

Many people worry too much and are stressed beyond their boundaries. Life can be challenging but I hope that some of the previous chapters may have helped you see that you can be our own worst enemy! The most important chapter so far is Chapter Three, where you learned that the power of your mind can override some of your challenges.

I have found that the Universe will throw you a challenge or nudge you in a certain direction if you aren't listening to what 'they' are trying to tell you. Perhaps you'll continue on your way, struggling and getting frustrated and stressed, and then suddenly – *boom!* – something drastic happens.

Friends and colleagues of mine have had a sudden jolt, perhaps fallen over and broken a leg: or they might have a heart attack that stops them in their tracks and makes them take stock of their life. It's as if the Universe is saying, *You aren't listening or slowing down so we'll help you do that.* You then have to pay attention because you can't do

anything else!

This is a time to reflect and take stock. You might need to ask others for help, or do the reverse and *let* someone help you. You do not have to struggle on your own. Your friends here on Earth and above in the Universe are all waiting to help — but you do have to ask. That is very difficult for some people: it feels like letting go of control. But often that is exactly why you are struggling.

If something like this has happened to you, it's important to let events unfold to bring certain things to your attention. What could this be teaching you? What might you need to let go? This sort of event can be a painful or a healing process. You *could* just carry on as before — but why do that?

GOING WITH THE FLOW

There is another aspect I would like to put to you. We constantly shout at our children when they misbehave. (There is more on this towards the end of the book.) We fall out with friends and neighbours if they do or say something we dislike. Why? Everyone has different views and ideas, which are unique to them. We may not agree with someone but why never speak to that person again? When anger and resentment build up inside us, it is we who then suffer, not them!

Anger, jealousy, resentment, envy and all the negative emotions to which you expose yourself create a world for you that can be unrealistic. You build your own obstacles. You might not be living your own life, because you are comparing yourself to others.

Many people also hold on to resentment for far too long. It begins to eat away at them. From the day they have their *Aha!* moment and let go, life is never the same again. It can be a liberating release. Dwelling on the dark side of life can lead to depression. So, you need to ask ourselves what good it does.

Often, people don't realise they are in an emotional cage; a very lonely place. They may have gone into that cage for self protection and do not know that they have closed their own door. Try coming out of it but gradually. To open your heart and show your emotions can be very difficult but do you want to stay in your confined closed closet?

This is different to understanding that the positive and negative need each other in order to exist. Without the dark side your beauty would not exist. How can you compare if you don't have both?

One of the best ways I have found to deal with challenges is to keep my faith by 'going with my flow'. I let some of the little things fly over my head. Many people can't do that, I know, but I want to turn this around and put it in a different perspective.

GOING WITH THE FLOW AUDIT

Here are a few questions to help think about both good and bad aspects of your life and, most importantly, how well you go with the flow:



Who is the most important person in your life? Do you wish they were different in some ways or do you love them just as they are?

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What gives you the most pleasure? Do you enjoy this when it happens to come along or do you go out of your way to try and create it as often as possible?

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What is missing in your life? Do you spend a lot of time fretting about it or are you happy that you will become more fulfilled when the time is right?

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What or who drains your energy? Is it because you just don't want to be with them or do the things they want? Do you feel you are always 'giving in' to their needs?

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What do you dislike about your life? Are you trying to change it or waiting for someone else to create that change for you?

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What has been your biggest success to date? Did it happen naturally or spontaneously? Do you enjoy the feelings of success and fulfillment it brought you?

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What can you contribute to the world that will make a difference? Do you think it will be easy for you to contribute, or is it going to be a struggle?

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By answering these questions I hope you can begin to see that life is far more beautiful if you appreciate it rather than moan about everything. Yes, bills have to be paid, health problems crop up and life does sometimes become painful – but so often you forget the wonderful things you do have. Friends and family need to be cherished. Our gardens, the parks, the mountains and nature are all around us to enjoy. How often do you do this? How often do you let life happen naturally and spontaneously, putting aside any thoughts of your own personal needs and problems?

We tend to concentrate on the problems rather than the highs in life. And when we do, it always pulls us down. On the other hand when we forget about the future, the problems that can't immediately be solved and our personal likes and dislikes, and simply enjoy the present moment with whoever we are with, suddenly we find ourselves having fun, laughing more and feeling more peaceful.

So, here are a few suggestions:

- Let go of control – you don't have to control or do everything yourself.
- People will not hate you if you say *no* occasionally.
- Delegate where you can – even at home with the children.
- Others will not think you are pathetic if you ask for help occasionally.
- Prioritise your diary – block out some time just for yourself.
- Give yourself time to rest and relax by having some 'me' time – and don't feel guilty.
- Practise patience – life is not a race.
- Communicate with others more – work colleagues, family and friends.
- Share meals around the table and chat and laugh!
- Forget what you don't have – appreciate what you do have.
- Self control: to get angry is human – but to express it properly is effective.
- What worry changed anything? Go with your flow more and see the benefits.
- Never be too busy to listen to others – especially your children and family.
- Focus on what motivates you rather than look at the negatives.
- Stop repeating negative patterns and you will move on faster than you think.
- Deal with a challenge instead of hiding from it, as it may not go away.



APPRECIATING OTHERS

I knew another challenge was on the horizon after a spiritual Circle one night when an Angel, 'Sister of Mercy', came to see me.

A 'Sister of Mercy' will often come when an emotional pain is looming and she comes to comfort you. Anthony, one of the Circle members, had done a Tarot reading for me but he felt sick with what he saw in the cards. He didn't know what was going to happen and neither did I.

The next day my five-year-old granddaughter came to see me in floods of tears, saying she wanted to live with me. She had packed her own little bags because my daughter and she were at constant loggerheads and she was unhappy at home. It broke my heart but I had to say no. My daughter then took me to court to stop me seeing her. The pain of this separation nearly drove me insane. My granddaughter suffered horrendously too. We were separated for three long years and it took another two years for everything to be resolved, and they both came back into my life.

I will not go into details here because they are now completely back in my life which is wonderful, joyous and a true blessing. It would be dragging up the past and I don't want to do that, for me or for them.

But I do need to mention it here because one of the best ways for me to deal with that horrendous challenge was to keep my faith and to learn forgiveness. Learning forgiveness is one of the hardest and yet most important lessons we can learn. Having my 'unseen' friends around was beyond doubt what kept me going; they gave me courage and a strength I never knew I had. But I also learned to look within, because I was so afraid of what might happen if I never saw my granddaughter again.

Then I learned to stop resisting that pain, because in some ways I was fighting my own fears. The negativity that was going on in my head was awful — but when I recognised that my fear was only making it worse for me, I began to know somehow that it would all work out. And it did. I also learned another valuable lesson which was to forgive my daughter and myself for the creation of this experience. I can't explain it any other way.

In fact, after I learned to work through my grief, which is what this painful experience felt like, I trusted and detached myself from the end result. I had started gradually to get back on track when suddenly both my daughter and granddaughter came back into my life, years earlier than I had imagined possible. The timing was amazing because it coincided with my first book coming out — so I knew that everything would be fine.

Sometimes you need to detach yourself, and let both parties work through their thoughts and emotions separately. When you stop *reacting* to a situation it helps calm everything down. This can be extremely hard to do. You need to give each other space. Everyone goes through things differently; outside events often play a part, and of course you may not know about them. You don't know how people are truly feeling and you never can — however much you like to think you do.

Another reason why I went through all this was to be able to understand how to cope so I can help others — that is why I wrote my first book. So many people are separated from loved ones, for all sorts of reasons, and statistics say that something like this will happen to around 60 per cent of the population — in other words, to millions of people. I became a volunteer for the Grandparents Association on their helplines, and what I heard on the end of the phone astounded me. The GA was my lifeline at the very beginning, and this was my way of saying thank you for the help they gave me.

I also know that this book has inspired others because of the feedback I have had, when people write to me or ring me up in tears, saying how they can resonate with it.

Something wonderful happened a few months after the release of my first book. A lady at an exhibition tapped me on the shoulder and said: 'You won't remember me but I can never thank you enough because you changed my life. I came to a talk you did and I read your book and it gave me the strength and courage to do something I should have done years ago. Thank you from the bottom of my heart as I now feel so alive.'

Wow. I burst into tears and so did she! Her friend told me that she'd read it too, and it had helped her with problems she had been having in her family — so I got a cuddle from her, too. That sort of experience makes everything worthwhile.

So, however painful it was for me, there was a *reason*. There's nearly always a reason that you can't see at the time. But keep your faith, learn from it and embrace with joy the new that comes into your life.

STOP THOSE RELATIONSHIP DISASTERS

Something I learned a long time ago is to have honest conversations.

This can be hard because you often don't want to hurt a person — but sometimes not knowing is harder to bear than being honest and knowing the truth. Your imagination may run riot but there are always two sides to a situation; knowing the other half can dispel your fears. Even saying how you feel, perhaps that you love the other person, can move mountains. So often you can't say those three little words.

But you do need to be careful with the words you choose to express your thoughts. Words can hurt deeply but there are times when it is better to be honest. Shouting your anger will only backfire on you — so be gentle but firm.

Importantly, you must *not* feel that meeting the perfect partner will be the answer to your happiness. You have to love yourself first and then, if a partner is what you want, when you do meet him or her, you will be in the strongest position to work at it.

You have to accept your partners just as they are, and accept that you cannot change them. They are the person you originally fell in love with, before you knew their faults, and you need to go on accepting and loving them just as they are.

Some couples may find that, with time, their relationship gets to become a habit; they merely exist with one another. It's as though the spark that they had first felt has died. For most couples those initial feelings *don't* last forever; what they achieve instead is a feeling of contentment. People do change — but if you work at it, and if you want it enough, you have the power within to change and move the relationship on and put some excitement back in.

Creating excitement does not have to be expensive but a little surprise can go a long way. A spontaneous gesture such as the one I mentioned earlier can be wonderful. It brings excitement and interest back into a relationship.

I can hear some of you saying, *It is such hard work...* or, *I have not got the time...* or even, *I can't be bothered...* A little effort goes a long, long way and creating excitement really does need only a small amount of imagination. Focus on the *benefit* of this 'effort', as it is sure to improve your relationship.

Too many couples get into such a rut that it is hard for them to pull out of it. It's almost as though they do not even want to. This is such a shame because at the beginning of the relationship, perhaps many years ago, they will have been head-over-heels in love.

RELATIONSHIP EXERCISE

Do you ever feel as though you and your partner are moving in different directions or failing to understand each other and consider each others needs? This exercise shows you how you can re-connect with that special person in your life.

Try this exercise to help learn about your relationship and how to appreciate it more. You can sit down together and just talk about your feelings or you can do this exercise individually as preparation for talking together/

First make a list of five to ten things that you each want out of the relationship. It can be physical things like ‘a secure future’ or emotional/spiritual needs such as ‘knowing that I am loved’.

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Make another list, of all the things that you love about the your partner.

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Can you identify anything that has changed in your relationship over the years? Are these POSITIVE or NEGATIVE changes?

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I hope this activity enables you both to discuss openly the key elements of your relationship. I also hope that it encourages mutual respect.

You will probably find that other issues come out, which are not on your lists; it may be painful to discuss these. However, if someone is unhappy, surely it is better to talk about problems and feelings, rather than just hiding them? This is when so often things start to go wrong in long term relationships. This can help rebuild the relationship and is a very worthwhile exercise.

QUALITY TIME

Some people in a partnership or marriage will say: 'I love them, but...' They think they can change that person into who they want them to be. I'm sorry — but no. No-one can change a person, only they can do this for themselves, and even then only if they want to. We just need to accept our partners as they are.

Maybe it is something insignificant that you want to change; perhaps one of you wants to take a lot of time out of the week to pursue a personal interest. For example, your partner might be passionate about sport, and want to watch *all* sports on the television, go to support their club or team and play sports themselves. You might resent this — but by viewing this 'annoying' situation differently and taking a step back, you could come to see this as a brilliant opportunity for you to spend time away from each other, which you can use as quality time for *you*. After all, your partner is enjoying their quality time, so why shouldn't you? Accept that it happens and join in, or simply plan to do something else which you enjoy and may not normally have the time to pursue. Isn't this more fulfilling than resenting your partner and their interests?

Everyone needs a little time to themselves, even if it is just for a few hours each week. You should never feel guilty about quality time for yourself. It gives you space, an escape from a lot of the pressures, and it is surprising how it makes you feel. You will find yourself feeling more relaxed and refreshed when you have more time for your thoughts and actions. You will be able to achieve more, and be in a better position to enjoy the time you do spend with your partner.

So many people think that they don't have time to do this sort of thing — but what are you saying when you don't make time for yourself? That you don't matter? Or that your needs are not important? I don't think so!

UNDERSTANDING

One of the hardest tasks when you embark on a journey of spiritual discovery and growth is winning the understanding and support of your partner and loved ones. Often people complain that ‘my partner doesn’t understand this’ or ‘they don’t believe in the things I believe.’

Now it’s true that not everyone can embrace spirituality.

- Some people do not want to be associated with ‘religious’ or ‘airy-fairy’ ideas
- Some do not want to confront their spiritual urges for fear of ridicule
- Some genuinely fear the unknown

But for most people, the biggest thing that holds them back is simply that they have so many distractions in life that they find it difficult to take time out to look deeper into their life.

How do you deal with a partner, family members or friends who feel this way?

Of course there is no simple solution to this question, but here are a few ideas that may help you to gain more understanding and empathy from others.

- Make them aware that your spiritual journey is **YOURS**. You are not trying to ‘convert’ them to a faith or religion. Reassure them that you are still the ‘normal’ person they know and love.
- Describe how much better your spiritual learning and daily rituals make you **FEEL**. Even if they don’t understand what you are doing or consider it silly, most people care about their partners feelings. Use words like **CONFIDENCE, HAPPINESS, JOY, PEACEFULNESS**. When they understand how much your spiritual work helps you, they may start taking a closer interest.
- Rather than suggest full meditations together, invite them to join you simply in moments of peace and quiet. Perhaps a silent meal, or 10 minutes sitting peacefully in the garden. Remember to let them experience the beauty of the world **FOR THEMSELVES**.

You may not get an immediate response from your partner or loved ones, but over time, these gentle techniques will help them to start understanding the journey you are now on, and discover their own meaning of the concept of ‘spirituality’ for themselves.



SPONTANEITY

I am not being flippant about dealing with life's challenges; they can take over your life if you let them — and they often do until you learn to work through the experience. However, I would like to point out that another way to deal with life is to have something which a lot of people seem to have forgotten — fun. Take some time out of your everyday life to do something different, which will take your mind off your problems and give you a much-needed lift. Life doesn't have to be so serious!

One of the things I love to do is give spontaneous gestures to friends and family when they least expect it. It brings smiles all around and gives me great joy.

When I visit my grandchildren and I bring sweets, instead of just giving them I hide them in the garden to find. Why keep an Easter egg hunt (which I also do) just for Easter? The children love it and the sweets only cost a few pence.

Another idea I had one day brought even more response. I came across Graham's car at his place of work. So I wrote a note on a scrap of paper — with rather a sexy message! It was raining so I found a plastic bag and placed the note inside before tucking it under his windscreen wipers, just as traffic wardens do.

Of course, his first thought when he saw this was dread of a parking ticket — but then he got a wonderful surprise which certainly put a smile on his face. He says he found this gesture exciting and that it had aroused such emotions that he landed up on my doorstep, after travelling along the motorway at high speed, and simply carried me upstairs. I will leave the rest to your imagination!

I once told this story as part of a presentation to a group of ladies, some of whom were quite elderly. Along with the laughter was a lady of about 70 sitting on my right, who was so engrossed in the story that her instant reaction was to shout out: 'But I don't have any stairs.' This brought the house down. After some giggly banter, we all decided that her sofa and downstairs bedroom would serve just as well ... but I have no idea whether she put the idea into action when she got home!

Putting fun back into your life can be deeply beneficial. You don't always need to concentrate on the challenges or on what you haven't got. There is far more, deep inside you, that you should give yourself credit for.

Putting excitement into life doesn't need to be expensive — just imaginative.

LET'S RECAP...

STEP 1 – Meditate every day and keep a diary.

STEP 2 – Let go of fears, core conditioning and resistance.

STEP 3 – Practise visualisation and follow your instincts, hunches and sudden ideas.

STEP 4 – Believe in yourself, because negativity will manifest suffering in one form or another.

STEP 5 – Rise to a challenge. Overcome obstacles and have some fun.

Final Thoughts

Overcoming challenges, whether it is an illness or another major obstacle, can be a huge step forward.

Many spiritual gurus have been teaching for years that to learn forgiveness is probably one of the most important lessons you can learn for your spiritual growth — and I have found this to be very true. It can be hard but you sometimes need to forgive *yourself*, too.

You also need to work at relationships to bring them back to the joy they were. This is important. Everyone changes as they get older but the core person is still inside.

FEEDBACK.....

Don't forget to keep in touch. Send me your stories and experiences by email:

sheila@sheilasteptoe.com

Recommended Reading & Further Information

You Can Heal Your Life

by Louise Hay

Hay House ISBN 978-0937611012

Jonny Kennedy: The Boy Whose Skin Fell Off

– Debra is the charity for people with Dystrophic Epidermolysis Bulla (EB)

www.debra.org.uk

– www.channel4.com/fourdocs/archive/boy_whose_skin.html