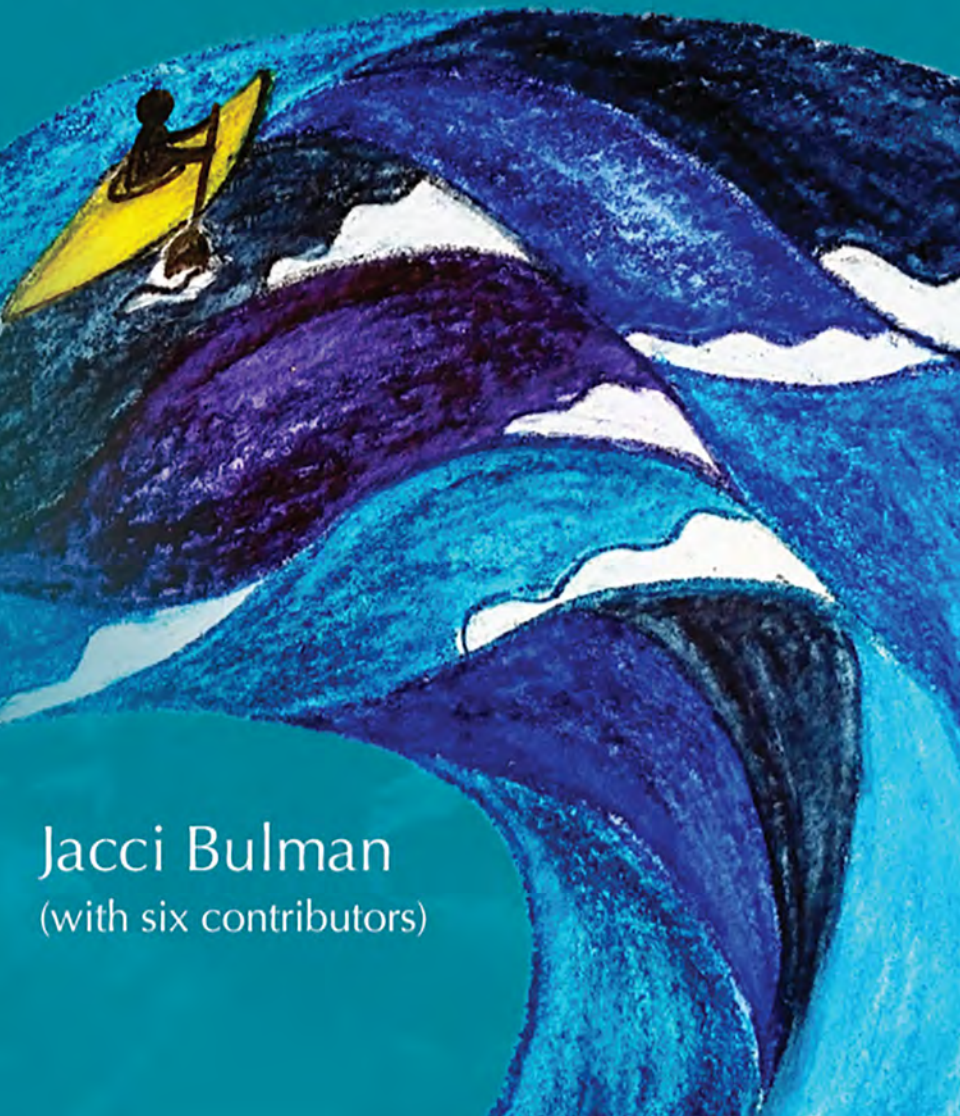
Talk Hope, Healing & Being a Survivor



Jacci Bulman
(with six contributors)

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For Nicki, my friend through life,
and for Mum, Jenny, Martyn, Moira, Hazel,
and everyone who is riding the rapids.

‘All shall be well’

Julian of Norwich (1342-1423)

‘Let us not file away our edges
in an effort to be smooth
when the records show the dents
are how we get into the groove’

Harry Baker, *Unashamed*, 2022

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Introduction.

This book is about **being a survivor**. It will *not* tell you how you can, with total certainty 'achieve' surviving or completely overcoming any major challenge in your life. It will tell you a way to *be* a survivor. To live as one. There is a huge difference. Why? Because any book that says it can guarantee you make it through a serious physical, mental, or any other kind of challenge in your life and be 100% cured, sorted, or fixed, is dishonest. I cannot be that arrogant. None of us are that much in control! But I *can* guarantee that no matter what you face, now or in the future, if you follow the Seven Steps which I have laid out here, then you will go through your challenge as the *kind of person* who makes it. As a survivor. It is a state of heart and mind, of being, and it is one of the best possible tools to have in your 'life kit'.

Imagine you are going along in a boat on a river, bobbing along, when suddenly you come to some rapids and are plunged into a huge waterfall that takes you right over the edge into real danger…no-one can guarantee that you will come out of those rapids completely safe and unharmed. No-one. But being a person who is a survivor, who has a bold, honest, loving, and hopeful attitude to life – this empowers you to face such dilemmas using the power of the brightest

part of yourself. And that will be your clearest way to get through – to hopefully come out safe again, and to possibly be transformed as you go. If you can learn to live as a person who says "yes" to life, you will live for as long as you can using as much as you can of your very best potential. It is that simple.

So, this is a book about how to be a survivor, no matter what.

It is also very much a book about **healing.** I am going to 'talk healing', so that you can find and practice the healing powers that are already inside you. I recently bought a card which had on it what are reputed to be the words of Mahatma Gandhi *'There is no path to peace. Peace is the path'*.* How much I agree with that! There is no point always aiming for a hope as if it is in the distance, presuming right now you cannot quite be that which you long to be…peaceful, loving, happy, fulfilled. To find peace inside ourselves and our world we need to just *be* peaceful, right now, in the way we think, act, breathe and walk about our lives. And to find love we can just be loving. It is a way of being, not a faraway goal. Likewise, there is no path *to* healing. If we focus only on finding a cure or 'solution' to our problems, seeing right now as the 'in-between' stage as we move towards becoming 'sorted', then there is no real healing. Our healing *is* the path. If you can go over this paragraph a few times until it makes even a tiny bit of sense to you inside, then you are already on the path!

*

And who is the person creating this book? What experience or wisdom do I have that I think is valuable

enough to write down and help other people through their life challenges? I am not a professional healer or life-coach. I am not a doctor or scientist. I am not a guru or mentor. But I am a survivor. Even if I die tomorrow, I am, right now, a survivor. I have made it through too many illnesses! – the number being part of the learning. These include chronic insomnia, nervous exhaustion, and then M.E. (or post-viral fatigue syndrome); a meningioma brain-tumour and its return; loss of feeling in the left side of my face and sight in my left eye, with further complications; melanoma skin cancer in my left arm; chronic neuralgia pain; and an auto-immune rheumatological disease called systemic scleroderma. And I'm still here! Still an honest optimist who loves being alive.

I am currently dealing with the challenge of two 'shadows' (hopefully late-developing scars from my previous operations) showing up on a brain scan. This has shaken me up! But it made me realise it is time to go over the most important things I have learned since this rocky route of healing all began, and to remind myself what it means to be a survivor. As I began to consider and evaluate what I have learned, I saw it would be best to write things down – because writing always helps me to clarify things. And then I saw I could pass these lessons and experiences on to other people – for the 'Seven Steps' to help you, as they remind and help me. So, here is the wisdom I have gained, not perfect wisdom but the real learning I have received, from living as a survivor through the long haul.

I do not intend this book to be all about my own life! A book full of long personal anecdotes can just be

tedious, and a drain on the emotions. Instead, I will try to give you bits of my own stories when they help me to *illustrate* a point, or to show you *how* I have learned what I am saying to be true. I hope to keep a good balance. You can be assured that I am always writing from experience, not as someone who has studied or observed these truths, but someone who has lived them.

I can also pass on to you some of what I have learned from the incredible people I have met along the way – people who have taught me so much, as both survivors and healers. My book *'Talking God: Daring to Listen'* (Lion Hudson, 2021) looks at how truly listening to other peoples' spiritual beliefs can help us to develop and clarify our own personal faith. In this book, *'Talk Hope',* I hope to show you how a group of people with different life-challenges and stories to mine, can inspire you with how they are living as survivors. And how some of the people they work with continuously teach and inspire them. We can learn from each other, and then find our own way.

*

Who is this book for? It is for people facing both 'acute' and 'chronic long-term' physical health problems – including long-researched diseases such as cancer and diabetes, more recently understood auto-immune diseases, and newly developed illnesses such as 'long Covid'. It is also for people with the disease of any kind of addiction, or with mental and nervous anxiety health problems. I hope it will be helpful for people who are caring for someone they love, or those they work with professionally. Or for someone needing to

deal with hard experiences such as abuse, grief, domestic violence, a broken home, or exile. It is also for people with spiritual troubles inside, who need to find their next clear steps. I do not have experience (of course) of all these challenges in life and may often use illustrations from dealing with my own health problems, to show you what I am trying to explain. But I hope you can relate these my reflections to your own struggles or needs, to make what I say work for you personally.

The book is also for people who may not have any big challenge or illness to face but who want, wisely, to learn what it means to be a survivor, in preparation, should any such hard times face them in the future. How to be ready for the rapids. Or, even more simply, how to 'go well'.

*

It may be that you already know or connect to many of the ideas or experiences I am trying to share here, and so my words simply re-affirm your own inner knowing. Or it may be that much of what I say is new or even provokes challenges in you. I hope in general that it is a mixture of both.

Part One of the book consists of Seven Steps, each one carefully describing and delving into a step which it is important to understand, and to learn how to take. The steps are, as I say, not a 'means to an end'. There is no certain result or achievement guaranteed, other than that you will be honouring your life right now. By being determined to get over every set of rocks the best way you can – and so giving yourself the greatest possible chance to do just that – you will become an

honest optimist, not a superficial smiler.

And whenever you do crash or capsize, you will be able to get yourself back up, give yourself love, humour and care, and then keep on facing those fast waters ahead of you. You will discover enough survivor spirit inside yourself to be willing to ride down Victoria Falls (if you must!), do *whatever* it takes, to keep on saying *yes* to your unique life.

Part Two consists of informal interviews with six people who I knew would be ideal to take part in this book, with their wide variety of wisdom and experiences, from charity director to recovered alcoholic, each with good reflections and ideas to share. Each as an ordinary human being who, like every one of us, is in truth extra-ordinary.

As you read through the book, I invite you to take a journal and pen, or art book and paints/crayons, or a musical instrument, whatever works for you. It may be that you just want to speak your responses out into the air. Simply choose your best tools (which may change from time to time, as you go along) and, if you want to, occasionally find some good private time for yourself, somewhere peaceful, inside or out, and *take part* in this. Reflect upon some of the ideas and questions. React to when your buttons are pressed, or respond when you really connect, agree, or disagree with something you read. Try to be honest with yourself where you are in your life, and consider how you can choose to change: how can you adapt to your limits, strengthen your attributes, accept as well as transform – as you become,

or remind yourself how to be, a survivor?

We do all need to remember this along the way – **healing is a verb, a continuous action**. It is not a static noun. It is a way of being.

And of course (taking the book's title in reverse!) this is a book about **hope**. My intention is for all the pages to help you kindle and encourage the hope that is a brave spark inside us all. We all want to live to the best of our potential, to have courage and confidence in ourselves and the life we are given. So, let's begin.

PART ONE

Seven Steps to saying "yes" to your life

STEP ONE

Be a warrior, not a victim.

I have struggled for quite a while with the risk of putting this step first. I don't want to alienate you early on by talking about how some of us play 'victim' roles in our life, while others play the 'warrior'. It may be that this chapter just does not relate to you and you are totally happy with the way you play out your life, both consciously and sub-consciously…but if by chance just a fraction of this step clicks any *'I see that'* responses, or even if it pushes any *'how dare you?'* buttons…it really is a step worth considering, to get ourselves on the healing track. After all, this is not a book for treading so lightly we don't bring about good change, even transformation… and we do that by being gentle with ourselves but primarily by being honest.

*

Great psychoanalysts such as Jung have created for us the idea of 'roles' which we 'play out', perhaps during different stages of our lives. We may spend a lot of our life playing out one role predominantly above all others. This may be because a certain role-play 'rewards' us (even in negative ways) with 'benefits' which our ego believes will help us to survive. For example, a role we play may reward us with more attention, or

more praise, or less criticism… The trouble arises when this role-play actually does us harm, rather than being genuinely good for us.

Let me give you an example. If I play the role of being a 'martyr' in life and threaten my own well-being by continuously helping other people before taking any real care of myself, then people may give me a lot of praise and admiration for being so kind, selfless and caring. To be caring is good. But caring as a life-driving habitual behaviour, in order to earn yourself some love and praise, is a role we could look deeper into, to see if healing changes are needed. However, this is not the role-play we are going to delve into in this chapter.

Victim. There we go! To be a 'sufferer', a 'poorly-person' (or, as my husband jokes, a 'badly-bugger'!), who continuously takes knocks in life and so earns the sympathy and attention of people around you. Such attention, for some reason, you crave inside, because you equate such attention with love, and you learn to receive this 'love' by being a victim. I don't mean consciously. We don't become ill or suffer any terrible challenges by choice. We don't hold on to being addicts because we rationally want this. But (and I can say this I think because I have been there, playing the 'victim' role for years) if our ego, the little child inside us who works out '*A earns me B*', susses out that being a victim in life earns us attention, praise, even power – and ultimately what we translate in our minds as love – then the victim role can quickly become a habit, which we play out incessantly.

I recently heard a young woman with anorexia say

that she has an 'Instagram' account, with thousands of followers, and whenever she has a 'relapse' or begins to self-harm, the number of followers increases dramatically. She acknowledged that such attention encourages her to relapse because it can be such a powerfully addictive 'food' to her fragile ego, which is desperate for attention.

I often prefer to talk about the 'little child' part of us inside, rather than the 'ego', because I think the ego has received a lot of bad press from thinking/writing which seems to make out that the ego inside us is a trickster, a selfish rotter who is always doing us no good. But to me that compartmentalises who we are into 'good' and 'bad' bits, as if the deeper or 'true' part of you is the goody, and the answer is just to throw out the trouble-making ego. No, I don't believe this. The ego is the little child in us, and we all know children can be superb, inspiring, joyful, creative, as well as selfish or manipulative…they just need teaching positive ways to get about in life, socially, personally, and for their own well-being. The ego-child is a vibrant, intriguing, and resourceful part of how we were created and who we are, as humans.

However (and it is a big however), the ego-child can mistakenly push us to play out roles which do have unhealthy causes and effects. Playing the victim in life by (perhaps repeatedly) becoming ill, mentally, or physically, may 'reward' us with attention – from doctors, friends, family, even strangers. Playing the victim role may cause us to stay in a bad marriage, with verbal or even physical abuse, and the constant abuse may be translated as some kind of 'attention', so

the little child in us, for reasons I do not claim to fully understand (not being a psychologist), may 'choose' to keep playing that role, over and over again. **Attention even of the worst kind can easily be *mis*-translated into love.**

Praise can also be mis-translated into love – praise for being brave or 'so cheerful through it all'. **Power** can also be mis-translated into being loved and cause not just over-domineering people to behave this way, but also victims. People who 'play weak' or 'play sufferer', may do this for the power of sympathy which this behaviour affords them.

The victim is in need of receiving more love, for reasons very often linked to both their character and their childhood. This is too simplistic an explanation, and I am no expert on causes for this craving. I only write from experience, which has shown me that the crucial love really needs to come from somewhere else…you guessed it…from inside of you! We will look at this essential self-loving in another important step of the book.

Some readers will be furious with me by now, slamming the book down, perhaps (and I hope not) refusing to read another word. How dare I say that playing the victim role can be the 'reason' why we keep becoming ill or having a hard time in life? But I am not trying to say it is *the* reason. I am not a doctor or a psychic! I do know that playing the victim can make us 'lean towards' difficult struggles coming our way, energetically 'inviting' such times along, enhancing them in our mind, even 'wanting' – in a deeply guilty, often not

quite conscious sense – that 'label' of a terrible illness or hardship to help *identify* us. Why do I know? Because I have been there. I know that dark corner well.

Such role-players often want to describe themselves using their illness as a key factor. When asked "who are you?" or "what is it you do?", they reply "*I am an – injustice or illness (of various kinds) sufferer/addict/ chronically fatigued/allergic to loads of things…etc*". They take every opportunity to tell people whom they hardly know, all about their stomach aches or sleepless nights, or whatever might 'reward' them with some sympathetic attention. They are trapped in a cycle of victimhood because it feels like the only way to get enough love. But I promise you that letting go of this role-play, learning to love yourself enough from inside, and finally being free of playing the victim, is a wonderful, empowering, life-exhilarating experience. The day I was asked in a workshop group meeting to 'say a little bit about myself' and said, *"I am a writer"*, never once needing to mention my illness challenges or brain damage, I knew I had come a long way**.**

But surely suffering of any kind is not something we ever 'allow' to happen to us, for loving rewards? I think if someone had said this to me in the past, I would have wanted to shout, *"HOW DARE YOU?!"* And for sure people going through any horrid illness or challenge have enough to cope with, without some 'smart-aleck' suggesting to them that playing the victim role has perhaps 'gotten them into this mess'. No! Please do not think I am blankly saying *"A has caused B"* about *any* illness or challenge. I do not go along at all with people who seem to think they can clearly declare what exact

'trouble' inside us has caused us to manifest a specific illness or problem. This 'expertise' is an arena of analysis which often does us no good and affords other people too much influential power.

Understanding 'how we got here' needs to be done with so much **self-tenderness and humility**. We can ask: will such understanding help lift me up, or will it weigh me further down with guilt and anxiety? Working out the exact reason why we are in the rapids right now might not ever be possible or be the best method to help us get though them. But to ask ourselves honestly if **any part of us** benefits from our own suffering – if that is a question which might help us break a bad pattern, then it could be worth whispering it to ourselves. Gently.

The truth is, I once discovered a book which changed (and helped me to keep) my life. It is Dr Bernie Siegel's *'Peace, Love and healing'*,* and in it he suggests we dare to ask ourselves the question: **what do I get from this illness?** Do I get something I really need and don't get enough of somewhere else, somewhere healthier in my life? It is a book to read and be brave with.

I read it at a time when I was dealing with the aggressive re-growth of my brain tumour, and then I went to see a fantastic hypno-analysist, who helped me to ask myself the big question *"does **every** part of me want me to get well and survive?"*. I discovered that, even when my life was under the real threat of ending, there was a 'little girl' part of me inside who still didn't want to help me to get well! Why? Because she saw being ill as a strategy to use to 'get love'. She needed some big inner hugs (by me) to be persuaded to let go of this

victim role. And in truth it took me a lot more years of struggle to become almost free of playing it. Even now, I catch myself going for the **'illness=attention'** role-play behaviour which has long dug roots inside of me. I am careful then to be aware, be light-hearted, definitely not castigate myself but instead laugh, love the little girl within, and even by being *conscious* of such role-playing, I can increasingly let it go. Move on to being stronger.

Perhaps you might want to find space to ask yourself, gently, if there is anything 'positive' you gain from being in a hard place right now. There are plenty of bad effects, for sure, but are there any good ones? I was terrified of having more brain surgery, so realising that some confused, love-hungry part of me saw this as being even slightly beneficial, was a real shocker! But hearing the truth was a big help, and I have been reminded, by my own healers, that **no guilt or blame ever needs to be laid on any part of yourself, for your own suffering.** Whatever actions we take in life, we often choose to do them from a part of us that thinks this is for our best survival…even when it has the opposite effect!

As I say, it can take a long time (and took me a lot of work and determination) to give up the victim role as our key identity. The 'child inside' part of me was very accustomed to this habit. It did seem to 'work' and acquire me sympathetic attention, plus praise for my bravery, and a powerful, interesting 'identity-label' as a person dealing with dramatic hardship from serious illness. Our media feeds the attraction of this role-play, as the victims in our world receive so much coverage and attention. People could understandably learn that if

they keep telling everyone about their constant terrible back pain or insomnia, they are likely to be felt sorry for – but will that help the back pain go away, or the sleep to come? No! And if they cannot stop talking to all who will listen about their life in the seedy world of drugs, or the terrible conditions of their job, this does, yes, earn them attention – but does it help them to come clean and step out of that drug-world, or into a better job? No. Such attention is like a thin blanket full of holes – it doesn't even really comfort us or keep us warm.

Resistance and variation.

If/when we decide to stop telling everyone about our troubles, or to cut our roots inside, however deep, to playing the victim in life, then our ego-child may well object and resist. We may feel a big urge to keep up the habit, which we are in a sense 'addicted' to. We may also feel too tired and fed up with struggling to want to bother finding the energy to change…but change is needed.

Some people have a different struggle and find it almost impossible to tell anyone about their problem. They may even mis-translate 'silent suffering' as a way to gain love, from sympathy and praise. But this is still the role-play of victim and needs to be healed.

*

Of course, many people do get ill or suffer repeated knocks in life due to sheer bad luck, or genetics, or circumstances all way beyond their control, and some readers will get no buttons of healing pressed by this section of suggestions in the book. It could be that you

have never played or identified with the role of 'victim' in your life and have no honest need to re-consider your role-play. If so…brilliant! This step of the book can help you to feel confident about your self-identity. But if you can be helped to heal yourself by realising that even a tiny part of the little child in you pushes you to play the role of *victim* in your life, in order to earn you attention, sympathy, praise or power – with the ultimate hope of love – then you have made a huge step towards being free from a habit of suffering. You are becoming ready to play a new role. And, more importantly, you are starting to see that the true person you are (multi-layered, fascinating, gifted, and unique) is **none** of the roles we all play in life to get us by. You are…well, who are you?

You are not *any* of the roles you play. And so, if it helps you to move forwards, **you can step free and let the victim role go.**

Play the Warrior.

It may be that this is the role you have always connected with. Or it may be that, like me, you have become aware and very tired of being an addict or downtrodden or a 'poorly' person – of playing the victim. So, you want to become, play, and remain, a warrior. What do I mean by this?

I am not keen on any aggressive focus we could relate to this role. I do not mean warrior in a 'battlefield' sense. Indeed, so much terminology used for survival (or not) from diseases such as cancer uses ridiculously militaristic words such as 'malignant', 'aggressive' and 'terminal'. I stay away from such language as a rule. It

helps no-one. But 'warrior' could symbolise someone who is proud yet humble, connected to earth, flowing with strong balanced energy, confident of their inner power, willing to give all to succeed, wanting to serve others, fully determined, focused, honest, clear, and holding true integrity. A good way to be! And a role we all have the capacity to embody.

A warrior can be a person who knows love is at the core of their being, and flows with this inside, as well as having plenty to share. A person focused not on what they cannot do but on what they believe they can. A person with the harnessed ability (which we all have) to make dreams a reality. Of course, this is a role none of us will play 100% of the time. And we do need to forgive ourselves when we 'fail' to be warriors in life, when we fall back into being victims (or martyrs). But the more we want to identify with this role, then the more it can become a strong 'framework' for the way we play out our lives. It can be the mind-set that we run along with as we think and act and create ourselves each day.

To reach 'beyond the sky' is the way of the warrior. It may be that we are given a diagnosis, or our life circumstances are so restrictive, that there are things we cannot now do, no matter how much we wish we could. But we can still reach as far and as high as possible, to get the utmost fulfilment from our life. Then, who knows? Maybe the things we do achieve will surpass all expectations and surprise us, and those around us. I have an elderly gentleman friend, Clifford, who was diagnosed with a 'dissected' ruptured aorta. But, instead of staying home and anxiously withering

away, he regularly walks into town, tends his garden and fruit trees, and amazes us with his brave enthusiasm to stretch the capacity of his life. And he has just recently taken a coach holiday to Ireland. He has used the power of 'yes' to overcome the 'no'.

A warrior seeks no gain from any attention received for their '**pathos**'. Linked to the word 'pathetic', pathos is a quality which evokes sadness or pity in others for a person's suffering. The warrior chooses instead to earn attention from being admirably awe-inspiring. They attract people and positive energies and events towards themselves because of what they hope for and succeed in, not where they suffer or fail. They receive positive reward for being positive in life. And the more they say "yes" to life, the more, from my experience, life says "yes" to them. That is not to say at all that if you play the role of warrior your life will always be healthy and ultra-successful…who are any of us to claim or expect that? But whenever hard times come, they do not knock you down completely. When you need to get over a big rock, you have the belief in yourself that enables you to find the reserves and optimism inside you to do this, or at least to give it every ounce of your capacity to try.

Taking control of your role-play.

People who play the 'martyr' role may be drawn to those who play the 'victim', but this will do neither of them much good. The martyr would be driven to care selflessly (in attempt to receive loving praise) for the victim, who is not thereby pushed to become a warrior and get well. But when we become **aware of the negative roles** we are playing in life, take control

and 'own' them, cut the roots – then they automatically lose their grip over us, and we can begin to set ourselves free. We begin to see the clear truth that, rather like the clothes we put on do not 'wear us', so too the roles we play in life do not wear us, **we wear them**. We are the ones making the choices and we can choose to take them off, change, even discard them. Remember, *you* are not the role you play, you are the one with control of choice, and if the role you choose to wear is that of the warrior, it is a keyway to you being a survivor.

*

Illness as a ticket out.

Playing the victim can also be a method used by the child inside you to achieve something other than attention. It can be used as a way out. Let me give you an example: when I was a student at Oxford University, for my own reasons (of working-class 'chip' and personal insecurity, and a basically overactive brain), I felt like I was falling apart. I had chronic insomnia and had not slept a full night through for nearly a year. I was desperately confused by my tiredness, and my family couldn't understand why I was so unhappy in such a privileged, fantastic place. Counselling and 'buddying' support is much better for students now, but back then (in the 80's) there seemed to be little help on offer. I also did not listen in and give myself help by changing any of the patterns of my behaviour. I continued to work over-intensively hard at my studies (which I loved), and do almost nothing to help myself relax, even though my exhausted brain was reaching a breakdown.

As I would not listen to the cries inside me for radical

change, rest and recovery, my body-mind eventually said '*Stop!*'. First, by forcing me to take a year out of university due to insomnia/stress/glandular fever, and then, when I returned to my studies and still did not listen or make any real changes, forcing me to take another year out with M.E. or 'post-viral fatigue'. When I returned and *continued* with my manically sleepless studies yet again, I finally developed a brain tumour, which forced me with a big loud STOP!! to do just that. I now needed brain surgery and so could not take my final exams; was given an '*aegro tat*' degree instead, which is Latin for 'given in sickness'.

I remember now, when I found out that an operation was needed because of something going wrong in my head (the hospital was not clear about the tumour at that time), I was horribly relieved that I would be getting perhaps a big plaster across my forehead, or some stitches. Why? Because this meant that I had an **'escape-route'** from sitting my exams, which I had been preparing for by either declaring that I was giving it all up, or by revising frantically. My nervous system was so shattered by this point that all I could think of was how much I needed a break from the stress. When the actual surgery occurred, and I came out of it looking like Frankenstein's monster on a bad day, it was a real wake-up call: **to *listen.***

Listen to the cries inside us. Listen to the asks. If we need a way out of a situation that is making us feel very bad inside, then it is not the best answer to become a victim – become ill, injured, abused, or hurt – in order to get away. We can instead listen to our inner child. To our true needs. Because our body hears them, even

if we do not. Our deep mind hears them. And if we keep ignoring these calls from inside us, if we force our body-mind to create a 'way out' for us…this can often lead to much more suffering than the thing/person or situation that we wanted to get away from.

I have learned from my mistakes that **sometimes the bravest thing is to walk away.**

Not perhaps just to blankly walk away and give up but to step **out**, step ourselves apart from that which we desperately want to get away from, or need a solution to, or understanding of, and ask ourselves what is really troubling us…then listen to the honest response. And then to take action for change as a warrior – which will protect and so enable us to be survivors.

*

Illness or suffering as an identity.

As I have said, it is a great step towards being a warrior when we no longer need to identify ourselves to people, when asked to introduce or describe who we are, as *"I am a victim of X"* or *"I have disease Y"* or *"I am recovering from Z"* etc. We are not our 'problem'.

Of course, this excludes the advantages to describing ourselves in such a way in a campaign for positive change, or at a meeting for those who share our disease, such as an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) group, or a domestic abuse or cancer support group. Of course. The benefits of such methods in a co-support group are well known to be invaluable. But if we no longer need to describe ourselves in such a way in a shop or bus queue or hobby group, or at work, then we are on the healing track.

I know that I have been most inspired in life by people who are not their illness at all. I once knew a poet, Chris, who went through years of progressive Parkinson's disease. But he never 'was' his disease. He ran a writers' group and would sometimes walk with great difficulty onto the stage at a concert, to read some of his work, but never once did I see him 'use' his illness as a way of getting any attention or sympathy. Indeed, quite the opposite. His illness never 'identified' who he was. But his determined love of writing, his wit, his authenticity, they did help create his identity, which inspired so many other writers around him.

The warrior aims to avoid the weak attraction of an illness or hardship giving us some 'pathetic' identity label, and instead reaches for the proud identity of 'inspiring artist' or 'ground-breaking scientist' or 'innovative entrepreneur', 'pioneering thinker', 'loving parent' or 'passionate activist'… Then ultimately, we need to realise that we are not *any* identity label, because we see that who we are is one whole unique person, **loved from inside for our weakness as well as our greatness.**

*

A blessing.

I will go into this in more detail further along in the book, but it is good from Step One, to consider the liberating idea that we **bless others, and are blessed ourselves, by our vulnerability.** To be a warrior is not to be 'all strong and all powerful' in every moment of our lives. As a true warrior we can be a vulnerable, fragile, honest human being, who can clearly say 'yes' to who we are. Other people then feel encouraged

themselves to be authentic, in the company of such a real person.

A focus.

It may be good to focus one more time on what this section of the book is trying to say:

We all know there are horrid negatives to being ill or suffering from a hard problem in life. Of course! But it may be good to be brave and ask ourselves, not what do I suffer but what do I *gain,* in any part of my being, from this hardship? We may need support from a loved one or healer or therapist to go through this question with real honesty, but ultimately, we need to be clear that if any 'little child' part of us does seek attention, escape, drama or 'pathos' from this suffering, then that part of us needs not chastisement or ridicule or 'how can I be so stupid?' accusations. The part of us that is calling out needs, you got it, LOVE. To get the whole of our being on board a boat called '*Survivor*', we need to be honest and forgiving of any 'irrational' intentions inside us, which seem to be leading us into rocky places. And we need to give ourselves a big (corny but much needed) hug inside. Perhaps many hugs.

Whenever I catch myself now returning to old ways and playing the victim – looking for attention, praise, or sympathy because of my physical health problems and what they put me through – remember, I don't tell that little child in me off, but laugh lightly and tell her I see what I am up to. I love her…and say it's time to move on. Be a warrior.

STEP TWO

What the mind can do.

I discovered hypnotherapy when I was a student at university. Learning the techniques of self-hypnosis and positive visualisation helped me to cope with my brain surgery and radiotherapy, because this empowered me to believe that I could drive my own healing process. I was not just a 'subject' being worked upon by medical experts.

Before and during every session of radiotherapy, I imagined white rays of light beaming through my brain and cleaning out any unwanted cells. I always used imagery that was loving and positive, nothing to do with war or the tumour cells being an 'enemy' inside me. The focus was on being well, rather than on not being ill. It is a *big* difference.

I developed a regular practice of visualisation which became quite creative, using 'symbolic' imagery that was often rather bizarre – but personally just right for me. The symbols were asked for and then chosen by my own mind, to represent whatever I was focusing upon. So, my immune system workers were 'Tetley tea-bag men' and they went around the 'garden' in my head with watering cans, tending vibrant 'red poppies' – which were my healthy brain cells. Occasionally a

'guard-sheep' would need to eat a 'thistle', and generally the scenes were good, even fun.

To visualise being filled with 'cabbage-white butterflies', was my symbol for being filled up with love. I will talk about this more in the 'Step Seven' chapter – how you can use creative positive visualisation and connection to inner love to really help you heal your life. Learning to visualise love inside me – love *for* me – was one of the most important routes I have ever taken. The more I practised this and the more dedicated I was to this process, then the better my visualisation skills became. I learned just how valuable our minds can be, in helping us to heal.

Heal or cure?

Now it is important to make something clear. To 'heal' is not the same as to 'cure' or be cured. We can all heal ourselves. We cannot all cure ourselves or be cured by someone else. To heal is to find the energies of harmony, acceptance, forgiveness, and light inside us. Perhaps these words sound simplistic, but they are still true. And to be honest, all of these energies come down to love – as the core of all our healing. They strengthen our capacity to cope. They empower us to defend and look out for our needs. They soothe our souls. When we heal, we are helping ourselves to be cured. We are helping our body and mind to be the most resilient and resistant to dis-ease we can be. Yet we need to hold the truth that we can heal *even if* the way forward does not include complete recovery.

So, key-point: even if we realise that we are not going to make it out of some harsh rapids in this life completely

'fixed', we can **always be healed**. We can always find inner calm, find a way to love and forgive who we truly are, and find a lightness that lifts us up, no matter what. To realise this can be the best tonic to our being, indeed to our whole existence.

The downside.

If the mind can help us to heal, even help us towards curing our illness or problem, what can happen the 'other way around'? What harm can we do to our lives with our minds?

Before appointments with consultants, or brain scans, I often experience an increase in pain in the 'problem area' of my body being looked into. If it is a brain scan coming up, I get headaches, or if I am seeing my scleroderma consultant, my joint pain and stiffness increases. Why? Because I am focusing on the negative aspects of that particular part of my life. I am more stressed and anxious, even if this anxiety is not on the surface of my awareness. If I take a walk by the river or have a good day out with my husband, the pain reduces, because I am giving it less attention. If we know this, then we can use such knowledge to our advantage.

*

One of the most significant lessons I have learned is how much stress can impact on physical dis-ease. The actual 'stress-chemicals' coursing around our anxious bodies can directly physically harm us, yes, but what I mean here is that our mind can also 'think itself ill' – so that the mental *transfers* to the physical plane. If we are unhappy, grieving, furious, fearful, guilt-ridden, or anxious, then those negative emotions can

create unhealthy thoughts in our brains, which then have unhealthy effects on our bodies. Especially if such emotions are not allowed to be 'felt through' and released from inside us. I know this from years of experience.

Once, when I was desperate from lack of sleep at university, and neurotically anxious about the fact that I seemed to have no energy anymore, my dear friend Ben walked gently with me to help me go and see a doctor. The doctor brushed me aside and told me to *"go back to your college room and read some magazines".* The anxiety I felt from this rebuttal was so extreme, and I felt so unable to express my despair to this doctor, that I literally could not get up out of the chair in her consulting room! I was 'paralysed' by stress.

But does this mean that if your chronic fatigue or joint pain or auto-immune disease or any kind of problem with your health whatsoever, if they are partly 'caused' by stressful, negative thoughts and emotions in your mind, does this make your illness any less real? NO! If your mind is 'making you ill'…you are still ill. If stress and nervousness cause you to be so distracted with worry that you trip and fall and break your arm, your arm is still broken! If our mind is 'behind' any chronic or other disease, this does not reduce the challenge of the disease. Indeed, if mental involvement means our 'psycho-somatic' illness is viewed less empathically by people all around us, this can make the illness *more* of a challenge, not less.

If the '*psyche*' of our mind is affecting the '*soma*' health of our body, then such a term as '*psychosomatic*' being used towards us in a derogatory way, can just add to the pain. When I had M.E or 'post-viral/chronic fatigue

syndrome', my own self-doubting insecurity about how other people judged my inability to walk upstairs – how much they might think I was 'playing ill' – was a much more severe worry than when I had a 'real' illness like cancer. How sad. It is therefore at times like this that we need to be our own best-friend, and not fall into doubting or criticising ourselves – because we need a lot of self-loving to get us out of this mess! **To be survivors means to be self-believing, with tenderness.**

For years I tried hard to pin-point a 'physical' cause for my chronic fatigue…was it a food allergy, a candida overgrowth, or a post-virus effect after having glandular fever? I grasped about for reasons that might make my illness seem 'acceptable', whilst never asking myself who it all needed to be acceptable *to?* I will never know how much an early-stage brain tumour could have been 'behind' this fatigue problem. But I do know for sure that *anxiety* inside me was a big causal factor to all my illness. To accept this, honour our problems and respect our mental health issues as worthy of help just as much as anything physical; to begin to regard our health as being that of the whole person – mental, physical and spiritual all interacting together – is a huge step towards our healing.

Imagine.

Our minds can do incredible things that we are only just beginning to appreciate. People tell me that some holy sadhus in India can levitate. I have never seen this but can believe it. Why? Because the potential of the human mind is vast. Our brains are incredible. To have faith and hope in this capacity we all have, is a great asset.

When I found out that I had a brain tumour, I was in the dilemma of dealing with two years of chronic fatigue, which was driving me nuts. Now I needed major surgery and life was suddenly a lot more dramatically scary. I needed to tap into my deep inner reserves of will-power and optimism, to get through this hellish rapid. All the strength of my being seemed to suddenly surge forwards, and my mind became a great helper, enabling me to learn visualisation skills, deal with shock and pain, overcome quite challenging weakness post-surgery, and lots more. Gradually, with determination, I increased how far I could walk each day, taking a few steps further to get out of the house, then up my parents' drive, up to the signpost on the corner, then along our village road…and the chronic fatigue as a 'problem' just fell away. When my mind focused on strength, hope, and recovery instead of weakness, despair and inability, everything changed.

The power of our mind to influence the *causation* of our disease, is the power which we can tap into, to imagine and reach towards the positive goals we long for, in the *overcoming* of our disease.

*

But what if our minds are negative or anxious in outlook?

Some people say, 'change your thoughts and you change your world'. That the very way you think affects the life you have and the environment you experience all around you. In many ways I agree. Recently, my husband chopped down a dead tree and we had an argument about the chopped wood – where to put

it. In the process of this argument, he noticed two ladybirds together on a branch, so he tenderly placed them somewhere safe on another tree trunk. Weeks later, as we sat by the spot where this tree-chopping had occurred, all I could think of was the argument we'd had. I recalled this to my husband, and he replied that he couldn't remember the argument, only the ladybirds.

That made me think!

Do some of us hold on tighter to the negative thoughts and memories than the good ones? Do some of us – even if we appear very cheerful and optimistic on the 'outside' – do we have a deep-grained habit of anxiously fearing the worst? This could be due to our life-experiences, of course (perhaps battling through too many rapids!), or because of a tendency we picked up as children. Who knows? But if you, like me, feel aware of too often loitering in the anxious shadows rather than enjoying the sunlight…then we need to turn ourselves around, turn our habit towards holding the positive memories foremost, cultivate an 'all will be well' outlook, and *keep doing that.*

Give laughter a chance to 'get inside you'. Being willing, even keen, to laugh alongside life, is such a precious commodity. And if laughing along to the funny things isn't something you find easy, then I can say practice does help! So does choosing to walk along the road singing or humming (not too loud!) and being open to noticing the ladybirds.

It may be hard to even realise you have a negative outlook or anxious habit if you have all the superficial appearance to the world (and yourself) of being an upbeat, positive person. But be really honest with

yourself, again. Do you imagine criticism coming to you more often than praise? Do you remember the ugly memories much more easily than the great things that have happened in your life? Do you guess people are judging you negatively much more easily than thinking they might like you? Do you worry about how things could go wrong and fall apart rather than expect plain sailing and success? Being truthful about this negative habit is another big step forward because, with determination and practice, habits can be changed.

Changing our ways.

It is true that habits are often not easy to change, especially if they are embedded into our 'sub-conscious' mind. A habit which causes us a lot of pain and trouble in life but affords a part of us some (often short-term) 'positive effect', can take a lot of grit to step away from. Addictions or even heavy usage of drink, drugs, sugary food, gambling machines etc are a good example of this pattern. I have known people who are obese or diabetic but cannot seem to kick the habit of 'comfort eating' junk food, or sugary pop. The behaviour pattern is held onto for as long as we choose the harmful 'quick plus' over the long-term benefit of stopping and re-directing ourselves onto a better track.

To change a 'bad' habit, we need 1) determination 2) discipline 3) to understand *why* we are doing the thing that is not good for us – what positive effect is attaching us to this repetitive unhealthy loop? 4) to be gentle and forgive ourselves when we slip…but not so gentle that we don't push ourselves hard to still make the break and 5) love inside.

We can also help ourselves by changing the environment we put ourselves in, which might be encouraging bad habits – like having a group of mates who are all heavy drinkers or continuous cannabis smokers. Also, by being aware of 'key points' when a habit is routinely triggered – such as feeling compelled to go to the bookmakers/online gambling as soon as your wages/benefits are in your hands. We are helped by understanding that the sub-conscious drive to do things 'just as you always do' can be strong. Change takes effort. We won't change our ways with very little energy input. To really want something, to really work for it, to really **believe we are worth the effort,** is part of the healing ride.

Bogey-monster avoidance.

Sometimes we may need professional support to help us understand the 'why?' to our habit, the real deep reason why we are doing this. For example, I once saw a counsellor who asked me to consider whether my habit of repeatedly being 'full of stress', even of *looking* for stressful situations/relationships/disputes in my life, being full of 'trauma' over them, was perhaps actually **a buffer**. A what?

She explained that if we have a deep and unconnected/unexpressed fear or pain inside us (such as my fear of further brain damage) then, rather than connect to and release this big emotion, honestly 'own' it and begin to let it out, we can choose instead (sub-consciously) to surround ourselves with a 'buffer' of other worries. These could be relationship issues, work or lifestyle (or other people's) problems, even other more minor health worries – because we find this 'easier' than feeling and

releasing the bigger fear, guilt, pain, anger, or grief, deep inside us. As soon as she suggested I consider this, I knew it to be true.

Do you connect to this? Do you have a habit of 'buffering' yourself with a multitude of continuous 'little stresses', to avoid perhaps another bigger one you don't want to approach inside you? The funny thing is, **as soon as we acknowledge and accept the fear, or the truth of a deep pain inside us, then the sooner we disempower it**. Like a hyped-up bogey-monster in the dark, when we put the light on and see it for what it is, it is not so big or scary after all. It is a real hard emotion, yes, but one we *can* handle. It certainly does us a lot more harm when hidden in the dark.

I have met many people who have a years-long pattern of 'being badly' or suffering life's woes. Their identity is 'being ill' or their conversation is the 'raw deals' they continuously face. They talk of bitter grudges and sad memories. They focus on being 'hard done by' in life. Being victims, not warriors, most of the time. These people are often sensitive souls, with kind hearts. But life just seems to keep knocking them down. If we can become able to see the potential truth of the repeated stressful situations and relationships, even continuous physical distress in our life, being used as a 'buffer' to distract or prevent our connection to a *deeper* pain inside, then we can finally allow ourselves to see the pattern more clearly, begin to transform it – and so transform ourselves.

We will look at dealing with the fear of our dying in Steps Five and Six, but fear can also be big when it is a fear of things 'going wrong again' in our lives.

Perhaps, like for me, fear of physical deterioration, of for others fear of mental illness returning, or of relapse of behavioural/addiction problems, or of abuse being repeated, or of another financial/domestic/even political or environmental or pandemic crisis. Fear covers many things. Left to go wild and have free rein to rampage, it can grow out of proportion, affecting a whole network of other patterns in our mind. It can hide behind bad habits for years, which buffer us from facing it in the light, so we never actually release it. **Fear of chaos can in truth lead us into chaos.**

We may be buffering ourselves from feeling grief over a loss of ability to something we used to be able to do, or grief from being told/realising we cannot ever do something we have longed for, or from bereavement of a loved one. Or it could be anger, fury over something that was done to us…or guilt over something that we did years ago and have never allowed ourselves to forgive. The range of pains we can bury down and 'buffer' by feeling other difficult things, is too wide to describe, but you can hopefully see what I mean.

To realise and feel these emotions in their absolute truth takes patience, gentleness, often support, and yes, it takes time. It can take a huge willingness to forgive both ourselves and other people, even God, for us to completely let go of such feelings. But really, I am talking here not so much about completely healing the pains, setting them free forever from us, but about at least seeing the *truth of their existence* inside us. To begin to heal can be to realise that our habit of continuously being a 'sufferer' in life, or of having stress repeatedly knocking on our door, is perhaps caused (even in part)

by our needing these distractions from a bigger stress, deep down. This is the crucial first step in our letting go of the 'bogey-monster' – to see that the 'big fear' or scary darkness deep inside us is even there, hiding away behind buffers, and that it is really a vulnerable, hurting part of ourselves, who needs to be heard. A part of us that needs **our tender listening.**

Are you your mind?

We cannot always *stop* ourselves worrying or being anxious, or our minds from 'chunnering on' over some list of concerns. Some of us have extremely active minds, which can enrich but also make exhausting demands on our lives. But are you your mind? No. Realising this has been a great step forward for me. If we learn techniques to help us 'step aside from our thoughts', we can begin to step aside from our mental processes and find the peace of stillness. If you have chronic insomnia or are plagued by persistent 'over-thinking', which can be so draining on your energy, it is good to learn to be aware of a distance that exists between who *you* are, completely, and your mind's activity. You are a unique whole being. Your mind is basically the creator of nerve signals into and out of your brain. Some people (me included) believe the mind also exists in the heart and the 'guts' of us, so we think, and we also feel and have instincts/intuition…but wherever it sits, the mind you have is still not all of who you are. **Your mind *belongs* to you, and you can choose how and when you give it your attention.**

Sometimes, when I just need a period of real calm, I gently follow a brief sequence of body relaxation, by

moving my awareness up the body, and letting it all settle heavy. Next, I become aware that my mind can think whatever thoughts it likes *but,* because right now I want to let my whole being have some rest, I am going to step aside from any thoughts that may come along. I may notice them from 'a distance', and then let them go, and come back to the moment I am in. I cannot *stop* my thoughts, but I can 'move away' from them in my focus of awareness.

I may visualize a lovely scene where there is an old 'steam-train' of thoughts passing through my head, but I decide simply to 'get off the train', disembark and go sit in a sunny field nearby, under a big old tree, and simply watch the thought-train passing along, but pay no undue attention to it, as I lean against the tree trunk and begin to relax.

Another 'disengage' visualisation I have recently enjoyed practising, is to imagine being in a 'coral' or circular paddock with my horse (my brain), where the horse is set loose and free to run about if she likes, buck and gallop around, or lie down and rest quiet, or even go out through the open gate, while I just sit or lie against the wooden fence in the paddock, and relax, rest easy, let it all just be how it is. Let the horse of my brain do what she likes with thoughts, while I take time out to 'disengage' and be filled with peace.

Or I may focus not on my thoughts but on a simple 'distracting' silent word or phrase like 'shanti' or 'in peace,' allowing my breath to flow gently in rhythm with the words. Recently, I have taken an even clearer route to mind-calm and begun to simply focus on the sound of the in/out breath itself – which is a bit like

a gentle wave on a beach, pulling in and back, in and back, across the sand. Breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth for a while is an effective way to really let go of tensions.

Whatever technique I use, as soon as I begin to detach from my unwanted thoughts, like an unnoticed child the brain begins to slow down and stop calling for attention. It begins to tune into deep, quiet peace, which has been waiting all along.

We can use techniques like this to understand that **we are not our minds**, our minds belong to us. The power of this realisation is also a great freedom – because we begin to realise how we can change and adapt our minds. And how we can break free of our thinking!

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The same is true for unwanted **patterns and habits** of thought. Once you understand that you are the controller of who you are, including your thinking patterns, then you gain a sense of returned power. I once had a counsellor who helped me with a pattern of 'O.C.D' or 'obsessive compulsive disorder' regarding a fear of time. Basically, after my first brain tumour surgery, I was neurotically nervous of time 'running out' on me. I began to time everything and make minutely detailed timetables for my daily life. He showed me how to create a 'Gnumph' monster (who was not scary, just foolishly annoying, a bit like some puppet out of *Sesame Street*), and every time the 'timing obsession' creeped back into my mind, I would tell myself *"the Gnumph is back in my head"* and chase it out. Over and over again, I kicked the silly monster out of my mind and then *ignored* him. When he tried to return, I

kicked Gnumph out again, ignored him some more… and gradually he gave up. The thought habit was lost because it received no attention.

You can try any of these visualisation and sound practices yourself, for disengaging with your thoughts and finding inner peace, or you could make up your own!

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Just like we are not our 'role-play' or our 'identity,' we are also not our minds**. We are so much more.** And we can always choose how we engage with, operate, even transform these aspects of ourselves. How exciting!

Think of your leg.

A good way to understand how we are more than our minds, is to look at your leg. You are not your leg, but your leg is a part of you. Unless you have disease or paralysis in that leg, you can control how it operates. You can let it be, lie still, you can bend it, run with it….and the same goes for our minds. We ultimately do have complete control over our minds, but most of us, me included, we are a long way from fully realising this powerful gift.

Still, it is good to know that the mind is a part of us which we can *harness* to help us get through the rapids. It can seem much harder to have control of our mind than our physical body. I can lie my leg still quite easily but ask me to still my mind and I might just go into hyper-think! But I am learning, and so can you, that **the less we struggle intensively to still and direct our minds, the more we simply let go, and 'step aside', in an awareness of our mind being only a component part of who we are, then the easier it becomes to**

find inner peace. Whenever I stop 'trying to be still' inside, then still I am! The way forward with this skill is to keep going, and to realise that not all skills take a lot of effort…some may come best when the effort is given up. Keep gently practising allowing your mind to be 'let go of' and calm and then, through positive visualisation, affirmations and simple intention, your mind can help you be well. You will see in the Appendix that on my website and You Tube channel 'the love that we are', and in some podcasts, I have created a range of deep relax positive visualisations and meditations, which I gently guide you through, to show you how to learn these healing techniques for yourself.

Of course, it is true that some people have damaged or diseased legs and do not have the capacity, temporarily or permanently, to control and direct them to do as they wish. The same is true for our brains, with brain damage from strokes, surgery, injury, or dementia, or if the mind is ill with mental illness. However, just like our legs, the more we see our mind as being a *part* of ourself which is there to be loved, and to work for us as best it can, and that we can choose to alter the attention we give to it, the more we feel – and fulfil – the potential for our own healing.

To step away from struggling to control our thoughts, and instead simply notice them as being a passing product of our brain, which we can engage with and respond to as we choose, is the way to gain mastery of – or at least a really good, healthy relationship with – our mind**…not through force but through freedom.**

STEP THREE

Riding the rapids with doctors and officials.

Pre-note.

When I was first creating this chapter, in 2020, the whole of my nation, indeed the world, was facing the pandemic of a coronavirus and 'Covid 19'. Never in my lifetime had the service, compassion, and sacrifice been shown so clearly to us all by the dedicated health and social/care workers, in their efforts to help people worldwide survive this disease. In no way whatsoever do I want in this chapter to diminish the gratitude and admiration we have for these professionals, volunteers, and all people who work for our common good. Instead, this Step Three is about doing our best to be a survivor *within* the system of how our society is organised. Not to change the system – that is not my business here. We are not looking in this book to transform the world, but to **transform ourselves.**

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The best motto I can create for this next practical step is:

Be Firm; be Fair; be True to yourself (FFT).

What do I mean?

First, let's look at some examples of when I have *not* interacted well with people working in the National Health Service (NHS), and what I have learned from this.

1) I once went to see a doctor in Oxford to talk about my chronic fatigue. I also mentioned that I had sharp pains in the left side of my head. At that time, my left eye was protruding, a bit like a goldfish. The doctor told me that he was running late with appointments and, if I had wanted to talk about two things, I should have made a double appointment. So, we didn't talk about my head pain, and even though my optician (without my knowing) wrote to him to ask him to look into the cause of the swelling in my eye, my doctor didn't call me back in to investigate this problem – which turned out to be a brain tumour.

How would I deal with this now? I would say (politely and firmly) to the doctor, *"Sorry, it is a shame you are running late, and I do understand how busy you are, but I do still need you to look into why I have these head pains"*. And I would make myself stay in the consulting room until the doctor did just that: investigate my pain. Perhaps set up some future checks. At least start the ball rolling to help me. Not just 'move me along' like a nuisance speck of fluff.

For any of you who have been in similar situations, you will know how much determination and guts this can sometimes take. **If you need to, 'glue your bum' to the seat!**

2) About six months after my first brain tumour surgery, I travelled from Stirling (where I was living) in Scotland

right down to Oxford, to have a 'field-test' for my vision and a consultation with my eye surgeon, to check things were all still okay. The receptionist at the desk of the eye department would not believe me that I had this vision test booked in, so I waited for four hours to see the consultant, and when I did, he asked me for the vision field-test results!…So then he had to send me for the test…and when I came back with the results, he was just closing the door of his consulting room and said, *"Sorry, it's 5pm, so I am going home now".* This delayed things, dangerously.

How would I deal with this now? I would politely insist that the lady at reception get help from her manager to see what had gone wrong with my vision test appointment booking record (she was very overstretched at the time, with patients' notes all over the place). Then, I would strongly request that my eye consultant make an *exception,* due to the mistake of a delayed vision test not being my own, by giving me five more minutes of his time, to look at the results *now* (which did show something was going wrong), before sending me all the way back to Scotland. **Don't let other people's mistakes mess up your life!**

3) After all the mess above, I then had appointment letters 'lost in the post', an appalling three times, for arranging a needed brain scan. The scan, (and so my second brain tumour surgery), was therefore badly delayed. I did not bother very much about all this at the time, partly because I was so afraid of more surgery, and partly because I just unquestioningly 'trusted the system' to look after me.

How would I deal with this now? I would never *ever* rely on 'red-tape' to be fully 100% efficient, either in the NHS, or anywhere in organisations delivering services which are important to my health and well-being. I would not allow sloppy bureaucracy to encourage me to also be sloppy. **Be your own best (and most efficient) guardian.**

I am not saying in any of these cases above that a greater courage to stand up for myself, and a determination to politely but firmly get the help I deserved, would have *guaranteed* optimal action as a result…but I would have known I had given it my best shot.

Now, over twenty-five years later, I received just this week a letter telling me that my appointment to see my neurosurgeon, (which should be every twelve months, to keep a check on the new shadows), was being delayed by two more months. I know from experience that such an appointment could again be delayed by a further two months after that, and so on. So, I telephoned my surgeon's personal secretary. I gave my name, so she knew who I was, and I explained why I was not happy. She was understanding and helpful, and my appointment was re-scheduled to a delay of just two weeks, not two months.

It has taken me a lot of mistakes and overcoming hesitance, to learn to look out for myself in this way, and I for sure do not always get it right. Being strong when you are feeling fragile, vulnerable, or just nervous of 'being cheeky', is never easy. But I would like to encourage you here how to be firm, fair, and true to yourself when dealing with doctors, nurses, social workers, care administrators, housing officials, mental

health services, psychiatrists, probation officers or drug rehab supervisors etc etc…These services, and the people within them, are all incredibly stretched, we know. But you still need to get the best help possible, for yourself or your loved one. You need to **be a name, a person, not a number.**

Be firm.

Sometimes, if you go to see a doctor, consultant, or any official care-service provider on your own, you will be pushed along. The NHS particularly is bursting with time-pressure. Sometimes (because they are human), the person may show you indifference, not listen to your questions or your worries. Or they may give you rushed, muffled, unclear answers. Or maybe use a terminology which you do not understand. Basically, for whatever reason, they may not treat you as a human being who deserves respect. The same can happen on hospital wards or in drug/social-care centres, with over-busy or distracted workers. The complex 'administration systems' of our modern care world can also seem, at times, like cranky old machines.

I have some wonderful consultants who amaze me with how they continue to be thorough and patient and make every endeavour to do their utmost for me and every person they see, hour after hour. I have known nurses who are literally angels, often just at the times when I felt I could fall apart without one. But I have also been left in my hospital bed and repeatedly ignored when I asked for my missing anti-epilepsy medicine, and to say that the care we are given is *always* good, is just not true.

The reasons for this at times inadequate care, are not your problem. Trying to fight and complain about such things, to somehow 'change the system', can be a drain of your time and energy at a time when you are better focusing on your own needs for recovery or even survival. You need to focus clearly on getting essential answers and help, as quickly and efficiently as possible. Let someone else deal with reorganising the infrastructure when you have your own life-project to deal with.

Again, from experience, I would say beware of using 'changing the way they do things' in the health/social care/rehab system etc, as a 'buffer' to distract you from facing and dealing with your own pain, fear or problems. I once knew a lovely young woman through my work, who had advanced cancer but focused intently on trying to complain about and change the NHS, rather than helping herself to heal. Beware or try to be honest about using such distractions, understandable as they may be.

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I recommend, **whenever possible, take someone with you**, to important appointments. This has so often been advice I have ignored, when going to see a doctor or consultant, thinking I am confident and strong enough to ask all the questions and get all the answers I need. But, when you get into that appointment room, it is bizarre how even the bravest and most confident 'lions' among us, can suddenly feel nervous, apologetically guilty about 'wasting important people's time', and transform into a timid mouse, succumbing to the pressure to get out of there as quickly as possible!

My cousin also reminded me that it is when we are most nervous and anxious of bad news, we can then rush ourselves through an appointment, and come out realising that we have not asked those questions we were sure we would, when we had the chance! The anxiety has taken away our calm intentions.

If you have someone with you, even if they do not say a single word, the extra person there 'on your team', gives you more confidence to be firm and clear about your questions and needs. Honest. And if you need some answers or explanations written down, the other person can help with that. To not miss things. To be another listening ear. The sheer alteration of ratio of there being 'more of you' in the room, really does help a lot. It gives you the power to sit and ask and listen. And even to stay put!

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I once went to see a wonderful eye consultant at Manchester Royal Eye Hospital. I was visiting a friend in the city when a burning feeling in my left eye (half-stitched closed now after brain surgery) told me that an eyelash had probably been pushed inwards. I needed someone to have a look and pull the lash out. The hospital day surgery was terribly packed. People were queueing with serious, urgent eye problems. When I got to my turn with the consultant, I apologised and said I didn't want to hold him up with such a little problem. *"Jacci",* he said to me, "*while you are in front of me right here, right now,* ***you*** *are what matters to me."*

I remember those words and hope you will. **You matter!**

Be firm. Be a survivor. Your own needs do count. If you want a clearer explanation of your diagnosis, or your specific concerns to be acknowledged, if you need a better understanding of the prognosis or symptoms of your illness, or of your medicine and its possible side-effects, or to find out about ways you can personally help alleviate your problems…**ask!** And ask again, calmly, until you get an adequate reply. I know how hard this can be. Just when you are stressed enough with the 'jitters' of dealing with your illness or trauma, this is the very time you need to be basically courageous and firm about getting the help you need…you need to be your own best guardian.

It is true that this can take up a lot of your patience and precious energy at times. It is true that you can crumble (I often have) and come out of a consulting room kicking yourself for not asking all the things you wanted to or feeling that you didn't really get sufficient answers. It is true that when you are feeling fragile or frightened, it can be ultra-hard, even feel 'impossible' to remain focused and clear. But you just need to take a deep breath, let go of your frustration, forgive your human frailty…and have another go. Be a *persistent* survivor – be aware of the help you need, know you deserve it, have a right to it, and do absolutely all you can to get it.

Be fair.

Just as much as it is important to honour your own needs, you do need to find a decent, honest balance. I have slowly learned how to speak up for myself, even if this causes some official people to see you as a bit of

a fusspot! At least they know who you are, and so are less likely to forget about you. When my head felt like it was going to burst open around the drainage tubes in my forehead after my first brain surgery, I buzzed for the nurse time and again. Every time, she told me I was just being fussy. But I kept buzzing. Eventually she checked my tubes and realised the drains were blocked. Sometimes you need to be a 'nuisance' to stay alive. However, there is a fine line between this and expecting constant care, as if no-one else on the ward or at your doctor's surgery or housing/drug/social services centre or wherever, also matters.

You need to decide if what you are asking for is fair care, or if you are being selfish. A consultant will likely respect you more if you are clear about the help you need, but they will probably not warm to you or want to give you their best attention, if you simply demand too much. The balance of being firm but fair is one which I have sometimes got wrong, because I am human, but all we can do is try our best, forgive ourselves, and keep going.

It's good to be aware that wanting to be 'firm but fair' is a balance which we can fear getting wrong so much that it makes us shakily nervous. Wanting to hold onto your right to have the necessary time spent on your needs, but not be seen as 'that time waster', especially in our ultra-time-pressed health care services, can be a nerve-wracking experience for sure. If you are speaking with someone who, perhaps literally, holds your life in their hands, then the last thing you want to do is annoy them! This power issue can really work to your disadvantage if it makes you dread standing up for yourself. All I can say is, I have survived things better

by being strong in this patient/professional or client/official relationship, than when I have been too nervous to speak. You need to see this person, as much as you possibly can (even when it is hard) as your *equal.* You need to show them equal respect, and remember, the **more you can respect *yourself,* the more, in general, they will also respect you.**

If someone who is being paid to help you is still behaving in an unacceptable way, when you have tried your best to follow this step, then you need to act, sooner rather than later. Find out if you can be referred to a different person, or speak to people in more senior positions, or if necessary, contact a complaints/liaison service such as PALS (Patient Liaison and Advice Service), and make it clear that you need better care. And if they don't help, or they try and the answers still don't come, keep going. If you are not expecting the whole system to revolve around you but simply asking for the help you (or your loved one) deserve, then keep strong faith in your rights, and persist.

Hurdle manoeuvring.

If we have a hurdle before us that we just cannot find a way over, sometimes we need to find a way to get *around* it, even with a bit of force. Once, my old hospital notes in Oxford were needed for my new consultant neurosurgeon in Newcastle to be able to see what material the two 'aneurysm clips' are made of, which clip across a cut artery in my brain. For a long time, all efforts to recover these notes were unsuccessful, yet still no clear statement about the truth of the situation was made. No-one would admit responsibility for or

find out clearly what had happened to my notes. This meant things were left at stalemate and I could not have a necessary magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan in case the clips are made of a metal which could be affected by the MRI magnets. Eventually, only after I made an official complaint to PALS, it was admitted that these specific notes in Oxford were lost – the paperwork had 'dropped out of the file'. Annoying yes, but at least now a solution could be found, whereby my scans are done on a lower magnetic strength MRI machine, to keep the clips from potentially wiggling about! Sometimes we need to push, and even push hard, to be true survivors.

Remind yourself often "*I deserve good care",* and that if *you* respect your right to uphold your needs, the rest of the world is more likely to do the same. Plus, as I said, be sure that there will be times when you do not do this! I can still come away from a conversation, in person or on the telephone, thinking how much I let myself down, not asking the questions I needed answers for. And I still apologise too much when I am asking for extra help. But we can then remember to give ourselves permission to not be perfect, to sometimes feel too weak or nervous to be our best guardian… then just give ourselves a hug inside, breathe, and carry on.

Be true to yourself.

We are all different. You will look after yourself better if you honour the *un*usual person that you are (perhaps no-one is 'usual'?). If you are afraid of needle injections – say so! Say you need help to keep calm if you know you have strong panics about being in a confined space

like a scanning machine. If you do not want to take a prescribed drug or go through with an advised operation – speak your truth. You may be told that it is essential for your health or survival to go ahead, but at least you will get the chance to discuss this in more detail, and then make your best clear, informed decision. The professionals you talk with are there, paid for, to help you. So, you need to speak honestly, as an individual with specific personal fears and values. But you do need also to **listen**. To open your mind, consciously making the effort to do this, and really listen to what is being communicated to you. Do not presume you have all the answers and remember that these people are professionally trained and will know or understand things which you may not. It is a real process of two-way co-operation and respect.

I once asked for a delay to my second brain-tumour surgery. I asked my surgeon if I could have 'time-out' to see if I could get the tumour to disappear using my own 'alternative' techniques. This was a BIG mistake (see later). I got my way and the operation was held back for several weeks, while in the meantime the tumour grew, aggressively. I had tried to be true to myself and my own healing ideals (really a naïve ideology), but I had refused to listen to someone who knew better, for sure, about brain tumours.

However, during my radiotherapy I very much was true to my values in a positive way. For the first week of daily treatment, I had to stay on a radio/chemotherapy ward, for nurses to keep a close check on my stability. I asked them for permission to put a *'Please Do Not Disturb'* sign on my single room door, to indicate when I was

doing my 'deep-relax-visualisations' to help clear away my tumour cells. It was something I believed in very much, and it made me feel I was involved in my own healing process, not just 'being radiated' by experts. It really helps if you can feel that you are involved in what is happening, that you are not a bystander while everyone else 'does things to you'. The kind nurses respected this need so, for about twenty minutes each morning and afternoon, I put the sign on the door while I visualised my brain cells being kept healthy, and I deeply relaxed.

I also sat in silence in the waiting room before each treatment, deep-relaxing with my eyes closed and breathing calmly, then during the radiotherapy I imagined the radio-rays as white beams of light going through my head at just the right place to heal and dissolve any tumour cells that might still be around. Being so positively involved with this whole process really helped me, I am sure, to cope well with the tiredness and the potentially unpleasant experience of lying in a machine, covered in a full-face mask, being irradiated. It made me feel I had the boat oars. All the staff took me for who I was and supported me for my choices. I think it is true that people do feel more inclined to honour and accept you for being specifically who you are, including your quirks, frets, and passions, *if you do.*

Ultimately, as you struggle through those rapids, *you* need to be holding the oars.

This can also mean that you need to take *responsibility* for understanding your problem. I don't mean look

up every single medical or technical term and try to 'outsmart' the specialists. You will need to put some trust into the hands of the people caring for or helping you. Going to an appointment and trying to sound like a medical or psychiatric genius does no favours to the time you have together. But then again, to not even try to understand the condition you have, to not even try to explore the various possible ways you could get treatment, is no friend to your healing either. I think it is a case of **discernment**…asking when do I need to step forward, when do I need to sit back? Now that I understood how important it is to keep a regular check on these new 'brain shadows', I will do whatever it takes to make sure those checks are carried out efficiently. And then I trust my neurosurgeon and neuro-radiologists to expertly analyse the scan results. To have their 'multi-disciplinary team' (MDT) meetings, and then tell me what the best next step is.

Sometimes this healing journey requires us to learn not just about responsibility, but also about **trust**. It is a fine balance. You might be holding the oars, but sometimes you need to let someone with skills navigate your boat through the water!

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What if you feel you are getting nowhere with your problem?

As I have said, diseases like skin cancer and brain tumours have not put me through the same kind of turmoil with insecure anxiety as when I had M.E. or 'post-viral fatigue syndrome' as it was called, when I was a young student. Why? Because nobody then seemed

to have a 'respectable' answer for what was wrong with me, and I felt as if almost everyone viewed me as a hypochondriac.

Things have changed since then and now many chronic 'syndrome' or 'multi-symptom' illnesses (such as long-Covid) are more often given genuine care by the NHS and society. But still, it is hard to believe in yourself if you feel the rest of the world does not. Diseases which have no clear 'external' physical signs that they exist, and for sure any mental illness, these require you to believe in and act upon your own needs, even if no-one else does. And if you are getting nowhere with your doctor, then be brave, make a clear list of your problems or symptoms and ask (as often as needs be), to see someone else. Find out if you have the right to be referred to a specialist/consultant, or if there are blood tests or other checks you could have.

This is how my systemic scleroderma was diagnosed, through a blood-test, when I went back to see a doctor and asked again for help to understand the cause of some chronic pain. I was found to have high levels of 'anti-centromere antibody' in my blood, which is a marker for scleroderma. I do not recommend trawling the internet too much for symptoms and diagnoses, as this can just freak you out with fear and over-imagination! But do not just sit back. You need to be active and keep searching and asking for the help you need. Remember always that **you are your body and mind's best keeper.**

Remember, for *all* important appointments, to breathe calmly, and to quietly prepare yourself before you go in. Do not rush into an appointment last minute or sit

in the waiting room focusing only on the magazines and people around you. Put some clear intention into what the next few minutes (or more) are about, for you. When you go in, hopefully with someone else, have your list of questions/symptoms/points to hand, and talk to your companion beforehand to tell them if they are welcome to talk too, or to please just listen/make notes and 'be there' for you. If it helps, try to take one deep breath before each question you ask or response you give. And remember not to rush your words, or to be rushed. Time can tick slowly, for once!

Self-belief as a survivor.

It is very true that getting no good help or being repeatedly knocked back by people who are supposed to be helping you, can be a great threat to your self-confidence. I cannot count the times I have felt 'pathetic' or like a 'pest', guilty for even asking for some help. There is no pretending, it can be tough being a survivor. But what you need next is to forgive yourself for being an insecure human-being (as so many of us are) and remember the **'Three P's': 'You are not Pathetic or a Pest and you need to Persist' (PPP).** If you keep believing you deserve help and keep asking for it, it will come – but you may have to work hard, not be lazy or apathetic, to get this.

The truth is that sometimes, right when you are feeling overloaded with stress from going through some horrid treatment, or having just had a bad diagnosis, or realising your mental health is in rapid decline, or your partner has become threatening, that might be just the time when you have to fight for your needs and rights.

When you have what seems like more than enough to deal with, you may need to ask your inner reserves of strength and energy for even more 'gusto', in order to be a real survivor. But you could be surprised just what the human-being can do, can manifest, when we put in every single ounce of our passion to survive – to say a clear "yes" to our lives.

After my first week of radiotherapy as an inpatient on a ward, I then needed five more weeks of radiotherapy as an outpatient. My boyfriend and I lived in Scotland, but my hospital was in Oxford. We were given a single room to share in the 'family accommodation' wing of the hospital. Then, a silly, false complaint by another lady staying in the wing (who was under a lot of stress about her daughter) caused us to be suddenly asked to leave. We were hundreds of miles from home, and I needed daily treatment. I was extremely exhausted, but what did I do? I had only one choice, as a survivor…I made a big protest. My demand this complaint be investigated soon showed it up to be untrue, and we received an apology from the hospital. Plus, much more important than the apology, we got to stay put. **In order to be a survivor, you sometimes have to kick off!**

When someone you love needs better help.

It could be that someone you love is not following the 'PPP' guide, worrying that they are a 'Pathetic Pest' instead of 'Persisting' and asking for the help they need. When I told my husband that once again, I had shown a doctor the little black dots on my arm and the doctor had said *"it's nothing"*, he insisted that I persist. The next time I had an appointment, I knew what he had

pressed me to say, so I apologised and guiltily mumbled *"My husband insisted I ask again…."*. That was how the melanoma skin cancer was found (before it got chance to spread) on my arm – because if you love someone and you know they need help, **keep reminding them!**

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There are times when I have been shocked as I accompany a person who is frail or has limited strength of understanding (such as my wonderful elderly mother-in-law, who had Alzheimer's) to a hospital appointment for another matter, and the consultant or registrar seems to make no effort to adapt their manner of speaking in recognition of the individual in front of them, who may need things to be said more clearly, or slowly, or explained in less technical detail. They may not acknowledge if the person has memory problems. It can be as if a 'set way' of talking to patients (or social services clients) is used, without adjusting to the specific needs of the person before them.

We can talk about why this may be (experience/training etc), but that doesn't get us past the problem in hand. If this happens to a person you are with, you can ask the 'official' person to speak more clearly or use less complex terminology. If an elderly person you are with is being 'shouted at' even when they are not deaf, or if they are being talked 'about' (I regularly cringed when people talked crudely about my mother-in-law's 'dementia' right in front of her, as if she was not there), then ask the professional to recognise your signal that this manner of speaking is not ideal. And if necessary, ask again.

You may need to carefully take notes yourself and write down important points or words, ticking when each question is answered. Note when things need to be explained better – and ask for that – and be clear if the help offered is just not good enough and needs to be explored further. You can ask for more help now and/or in another context, after putting some thought into what the best next step will be. You can then do your best to explain everything to your loved one, when they get back home.

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The value of all this help is wise and kind to remember when we know a family member is going to the doctors, hospital, or for any appointment where they may struggle with giving and remembering details, or asking the best questions…*can* you go with them? Can you offer this – perhaps regularly? Can you adapt your life to this possibly new need? Can you even help them make and keep their appointments?

It's also good to think of the value of having someone just to 'be there', when considering whether to offer to accompany an elderly neighbour or a friend or perhaps a close work colleague, who would be going alone to an important appointment. Not to 'butt in' where your presence is unwelcome, but simply to offer that supportive companionship, respectfully, making it clear they are fine to say *"no thanks"* – in case it is just what they are wishing for.

And if you are that family member, friend or neighbour being asked if you would like help, can you look after your life, even swallow pride, and say "yes"? Or can

you *ask* for the help you need, for accompaniment, from those you are close to? Or if not, from a charity, care-worker, or social services? Your life deserves such efforts and courage.

Because, at those crucial meetings where we need to look out for ourselves in life…**two in your 'canoe' is very often better than one…for all of us.**

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When someone we care for is promised help that doesn't come, what can we do?

I think of someone I loved very much, Lyndsay, who was mentally ill with drug-induced schizophrenia and was 'sectioned'* in hospital in Scotland. My friend was promised that if he took the medicine he was prescribed, then he would be given psychiatric therapy to go alongside the medication. It was a kind of 'two-way' offer. He didn't want to take the meds, but I pushed and helped persuade him to co-operate with the hospital requests. Yet the therapy never came. None of us who loved him felt able at the time to make our way into the 'jungle' of the mental health care system to find out how and why my friend wasn't getting the full care he needed. How to locate and insist upon proper co-ordinated support for his mind. From that point of system failure onwards, he deteriorated into more severe mental breakdown. Then he took his own life.

I felt so guilty and many 'if onlys' spun around on top of my grief. But thankfully, years later, I have at least made use of some of the hard lessons from this experience of feeling 'lost' in terms of finding help for someone you love. When my stepson had severe mental health and

drug addiction problems, the two 'service providers' of mental health and drug rehabilitation care, seemed to be in shockingly separate camps. The one was not 'officially able' to work with him while he needed help from the other. So, he could not be admitted onto a mental care ward for help with suicidal thoughts and intentions while he was taking drugs, yet he could not go into rehab because he was mentally ill! But his parents and I did not give up. We dived into the jungle and we demanded over and over again, that he be given the care he needed. Gradually, after a lot of foot stamping and jungle-clearing, (and of course primarily *his own* eventual determination to get through), my stepson got better, and is now a strong, positive, confident young man, with a lot to offer the world from his own experiences.

When you feel the help is not coming through for someone you care about…get yourself right into the midst of the jungle if needs be, and keep asking, calling, even demanding help until it comes. This may be exhausting. It may take up all of your strength and resources and imaginative ability to see ways 'around things' and create action...but often the only way forward out of a mesh of no-direction, is to make full use of your navigation skills as a survivor, to help the people you love.

Sometimes…

During the final stages of my dear mother-in-law's life, in her mid-nineties, she was being cared for in a community hospital, during the stressful time of the Covid pandemic. There were times when her basic care

was not adequate, the physiotherapy she was promised did not exist, and our family's permission to visit her before she died was managed shambolically. She was mistakenly taken off the eye drops that soothed her sore eye, regularly given a drink tumbler that spilled liquid all over her in bed, and more…so I made myself persist to insist that she got the care she deserved, and even if this did not change things enough, it did make things a bit better. We cannot always 'fix' an imperfect situation. There are times I look back now and wish I had done this or said that to help improve her care more. But we do need sometimes to accept that we have done as much as we felt we could, or to forgive ourselves if we wish we had done things differently. These are not easy situations, and no-one knows the perfect answers or perfect actions. But to do *something*, to stand up and call out for those we love, is often needed and always worth trying.

We can even use what we have learned from personal experience to help others in the future in similar situations. After our beloved mum passed away, we left money for decent non-spill tumblers to be purchased for other bed-bound residents of the ward. We do what we can, and then need to keep looking forwards.

Focus on the good.

Part of saying 'yes' to your life is to *choose* to focus on the good people and 'lucky chances' or positive things you experience. When I was struggling through some pretty poor nursing, after my first brain tumour surgery, there was one nurse called Anna who was so kind to me. One day she offered to be the one to take the metal

clip stitches out that went across the top of my head, from ear to ear.

She was like someone tending a beloved rose in her garden, so gentle and caring, and will stay with me forever as someone who was like a 'light in the tunnel', seeing me through to the other side. People like this are treasures to lift us up, and sometimes come just when we feel like we are slipping down too low.

Another memory I have is of the night before my second brain surgery. I began to have a 'panic attack' because of the big clock ticking on my hospital room wall. The ticking away of time, before an operation I might not wake up from, just pushed me into the shakes! Along came a nurse who was so motherly. She took me in her arms and held me to help stop the shaking, and then got on the telephone to ask my boyfriend Simon to come quick. A camp bed was put beside mine, and he slept the night there.

To recognise the good, loving people in our lives, see the light they are bringing, will always help us to overcome the dark. When we do not even notice their special upholding presence around us, then the dark can become a lot more frightening. It is the times when I have failed to value and cherish the people who bring me light, that the darkness has almost overwhelmed me.

Say thanks!

Sometimes it's good to let the people who give you special care know that you recognise their skills and kindness, or their patience. I wrote a card to my scleroderma consultant, to tell her how much I appreciate the care she takes every time she sees me to check me over,

and the detailed reports she writes afterwards. The way she makes sure any necessary further checks are always done, even when this goes beyond the remit of scleroderma care.

The same is true for my eye consultant. It was because of his concern about why I was having 'phantom vision' in my blind eye – really listening as I described the peculiar new flashes and red dots I see – that he wrote to ask my neurosurgeon to arrange a scan. This caused the discovery of the (unrelated) new shadows on my brain. I will not forget the value of his attentiveness.

Sure, it is sometimes very important to ask for better care, to stand up for your needs, but when those needs are met (and then some) it is good, not just for the caring person, to tell them how you much recognise and appreciate their service, their attentiveness, it also is good for you. **It helps you to stay focused on the light.**

Put in the extra effort.

Finally, in this chapter, I want to stress how important I have found it to be to really **do all you can** to help yourself get through a challenge. That might sound obvious, but I continuously notice how much some people just don't put in that extra determined effort to find their way out of a pickle! Appointments that are due and never come in the post (been there!), forms or letters or test results that don't arrive when promised, or people who are meant to be helping you never even turning up for the appointment…the effort needed is often…to get on the telephone! But so often instead we sit on our hands and wait for 'someone else' to fix it. Or we trust in the quite obviously shoddy 'red-tape'

of a system, partly out of resistance to do the work of saying *"Hang on, this isn't good enough. Better service required, please".* All of this does take gumption, which requires energy.

The resistance may also come from a fear of *'prodding the professionals'*. A feeling they are 'above you' or that you may not really follow what is going on. It could be that you feel you do not understand how the system works and are too nervous to try to navigate your way through it. Or you could feel exhausted. Perhaps you have become apathetic about keep 'banging your head on brick walls', because no-one ever seems to be listening, and you are feeling defeated by dead-ends. Or, if you are depressed, it is true that a 'lethargy' can come over you which makes all that extra effort even harder to find the energy for. But somehow you **do need to find this energy.** And you can.

There is also the effort needed to find, explore, and follow up the various routes you could take for yourself, to help you get through. Perhaps complementary therapies or dietary changes. Perhaps literally getting moving, with a new kind of exercise. Perhaps going to a support group or to a service like Citizen's Advice, or to a place of worship. Getting out into the world and finding the therapies, books, websites, organisations, Facebook groups, anything basically that might help you get where you need to be. Not moaning forever to your friends or family, but getting up, *pulling yourself up* if necessary, and putting in the 'umph'. Dig down deep if needs be for that energy, as best as you possibly can in your circumstances, to help get *you* well. Whatever 'becoming well' means to you. If you are on the path of

healing, then you do need to move! **Because in general, survivors are not 'don't bother' people.**

And if you find you are resisting doing this, if you cannot be bothered to go find and utilise the help that might be out there, then you may need to ask yourself *why* that is? We will look at this further on in the book. But for now, if going to that therapist means two trains and a day of your time, if affording some good supplements means giving up the highlights at the hairdressers, if giving your body a real chance to recover means giving up that thing you love to eat, if getting that appointment sorted means spending what feels like hours on the telephone, if ensuring you get the right supportive package for your loved one means going back again to the services, and back again…then if you are a survivor you will do this. Because **life is worth it. You (and your loved ones) are worth it!**

STEP FOUR

Know your limits and the limits of your solutions.

Does this sound negative? It is not. It is realism. To love ourselves, we need to love and protect our bodies and minds. To press them way beyond what feels like enough for us, is not loving. If you have any physical or mental condition which limits what you can do, or take part in, or feel safe with, then respect that. You are *uniquely* you, and if you say to yourself *"this is who I am"*, then try to love who you really are, including the 'restrictions' or limits that make you this unique person.

To eat chocolate when you are diabetic and advised not to, or to work all day then agree to go to partying at night, when you know this will be way too much for the current pain in your joints to cope with, is like saying to your precious body *"I don't care"*. We can do this occasionally, of course, and we can forgive ourselves when we push too hard now and then, but to do this regularly, always ignoring our own limits, becomes an insult to who we are.

It is great to stretch ourselves and reach for goals or new achievements. But to stretch and stretch and never listen to the calls for *"whoa there!"* from inside, not

only ignores the real you but also creates after-effects of exhaustion/pain/anxiety and so forth, which are just not worth it. We need to stretch ourselves, yes, but disrespect and abuse ourselves, no. When your body or mind says *"Help! I need more care"*, then **listen**. And be tender.

When we listen to our true personal limits, it is like we are saying to ourselves, *"Yes, my other responsibilities in life do matter – my kids, my family, my job, my part in the team or community – but my own needs and limits matter too. I am not secondary to everything and everyone else."* So, if you really need to stay home and enjoy a book instead of going on a girl's night out or helping at the school fair, or if you just know that joining in with that group fell climb will press you to walk too fast or be too demanding on your nerves…if feeling this would be too much for you is temporary, or if it is a new limit to your capacity from now on, then listen to your inner voice. Accept who you are now. Begin to see that *within* your limitations you can find great new things which you are capable of, new projects, new directions. It is time to be honest but also time for a new kind of bravery. **Being you.**

When you mis-function.

From experience I can tell you that an over-exhausted body or brain can sometimes turn you into a wretch! A selfish, childish monster. So, you may suddenly hear yourself talking (or shouting) aggressively and think *"Ouch! That's not a very nice me!"* When children are too tired, they can throw tantrums and cry more easily. They can become focused purely on themselves and their

own needs or wants. I think when our inner workings are in a panic that they are losing proper function – due to stress, hunger, thirst, pain, tiredness, or even fear of lost safety – then the brain can switch into 'survival-mode' and cause us to think a lot more singularly about 'Number 1'. Not always, of course, but it is good to be aware this can happen.

You can even become more aggressive, not caring about other people around you, as all you seek is rest, or a solution to your feeling of panic that 'chaos' is ensuing inside. People with brain damage from strokes/injury/surgery/dementia and so on may sometimes seem different, more selfish than they used to be, especially at first. I think this could be the brain acting in 'survival mode', as it tries to find a new settling point inside. The same may be true after you have gone through any major surgery or other frightening traumas. You may focus a lot more on your own needs, sometimes ignoring the needs of others. This is perhaps a natural human animal behaviour – and the more we are aware of it, the more we can keep watch, monitor ourselves, and ask for help.

If someone you love is behaving like this, either temporarily because they are mentally/physically exhausted or distraught, or more long-term after any traumatic experience, you can begin to look into understanding their behaviour, and then look for ways for *both of you* to manage and adapt.

When you just can't.

Sometimes, because of our limits, we just cannot do a thing we long to do. We perhaps cannot be as mobile or

active as we would like or carry on with a hobby we love. Or, more painfully, we can no longer do something that feels like it is the meaning of our lives. A real survivor learns eventually not to sulk about this or wallow in self-pity, or demand that they should be able to do whatever they want to in life. Our modern culture is perhaps too full of expectations that everyone has the 'right' to do absolutely everything. I don't live like that. Sometimes it is empowering (and gives us a new freedom) to accept that we cannot do some things we would ideally love to, and 'take it on the chin'. It's a hard knock, a limitation, but that is life. We were never really promised at birth that everything we want is there in a suitcase for us to pick up and enjoy, not even if we do our best to work for it. Even, (and I know this can be a hard, distressing truth) when we desire it so very much.

Now you may be recoiling at such words, thinking *"No! no! It is our human right to have equal limitations. Our world should be full of opportunities for us all to have access to equal limits and possibilities."* . Well, to aim for the stars is the way of being of the survivor, but the way is also **acceptance, and forgiveness, of who you really are.** Accepting and then living around our limits, *as well as* stretching and aiming high beyond them, is part of the **balance, grace, and great challenge, of being an honest warrior.**

To lose the ability to walk and be determined to walk again is brave, exemplary, amazing. I see people doing such things and am in awe. To use techniques such as visualisation and positive affirmation to empower us to reach for high goals and overcome life's challenges, is for sure the way to go. I do this on many days of my

life. But I also have had to find a balance between can and cannot. To accept, gradually, that I cannot now and never will be able to do lots of 'multi-tasking', where I try to do two things at once without becoming 'fuddled'. My brain can no longer do this without distress. I cannot see without constant small red dots everywhere, and I need to 'rest my bones and brain' a lot more than I would like to. That is how it is! That's my life.

But to accept 'how it goes' and find a way *around* our limitations, to find a way to be light about them, (even if this takes great resolution and perseverance), does take so much pressure off us. It stops us being worn out by heavy frustration. Sure, I would love to still do things with my brain I now cannot, especially academically and memory-wise, but I have learned to appreciate the big box of things I still *can* do, to cultivate the parts that work well, and not waste time or tears kicking off inside about the 'cannots'. Feeling 'hard done by' in life is for the victim, and we aim to be warriors. Such acceptance takes guts, a sense of humour, courage, and a lot of patience. It also takes honesty. To let the roars of frustration out, not repress them, let them out and then get on with real living. I have learned the hard way that repressed roars just get louder (see Step Five), so we need a good inner supply of honesty mixed well with a big dose of humour.

It helps us if we know or meet people whose own grace and humour are a huge inspiration to us. About twenty years ago, I was lucky to meet (and find ways to help) a group of such young people. They were children living in an orphanage 'handicapped room' in Hoi An,

Vietnam. Whenever I now struggle with accepting a thing I cannot do, or which is painful or frustrating inside me, I think of one of them, remember their incredible spirit, and it does help. They showed me how strong humans can choose to be at coping with life **how it is.**

It may not be easy to achieve real acceptance of our new limits at first. It can take a long time before we truly accept who we are now, not who we wish we still were or could be. **The key to healing is to love ourselves not despite our limits, but within them – even because of them.**

Humour as a best resort.

Those young people with disabilities I met in Vietnam taught me how to laugh when life is grim. Not to pretend joy, or to cover up anger or sadness with fake smiles, but to really find a way to see the bright side of the clouds. I will never perhaps grasp quite how they were able to express such lightness in the darkest place I have ever been, but they taught me something for life. Now, when for example my weakened memory means that someone is saying hello to me, clearly recognising me and expecting me to know them, but I haven't got a clue who they are…I don't feel ashamed. I just laugh about it and explain that my memory *"aint what it used to be, sorry!"* …and we carry on. Life is rarely so serious that it is impossible to find a way around the awkward corners.

The limits of our solutions.

Okay, so I am a great advocate of *complementary medicine.*

I have benefitted hugely from Reiki, hypnotherapy, spiritual healing, holistic massage, and homeopathy. We can each find the therapy, complementary medicine or technique that works best for us. Acupuncture did not really 'click' with me (even though it is great for others), while homeopathy, and recently aromatherapy, does. We need to each work out our own route, by trial, error, intuition, and by connection with good practitioners. We can also learn complementary therapy skills. I use deep-relax creative visualisation nearly every day, and during my brain tumour treatment I practised it two or three times daily, plus whilst inside the radiotherapy machine, to help empower my self-healing. I 100% believe in the 'holistic' (whole person) well-being approach!

BUT – and it is such a big but, learned from hard experience – I warn against using the term 'alternative' medicine…because it is not. When I found out my brain tumour had grown back, I was invited by a spiritual community in Wales to go and stay with them. They strongly advised me to say no to further brain surgery. *"You can cure it yourself through faith, Jacci"* they encouraged me. *"Western surgery is invasive, aggressive, you don't need it. Come here and we'll pray together, and you can imagine the tumour being washed out of you as you clean the windows…".* It sounds funny now, but it wasn't. I did delay my surgery. And I did join in with the beautiful chants and prayers and do all the good healing things to balance my energies…but when I returned to the hospital for a brain scan, absolutely convinced that my surgeon would be shocked and say *"Wow! Where has your tumour gone?"* he told me, with

regret, that it had grown aggressively, and surgery was now the only way to stay alive.

What did I learn from this? That sometimes, a surgeon's knife is needed! Also, crucially, that to be healed is not the same as to be cured. And many people, even with the most loving intention, can get mixed up between these two terms. My time in Wales did wonderful things to boost my courage and self-confidence before my operation. I was more equipped to cope with the loss of use of my left eye and some facial changes. It lifted my spirits and prepared me for the big traumas ahead – strengthened me for my recovery. The visualisation I used helped me to *self-heal.* But none of this was enough to *cure* my brain tumour. Sometimes Western medicine (including the skills of great surgeons) is not only crucial, it is a Godsend. And it infuriates me now how much some people seem to encourage others *never* to use Western medicine, but to stick with 'alternative', spiritual, blankly generalised 'non-Western', or 'New Age' ways, especially when such 'advisors' are talking to those who are weak, vulnerable, and afraid.

We can be – especially if we are the kind of folk who are drawn to holistic thinking – made to feel somehow *guilty* for taking the conventional route when we see this is needed. But holistic means just that – wholeness – *including* the medicines of the West! Sometimes I have heard therapists sneer if I say I am taking a conventional medicine I need. Some people are bursting to tell you of all the terrible side-effects of a drug. We can feel pressed to 'join in' with a resistance and feel proud when we refuse a medication or treatment recommended by our doctor. But sometimes, this is just foolish.

And dangerously foolish when we refuse an operation because 'alternative ways are the answer'. Says who?

If a therapist or well-meaning person tells you not to do something simply because it is 'Western', or if any kind of healer or spiritual teacher *guarantees* they can cure you, or that prayer will be enough, please beware. I very often do prefer to choose complementary medicines and therapies to help me be well as a person. I think carefully and research options before deciding if and when to start taking a new prescribed medicine I very much believe in prayer and spiritual healing as a connection to God's healing love – it is at the core of my life. But I advise anyone who is told by a doctor that an operation or medicine is crucial to their health, even their survival, to please at least listen! Don't say no just because you want to be 'spiritual' or 'holistic', because if so, you are perhaps not understanding what these words really mean. My spirit as a living human being has survived *because* I had brain surgery and because I took anti-epilepsy tablets, as well as because of my precious complimentary healing therapies. If you are lucky enough to be offered a chance of some medical or surgical help to cure or lessen your illness, then think hard before you say no. All solutions have limits, including cleaning windows.

'Cool drugs' v 'medicines of the West'

Another strangely confused way of thinking which I have experienced, with terrible consequences, is when people I love have been encouraged by friends not to take the medicines prescribed to help relieve their symptoms of mental illness (such as addiction or

schizophrenia), and yet strongly encouraged to carry on taking illegal drugs. These are often the very drugs which have been a strong factor in causing their mental problems…or even drugs which are themselves stolen prescription medicines! It is as if a drug from a dealer is 'cool' and potentially enlightening, whilst medicines from a doctor are 'damaging to the soul'.

I would never recommend taking prescribed medicines alone as a way out of mental illness. Good therapy is crucial and so often tragically under-supplied. But for sure, the drugs from your 'mate' or dealer will not be the answer either. Anyone who presses you to feel you are 'giving in to the system' if you accept medication as part of the solution to your mental distress, and should instead carry on taking drugs, is no friend.

From my experience, enjoyable drugs such as cannabis may not cause serious health problems for most people, but for those with a predisposition to brain disease or mental illness, this can be a horrid way into the dark. Therefore, think twice before you encourage yourself, or those with a sensitive nature, to cover the word 'alternative' in a blanket of false coolness.

Practical v ideological.

My cranio-facial surgeon was the lead consultant of three surgeons who operated together to remove my brain tumour (cranio-facial, eye and neurosurgeon). He was one of the best in the world, and he showed me how *practical* solutions can be found to our fears of accepting medicine or surgery. A big reason behind my initial refusing/delaying a second major operation, was the dread of going back onto the ward where I

had been put to recover from my first brain surgery. It had been hell, to me. I could not cope with the idea of going back there – so I went to Wales!

My surgeon found instead a *real* solution to this fear. He offered me the chance to recover from the second operation on another ward in the hospital. After Intensive Care (with incredible nurses) I was allowed to stay in a room on the 'neuro-surgery' ward, instead of 'cranio-facial', and this legend of a surgeon was willing to go up in the lift each day, as part of his 'ward round', accompanied by his team of medical students, to check on me. He taught me how **life can have practical solutions which work, instead of silly, fearful ideologies.**

Killing pain.

There are some people I love who are wracked with pain yet will not take painkillers because of this very 'anti-Western-medicine' mind-set. I did the same once. I had a period of chronic pain in my back but refused all painkillers. Then my doctor (and some research) helped me to understand that our brains operate in a manner we might not expect, when they respond to the repeated stimulus of pain.

If you feel pain regularly, you might presume that your brain will 'get used to it' and raise the reaction 'threshold', so you do not feel the pain quite so easily or frequently over time. Like if you smell a perfume every day, you might get used to it and even begin to not notice it is around. But what can happen instead with pain is this:

The nervous pathway which goes – 'pain…. ouch!'

actually becomes *stronger* from such regular use, due to being 'built up' as a nerve-way over and over, every time it is used. So, the pathway becomes upgraded to 'thicker' if you like, with nerve-way protection sheathing, like a slow 'B' road becoming a faster motorway.

And so, the motorway for pain response becomes – '**PAIN…. OUCH!!!'**

This means that your threshold for pain – how soon and easily you feel it in one area or perhaps the whole of your body – becomes not higher but *lower,* and you feel pain **more often, more easily.**

I am no doctor and never try in this book to even attempt to explain things 'scientifically', but I do understand from this explanation why sometimes a painkiller *is* the best thing to take, as a means to handle pain. This is a holistic way, because you are understanding and respecting your own brain and the need of your whole being for peace. Your need to stop your body becoming a 'spaghetti junction' of OUCHES!! The less often you feel deep pain, the more you help your brain to reduce the 'thickness' and strength of your pain-roads, making it less easy for pain to shoot down them and distress your life.

As ever, you need to find your own authentic way of being a survivor. I still do not take strong painkillers very often, because I find they can 'fuddle' my thinking. In truth, as I edit this chapter, I am at a point where it is time to choose between the brain-sleepy side-effects of a nerve medicine and the neuralgia pain around my body. But I do not just ignore and deny that choice. When I need to take a medicine to look after myself the

best I can, all things considered and balanced, then I do, without any guilt. I use yoga, qi gong, walking, Reiki, visualisation, homeopathy, massage, to help relieve my pain, but when I have a sharp twinging 'YIKES!' in my back, or too much nerve-pain shooting all around, then I will get out the pills. There is no shame in pain relief. It can sometimes be the 'road-aware' way to being steady.

Beware dependency.

Of course, strong painkillers should only be prescribed by a doctor, and they have their own very real risk of becoming addictive 'solutions'. Unfortunately, many prescription medicines have now become widely used drugs, sold by dealers rather than pharmacists. When seen as 'streetwise' they can take on a whole new power of enticement to the vulnerable. But any pill or liquid taken without awareness, or because you 'cannot cope' in your life without it, is a serious thing.

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Letting people down.

If you have a date with friends, family, or a commitment to something you promised to help with, but then realise, after 'tuning in' clearly to your inner self and asking – "*Can I push it this much, today?"* – if the honest answer is *"no"*, then honour your instinct. If people are true friends, or loving family, they will understand. If they don't – then perhaps you can explain things honestly to them. Then look after yourself. If you keep finding that you are making plans and having to cancel them, as you are regularly overloaded (I know that feeling!), then maybe think again about your honest

limits and what you are arranging to do with your energy each day. Be real. Be your own best guardian. At first, saying no to things can be quite frustrating, even upsetting, but the more you honour yourself, the more you begin to listen and respond to your true needs – then the more you feel good about your own self-respect and self-care.

The limits of being a care-giver.

People caring for someone who is going through a hard time or illness are very often also going through a hard time! Sometimes it feels like it would be easier/preferable to go through a big trauma yourself rather than witness your loved one dealing with it. You can feel helpless, full of fear and anger. Frustrated that you need to appear calm and positive just when you want to scream out with horror. I remember, at the time of my second tumour surgery, my dad genuinely wished he could have the operation himself instead of me going through it. This is the response of love.

But the role of 'carer' does not need to equal 'constant hero'. You can also have dark feelings or bad days, selfish moments, be fed up of hearing constant complaints or requests on your time and energy. Be honest with yourself about this. It might help you to *communicate* and express how you are feeling, even if this talking needs to be done with someone else in your family or a friend or counsellor. Say too when you really need a break. Honour your own limits. If you are going to be helping someone over a long period of time – whether that is actual physical care work or supportive loving and reassurance, or perhaps working hard to find out

information, or dealing with the health/drug rehab/social services/legal system – then you need to honestly look after your own well-being, in order to keep up your capacity to care.

My husband once said to me, when I was moaning on about my skin cancer worries *"I just can't take any more of this!"*. It was a moment of his own exhausted frustration, and it woke me up. I saw I needed to take the focus from my needs onto his, for a while. And this helped us both to be survivors.

Awaken potential!

It's important for me to end this chapter with a strong message of hope. **Whatever your limits, never forget how much you can achieve**. The children I met in Vietnam taught me a crucial lesson, big time: if you cannot do something, find *another way* around the problem or even under, over or crash through it. One boy, Van May, could not walk, because of his cerebral palsy, but he showed a huge amount of determination. My friend Jackie and I set up a charity, The Kianh Foundation, (www.kianh.org.uk) to help the children get support to do the things they had every potential to achieve. When we first met Van May, he could only get from his shared bed to any other place in the room where he lived, by throwing himself onto the concrete floor and then rolling until he got to where he wanted to be. He would then slowly pull himself up something, or someone's leg, to become vertical. He showed the same initiative and will-power during the physio exercises we set up for him. Van May was resolute that he would find a way to get himself independently about – never giving

up. Even if he could not walk, he could (and would) find a way to have mobility (see Jackie's interview later, in Part Two). It is incredible what you can achieve, how brave and resilient you can be, if you want it enough. We must not underestimate this capacity within every single one of us.

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I was once terrified of having needles come anywhere near my eyes. It was like my 'Room 101' nightmare of the worst possible torture. But then one day I needed to have antibiotics urgently injected into the corner of my blind left eye, with a long needle, to halt a serious infection. I couldn't help watching that big syringe coming towards me, and the fear was intense – but I got through it. In fact, after I got through this 'syringing', the feeling was more of elation than horror. I was so amazed with what it had been possible to withstand. And it began to teach me this: **the human being can cope with more than most of us can imagine – if we are brave warriors, if we are powered by hope, if we want to say a clear, passionate "yes" to our lives.** Even in the passion of our suffering.

Change we can.

The women who fed, washed, and put handkerchief nappies on the children with disabilities in the 'handicapped room' of the orphanage, also taught me a big lesson. When we first met them, the women did not seem to relate to the children in any kind or caring way. Several children were 'hosed down' to be cleaned and were fed on their backs without any communication – not treated as young people deserving love, who had

potential. But when the women saw how much we enjoyed and took great satisfaction from the children's company, saw that the children could indeed make great progress with their abilities, and when we improved the carers' wages and treated them also with respect… it was humbling to see how things altered.

People who I had thought were innately cruel became kind, even became teaching assistants in the new classroom Jackie created. This taught me that, in different, better environments – with education or a fresh way of understanding – human beings can be different people. We are not 'bad' or 'cruel' in a fixed and changeless sense. We are who we choose to be, in the world we live in. Change the conditions of the environment around us, or even just help us to change our way of seeing things, and we *can* change ourselves. Because, I believe, the real core of every one of us is hoping to be the best that we can be.

STEP FIVE

Free the fear.

The tribal chief in Mel Gibson's film *'Apocalypto'** tells his people that fear can *"eat away"* at your soul. I don't believe that anything can reduce our souls (see later), but for sure it is true that –

Fear can warp every angle you have on your life.

Fear can cause you to 'ignite' your life with repeated dramas and stresses, so that your body will release adrenaline and other such chemicals, to make you feel reassured that you are definitely alive.

Fear can make you angry, as a reaction to the very unpleasant disturbances happening inside you.

Fear can also make you refuse to be negative, refuse to set free the dark emotions trapped inside, in case they overpower you.

Fear can make you try too hard to solve all your problems, fix everything in your own life and even other people's lives around you, to make things seem 'all sorted' and in order – in the hope that this continuous 'solving action' will itself somehow fix the cause of your big chaotic fear deep down.

Such addictive solving can enable us to live in the false pretext of having 'control' over our life and emotions, as

we try hard to perfect our career/relationships/fitness/spiritual awareness/appearance/hobbies/the whole world around us…hoping (often sub-consciously) that we can therefore gain indirect rule over the thing we are truly afraid we *cannot* control. And still, we dare not go near it. Our fear.

The more we avoid and substitute other emotions, solutions, or life activities for actually handling our fear, the 'wilder' it becomes inside us. The more we 'detach' from our fear, the more power we give it to control us. The only way I have ever found to get out of this dangerous hiding game, is to stop refusing and accept that **fear is a part of who I am.**

My first poetry collection* has a line on the back cover which comes from a poem in my second collection. Both books have in them this important thread which has been running through my life for over twenty-five years. It says, *'a mortal smack has shaken every perspective'.* What do I mean?

Since my early twenties I have known how fragile, how mortal, life is. This awareness of our mortality in terms of death itself I cover in the next chapter, but there is perhaps a bigger, deeper fear inside me. I grieve for my brain being damaged by surgery, and I fear it being damaged more by future tumour regrowth or long-term after-effects of surgery. That is my fear – brain fragility. I own it now. Sometimes ownership slips from me and I lose the oars and get very wobbly in my boat again. But mostly, I own it. And it has taken me a long hard rapid ride to do so.

Do you have a deep fear inside you that is incredibly hard for you to go anywhere near? If you want, maybe you can begin to approach this truth, and in your own way you can perhaps write it down or do something creative to very gently, tenderly be honest with yourself and go up to it. But if this is too hard, just be patient. Simply begin the process by telling yourself you are willing to be honest, when the time, environment and support feels right.

Some people with strong faith say to me that believing in God's love will *"take away all your fear".* There are ways in which this over-simplistic line can be an aggravating 'button pusher' for people who are in the rapids, intensely struggling with their big fear management! Yes, the love of God, the love we all have inside us, can soothe and calm our fears. Love can be seen as a light, and yes light does put out the darkness. But if you are in a room with intense pitch-black dark all around you, terrified, then a little candle is not going to light up the whole room! There can still be a lot of spookiness.

Love is the complete healer and antithesis of fear, yes. (There are also levels at which God's love does not oppose but in a deeper sense *contains* all fear, but that is for my book on faith, *Talking Unity*, not this one!). However, if we are not 100% full (or fully aware) of such pure love inside us, because we are human, then we may not know or feel we contain within us enough light to put out every bit of darkness. So, there is still a high chance we feel fear within. And we must not hurt ourselves more by feeling guilty for that! I have strong faith in God's love, but I still feel fear inside me. To be honest and kind with ourselves about this is key to being a survivor.

I recently heard of some young cancer patients being encouraged to speak about their fears, because a boy had admitted he felt guilty for not being 'courageous enough' about his lymphoma. The popular adulation of people being 'heroes' who show constant bright positivity about their cancer or other traumatic problem, can sometimes back-fire, if it comes from our genuine fear and avoidance of fear itself. We may be afraid to be mortal, to be fragile human beings, but we are.

Many parts to the whole.

My current homeopath has taught and reassured me that we can be many things all at once! We can be brave and full of hope, but *at the same time* another part deep inside us, perhaps more hidden than the positive part, can be a frightened child, carrying a box full of fear. And we need to, at some point in our healing – perhaps several times – unlock the box. Not to hide it away in a corner, refusing to ever see or go near it. Because the more we push it into corners, the more of a troublemaker it becomes, growing like a shadow into some huge ghoulish shape, when really it is just a frightened little part of you, being human.

The truth seems to be that real healing comes when we can accept and love *all* parts of ourselves, and be frightened *at the same time* as hopeful, knowing that we are complex beings with different layers to our consciousness, all a part of the whole. We need to recognise and reconcile with the not-so-nice tasting parts of us, as well as the sweet juicy bits.

When I was first learning about healing my brain tumour, I spent a week at Bristol Cancer Help Centre*,

in the early1990's. During a creative art-therapy session, we were asked to paint a picture of our bright, positive, optimistic feelings about our illness. I let rip with rainbows and suns! Then we were encouraged to paint our 'dark feelings', our fear, anger, bitterness and so on… I refused point blank. *"No!"* I said. *"I don't have any negative feelings I want to paint. I feel totally positive about it all."* I could not go anywhere near my fear. So, it grew.

I am not saying wallow in your darkness or let it be the anchor of your attitude to life and your challenges. Of course not. To live in a general celebration of your life is to be a survivor, right up unto your last breath. But a true celebration means no hidden boxes, no ghouls spooking us with scary noises from corners where we are refusing to look – because this can *'shake our every perspective'* so much that we might just fall apart.

How do we free our fear?

With the help of honesty. With the awareness that fear is okay to have and feel. It won't kill you! With the help of loved ones, friends, possibly a good therapist, counsellor, or healer. With a notebook and pen, or art pad and paints, or with a musical instrument. With walks in wild nature or sitting quiet in woods or jogging in a park. And with yet more honesty.

The funny thing is, when we 'admit' our fear, or rather when we realise we don't need to feel guilty for having it, when we *accept* it being in there, then it becomes much *weaker,* the very second we take ownership of it. It stops over-ruling us from deep inside. Like a wild creature harnessed, it becomes more tame. We can breathe it out

bit by bit, as we accept our own fragile humanity, and love that fragility, rather than disowning it. We can see that things change and are fluid. One day I can be so bright, positive, and hopeful, full of enthusiasm for what I can do with my life, another time I can notice a pain in my head or arm and become fearful of the darkness returning – start churning worries in my mind. That is natural. By owning every part of who we are, things are much less likely to get out of proportion or run wild on us. The picture is not 'all sweet', no, there are grossly ugly bits we don't enjoy – but that is real living.

We are who we are because of all that our life entails.

If you honestly look at the real you, can you see bits that are strong, interesting, wise, capable, good humoured… not despite but *because of* all that your life has been so far? Has knowing fear made an impact on your whole self, and can owning, freeing that fear, make you an even stronger, wiser, complexly fascinating human being? Worth pondering.

To accept and release the fear within us, can then release a huge amount of restriction and suppressed life-energy, which can enable our health to be stronger. We are giving up the exhaustive habits of hiding and distraction and 'buffering', and we are taking back control. Ironically, as you begin to set the fear free, you could be wary that it might go rampant within you and tear you apart, but in truth the fear loses its 'harm-power', loses the opportunity to do this inside you – because even speaking its name, even letting out a tiny bit of it, with honesty and love for yourself as

you go, begins to reduce its capacity to cause trouble in your life. You begin to heal.

And it is *not at all* a 'one time' healing process. No. I feel fear regularly creeping back and stirring trouble inside me, and I often need to acknowledge it is there, 'name it', and let it go. I may never be totally free of it, but I have stopped being spooked by the hidden ghouls in the shadows. Healing is not often a quick 'singular event'. It is, a **continuous, active way of being – to be authentic about who you are, all of you, including the spooks.**

The blessing of admitting our fragility.

The wonderful thing is, we begin to learn that we are not weaker or less useful to the world when we admit to our fear and vulnerability. We can *bless* others around us, because we encourage them to also connect to this human truth. To feel they are not alone, none of us are alone, in our human state of weakness as well as strength. Of need as well as bounty. Of insecurity as well as courage. Then we can more surely and clearly hold ourselves up, and hold up each other.

Love is and fear is not.

Gradually, we can begin to know, at a level beyond words, the meaning of what I am learning each day now. This is that love is an energy, a light, while fear is a *non*-energy if you like, a dark hole, a shadow which is simply an absence of light. This does not make the fear inside us any less effective or remove its potential to do us harm, but perhaps we can begin to realise that love is the true force, and that **fear is just love waiting to be felt** – an empty 'lacking' waiting to be full-filled.

We can begin to see the truth of fear, that it is a weak counter to love, and that love, as we shall discuss in the final Step Seven, can *always* be the resolution. Love is, while fear is not. And **fear owned is so much weaker than fear repressed**. Because as we own it, as we 'love it', we put more and more light into the darkness. We set it free and reduce it all at the same time. Worth yet another ponder?

The whole box of spooks.

For many people, the bad feelings trapped inside them are not what they would call 'fear'. It could be that you would describe your darkness inside as anger, bitterness, guilt, pain, sadness, grief, or even hate. My understanding now is that all these emotions, at their deepest point, come down to fear, which is itself a lack or loss of love. **All negative emotions inside us are holes of non-love.** This understanding of fear is best to perceive without too many words, so I shall let you do that.

Whatever we call these spooks, we need to set them free. On a light note, my nana used to say, when she chuckled as she trumped (broke wind) "*Better out than in!*". I have seen what horrid, even fatal effect the trapped wind of colic can cause in horses, and it could be a good analogy for our need to release our negative feelings. Not blast them out in a violent or uncontrolled way which may hurt other people, but yes for sure accept they are a part of us, then find a way – through creativity, therapy, nature, exercise, or simply through tender loving of who we really are – to set them free.

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Let's never forget that one of the best, simplest ways to let out negative feelings, is to be active. Ideally to get outside in the wonder of nature, but whatever works for you. It might be swimming or the gym. I know that it is hard for some people to do this, either because of actual physical restrictions, or because depression can grip you in a lethargy that makes it a real struggle to shake your body awake and get moving. But if you can find *any* way to do this, especially if you can get outside and breathe in the breeze, see the trees, hear the birdsong, the sea, if you can involve yourself in and connect to the landscape around you, then this action alone can help you begin to let out the negative energy. The intention to be honest and free is what counts.

You can even throw the odd stone into a river or the sea, together with a releasing yell out loud, or stand on a hillside and give a big freeing shout out, if you feel brave enough! It is as if nature feels 'big enough' to take some of this pain from you, bit by bit, and wash it or blow it away – transform it – so you can breathe in some fresh peace. Instead of 'thinking through' a painful feeling inside us, we can often find much stronger healing by putting on those boots and walking (or running), by a river, through fields, up a fell, along a beach, in a park – letting things go without words.

And if indoor sports, gym work, or activities such as yoga or tai chi are more your thing, then here the movement alone can be a healer. Personally, I practice qi gong, which feels like slow grace in motion, and this works for healing in inside space – which is great for when the rain is pouring, or I'm still in pyjamas! It is even better practised outside under the sky.

If you *want* to let go of the darkness inside you, to 'let out the old' and bring in the new light, that is your big step towards freedom. And if you are physically limited so that active movement is just too hard for you right now, can someone take you into a good outdoor space, for you to just breathe in and out some healing air? If not, can you open a window? If not, you can always use your imagination, and visualise yourself running along a beach, walking through woods, and breathing the dark negative emotions out into the space around you, breathing in the positive light…you *always* have your breath, and your imagination. I was recently told by my physiotherapist that imagining exercises (without doing them) can actually strengthen and improve our physical health…so it can do this for our mental and emotional health too!

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Free the projections.

For some people, being fractious, even furious about a bad thing happening to them, feels very wrong. They (including myself here) may feel guilty about sounding spoilt, as if we are expecting our life to be entitled to be 'all-rosy'. If you have a strong faith, like me, it can feel incredibly disturbing to in any way 'get mad' at life, even at God, for your hard lot. Anger, or any kind of 'why me?' was an emotion which I did not dare go near for years. So…I felt it through other people. I 'projected' my anger by connecting closely to 'angry on the surface' people, who raged easily and let out fury that felt, in some unhealthy way, like it was anger being let out *for me.* People who had no problem at

all with being angry and letting their anger out, often releasing it without control, and often in my direction, which was very frightening. For sure, anger being felt *via* another person feeling it for you, is a dangerous diversion.

We can also project our deeply trapped anger by venting it on people we are very close to, for every little thing they do wrong. By repeatedly getting frustrated or becoming irritated with them, we try to push further down the supressed frustration and anger inside us. But it doesn't work. The deeper it goes, the more it wants out. Eventually I have begun to understand that anger can be okay to acknowledge and feel. We can say "*why me?*", even to our God, and not feel guilty for this. **Every human emotion deserves forgiveness!** In fact, the more I learn from this healing journey, the more I begin to understand that **forgiveness is the key.**

So long as we are honest with all of ourselves, stay aware that suppression only takes us in an unhealthy downwards direction, and aim to keep a balance that is on the positive 'yes' side of the survivor, then we are healing. You might even find a way to *transform* the energy of your anger into a strong, effective willpower to get through those rapids.

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Big fear. Big Love?

Some of the bravest people I have met, who have dealt with traumatic challenges in their lives beyond the imaginable and overcome terrible 'unfairness' brought on them by nature, or by the society in which they live, have also been the most full of joy and compassionate

love. Not always. But for some people letting go of huge fears, forgiving huge wrong doings, accepting, and forgiving a very 'raw deal' in life, has created in them, in the space perhaps where the darkness was once inside, a huge amount now of light. I do not even try to understand this completely, but perhaps where all the dark negative energy has been let go of, and an emptiness needs filling, it creates a strong positive 'draw' inside the person, where a big lot of light can now dwell?

This is no reason to advocate having a hard life! I have no idea why some people face bigger life challenges and fears than others. But at least one benefit of having a tumultuous life-journey through many wild rapids, or even one huge 'Victoria Falls' of trauma, can be the potential it awakens in us, to allow so much light in, so much **capacity to forgive and so to love.**

In the next chapter we will look at how fear cannot truly 'eat away' at our souls because our soul – or if you prefer, the 'core energy' of us – unlike fear, is invincible.

STEP SIX

Accept your human mortality.

For sure, we all die. For many people, even the elderly, coming to realise you are going to die at some point, can be a shockingly blunt *"Oh really?!"*, as our human mortality catches up on us in what feels like a sneaky way. The recent coronavirus pandemic – and even the climate change crisis – has perhaps put such 'mortal truth' much more to the forefront of many of our minds, young and old. And this seems like a big rock to get past – quite a hit to our emotional, spiritual, even physical sense of balance.

I sometimes think it is a hard task, being the only species (perhaps) that lives in *considered* awareness that it is going to die. I look at my cat lying contented by the fire and think, how wonderful it must be to live in the gift of the 'present', and not be thinking of yesterday, or tomorrow.

But then, with deeper consideration, we can see that animals are in truth very aware of death. Some wild animals spend a lot of their lives avoiding being killed. My cat is very domestic now, but because she was rescued from living wild, she has never lost her nervous sense of threats to her life while she is eating. Perhaps animals are acutely aware of their mortality,

but somehow *accept* dying as an integral part of being alive. They live 'in the moment', with quiet awareness that this moment may be all they have. They do not struggle to resist or deny being mortal, and only fear death when it presses upon them.

What if we also look at this truth square on and accept it, how can that feel? My experience has been that **facing the fear of dying can make dying into less of a big deal.** It's like when you are watching a good film. You don't want it to end, but you know it will, and knowing this can actually help you enjoy the film more, not less. The key is to make your life feel like a good film, not a ropey 'C' lister.

I am not talking about pressing mega-thrills into every second. That is just a chore. One day, after my first brain surgery, giving myself the freedom to do absolutely nothing but lounge about till bedtime, helped me to see that 'making the most of life' can also mean chilling out. Being *too* acutely aware that the clock is ticking, can warp your life in a fearful way. There is no point making your life into a good film, with brilliant stories, co-stars, and adventures, if you then feel too heavily 'pressurised' to be able to enjoy it! If you turn up the pressure to feel 'fulfilled' too much, in every moment of your mortal life, then it can begin to feel like being on a holiday, and even when one day the rain never stops pouring and the electric gets cut off, you *still* have to go about smiling. No, only smile if you feel like it, or if you want to cheer yourself up. But if you need to be blue or just cruise along for a while, then do that.

Yes, make the best of your life, but we need to do this

whilst being *authentic* and honest to ourselves. If you are young, fit, and healthy *or* if you haven't got long left, it can still happen that you have a bad day and need to let yourself be sad. Then get back on with living as a survivor. Life can be tough enough, without feeling guilty for being real. To make the best of our life is to 'go with it', through ups and downs and those flat, calm river times. To not *always* look on the bright side, but to know that the bright side is where you want to be…and aim for it.

The illusion and truth of forever.

To realise and accept our mortality is a gift. Why? Because this takes away the illusion that now is forever but, paradoxically, this can then turn now *into* forever, in a deeper sense, because we understand that now is all we have. The absurd magic of time comes full circle. Clocks tick, but they are only ticking right this second. And then this second can begin to be understood as happening concurrently to every second that ever was and will be. What we can call the 'linear dimension' of time (a straight line) becomes a non-linear, eternal moment… We can think about time until we get a headache (or we get scared or even excited), but the gentlest answer is to live it with every breath in and out.

Accepting time is as simple as being your breathing.

To accept our mortality frees us because it releases all the energy which we were wasting on denying it. We can stop all the escapades we may have set up to hide from the truth. I love being alive very much indeed, perhaps more so because I had to think about possibly dying quite young. Whatever the reason, I love life.

But the day when I was on my way to Newcastle to get the results of a brain scan, and I called into Hexham Abbey to pray – that day, I accepted in a new, even transforming way, that whatever happens next, I will be okay. This acceptance changed my whole life.

It did not make me absolutely fearless of death, like some kind of saint or wise angel, no! Anything we don't fully understand or have experience of is going to be quite weird. But it made me as sure as I feel it's possible to be, that death is not the end.

For sure, to have spiritual faith and believe in a heavenly 'afterlife' helps people like me massively with their acceptance of death, whenever it comes. No doubt about that. I have every certainty that my soul will carry on, somewhere, and that even if this life is good, the next stage will be groovy too. To believe in nothing divine, no loving future or next stage for your soul, or to not even believe in a soul, there is no denying this will make death's 'ending' much more absolute.

Even if you do not believe in anything divine or a meaning to our universe, you could consider (ready for the next chapter) if the universe, including us, is made from love. If we are all made from an energy, and if that energy is love, then perhaps this energy goes on forever, and so do you? This is not the book for discussing faith, but if you have not so far considered it or even been open to the possibility of something 'more than this' – of you being a part of something that never does end, perhaps now is the time?

Verdi's opera *'La Traviata'** has a line in it that love is *'the heartbeat of the universe'.* If the universe, even if

you do not believe it to be timeless and endless, at the very least goes a very long way out and will be here for a very long time, then you could believe that the 'heartbeat of the universe' will go on for eternity as we can conceive of it. So, if the love that is inside you will go on 'eternally', perhaps also will the most precious part of you?

Of course, some readers will be atheists and believe, as I say, that death is the absolute end of who we are. You may also believe that some force other than love is at the root of all existence. If you are happy or settled with this belief, I am not trying to convince you otherwise. But every one of us can consider, if the universe is made of a core energy – which by default means that, as contents of the universe, so are we – then if this energy goes on eternally, in some sense must we all be eternal? Such discussion is perhaps not for here, but the crux of what I am suggesting is, **eternity belongs to each of us**, and if you believe that the eternal energy is love – then that sure helps life and even death feel like a river, even a waterfall, you can ride.

Does everything happen for a reason?

My take on this is – **I don't know!** We are not necessarily ever going to understand the whole 'why' and 'if' about life. People who say they are totally sure everything that happens has a definite purpose kind of annoy me. I've seen things there seems to be no good 'explanation' for. A woman literally rotting to death who is brought each day to beg on a pavement in India – how can anyone *presume* there is a divine purpose for this cruel fate? To tell a mother whose infant child is dying of leukaemia,

or the family of a father who has just been hit by a car, that 'it's all for a reason' (unless you are *certain* that both of you hold such beliefs, and so these words will provide real comfort and support), is just not needed. It may have no helpful value to make a statement which presumes we know more than we do. Sometimes it is better to keep quiet and accept life without trying to always analyse it into answers. Some of the mysteries are too big for us. My own faith enables me to trust that something greater than me knows best and is taking caring of things on a level way beyond what I can perceive. Even without such a belief, we can help ourselves sometimes by just letting things be what they are – accept how life is presented to us and get on with riding the rapids.

A need to have everything worked out and create solutions or theories for life's meaning, can sometimes come not from curiosity or arrogance but from our vulnerable fear. Fear that if we do not convince ourselves of a certainty behind everything, a definite reason for all that happens to us and those we love, we will feel less secure. More fragile to chance and circumstance. But to embrace that insecurity, that unknowing, is itself an empowering way to be.

Getting on without too much questioning.

'Ours is not to reason why' often helps me to cope with life and what I see or experience. It does not make me confused or saddened but it enables me to take all the energy I might waste on searching for clear 'answers' to why things are, and put that energy into getting on with the now. For example, when I walked into the

orphanage 'handicapped room' for the first time in Vietnam and saw the appalling state of the children, one of them, Anh, who is deaf, blind, and possibly autistic, was curled up in a tiny ball, continuously banging his head on the bare wooden slats of his shared bed. My friend Jackie and I did not have time to work out why this was happening, or who to go to and complain. This would have so wasted our opportunity to help. Instead, we worked at finding out what we could do to enable this boy to have chance for a better life. We chose **action rather than analysis**.

We discovered quickly that what Anh loved was to feel movement, so we bought him a 'toddler walker' and set him up in this in the orphanage yard. He shot off, careering around, not caring if he bumped into obstacles which he couldn't see, just loving the sensation of motion. His smile as the wheels moved along showed me more than anything ever has, what *joy* means. It exists in the moment. We then did all we could to organise the support so that Anh could regularly be helped to get off his bed and enjoy moving about. If that support was not sustainable, we would have to think again. But we didn't look back or ask "why?". We looked forwards. We got moving.

Likewise, when I was told that my brain tumour had grown while I was naively 'imagining it away', even *expecting* miracles from prayer, there was no time spare to get mad at myself or anyone else. As my surgeon plainly told me *"We must operate **now** Jacci."* And so, I got myself some hospital pyjamas.

To search desperately for who/what/which event or

pollution or childhood trauma or spiritual lesson and so forth *caused* that bad thing to happen to you, is so often a wasted ride on the 'why machine'. Who is to 'blame' (be it God, your parents, the government, doctors, specialists, social workers, a prejudiced culture, nature, yourself or whoever) is often a dead-end search, like banging your own head on a wall for faraway solutions. It is a question of balance. Yes, later down the line of dealing with your problem you (or your loved ones) may benefit positively from looking into causes and how you can change them. But you do not need to search for answers to *everything* – some of which may not be written in human language. Not every 'why?' in life either has or needs a human answer. And very often **'Why me?' is less helpful to survivors in life than the active question 'What now?'.**

One day at a time.

If you are having a tough time and life's challenges are huge for you, it can be overpowering to think of this set of rapids possibly going on for weeks, even months or years ahead. How exhausting. But what about if you focus on dealing with now? If you aim to have enough strength, intention, courage, and insight to get through this single moment. This day even.

You will perhaps amaze yourself with how much the human spirit can endure, especially if we aim just to deal with, live through, the painful moment we are in. If you are having to cope with intense pain, or chemotherapy sickness, razor sharp grief, or with drug craving, heavy depression, whatever, dealing with that for just today gives us the power to cope. And knowing that we are

mortal, that today is temporary, just as we physically are temporary, can actually give us a **sense of lightness,** because it emphasises to us that right now, just now, we *are* fully alive.

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The awareness of our own mortality can also encourage us to use the gifts and talents that we have, right now, to fully **engage** with our existence. To use the wisdom we have gained from our life experiences to help us create beauty and express the beauty within us.

While creating this book, I went to see an exhibition at the Oxford Ashmoleum Museum, by the artist Ali Kazim. The display in the room included a small terracotta clay jar and flask from Harappa, Pakistan, made in 2,500 -1,900 BC. These objects had inspired the modern art of Kazim and the notes by his work reminded us that, while it is true, we all do come from dust and will return to dust, if we use our wisdom and 'make clay', the things we create can then survive for thousands of years. The seeming fragile can become strong.

Likewise, the influence we have, the inspirations we offer, the things we create both in materials and ideas, and as memories in people of present and future generations, these aspects of us can certainly go on way beyond when we return to dust. The more we use our inner beauty, love, and wisdom to create gifts for the world, the more we inhabit eternity.

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Post-note.

As the coronavirus pandemic did spread around our world, I heard politicians talk on the news about a 'war' on this disease, and how we will surely soon have 'victory' over it. But a crucial thing we can all learn from this pandemic is that a new language and attitude is needed. To grasp that humans can *never* have complete control over nature. For us to accept this truth takes such humility and honesty about our dependence on, not 'mastery over' natural laws. We need to work with great, active respect for nature's power, if we are to find a sustainable way out of pandemics, or other natural emergencies, such as the rapid advance of climate change.

To heal our humanity, and our planet, we need to **accept and *own* our fragility**, and then to actively, humbly – without playing '*Who Rules?*' in the dark – draw light in.

We can see this light-work happening when people help each other during urgent crises, such as in Ukraine during the war happening as I write this book. It has been incredible, the huge compassion, service and sacrifice shown from one human being towards another. Shown not just by one community member towards another, but even by people who are total strangers, who volunteer with huge efforts and risk to help others they genuinely care about, with courage that is love at its brightest.

A 'mortal smack' by our fragility can, if we allow it, shake our perspectives in a good way. We can begin to realise what truly matters to us – as individuals, communities, connected countries, and as a whole

planet. We can become more 'panoramic' in our view of how we each belong to *one* life on earth. Of course, there is the chance (and reality) that some do go far the other way, and become more self-centred, caring only about their own narrow greed and desires. But the potential is there for so much more. By realising our own mortal weakness, and our essential connection to each other, we each have the chance now to know our true eternal strength – love.

STEP SEVEN

Be the love that you are.

This is the most important chapter in the book. So much so that I have made a range of guided visualisation videos to go with it. But first, let's look at what I mean by us 'being love'.

If we consider the idea that the universe is made of two kinds of energy and call them 'light' and 'dark' or 'love' and 'fear', we can also go further and imagine that love is an energy which 'exists' while fear is a 'non-existence', a lacking of love. As I said earlier in the book, I actually believe that the ultimate source of all energy and matter is a love which contains within it the dark as well as the light, but for now let's go with the idea that love is a positive existent energy while fear is a negative non-existence, and love is everywhere in the universe…. including inside us.

What does this energy of love do? What does it create as an effect of its existence? Think of the effect of your loving another person or animal. Very often that loving *nurtures* the being who is loved. They feel better about themselves, life. They may find it easier to cope with stress or challenges, maybe even get better sooner or more vibrantly from an illness or trauma. When we love someone, we 'hold them up' to the light, to comfort,

hope and positive healing. And that is just what loving ourselves (or rather welcoming the love that is already inside us), can do for us. It can help us to heal.

When I found out my brain-tumour had regrown, I re-read Bernie Siegel's *'Peace, Love and Healing',* and realised that, the first time around, I had missed the most crucial point…*do I love me?* In the West we have long been encouraged to believe that love for the self is selfish, and that we should look very much for *external* solutions to our problems – in the outside world of experts and medicines, groups, services and so on. But we need to heal and love what is at the *centre* of us, for any other solutions to have a lasting chance of helping us be well.

We also cannot give genuine love to others in the world around us if love is desperately lacking inside ourselves. Yes, we can help people, but if this helping behaviour is driven by a 'coping mechanism' inside us – as a way of gaining praise to somehow 'validate' who we are, because of our low self-esteem – then this care is coming more from a need to receive rather than to give love, and so it is less powerful. Or if we are keeping busy caring for others because we cannot bear to love and care for ourselves, again the care is less powerful. Love-hungry care is a bit like trying to bake a cake with all the ingredients but very low heat in the oven. It doesn't quite gel.

The same is true for loving in our personal relationships. From personal experience of how fickle I was at times in my first marriage and early relationships, I have learned that to be able to love another person fully, we need to

learn how to feel and be comfortable with love inside of us – for it not to seem like a stranger to our inner world or crowded out by troubles within. The key is to become a 'good host' to loving. This can be an ongoing continuous process, learning how to *allow* the energy of loving to be welcome inside us, and so be able to enjoy giving love to others as we have plenty to share.

It is not a one-shift transformation. We do not suddenly become an expert 'love-machine'! But the truth is, once we begin to take steps to know love inside our own being, love for who we are, the process takes off, like a dimmed light being turned up stronger and stronger – and this is all much easier than it sounds!

If the universe is full of love, whether you call that God's love, One Love or simply love itself, then we need to consider how much we want to let ourselves be healed by that loving. But I have found that 'consider' is really the wrong word, because this healing comes not from a rational *"do I deserve this love?"* consideration of how much we like who we are, or how good/bad or guilty/worthy we think we are. It comes simply from *practice* – a willingness to practice being loved inside.

Love, as the 'heartbeat of the universe', is the energy pumping life and vitality, connection and harmony, compassion, and contentment, everywhere that exists. That includes inside you and me. Love is what we are. It creates us, nurtures us, uplifts us, even forgives us, and it allows us to heal. Love enables us to be authentically real. It celebrates who we are. And it reveals to us the truth of who we are. This may all sound a bit 'spiritual' but the crux of what I am saying is that the decision you

can make, to allow love to be realised and celebrated, held with affirmation inside yourself, is perhaps the most important decision you will ever make, both for your healing and for your happiness as a being on this earth.

We are each tiny, infinitesimally small parts of the love that is the energy, the existence of our universe, but **while we are each a *tiny part* of the whole, this means with certainty that love *is all that we are!*** Take a moment maybe to reflect on that thought. We are each, if you like, miniscule but still significant beats of energy within one infinitely huge energy that is never-ending unconditional love. To recognise this even fractionally, even momentarily, is our gift in this life, and our healing.

Now some readers will think I am being far too 'positive' about life on this earth, which is of course packed with negative examples of fear, of love's lacking – packed with cruelty, tragedy, dis-ease, and with hate. But if you look back over previous chapters I have not denied this. I know that life can be 'unfair' and horrid and painful. And I do not say that *only* love works as a powerful force in this life. Fear and the hatred that results from fear are powerful forces too. Of course. But I am trying to focus here on what I believe is the deepest, most 'real' energy in all of life and existence, beneath everything, even beneath the fear which is the temporary non-existence of it…and that is love. To live in the often harsh 'seeming reality' of our physical world, whilst holding onto this joyful awareness of what we are essentially made of, is the way of the survivor.

Practice, practice, practice.

Your heartbeat is made of love. Some people, like me, believe that we are this love forever, even when our heartbeat stops, but simply believing in this love being inside you right now, will be enough to heal you. Knowing it also enables us to then give love to others from a 'full pot', or at least a fuller pot, inside. And the way to begin, from my experience – gradually then with increasing certainty and speed – to touch upon and discover then explore and expand this love inside us, is to **practice connecting to it.**

How?

Some people use meditation, prayer, or Reiki, as very good ways of healing. These are powerful ways and I love to practise them (in fact by the time this book is completed, I have trained as and love being an angelic Reiki healer and mindful meditation teacher, but that is mostly for another book!). I want to tell you here how we can connect to love inside us, *give* love to ourselves inside, through **deep-relax visualisation.** I have offered a taste of such visualisation practice in two guided videos on my website and You Tube Channel 'the love that we are' (see Appendix). Here I guide you through the technique of learning how to deeply relax your body and mind. You are then guided to create a *symbol* for love (such as a butterfly or flower or shape or cartoon figure) which feels 'right' to you personally. Mine is the cabbage-white butterfly. Yours may be a blue tulip, a golden star or – who knows! You then learn how to do three things together, and the **together** here is crucial, to help you connect to love inside yourself.

1) You ***see*** the symbol, throughout all your body, or in one special part of you needing healing right now.

2) You ***say*** in your mind the silent words *'I love myself',* and

3) You allow yourself, gently, increasingly, to ***feel*** love inside of you.

To see, say and feel the love, all at one time, is the way to heal: to put this affirmation of self-loving into your *sub*-conscious mind, and so transform your own acceptance of love being inside you. You allow yourself this gift. This inner loving. You feel the love coming in from outside, from the world around you, from God if you choose or from the universe of life, into you. Then you allow yourself the process of giving that love to yourself, *from inside.* Gradually, with practice and not thinking or analysing or questioning it all too much, you begin to understand that loving yourself is not a selfish thing. It enables you to connect to the love that is the essence of who you are.

Practice is needed. Discipline is needed. It won't perhaps be easy immediately to create the symbol you feel most in tune with, or to say the words and feel comfortable with them, or to feel the energy of healing love inside yourself. But with time it *will* come. Being willing to get going is the most important step. And being determined to give your life this chance, to keep honouring yourself with the affirmation that you are worth this effort, this practice. It all says a simple 'welcome' to the love being realised. You can do this visualisation perhaps daily, or more often if you are going through an intense challenge or treatment. I still often run through the sequence,

whenever I just want to deeply relax and feel good. Feel connected.

Eventually you will be able to say the words *'I love myself'* to yourself, or even out loud, and mean them. You will feel comfortable and deserving of such love. That might sound a difficult strain to you right now, but I promise that with practice you can do this. Giving yourself the permission to try means you do want to feel this loving inside of you. So, it will come. Because, as with healing, loving is ultimately a verb, an *action*, not a noun or an end-goal, and by starting this process of finding and allowing love to be inside you, you have set the action off. The energy has begun to move in… or to wake up from already inside of you.

Some people find the visualisation process of seeing images in their 'mind's eye' easier than others, but it is often a case of just believing you can do it. We all dream. We all imagine and wish for things. If you do struggle and prefer sounds to images, you could make your 'symbol' for love a sound, like a waterfall running through you. Go sit by a river or by the sea, or in a forest of leaves rustling in the wind, or in a birdsong meadow…then take that sound home with you, in your memory or on a recording, and practice hearing it as the 'sound-symbol' of love inside you. Or if you cannot get out there yourself, you can access simple recordings like this on my You Tube channel, or on many other digital platforms. Play with it! The crucial thing is to be open to feeling love inside. Because we do all want this love. We do all deserve it. It is our inheritance, from the second we were born – or even before then.

Peace and light.

As well as you hopefully enjoying the practise of learning to see (or hear), affirm and feel love inside of you, I have also made a deep-relax sequence which will guide you to see and feel healing light (of any colour), and the light of peace inside of you (see Appendix). To 'become' healing light is a wonderful visualisation technique which introduces us to the sense of loving light being 'who we are', as a pure healing energy inside of us. We can simply enjoy this healing gift in our own bodies, and then (if we choose) send it out into the world. And the same for the much-needed light of peace.

Remember that to be true to your own life you need to recognise your *inner* need for peace, healing light and ultimately love, as well as sending it out into the world. A survivor needs to be strong and say "yes" inside before we can really be strong for others. That is not selfish. That is authentic truth. It is a balance. When you love yourself more you will *automatically* be more loving to others, in a genuine way, because that is how love works. Of course, we don't want to aim to always focus on our personal needs, in a self-centred way – but if you are in a challenging set of rapids right now, then you may need to get through these safely, keep *yourself* afloat, before you are truly able to help others along their tracks. It is a balance of conscience and healing, which love itself can guide you to find.

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When love guides us.

As I was working on the final touches to this book, I heard Jason Donovan singing on the radio about how, when we are guided by love, nothing can divide us. This 'reconciliation-power' is true on so many levels!

Globally, nationally, within communities, families…love is the key energy to help hold us together, counteract division. And on the level of the person, as individuals, it is good to know that the words, 'whole', 'heal' and 'holy', (or, further back in Old English time *hal, haelan,* and *halig*) are all three connected at their original roots, sourced from the Proto-Indo-European word '*kailo-*'. When we are guided by love inside us, when love drives our motivations and choices from within – then we can be whole as a person, and so healed, (even holy!), because we can *accept* all of who we are, unconditionally. No part of us will be excluded from or be 'divided out' from being loved. We can become complete (as could our world).

'But I can't do it!'

What if you resist any idea of allowing yourself to find, feel or even imagine love inside of you, for yourself? If you think that you don't 'deserve' such love or that experiencing healing light is 'too much', or that you have done nothing to 'earn' peace inside of you. I would say just let those feeling be. And keep going.

It may even happen that as you focus on connecting to love inside of you, the *opposite* feelings are aroused – so you feel anger, fear, guilt, or sadness instead. The 'little child' ego in you may kick up a tantrum at being

faced with all this loving which it is not at all used to. Sometimes **love does stir up in us that which is very much not itself.** It is true. I have experienced all this, and it can be very disorientating!

Again, I would say, just go with it. The resistance will pass. If bad memories or guilty feelings are brought up which you really are troubled by, you may need to talk with someone or go for some healing therapy to help set things free with support. But keep going, keep practising connection – or being *willing* to connect, or even just being *prepared to be willing* to connect – with love, and try not to analyse too much. Just say the positive affirmations, see/hear the symbols or the light, and the feelings will come. **Love will come because it is *already there* inside of you,** waiting to be recognised and 'return home' where it belongs. Let the other negative thoughts just pass by through your mind. And the feelings of resistance, you can notice them, then let them go, and gradually love will become your comfortable heartbeat.

Up and down and up again. Hope.

Do I mean that to be a survivor we need to be people who are constantly feeling full of love, loving ourselves and the world and glowing like angels? No! Super-healthy and super-sorted? No! I can check anytime and know I feel a constant loving deep inside of me, but I can also feel moments of dark fear, anger, and life can still suck. There are days when I feel unhappy or grumbly about life or other people, or myself. I am not 'all-love' in how I consciously feel every day, because I am human, and I accept and forgive all that. Then move on.

To regularly practice being aware of love as the 'core' energy inside us, creates an increasing resilience in us as survivors. A *'no matter what happens, all will be well'* attitude. As a friend told me, it is to **feel called to hold the reality of the world, of our lives, joyfully.** That does not mean always being happy, it means living towards joy. The optimism of hope. When life is hard and pain is bad and people seem mean and the hard waves keep crashing over us, it is by knowing love is inside of us that we are able to keep things held in the perspective of being surmountable.

Another friend reminded me too that hope itself, like healing, is strongest as a current moment, an *active* way of being, not a static aim. To be hopeful is a dynamic choice – being full of hope in the way you live your life right now, rather than just hoping for something good to happen 'in the future'. And such hope, the hope of the survivor, is grounded in love.

"I/we will get through this" is the way to be…even if you don't. In fact, to have hope you will get through a challenge, and then to get dunked in the freezing river, shocked and hurt but *undiminished,* and then come up and try again, still hoping, that is a true survivor!

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We are not alone. Truth. We have all the limitless power of the universe's heartbeat inside of us – because we are a part of it. And so, we can begin, just begin, to be aware of this potential and see that nothing can or will ever really defeat us – because nothing is stronger or more real than love. Everything we experience in this life can be healed by love. All darkness can become

lighter. Now it may be that the darkness is not filled and cancelled out completely. We may not physically be able to overcome what threatens our life and be totally cured. But we begin to understand that really, we have already overcome everything, because the love that we are, is perfect, absolute, and limitless. And the only real obstacle we all need to get over in our lives, the only one, is **our resistance to knowing the love that we truly are.**

These words can seem a bit overwhelming or even annoying if you don't feel in the mood for reading them, but by just giving the ideas here a bit of space in you to be contemplated, could be a good thing.

When fear, guilt and doubt cause us to resist the love inside of us, then we can be painfully knocked down by obstacles, but when we dare to aim for the joy of holding the reality of our life in love, then we are survivors no matter what.

What if the love just won't come?

I have already said that it is okay if you don't believe in or connect to the idea of love being the 'core energy' of the universe. Connecting simply to love as a healing energy which you can harness to help you be well, is fine. The visualisations I have created will still work for you. But what if you really do not find it possible or reasonable to imagine any love in the world around you, never mind inside yourself? What if it all seems selfish and cruel? I would suggest two things – **inaction and action.**

I mean, firstly, to just let yourself 'be still and know'. Don't try to work out if love is in the world or not,

with all the atrocities. Simply sit quiet and be open to the possibility. Practice calming and quieting your mind as I suggested in Step Two. Then, let the chance of love have open space to come to you. If this really doesn't work or if you just feel fidgety and frustrated, don't worry! Some people find stillness by being active. If that's you, then find the survivor willpower inside yourself to get up out of your chair, get boots and coat on, or swimsuit, whatever, and take yourself out into nature. Engage with the power of the natural world to show you your 'belonging' in the love of the universe (just as nature can help you to set free your negative feelings). Just go out in nature (in the wilds or in a park), be active, then maybe sit for a while, but all the time just be, breathe in the air and instead of 'trying' to feel and know if love exists out there, simply be open to the possibility.

And what if the big, seemingly unsurmountable struggle for you is to even contemplate loving yourself? What if, when you try these suggestions, all you get are bad, guilty, critical thoughts about how much you don't deserve to be loved by anyone, but especially by yourself? Again, just let such thoughts be what they are, let them pass through you and remember that you are not your thoughts. These are temporary, passing activities in your brain. Then, be willing, no more than that, simply be willing to forgive yourself. Perhaps also to forgive someone else who has harmed your self-image, self-worth. But focus primarily on **being willing to forgive *you*.**

Forgiveness as grace.

In Vietnam I met a boy called Khanh, who showed me that forgiveness is the key to love. To grace. If we can forgive life, God, other people and ultimately ourselves, then we can love. To forgive our own self is healing at its most powerful. You may or may not believe that the love in our universe can forgive *anyone* unconditionally. I believe this, but for others it may be more comfortable to say that **love is forgiveness** and let that be enough. By saying *"I am willing to forgive me",* you open the door to your healing. And by practising forgiveness you make the best of your gift of being a human.

I cannot advise anyone on specific issues of guilt or past shame they may have. I only know that opening this door of forgiveness lets love make its way back in. It may take time, and practice of the visualisations or any technique that works for you. It may be that you benefit from getting help to dislodge guilty feelings that are stuck inside you. But the willingness, the wanting, the *open door* is the key. Even just unlocking the door. The truth is that we are all human. We all do wrongs. We all try to make the best of the life we are in, even if this involves making big mistakes. But we are all perfect at doing one thing…being human! And the heartbeat of the universe, the 'more than this', the divine, or simply love, completely accepts us for this. It is time now to let that loving do its work, and heal you by forgiving you.

You *can* love and forgive the person you are because the forgiveness is already waiting within you. Love will never go from inside us. It is just up to us to recognise and **'admit to'** this love, or we could say **'admit it'** in the

sense of letting it in, allowing it, welcoming it. And if welcoming love seems a long way from your mind and heart's acceptance right now, just let that thinking pass through you, let the critical thoughts be what they are, just thoughts, or the feelings just temporary feelings, and again be willing to forgive…see what happens.

Remember again to simply be still and know, or be active in nature and know, without intensively thinking about it all…because whenever we let go of too much analysis or 'justification' pressure being put upon our self, the forgiving sound of our own breath can be enough.

Breathe.

It is good for a moment to talk about breathing a little more. I once attended a workshop led by Neil Douglas-Klotz*, which coincided with my own growing awareness that I wanted to 'think even less' during my relaxation sessions. I was beginning to discover the power of simply listening to the sound of our breathing. Neil described how we can begin to hear the 'name of love' if you like, which is unique to each of us, in the unique sound of our own in and out breaths. He spoke of the sacred Hebrew name for God, 'YHWH', having a similar sound to this in/out breath, (in – Yah, out – 'weh'), and being slightly different for every one of us – because our breath sound, like our fingerprint, is unique – while at the same time connecting us all together – because we all breathe life.

Whatever word works for you. It could be 'Om' (which some people call the 'sound of the universe') as the sound you connect to in your out-breath. Or it could

be you like to imagine the sound of your breath as the ebb and flow of a wave…or even simpler just listen to your breath itself! And become aware, as you listen to the sound of your own breathing, for as long as you can hold this attention, how powerful this is – almost exciting, in a 'calm excitement' sense! You begin to see how much healing is held in this uncomplicated action of attentiveness. It is an honouring and **anchoring** of your own existence, and an unspoken connection to, a gratitude for, your being a part of the whole of life.

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Are we afraid of the light?

Sounds bizarre and irrational, yes? We so often focus, in our culture, myths and fairy tales, on being afraid of the dark – of death, conflict, ugliness, trauma, cruelty. The ghouls and monsters run through our horror films and nightmares. But can you ask yourself this, for a change…are you afraid of having too much light inside you? Are you afraid of loving yourself or being loved, completely – by others or by love itself? Does the concept of being very strong, very hopeful, very positive, very joyful, very light as a human being, actually freak you out a bit?!

Do you (if you can be totally honest here) somehow find it easier to fill your life with stress, illness, hurt, difficult relationships and complex, heavy issues – which all require you to try to fix and 'sort them', or at least to carry them, and know what you are carrying? Or is it less unsettling to bear grudges, than to forgive and let go? Do you feel habitually drawn to spending your life-energy struggling with problems? Is this

somehow more 'normal' for you, more comfortable, more comprehensible? If so, you are not alone.

To be at peace inside, to have nothing you need to 'solve', carry, might leave a big space…for what? A space that is scary because it is so new to us. A space too potentially light when we are so used to bearing the 'heaviness' of life's burdens. A space too powerful perhaps to even go near, without feeling our nervous little child inside wanting to 'run for it'. To busy our body and mind with a bit of familiar stress, trouble, weight, or frustration, can be strangely reassuring, yes?

I have talked about this on the level of 'buffering' earlier, in Step Two, but this could also be because the negative emotions which *limit* our capacity as human beings – such as anger/anxiousness/guilt/sadness/fear – are easier to 'hold onto' inside of us. They may be repressed or doing great damage in our lives, but they are still within our grasp.

To be open to the **limitless capacity of love** may need us to let go of some of that sense of being in any way 'contained', or in control. **To let go of the boundaries of our burdens**. We can feel it is 'uncomfortable but familiar' to carry our darkness in life, and sub-consciously too challenging to embrace, or at least let go into, something too immensely light to grasp.

Love is beyond limitation. True love is unconditional, has no 'ifs' and 'buts' to being given or felt. *"I will love you if you do this but not if you do that"* makes a parody of love itself. We know this ourselves, through the love we feel for our children, parents, or those we call beloved. Even when they do things to hurt us, our love almost

always does not stop. And the love unconditional in the universe can reach way beyond even these human parameters. It *never* has a limit where it stops.

We have the worldwide culture as humans of preferring things to be kept in labelled 'categories' – organising our lives within restricted structures of containment. We have a habit of criticising and analysing rather than encouraging and expanding. We are so used to doubting rather than seeing beyond our dreams. And in a way all this is 'safe'. It gives us boundaries and an impression of 'order'. Such a widespread habit of limitation then 'fits' and synchronises better with feeling limiting emotions. But to become aware of a love inside us that is so deep it could go on forever and so light it could have the power to help us achieve beyond our greatest possible imagining – well, that is a big dare!

But we *can* dare it. We can allow ourselves this gift, even a taste of it; a willingness to 'open up' to this love. It is our essence as human beings, who are created to be loving, to be loved, and to ***be*** love. Every one of us. If we can only let ourselves know the love that we are. To be expanded not reduced. Lifted up and not put down. To celebrate our lives. To allow love to help us know joy in the holding of the reality of our life, however hard and fast those rapids are. And, especially when life is cruelly hard, to let love show us the limitless power of forgiveness.

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Stillness as time to heal.

As my friend, a healer, advised me, **doing nothing is doing something.** What did she mean? It is a question again of the importance of *balance* in our lives. As

much as it is great to be motivated and active as a survivor, it is also crucial to allow our self the chance to be still. Quality stillness, which gives us time and space to gather, refresh and harmonise our energies, or simply to be. While we are peaceful and at rest, we are then actively, in this 'neutral space', doing something which is so vital to our life – quiet healing. If we are forever rushing about, then our body and mind have little chance to put everything into good order. Into balance. Into rejuvenation and restoration. That is why we sleep and why we need to 'do nothing' more often when we are awake.

Increasingly I notice how we all seem to find less and less time to simply 'chill' in our lives. Even today I was told how 'hectic' my life seems. We often do mistake complexity for a full and valuable life, and simplicity as less 'meaningful'. How we all need to learn the grace of being still. And practice it more. I sit by the river and watch a heron standing for a very long time on a stone, so still and at peace, and I see a little more clearly the truth in the words *'be still and know'.*

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A gift.

While I was staying in Oxford working on an early draft of this book, I saw a man from my flat window on St Giles. He was a homeless person and was washing his spare T-shirt and shorts, using a bottle of water, which he carefully poured over his clothes as he held them above the gutter, and then he spread them out to dry over his rucksack beside a bench, and then sat watching the world. I finished brushing my teeth in the bathroom

and went out to talk with him.

He told me about how he had been thrown out of his rented flat with no savings and was living like this until he could draw his pension, in two years' time. He then enjoyed telling me all about the exercise targets he sets for himself – 100, 200 then 300 press-ups a day. And he told me about his hard-working father who was a lorry-driver, like mine. When I offered him some money, he asked if he could go get change and give me some of it back, because it was more than he needed. And then we parted.

Next morning, I saw him again from my window. He was by the bench doing his press-ups on the pavement, this time with his rucksack on his back. This gentleman taught me a lot. He seemed to have no big store of bitterness or self-pity, and an attitude to life that says "yes" no matter what. He is a survivor.

For a few moments I felt some surprising envy towards him, for having a body so strong he could do press-ups like that! I realised he has a physical health I would give all my wealth to possess. But then I realised that this is my own unique life. My lucky gift. Just as your life is your gift. The gentlemen, Peter, has his own big life challenges and rapids to ride, things to discover, be shocked and be blessed by. So do I. So do you.

To accept, forgive and love our lives is such an honour. Not to be constantly focusing on how difficult or unfair our life is, or how we would rather have it as a different 'package'…but also to be honest about the dark feelings that are a heavy burden part of us…and then let them go free. Unload. Letting the negatives out

gives us space to 're-charge' and draw positive energy in… and switching lights on gives us power to make the darkness go out. It's an all-win cycle!

To be a survivor is to hold the oars and ride our own river wherever it takes us, even through the sharp falls; to guide ourselves as best we can (and forgive the bad navigations as well as the odd cold dunking!); to have hope when it gets scary, with will and determination to find a way through; to have a flask-full of courage in our 'back-pack' which will sustain us through every reality, plus a blanket to wrap around ourself and comfort us through the pain….and to be able to say, to embrace our inborn capacity to say to ourselves inside ***"life of mine, I love you."***

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PART TWO

Interviews with six inspiring people

Introduction to the people in Part Two

The first part of this book contains seven healing steps towards being a true survivor in life. Now let's look at seven healing ways – as in, you have read all about my way of being a survivor, now let's look at six others. I chose to invite six new people to be involved in this part of the book, and these are their stories. People with very different life experiences than mine, who I thought would add some inspirational ideas and wisdom to our understanding of being a survivor. People who say "yes" to their own lives, and who now work to help others find their way through life's challenges. I will briefly introduce them here, and then detail each of their informal interviews, which followed a set of seven specific questions. The answers and stories people gave me were all in 2020, and since then (while I have been working on this book and learning/experiencing a lot more about healing) they have all continued to live well, with full and still adventurous river rides!

These are the people:

Jackie set off traveling to regain confidence after leaving a violent relationship. She then co-founded the charity 'The Kianh Foundation' with me in central Vietnam in 2001. Jackie took over as Director and has remained so to this day, setting up an exemplary physiotherapy and education centre for disabled children, to support both them and their families. Inspired by the children's courage, she empowers them with her dedicated fundraising and management of the charity. She has been awarded the MBE in honour of her work.

Lana has experienced dark, painful times of involuntary childlessness and depression, and has recovered from being down low by finding skills for uplifting and healing her sadness. Inspired by this light, and as a natural healer, she has now trained to become a holistic healer of body and mind, helping others to find peace in their whole being.

Abdul dealt with bullying and harassment when he was young, finding ways to overcome such behaviour towards him with humour and integrity. He then learned to teach other people ways to interact non-aggressively, and to deal with aggression towards themselves. He went on to become Training Manager for 'Place for Hope', a charity which helps people learn the skills to facilitate discussions during situations of conflict in faith settings.

Urzula struggled to find a way to follow her calling to ministry, as in her home country in Latvia there was a sudden change in policy in the Lutheran church, forbidding women from being ordained. She persevered

with committed dedication for twenty years, until finding a position as probationary minister at Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh, where she works with people from a wide range of economic and social backgrounds, helping them find their way.

David, from his teenage years into his thirties, experienced a hard struggle with drug, drink and gambling addictions, which led him towards crime. After hitting 'rock bottom' he used his own survivor attitude, alongside the support of others and active faith in the '12 Steps', to unlock the potential inside himself to step clean away from addiction and crime. He has since begun to volunteer and study with 'User Voice' alongside the probation service and continues to be strong as he finds a way to work for others who are on the same road he has travelled.

Claire witnessed hard times during her childhood in Dublin but found a way to escape this through magical drama and fantasy. She took these skills of play-acting and creative role-play to Irish prisons and to Native American people in jails in the USA, as well as to Irish Catholic nuns, with great effect in helping people find their voice.

The seven questions.

These are the seven questions which I sent to everyone to consider, before we talked on the telephone or communicated several times on social media (Covid 19 'lockdown' preventing actual meetings). I asked everyone to reflect and then respond with their own personal stories, learning and beliefs. Before, during or after you read these interviews, it may be of value if you also consider the questions and see what comes up for you. Then write down or draw or speak or play out your responses.

1) Please tell us something about the 'rocky routes' in your life. What has been the most challenging obstacle you have faced or overcome?

2) How did you discover, and what did you find to be, the best way to help you get through these difficult times?

3) How did this change you, your understanding of life, and understanding of yourself as a person?

4) How has learning to be a 'survivor' yourself, enabled you to help others to face their own big life challenges?

5) What is the key understanding you try to share with the people you work with?

6) What do you learn yourself, from the people who you work with? What do they help you to see?

7) In a nutshell, how would you define the term 'to be a survivor'?

And now the responses…

Jackie.

1) Please tell us something about the 'rocky routes' in your life. What has been the most challenging obstacle you have faced or overcome?

My life took a turn for the worst when I was twenty-four and moved to London to get a job. Up until then I had always been successful, but there was a recession, and it was not easy to find work. This was such a shock to my system. It was the first time that I had encountered failure and completely knocked my concept of myself. I fell into depression and had to return to Liverpool to live with my parents, after having moved out many years before. In Liverpool, I met an old suitor and, despite all my intuition telling me not to, entered a relationship with him. It quickly turned violent, culminating in him trying to kill me and then keeping me hostage in his flat. I did escape but I had a breakdown, and it took me many years to recover and be able to participate in life again.

2) How did you discover, and what did you find to be, the best way to help you get through these difficult times?

A few years after escaping the violent relationship, my life was still a mess. I felt scared of everything and everyone and after being quite a high achiever at school and university, I could now only manage the most basic of temping jobs, such as working in a static caravan chip shop on Brighton Beach. I could not push myself to do anything more. When two of my friends suggested

a holiday to India and Nepal, I decided to go with them, even though the thought of doing this terrified me. It was just a three weeks' holiday, but when they had to go home, I was determined to stay. I wanted to put myself in a situation where I knew I would have to work hard to push myself fully back into the world, because there was nobody else who would help me to do this, while I was out in a distant country! This was enormously difficult, but the experience helped me a lot, and so began my love of world travel.

I was still damaged and did not begin to heal properly until I – along with Jacci, the author of this book – met a group of very vulnerable children with disability in an orphanage in Hoi An, Vietnam, and began to work with them. This also was not simple or easy. I had several difficult and traumatic experiences throughout the years whilst I was trying to help these children at the orphanage.

3) How did this change you, your understanding of life, and understanding of yourself as a person?

I learned that I am not a 'naturally lucky' person, who will always have everything simply handed to them. It was a shock to me to learn how easy it is to be left behind by life. I learned that I had to build my own character, and that if I wanted to get back in the game, no one was going to do this for me. I also learned that even if you have been through one traumatic experience, this does not necessarily mean that it's the end of life's difficulties for you. Other hard situations may still lay ahead. If you have already been through what you believe is the worst thing you are ever going to go through in life,

to find yourself at some point going through another traumatic experience, can be an additional shock.

4) How has learning to be a 'survivor' yourself, enabled you to help others to face their own big life challenges?

The children that I work with now do not live at the government orphanage. Whilst working there, we found that many of the children with disability were not actually orphans, but children from families who had no support system, and who felt they had no other choice but to put their child in an orphanage. In 2012, we were able to fulfil a dream of opening our own education and therapy centre, where children with disability could come to school full-time, which gave their families the support they needed to keep their child within the home. These children face far bigger challenges than any I have faced. Because of this, and because of the negative things they may already have been conditioned to believe about themselves, often from a very young age, they have sometimes given up on trying, even before they have truly begun their lives. I know that, to become survivors, they need to start pushing themselves out of their comfort zone as soon as possible.

5) What is the key understanding you try to share with the people you work with?

There is a prevailing culture within Vietnam of further disabling children with disability; by which I mean, they are given little opportunity to develop and to learn to do anything by themselves. Everything is done for them, either by their family or by the people in the institution

in which they live. We do not allow that at the special school that our charity, the Kianh Foundation, set up. From day one, our students have to learn to do as much as they can independently. The staff at the school and I impart to the children that they can only truly rely on themselves, and that if they are going to wait for someone to come along and help them, they may be waiting a long time.

6) What do you learn yourself, from the people who you work with? What do they help you to see?

The children that I work with have no self-pity whatsoever. I find that amazing. The children with disability that we worked with at the orphanage lived in the direst circumstances imaginable, and yet, it was so easy to find their smiles. If you reached out a hand to help them to do something, they would embrace that opportunity with all their being. They were appreciative of everything, enjoyed everything good. The children at our school, who all have families, present themselves a little bit differently. They are usually extremely low in confidence and self-esteem when they first arrive. But give them a little bit of time at the school, and they quickly flourish into these splendid little people who are highly pleased with themselves!

I have an adopted Vietnamese son, Khoa, who has Cerebral Palsy (CP), and he and his teenage friends from our school, who also have CP, are a case in point. They will often go into town at the weekends, and even though many people stare at them, comment on them and they sometimes encounter unpleasant behaviour, this doesn't diminish them in the least, as they are

quite certain that they are cool. When I think of how self-conscious I was as a teenager, I marvel at how self-assured and confident they are. It's such a wonderful thing. It makes me realise how I could have overcome many more boundaries myself when I was younger, or even as an adult, if I'd known how to access this gift of self-confidence. I wouldn't have started to flounder at the first simple hurdle, such as not being able to get a job in London.

I think this self-confidence is the main thing that we are able to give the kids who come to our school. From day one of being there, they are praised and given affirmation. They are never told that they cannot do something, that they are slow or that they are stupid. Every achievement they make is celebrated, no matter how small. One of our regular weekly sessions at the school is 'Dance Therapy'. There is nothing that you can do wrong in dance therapy. Whatever way you might want to move around to the music, that is the right way to move. I have seen the most incredibly self-doubting children flourish during these sessions; it's like magic.

Also, whilst the children at our school are continually assessed, they do not take exams and they therefore never fail. Our whole curriculum is adapted to them and what they can do, not the other way around, with them having to achieve a standard that may be out of their reach. Each child has an Individual Education Plan and goals are set for them within this. But if after a significant amount of time they are unable to reach that goal, then the goal will be changed to something they can manage. I think this constant string of achievements (whatever the level) in a supremely

positive and nurturing atmosphere, builds up their morale enormously.

7) In a nutshell, how would you define the term 'to be a survivor'?

A survivor is **someone who gets up again after being knocked down and doesn't let an event – no matter how traumatic – determine their ability to live a full life.** Maybe it is not the life you envisaged before the traumatic event, but perhaps the life unimagined can be an even better one. Whatever happens, it is important to keep on showing up for Life, and not to crawl under a rock. This may sound rather glib. You will no doubt need to crawl under your rock for a while; the damage from a trauma does not just stop when the actual source of trauma itself stops, and the consequences of and reactions to it, can go on for years. What I mean to say is, it's alright to go to your dark place – but you can't *stay* there.

That's a great way to understand it, Jackie! What more can you tell us about this?

My son is a superb example to me of being a survivor. When Khoa was first learning to walk, when he was six years old, he would fall over and hurt himself all the time, once even requiring stitches. I never saw him even think about giving up on walking. He would always immediately get up, sometimes bleeding, and carry on. I can give myself some credit for this attitude. I was not an over-protective mother and after checking that he was alright, I would allow him to carry on. I never made a big fuss when he fell. I think a lot of Vietnamese people must have felt I was an evil mother!

As I mentioned earlier, most Vietnamese people here are over-protective of children with disability and will go out of their way to keep them cosseted. But I was the opposite and was determined that Khoa was going to have a good shot at life. When Khoa was a bit older and was learning to ride a large tricycle, he would sometimes fall off on our rides around the town. People would come running out of their houses to scold me for allowing him to ride a bike. They were often really angry about it! They could only see his grazed knee or his bruised elbow, they couldn't see the end-goal of his independence.

Saying all this, though, it is Khoa who has really been the main instigator of his success. He is a really determined person with a strong mind, who has always wanted to participate in life. I haven't had to push him to do the things he does. I have just followed his lead. He is now nineteen years of age and works at our school as a teaching assistant, and he gets to the school (and many other places) by driving a three-wheeler motorbike.

Jackie, can I ask you a few more questions about your work in Vietnam?

Yes, go ahead!

In July 2018 you were awarded an MBE for your work. What would you say have been the biggest challenges to you in this work -- in directing the charity, setting up the The Kianh Foundation Centre for the Development of Children with Special Needs, and working with the children and their families? What has made it hard to be a survivor?

A big challenge for me has been being the leader of this

organization! I am an introvert by nature, and then whatever confidence I had was smashed during my violent relationship. Circumstances meant that I ended up becoming the Director of the Kianh Foundation, and in any position of leadership, you are going to end up disgruntling certain people from time to time, because you are the one who ultimately has the say on decisions. At times I have really hated having to do this! It has exhausted me, and I have thought to myself, *"Why do I have to keep on doing difficult, unpleasant things in my life, when I have already been through something so difficult and traumatic?"* I realize now that perhaps the reason I keep on turning up to do the difficult jobs, is because I know I can. Ever since escaping from the flat where my boyfriend tried to keep me after the attack, I have worked my way through life's challenges, and I don't suppose I'm going to stop now.

And what have been your greatest successes, in terms of you learning how to manage tricky situations and bringing your 'survivor skills' to the smooth running of the charity and Centre?

Getting the whole Centre built, running, and functioning at a high level has certainly been my greatest success. Sometimes I walk around and just feel the buzz of happiness that fills the whole place and see what fantastic work the local staff are doing with the kids, and I feel quite amazed that I have been part of bringing this into being. But it certainly has not been easy reaching this point and every positive thing you see at our school has involved some kind of battle to achieve it. Working in Vietnam can be so challenging at times, with the way we work at our Centre often

coming up against and needing to be negotiated with Vietnamese expectations of the way things should be done. But I manage to carry things through by doing what I have always done in stressful situations, and that is by not giving up.

There have been times over the years when I would have loved nothing more than to jump on a plane out of Vietnam and leave the whole Kianh Foundation project behind me. But I have not done so yet and I always keep in mind the mantra, *"this will pass, as all things do".*

Amongst your experiences with the children you have worked with over the years, what could you tell us is the biggest obstacle to some children in their ability to be the best they can be? What attitude holds some children back, or holds back their families from supporting them healthily?

It is often said that **it is society that disables people,** and to a large extent, I really believe this. Out of the children with disability that I have worked with, I have seen that the main obstacle they grapple with is an external one. Often, everybody in their lives – the people in their family or the people in the orphanage where they live, and their neighbours – have no expectation that they can do even the simplest thing and therefore not the simplest opportunity is provided for them. This is then mirrored in the community: there are no schools for them to go to; there is nobody who will give them a job.

I often think of Van May, a young boy with Cerebral Palsy who lived at the orphanage Jacci and I visited,

and who Jacci also mentions in this book. When we first started working there, it took him so many times of throwing himself off his bed, hurting himself in the process, rolling over to wherever we were, staring at us with burning eyes – only to be put back on his bed by an orphanage care worker – before we realized he wanted us to try and help him walk. He was pretty badly bruised by the time we finally realized what he was trying to tell us! However, even though the care worker's behaviour was an obstacle that Van May was trying to overcome (amongst many, many others), she was not putting him back on the bed for any mean or malicious reason. All she could see was that he kept falling off the bed and hurting himself. She was trying to protect him.

And this is the case with many of the families of the children I work with, who unwittingly stand in the way of their child's progress.

(I have also written about this experience with Van May and see from both our strong memories of his actions to get mobile, how much true survivor people can teach us – because the simple, important things they help us realize, can stay with us for life).

And finally, what is the greatest attitude or attribute which the children have who do really well and thrive as the best they can be?

Van May, mentioned above, exemplifies the greatest attitude: utter, blind determination. Never giving up. Van May wanted to walk, and even though physically, Van May is unable to walk, and even though Van May lives in a government institution in Vietnam (he now

lives in the Quang Nam Social Centre for Invalids, the Homeless and the Elderly), he convinced those around him long ago of his need for mobility and so we at the Kianh Foundation had a large, seated mobility frame on wheels made for him, which gives him quite a lot of independence.

Even though we now no longer work directly with Van May, the people at the Social Centre always maintain his mobility frame and repair it when it needs fixing. In fact, it is the only mobility aid at the whole place that has not been allowed to rust away or fall into disrepair. One can only imagine the protests that Van May would wage if that happened! And Van May did that. Van May convinced everyone.

Lana.

1) Please tell us something about the 'rocky routes' in your life. What has been the most challenging obstacle you have faced or overcome?

Being childless, not by choice. I always thought I would be a mum. To me, it's natural, it's how I was brought up, with my own mother saying *"when you have children"* etc, etc. I took it as a societal norm. So, when it didn't happen for me, it was very scary. I became depressed and couldn't see a way out. Just getting out of bed and getting dressed was an effort. Anything more than that was for me so out of reach and unattainable. I was sad and lonely. But I was also determined to not leave any stone unturned when it came to my becoming a mum. I've always been a very determined person, so it felt absolutely right to go down the 'In Vitro Fertilisation' (IVF) route.

I had five IVF 'cycles' (three privately paid for – yes, that's thousands of pounds), but it didn't work. I went through two miscarriages – one natural, and one via IVF. At the time of starting IVF, I didn't really know what it was about. I thought it was a couple of needles and one trip to the clinic. How wrong I was! For weeks, my life consisted of injecting myself daily (scary to do at first), long drives across the country for hospital and clinic visits, lots of scans, blood tests, weeks of waiting, weeks of trying to think positively because *"if I don't think positively it will be my fault if it doesn't work"*, alternating with *"don't think about it, try to find something to occupy your mind"* and a rollercoaster of emotions. I spent four years in this misery/hope cycle that was,

for me, unsuccessful IVF, and it was very depressing.

It was such hard work, but I didn't want to give up. Then I also realised that I was with the wrong man and didn't want to have children with him! That was a shocking revelation, and hard to take in, but I had to finally go with my heart and acknowledge that I couldn't spend the rest of my life with the wrong person.

2) How did you discover, and what did you find to be, the best way to help you get through these difficult times?

I went through lots of different therapies to try and find solutions for my depression and childlessness and then, after fifteen years of being trapped in what felt like endless torment, I finally felt ready to start letting go.

This was a very slow process, as grief, sadness and longing had become such a familiar part of me that I couldn't even imagine what letting go of the identity of being 'a woman trying for a child' would be like. I'd tried counselling, acupuncture, hypnotherapy, homeopathy, anything and everything to help me conceive and feel better.

Then, in 2018, when I was on holiday in Italy, I had a holistic massage. It was at an isolated campsite in Tuscany, very quiet and tranquil. A Dutch holistic massage therapist was working there for the summer. I felt that a massage on holiday would be a lovely treat. The therapist spent time telling me how he would just go with whatever was going on in my body and mind and I was thinking *"just get on with it, I just want a massage".* It was a very slow massage; unlike anything I'd had before. At the end of the hour, I felt so light, as

if my grief, loss, misery, jealousy – baggage – had been cleared away. It was a real physical sensation, as though my right arm and neck were empty – not in a 'barren' way, but in a cleansed, 'ready-to-accept-what's-next' kind of way. I asked him about it, and he said he had been reacting to my body's energy. I was so amazed that I immediately booked for another session and wanted to learn more about how and why this type of holistic massage could be so effective at releasing emotions.

I was becoming ready to leave behind the sadness that my childlessness had given me. I also began to read a book called '*Living the Life Unexpected: 12 weeks to your Plan B for a meaningful and fulfilling future without children** by Jody Day, about how women without children can have fulfilling lives. At first, I couldn't even read the book without feeling sick to my stomach with how the 'I wanted to have a child but couldn't' identity – or even ***letting go*** **of that identity** – made me feel.

But gradually, as I relaxed on my holiday, I felt brave enough to start flicking through the pages of this book, knowing that I could put it down if I had a bad reaction to it. However, by the end of reading this, along with the deep healing massages I experienced, I realised that I wanted to spend the next few months of my life, before I turned fifty, getting ready to start a new chapter of my own. From the caravan site where I was staying, in the isolated hills of Tuscany, I booked onto a weekend workshop called 'Reignite', with Gateway Women*. It was a workshop to help women let go of their grief of childlessness, and I began to discover what my own 'Plan B' would be.

3) How did this change you, your understanding of life, and understanding of yourself as a person?

The changes I went through during the weekend workshop were amazing, and totally unexpected. There was a group of eleven other women, all with different circumstances and life-stories, but we were all connected by our involuntary childlessness and sadness. To be able to share in a group with people who really 'got' what we were talking about – and what we were feeling – was so liberating. We did exercises about the language that people use around childless women ('old crone', 'spinster', 'cat lady', etc) and changed these towards a more positive focus, with words such as 'determined', 'strong', 'brave', 'independent', 'successful', being used to describe ourselves. To realise that I could safely leave my old identity behind, that I could step – not just tentatively, but boldly – into the future, while leaving the grief, depression, sadness, feelings of loss and helplessness behind, was a complete revelation.

4) How has learning to be a 'survivor' yourself, enabled you to help others to face their own big life challenges?

By realising that it is safe to shed one identity and give yourself space to start discovering a new one, I can now give hope to others. Not to believe that their original dreams will necessarily come true, but that there is an alternative, and the alternative can also be fulfilling – as life in a different way.

When you're so exhausted by your grief, sadness and envy of others being able to do something which you see as very natural (like, for me, becoming a mother,

and in the future, my sisters and friends becoming grandmothers) it's hard to see that there is another way. But my healing and learning has showed me that there *is*. Rather than call this other way 'hope', I like to call it 'potential', or 'other opportunities'. Hope is such a loaded word to me that I prefer to use other words, with more flexible meanings and connotation.

To now be able to share with other women (and men) my awareness that a new identity is possible, feels like a gift, but I also have to be mindful that everyone moves at their own pace, and so my story and timeframe are not theirs. But if people know that things/life *can* get better, and you can find a (different kind of) happiness, that's something really positive to share and to help other people reach towards.

I now provide Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), which is a talking therapy that releases old energy in the body by tapping on acupressure points. By incorporating this with positive and powerful re-frames in language, clients discover how their thoughts and beliefs, and the words they use, can change the emotions in their body. It's gentle but effective and allows clients to 'release the old and make way for the new', to use a well-known phrase. I also use holistic massage techniques to really listen to the client's body and provide release from tensions inside them that are holding them back.

5) What is the key understanding you try to share with the people you work with?

That there are alternatives – the past doesn't need to drive the future if you don't want it to. But you have to be willing to start looking at the process of letting go.

And that you don't need to carry on believing all the beliefs you've grown up with, such as that being a mum is the only important thing in the world you can be. That by letting go of unhelpful, unrealistic beliefs and expectations about our life, we can be more open to what's actually going on, and what we'd like to accomplish. It could be becoming a brilliant cook, or starting a business, or running a marathon. I became a holistic therapist and EFT practitioner, to help people heal their sadness. When I was little, I wanted to be a nurse, but later found out I didn't like dealing with wounds, so I never went down a traditional nursing route. Now, I have used my natural desire to care and help people flourish by putting that energy into being a healer. It doesn't matter what it is you do, as long as it's reaching for your own personal goals, so that it means something to you, not anyone else.

6) What do you learn yourself, from the people who you work with? What do they help you to see?

That there are so many different problems and so many different interpretations of the same problem, and that we shouldn't judge.

That it is not healthy to value my own life based on other people's expectations or by my view of their life. We never really know how other people are feeling unless they tell us. There's so much assumption out there in society.

The people I work with also help me to see that even though I've moved forwards, there's still lots of potential and scope for me to move forward more, and to embrace more joy as well. I know I receive as well as give, and that has a lovely symmetry.

7) In a nutshell, how would you define the term 'to be a survivor'?

To realise that, even though your original dreams didn't come true, **you *can* find another way,** find other dreams, and you can have contentment with that alternative.

However, this realisation often doesn't happen overnight. The best thing I eventually learnt, is that 'accepting' doesn't mean 'agreeing' with what has happened to you (or not happened, in my case), and there is absolutely no point in putting all your energy into something that cannot materialise. I also realised that I had wasted – although that's not the term I would use, perhaps 'spent' – too long, fifteen years, trying to become a mother and grieving because I could not do this. For so many years, all my energy was used up with the painful identity struggle of being someone 'trying to have a child'. The grief, the anger, the jealousy, the envy, the unfairness of it all was so exhausting!

To be able to leave all that behind and feel (and really believe) that I *can* have a future, even though it's different from what I had for so long thought it would be. And not just 'a future', but a happy one, where I feel content. I now have a wonderful partner in life, and have time to be me, time to enjoy the things I want to do. And those pleasures don't need to be the same as other people's – so, if I'm not taking the kids to the pool or baking homemade cakes with them, it doesn't matter. I can do what I want to make me happy, as my time and my life are my own.

Being a survivor means being able to live the rest of

my life from now on, not living in the past with a 'what-if' lens. Being a survivor means that I am living my life independent of expectation from others; being true to my own dreams. Being a survivor means I have the energy to leave my past identity (and all the emotions associated with it) behind, because a new identity *is* possible. I can now embrace the potential and opportunities of the future, even though they are completely different from what I thought they would be, when I was growing up and through my 20s, 30s and 40s. I'm now in my 50s and feeling great about life!

Abdul.

1) Please tell us something about the 'rocky routes' in your life. What has been the most challenging obstacle you have faced or overcome?

The first thing Abdul wants to get clear to me is that he feels his own story may not do justice to the idea of him being a 'special survivor'. He wants to impress that his own experiences are no different from those of many people he knows. I assure him that this makes his story good, not irrelevant! Many people may connect to his experiences and be helped by the things he has learned. I thank him for his humility, and we carry on with our 'interview' over the telephone.

My struggles, says Abdul, began when I was about seven, and carried on until I went to secondary school at age eleven. I suffered from bullying on the streets where I lived, in Burnley, Lancashire. No, he replies, this was not racist bullying (as the interviewer, I had jumped to conclusions and presumed this). It was bullying from within the Pakistani community I belonged to. I am Punjabi, from the Punjab region of Pakistan, and these were boys with a heritage from the Peshawar region – Pathans, who had different ethnic roots. I was afraid to go out on the streets most days, and never knew why some Pathan boys chose to pick on me in particular. But it made my life hard, never knowing, when I was playing out, if these bullies would turn up. In the small area of terraced streets where we lived, there were few places to play…so it was impossible to avoid them.

They would come and 'rough me up' or just torment me until they got bored. Or make me get them things

from my house, threatening to beat me up if I refused. I might be playing cricket or football with friends, and they would arrive, take our stuff, then a few of them would start to bully me. I couldn't live without the fear of this disruption to my life and felt quite helpless.

Did older Punjabi boys or adults not help you out?

My elder brothers or their friends might try to appease them, but Punjabis are usually quite placid and passive by nature, whilst Pathans are often hot-blooded, quite 'macho' and tough males. They would never pick on their own and were a very tight group when under any challenge, which I admit I admired. I remember once a boy tried to catch me and I tried to hide behind a friend of my brother, but he didn't want to be caught either, or messed with, so he helped me hide a bit, then in the end his need was to look after his own 'survival', so his coping mechanism kicked in and he stopped helping me hide from them. I understood.

And no, we didn't tell our parents our troubles like this. "*Deal with stuff on the street, don't come home crying*" my dad would say to me, which I accepted. Also, I am just not like that, to go telling my parents my street problems. I knew I had to deal with it myself.

2) How did you discover, and what did you find to be, the best way to help you get through these difficult times?

Given that I am not violent by nature at all, and am quite short, small in build, I knew I couldn't fight these boys and beat them. But I am fast! I could run. I ran a lot. Then, when running away became no longer an option, I decided that I needed to learn to *talk* my way

out of this trouble. To use my brains; my 'street-smarts'. I would talk and communicate with them, distract them, somehow find a way to take their attention off me. I would comment on the branded gear they were wearing (they were a bit richer than us), talk not about me but about them, their family, like *"I saw your brother at mosque…."*. Yes, we all went to the same mosque, but such bullying never happened there. It was kept to the streets. At mosque, we knelt and prayed together. That's just how it was.

But I learned two things:

1) **the importance of talking with those who might want to hurt you.**

2) **to look at what I had as my power**…not physical but mental strength.

I used my wits, my sense, and I learned to 'out-smart' them. Later in life I would learn to use wit and humour even more as a skill, but right then it was just about being smart. Using talking as a way to be free from harm.

For example, once some boys cornered me by a wall. They wanted to make me give them the trike I was riding on. I knew they would just break it, and I knew I couldn't get away. So, I explained to them how it was too small for them and no use, but I could go home and get them my brother's bike, which was bigger. They let me go! Then of course I kept out of their way for a few days, and when they caught me and hassled me again, I talked my way out of it again, saying *"Oh, when I got home, my dad sent me to mosque and then I didn't see you about…."* And so on, talking until they

got bored, and let me go.

I realised that these bullies wanted *easy* bullying. They didn't want to work at it, or that would be no fun for them. So, I made it harder and harder for them to bully me successfully. And I learned that I could survive! I felt good that yes, I could use my brains to cope. I sometimes would pre-empt things and massage their egos *before* they got in on bullying me, telling them how cool their new gear was, giving them chance to brag about it to me, where they had bought it and how expensive it was. Often, they would then forget about bullying me, being too busy thinking about themselves. The more I made bullying not the easy thing to do with me, the more I made them have to use their own brains to do it, the more I got away…until I started high school, and it all stopped.

3) How did this change you, your understanding of life, and understanding of yourself as a person?

I learned from early in my life that if I find myself in a hard situation, I *can* find a way out! I can work it through with my mind. No need for bulk, just wits. And I learned from my Islamic faith that every one of us has a gift from Allah (from God); we each have certain skills which we are meant to harness and use for the good of all. And mine is my intelligence to work things through…I don't mean this in a bragging way, just that every one of us has a skill to offer to others, not to be selfish with. We are none of us the centre of the universe. When we are young, we naturally may think that we are central to everything, but we can learn to recognise that we are in truth a collective, and to serve each other.

I like the Ubuntu* (Southern African) philosophy that **'I am because you are because we are'**. That says a lot to me. I exist because you exist. As a Muslim, we also recognize this connection to others, and I learned as I grew up that I wanted to do a job that benefits the rest of humanity, not just myself.

4) How has learning to be a 'survivor' yourself, enabled you to help others to face their own big life challenges?

I am clear that I have made plenty of mistakes in my life, some of which are real regrets, but I have tried to use my mistakes as lessons and learn from them. I wish in some ways I could start again, there is no honesty in saying otherwise, but of course I cannot. So, I have learned to move on, always seeking to find a way through.

Even early on, in school, I was the person who others came to for help in negotiating between differences of opinion, or if there was disagreement about rules playing cricket etc. I would be the 'one in the middle', which seems to be my gift, for mediating between people. And my faith has taken me deeper into this way. I am not there in my work to make decisions *for* people, but to help them decide well for themselves. This is a good way to keep my own ego out of my actions, because ego needs very much to be out of the centre of my work, and that is good. I am now the Training Manager for Place for Hope, whilst also a Senior Practitioner and Director for the Centre for Good Relations (CfGR). The former organisation helps people deal with denominational (mostly Christian)

conflicts, while the latter is focused on secular, societal conflicts. The two ways of my working interact together and help me to learn more for each aspect of how I use my skills – to facilitate people finding their own resolution to their conflicts.

In any conflict setting, there are those who feel powerless, and feel their 'tormentor' has all the power. But I admire how people can still keep on, keep trying to find a way through the conflict, even when they feel harmed as a victim, wronged or harassed. To be able to find in themselves a **desire to see the humanity in the other person** – that is the asset and the crucial key to the shift that is needed.

Very often both 'sides' feel they are the party that is 'wronged' and suffering as a victim of the other. It is rare (but does happen) for just one side to be the egoic power-lover who enjoys playing the dominator. Usually both parties feel hurt. I work to help them see something which the ideas of John Paul Lederach* have taught me, which is that the future of my grandchildren is directly tied to the future of my enemy's grandchildren – that is, we can *all* gain from a resolution of our conflict.

In my work, we create the space for people to be able to see this. We don't *make* them see this. It is a challenging 'light-bulb moment' shift that is needed, for people to see the humanity even in those they hate. Yes, perseverance may be needed in big amounts for me as a mediator/facilitator for such change. I may need to be a 'sponge' for a while, to allow the negative feelings from both sides to be let out and soaked up… but I have learned not to take this personally. Learning

to be a survivor of bullying helped me to learn this skill, for sure.

5) What is the key understanding you try to share with the people you work with?

My key understanding about finding a way through conflict is the importance of two things:

1) **Being *willing* to find a way through.**

2) **Being *ready to engage* with the 'other side'.**

Does one come before the other? Yes, perhaps being prepared to even engage with the opposite 'side' comes before having the will to find a way through. A commitment to sit down and look at each other.

Often conflicts are deep rooted and have gone on for years, even for several lifetimes of families, so people need to meet with others who may now be 'the enemy', which can be extremely hard. I help people to come together and begin, which requires a big shift in energy, and then a readiness to enact change. To be prepared to even sit with those with whom you fundamentally disagree, sometimes takes real determination. I try to show people the value in this process for themselves, not just the other side. To see that *"I can engage and can also gain"*; that engagement in the process of resolution does not mean necessarily 'losing out'. The 'other' may gain, but so might you. It is not 'either/or'. I work to create the *space*, simply that, for such an understanding. Such a space can take skill and awareness to create.

6) What do you learn yourself, from the people who you work with? What do they help you to see?

This question is at the core of my learning. I have been

humbled by so many people I am in contact with. True survivors. Incredible people who have found a way to reconcile with their lot. To persevere through traumas that I feel I would not have had the capacity to endure. I draw such inspiration from them. For example, the son of one of my second cousins, he had brain tumour surgery as a teenager, then it came back again. He is eighteen now, and he was so reconciled and patient with his own lot in life. I was taught so much by what he had the capacity to live through, with all the hospital treatment and surgery, and the fear. In the Muslim faith we see this as the 'test', the path that God has given us. To learn to persevere and get through things. To say and believe "I will pray and find a way".

We consciously make an effort to say *'Insha-Allah'* which means *'God willing'* or *'if Allah wills it'*. We all have no telling what will happen to us in the next moment of our life. We say very often in our conversations something like *"See you tomorrow, Insha-Allah".* It is a belief key to our vocal communication and to our life attitude, our spirituality, and to my work. It is also about keeping on through our struggles. And I see and admire this same perseverance in many people I work with, of all faiths or none. People who do not give up.

7) In a nutshell, how would you define the term 'to be a survivor'?

This is very simple for me – to be a survivor is to **keep going**. There can be dark times, yes. But don't stop. There is no profound feeling in me of *"I'm a unique survivor".* Lots of my friends have been through bullying and so on. But we can all choose to either stop and give

up, or to keep going. **The choice is our opportunity – to engage or not, to persevere or not. It is in our hands.**

I have been in some very dark places in my life and many times have found myself standing at the proverbial 'edge of the cliff'. However, I've never reached the point of thinking "*I'll step off this cliff*" or whatever. Why? Perhaps because of my faith or because it is just in me to keep going. My journey is my journey, no matter how difficult it is. People like my young relative with cancer help inspire me to reconcile with my own journey in life. And no matter how hard it gets, I am grateful. I have a lot of humility coming from those people who I work with and know, who keep going through so much. They are my 'reality check'. They help me be grateful for what I have. I think I am a survivor because they are. Yes, **a survivor seeks and draws strength from others. We never exist alone.**

Islam teaches us, 'don't look up, look down'. What this means is, if you see someone with more than you and feel resentful or jealous, look about with awareness and see others who have so much less than you; how lucky you are. I was inspired so much by the story I once read of the great footballer Zinedine Zidane*, who grew up in a very poor part of France. He said that when he was quite young, he looked up one day to the heavens and asked why God had made him so poor. He pleaded for a better lot. Then he turned the street corner and there was a homeless guy, whose feet had been amputated. I read that he thought to himself he would never complain about his poverty again, and then his own feet became his great skill, his wealth. It

was like God was teaching him at this point to realize how rich he really was, and to use the special gift that he had been given.

We all have a choice to learn from such stories. To draw strength and inspiration from other people. And to then choose if we want to use the gifts we have been given, to help and inspire others. This service is the key, for me.

Urzula.

1) Please tell us something about the 'rocky routes' in your life. What has been the most challenging obstacle you have faced or overcome?

I grew up in the Soviet occupied territory of Latvia, under a very brutal, oppressive, and abusive system, with closed borders. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union allowed the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and so we were trapped. My Grandmother, Velta Ābele, together with her father (my great-grandfather) Jānis, tried to escape and reached the 'Courland Cauldron' – the last pocket of resistance which enabled people to flee from the occupied territory in small boats over the Baltic Sea. However, he was reached there by a message that the house which he had built brick by brick by his own hands, had *not* been bombed during the war – and he decided to take his daughter and turn back. My grandmother regretted this for the rest of her life.

There were nights when my family had to hide at friend's places or even in the forest. There were guards coming to family homes and pulling people out at night – men, women, children alike. More than 200,000 people were deported from the Baltic states to Siberia to work camps. In addition, at least 75,000 were sent to Gulag. They were transported in trains meant for cattle, not humans – no water, no food. Many died on the way, others died of cold and hunger in Siberia, including the closest friends of my family.

I grew up under that shadow. Many horrible and cruel things happened in the first decades of my life that I will not mention here.

Churches were pretty much forbidden in those times and many church buildings were converted into storages, sport halls or even stables. My grandmother was an organist for the Lutheran church throughout the Soviet years – despite it being dangerous – and I went with her as a girl. My grandfather was the exact opposite to my very Latvian and church-affiliated grandmother: he was an atheist who was convinced that the Soviet was the most wonderful system of all. Interestingly he still helped my grandmother to play the organ by treading the pedals that brought air into the instrument (before an engine was installed).

I learned to listen to different, even opposite sides and then to make up my own mind from early on in my life's journey.

I joined the underground church when I was fifteen and the Singing Revolution for independence from the Soviet when I was seventeen, and I went on barricades for freedom of thought and faith. It was an 'all faiths and none' movement and all the existing churches joined in striving for independence, justice, and freedom.

Many of the churches in the city were transformed into hospitals for the wounded during the barricades in 1991. We were strong and joined hands in a living human chain through all the three Baltic countries, all the churches and people together in singing, praying, and fighting for freedom. We knew that we were risking our lives, but we needed freedom. People were shot just around the corner from me. We didn't know what would happen to us but were hoping that the world would see us. And eventually it did.

I was also fifteen when I decided to pursue studying theology and entering ministry in my church. I was in an underground youth group which was led by Aida Prēdele, a wonderful woman who was an ordained minister. I started with leading an underground Sunday school (these were still atheist Soviet times), learning things myself about my faith along the way. Around the same time, we founded an 'ecumenical' (representing a range of different Christian churches) student movement in Latvia. It was all rebellious, dangerous, and wonderful.

I started to study theology as soon as the theology faculty was reopened, with the independence of Latvia – at the beginning not studying at the University, but in a 'Tram and Trolleybus Culture Club'. Oh boy, was it cold there! Positively Baltic! We were wearing gloves at lecture times. The good side was that we had a whole empty church available to us and could start each morning with a service planned and led by ourselves, and it had a lilac garden around it, so in springtime we took our chairs and had the lectures outside. But the best part was really knowing and feeling that I was in the right place, on the path I was meant to be on.

It was more than heart-breaking when I was then excluded from this path in the mid- 90s, because of being 'the wrong gender': my home church decided to exclude women from leadership! That meant that if I wanted to follow my calling, I had to leave the country that I had risked my life for on the barricades.

2) How did you discover, and what did you find to be, the best way to help you get through these difficult times?

For me it was through nature, singing together, being with other, likeminded people who strive for justice, peace and the wellbeing of all, including the environment; and it was my faith in a loving God whose heart is full of love for the poorest and the oppressed, the ones on the margins. God who cries with those who are suffering and puts the fire of a **passion for peace rooted in justice** into people's hearts. That is where I found my strength and encouragement; and the will to carry on.

As soon as the borders opened, I joined the ecumenical youth meetings in European cities which were organised by the Taizé* community: in Budapest, Vienna, and other places. It was so wonderful to meet other young people from all around Europe, to sing, pray and celebrate together. In '97 I had the pleasure of being part of the Ecumenical Forum in Graz, Austria. It was like a foretaste of heaven – people from everywhere and of every colour coming together, the whole city transforming into an open, welcoming place.

The cafes and restaurants would not take money but coupons. People who had the means would pay for themselves and for others beforehand – as much as they could afford – and people from poor countries would get their meals for free. This way everyone was equal for some days. No one knew who was rich or poor. People living in Graz opened their homes and hearts. I remember an old lady giving out apples through an

open window. We had a triple rainbow come over us, for the open-air service on the first night!

I continued to study in other countries – some student work in Norway, an MA in Germany and in Latvia, a PhD in Dublin, Ireland (being one of the only two Protestants at a Catholic Jesuit institute!) – and I hoped that something, some work for my faith, would open up for me eventually. It took twenty-five years! In 2016 I got a job with the ecumenical Iona Community*, doing programmes with the guests at Iona Abbey and the MacLeod centre. That was the first great thing to happen on my path for a long time. Now I am in the process of becoming a minister in the Church of Scotland, living and working in Edinburgh.

I have recently been discovering and using the ideas of Dr Luise Reddemann*, who works with people who have been very deeply hurt, people who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders. She observes how the 'culture of thought' in Germany has developed over centuries into one where people automatically think that life is hard, and always expect it to be so (especially if you are a woman). People who have suffered deep trauma have this as their life experience and future expectation. But the good news is – it doesn't have to be that way, not always, not forever.

Reddemann has found that even the most terribly hurt person still has an 'intact inner centre', something that can be discovered, developed and then strengthened by mindfulness, self-compassion – and I would say, in addition to that, by faith and trust in God, whose love is stronger than anything, stronger even then death.

From such trust and from our strong inner centre, new dignity, resilience, and resources can grow and flourish.

3) How did this change you, your understanding of life, and understanding of yourself as a person?

I guess it has made me resilient and strong. It also has opened my heart and mind to those who are in any way oppressed or discriminated against. Life is messy and difficult at times. It is also beautiful and worth living. And if we work together, we can make it better for everyone, and for the wonderful planet we live on. I learned that I am not alone.

4) How has learning to be a 'survivor' yourself, enabled you to help others to face their own big life challenges?

By listening, by understanding, by feeling with, being compassionate and mindful to myself and to others. By knowing how it feels to be oppressed, discriminated against, powerless, but at the same time also knowing that resources, strength and power can be found within oneself, in nature and in song, in community, in God and in standing together in solidarity.

5) What is the key understanding you try to share with the people you work with?

Everybody is valuable and worthy. Everybody has a voice. Everybody has something to give and to share, especially those who think that they have nothing. And we can do it – together!

6) What do you learn yourself, from the people who you work with? What do they help you to see?

I now work with people at the Grassmarket Community

Project in Edinburgh, people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Many of them have had traumatic experiences in the past, many are struggling with mental health issues and addiction problems. Some are living on the streets; some have fallen through all the usual 'care nets' of society. Others live with lifelong health conditions.

At our community project, people become a community. We share in our joys and sorrows, we eat and celebrate together, we learn together and from each other. The members at the project give me at least as much as I give them. The 'Mindfulness' class, and the conversations after it, are the highlight of my week! It is real, honest, authentic sharing and strength-giving.

For example, what I have learned from people about living with incurable, painful, lifelong illnesses, is that first you cry and rage and grieve when you get the diagnosis. You need to do it – it's healthy and natural. Allow yourself to do it. And then you can become a specialist for yourself. Do the therapy and take the medicine you need. And read scientific literature about your condition. Check your sources though – there are many unreliable ones. Best to check out the official medical organisations specialising in your condition. Keep learning and discovering for as long as you live – it will help you both practically and psychologically.

And every day avoid the trap of self-pity, the *'Oh why is this happening to me?'* way of being. Instead learn self-compassion. Learn to be as kind to yourself as you would be to your closest friend, to a beloved child, or to a dog or cat that you love.

And focus on the good things in life – there are so many! Get out in nature, and spend time with your community, your friends, and your hobbies.

I am also learning and practising an important understanding, which is that there is no place for an 'us' and 'them' approach in my work at the grassroots. The people I am involved with have the words and wisdom to find their way. A 'we know best' approach to helping people in the margins, or in poverty, still pervades a lot of our Western culture, and is often neither just nor valid. I work *with* people at the community centre, and I learn a lot from doing this.

I have also learned that, if you are someone who has yourself suffered from oppression, then it's easy to forget when times become easier, and to become the oppressor yourself, in some ways – perhaps even to *compensate* for the feeling of being the oppressed and the powerless. I see that pattern a lot with people with childhood abuse history. Some feel powerless their lives long, others become abusers themselves. Yet others work on themselves and work on changing the situation. That gives me hope!

I have learned that the margins, the 'cracks and edges' of society, are often the place where life is strong, that even the most poor and broken person is a treasure and has something to share, and that every person is an asset.

7) In a nutshell, how would you define the term 'to be a survivor'?

Never give up, no matter what happens! Be kind and compassionate with yourself and others. **Both kindness and resilience are like muscles that need**

to be exercised and trained regularly. And if possible, keep away from people and systems that do you harm – or work on changing these systems if you can. But you cannot change other people, they need to do it themselves. And raise awareness about injustices – do what you can to change them to equality, justice, and peace!

David.

1) Please tell us something about the 'rocky routes' in your life. What has been the most challenging obstacle you have faced or overcome?

My life journey has involved a lot of sharp rocks! The main challenge in my life has been with addiction, which took me into a lot of hard places, as I followed a dark route. My use of drugs began at about age eleven, when I was arrested for smoking cannabis. But really my being pulled towards addictive behaviour began even earlier when I found such a thrill in the amusement arcades which I visited now and then on family holidays. I was arrested again for dealing when I was twenty-one and went to a young offenders' institution. Eventually I became addicted to alcohol, cocaine, heroin, prescription medicines like benzos and morphine, and gambling.

But the drug use itself caused me so many other life problems. I was very unsettled due to constantly being in different housing projects for drug users or ex-offenders. Or I would be in and out of rehabs (drug dependency rehabilitation centres) – being thrown out of places or giving up and leaving so I could go back to my addiction. The drugs took me into the circles of bad influence people: dealers who beat me up and people who used me when I was vulnerable. I was put in hospital several times, either from beatings for not paying for drugs, or from my own fights or overdoses. I turned to crime to pay for my habits and was in and out of police stations, or courts, or jail. I also got put on probation – which would later play a big part in my life.

The drug addiction and gambling went alongside mental

health problems, and I often needed help with this, which was hard to get. I even was so desperate at one point to get mental health care – and to get away from being free in society to give in to my need for drugs – that I threatened to kill myself, just so the mental health services would 'section' me and put me in a hospital to keep me safe. But they refused, because they said I couldn't go and stay on a mental health ward when I was a heroin/morphine user. They said I needed drug therapy, not psychiatric care – but the truth was, I needed both.

Once, when I was in Lancaster, I was 'kidnapped' by a group of dealers who kept me locked in a house and used me as a 'mule' to deliver drugs to users, supervised by one of their gang. I only escaped by putting on a 'mask' of pretence that I was okay in the situation I had become trapped in, so they eventually trusted me to go out and do a deal alone…and I got free. It was a bad life.

I suppose even from my childhood I had confidence problems, issues with my way of thinking, my sensitivity, my self-security. I had anxiety and nervous tics. When I was arrested as a child, I guess I felt from then on that I had a bad identity 'label', and so I carried on playing it out. Then I think I must have a genetic or some other drive in me, to fill what felt for years like a 'hole in my soul', by using drugs or getting the chemical rush from gambling the slot machines…a hunger in me that took a lot of years to learn how to fill, healthily.

During the last decade of my life in addiction, I felt many times that I had hit 'rock bottom'. I had been through

three failed stays in rehab, but still could not admit that I was losing my battle with my addiction. Then I landed on the streets of Preston after a jail sentence, went to stay in a hostel, and gave in to my addiction to gambling. I continued to wrestle with trying to stay clean of drink and drugs, until a relationship breakdown left me emotionally vulnerable, so I used, and it nearly killed me again.

Finally, after wanting to end my life, along with the drugs and drink no longer working to numb my pain, I swallowed my pride and asked for help, which put me on a waiting list for a recovery home.

Now I started to detach from the negative influences all around me as much as I could. But at the same time, I was also in hiding from a drug dealer and avoiding the police. All of this put me in a lonely place. Reducing my substance intake so I would be allowed to stay in the recovery home, left me in a state of despair, confusion, pain, and fear.

And your most challenging obstacle of all?

I have to say I was self-centred. I behaved as if the world centred around my own ego and needed to learn what this self-centredness was all about…which was actually by learning to love myself.

My main dilemma was that I had a lack of power over the 'slavery' of my addiction. The solution for me was simply admitting this, and then launching myself into action with the '12 Steps' programme of 'Alcoholics Anonymous' * (AA).

2) How did you discover, and what did you find to be, the best way to help you get through these difficult times?

During the initial part of the steps, I developed a relationship with my God or 'higher power', then I looked at my own self and developed a good relationship with me. The third part was to develop a relationship with others, the people I had wronged, to bring about apology, forgiveness, and to 'make amends'. The final, fourth set of steps enabled me to 'watch self' and 'get out of self' through meditation, awareness, and 'keep out of self' by helping others. Now, I try to practice the AA principles in all of my affairs.

What do you mean by 'watch self'?

By 'watch self' I mean, watching myself and my thought processes from 'above', from the knowing in me that I am not my thoughts. So, if my thoughts are unhealthy and pulling me towards my addictions, I can keep separate from them, and get help. So, I continue to 'watch self', to look carefully at my moods and emotions, and if there are any resentments or fears or pressures arising in me, I then quickly turn these over to God. If they still linger, I can discuss them with another person in recovery, and if needed I write things down on paper, and have a good look to clear out whatever is swirling around.

I can take my issues to God, or an AA elder, or my sponsor. A sponsor is basically a sharing partner who has been through and can now help guide you through the '12 Steps', and who is at the end of the phone for you for suggestions and support. A recovery elder is a

member with ten years of sobriety.

Being in a supportive fellowship group seems to be a big help to you…

After all else had failed, and I was right down low, I finally found the power in me to change the circles of people I spent time with. I gravitated towards people who had gone before me and made their lives good again, and I stuck around the winners. But I had to wade through various support groups, until I landed in amongst the healthy one for me, which is an AA fellowship in Warrington.

I learned that **the opposite of addiction is *connection***, so by being in the fellowship with people like me that all want the same thing, this makes it much easier. We all give each other strength, encouragement, and compassion, by being in a collective consciousness. We learn that we are not our thoughts, and so to share our addictive negative thoughts with others takes the power out of them.

Talking to the right people also helped diminish the misguided belief system which I had created for myself – often from faulty information around recovery and life, given to me by people who were not on a healing path to recovery themselves.

So, I use techniques I have learned now to be 'mindful' of my thoughts – to scan my body and mind, checking if I am saying harmful things to myself, negative things to do or believe, and I can then 'step out' of this and get help, or help myself. I feel now that I have a 'thinking problem' rather than a 'drinking problem'. I get fractured, repetitive, difficult thoughts coming into

my mind, and I need to keep up my prayer, my talking to helpful elders, and all my practices to be and stay well. It's really important not to 'fall back'.

'Self-talk' is also something I came to believe is extremely useful, as is 'self-affirmation'. Realising when we are low that we are loved by others, we are worthy, and so we can say to ourselves "*I am loved. I am worthy"* and begin to feel the powerful truth of this. Listening, telling, and affirming to ourselves positive things, is so important.

Voluntary work has also unexpectedly helped me a lot, as has going to the gym and being active, and being kinder to myself.

All these things have led me to the source of my main tool which has carried me through difficult times, which is my faith in God, the God of my own understanding. After all, we are not amongst people all the time, so having some way to always get comfort, inspiration, and love, is enabled by my faith. Being an addict, I was undisciplined, so God helps me with this discipline as well as the extremely important reassuring.

3) How did this change you, your understanding of life, and understanding of yourself as a person?

Being a 'social chameleon' all my life has meant putting on a lot of masks, so I didn't know who I was. I have needed to learn how to get to know myself. And hearing I am not a 'bad person', I just possess bad habitual behaviours, has changed how I see who I am. I have stopped seeing myself as the 'centre of the universe', but instead see myself as a pillar of help to others, and I am proud of who I am now.

I don't regret my past, because it has enabled me to

now use my experiences to help other people. I feel 'tricky' in some senses around my family, both in huge appreciation of how they helped me but also knowing the pain I gave them…but I keep living and making amends, which is so important.

I have learned to 'accept myself'. This has been hard, but I have learned that **the opposite of acceptance is resistance**. If we stop resisting, we can accept, and then love who we are.

4) How has learning to be a 'survivor' yourself, enabled you to help others to face their own big life challenges?

When I first decided it was time to change, this new attitude in me was encouraged by a man called Kevin, who ran the 'Omega Project', taking lads from the hostel where I lived in Preston, to decorate and get flats ready for ex-offenders coming out of prison. I have benefitted a lot from my voluntary work ever since.

I now volunteer for 'User Voice'*, which works alongside the probation service. (User Voice works with people who have a lived experience of the criminal justice system, and allows them to voice their opinion in a safe and supportive way, which in turn helps break down barriers with authority, and others, and helps make sure that fit-for-purpose services are developed, delivered and maintained. That feeds into reduction of offending, better rehabilitation, and a safer and more productive community for everyone's benefit).

This is all run by ex-offenders, and gathers responses, problems, and referrals, by us going and sitting in on probation surgeries. We ask the clients questions,

observe for ourselves, listen, and take all the feedback to council meetings. The leaders of the probation service then pay us for this information, on problems and proposals for change. I have now been asked to represent our service for the North West, at a National User Voice Council Meeting soon, in London.

Ian and Caroline, my engagement team members at User Voice, have been a massive part of significantly changing my life, as they are always upbeat, bringing fun into meetings, motivating the team, and offering endless support and encouragement. This allows my own self-confidence to increase and gives me hope for a future in this field of work. Not only this, but Ian has ties with Dr Helena Gosling, the Senior Lecturer in criminal justice, and Professor Lol Burke, at Liverpool John Moore's University, who have created a certificated 'Learning Together' course which I was given the opportunity to participate in, as an ex-offender. This course brings together students and people with lived criminal experience, to study the theory and practice of criminal justice. It lasts for a year, and I really enjoyed attending the University, being recognised as a student with my student card, and now I have a foot in the door to access a degree in this area. So, I'm considering studying Criminal Justice, unless I choose to continue training in probation work. The doors are now open!

At my AA fellowship group, I often put up my hand at the end of meetings when we are asked if anyone can help informally support someone else by talking and sharing with them. With my experience I can share my past and how I dealt with specific matters. As experience gives us the means of influencing and helping

others, it is vitally good and often a better help than 'opinions', because everyone has one of these! Sharing my real experience of addiction and crime, my learning from mistakes, my newfound strength and hopes, is a fundamental icebreaker. And by sharing my journey with people, they get a chance to 'identify' with me, putting them at ease to expose the dark parts of their own life into the light.

I was told by one recovery elder that we are all on with reading the same book, just some of us are a few pages ahead, so we can pass it about and throw things to each other. And when two people or more meet up that have this disease of addiction within themselves, if we want this, God can join in.

5) What is the key understanding you try to share with the people you work with?

I have learned that **we are all equal, and one helping another is the other helping the first, and reaching out is the way forward.** After all, why deny a person's happiness by refusing to ask for help?

Talking has a lot to offer us, because by sharing your thoughts this often takes the power out of a problem. Self-affirmations and positive self-talk are also helpful, as is going with the flow, taking a step back before responding rather than instantly reacting. I try not to talk much about my God as it can scare people off, but my first sponsor said to me *"just say 'please' in the morning to keep you safe and 'thankyou' at night to a power that has watched over you"* and this has really helped to keep me feeling protected

6) What do you learn yourself, from the people who you work with? What do they help you to see?

I have learned so much from the people I work with – from how to operate as a person, to being totally inspired by the ways they show me to be strong. I also get reminded of where I came from, how bad things have been for me in the past, and how my resolve to be clean from addiction must be maintained daily. I see how, if you take your eye off the ball, it can cost you your life.

I also see now that **growth is a limitless expansion**, while I am using my faith and the '12 Steps' as a ladder. I've been shown that I must always have the humility to remain teachable, even in times of success. I am now going through the '12 Steps' for a second time, and my sponsor this time is a man called John Gill, who has so inspired me, with his precise following of the steps, and his compassion.

My own working to listen and share with a still suffering addict or alcoholic often shows me that there is no better feeling in the world than seeing someone get well – having the chance to be useful to someone else's recovery. Even if he/she fails, this time, I have helped them get closer to recovery, and this gives me a sense of worth.

I appreciate so much how other people have done this for me. Been there when I was down low or shown me the way to resist falling further down. When I was staying in the Fox Street hostel in Preston, I had lost everything, and I felt like an empty shell. I was at my depths. But a glimmer of light came to me. The great

staff there encouraged me and said, *"Get yourself back into a recovery home, David".* They helped me find my way forward out of the dark. And when I was thrown out of the recovery home for a weekend, as I had broken the rules, I could so easily have slipped back into drug use, but a friend from in the home arranged for me to stay safe in a flat. He kept me held. There have been a lot of people who have been good to me.

7) In a nutshell, how would you define the term 'to be a survivor'?

After experiencing various forms of self-harm and abuse, being locked up in jails, institutions, and many near-deaths, I was broken – mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually bankrupt. My resilience had carried me a long way, but it was wearing very thin. My stopping bad behaviours in the past had always seemed to prove to me that I could not *stay* stopped, because I always fell back into repeating doing what I had always done, while somehow expecting a different outcome!

I gradually learned that I needed a power greater than myself to restore me to sanity. When I was at total rock bottom there was a glimmer of light, when I came to believe in a higher power – a source of knowing, where I could turn over all my thinking and actions.

The time I let go and surrendered, this allowed me to survive. But it has been important also to learn and know that God alone will not keep me clean. I need to carry out my *own* determined work to stay well and show a commitment to my new way of living, and of faith, through a continuation of the '12 Steps'.

And it's also so important to forgive yourself, in order to become a survivor. You might need to get help to do this. I was shown that, to *be* forgiven, we need to forgive ourselves, and to forgive others. We need to learn to trust people again. To take notice of our surroundings and rebuild our trust in others. Then to trust ourselves.

It seems to me that you have survived several very near-misses, including a collapsed lung, often been taken to Accident and Emergency after being found either overdosed or beaten up…yet you have always survived…you must have a deep desire to live, David?

I never do give up. I have hope. I have a strong family and perhaps some indestructible genes! But yes, deep down I think I have a strong desire to live. Plus, I have been extremely lucky. I have often wanted to destroy myself and yet a part of me has always wanted to live. To succeed. To have self-belief. To fulfil what was hoped for me by my family in my early upbringing. To prove others who put me down low to be wrong.

Yes, I now want to settle in a home of my own, with hopes for a good career, a good faith, and good, loving relationships. I now can say I am a survivor because I have moved from self-hatred to self-love, and this helps me to stop being driven to search for self-gratification from false sources. It also helps me want to help others and show compassion – because giving back, I would say, is now the main drive in my life.

Claire.

Introducing Claire

Could you tell me a little about how you grew up? You told me once that play acting and fantasy were important to you as a child?

I grew up in Dublin's inner city, but I was privileged – I lived in a two storey Victorian house which stood adjacent to and looking out on the most decayed tenements in Dublin. Fairy stories empower the child to feel that they can cope successfully with challenges. The hero or the heroine of the tale need to go on a journey, which leads them to discover their strengths, wisdom or indeed their weaknesses. I escaped into a world of make-believe in my childhood, to transform an inner-city landscape of poverty and decay around me, into a magical experience, where people became my heroes and heroines. It was my 'coping mechanism' for survival.

My interest in acting was sparked off by an English teacher who addressed my disruptive behaviour of 'playing the clown' in class, by casting me in Shakespearian roles for plays on our curriculum. She said to me one day *"You have a talent and you should use it".* Things changed for me inside then, and those were words that I later carried into the jails, using the 'transformative power' of stories and drama to bring about changes in the self, and the discovery of our uniqueness and gifts.

I studied acting after school and trained as an actress at the Gate Theatre in Dublin. I then founded 'Exit', the first theatre company in the British Isles which operated inside prisons.

Tell me more about the work you did with 'Exit'?

For example, I took a group of inmate performers from Mountjoy Prison in Dublin, out to enter the P.J. O'Connor National Radio Drama awards. It was the first time that prisoners were let out of jail to perform on radio. I then directed a television play with them, and for the first time, cameras were allowed inside a prison. The play was written by a prisoner and was called *'On the Inside'*. This was truly shifting perspectives because prisoners played prison officers and held keys! It was aired on National Television.

I was given 'The Harvey's of Bristol Award', which is an award given to one person in Ireland, both North and South, for their contribution to the Arts. I then left Ireland and my work in the prisons, to train as a theatre director at the National Theatre in London and Circle Repertory New York, and have directed internationally in Rome, America, and Egypt.

When I returned to Ireland in 1986, I was approached by the Dept of Justice to initiate a full theatre project, which meant building a theatre inside the Mountjoy jail, and producing a play. It was like a medieval theatre, with all the trades and many of the actors being sourced from within the prison.

I originally used the name 'Exit' because it arrests our attention in the dark spaces, to show us the way out in a crisis. It provides a portal of escape from where we are, if threatened, as an entry to another place of safety. 'Exit' is usually a sign, lit as a beacon of light in theatres, shopping malls, airplanes…it's everywhere. So, it fitted with my beliefs that we can shape-shift our bodies and

minds to another dimension. The opportunities are everywhere – to leave, to escape our situation through creativity.

So, we put on fully fledged professional productions in the jail. I was permitted to bring in some female prisoners from another jail, as well as professional actresses. The prisoners acted out the male roles. A backstage crew of prisoners were appointed to work with a professional stage manager and director. Painters and carpenter prisoners were appointed to work with the professional theatre designers. My idea was that just because it was in a jail, it should not be any less professional than a theatre production 'outside'.

Acting and drama work relate to finding our voice and then feeling free in our own skin. That freedom brought about a passion in me for the power of drama. My passion enthused the cast in the jails to do something different with their lives. When I found my own voice, I was passionate that they could find theirs.

In the theatre as a director, I was often drawn to stories in which people could transform themselves. In acting out roles, the prisoners took on the mantle or costume of another character, for example of the 'father of a drug addict', who could be played by a drug pusher. The learning curve would be that in walking in the other person's shoes, they could see or feel what it was like to experience the father's pain in seeing his son addicted to drugs.

I know that you took your work to penitentiaries, (jails) in America. Could you tell us a little about this?

The story is Shamanism.

I knew that the Sioux were interested in Shamanism and 'shapeshifting' and used this belief to link with them about how theatre works. Through discovering gifts and talents inside ourselves, I wanted to show them how they could 'shapeshift' inside a jail – through art, drama, writing, all as an entry into their own spirituality.

In talking to them about myself and the role I had played as 'class clown', I wanted them to see that I was not coming to them as an 'expert' on change. I was like them, somebody who had been heading towards annihilation of myself, by playing a role which fitted other people's expectations, because I made them laugh. But it was a toxic role, which had become impossible to sustain, as it was poisoning my whole wellbeing.

I had learned, and am still learning, that it is not good enough to just survive – it is important to *live.* The power of acting could bring about for them, as it had for me, a kinetic energy for transformation. They could shift from playing the role of 'the no-good Indian', which another culture had pressed upon them, and become whoever they chose to be.

That sounds fascinating…could you tell us in more detail about this work?

Well, I was invited to direct workshops and bring a production of mine to work with Native American Indians in a penitentiary called Springfield, in South Dakota, and another called Lincoln, in Nebraska. With regards to the Indians, they were mostly Ogallala Sioux. We have all seen American films with the depiction of the Indian as the 'baddie'. The population of both

Nebraska and South Dakota penn was mostly comprised of Native Americans, so that belief must have been imprinted deep inside them. When I worked with them I tried to show them, by telling them a true fairy-tale of the success of Exit, my Irish Prison Theatre Company, how they too could empower themselves to write, to act, to be creative, and I used the metaphor that they were familiar with…'shapeshifting'.

I also used an example of my own life's role-play as the 'class clown', to show them that I had needed to shapeshift myself, to create a different perspective in my life – and look what happens when you do this! I had become an international theatre director, with awards for my efforts. Some of the prisoners in Ireland had become actors, and award-winning playwrights, and they were seen differently by the media, the politicians and indeed by the actresses who came in to work with them – so it was through the shapeshifting method that they had changed and healed. Their families had also healed, because they rose with pride in their seats when they saw their sons and daughters on the stage.

I created an acting workshop and did some rehearsed readings in South Dakota with the Sioux. I brought some scripts that Irish prisoners had written, and I pointed out that some of the people who had created these scripts could not themselves read and write – how empowering it had been for them to see their own words in print, and how this had helped their self-esteem and confidence. I had taped the improvisational plays as they were being performed in the Irish jail classroom, and then had them typed up and printed out so that the men could see their own writing – giving voice to

their words. These were the scripts that I used with the Sioux, to show them how they too could defy their own fear of the printed word.

I wanted to show how a shapeshifting of negative beliefs which were imprinted and inherited, through stereotypical imprints in their history – thereby rising above their limiting environment – could all be achieved.

I hoped that my brief interplay within the rigidity of the American penitentiary system would encourage them to open a door to creativity and its empowering ability to change negative narratives – both culturally and, importantly, within the people in their jails.

1) Please tell us something about the 'rocky routes' in your life. What has been the most challenging obstacle you have faced or overcome?

I became ill one time while I was out working in the States and faced death. Because of some outstanding issues that were being covered up in my marriage, I decided that I could not live a lie any longer and, even though it was going to be painful, I needed to deal with the truth at home. But I would be okay – it was better than losing my life. I had been unable to breathe when I was ill because my lungs were collapsing, and my heart was compromised. This felt like it all came from the emotional pain in my heart. I realised while I was in the States that I was alone away from home, but that in truth I had been alone for a long time. So, I decided to separate from my husband. That was my greatest challenge.

2) How did you discover, and what did you find to be, the best way to help you get through these difficult times?

I realised that, for the first time in years, I was now both physically and emotionally alone, and I had to deal with my fear and struggle. I had started therapy a year before the separation, and I don't think that my husband could cope with all the changes in me. Now I needed to discover myself anew. At first, rather than do that I entered a series of unsuitable relationships, partly to appease the feeling of rejection in me. Further therapy did help me find a safe place to express my grief. Things got easier, and then I was awarded a scholarship to the Mater Hospital in Dublin, and I began to study for a diploma in 'Family Therapy'.

In return for my scholarship, I travelled to many convents in Ireland at weekends and gave retreats to the sisters. This travelling to do a new kind of work with groups, alongside my studying, all helped me. It opened new doors. The Mater Hospital is just opposite Mountjoy Prison where I used to direct drama – so quite literally I crossed the road and discovered another aspect of myself.

The work with the sisters…again, I'd like to hear more?

The shape-shifting theme continued in my work with the religious orders in Ireland. I had been employed to lecture on my own drama work at All Hallowes college in Dublin. The course participants were priests and nuns who had returned from missionary work in foreign parts. Some of them were traumatised through experiences of famine and war. My module was called 'Creativity and Spirituality'. I developed this module myself, putting them in touch with their bodies through

kinetic exercises using music and movement to engage them with their spiritual selves. I taught there for five years, so I got to know a lot of religious people.

When I decided to train as a family therapist at the Mater Hospital, I was offered a scholarship by the Mercy Sisters who owned the Mater Hospital. In return, I agreed to visit every convent belonging to the Mercy Sisters, both North and South of the Border in Ireland, and bring my ideas on 'Creativity and Spirituality' to the sisters.

I found that a lot of the elderly sisters were left behind in the changes which had taken place in the Church. They were used to rigid rules and discipline, and they were uncomfortable with these modern changes. I began by getting them to have fun, to play simple games, to enjoy colour in nature. I encouraged them to leave the confines of the convent, to go out and explore the grounds and to find objects like rocks, flowers or anything which spoke to them. I encouraged them to listen and let God speak to them through nature, to develop their awareness and sixth sense or 'kinaesthetic' sense, then to share their findings and awareness with each other. To develop a different conversation with each other besides formulaic prayer. To truly enter the spirit of prayer through the discovery of the natural environment.

I used deep relaxation methods with creative visualisation, to bring them into their bodies and to connect with each part of the body, and let it speak to them. Some of the sisters had never thought beyond their neck and their habits – particularly the older

sisters, who were used to wearing the wimple and only black garb.

I found that they became more animated and livelier after our sessions, and a good brandy was enjoyed by the fireside!

During this time, I was approached by the Vatican in Rome to direct a concert at the Vatican, with 6000 people in the audience and 600 performers from all over the world. Performers from India to South Africa presented their pieces within the concert. I flew out every third weekend to Rome to organise the concert at the Vatican, while studying Family Therapy at the Mater Hospital! Then, the hospital stipulated that I abandon directing in the theatre if I truly wanted to become a family therapist. Little did I know that I would create my own blend of therapy-theatre, a few years later.

What do you mean?

Theatre and therapy as shapeshifters. It was all coming together, combining everything I had learned. I created a form of therapy-theatre, working with clients through the medium of drama to help them tell their own story through acting out aspects of their lives to an invited audience, and getting feedback. This can be transformative.

3) How did this change you, your understanding of life, and understanding of yourself as a person?

The transformative healing I have learned for myself, and am still learning, and which I try to encourage in the people I work with, all comes from decluttering our lives of intrusive and negative thoughts, such as self-doubt and negative self-images, all of which can

keep us stuck so that we remain victims – prisoners of our own making. When we make room for new ideas, new thoughts, then we have room to expand in our awareness and thinking. We might then begin to address the thoughts that have kept us locked up inside ourselves.

When we change or **shift out** these negative thoughts – through reading, therapy, or finding like-minded souls, or by pursuing something that we have always wanted to do – then we are experiencing our uniqueness. We are not being shaped or moulded by others. We are living to the best of our abilities, creating space for new ideas and opportunities, and so change happens inside ourselves – and then nobody can take away our power.

With negative thinking and images, we are giving ourselves to others to treat us as victims. I have learned to stop doing that and to shift – start believing in myself.

4) How has learning to be a 'survivor' yourself, enabled you to help others to face their own big life challenges?

I have learned that it takes time to process all the nuances of life, and that above all, in the work we do to heal, it is important to be kind to ourselves and non-judgemental. And not to rush to arrive at a perceived goal or ending. I try to impart this to clients who rush to get answers, and I encourage them to go gently. I learned this from a non-productive encounter I had with my first therapist. She 'regressed' me and I injured my back in the process. I felt uncomfortable in our following meetings, but still I continued! Trust your instincts. If you feel uncomfortable with a therapist

– **leave**. Find one who will walk the path with you without their own agenda.

And, as now both a theatre director again and a therapist, I always encourage a sense of *lightness* to the process. This doesn't mean that the work is not taken seriously but it means that we are engaged in a process of empathy and understanding. It is true that **being heard is the most valuable gift we can bestow on anyone.**

I have also learned that giving myself permission to 'Exit' is important. That it is **fruitless to expect a dry well to give us a drink of much needed water**. And to go continuously to that well expecting to be heard or given sustenance will only leave us trudging a path which is unproductive and depressing, because we come back depleted.

Theatre and therapy are interlinked for me because they both address human conflicts – both expose scripts which are repetitive and dysfunctional. I gently nudge my cast and clients towards a greater understanding of themselves. Actors draw on their own life experiences to help them bring a truth to their characters, and clients are truly experiencing their lives in a safe place, with only one member of the audience – me – as a 'sounding board'. Therapy is not a performance, but it is a dance of intimacy between the self and the therapist as audience, both moving with the narrative.

5) What is the key understanding you try to share with the people you work with?

That it is important we find our own 'family'. Not necessarily the family of our origin, but any group or individual that we feel safe with, who will encourage

us to heal and above all will accept us as we are. I tell my clients that 'expunging toxins' from your life can be exhausting. I use the image of clearing out a deep, dirty pot. Scrubbing, scrubbing the pot until we can see the shiny surface. The shiny surface is our self, our soul, our core energy which has become grey or discoloured by life's challenges and threats, but with care and inner listening, we can befriend our self and wipe clean the past.

6) What do you learn yourself, from the people who you work with? What do they help you to see?

I learned one thing from a person doing a life sentence when I was talking to him about coping with being in prison. It has stayed with me to this day:

"Every Monday I wake up, and I wake up with hope because it is the beginning of a new week – and anything can happen. If we don't have hope, then we cannot face the week ahead."

It taught me that opportunity and new beginnings are always waiting to be discovered, but it is up to us because even on our darkest days, if we open a door even ajar, or a window, we can let in a breath of fresh air. There have been times in my life when I have recalled the conversation which I had that day in jail with a 'lifer', and it has changed my thinking on a difficult situation.

7) In a nutshell, how would you define the term 'to be a survivor'?

A survivor means 'to live' with all its connotations. If it means **living nakedly –** stripped bare of expectations of ourselves and of others and finding our own voice

– which then makes the nakedness worthwhile. Even though it can be painful until we do find our voice and our giftedness, **living** is always more important than surviving. 'Survival' is important of course, during or in the aftermath of trauma, but it conjures up an image for me of the head just above the waves, while the body struggles underneath in the stormy water. To merely continue to survive means that we are only existing, not living.

Moving on.

Connections in a double-thread.

I hope, like me, you have found real inspiration in these interviews. There seems to be a common thread running right through them, which I had not predicted when I first invited these six great people to be involved in the book. The connection is in a double-thread, and I understand the two key messages running through to be:

1) Never give up.

To keep going, no matter how many hard rocks you face or knocks you bear. To have *active hope* for the opportunities both now and ahead of you. To believe in your life being worth a great determination to survive – not just to survive but to live well. To learn (perhaps with help and inspiration from others, and with much perseverance, getting back up from however many falls) how to live in a way that stretches out the talents you were born with, to your full and unique potential. To believe in your own capacity to succeed.

2) Create your own positive identity.

To cast off any identity that harms you or holds you back from this potential. To see that who you 'live as'

in this world, is an identity which you can *choose* to change – because we can 'step away' and change our minds and behaviour, (just like clothes), through a self-valuing determination to heal who we are. We can choose to live with the identity of being someone who says a clear, loving warrior "yes" to their lives.

And keep going!

I recently came to understand, through the help of a friend, something important about the process of healing our identity and the roles we play. I came to see that to really move the key role we play in life forwards from being a 'victim' to a 'warrior' (or, if this does not connect with you, to truly change the 'identity clothes' we wear in this world from dark negative to light positive ones) we need to:

Recognise our role-play, by looking in an honest mirror. Then, to work on understanding **where this role-play and identity comes from,** what has caused us to choose this way of being. We began looking at all this in Step One. But then, I see now, we need very much to make sure we…**don't stop there!**

If we only *name* and understand the identity role we play, we may become trapped into focusing *even more* on this identity in all that we see and do in our life! This is like seeing the horrible clothes you are wearing but continuing to stare at them in the mirror, instead of taking them off and throwing them away.

If we keep holding on to a role instead of discarding it, then we may perceive and judge the world and people around us through the eyes of a person with *heightened* sensitivity to this specific suffering. We may feel we are

being accused, criticised, or bullied more easily. We may perceive and judge people as doing wrong to us (or to those we care for) over-readily and react more instantly, because of our hyper-concentrated awareness. This is our reality, but it is a reality coming through as a reflection of our negative sense of being a suffering victim, which we have still not discarded. We may even put ourselves into situations or relationships which draw oppression or abuse or harmful opportunities repeatedly towards us, because this is how we continue to enact our negative role-play in life.

To *truly* transform from being a victim or sufferer and become a living warrior, live as an authentic survivor, we need to **fully engage with our own healing process**. To consciously discard any negative identity that we have held within us and played out, possibly for a lot of our lives. This is often not easy. It can take effort and determination to 'throw off old clothes' which are a long-worn and settled in habit in our minds, behaviour, and lifestyle. But it is very important to *not just look* in a mirror, see the negative clothes you are wearing and *name* them, focus on them…it is totally essential you keep going and **take them off!** Otherwise, you may be acutely aware of an unhealthy identity, but keep on wearing it, perhaps even more intensely.

We may need a lot of patience. We may need support and inspiration to, as Claire says, 'shapeshift'. We may be helped very much by creativity and humour or, as David says, the experience and wisdom of others who have gone before us. But to transform ourselves into living as the best that we truly are, we need to **remember not to stop half-way**. Not to become *trapped* and not

to become *stagnant*.

If we believe – or even just want to believe – in our value as talented human beings, then we need to take the full length of our brave healing steps, perhaps holding out a hand for help at times, to create, and then really get into and *walk about in* our fresh clothes and be the brightness of who we are.

Yes, it can be a process of self-healing that we do need to repeat, whenever we catch ourselves falling back into dark negative rags. But we need to be **ever self-forgiving** and consistent with this choice to move forwards. What I mean is, healing how we play out our lives is not as simple as 'crossing the line' and permanently becoming well, strong, and 'sorted'. We may repeatedly slip back, especially at first, but it is important to continuously forgive ourselves for this, and always to keep moving in a good direction. Even if that is inch by inch.

Accept the complexity.

I have talked quite a bit in this book about healing actions and decisions needing to be *repeated or re-affirmed*, for us to keep on accepting and forgiving, and so loving ourselves. Because the journey of healing is in truth as complex as the people that we are, with all our memories and multi-layers of problems, quirks, and qualities. Just like our genetic DNA, **our healing journey is not a straight line – it is a spiral.** We move upwards as we learn, develop, and grow, and we also make mistakes, perhaps slip back, then hopefully learn more, forgive, and adapt. Remember, please don't ever feel frustrated or guilty if your own healing change process feels very complex and involves several repeats

of what feel like the same steps…that is life! And the truth is, we *are* learning and changing, bit by bit, all the time.

And then…

And then, yes, there is another step. A kind of 'side-step' which takes us fully onto the best track or our best 'groove'. When we have learned to truly identify as a survivor in life, there is one more link which can still hold us back from freedom.

We have looked at our ego as the little child in us which may want a clear 'identity label' to help us feel secure in the world, as someone who has a 'set place' here. If our ego still finds our identity *through* this challenge, even in a positive way, then we are still not completely free.

What I mean is, I now realize that to be a 'survivor of cancer' is so much better than to be a victim of it, yes. This is a positive identity, a bright set of clothes, yes…but! But this still connects me to cancer, even in a positive way. To be a 'survivor of addiction' or 'survivor of bullying' or abuse, or depression, or anything negative and harmful, these labels still have the potential to make that negative experience a key to who we are. There is the chance that our ego will **hold on to the illness** or life-challenge in some barely tangible way, even repeat it, not with the intention to negatively keep living it out…but to enable us to continue being identified as **'positively good at surviving it'.**

I am good at getting through serious illness, at being a brave survivor of brain tumours…but I want to be more than this. I want to play, even sing, a completely fresh song! Be more than someone who survives a health

crisis well. And that means to let go of *any* identity clothes that have 'illness' woven through them. I see now that we can look for the reward of praise (seen as love by our inner child) for being good at *overcoming* hard knocks. This is of course a step forwards from looking for love-rewards for being a *victim* of knocks in life…but we can still do better!

If, like me, praise, attention, or recognition is something you hungered for as a child, even now as an adult, it is important to heal this connection to suffering even further and be good, not at surviving repeated challenges in life, but simply good at being who you are. At saying "yes" to all of you.

Healing as a reconciliation.

One of the biggest understandings needed for this honest, if complex, healing is to take *all* parts of us with us. I said this in Step Five and elsewhere, but it is worth re-affirming here. That is, we do need to bring all the different aspects of who we are to our 'healing table' – the brave one, the frightened child, the caring guardian, the angry-for-being-ignored, the optimist, the bitter-for-being-put-down…all the varied, even conflicting parts of who we are, need to be accepted, listened to, and forgiven. I may have a strong part of me that trusts I am eternally loved, but there is still a little girl in me who is frightened of the future. And all these voices of the different parts of who we are, need to be heard. The brave part could reassure the scared, the caring part show kindness to the hurt, the angry could have a chance to shout out, and the guardian take time to really listen and share wisdom.

As Abdul spoke of in his work to help reconcile people in human-to-human conflict, *all parts* of us can gain from this engagement, willingness, and honesty. And all parts need our resolve to be loving. Our resolve to move forwards and forgive.

It can be scary, surprising, awkward, not at all a smooth ride, but we can each choose to take this chance to heal our complex lives, by choosing to say "yes" to ourselves, **completely.**

Then finding the simplicity.

And then we can come to see more clearly that the 'clothes we wear', the identity we live as in the world – as in, the way of thinking that we live and interact by, the actions we focus on to do, the ethics, religion, and culture we hold onto – *none* of this is ultimately who we are – even when we learn to live as a positive survivor. Because each of us is a uniquely shaped, multi-layered person, which no changing identity label can *ever* fully justify.

We can even begin to understand that there is a simple energy deep at the centre of who we are, which **never does change**, and which seeks no identity. Because this is the love that we are. The constant, limitless truth of our being, given to each of us to honour, to explore, and to celebrate.

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My own reflections.

We are coming now to the end of this book, and what I hope has been an illuminating journey of both remembering and discovery for us all. For my own story,

I did get the results of my brain scan to check on the two 'shadows'. They have been reported, three times now, to be thankfully, 'unchanged'. Nothing has grown. However, a new 'aneurysm' (dilated brain artery wall) was suspected to be found, which meant some long weeks of dealing with anxiety and not getting 'over-exerted'. It's a funny feeling, trying to be sure you *don't* get your heart pumping, and this included turning back on a walk that meant going through a field of mother cows and their calves, just in case they made me need to run for it! I was nervously protective of not getting my circulation going too fast. But then more scans showed the aneurysm suspect to be 'very likely innocent', and this fear was also sent away in the breeze. I can more confidently pump my heart again. Phew!

However (again), my consultant neurosurgeon reminded me that the shadows are still there. He told me that we do need to *"keep an eye"* on them, with yearly scans and multi-disciplinary team reviews, as he now believes they are scar tissue mixed in with *"two tiny tumours"*.

Hearing these *'t'* words again felt like telling a person with claustrophobia to spend an undisclosed amount of time shut in a box! Tumours are still a cause of dark dread emotions for me. But the more I let this be honest, let the fear (and even the anger) be felt and set free, rather than burying it down or bouncing it about via buffers and projections, the more easily I move on and live a good life, with the light on – aiming for 'up' but accepting and forgiving the 'downs'. We can be tender, even fragile, and still do so much!

My damaged left optic nerve is causing me a bit more visual disturbance, with the red lights and shadows now increasingly jumping about. I recently joked to my eye consultant that it would be a lot more fun to be seeing things like tropical fish and elephants – as can happen in some people with damaged optic nerves, who have 'Charles Bonnet Syndrome', and were probably once thought to be crazily hallucinating! But I just get the leafy shadows and millions of dots, as my eye and brain try their best to do what they were born to do and 'see things' – and it's amazing how much difference it makes when I accept and use humour rather than anger to see what I see. I accept that there is no other way for me to see than the way that is mine.

*

To say "yes" to the unique life that is given to each of us is:

To live in this moment as much as we can – not be embedded in yesterday's pain or fears about tomorrow. **We all have the capacity to be fully alive, right now.**

To be sure in our core that we **deserve** to be treated with **kindness and respect**.

To **walk away from stress, harm, and being controlled or limited as a person** – not be drawn towards such negative energy.

To learn about the healing, reconciling power of love by **practising acceptance and forgiveness**.

To be still and know that **we are loved. By the universe. By God. By ourselves.**

To be brave with and **excited by our own potential,** our own chances for **transformation**, even if they involve some rocky rapids and hard falls.

To **get back up!**

And to see that life really is a gift. That to be a survivor we need to **hold this gift, for every moment we can,** as a precious and **unique opportunity**, which is the time and space to honour our own existence.

And even (if we choose) to begin to realize that our true time to exist is eternal, and our space infinite.

In a poem I wrote called '*Can we fail?*'* there is a line:

'*In the holding of the gift we turn it around in the morning light and, for a few moments, succeed'.*

When we say "yes" to our life, we cannot fail, because we are honouring – for however long we hold that yes – the gift of the love that we are.

*

And around the corner…

This book has developed over more time than I first imagined, because the healing steps of my experience I wanted to be clear about and refine into their most crucially honest form. Plus, I had a strong feeling that new steps were around the corner for me, and I wanted to be able to share these with you too. In their beginnings.

We all need to keep our excitement about new moves, new phases of learning, and fresh chances for adventure

in our lives. I am just beginning to learn about the power of **hope** in a very creative way. Encouraged by the positive energy of a new friend (because people with such good nudges for us can come just when we need that guidance, if we keep open to nudges!), I am stepping lightly into discovering the power of putting our **dreams into reality.**

That is, by believing and imagining our hopes and dreams to already 'be so', we have the potential (*if* we can tap into it) to make them much more likely to happen. It's the 'tapping into' this power that takes the understanding and practice. And I am only just beginning, but it is fun!

By a 'grateful asking' of the universe (of God) to materialize and make happen our loving aspirations, our dreams and goals in life, perhaps we can help them to become a reality. By feeling that, God willing or 'universe permitting', the positive hopes that we make clear – if we visualize, even write down or draw or affirm or pray or send out healing for them – do have, *within their energy*, the potential to become real. It's possible that a big strong "yes" can create the real happening of the dream. If it is rooted in love and for the good of all. Not by magical supersonic powers, but by knowing that we are all able to create 'miracles', by using our own active powers of love, hope, belief…and trust.

With my own faith, I believe ultimately (and surrender happily to) *'whatever will be will be'*, God willing. As Abdul shared with us, this is a wonderful, freeing way to live. But as David added, taking our own responsibility to put the graft and energy in – to paint that bright

picture and keep imagining it, adding colours to it – keeping our whole body, mind and soul in the forward, upward moving direction, is how we get there. Not just to create a great future, but to create a great present, in the gift of now.

As so often, the survivor healing action is in a 'double spiral' of balance between honest acceptance and active hope for transformation. Stillness and movement. Release and containment. Connection to the whole and individual determination. And then, above and beneath, inside and around all of this, trust in the one love we all belong to, who I call God, but which exists beyond names.

This is how we make real our good hopes, for ourselves and for our planet. How we manifest our potential. Every loving one of us.

*

Spirals keep turning…

And it really is true that life never stops offering you doorways to walk through, opportunities, challenges, revelations…

By fate or chance, I came upon a week-long course at my old Oxford college, St. John's, for learning to teach mindful meditation. I thought how amazing it would be, to circle around from a 'hyper-doing' success-orientated focus to 'peacefully being' and accepting what is, in the setting where all my big challenges and manic brain problems began. So, I applied for the course.

As it was, the course was quite intense, so it wasn't easy to find chances to 'simply be' (we still needed to train

to be teachers!), but I did at last pay more attention to a crack of light which must have been waiting patiently for years for me to see it, and I opened a doorway there to a new way of being, which has quite literally changed my life: **mindfulness.**

I have learned how we only really take notice of something on our unique route through life when we are truly ready. A good while back I read a great book to help people with chronic insomnia be able to sleep well every night. It is called *The Sleep Book*, by Dr Guy Meadows*.

The techniques and new attitudes I learned to use had a fabulous effect on my relationship both with my thinking patterns and with my habitual insomnia. I began to stop 'trying to fix it', and I then began to really enjoy my sleeping! Yet it's only now when I read the book again (due to another insomnia episode) that I see the word 'mindfulness' repeatedly used as a key focus in Dr Meadows' advice for sleeping well. It's as if before, the term and true concept of mindfulness had only skirted my consciousness – like trees along the riverbank I took no real regard of – while now, since my training course, the practise of living mindfully has become a favourite part of my existence! It's as if I am going along the river and suddenly realise, how could I not have seen those fantastic trees before? The word 'mindful' and what it means is everywhere, I just had never seen it clearly, because I wasn't ready. This is what makes our healing journey ever revealing, for each of us.

I have begun to sleep well again, not presuming this is a permanent cure for my old insomnia habits –

because, yes, healing is a *spiralling* process – but I now am very confident that mindfulness shows me how to have a great relationship with my sleep, and with my wakefulness.

Mindfulness is a way of living and being and healing that can transform not just your sleeping patterns (of course) but every aspect of your life that you apply it to. That sounds like a big declaration, a big effort, a big skill, but the truth is, from my experience and that of millions of others around the world and throughout history, living mindfully is the **opposite of trying hard**. So, what is it?

Mindful awareness involves letting go of our thoughts, bodily sensations, and feelings, letting them 'pass through us' as temporary creations of our mind, without us trying to stop or control them. This is just as I describe in Step 2, where practises of visualisation and breath awareness etc. can help us to 'step aside' from our busy thinking and find inner peace.

However, mindfulness is a twofold process. To begin with, we do 'step aside' and know that we are more than our thoughts and feelings. We know that we are more than our mind, but we are also aware that our mind is a constant part of us, while our thoughts and feelings are impermanent. They are the creations of our sometimes busy creating mind, and they are what we are stepping aside from. We can be 'in our mind' but not attached to the creations of it. This is like how the sky is more than the clouds that pass through it. The sky (our mind) contains them but is more constant, while our 'thought and feeling clouds' are variable, temporary, passing through us.

Sometimes the sky is full of dark clouds, sometimes it is serene and blue. But it is always the sky. Then, in the second aspect of being mindful, whilst stepping aside from the passing clouds and knowing that our mind is the more constant sky, we also practise **noticing**. Noticing is very different from subjectively *thinking about* or *judging* our thoughts and emotions, referring them back to stored memories, making predictions, and reacting accordingly. Noticing is the act of a simple, objective, brief describing, with **non-judgmental, open awareness**.

So, rather than just letting our thoughts and feelings go, with no attention paid to them at all, we do notice them, even welcome and briefly 'thank them' for being there within us – and then we let them go. Let them be. We note our passing thought or sensation or emotion for what it is, honestly. We accept it as a temporary experience within us, and then we move our focus back to simple, anchoring things such as our breathing.

You can read all about mindfulness in lots of places, online and in books. You can think it is a fascinating or curious concept, study it to find answers, to relieve anxiety or pain…but the best (and much simpler) way you can discover it for yourself is very definitely to *actively practice* it. How? By (and this is a great relief to all hyper-tryers like me!) **not trying**. By not trying to stop or analyse or alter your thoughts, or your emotions, or your body sensations. By not trying to do well at having an 'empty mind' or a 'chill persona'. By not trying to rectify the problems inside your head or understand yourself better or work on your unhealthy habits. By not trying!

The amazingly wonderful truth is, that by living in the process of just being here in this very moment of real-time now, however that is – comfortable or restless, ugly or beautiful, painful or blissful or whatever – by just being however you are and noticing, accepting, allowing it to be, the very act of living this way delivers you a surprise gift, almost like a present you never paid for or worked hard to receive. Your allowing yourself to be just as you are, heals you. That's it! All you need to do, for this fantastic prize way of being to kick in and activate itself in your life, is to be dedicated to the practice. To keep coming back to now, over and over, always congratulating (rather than criticising) yourself every time you notice you are 'somewhere else' – either going over past niggles or worrying about future ones – and just simply allowing that distraction to be, noticing it, then coming back to now, as gently and tenderly as you can.

Very often you come back to now with the anchoring help of your breath, which is nature's perfect 'be now' process, because you can't hold on to old in-breaths forever – they have to be released – and you can't stay on hold after an out-breath forever – the new intake has to happen. So, you come back to now, over and over, moment by moment. That's how easy it can be! And the more we let go of thinking being mindful is hard, to be 'achieved', the more we simply live in this as a way of being – then the more we embrace and empower ourselves and re-connect to our waiting **insights of wisdom**. We allow the knowing that is inside us to be heard. And every time we don't – we can just say to ourselves *"well done for noticing"* (how great would it

be if all learning was like this?!) and come back to now.

If you are intrigued and want to learn about mindfulness, there are free videos for practising this on my website Resources page, and You Tube channel, and in countless other places online. But most of all…just go for a walk or jog or sit and breathe – and stop trying! It is an all-win gift of being human, which as you can see, I am hugely enthusiastic about…and now I need to go and stop writing about all this, and just be alive.

With Love. Go well. Be You.

*

Appendix.

The guided visualisation and mindful meditation videos.

I have created two guided deep relaxation videos, one to help you visualize, affirm, and feel love energy, and the other to be filled with healing light and peace energy, inside of you. There are also – fresh through the doorway of discovery that I opened late along the journey of this book – two mindful meditation videos for you, one on mindful body and breath awareness, the other on mindful connection to your inner kindness and compassion. These videos have all been created specially to accompany this book, and are available for you to download free on my website Resources page, **www.thelovethatweare.org/resources** just next to the free download option for the book itself. They are also on my You Tube channel **'the love that we are**', in the **Talk Hope** playlist.

For the two deep relaxations, I recommend you put some time aside to be free from distractions, get warm, comfortable, and quiet, then let yourself become deeply relaxed as you visualize and feel filled and re-connected to the healing love, light, and peace energy that is already there inside of you.

If you easily fall asleep (lucky you!) perhaps it is good to listen to the recordings for the first few times from a comfy chair rather than lying down. Then soon you can practice the techniques wherever you are, as the affirmations nestle down into your sub-conscious.

The two mindful meditations are also to be practised when you are free from distractions, in a slightly more 'alert' posture if you can, sitting or standing, as you allow yourself to become aware of the moment you are in, with love and acceptance of whatever is – including acceptance of your insights of wisdom which can naturally arise from this practice.

You will see there are many other playlists/videos on the You Tube channel, some of which also offer deep relaxations, meditations, as well as poetry and prayers.

If you have any specific mental or physical needs or limitations, which you feel could compromise your benefitting from any of these deep relaxations or meditations, please take personal care and responsibility, and if you are not sure, it is always best to seek professional medical advice.

I also will soon have a podcast channel, with a wide range of healing visualisations, and mindful meditation podcasts – details will be on the website **www.thelovethatweare.org**

I hope you can find something that helps you to connect to your own unique healing adventure – to bravely face your rocky obstacles, and to hold your life with joy.

Endnotes.

Introduction.

*Mahatma Gandhi, (1869-1948), Indian political and spiritual leader, quote taken from *Non-violence in Peace and War 1942-49* (Garland Publishers, 1972)

PART ONE

Step One.

**Peace, Love and Healing: The path to self-healing* Bernie Siegel (Arrow Books, London, 1991) I refer here to question 3 of 'The Five Questions' in chapter 2.

Step Three.

*to be 'sectioned' means to be detained under a 'section' of the Mental Health act 1983, because doctors are worried you may hurt yourself or other people.

Step Five.

**Apocalypto* (2006) is a film directed by Mel Gibson in which a peaceful Mayan tribe is brutally attacked by warriors seeking slaves and human sacrifices for their gods.

*The line *'a mortal smack has shaken every perspective'* is connected to the back cover of my first poetry collection

'*A Whole Day Through From Waking*' (Cinnamon Press, 2016) and is from the poem '*but by loving*', in my second collection, *'In the holding'* (Indigo Dreams, 2019).

*'Bristol Cancer Help Centre' is now called 'Penny Brohn UK' (www.pennybrohn.org.uk)

Step Six.

La Traviata is a three-act opera by Italian composer, Giuseppe Verdi, (1813-1901). Premiered in 1853, it is based on a play adapted from the 1848 novel *La Dame aux camelias* by Alexandre Dumas fils.

Step Seven.

*For more information about the work of Dr Neil Douglas-Klotz, see the 'abwoon network' (www.abwoon.org)

PART TWO

Lana.

*Living the Life Unexpected: 12 weeks to your Plan B for a meaningful and fulfilling future without children Jody Day (Bluebird Books for Life, Pan Macmillan imprint, 2013).

*Gateway Women (www.gateway-women.com) is a global friendship and support network for childless women.

Abdul.

*'Ubuntu' is a Southern African Nguni Bantu term meaning 'humanity', often translated as 'I am because we are' or 'humanity towards others' and popularly taken as a belief in a universal bond which connects all

of humankind – 'I am because you are because we are'.
*Zinedine Zidane (1972 –) is a very popular French footballer/manager/coach
* *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* John Paul Lederach, (OUP, 2005, p. 34-35)

Urzula.

*The Taize Community (www.taize.fr)
*The Iona Community (www.iona.org.uk)
*From reading the book *Imagination as a healing force – Bromine for the Treatment of Trauma Consequences with Resource Oriented Procedures* by Dr Luise Reddemann, written in German (Pfeiffer/Klett-Cotta, 2005)

David.

*Alcoholics Anonymous (www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)
*User Voice (www.uservoice.org)

Moving On.

*the poem *'Can we fail?'* is in my poetry collection *In the holding* (see above).
* *The Sleep Book: How to Sleep Well Every Night* Dr Guy Meadows (Orion, UK, 2014)

Select Bibliography.

I asked everyone I interviewed to recommend for you two books which they feel have helped them – both to become survivors themselves, and to help others hold the gift of their lives.

They may also give websites to connect you to their work.

Jackie Wrafter MBE

1) *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, Susan Jeffers, (Penguin Books, 1987)

2) *The Diaries of Frances Partridge, 1939 - 1972,* Frances Partridge (Orion Books, 2000)

www.kianh.org.uk

Lana Walker

1) Living the Life Unexpected: A meaningful and fulfilling future without children, Jody Day, (Bluebird Books for Life, an imprint of Pan Macmillan, 2013)

2) Overcoming Worry: A self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques, Kevin Meares & Mark Freeston, (Constable & Robinson, 2008)

www.bodyandmindholistics.co.uk

www.worthyandcontent.com

Abdul Rahim

1) *The Freedom Writers Diary* Erin Gruwell

2) The Moral Imagination John Paul Lederach (OUP, 2005)

www.placeforhope.org.uk

www.centreforgoodrelations.com

Urzula Glienecke PhD

1) *Self-Compassion Step by Step*, Kristin Neff, PhD, (Audiobook, Sounds True; Unabridged, 2013)

2) *Will I Ever Be Good Enough?* Karyl McBride, PhD, (*Atria Books, Reprint 2009)*

www.greyfriarskirk.com/ visit/

www.grassmarket.org

David Bulman

1) *Change your life in 7 days* Paul McKenna (Bantam Press)

2) *Getting things done* David Allen (Penguin books)

www.uservoice.org

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Claire Galligan

1) *A Woman in your own right* Ann Dickson (Quartet Books, 1982)

2) *Pulling Your Own Strings* Dr Wayne W. Dyer (Arrow, 1978)

And here are my own recommendations – from a book that did transform my understanding and active practice of love and healing, nearly thirty years ago, to an exciting book of poetry I am relishing right now, as Harry encourages us to be unashamedly true to who we are:

1) *Peace, Love and Healing: the path to self-healing* Bernie Siegel MD (Arrow Books, London, 1991)

2) *Unashamed* Harry Baker (Burning Eye Books, 2022)

Website: **www.thelovethatweare.org**

You Tube channel: 'the love that we are'

Talk Hope, Healing & Being a Survivor

A book to help you transform your life, by showing you how it is possible to be full of dynamic hope, to heal your authentic self, and to be a survivor in your own unique way, no matter what rapids you need to ride through. How to be the love that you are, inside.

