

# JACK KORNFIELD

Bestselling author of *A PATH WITH HEART*



## NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT

---

FINDING FREEDOM, LOVE,  
AND JOY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE

# Contents

Epigraph

Invitation to Freedom

## *Part One: Freedom of Spirit*

### 1. Vastness Is Our Home

The Dance of Life • The One Who Knows • Sacred Stillness • Loving Awareness • Running from Hyenas • Rest in Love

Practice: Opening to Spacious Awareness • Practice: Mind Like the Sky

### 2. Free to Love

The Beloved • Love's Many Faces • Grace and Angst • Respond with Love • The Sparkle in Your Eyes • Encounter with the Gods • Embodying Love • Love Baked Fresh • Blessing of Respect

Practice: Lovingkindness Meditation

### 3. Trusting the Living Universe

Tending Our Garden • The Dance of Life • Wise Trust • Beyond Despair • Embraced by a Living Universe • Aging with Trust

*Practice: Trust in the Big Picture* • *Practice: Trust Your Inner Knowing* • *Practice: Be Inspired by Trust*

#### 4. The Eternal Present

Touching the Eternal Present • Notice Now • Moral Mathematics of the Moment • Beginner's Mind • How Then Shall We Live? • Finding Sanctuary • Timelessness of the Natural World • Lover of the Moment • That's for You

Practice: Open to Timelessness

### *Part Two: Obstacles to Freedom*

#### 5. Fear of Freedom

Trauma, Fear, and Freedom • Self-Hatred • Trying to Please • Fear of Falling • Acting Flawlessly • Lean into the Wind

Practice: Entering Difficulties with an Open Mind and an Open Heart

#### 6. Forgiveness

Forgiving Yourself and Another • Your Spirit Is Not Bound by Your History • Honoring the Past • Heart of Forgiveness • Courage and Clarity • True Release • I'm Going to Kill You • Letting Go: The Chord That Completes the Song

Practice: Forgiveness Meditation

#### 7. Freedom from Troubled Emotions

Praying for Our Enemies • Powerful Inner Forces • Befriending the Trouble • Resolving Conflicts • Facing Demons • Dawn of Compassion

Practice: Compassion • Practice: Practice with Troubled Emotions

## *Part Three: Realizing Freedom*

### 8. Elegance of Imperfection

Invitation to Care • Tyranny of Perfection • Wild, Uncharted, Imperfect Glory • Eyes of Love • What You Have Left • Mastery • It's Already Broken

*Practice:* I See You, Mara • *Practice:* Practicing Imperfection

### 9. The Gift of an Open Mind

Zen and the Art of Openness • Prejudice and Perspective • Breaking Barriers • Are You Sure? • Actually See Her • The Healing Power of Words • Heartfelt Communication

*Practice:* Is This True?

### 10. The Gift of Authenticity

You Were Born to Do This • Staying True • To Whom Are You Faithful? • Start Where You Are • Aware Inside, Calm Outside • Honoring Your Feelings • Desire • Free to Be Human

*Practice:* Being True

### 11. Free to Dream

Express Your Heart • “Bird Got My Wings” • They’re Your Dreams • Crafting Your Life • Conscious and True • The Currents of Life • Dream Big and Dance

*Practice:* You Are an Artist

## *Part Four: Living Freedom*

### 12. Deliver Your Gifts

[Free to Act • Try Again • Vision and Action • Bring Your Gift • Selfless Service • The World Needs You • Your Very Flesh Shall Be a Poem](#)

*Practice: Deliver Your Gifts*

### [13. Freedom in Challenging Times](#)

[Our Challenge • Listen with Your Heart • Join the Web of Care • Blessed Unrest • Lead with Humanity • Strategic and Strong • You Have Been Training for This](#)

*Practice: Stand Up*

### [14. Live in Mystery](#)

[Not Far Away • The Mystery of Incarnation • The Earth Is Breathing You • Beyond History and Self • Interbeing: You Are Not Alone • Everyone Gains • Outer and Inner Freedom • Emptiness Is Our Home • Vision • “I Told You So”](#)

*Practice: Open to Mystery • Practice: Just Like Me*

### [15. The Joy of Being Alive](#)

[Happiness for No Cause • Bouncing for Joy • Gratefulness • Pure Heart • You Deserve Happiness • Wonderful! • It’s in Your Hands • Coursing in Gratitude](#)

[Acknowledgments and Bows of Gratitude](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Index](#)

[Credits](#)

To my twin brother, Irv  
An adventurer, a lover of life, an unbridled spirit

*A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it  
has a song.*

—JOAN WALSH ANGLUND

# Invitation to Freedom

**D**ear friends, after more than forty years teaching mindfulness and compassion to thousands on the spiritual path, the most important message I can offer is this: *You don't have to wait to be free. You don't need to postpone being happy.*

All too often the beautiful spiritual practices of mindfulness and compassion become entwined with a vision of self-discipline and duty. We see them as taking us through a long road of obstacles that leads eventually to distant benefits. Yes, there is hard work of the heart, and there are demanding cycles in our lives. Yet wherever you are on your journey, there is another wonderful truth called “Living the Fruit” or “Starting with the Result.” The fruits of well-being and the experience of joy, freedom, and love are available now, whatever your circumstance!

When Nelson Mandela walked out of Robben Island prison after twenty-seven years of incarceration, he did so with such dignity, magnanimity, and forgiveness that his spirit transformed South Africa and inspired the world. Like Mandela, you can be free and dignified wherever you find yourself. However difficult your circumstances, however uncertain the times, remember, freedom is not reserved for exceptional people. No one can imprison your spirit.

When your boss calls and you feel fear or anxiety, when someone in your family is in conflict or duress, when you feel overwhelmed by the growing problems of the world, you have choices. You can be bound and constricted, or you can use this difficulty to open and discover how to respond wisely in this unfolding journey. Sometimes life gives us ease,



sometimes it is challenging, and sometimes profoundly painful. Sometimes the whole society around you is in upheaval. Whatever your circumstances, you can take a breath, soften your gaze, and remember that courage and freedom are within, waiting for you to awaken, and to offer to others. Even under the direst conditions, freedom of spirit is available. Freedom of spirit is mysterious, magnificent, and simple. We are free and able to love in this life—no matter what.

Deep down we know this is true. We know it whenever we feel a part of something greater—listening to music, making love, walking in the mountains or swimming in the sea, sitting with the mystery of a dying loved one as her spirit leaves her body silently as a falling star, or witnessing the miraculous birth of a child. At times like these, a joyful openness swells through our body, and our heart is surrounded by peace.

Freedom starts where we are. Sara, a single mom with two kids, found out that her eight-year-old daughter, Alicia, had leukemia. Sara was terrified, anxious, grieving the loss of her child's health, scared that she would lose her. For the first year, Alicia went through long rounds of chemotherapy, hospital stays, and doctors. A fearful sadness filled the house, and anxiety colored Sara's days. Then, one afternoon when they were out on a walk, Alicia said, "Mama, I don't know how long I'm going to live, but I want them to be happy days."

Her words were a splash of cold water on her mother's face. Sara realized that she had to step out of the fearful melodrama to meet her daughter's freedom of mind with her own, to return to a trusting spirit. Sara grabbed her daughter and did a little waltz, holding her tight. Her fear dissipated. And in time, Alicia healed. She is now twenty-two and just graduated from college.

But even if she hadn't healed, what kind of days would you have had her choose? You can't do much with your life if you're miserable. You might as well be happy.

When I was eight years old, on an especially bitter, windy winter day, my brothers and I dressed in jackets, scarves, and gloves and went out to play in the snow. I was skinny as a rail and shivering with cold. My twin

brother, Irv, stronger, wilder, and more robust, looked at me, contracted and fearful, and laughed. Then he began to remove layers of clothing, first the gloves, his coat, then a sweater, his shirt, undershirt, all the while laughing. He danced and paraded around half-naked in the snow, the icy wind whipping around us. We were all wide-eyed, laughing hysterically.

In that moment, my brother taught me about choosing freedom, manifesting a spirit that to this day I still remember. Whether we're in a wildly blowing snowstorm or feeling the cold wind of loss, blame, or of our collective insecurity, we want to be free. We want to be released from fear and worry, not confined by judgments. We can. We can learn to trust, love, express ourselves, and be happy.

As we discover trust and freedom in ourselves, we will then find our way to share them with the world. Barbara Wiedner, who founded Grandmothers for Peace, explains, "I began to question the kind of a world I am leaving for my grandchildren. So, I got a sign, 'A Grandmother for Peace,' and stood on a street corner. Then I joined others kneeling as a human barrier at a munitions factory. I was taken to prison, strip-searched, and thrown into a cell. Something happened to me. I realized they couldn't do anything more. I was free!" Now Barbara and her organization, Grandmothers for Peace, works in dozens of countries around the world.

This same freedom is here for you as well. Each chapter of this book is an invitation to experience a particular dimension of freedom—we begin personally, with freedom of spirit, freedom to start over, freedom beyond fear, freedom to be yourself, and then discover freedom to love, freedom to stand up for what matters, freedom to be happy. There are stories, reflections, teachings, and practices that illuminate how we get stuck and how we can free ourselves. This isn't a book that you read just to make yourself feel better for a little while and then put on your shelf. Finding freedom is an active process that engages your intellect, your heart, and your whole spirit. The means and the goal are one: be yourself, dream, trust, have courage, and act.

You can choose your spirit. Freedom, Love, and Joy are yours, in your very life, your exact circumstance. They are your birthright.

*Jack Kornfield*  
*Spirit Rock Meditation Center*  
*Spring 2017*

*Part One*



Freedom of Spirit

*What do you plan to do with this one wild and precious  
life?*

—MARY OLIVER

## Chapter 1

---

# Vastness Is Our Home

*Sometimes I go about pitying myself, when all the while I am  
being carried by great winds across the sky.*

—OJIBWA SAYING

**W**e are being carried on a luminous star, sharing in the dance of life with seven billion beings like us. Vastness is our home. When we recognize the spaciousness that is our universe, around us and within us, the door of freedom opens. Worries and conflicts fall into perspective, emotions are held with ease, and we act amid troubles of the world with peace and dignity.

### The Dance of Life

Whitney was caught in midlife troubles. Her mother was scheduled for hip surgery, and her father was suffering from early-stage Alzheimer's. She wanted her parents to continue living in their home in Illinois, but their disabilities made independent living challenging. Whitney's brother in St. Louis was not involved and wanted his sister to "take care of it." So, Whitney took a month's leave from work and went to her parents' home to help. When she arrived, the house was in shambles. Her mom needed time

to heal from the surgery, and her father was unable to care for himself. They could not afford round-the-clock care, and it was clear they would have to move.

Whitney took a walk up a hillside she'd known since childhood. She didn't want to lose the family home; she wanted her parents to stay there until the end—and she didn't want to lose her parents. She wept as she walked, but when she reached the top of the hill, she sat quietly, calmed herself, and looked across the vast midwestern fields stretching to the horizon. The sky was filled with cumulus clouds bringing shade to the many small houses clustered at the edge of town and beyond.

Facing this unbounded vastness, she suddenly felt less alone. She could sense how everything has its rhythm—arriving and departing, flourishing and struggling, coming into being and fading away. *How many people, she wondered, are in the same predicament we are in right now? As she breathed with more ease, her mind opened further. I am not the only person with aging parents. It is part of the human journey.* And as the space within her opened, she felt more trust.

We can all see this way. We can gain a broader perspective. With a spacious heart, we can remember the bigger picture. Even when illness strikes, a parent is dying, or any other form of loss is upon us, we can recognize that it's a part of life's seasons.

What would it feel like to love the whole kit and caboodle—to make our love bigger than our sorrows? Among the multitudes of humans, many are experiencing loss and change. Many need renewal. And still the world keeps turning, farmers growing food, markets trading, musicians playing. We live in the midst of a great and ever-changing paradox.

Breathe. Relax. Live each day one at a time.

## The One Who Knows

As your spacious heart opens, you can rediscover the vast perspective you'd almost forgotten. The spacious heart reveals the spacious mind. This is the mind that, after you've stubbed your toe, hopped around, and howled,

finally laughs. The mind that, when you are upset with your partner, goes to sleep, wakes up, and sees that what was such a big deal has fallen into perspective.

Your spacious mind is the natural awareness that knows and accommodates everything. My meditation teacher in the forests of Thailand, Ajahn Chah, called it “the One Who Knows.” He said this is the original nature of mind, the silent witness, spacious consciousness. His instructions were simple: become witness to it all, the person with perspective, the One Who Knows.

Pay attention to the movie showing in your life right now. Notice the plot. It might be an adventure, a tragedy, a romance, a soap opera, or a battle. “All the world’s a stage,” wrote Shakespeare. Sometimes you get caught in the plot. But remember, you are also the audience. Take a breath. Look around. Become witness to it all, the spacious awareness, the One Who Knows.

I sat at the bedside of a woman with pancreatic cancer near the end of her days. She was only thirty-one years old. We looked in each other’s eyes, and the layers just peeled away. Her skinny body, her gender, her poetic accomplishments, her family and friends. I was graced to be a witness to her spirit. “How’s it going?” I asked, with great gentleness. “It looks like this incarnation is going to be over soon. It’s okay. It’s natural to die, you know.” And what peered back through her deep, knowing eyes were vastness, tenderness, and a timeless freedom.

Rest in spacious awareness and feel the presence of love. The One Who Knows becomes the loving witness of all things. You become loving awareness itself. The freedom of loving awareness is available; it just takes practice for you to remember it and to trust that it is always here. When you feel lost, stuck in a tiny part of the big picture, contracted, or caught up, take a breath and visualize yourself stepping back. With a spacious mind, you can witness even these contracted states and hold them in loving awareness.

Relax. With loving awareness, you can notice your feelings, your thoughts, your circumstances. Just now. Even as you read this book,

witness the one reading and smile at him or her with loving awareness. Begin each morning with loving awareness. Tune in to the space around you, the space outside, the huge landscape that spreads across the continent. Feel the vastness of the sky and of the space that holds the moon and planets and galaxies.

Let your mind and heart *become* that space. Breathe into your heart. Observe the clouds floating in the endless sky and become the sky. The clouds are not just outside; they are in you as well. Feel the landscape, the trees, the mountains, and buildings all arising in your own heart. Let yourself open, merge into space with love. Relax and rest in the immensity that surrounds you, the immensity that is you. Notice how vast loving awareness can be.

As the One Who Knows, witness it all, let loving awareness make room for everything: boredom *and* excitement, fear *and* trust, pleasure *and* pain, birth *and* death.

## Sacred Stillness

When you walk into a shaded grove of giant redwoods or into a great cathedral, a sacred stillness descends. As spaciousness opens within you, you can experience a profound silence in your very being. You may feel nervous at first, and at the same time, you've longed for this. This is the vast silence that surrounds life. Trust it and rest in the stillness. Feel your heart open and become more fully alive. Everything that arises from this silence is only a cloud in the vast sky, a wave on the ocean. Rest in the depths of silence.

Vastness is the nature of consciousness. If you gaze at it directly, you'll discover that the mind is transparent, spacious, that it has no boundaries, that your heart is as wide as the world. As you open to this vastness, you can allow the waves of life to arise and pass. In silence, you'll see the mystery giving birth to life, to thoughts and feelings and sense perceptions. The waves of the world rise and fall, expand and contract, the heart beats, cerebral spinal fluid pulses, there are ever-changing rhythms in the phases



of the moon, the changing of seasons, the cycles of a woman's body, the turning galaxies, and the stock market, too.

Begin to notice that there are pauses between the waves, gaps between breaths and between thoughts. At first these seem fleeting, but gradually you'll be able to rest in these pauses. As the waves rise and fall, you *become* silent loving awareness itself. This silence is not withdrawal, indifference, or punishment. It is not the absence of thoughts. It is spacious and refreshing, a tender stillness from which you can learn, listen, and look deeply.

## Loving Awareness

Notice how loving awareness fills time and space. This is the mystery witnessing itself. In loving awareness, the river of thoughts and images flows without judgment. With loving awareness, you experience the stream of feelings without being afraid, falling under their spell, or grasping too tightly. Delight and anxiety, anger, tenderness, and longing, even grief and tears are all welcome. And loving awareness encourages the full measure of joy, inviting well-being to grow.

As you rest in loving awareness, trust grows. You trust the universe to run itself, and you trust your awareness to hold it all. I remember when I first learned to swim in the university pool. I was a shivering, skinny seven-year-old. I flailed and bobbed around. And then, one moment, being held by the instructor as I lay on my back, he removed his hand and I realized I could float. It was magic. I learned to swim. In the same way, you can learn to trust loving awareness. It will always hold you.

As an experiment, try *not* to be aware. Take thirty seconds right now and stop being aware of any sense impressions, thoughts, feelings, and so forth. Try hard. Even if you close your eyes and plug your ears, it doesn't work, does it? You can't stop it. Awareness is always here.

Like the fish that can't see the water, you cannot see awareness directly. But you can experience it and therefore trust it. Loving awareness is spacious, open, transparent, silent, vast, and responsive like a mirror. You can always return to it. It is timeless, awake, and appreciative. Loving

awareness sees without possessing. It allows, honors, connects, and dances with life as it is. It appreciates but does not grasp experiences or things. Author Steven Wright elucidates, “I have the world’s largest collection of seashells. I keep it on all the beaches of the world. Perhaps you’ve seen it.”

## Running from Hyenas

Benjamin, age sixty-four, lost more than half his retirement savings in the 2008 economic crisis. He knew that he and his wife were better off than others whose mortgages went underwater and were losing their homes, but he became almost sick with anxiety. He checked the stock market ten times a day. His dreams were filled with images of drowning, being chased by hyenas, losing his way. His family told him to stop obsessing, but he didn’t know how. When he came to his first meditation class, it was nearly impossible for him to sit still. Anxiety generated feelings in his body that were hard to accept, and his mind was racing. Should he pull his remaining money out of the badly lowered stocks? Might he lose more by abandoning a questionable real estate venture?

At the second class he attended, I led a guided meditation on space, inviting vast open awareness to surround body and mind. Students listened to the Tibetan bells in the room and the distant traffic and voices outside, listening as though their minds were as big as the sky and all the sounds were clouds within it. This experience brought Benjamin a sense of relief, and he bought a meditation CD to take home. After that, when anxious thoughts woke him in the night, he had a way to work with them. With vast space as his mantra, the grip of his obsession began to loosen. Now he had some perspective. He knew he could safeguard what remained of his money and invest more conservatively. He also relaxed the need to imagine he could control the future. Freed from obsessive thoughts, he was able to be present with his family again.

Shifts like Benjamin’s are possible for everyone. We all remember times we’ve felt spacious and calm. We listen better, see more clearly, exercise more perspective. With spacious awareness, our inner life becomes clearer,

too. Difficult emotions get clarified, their energy freed. Depression reveals its message about hurt, anger, and unmet needs. Fearful stories, when seen clearly, are lovingly open to release. The freedom of a spacious mind and heart is always available. Turn toward it. Open to vastness whenever you can. Become the sky of loving awareness.

## Rest in Love

Spaciousness, awareness, and love are intertwined. I heard Frank Ostaseski, a friend who cofounded the Zen Hospice in San Francisco, tell the story of a resident there in a great deal of pain, who asked if learning meditation could help. He had terminal stomach cancer. They began to meditate by turning a kind attention toward the physical sensations.

But as he tried to open to these sensations, it was too intense for him and he screamed, “I can’t, it’s too much. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.” Frank told him okay, let’s try something else and put his own hand gently on the man’s stomach and said how’s that? He said, “Oh, that hurts too much.” “Let’s try this,” Frank went on, and put his hands near the man’s feet. He said, “Ah, that’s a little better.” Then Frank put his hands a foot or two away from the man’s body. And he said, “That’s lovely actually.”

This was no special form of body work, no esoteric practice. Just an opening to more and more space. After a few minutes, from a more relaxed face, the fellow said softly, “Oh, rest in love, rest in love.” After that, whenever he’d get in trouble with his pain, he would push his morphine pump and then just repeat to himself, “Rest in love, rest in love.”

It’s really simple. Whether it’s physical or emotional pain, anything you give space to can be transformed. Whatever the situation, widen the space; remember vastness; allow ease and perspective. Spaciousness is the doorway to freedom. Your spacious heart is your true home.

### PRACTICE

## *Opening to Spacious Awareness*

Think of a time in your life when you felt the most expansive, open, and loving. It may have been walking in the mountains, looking at the night sky filled with stars, or after the birth of a child. Remember how spacious awareness feels in your body. How it feels in the heart. Let the mind quiet. Remember how silent it was, how present you could be.

Now close your eyes. Feel that same vastness here and now. Relax and become the space of loving awareness that can allow sunshine, storm clouds, lightning, praise and blame, gain and loss, expansion and contraction, the world endlessly giving birth to itself, all with your gracious and peaceful heart.

## PRACTICE

### *Mind Like the Sky*

Sit comfortably and at ease. Let your body be at rest and your breath natural. Close your eyes. Take several full breaths and let each breath release gently. Allow yourself to be still.

Now shift your awareness away from the breath. Listen to the play of sounds around you. Notice whether they are loud or soft, far or near. Just listen. Notice how all sounds arise and vanish, leaving no trace. Listen for a while in a relaxed, open way.

As you listen, let yourself sense or imagine that your mind is not limited to your head. Sense that your mind is expanding to be like the sky—open, clear, vast like space. There is no inside or outside. Let the awareness of your mind extend in every direction, like the sky.

Allow the sounds you hear to arise and pass away in the open sky of your mind. Relax in this huge openness and just listen. Let the sounds come and go, far and near, like clouds in the vast sky of your own awareness. The sounds play through the sky, appearing and disappearing without resistance.

Then, as you rest in this open awareness, notice how thoughts and images also arise and vanish. They are like clouds. Let the thoughts and images come and go without struggle or resistance. Pleasant and unpleasant thoughts, pictures, words, and feelings move unrestricted in

the space of mind. Problems, possibilities, joys, and sorrows come and go in the vast open sky of mind.

After a time, let this spacious awareness notice the body. Become aware of how the body is not solid. The sensations of breath and body float and change in the same open sky of awareness. In awareness, the body can be felt as floating areas of hardness and softness, pressure and tingling, warm and cool sensations, all appearing in the space of the mind's awareness. Notice, too, how the breath breathes itself; it moves like a breeze.

Let all experience be like clouds. The breath moves as it will. Sensations float and change. Allow all thoughts and images, feelings and sounds to come and go, floating in the clear open space of awareness.

Finally, pay attention to the awareness itself. Notice how the open space of awareness is naturally clear, transparent, timeless, without conflict, allowing all things to be but not limited by them. Remember the pure open sky of your own true nature. Return to it. Trust it. It is home.

## Chapter 2

---

# Free to Love

*What good is a clear mind if not wedded to a tender heart?*

**W**e all want to love and be loved. Love is the natural order, the main attraction, the mover of nations, the bees in spring, the tender touch, the first and the last word. It is like gravity, a mysterious force that ties all things together, the heart's memory of being in the womb and the oneness before the Big Bang. The vastness of the sky is equaled by the vastness of the heart.

Neuroscience shows us that love is a necessity; its absence damages not only individuals, but also whole societies. Our brains require bonding and nurturing. Close emotional connection changes neural patterns, affecting our sense of self and making empathy possible. "In some important ways, people cannot be stable on their own," writes Thomas Lewis, MD, in *A General Theory of Love*.

## The Beloved

All the work of Dante, the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century master poet of *The Divine Comedy*, was inspired by a single moment of love, and that love lives on. As Jungian analyst Robert Johnson describes, it began when

the young Dante was standing near the Ponte Vecchio, a graceful medieval bridge that crosses the Arno River in Florence. It was just before 1300, and Dante spotted a young woman named Beatrice standing on the bridge. The sight of her ignited in him a vision that contained the whole of eternity. Dante only spoke to her a few times and, shortly after his epiphany, Beatrice died, carried off by the plague. Dante was stricken by the loss, but his work was inspired by Beatrice. She became his muse, his anima, the bridge between his soul and Heaven itself.

Six hundred fifty years later, during World War II, the Americans were chasing the German army up the Italian peninsula, as the Germans, in retreat, were blowing up everything in their wake, including bridges, to stop the Americans' progress. But no one wanted to blow up the Ponte Vecchio, because Beatrice had stood on it and Dante had written about her. So, the leaders of the German army made radio contact with the Americans and, in plain language, said they would leave the Ponte Vecchio intact if the Americans would promise not to use it. The promise held; the bridge was not blown up, and not one American soldier or piece of equipment went across it. The bridge was spared in a modern, ruthless war, because Beatrice had stood upon it and love had touched Dante.

Remember the days you were in love, how it felt on a spring day of crocuses and plum blossoms or a crisp autumn evening with the smell of burning leaves, how your heart soared as you met your Beatrice or Brent standing on the street corner. And if you never fell in love because of the oppression or pain around you, the Persian poet Rumi suggests, "Today is the day to start."

Love and spacious awareness are your true nature. They commingle. The sage Nisargadatta frames it this way: "Wisdom says I am nothing. Love says I am everything." Consciousness knows each experience; love connects it all. For a time, you can get caught in fear and separation. We all do. And then loving awareness remembers. Oh, this, too, is a place to love.

Love is inclusive, generous, and down-to-earth. Father Greg Boyle, author of *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, writes about his work with gangs in LA's immigrant community. He also tends

Dolores Mission Church, and in the 1980s, the church was a sanctuary for undocumented immigrants. Recently arrived men from Mexico and Central America would sleep each night in the church, and women and children in the convent. One morning, someone had angrily spray-painted across the front steps: WETBACK CHURCH, intended as a massive insult. Saddened and upset, Father Greg assured those inside, “I’ll get one of the homies to clean it up later.” It was one of the jobs the ex-gang kids he worked with would do.

But to his surprise, Petra Saldana, a normally quiet member of her church, stood up and addressed the congregation in no uncertain terms, “You will not clean this up! If there are people in our community who are despised and hated and left out because they are *mojados* (wetbacks) . . . then we shall proudly call ourselves a wetback church.”

Solidarity. Compassion. Love.

## Love’s Many Faces

Love is unstoppable. It seeps into our words and our actions in a thousand ways. Sometimes it feels limited, sometimes expansive, but underneath, the mystery of love always pushes through. It has a thousand flavors. There is the kind of love expressed as desire: “I love chocolate ice cream; I’d love to find a new apartment.” There is love as an exchange, businessman’s love: “I’ll love you if you make this deal.” There is romantic love, the love that writes poetry and operas, that creates songs and tales of infatuation, falling in love, obsessive love, and the love like that for Helen of Troy, which launched a thousand ships and a war.

There is brotherly/sisterly love. This love cares for others, as part of the human family. In many cultures, family titles are used for everyone from politicians to Nobel laureates: Grandfather Tutu, Grandmother Angela Merkel. In America, we would say Auntie Hillary and Uncle Barack.

There is parental love for each precious child—unshakable caring, like the stories of mothers who lift cars to free their children and those of fathers who rush into burning buildings.



There is devotional love, and there is divine love, the spiritual ecstatic love that grows as vast as the ocean the moment you jump in.

And there is love for no reason, love in being alive, love married to invincible joy, openhearted and overflowing love, free and natural as a spring breeze.

When you open to any form of love, others feel it. Neuroscience calls this *limbic resonance*. Your mirror neurons and whole nervous system are constantly attuned to those around you, and love is communicable. We catch it from one another. Love permeates activity and changes all things. Neem Karoli Baba was asked how to get enlightened. “Love people” was his answer. “Love them and feed them.”

Jerry Flaxstead, MD, describes his initial revulsion to a patient named Frank, an angry and obese homeless man who had diabetes, was unbathed, and had gangrenous legs and open sores. When he did not take his meds for his mental disorder, Frank would flail his arms and spew epithets and curses at those around him. Frank was admitted repeatedly to the hospital. For Dr. Flaxstead, Frank was a patient who was hard to love.

One day, Frank was brought to Richmond Hospital with congestive heart failure. The diagnosis was serious, and Dr. Flaxstead tended him as best as he could. Then twenty members of the down-home neighborhood church in whose shelter Frank sometimes slept arrived. They brought flowers and homemade food, chanted and sang hymns to Frank, creating a chorus of care and communion. When Dr. Flaxstead returned to Frank’s room after tending to another patient on the ward, he saw that Frank was smiling, bathed in their love. The doctor realized that he had never really seen Frank at all.

## Grace and Angst

No matter where we are, we can see the world through the eyes of love. Without love, everything is constrained, if not false. With love, we stand in the presence of all of life’s mysteries. We can hold a golden apricot, a worn baseball glove, a photo of a child, or an old chipped cup, and our love can

burst forth. Holding a stone, we feel the whole mountain. When we gaze at a pine tree, its presence becomes love of the earth itself. When love is present in us, the world returns our glance, radiant and filled with its blessings.

When Bill Moyers was filming *On Our Own Terms*, a PBS series on death and dying, he was concerned that his young production-crew members had never been close to death. So, he asked Frank Ostaseski, founder of Zen Hospice, to meet with the crew and describe the stages of dying and the people they would be filming. To humanize it, Frank handed out eight-by-ten black-and-white photos, intimate close-ups taken of patients who had come through the Zen Hospice over the years. The crew sat quietly meditating on the photos, looking at the eyes and tender faces of each individual facing death. After five minutes, Frank asked them to pass the photos to the person on their right, and they couldn't. They'd each fallen in love with the person whose photo they were holding.

The human heart longs to love and be loved, yet we are all too often afraid. We've been hurt, betrayed, abandoned, misunderstood, targeted, left out, and our love story has become a ghost story. The ghosts of loss and pain haunt us, warning us to hedge our bets and put up a shield to protect ourselves from further loss and rejection.

Rejection is one of the most difficult experiences to bear; it touches our most primal pains of abandonment, echoing the mistaken belief that there is something wrong with us, that we are unworthy, unattractive, unlovable. Whatever form our injury takes—family trauma, abuse, or neglect by an overwhelmed family or a loveless institution—we may become afraid to love. We have trouble opening to love, even for ourselves. Yet each of us is a mysterious, unique, amazing being, fully worthy of love.

Like rejection, fear of death or fear of the unknown can also block our love when we are afraid. We cling to a protective shell, a small sense of self that wants to be secure, to control life. We pretend we aren't vulnerable, but this is an illusion. We are incarnated in a delicate body, intertwined in the community of life. Our senses have evolved to be exquisitely attuned to the ever-changing world of pleasure and pain, sweet and sour, gain and

loss. Love and freedom invite us to turn toward the full measure of this world. They offer the gifts of a flexible heart, wide enough to embrace experience, vulnerable yet centered.

“Ultimately it is upon your vulnerability that you depend,” the poet Rilke writes. We are born and cared for by others, and we’ll die in the same way. For the time that we are here, we are dependent on the web of life. We eat from the farmers’ verdant fields, we trust other drivers to stay on their side of the road, we rely on the water department, the utility web, the electrical engineers, and the teachers, hospitals, and firefighters who sustain our lives. Listen to Mother Teresa: “If we have no peace, it’s because we’ve forgotten we belong to each other.” When we honor our vulnerability and our dependence on the community of life, we open to love.

Yes, you’ve been hurt and abandoned. But you found a way to survive your traumatic past and now the prison door is unlocked; you can walk out anytime. How long will you keep your heart closed? How long will you turn your back on love? Whatever blocks your love is, in the end, unreal. Take W. H. Auden’s advice and learn to “love your crooked neighbor with your own crooked heart.” Have courage. Tend to politics, care for the community around you, but remember that, in the end, it is your love that matters most. Love is your gateway to freedom and your last word.

## Respond with Love

Ismael and Bridgit met in Indonesia and fell in love. She was working for an international nongovernmental organization, and he had just returned from a Fulbright Fellowship in America. They shared a devotion to the education of village children. Ismael came from a well-to-do business family who lived in Singapore and Brussels. Their clan was Sunni Muslim, well educated and devout. Bridgit had been raised with modern European ways, and Ismael’s parents cringed when they first saw photos of her in a short sleeveless dress. Parents want their child to marry the person they think will bring happiness and success and will carry on the family’s future. As if in a Shakespearean play, Ismael’s parents did all they could to stop the

relationship, threatening to cut off money and calling it a betrayal of the family. “They tried to stop us from loving each other,” explained Bridgit. “All we wanted to do was to put more love in the world.”

One night in London, she and Ismael looked at each other and lifted all the family-made suffering and fear up to the light. They drank tea, went for a walk under the stars, held each other. And they realized there was nothing wrong. For the first time, they knew they were not bound by the external opinions and judgments of others. All else—the ignorance and fears of the family—was superfluous. “We knew from within that we were allowed to love, we were right to love.” They looked into their hearts and determined to respond with love.

They were married in a chapel in Scotland, and Ismael’s parents attended. They had realized that their son would be their son no matter what. The minister read a passage on love and mercy from the Koran, and they all began to weep. It was a Brave New World, and Ismael and Bridgit knew they were free to love. They now have two beautiful children and work for the United Nations in Africa.

## The Sparkle in Your Eyes

Romantic love can deepen when we let it. At first it is a kind of idol worship. It can come with idealism, possessiveness, jealousy, and need. Our songs and movies and dreams are full of idealistic, romantic love, the eros of sexual desire. “I want you, I need you, oh baby, oh baby.” You see another person who matches enough of your inner image of “the desired one,” your heartstrings resonate, and you are intoxicated, not only by his or her looks and wit and charm and strengths, but by how the person fits your own template of the one you want to love. The other person becomes, like Beatrice was for Dante, the ideal that awakens your own loving heart. You transfer onto the other person your longings, so he or she represents and carries beauty, strength, courage, intelligence, and steadiness. These qualities are also in you, but you don’t always know it. They are unconscious, so your beloved becomes the carrier of your own golden

qualities, and being with her or him helps you feel lovable, complete, whole.

You know the rest of the story. Placing your beloved on a pedestal works for a time, but slowly you look down from the golden glow and encounter the clay feet. They burp, belch, pout, get irritated, withdraw or cling, are too messy or too controlling. They become human. Of course, then you might discard the fallen lover and look for a better one, but this would be never-ending. Instead, when your idealistic love has been disappointed, a freer love is available. If you and the other person are a good-enough match, you can stay with the relationship and let it deepen and lead you to fuller, truer love. This is an invitation to love beyond expectations, clinging, or attachment.

Still, attachment, clinging, and expectations will arise along with love, and there will be times when your love is mixed with need and fear. Here is what you learn. Whenever you cling to how your partner (or your children or anyone) *should* be, you create suffering. Your partner does not want to be controlled; he or she wants to be loved, seen, accepted, held in your heart, and honored and respected and blessed by your love.

You might ask, if our love is not based on attachment, what holds us together? Care, commitment, and dedication. Commitment isn't about loving another person only when he does what you want, meets *your* needs, or when she fulfills your ideas for her life. You commit to love them as they are and dedicate yourself to their flowering. They will change and grow and explore, and sometimes they will do what you want and sometimes they won't. This is the paradox of love, that it does not grasp. Love is generous, spacious, and free to bless. We love best when we let go of expectations, just as we pray best when we don't expect a certain outcome. As T. S. Eliot instructs, "Teach us to care, and not to care."

"To have loved one soul is like adding its life to your own," said Meher Baba. True love, given freely, blesses the one you love and frees you at the same time. This is love that is openhearted, spontaneously offered, caring no matter what. Your commitment is to love, and your dedication is to honor the heart's connection.

caring for the one they're with. Though your True Nature is love and awareness, at times you forget, which is utterly human. Ursula Le Guin reminds us, "Love must be remade each day, baked fresh like bread."

Modern neuroscience reinforces that while love is native to us, it is also a quality that can be developed. Like gratitude and forgiveness, love can be invited, nourished, and awakened. It can flower and expand. It can become our way, no matter what. Every great spiritual tradition understands this. Ecstatic music and art, devotional prayer, sacred rituals, and contemplative practices all offer us ways to open to love. Neuroscience shows how practices of love and compassion can change our nervous system and greatly increase access to these capabilities.

Practices of lovingkindness and compassion drawn from Eastern psychology are being adapted for medicine, education, psychotherapy, conflict resolution, even for business. The inner trainings of meditation and prayer tune us in to the love channel. They invite us into the reality of love over and over until the time comes when love bursts our heart open, swoops in and fills us, and we can't say no.

Think of those who choose love in this world, and remember that you can awaken your own love and join them. Practicing in any of these ways profoundly affects how you hold others. Thupten Jinpa, His Holiness the Dalai Lama's translator, tells a story of a middle-aged doctor of internal medicine who came to their Stanford program on lovingkindness and mindful compassion. The doctor was disheartened. He had lost his spark at work and felt weary and pressured by the speed of care required by the insurance-driven medical system. After two months of compassion and kindness classes, he said he changed the way he greeted his patients and listened to and interacted with them. Meditating on lovingkindness and compassion renewed his sense of connection to himself and those he treated. One of his patients, an older woman, asked him, "Doctor, you seem different, what has happened to you? Are you in love or something?"

## Blessing of Respect

Love brings with it the blessing of respect. At a men's retreat, Richard shared with other attendees a story about his role as the host of a Sunday afternoon radio show in Los Angeles that was devoted to the blues. He got lots of mail, including from devoted listeners incarcerated in Southern California prisons. One letter came from an older man, Walter Jones, who requested he play some of the early blues greats: Blind Lemon Jefferson, Muddy Waters, and Big Joe Williams. Richard devoted part of one Sunday show to these blues icons, announcing they'd been requested by a Mr. Walter Jones, a man who clearly had rich knowledge of the history of the blues. Several weeks later he received a letter from Walter in prison, thanking him for the show and the acknowledgment, adding, "That's the first time I ever remember hearing my name spoken with respect."

When Yasim, a refugee from Kosovo, came to the United States at age seventeen, she was disoriented and lost, filled with anxiety and worry. She studied health technology in a community college and got a job in a large, overbusy urban clinic. With the ongoing stress in the health-care system, she felt overwhelmed.

She attended a weekend retreat and learned *metta* (lovingkindness) meditation. Her meditations were naturally visual and filled with colors, and she was able to apply this newfound skill to her daily work. As each patient arrived, Yasim would sense a color that surrounded them, then in her mind's eye she would fill that color with love. This helped her see beyond each patient's demeanor—their worn clothes, illness, or mood—and hold them in her heart. But love for herself was more difficult for her. Her family in Kosovo, when they were trying to survive, had been very harsh, and the legacy was painful. She was doubtful, self-critical, filled with shame. When she thought of her friends or the patients at the clinic, each came with a color. But when she directed thoughts of love toward herself, she found only a hard, black hole in her heart.

One day, she received an affectionate message from a work colleague. This was a woman Yasim had a secret crush on. The note filled her heart with waves of kindness and a golden color. Another note brought more joy. When Yasim meditated and tried *metta* for herself, the black hole dissolved

into open spaciousness and the colors of luminous clouds appeared. She told me, “Loving others healed half my heart; feeling loved helped heal the other half.” Being human, Yasim had to repeat the practice. Openness doesn’t always last. The heart opens and closes, and feelings fade. But now Yasim knows what it’s like to feel loved and to love herself.

Trust in your goodness. Find the safety you need to open. Let love resurrect you. Let its magnetic pull connect you with the life energy you were born into. Let love make you quiet, tender, strong, and caring. Let love make you dance. Discover the love that is your home. Live from the love that you *are*.

## PRACTICE

### *Lovingkindness Meditation*

*I am larger than I thought!*

*I did not know I held so much goodness!*

—WALT WHITMAN

Begin the practice of lovingkindness by meditating for fifteen or twenty minutes in a quiet place. Sit so that you feel comfortable. Let your body rest and your heart be soft.

It is best to begin by directing lovingkindness to those you love, because often people can find it difficult to direct love to themselves. Picture someone you love a lot, where love comes easily and is uncomplicated. Start where it’s easy to first open the heart. You can even begin with a child or a pet.

Breathe gently and recite inwardly the following traditional good wishes directed toward their well-being.

*May you be filled with lovingkindness.*

*May you be safe.*

*May you be well.*

*May you be at ease and happy.*



As you repeat these phrases, hold this loved one in lovingkindness. Adjust the words and images to best open your heart. Repeat these phrases and kind intentions over and over again, letting the feelings permeate your body and mind.

This meditation may, at times, feel mechanical or awkward. It can also bring up feelings of irritation or anger. If this happens, it is especially important to be patient and kind toward yourself, allowing whatever arises to be held in a spirit of friendliness and kind affection.

After a few minutes, picture a second easy person and extend the same wishes of lovingkindness to them. Whether the image or feelings are clear or not does not matter. Simply continue to plant the seeds of loving wishes, repeating the phrases gently, no matter what arises. The rule in lovingkindness practice is to follow the way that most easily opens your heart.

Now after a time, you are ready to turn to lovingkindness for yourself. Envision or imagine these two loved ones gazing back at you with the same well wishing. They want you, too, to be held in kindness, to be safe and well, to be happy. Picture them saying to you, kindly:

*May you be filled with lovingkindness.*

*May you be safe.*

*May you be well.*

*May you be at ease and happy.*

Receive these gratefully. After a few repetitions, take their good wishes into yourself. You may even wish to place a hand on your heart. And recite:

*May you be filled with lovingkindness.*

*May you be safe.*

*May you be well.*

*May you be at ease and happy.*

When you have established a sense of lovingkindness for yourself, you can expand your meditation to include others. Choose a benefactor,

someone in your life who has loved or cared for you. Picture this person and carefully recite the same phrases.

When lovingkindness for your benefactor has developed, you can gradually include other people you care about in your meditation. Picture each beloved person, recite the same phrases, evoking a sense of lovingkindness for each person in turn. After this, you can include a wider circle of friends. Then gradually extend your meditation step-by-step to picture and include community members, neighbors, people everywhere, animals, all beings, the whole earth.

Finally, include the difficult people in your life, even your enemies, wishing that they, too, may be filled with lovingkindness and peace. This will take practice. But as your heart opens, first to loved ones and friends, you will find that in the end, you won't want to close it to anyone.

Lovingkindness can be practiced anywhere. You can use this meditation in traffic jams, in buses, and on airplanes. As you silently practice this meditation among people, you will immediately feel a wonderful connection with them: the power of lovingkindness. It will calm your mind, open your heart, and keep you connected to all beings.

tyrants, and for a time they can seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Think of it, always.”

During hard times, trust demands a shift from the small self, the body of fear, to a connection with that which is vast, sacred, holy. It is a trust in the greatness of the human spirit.

Enduring the pain of broken trust, it may take some time until your faith in life is restored. But it can be renewed. Remember, it is not just you. We've all been betrayed, had our trust broken, abused. Sometimes betrayal starts in a painful childhood. Sometimes it is later: lovers who had affairs, business partners who betrayed and stole from you, family members fighting, strangers who violate your home or body, institutions that lie. These breaches of trust are difficult to heal. But you can learn to trust again. Wise trust is not naïve. You can be trusting and protect your body, your heart, and your possessions. Wise trust requires discernment, the ability to distinguish what is worthy of trust and, most of all, the ways you have to trust yourself.

We can trust that the joy and the suffering given to us are what we need to awaken to freedom. Hardship and loss are the graduate school of trust. They teach us survival and a freedom that is unshakable. There is a force born in us from a thousand generations of ancestors, survivors who have offered us life. Now it's our turn. Even when we've lost money, our job, a relationship, or hope, it is not the end. Like the grass that pushes through cracks in the sidewalk, trust can grow again. No matter how lost or desolate we may feel, something new awaits us, and life continues.

## The Dance of Life

We live in a culture that encourages the belief that we can control everything. We try to eat healthy diets, watch the Weather Channel for storm predictions 24/7, and stand in long security lines at airports. But, ultimately, no one can predict illness, tornadoes, or accidents. Nor can we accurately predict rainbows, smiles, gestures of love, or the span of a life. Our politicians foster fear, often misleading us about impending danger,

putting out one fearful story after another. We were once directed to fear Communists, nuclear war, and gays; now we are encouraged to fear terrorists, immigrants, and Muslims.

H. L. Mencken, a journalist in the 1920s, saw this whipping-up of fear as endemic to politics. “The whole aim of politics is to keep the populace alarmed—and hence clamorous to be led to safety—by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, almost all of them imaginary.” This dynamic persists today. A barrage of scary stories and lies from politicians and officials resonates with our underlying anxiety.

Yes, things are uncertain, but wisdom brings us love, perspective, and the ability to trust. Wisdom invites us to live with a trusting heart. Howard Zinn, author of the celebrated *People’s History of the United States*, notes, “Revolutionary change comes as an endless succession of surprises.” He cites the fall of the Soviet Union, the Spanish shift from fascism to democracy, the Chinese Communist turn toward capitalism.

*I keep encountering young people who, in spite of all the evidence of terrible things happening, also give hope. There are hundreds of thousands working for the good everywhere . . . To be hopeful in hard times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.*

What is true for the collective is true for each of us. In the worst of times, you may lose your job or your home, become seriously ill, or find yourself in a painful divorce. Yet the heart can still trust—even in the midst of your difficulty. This is not naïve trust—you are not necessarily counting