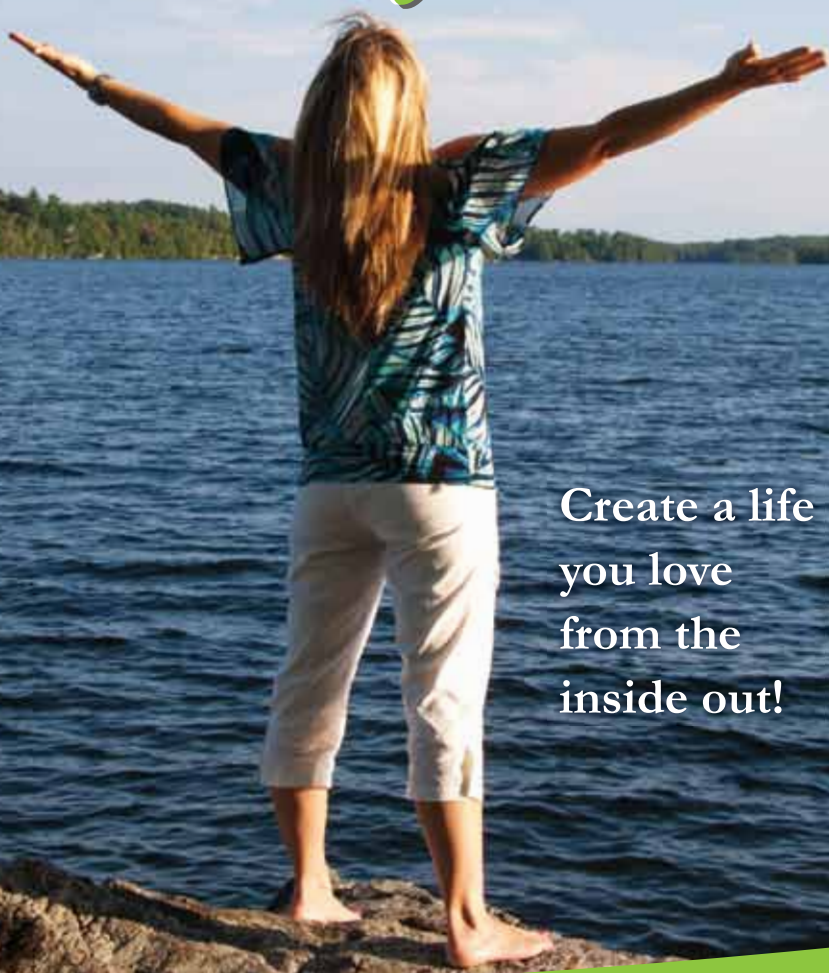


free to be me



Create a life
you love
from the
inside out!

karen strang allen

praise
karen strang allen and free to be me

“Karen Strang Allen’s *Free to be me* is one of the most comprehensive books I’ve ever seen on creating the most extraordinary life you can imagine. There is no time better than NOW to take yourself and your life to the next level, and this book will be your guide.”

—**Hal Elrod**, #1 bestselling author of *The Miracle Morning*

“I could not put it down! Karen is so gifted and inspiring—one of those rare writers who is deeply real about her own experiences. Her insights evoke emotion, compassion, and a feeling of being understood. Every chapter left me with goosebumps and wanting to learn more. This book will forever change the way you view your life, and will empower you to be the creator of your ideal future.”

—**Jenny Cooper**, owner of JC Consulting, Arbonne® consultant,
and mother of two

“Wow! You gotta get this book, because it’s really funny, inspiring, and entertaining! Karen’s witty humor makes it so easy to figure out who you truly are, where you want to go, and how to get there. If your life is begging you to make a positive change now, *Free to be me* is just what the doctor ordered!”

—**Mike Angulo**, master NLP practitioner and life coach

“This book is intriguing and insightful, with a big impact. Karen draws on her own personal experiences to create a mind-body-spirit roadmap to help you manifest the life you want. If you put just one of these steps into practice, you can find a more peaceful way to live, work, and feel. *Free to be me* is a heartfelt and entertaining path to a balanced life.”

—**Kealy Mann**, naturopathic doctor and mother of two

“*Free to be me* is a refreshing look at life with all of its ups and downs, good and bad. Karen Strang Allen shares important life lessons and simple tools for change that anyone can do right now, right away, to live the life they’ve always wanted. Like the journey of the caterpillar into the butterfly, Allen leads the reader step by step on a path of transformation and self-awareness.”

—**Jennifer Jane Clark**, transformational coach and professional spiritual teacher

“*Free to be me* is packed with the principles and practical direction needed to live a passionate and fulfilling life. Karen Strang Allen has studied the self-help masters, and with stories of personal experience and a sprinkling of humor, has compiled an inspirational, motivational compendium to address the challenges of modern-day living. It will be a must read for my daughter, and several copies will be needed for the patients in my reception room. I only wish that our schools included material like this in their curriculum.”

—**Dr. Ken W. Dick**, sports kinesiologist, doctor of chiropractic, and father of three

“I took life coaching lessons from Karen Strang Allen, who is a knowledgeable and inspiring coach. She has guided me through some really challenging times, helping me to see myself more positively, and to believe that I can get what I want. After each session with her, I felt grounded and powerful. Everything in my life is getting better, and I now have a job after being unemployed for over a year. I have also read her book and love it! Her personal experiences really resonate with me, leaving me to believe that if she can do it, so can I. *Free to be me* is the ultimate guide for how to change your life. I highly recommend it and will be passing on many copies to my friends.”

—**Linda Ciarla**, events coordinator

“Karen shares very practical tools that her readers can use to transform themselves from the inside out. She puts the fun back into personal development and, through her alter ego, presents wit that will be sure to make you laugh. This is a must read!”

—**Mary Cavanagh**, co-founder of Ignite Potentials Training
and life coach

free to be me

Create a life you love
from the inside out!

by

karen strang allen

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dedication

This book is dedicated to my soul sisters—Shelley, Cindy, Jenny, Mary, Nina, Kerrie, Cara, Linda, Jane, Carolyn, and others—who have been wonderful companions on my spiritual adventures and encouraged me to write and publish this book. It is also written for my beautiful children, Keagan and Keira, who give me daily doses of inspiration and love. May your lives be filled with joy, love, laughter, and meaning.

Also in memory of my late husband, Blair Allen, who—through his love of life, people, nature, and me—inspired this journey of self-exploration.

note to readers

While this book sometimes makes reference to my former husband James, he and I separated amicably at the end of 2008 and now share custody of our two beloved children. I left in references to him, since I believe a book is a snapshot in time. It took me eight years to complete this book, and my experiences with James at the time this book was being written were integral to the themes and ideas explored here. Despite the fact that our relationship as husband and wife has ended, I still value the contribution James made to my life. Without his support, this book would likely never have seen the light of day.

Also, while I try to use generic language like “Universe” to describe the higher power that connects us all, I sometimes use Christian language in this book (God, angels), since I had a Christian upbringing (even though I now practice a non-denominational spirituality). I welcome that you may have a different background and use other words to describe your spirituality. This book is for people of all spiritual beliefs, so please feel free to substitute the words that resonate most with you. (See Chapter 7 for more about the words and definitions I use.)

Lastly, I am not a psychiatrist, doctor, or counsellor, and I do not know your particular circumstances. So I cannot give you therapeutic advice. I am a professional writer, a life coach, and a mother of two, so I have done a lot of research and have a great deal of experience with finding the blessings in challenges and creating a great life. My intention with this book is to share what I have

learned that works for me and others in my life, in the hope that it will work for you too. Ultimately, however, it is your life, so you must decide what is right for you and seek advice from health professionals if you need it.

This book uses mind-body-spirit principles and my own life experiences to show you how to shift your beliefs about yourself and create the life you want. Using the metaphor of how a caterpillar transforms into a beautiful butterfly, it leads you step by step through the process of personal transformation.

The book is written in five parts, divided into 11 chapters, with each part showing a different stage in the metamorphosis process. While you do not have to read all chapters consecutively, it is a good idea to read the Preface, Part I (the caterpillar), and Part II (the butterfly) first, as they explain the process used in this book to help you transform your life from what it currently is into what you really want it to be.

Part III (the chrysalis) will give you a greater understanding of how the mind-body-spirit connection works so you can use it to your benefit. While this may be a review for those of you who have been studying this area for a while, it is particularly important for anyone new to these concepts.

Part IV (metamorphosis) gives you the tools you will need to transform your life. Feel free to skim through the subtitles and pick and choose the ones that resonate most with you.

Part V (taking flight) is meant to be read in its entirety, as it ties everything together and leaves you with a plan of action for changing your life and making a difference in the world as well.

preface

It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.

—Henry David Thoreau

Most of us live our lives from the outside in. We gaze through hazy windows and over stained wood fences, observing the world and people around us. We often compare our lives, and believe we are lacking in...something. Maybe we think we're not pretty, handsome, confident, smart, or strong enough. Maybe we believe our neighbours are more wealthy, powerful, or happy.

But these feelings of inferiority are illusions. They are errors in perception, based on faulty childhood beliefs about ourselves and how the world works. We think we are an ugly caterpillar, when really we are a beautiful butterfly, capable of flying anywhere we choose. We just need to go through a process of transformation before we're ready to emerge. Anything our neighbours are and have, we can be and have too. *And your neighbour's life probably isn't as perfect as you think anyway.*

But for most of us, instead of taking action to change what we don't like, we wait for...something. Something to happen, to change our lives. Someone to love us, to make us believe in ourselves. We

think the source of our problems—and therefore our solutions—is outside ourselves.

The good news is, we already have everything we need within us to create the life we want! We don't need something or someone else to do it for us. We already have all the tools and resources... we just need to learn how to use them. We also need to trust in the abundance of the Universe. Once we decide what we want and take positive action, the Universe will rise up to support us, opening doors we never realized were there.

Often, when we do start to make changes in our lives, we focus on external appearances. We change our hair, our clothes, our weight. We buy new cars and houses. We redecorate our homes or do some landscaping. We may even change jobs, friends, cities, or spouses, thinking if we just make this one change, then we'll be happy.

We make these changes with good intention, but we forget to change what really matters, what we carry with us wherever we go: our inner beliefs about who we are. No amount of cosmetic changes or material possessions will ever make us feel better or happier, if inside, we think there is something wrong with us.

Does any of this sound familiar to you?

Thankfully, creating real and lasting change for the better is easier than you think! To change your life on the outside, you must first change your beliefs on the inside about who you are and what is possible for your life. Then you must decide what you actually want, believe you can have it, overcome obstacles to getting it, and take action step by step. And suddenly, the life you've always dreamed of will start to take form. This is what it means to change your life from the inside out.

Transforming your life is like changing from a caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly. When you're a caterpillar, you have to slowly make your way through the world. You can't see very far ahead of

you. You risk being stepped on or eaten. People may judge you for what you look like on the outside, so you likely don't think much of yourself.

But once you transform into a butterfly, everything around you changes. You look and feel beautiful, powerful, happy. You are free to do what you want and go where you want. You can soar in the sky and see the bigger world around you. Your perspective completely shifts. Everything comes more easily to you. You bring beauty, peace, and joy into the lives of people around you.

Whoever told you you're a caterpillar left out one very important detail: you always were—and were always meant to be—a butterfly.

Part I



who you think you are
(the caterpillar)

*Everybody is a genius.
But if you judge a fish
by its ability to climb a tree,
it will live its whole life
believing that it is stupid.*

—*Albert Einstein*

Chapter 1



what on earth am i doing? our common quest for meaning

Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world.

Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.

—Rumi

Have you ever looked at your life, bewildered, and wondered how you got here? Do you question how you ended up in the place where you live, in the job you're in, or with the people you're with? Do you sometimes feel dissatisfied or not good enough, and want something to change, but are not sure where to start?

Many of us feel this way at some point in our lives, often in midlife. We begin questioning whether we are what we want to be, have what we want to have, and are doing what we really want to do. We wonder what our purpose and direction should be in life. But so much of our time and energy is consumed with simply getting through our day that we run on automatic pilot and forget to think about and visualize what we want for our future.

The first step in going anywhere new is to understand and accept where you currently are. By looking at how you got here, you can avoid taking the same detours in the future. Then, once you know where you actually want to go, you can plot the best route from here to there.

To help you do this, I will share my own personal experience of feeling lost and far removed from the life I really wanted, and provide you with shortcuts so you don't have to take the long route back to your dreams.

Where am I, and how did I get here?

My dream life looks something like this. I'm sitting nestled in a walnut brown wicker chair, on an expansive deck overlooking a lake. The sun is just beginning to rise, with pastel pinks and blues tinting the mist over the lake. It is quiet, not a boat on the water, with only the rustle of the maple trees and the soulful call of a loon to keep me company. The air is cool, but I keep warm with a sweater, a blanket, and a warm cup of tea.

On my knees sits my trusty laptop, and I can't help but smile as I write my next bestseller. My husband and kids are still asleep in the cottage, so I have a few hours to work before they join me for breakfast and a day of family fun. I am relaxed, peaceful, and overcome with a feeling of joy, purpose, and gratitude. This is the life I've always dreamed of, and now it is a reality.

My real life (a few years back) looked more like this. I stare at the mountain of laundry next to the washing machine. *Where on earth did all this come from? I did two loads yesterday!* My two-year-old daughter and four-year-old son are busily playing playdough in the living room, grinding bits of dough into the floor and their clothes. *Great—more stuff to clean.* Suddenly my daughter screams because her brother wrecked her playdough creation. *Sigh, another fight to break up.* Meanwhile, the timer goes off to remind me to

take the muffins out of the oven. *Where's an octopus when you need one? And when did I sign up for the "servant" job? I'm sure I'm over-qualified.*

I trip over a few trucks and dolls on my way up the stairs, and intervene in my children's dispute before it turns into an all-out war. Next, I spend a few minutes explaining the virtues of hand-washing and toilet flushing to my non-compliant son who left poo in the toilet while the stove timer continues to beep.

It's 9:30 a.m. on a Saturday, but already my head feels like a bashed-in watermelon: soft and squishy, too many dents, and much more water than substance. *Do I still have a brain? Can I articulate anything more intelligent than toddler-speak or a three-word command? And why does every second sentence involve the words "poop" or "pee"?*

Unlike some of my friends who swore they'd never have "rug rats," I knew since I was a pre-teen that I wanted to have children. I pictured soothing babies to sleep in my rocker-glider, snuggling cuddly toddlers on my lap as I read them a book, and enjoying fun family outings at the park.

Granted, all of these moments have materialized. My dream just left out the parts about monotonous housework, toys overtaking every room, temper tantrums, sleepless nights and children who don't listen. *And about sleep becoming way more important than sex. And about brain cells dying during labour and delivery, never to return.*

Hey, who is that? It sounds kind of like Stewie from "The Family Guy." I must be hearing voices again.

Don't get me wrong, I do enjoy being a mom. I love my children dearly. *Except when they're fighting. Or crying. Or being naughty.* But I discovered I was not very well cut out to be a stay-at-home mom, which I did for three years while the kids were little. I suck at being patient. I dislike routine, repetitive chores—like laundry,

dishes, putting away toys, and cleaning the house. *Most of what's involved in being a stay-at-home mom, really.* And I really don't like getting up in the middle of the night because once I do, I can't get back to sleep. *That's why you made your ex-husband, James, do it.*

Seriously, who is that? *It's Harold.* Harold—who on earth is Harold? *I'm the voice in your head.* Thanks, I gathered that. But who are you, really? *I'm your alter ego. I say what you're really thinking, what your "goody-two-shoes" side doesn't want to admit.* Lovely. What would I do without an alter ego. *My thoughts (or should I say "your thoughts") exactly.* OK, stop distracting me so I can get back to my story.

So, feeling like a failure as a stay-at-home mom, in 2009 I started back to work, opening my own writing consulting business. I quickly learned that achieving work-life balance looks way easier in Hollywood movies. In my world, I was either feeling guilty about not spending enough quality time with my kids, or feeling stressed that my kids were sick, causing me to miss work.

The year I returned to work, I often felt so tired at the end of the day that when I did get a chance to have some quiet time to myself, I'd plunk in front of the TV and watch "The Office," or "House," or "Survivor." Or anything that helped me to escape reality. *Who knew they called you the "Energizer Bunny" in university?*

I come from a long line of very bright, capable and strong women. *You forgot to mention stubborn and impatient.* My maternal Newberry heritage continues to have a strong influence on my personality and expectations of myself. I'm a perfectionist who has trouble settling for less than the ideal vision in my head. I like my house, my finances, my work, and my life to be neat and organized.

Like a lot of women, I act like Superwoman and think I should be able to do anything and everything...all at the same time. *Close, but no flowing cape and sexy tights.* I give a lot to others because I

genuinely want what's best for people, but then I realize I've sacrificed too much and become resentful. *Ah, the Newberry martyr syndrome. You come by that one honestly.* I have a good heart and work incredibly hard, but because I expect so much of myself, I can be hard to live and keep up with.

All of this means that my life (until recently) didn't quite live up to my expectations. By most people's standards, I had done well for myself. I had a caring, supportive husband and two wonderful kids. I had a fun, eclectic circle of friends and family. I lived in a modern four-bedroom house with a landscaped lawn, in a friendly neighbourhood within walking distance to shops, parks, and nature trails. *You also had a minivan. You were just missing a white picket fence.*

In the six years I worked before heading out on maternity and family leave, I scaled the ladder of success, working my way up from technical writer to project manager to manager of internal communications for a Canadian government department. I was approaching a six-figure salary when I decided to put a sticky note on my career and come back to it once I was done having children. *I think that note fell off your bulletin board a few years back.*

Then a funny thing happened. I realized I didn't want to go back to my job. Even though I was good at what I did, was respected and gaining influence, made a great salary, and even had an ergonomic chair and my own printer, none of it meant anything to me. *Not even the spa days or travel to exotic places your salary let you buy?*

OK, maybe those things meant a little. But I had come to despise what I did for a living. I enjoyed writing, but disliked what I was writing about. I hated office politics, but worked in a place where hierarchy was king, politics were the norm and you were expected to treat people differently based on their job title. I loved being creative and innovative, but had every ounce of creativity

squelched out of my work by the time it was pressed through the fifteen layers of management above me.

I was becoming someone I didn't even recognize and certainly didn't want to be. Gradually, I started hearing myself making negative, cynical, and sarcastic comments. *You're normally so soft-spoken.* I started noticing my staff, friends, and kids absorbing my negative energy and being adversely affected by my behaviour.

My health took a nosedive: I had migraines, month-long colds, back problems, and allergic reactions to everything. I stopped enjoying and doing the things I usually loved and instead sank my exhausted body every night onto the couch to watch TV, because it was the only thing I had the energy to do.

And I woke every morning with that ever-increasing feeling of dread that came with the inner knowing—admitted or not—that I was not living a life true to my purpose. I didn't want to get out of bed in the morning. I felt a growing sense of unease, dissatisfaction with life, and restlessness deep down in my bones. I felt disconnected.

I wanted...something more. More than getting up, going to work, coming home, doing chores, going to bed, then repeating it all the next day. Even more than a nice home, healthy kids, a supportive husband, and a good-paying job.

I was soul searching, looking for meaning, wanting connection, wanting that state of peaceful bliss I imagine whenever I see pictures of someone doing yoga on a dock overlooking a steamy lake at sunrise. *You want to be Rodney Yee?*



I'm guessing if you're reading this book, you can relate to at least some of this. You, too, may be feeling restless and unhappy with your life. Maybe it's clear to you why, or maybe it's not. You just

know you aren't where you want to be, and you're probably not quite sure how you got here. You may feel like you have lost touch with who you are and what really matters to you.

You may also feel like you have no control over your life's circumstances. That's just the way things are. Bad things "just happen" to you, and there's nothing you can do about it. You feel unhappy, so you distract yourself with any number of things—TV, food, drugs, alcohol, sex, texting, Facebook—to numb those uncomfortable feelings. But some part of you is wanting more. You may even feel you want to escape this life you now find yourself in.

You are not alone. So many people feel the same way you do. I used to also. Thankfully, you really do have the power to change your life. Whether you realize it or not, you actually created the life you're already living, through your thoughts and the choices you made. That is not meant to make you feel bad for where you currently are. It's actually a good thing! By realizing how you got to where you are, and how much power you actually do have to change things, you can create a different, much better life for yourself. You just need to think different thoughts and make new, more self-affirming choices.

Life is meant to be happy! It is meant to be much easier than it is now. And it will become both easier and happier once you learn how to change your beliefs about who you are and what is possible for you.

Waking up to the life you really want

Knowing I wanted my life to be different, but not sure what to do, I began learning about the mind-body-spirit connection and figuring out what I really wanted. I read books and took classes in everything from Reiki and law of attraction, to yoga and meditation.

I admired stories about monks and spiritual seekers who escaped to the mountains for months or even years at a time to explore the depths of their souls. I sometimes wished I could do the same. But I chose to be a mother, and even though there have been many days I would love to flee for the hills, I have made commitments to my children that I must keep. *And miles to go before you sleep.*

Besides, shouldn't it be possible to find meaning and be happy in everyday life? It's likely more challenging than if I removed myself from all distractions, but surely it's possible? *You always were a dreamer.*

So I began making some brave but scary choices. I didn't go back to work after my maternity leave was over in 2006. James and I made the expensive decision that we would give up nearly half our income and the maternity benefits I would have received for our planned second child so I could take another year off work, spend more time with my son, write this book, and figure out if I really wanted to be an author when I grew up.

Then in 2009, I started my own writing consulting business, called The Written Edge. The same year, James and I decided to separate, terrified of hurting our children, but knowing we were not happy together and that after 10 years of trying to "make it work," it was time to cut our losses. So I moved out and bought a new home, effectively jumping off two cliffs at the same time: leaving behind the financial security of both my marriage and my former full-time job.

It is hard to go against the grain and do something most people think is crazy. Most people would have returned to work for one year to keep the generous salary benefits the Canadian government gives you when you're on maternity leave. *You always had to be different.* It is even harder to make such a choice when you're not sure that the path you're now running down—*like an unsteady colt*—leads anywhere. What if people are not interested in what I

have to say? Or what if I discover I don't really like being an author/speaker/coach?

Believe me, I did not make any of those choices lightly, especially knowing they would also impact the lives of my children. And I did not feel brave at all. I was actually afraid of many things: of wasting time and money chasing a dream, of failing, of being too successful and having people treat me differently, of being criticized for what I said and who I was.



Being afraid is like sleepwalking. We move through our lives appearing to be awake, but we're internally paralyzed and can't experience anything completely. Fear keeps us from living, from trying, from being what we dream we can be.

I was sleepwalking for almost a decade, and once I started waking up, I was uncomfortable, terrified, and unsure of myself. But I had finally discovered that I had to stop waiting until I was no longer afraid to make changes in my life.

Fear is natural: most people fear new experiences and the unknown. It's not going to go away. We simply have to stop focusing on our fear and move through it.

For me, the urge to change my life had become unbearable. I wanted to know who I was and why I was on this earth. I wanted to have no regrets and live life to the fullest. I wanted to contribute something to the world and teach my children to be good people. I wanted to jump out of bed in the morning with enthusiasm and excitement for each new day. *Jump out of bed? Who are you kidding?*

I realized I had no excuses anymore for my unhappiness—there was no parent or boss to blame. It was very scary to finally take full responsibility for my own happiness. But it was also exhilarating. I suddenly realized I could make my life into anything I wanted it

to be! I could reinvent myself! I could choose, today, to take action, to do something different. *Right after you take the muffins out of the oven.* Oh, crap!

Real life—complete with loads of laundry, screaming children, and burnt muffins—is bittersweet, just like dark chocolate. Some moments are delicious. Others leave an aftertaste in our mouths. But once we develop an appreciation for it, we realize it's much better than the fake stuff and we stop craving candy-coated impostors.

Like me, you may not be able to take a year out of your life to travel the world or live in an ashram and “find yourself,” but you probably still want to figure out who you are, what your purpose is, and how you can make a difference in this world. The following chapters will show you how! *The only catch is, you have to find your answers between loads of laundry and text messages.*

Using a map for an easier journey

As I searched for more meaning in my life, experimented with new spiritual practices, and read books, I gradually came to know myself better and figured out what I really wanted. It occurred to me along the way that I wished there was a book that gave me a quicker roadmap to the process of re-discovering myself. *Let's call it the “Google Map” to your destiny.* I also wanted to learn more about mind-body-spirit practices I could use to improve my life, without having to read an entire book on each subject. And so I was inspired to write this book for you.

This book gives you a high-level overview of a number of tools and practices you can use, but is by no means exhaustive. Some things may resonate with you. Others may not, and that's OK, because we're all unique and many paths lead skyward.

In this book, I describe the experiences I've had on my journey to create the life of my dreams. Through this exploration, I hope

to give you insight and inspiration for your daily life, helping you remove internal blocks and find mind-body-spirit tools that will calm, energize, and connect you with your highest self and your life's purpose.

You will read my perspective on what different tools and practices have to offer, and learn about why and how I liked them. But I firmly believe that spirituality, while universal in certain truths, is highly individual in practice. In other words, you need to discover for yourself what brings meaning to your life and makes you feel connected.

May this book be a roadmap for your life's journey, as you transform from a caterpillar to a beautiful butterfly that takes flight. I hope it makes your travels happier and easier, and helps you find purpose and fulfillment in your everyday life.

Self-reflection questions

1. What does your dream life look like?
2. Does your current life look different?
3. Do you distract yourself or find ways to escape your life (using TV, food, drugs, alcohol, sex, texting, Facebook)?
4. Can you see some of the choices you have made in the past that got you to where you are now?
5. Are you ready to create the life you really want?

Chapter 2



what planet am i from? how our past shapes us

Your living is determined not so much by what life brings to you as by the attitude you bring to life; not so much by what happens to you as by the way your mind looks at what happens.

—Khalil Gibran

We all use stories to make sense of our world. We entertain others with tall tales, share news and information, and explain the unexplainable with myth and legend. What many of us don't realize is that the stories we tell, particularly about our past, influence who we are and how we see the world. They can actually shape the person we become and the life we create. This is why we need to pay close attention to the stories we tell ourselves and others.

When we are young, we interpret everything through the tiny, finger-smudged lens of a child. And because as children we are naturally self-centred, when something bad happens, we assume it is

our fault. If a parent gets mad at us, we believe there is something wrong with us. We don't understand that our parent may really be upset over something completely unrelated and simply be venting their anger on us. Over time, these thoughts and memories become internalized as beliefs, and form a part of our core identity and the "story" we tell about our life, that we then keep repeating in adulthood.

But our past does not have to define us. In fact, once we look at it from a more empowered adult's perspective and understand it better, we can use our past as a stepping stone to where we want to go, and rewrite our life's story with the happy ending we choose.

I will now share some of my life's story with you. I hope that my experiences will resonate with you and help you gain insight into how the story you tell about your past has shaped your present reality.

Rudolph, Cinderella, and the Ugly Duckling

I often felt I was from another planet growing up. In my family of six, it seemed to me that I was the odd person out, like Rudolph at the reindeer games. *Didn't help that you actually had a red nose when you were cold.* As a child, I dreamt of discovering I was really the swan in "The Ugly Duckling" or the princess in "Cinderella." *Or hell, even Santa's lead reindeer.*

It's hard to say how much of my childhood experience was perception, and how much was reality. Watching my mother's memory fade to black as Alzheimer's clouds her mind has given me a new appreciation for how the mind works, and how we interpret what we remember based on our age and point of view. *Remember how when you were five, you used to think the entire country of Canada fit in your front yard?*

We can't possibly remember everything that happens to us. So our minds filter out mundane information, and retain only the most memorable moments. These moments are typically either the best, or the worst. Then our mind colours the gaps in between our memories with the same shade...so if several of our memories are negative, the entire filmstrip of our childhood may appear dark.

There were many things I loved about my childhood. Like growing up on a huge property in rural New Brunswick, and spending much of my youth outside: playing sports and riding bikes with my siblings, climbing trees and building forts, and picking fresh vegetables in my father's garden. I loved having bonfires and sing-songs with my family, catching fireflies like lanterns in my hands. *You were a little hard up for entertainment back then.* I enjoyed having huge Christmas gatherings with my cousins. My father and siblings and I would sing four-part harmony in local variety shows. I also enjoyed our banter at mealtimes, and my Mom's delicious cooking. My family did not have a lot of money and material things, but we had plenty of food and lots of space to play and breathe fresh air.

But I grew up believing my family did not like or understand me. I was a middle child, the third of four kids born in a span of only five years. I felt that my mother was very hard on me (I realize now she was hard on all of us, including herself). She worked very hard to create a good home for us, but she seemed to be upset a lot and frequently criticized me. No matter how good my grades were in school or how many chores I did, I felt she was never happy with me.

I realize now that my mother was maxed out from looking after four young children, with virtually no time for herself. *You weren't exactly quiet, calm children.* So, little wonder she seemed cranky and didn't have time to enjoy us. But as a young girl, I had no way of understanding any of that. All I knew was that my mother often said harsh things to me, rarely played with or hugged me, and

sometimes spanked me. *Ah, yes, the dreaded wooden spoon.* I longed to have her snuggle me and tell me she loved me and that I was special. Unfortunately that didn't happen, so—whether it was true or not—I felt she didn't love me.

I understand now that love looked different to Mom's generation. Mom showed her love by cooking and cleaning and caring for me. She drove my siblings and I to sports games and birthday parties. She took us to the beach. She crocheted blankets for us and mended our clothes. She taught us good manners and encouraged us to go to university. She cooked homemade meals and made our favourite dinners. There were many things she did for us to show us she loved us. But I didn't realize that at the time.

I also struggled to feel like my siblings liked me. As siblings often do, they made fun of me, threw things at me, and took toys away from me. I would at first try to remain calm, hoping if I was quiet and didn't fight back, they would stop. Unfortunately, I was only able to keep my cool for so long before losing my temper and screaming “bug off,” which made for a fun game for everyone other than me. *Well, your temper tantrums—or “yoga fits” as your siblings dubbed them—were kind of amusing.*

I have often wondered whether my siblings picked on me because I was sensitive and reacted strongly, or whether I became sensitive because they picked on me. *Well, you did have a tendency to take things personally.* Either way, I grew up with the perception—accurate or not—that my family did not care for me. The only person who seemed to be in my corner was my father, but he was not always around to defend or protect me.

I imagine my siblings didn't think they were doing any harm at the time. They are hard-working, generous people today and may not even remember things the way I do. But the teasing really hurt my feelings. And with a 3:1 ratio, I felt unsafe and powerless to fight back or do anything to make it stop. My self-esteem suffered as a

result...after all, if my own family didn't love me, who would? And if they thought there was something wrong with me, there probably was, right? Or at least, that's how I felt as I entered my teen years. *Horn-rimmed glasses and all.*

In school, I encountered a few bullies who also taunted and teased me. The people who called me fat and ugly probably had no idea the impact their words would have on me, but I unfortunately internalized them and thought they were true. I learned the hard way that the emotional scars left by unkind words can run very deep.

I look back now at my high school yearbook and think it's funny that I used to think I was fat. I never weighed more than 120 pounds, and yet I always thought I was overweight. *Though you did have bad hair and awful clothes, so it's little wonder you thought you were an ugly caterpillar.* Many of my friends told me that I had a warped sense of what I looked like, because I struggled to think of myself as thin or attractive.

In school and later in university, I had several good friends, but was never part of the "in" crowd. *Didn't help that you brought a dictionary to school with you every day.* I continued to feel different than other people my age, and often felt more comfortable with older friends, boyfriends, and teachers. To this day, many of my friends are older than me, some by several decades.

Thankfully, during my difficult and awkward teenage years, I met several people who really "saw" me and believed in who I was. It helped me to hold onto that thread of hope that one day I would escape my prison of self-doubt and show everyone who I really was.



If you, too, had a challenging childhood or were the subject of bullying or abuse, many of your beliefs about who you are and

how life works have likely been conditioned by your past. These beliefs, as you'll see next, may be causing you to unwittingly recreate similar unhealthy patterns in your life today. But as you'll read later on in Chapter 3, you can rewrite the story of your past, find the blessings in your challenges, and reclaim your power to create the life you want.

Repeating patterns and reliving the same old story

That sense of being different, but wanting to fit in, has followed me throughout my life. So has the feeling of there being something “wrong” with me or not being good enough. And so, too, has a strong desire to help people and look out for the underdog. *Guess that's why you still root for the Toronto Maple Leafs.* I often made choices that weren't popular and went against the grain, and in hindsight, those choices have served me well. But I also tended to settle for less than what I really wanted, because I didn't believe in myself and felt I didn't really deserve something better.

During my childhood, I went to weekly religion classes before church (my family is Catholic). I really enjoyed the lessons about being kind to others, acting generously, and helping people. I was particularly inspired by the story of the “Good Samaritan,” who selflessly stopped to help someone in need on the side of the road after several others passed him by. I daydreamed of being a child superhero who would rush to people's aid when needed. *Oh, boy. Is that “Chariots of Fire” I hear playing?*

I'm not sure how successful I was as an imagined superhero, but I did try my best to help. I remember in elementary school how I made friends with less popular children to keep them from feeling lonely. Sometimes, my efforts earned me an unintended “boy-friend” who thought my kindness meant I liked him. So I ended up with several unusual elementary school “boyfriends” because I was too soft-hearted to tell them I wasn't interested.

Defending others also sometimes turned the attention of bullies toward me. I remember being pelted by fruit and sandwiches on a bus ride home from school when I tried to step in and protect a boy from being beaten up. I learned that sometimes being a “good” person and setting boundaries is not appreciated by others.

Because I associated being loved with being “good,” I think I tried too hard as a child—and later, as an adult—to be perfect. I tried to be a good kid at home, did my chores (usually without prompting), and excelled in school. I volunteered at church suppers, sang in our church choir, and went to the local nursing home on occasion with my family to sing for the seniors. *My God, you sound like a saint!*

Don’t get me wrong—I’m not saying I was a perfect child. *That’s better.* I had temper tantrums, fought with my siblings, and was stubborn like most children. But most of my actions were influenced both by wanting to be loved and accepted, and by genuinely wanting to help others.

It’s probably fair to say I began searching for my purpose in my late teens. Like many young adults entering university, I needed to decide what I wanted to do for a living. *Remember how you wanted to be a horse jockey, like Alec in “The Black Stallion?” You thought it would be a good job for you because you were short and loved horses, and begged your parents every Christmas to buy you a horse.*

I knew I enjoyed music, writing, and most things artistic, and dreamt of being a writer or musician. But, based on what I had been told about “starving artists,” the fact that I didn’t at that time know anyone who had made a living doing these things, and my lack of faith in myself, I didn’t think I could make my dreams happen. So I shelved them for a rainy day.

Since I wasn’t quite sure what else I wanted to do, I decided to pursue a general arts degree and hopefully figure it out along the way. So I packed my trunk and off I went to St. Thomas University

in Fredericton, New Brunswick, still starry-eyed and determined to make a difference in the world. *You're such an idealist.*

Every summer during my arts degree, I returned home to rural New Brunswick (where I grew up) to work for Marine Atlantic, the ferry service that used to operate between New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. It was there that I met my first husband.

Blair was considerably older than I, by 21 years to be exact. It was quite a scandal in our tiny community that a 40-year-old man would be dating a not-quite 20-year-old “girl.” But we ignored the looks and whispers and spent most of that first glorious summer outside in the sunshine, picking blueberries, swimming at the beach, and walking in the woods. During the rest of the school year, I bussed two hours back and forth nearly every weekend to be with Blair.

While I received an excellent education at St. Thomas, I thought that it would be hard to get a decent job with a Bachelor of Arts degree because it was not specialized enough. And so I looked at my skills and interests to help me determine what to do next. I decided since I was independent and energetic in nature that I would like to own my own business, though I didn't know what kind. *Ah, indecision: the mark of a true Libra.*

So after completing my arts degree, I began a Master of Business Administration at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I found the coursework very difficult and dry, and felt distanced from my creative self. But I focused on the prize at the end—owning a business—and on the fact that Blair and I had just become engaged and would marry at the end of my studies in two years.

Then, only six weeks into my studies, we discovered Blair had terminal liver cancer. I still remember the day I received the news. It was a warm day in early October. I had just finished a midterm exam at the university, and had called home to see what Blair's

doctor said about his blood test results. When he said he had cancer and had only months to live, I dropped the phone. I began running home, and everything seemed surreal, like I was in a movie. It was a beautiful sunny day and everyone was acting like nothing had happened, when my life had suddenly changed forever.

I immediately withdrew from university to care for Blair, and we decided to move up our wedding date. My parents were understandably concerned that I was leaving behind my education and scholarship, but I felt that “sacrificing” one year of my life was nothing given that it would be the rest of his. Looking back, it really wasn’t a sacrifice to be with the man I loved in his final days: it was an honour. To this day, it is still one of my proudest and truest-to-self decisions.

We decided to get married right away, to honour our love for each other. Less than two months after our wedding (three months after he was diagnosed), Blair died. He slipped away peacefully at home, and I remember being thankful that we had met so that he had someone to love and care for him while he was sick and was not alone in a hospital when he died. I was also grateful for the love and support of the many friends and family members who helped us during that difficult time.

The events surrounding our marriage and Blair’s death touched me profoundly. I began questioning everything in my life, including my spirituality. I wondered, as many do, why good people have to die so soon. I also wondered why my fervent prayers and the prayers of many others who loved Blair were not able to save him. I wasn’t angry that he died, just bewildered...and very, very tired.

Given the amount of stress and grief I had to deal with after Blair’s death, I decided to put questions of spirituality and purpose aside in order to get on with my life. Little did I realize at the time how closely life and spirituality, purpose and happiness are intertwined...

I also began questioning my career path after Blair died. Realizing I wanted to do something more artistic than business administration, I withdrew from Dalhousie University and entered the Master of Journalism program at Carleton University in Ottawa. I left behind the rural lifestyle, friends, and family I loved and moved to a large city 1,300 kilometres away, where I essentially knew no one. *And where you nearly got run over at a crosswalk on your first day because you naively assumed everyone stopped at red lights.*

The next two years were challenging ones for me as I struggled to breathe under the weight of a gruelling master's program that required 12- to 14-hour days and little time for resting, grieving, or socializing. *Or finding a new man, like many hoped. Because that would solve everything.* My friends and classmates were far too young to have lost a spouse or to understand what I was going through. So I felt very alone and struggled with depression.

Thanks to the help and support of a few key people, including a former professor and a university counsellor, I made it through those difficult two years and graduated third in my class. I got a technical writing job with a great salary at Nortel, made a bunch of new friends, and met my second husband, James, on a softball field. We dated for a few years, married, and had two amazing children together: a son and a daughter.

During that same period (from 1999 to 2005), I advanced quickly through my career in communications—first as a technical writer, then as a website editor, project manager, senior communications advisor, team leader, and manager. Up the ladder I climbed, earning more money, awards, and influence with each rung.

But gradually, a persistent feeling of unease set in along with a host of illnesses, and I realized I wasn't happy. With each step up, I was spending more time at work and less time doing the things I loved, and I was climbing further and further away from having any meaning in my life.

By being afraid to pursue what I felt truly passionate about (creative activities like music, book writing, and photography), I had unconsciously chosen what Richard Bolles refers to in *What Colour is Your Parachute?* as a “shadow career.” I was writing, but what others told me to write, not what inspired me. *Right field, wrong career.*

Meanwhile, household responsibilities and parenting seemed to eat up more and more of my time. *While you ate more and more chocolate.* I found it increasingly difficult to fit in spiritual pursuits and volunteer activities. *Or fit into your pants.* I participated in a few charity fundraisers and volunteered with James to deliver meals to seniors, but I often felt my efforts fell short of what I “should” be doing. I continued to pray sporadically, but really felt disconnected from God.

Also, I discovered I was not happy in my marriage. I had married a really good man, and we had two beautiful children, but we were not happy together. We spent many years in counselling trying to fix things, but eventually realized we weren’t a good enough match.

So while I had a good life by most people’s standards, it no longer felt like my own. I felt like I was acting in a play, pretending to be happy, when really I felt empty inside. I felt disconnected from myself. And the more disconnected I felt, the more control I needed to have over my external environment. *Which drove your husband and kids insane.* I felt restless and couldn’t seem to relax. I knew I was not living the life of my dreams. But I was not sure how I had gotten here, or what to do differently.



Incidentally, the feeling of living someone else’s life is quite common when we blindly re-enact our past conditioning. If we have faulty beliefs about what is possible for ourselves, it is hard to make choices that really serve us. And if these faulty beliefs remain

invisible, it is difficult to change them. But once we become conscious of these beliefs, we can change them into something that serves us better.

Awakening

As I turned 30, a series of events happened that rekindled my belief in myself and my dreams. First, I attended a “Power Within” seminar, which featured inspirational speakers like Deepak Chopra and Robin Sharma. I remember having goosebumps as I listened to Chopra’s talk about metaphysical topics like the power of our mind to shape our reality. It was a whole new world I didn’t even know existed! No longer did I need to feel I was a victim of circumstance—I had the power to change anything I didn’t like in my life!

I realized that while I had made many positive changes in my life, what hadn’t changed, after all those years, were my fundamental beliefs about myself. I was carrying faulty beliefs and stories with me from my childhood, and unconsciously re-enacting them. By believing I wasn’t “good enough,” I kept attracting people and situations into my life that proved me right. By thinking I was not worthy of unconditional love, I struggled to find it. By believing life was hard, my experience of life conformed to my expectations.

All of that started to change the moment I realized that to change my life, I had to change my beliefs. I started asking myself what was really true, and changing any beliefs that didn’t serve me into beliefs that would lead me to what I wanted.

I eagerly bought a number of books and CDs by people like Deepak Chopra, Anthony Robbins, Neale Donald Walsch, Eckhart Tolle, Jack Canfield, and Marci Shimoff, and began to learn more about what I could do to create the life of my dreams. I attended seminars by Barbara DeAngelis, Arielle Ford, Claire Zammit, and Katherine Woodward Thomas to help me unpack my emotional

baggage and transform my limiting beliefs. I went for counselling and found wonderful life coaches and mentors.

I started setting goals, journaling, and meditating...with fairly astonishing results. The next period in my life was overflowing with successes and welcome surprises, filling my life with more than I could have imagined possible. I ran a marathon, made wonderful new friends, experienced a number of serendipitous “coincidences,” and negotiated for a promotion and raise at work. I was flying high.

I kept reading, talking to my girlfriends, and signing up for classes. I went for angel readings, attended classes on meditation, yoga, and Reiki, and set up an altar in my home where I could meditate, pray, write affirmations, and do card readings. My focus shifted from career advancement to spiritual growth and discovering my purpose in life.

I also started to feel much better about myself, and more positive about what was possible for me. And not surprisingly, I started receiving more positive feedback from others and making a ton of new friends. My business flourished without any marketing, to the point where I had to turn down contracts. Suddenly, my identity was changing from someone who was unwanted, to someone who was in demand!



Do you find it difficult to trust that things will turn out well for you? Are you hard on yourself, and beat yourself up about every mistake you make? Do you struggle to accept compliments, take risks, and believe in yourself? Do you think there is something “wrong” with you, or that you’re not “good enough”?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are probably being held back by faulty beliefs about yourself. Your interpretation of

past events is clouding your vision of what is possible in the future, and preventing you from enjoying the present as well.

You cannot change your past. But you can change the lens or filter you use to look back on it, changing your perspective on everything in your past, present, and future. This will empower you to move forward and live the life you really want, the one you used to think was an impossible dream.

Part II (Chapters 3 and 4) will help you examine your limiting beliefs and transform them into ideas that better serve you. It will also help you rediscover who you really are (your highest potential) and reconnect with what you really want.

Self-reflection questions

1. What is the story you tell about your past?
2. Have you repeated patterns from this story in your life?
3. Have you settled for less than you really wanted?
4. Do you have trouble believing in yourself?
5. Are you ready to change your limiting beliefs into beliefs that serve you better?