

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

“The universe is made of stories not atoms.”

---Muriel Rukeyser

The journey of the spirit can be humorous, lively and sometimes outright drudgery. I am amazed how wonderful the path has been. Although many times I have wondered why anyone, including myself, would go down this road when it is difficult and frequently clouded in mist. Truth be known, I started out wanting a clear view on a sunny day from a mountain peak. Instead, I often found myself in the deep, dark forest at night. Now, I enjoy the deep, dark forest. Indeed, I have actually learned to embrace whatever life presents me with. What follows are a collection of stories from my life that I hope will provide amusement, insight and inspiration.

Not surprisingly, I learned that the ‘answers were within’ only after spending years and years looking outside myself. Early on I was taught that negativity was to be avoided. The goal was to protect myself from negative energy and strive to be good and pure. So I sought to do this. However, I immediately ran into a problem. I couldn’t determine what was bad and what was good. It would seem that the distinction between good and bad would be easy to make, but it wasn’t clear to me at all.

I heard people talk about horrible events ultimately bringing them gifts. Others would claim that killing would be a good thing if it was someone like Hitler. I found that while taking care of others seemed like a good thing, it wasn't good if it prevented others from growing. I simply could not find clear cut rules on what was good and bad. Inherent in every “bad” thing was good and in every “good” thing was bad.

Events are too interconnected for a mere mortal to know the full ramifications of each action they take. And even if all effects could be

known, how does one judge good and bad? I have now abandoned the belief that there is good and evil. I no longer accept that positive is to be sought after and negative to be avoided. The truth is that everything is a blend of both and, perhaps more accurately, neither. The world simply is as it is. There is certainly cause and effect, but in the human realms the immediate results of a given action can rarely be accurately predicted nor counted on. For instance, have you ever told someone something and got a completely different reaction than expected? Perhaps you forgot to factor in some unseen event that dramatically changed that person's state of mind the morning before you approached them. Humans are indeed complex.

It was once thought that human biological responses to medicines would be free from the influences of a person's mind or mood. However, science now accepts the fact that a person's knowledge does influence their body's response to medicine. Placebo-controlled studies are used in an attempt to isolate purely biological effects. Still, due to the complexity of the human biological system, we never find a medicine that works on everybody. We find that all medicines work on some of the people some of the time. Frequently we don't really know why a medicine or therapy doesn't work on every person or what people it will work on best.

The practice of medicine relies on a combination of knowledge and intuition. Knowledge of drugs, medical practices and the organism being treated is essential, but this type of book knowledge is limited. It is limited by how little we actually know. Hence, medicine is not practiced as a science, but as an art. The medical practitioner takes their knowledge and, using a variety of processes, makes decisions. Some may rely heavily on doing what their peers do in similar situations, others may make educated, rational guesses and others simply follow their gut. Of course, a mixture of these methods is often used to come to final decisions.

Living is also an art and not a science. Like the medical practitioner, if I look solely outside myself for answers or direction I will be disappointed. My life and the world are complex. I don't even know many of the variables

that contribute to the whole. So, how do I decide what is right action in each circumstance?

To figure this out I started an experiment. I began to apply spiritual principles I'd heard or read about and study the results in my life. I spent a lot of time sitting on the couch. I learned to get still. I learned to be by myself. I was told that I could rely on my heart to direct me. I tested this out. I would sit and ask myself, "What do you want to do?" And I would wait. I would wait until I was moved to do something or until I got bored of waiting for an answer. Then I would get up and do what I "felt" like doing or I would simply do my chores. It was by this process that I learned the answers were within and to trust that truth completely.

My early life was filled with ample events I could use to investigate what worked and what didn't. I struggled over relationships with lovers, partners, friends, coworkers, teachers, bosses and my daughter. I struggled over my internal voices, cravings, obsessions and unwanted emotions like fear and anger. I tried to change myself and others. My story includes a boring childhood, absent parents, running away at fifteen years old, a Bachelor's degree in chemistry, an abusive marriage, health crises in my daughter's life, spending years in court battles with my daughter's father, a prestigious NIH NCCAM predoctoral fellowship, being "dropped" by my major professor close to graduation, a Ph.D. in physiology, being fired unexpectedly from a

job, continued unemployment and other personal gains and losses.

You won't find many references to these events in the stories that follow, because, in general, I learned from them what didn't work. I prefer to share with you what has lifted me up. I mention them now to demonstrate that I have had a variety of experiences. My personal history is the rich soil that my current life springs from. My background qualifies me to completely relate when people tell me they want things to be different. I also know how hard it is to not be satisfied with things as they are.

Despite the pain of dissatisfaction, it was a struggle for me to let go and finally accept life as it is. I had to use my rational mind to support the decision to experiment with complete surrender to life. The process went something like this. I acknowledged I wanted to be happy, I wanted to have freedom from fear and I wanted to feel love and peace. Then I surmised that struggling and dissatisfaction would not bring me peace. Sure, there was the sense that the struggle would bring me peace in the future, but that future never came. I wanted serenity now, today. It wasn't hard to figure out that to have peace in the moment I need to take action in the moment. What brings me peace today is letting go of the struggle, trusting that I will be taken care of, believing that following my hearts desire is right action and that ultimately everything is perfect just as it is, right now, today.

I have to admit, at first it felt unnatural for me to not want things to be better. What felt natural and frankly right was to be dissatisfied. But as I practice, I have found peace comes with acceptance. I like the way peace feels. It helped my surrender process to remind myself how fighting “what is” didn’t really work and how much the effort drained me. In fact, I found my exhaustion from the previous struggles to control life made it easier for me to let go. I also discovered that like any spiritual practice I had to keep returning again and again to my decision to surrender as I was apt to become distracted.

How does one “surrender to life”? Imaging life as a river is a helpful analogy for the surrender process. The river of life can be swift and turbulent like when a river is moving through a rocky gorge with boulders in the water or it can be slow, deep and calm like when it flows over a broad plane. In my imagination, I am riding the river of life in a little boat. When I stop trying to control everything I align my will with the flow of the current. I surrender to the current<sup>1</sup>

I still have decisions to make and I must play an active part in navigating the river, but my job becomes keeping my boat turned around straight and flowing easily. Does this mean everything goes smoothly? No. In sections of the river there are rapids or perhaps submerged logs. I may find it difficult

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<sup>1</sup>What I am referring to as “current” others may identify as God, Spirit, Dharma or natural law.

to keep my boat upright. Sometimes the river may be so swift that I have no control whatsoever. Still if I try to row to shore or turn back I will be in worse shape than if I simply surrender to the current and work to align myself with the flow. When the river is broad and deep I may find I have more choice in my course. I may experience the slow moving water as calm and peaceful. I may have time to look at the banks and admire the birds. In slow and calm water it is easier to drift with the current, but my job is still to remain aware and awake, less submerged logs throw me off or the river suddenly changes and upsets my boat.

I have found that meditation focused on body awareness to be the best way for me to connect with the current in the river of life. When I sit and simply be, I not only learn if I am in the middle of rapids or on an easy section of river but I also get a sense of how much I am fighting the current. I may notice repetitive thoughts, general distraction or agitation when I am trying to row upstream or when my boat has turned sideways.

Although I accept that there are many things in life that I can not change I am aware that I can't remain passive. My life demands my navigation. The key is to stay lined up with the flow of life and not waste energy and grief on trying to change things I can't affect. But here I am presented with a new dilemma. I am not always sure what I can change and what I can't.

More and more I am learning to rely on the answers found within me. My decision making process includes turning within and connecting to a sense of peace. Many times out of the stillness of meditation an answer will come to me. Other times it pops into my head when I first wake up in the morning or during the day when my mind is preoccupied with something else. If I do not seem to get a clear answer, it usually means the answer is to wait.

I learned to trust that the answers were within by either acting from my intuition or from my rational mind and watching to see what seemed to work best. For example, during my long court battle I was scared to trust my internal sense of what right action would be for me since it seemed to jeopardize my daughter's welfare. Quite frankly inside I felt like I should just let her go, but I could not let myself desert her to live with the man that I had fled from. I chose to fight for what seemed like her best interests only to loose repeatedly in the courts. I can't know what a different perspective would have brought about, but I do know that I did what my rational mind thought I should do to protect myself and my daughter and the results did not bring me peace nor the results I wanted. I might have found that through letting go, everyone involved may have benefited. Sometimes even a small shift can make a big difference.

I was originally moved to write a book so I could share what I had learned after many years of diligently applying spiritual principles in my own life