

## **I'm No Expert**

*A fake guide to real success.*

Written by Deborah Pades

### **Showing up**

I'm walking with a friend whose high heel snaps while we're strolling on the boardwalk. Silly to wear heels while traversing planks of wood but I'm not her mother. She stumbles as her left heel breaks off and stays stuck in the path behind her, like the lone surviving tree in the wake of a forest fire. Heroically, I pull the heel up to safety and calmly announce, "*I can fix this.*" I pull out the rubber band that I've been saving in my pocket for this rainy day and wrap it first around the heel of her shoe and then around the heel itself until it slips back into its original position. The test comes when she bears weight down on her foot. I'm no expert in shoe repair but there she goes – off in her normal confident gait to meet the seagulls at the end of the pier. It appears I've saved the day in a small but significant way.

Patience has never been a virtue of mine. It's why I don't bake. I can't wait around for things to rise. I'm ready now. I can do this now. I'm not a shoemaker but if I want to get things moving I'll find a way to heal a heel.

I'm not a person of method or due diligence. I don't ask good questions before using dangerous machinery. I honestly have too many dark moments of self-critique, blaming myself for not being a certain way, a certain kind of person. As I come crashing towards mid-life, it occurs to me that I've gotten by with more chutzpah than knowledge. I want to flip this around before I die. I want to know more things. But the latest headlines tell me that my brain, like other brains around me, is likely to start acting funny later in life. My memories might get mixed up with other people's memories. I might start believing in things unseen, such as God. I might have trouble giving the exact change and just leave a twenty and split. So I figure before I lose my capacity to thread a needle, I should celebrate the knowledge I do have. It's an indulgence but one that will help me mark my way forward. Where we've been always tells us a bit about where we might go. Heel in hand or tied on with a rubber band.

### **Life and Death**

My father is physically ill and also showing signs of dementia. By the time you're reading this, his state will have deteriorated further or changed into something else completely. Or maybe we'll all be painted blue and hung as Christmas ornaments on the tree of our Alien invaders. Life is uncertain that way. But here's

what dementia proves to me: The brain is not like a muscle that if worked hard will expand in capacity and strength. I know teachers tell us otherwise. Logic tells us otherwise. But the brain doesn't behave like the quad that bulks up from a bicycle ride. With all its nooks and crannies, it's hiding things and is not to be trusted. My father is a physicist and electrical engineer and he invented the bar code. So his brain was exercised more than a happy dog's tail and yet his thoughts are being jumbled up and lost just the same. What does this prove? It proves that keeping healthy is not about beating disease. It's about living life feeling really charged and good, moment after moment. That's why we keep healthy. Eventually, we will all come to our last moment. We can't beat death. We can only win life. I know that's sounds like a health insurance ad. Or a sign outside of a church. Or a cereal box sentence.

I have a couple ways I manage to stay alive and thrive. I'll share these as tips. Good luck. Try them at home, at work, or away on vacation. Do not try them on Southwest Airlines. They will kick you off.

**Follow the String.** Pretend there is a long string lifting your chest to the sun. Stand up as straight as you can every day, like you're following that string to the sun, nipples first. Standing like this improves your posture and aligns everything inside and out. It keeps you from getting a double chin, a hunchback, and sagging breasts. It aids good digestion and better breathing habits and it makes your voice sound sexier. It constantly works those tiny muscles all around your back and stomach. I even think that following the string to the sun opens your chest wide enough to let more love into your heart. This is my version of the string theory. It unifies the universe, too. It's gotten much less press.

**Look Both Ways.** I've lived in New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. I've seen buses fly, trains melt, cars appear from out of nowhere. I've seen cyclists go faster than the legal speed limit. Baby carriages have rolled over my toes right after I've gotten a pedicure. Trolley cars have stopped so fast I've been blown off of one and into another going the opposite direction. Ferries have sprayed polluted water into my fresh cup of coffee. I have even been peed on by drunk Wall Street boys when I disembarked on the docks of the South Street Seaport. I can't speak about tractors and gliders but I know they come and go without ever having me in mind either. Look around you. Above you. Beneath you. To the left. To the right. All the time. Everywhere. Be aware. Don't ask someone to do it for you and then take their word for it. You will die. Trust only your eyeballs when it comes to fast moving objects or any objects that move at all. We are targets. All of us. All the time. The universe is a ping-pong paddle and we are pathetic little white balls thinking that the net will save us from a free fall. There is no net. There is no bunny with chocolate and foil dreaming of real fur. There is only the constant threat of being squashed,

trampled, flattened, or blown out, with no ticket back. God gave you a neck. Use it. Don't trust mirrors. They distract you because you think that freckle is a smudge you can just wipe off. But in that split second of spit on finger, finger on the smudge and – BANG! – you're mustard on the Alien's toast about to be covered by asteroid meat. All because you didn't focus on what was happening around you.

**Avoid Toxic Waste.** Don't get all nuclear-focused right now. Toxic is not synonymous with nuclear. Toxic is anything that sucks the life force out of everything. Avoid toxic anything. Let's focus on people. They're easy targets to identify because, if they're toxic, alarms should sound in your head when they breathe near you. The person who is contrary all the time like it's a sport to disagree with you. Toxic. Avoid. The person who diminishes others and elevates himself in the same sentence. Toxic. Avoid. You're next. Maybe even in the next sentence. If you are married to that person then resentment of you has replaced respect of you and the only way to detoxify that is serious rewiring. Possible? I don't know. I do know that if you live in the same house with a toxic person, it's like a blood bank hiring a vampire. Supplies will run low followed by a big shrug of the shoulders. The world is big enough for separations. Separate from toxic people before working on some kind of detoxification plan. If one exists at all. Sorry for the bad news here but – much as I love humans in all their imperfections – I know my limits to supplying them with my fresh blood. Therefore, when it comes to toxic people, send them on their journey alone. Collect good people, not bad.

**Cuddle.** You've got to spoon, you've got to spork – you've got to have touch in your life. This is my fourth, final and best researched way to stay alive. Get a massage – sure. Pay for it if you have to because people get really sad if they don't have some form of physical connection. And sadness leads to shortness of breath and death. Touch is more important than exercise. It must be, because we have no laws that govern touching your toes but tons that govern touching each other. Religious laws. Parental laws. Federal laws. Social laws. And as you get older – gravitational laws. Laws are born from something getting out of hand. Kids need to be protected. Stars should not be groped by fans. Laws keep order. How did we on this legal brief? I was talking about cuddling and you see what happened? People avoid this topic because it makes them feel uncomfortable. But we know better. Hug your neighbor. Put your head on your co-worker's shoulder and see if it leads to something fabulous. But really – get your groove on with some form on form and, if appropriate, skin on skin. All these chemicals are released and your soul has a party. Touch saves my life every day. When you can't touch, think about touch. Let it feed your desire and send you on your way towards whomever is

your target. Let it be the skip in your next step. Just look both ways before you step. And wash your hands often. It makes you smell more attractive.

## **Making Friends**

They say it's the books you read and the friends you keep that make up the person who you are. Books are easy to choose. And easy to put down. But when you put down a friend you have a good chance of losing them. I suppose if you put down a book and then forget where you placed it there's a good chance you'll lose the book too.

Humans are just like us. They require air and care. They want to connect but are so often afraid to stick their human hands out to be held. I have an eight-year-old friend named Leo and he's my hero because he has mastered the art of friending by being uninhibited. He darts around from Legos to eating baby carrots to examining his mother's hands. And when there's a kid his age around, he makes life so exciting as to whisk the kid right smack into friendship. Like no one has a choice in the matter. He's in the throes of life's passions and it's that happy momentum that is so infectious you can't help but join in.

Adults are kids coping with a permanent hangover. We're devastated that the party is over and we can't remember where we parked. How could our twenties have disappeared into our thirties and fifties? How did the big chill become the deep freeze so fast? What gnaws at us most is that stupid theory that, as one grows older, it gets harder to make good, solid, friends who turn into dear, close friends. It reinforces this notion that youth is wasted on the young. I think youth is a timeless state of being that lives inside laughter. It's in a perpetual state of waiting for humor to release it. It's infinite and needs no fountain to spew it forth. Or night cream to protect it. Or Viagra to point it. It just needs a funny circumstance to celebrate its timeless reign over all of us. Youth *is* laughter. You feel it when it happens, every time it happens.

It's never about quantity. You can never have enough friends. And if you just have one friend, that's ok. A little sad though, only because it's hard to create a group of two. Groups start with three. Then the discounts come. Along with the chance to have one person distract the museum guard while the other two take pictures of each other holding *David's* big, strong hands.

Making friends at any age makes you feel alive and excited. Like a fresh piece of gum is bursting inside your mouth. It's an adrenaline rush at first to think that there is someone fabulous to connect with. It's so different than dating. Dating immediately starts and ends with suicidal ideations. Making friends is more sublime and less threatening if you believe this one true thing: You are a good friend. If you believe that deep into the soles of your shoes, then the process of making new friends has so much buoyancy and spirit. You know you are worth

people's time and love and invitations to their weekend homes. You know you will bring them joy, companionship, wit, and the occasional request of a favor having to do with a traffic ticket. So it's not about questioning *your* being attractive as a friend. The real hardship is finding someone out there who doesn't make you question your judgment after you've just given them one of your kidneys.

When I was 25, I lived in a big Victorian house on Masonic Avenue in the Haight Ashbury area of San Francisco. I was renting the back room of a young couple's apartment. It was the third ring of hell in many ways, but as a 25 year old, I didn't yet know that. To me, the more compromised my position in life felt back then, the more I was convinced I'd write a hit song. *Bring it on!* I'd say to the misery gods. Elizabeth and Eric could not have been sweeter but they were not friend material. My neighbor Alicia was. I used to watch her leave in the morning to go to where she was going. Then I'd watch her come back in the evening from where she had been. I was like a lawn troll but she never noticed me. Finally one day, I stuck my head out of my window that faced her window and I yelled "*Will you be my friend?*" To this day – over 21 years later – she still tells that story because to her it was the most wonderful and candid question she had ever been asked. I saw it as my mild Tourettes manifesting in odd, social behavior. I just officiated at her wedding this past Fall. I think my mouth behaved, a good thing for everyone's sake.

So here's a scenario. You're in the middle of your long life and you move to a new town. You know a few kind souls but you are mostly starting over. (Yes, this is reminiscent of my move to LA in 2009.) Nights are filled with sleepless tossing and turning because of what you fear the most. You imagine yourself on one of those dreadful long weekends sitting outside on the weather-proof beanbag chair that you ordered from Sweden. You sink into the beans and realize that, under the right conditions, you could become the chair. Who would find you? Would they even know you weren't really always a chair?

Ways to make new friends who will become great friends:

***If you are a dog owner*** you don't need any help. Dogs are like babies. Having one gives you permission to talk to strangers about poop and the perfect toy. From there, you can begin to stalk them on their route until the frequency of your encounters literally tricks you both into being great friends.

***If you are an alcoholic*** you don't need any help. Just do the good, hard work with strangers in AA meetings and I guarantee you the deepest, most process-oriented friendships will emerge before you hit the second step. By the ninth step, you'll be baking so many cookies for so many best friends you'll be wondering why you ever considered sobriety on your own.

***If you have a terminal illness*** you can make friends by offering them parts of your estate.

***If you love to read*** you make a lousy good friend because you are too self-sufficient.

***If you are a good cook*** just stand in your favorite aisle in the market and strike up a conversation with someone who sparks your fancy. When they near an ingredient you love to cook with, offer to cook for them. *I love those adzuki beans. I know this sounds odd but I just live up the road and I'd love to have you and whomever you like come over for beans and cod liver oil.*

***If you own a fast car*** offer a lift to a casual acquaintance during rush hour. Show them that patient side of you that knows how to breathe and respond appropriately to any situation. Play classical music. Point out landmarks and plan to go to one together soon. Don't rev the engine while stuck in traffic. Instead, ask your new friend the last time they felt like leaving it all behind. Talk about *Thelma & Louise* and what really happened off that cliff. Apparently, there are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe the two ladies died, and the others who believe they changed studios in mid-air and have since been in every single Harry Potter movie.

Don't be shy. Be inventive and bold. Great people need great people in their hearts to survive and thrive. A fast click with someone is rare, worthy of attention. Don't let it fly away. If you start to banter with someone while you're both waiting to buy a ticket, ask them for their contact info so you can forward them more details about something you discussed. With that in hand, you can either nurture a new friendship with invitations to exciting buddy trips or steal their identity. I guess either option would give you that warm feeling of connection. Both promise risk and reward.

### **Love in the time of Challah**

Forget the specifics. Girl, boy, old, young, divorced, nubile. Avoid the trappings of stereotypes, archetypes. Hold up a mirror and look into it. That's your biggest love story ever, in progress. Every hair on your head or on your chin, every move your eyeballs have made to drink in the world for you, every deep sleep, delicious taste, every hum, every bump that eventually healed and every scar that marks the road you've taken from in here to out there everywhere – you have already succeeded at committing to yourself every day of your life. You've stayed alive, dressed for the occasion and even learned to read. You haven't quit talking to yourself when you're upset, taking yourself for a walk at night when you feel romantic. You're in a loving relationship with yourself first and foremost, so when talking about love, you ARE an expert. When it come to thoughts about love, I

hope you have or will soon find the hottest, kindest, most consistently present lover/partner/droid ever, one who puts a spring in your step and a twinkle in your eye, one who tells you enough kind words to protect you from your own naughty tales about life's darkness. Love makes life feel better. Starting with self-love. Ending with self-love. And, always sprinkled throughout, a healthy serving of selfless love for those in your life who deserve it.

## **Dirt**

### **Laundry**

Paying for your laundry to be done by an outside service or by your maid or even your lover is giving up an intimate opportunity for regular reflection on your life. Doing laundry is a secret weapon to increase your brain capacity, improve your memory, and get rid of nasty stains on your conscience.

We wear clothes and then we dirty clothes. We toss them in a basket. Like a holding tank for prisoners, the laundry basket is vibrating with stories. Our energy rubs off on our clothes. For hours, our clothes rub up and down and all around our bodies, sloughing off not just dead skin but billions of molecules of life-stuff that come from where we've been, what we ate, who we touched, and even what we said. Clothes are the keepers of our stories, markers of our times. They absorb every moment we experience. Our sweat, our spit, the way we sat and creased the material – they are the mark of our *being there* because they were there, too. Not passively. Clothes speak before we do. We give them permission to. The whole fashion industry is built on the theory that clothes speak our first thoughts and intentions for us. So it makes sense that on the backend of things – just before clothes get tossed into the holy waters of forgetfulness – there might be an opportunity to reflect on where they've been, what they heard and saw. The chore of doing laundry can be transformed into a deeper inquiry, a ritual of remembering that can lead to clean clothes and a spotless conscience.

They say that talking to plants affects how they grow. I don't talk to my dirty socks but they talk to me. If I let them. I used to grab a huge pile of my dirty clothes and dump them into the wash. Who's got time to sort and study the outfits of yester-week? But then I realized that it's not about sorting – especially darks from lights or delicates from permanent press. That's mundane. It's about dropping each item into the washer one at a time – like you are picking cashews out of mixed nuts – one at a time. I know your mind just shot out the sentence *What a waste of my time*. It's not. Don't fight me on this one until you've tried it. Next time you do a load, drop in one item at a time and try to REMEMBER the last time you wore that piece of clothing. This exercise makes Sudoku feel like staring at a wall. Remembering when you last wore something pulls every lever on your brain to *on* and conjures up the oddest notes about yourself. It takes an

inventory of the last week of your life in a way that a therapist would drool over. Don't just remember *when* you wore something – try to recollect how you felt, who you were with, things that got said. We're only the culmination of who we've been, so why throw that information out with the laundry water? Maybe it's a function of my age, but if I don't try to remember, I soon forget. There aren't enough people in my daily life asking me about me. I'm not accountable to too many people. So the places I've been in just one week, the conversations I've had, the food I've dropped on my thigh during that dinner – all those details can vanish as fast they happened if I don't shine back at them at least once more just to validate that they happened.

History is our teacher. We generate more of it every day but then may never really learn from it. It accumulates. Like teachers piled into the supply closet. Underutilized, undervalued, eating from Tupperware.

I guess my attitude towards laundry is about the opportunity to slow down for a second to fine-tune my course and the way I'm living. It's in the little details. Clothes bear witness to moments that could have been lived better. So sorting through life in this intimate tangible way can be one of the best tools for reflection. I know rabbis and priests and monks have their own ideas of serious meditative methods that can yield mounds of deep thought. But when you return from those temples of high glory all filled up with God and free snacks, you find your laundry waiting for you at home. Unpicked. Unexplored. Unwashed. An opportunity waiting ...

### **The Dust Bunny Has No Head**

There are professionals for everything and they have equipment strapped on their backs as they ring our doorbells. I remember when the movie "Ghostbusters" came out. I spent months afterwards wearing a vacuum on my back and singing the theme song. It felt good to be so deeply in character without the camera crews hounding me. Moments of freedom like that are hard to organize.

No matter how tall you are or how many domain names you've bought over the last ten years, you've got dust hovering right next to you. Under a microscope it looks like a street in Bombay at 10 am. Very busy beings moving in place. If you're allergic to dust you're allergic to life. That's a bummer. Dust is air with a hair-do. It's all around us so it's no wonder professional dust busters are conning us on every corner. If you believe in the dust bunny then you believe it comes and goes. It doesn't. It never leaves, ever. No swifter or grifter or medicine man is going to make dust disappear for more than a minute or so. Dust is like Adele – the singer who won 427 Grammys in one hour. Radio played her so much that there is a small island off of Argentina that thinks Adele is the voice of God. They are Adelites and rumor has it they are rolling in the deep. Dust doesn't go away no matter what channel you choose.

So if you really want to dust – which is that popular misguided act of moving a dusty rag to get rid of dust – then I suggest taking a Tai Chi class at the same time. That way you can work your spine and your spirit while attempting the impossible. Guests will marvel at your grace and concentration. They will sneeze and feel that nearly orgasmic sensation of release. You will become popular again.

### **Dishes in the Night**

You wake up on a Saturday morning and see last night's dishes piled up in the sink. The help didn't come. But I did. I'm wearing blue jean overalls with just a black bra underneath. I'm whistling what sounds like *love potion # 9* but it's an original tune that I've just written from the inside of my hits-never-stop-coming head. There are no plastic gloves anywhere in your house so I've returned to your kitchen ready to bare-back your dishware. You didn't expect me, I know. You expected elves to have come and gone already. Well, this is the real world. And people like me are taller and don't work as hard.

Dishes can be slippery when wet. How many times have you broken a plate because you lost your soapy grip? Or a crystal glass? A sippy cup? No, never a sippy cup because they are plastic and brilliant at not breaking. Worse yet, have you ever cut yourself after breaking a glass? The white suds turn nightmare red and your cut always looks worse than it is. You feel faint just the same and lie down on the couch. Help comes quick, kind words are spoken and hours later – after you've fully recovered – the dishes have been done, dried, and put away. It's always good to have a crisis to drum up help when you most need it.

I think leaving dirty dishes on a person's bed is a viable option. If they haven't washed up after themselves, encourage them with spiteful, immature, passive-aggressive behaviors. Dirty dishes strewn across a pillow is very disturbing to discover just at the moment a person is ready to sleep. Upon finding them, they're forced to put them somewhere. Probably back in the sink. Then you contribute to a cycle of non-verbal communication that can end in clean dishes or moldy, lost dishes. It depends on how tired the person is. Throwing dishes under the bed is easier than loading them back into the sink. I personally have never instigated this kind of punitive routine, but the idea strikes me as a smart one for roommate-infested homes. Just get through this period of your life as fast as you can. Roommates are strangers who have a set of your keys. Craigslist should be shut down for aiding in the propagation of this culture, along with several other socialist behaviors such as listing *volunteer opportunities*.

Of course we can pretend we all have dishwashers, brand new ones that don't require the complete scouring of dishes before they're loaded in. Those remind me of an announcement I heard a few times a year while growing up: *Clean up! The maid's coming*. As confusing as that sounds, it's equally annoying to offer help to a host in the kitchen because you spy their shiny dishwasher only to be

told that you need to wash each plate before you load them. That's punishment for being a lovely guest. Better to stay at the table and feign being so stuffed that you can't even move but you'll refold the used napkins as a favor.

Julia Childs taught us to drink while cooking. Doing dishes requires both hands, so you need a friend to pour your drink into your mouth. You could create an assembly line and things get done much faster. Look at the pyramids in Egypt. Amazing example. But if you do wake up on that infamous post-dinner-party Saturday morning and you are alone, alone, alone, look at the dishes as a reminder of the laundry that you have yet to sort through to reflect on the life that you lived so far and have yet to sort through. Live, reflect, rinse, repeat.

### **Hi Giene, how are you?**

There is a smell of success. It's a clean smell. It carries no faint wafts of human weakness. Only sweet odiferous overtones of sublime moments – summer breezes, bursting rain clouds, cello solos, the christening of a ship, and laundry just in from the line.

Armpits hold the smoking gun of body odor. They're called pits for a reason. Crotch holds the same honor when it comes to an incriminating name but a crotch is usually not at nose level with the same frequency as are armpits. And when a crotch is at nose level, the rules of the game have changed and smells are among the many offerings in a banquette for all the senses.

Don't let your armpits sweat. Choose not to sweat. Tell your pores to take a break and just hold back expressing. Sweating except while exercising is so unhelpful. It ruins clothes, broadcasts your feelings way too abruptly. Try to breath and expel perspiration in other ways. Dogs pant and release all that emotion through their mouths and their armpits smell fine. Panting can be attractive if done like a yogi or a Lamase-instructed mother-to-be. Intentional, rhythmic, commanding of everyone's attention.

A huge deodorant and antiperspirant industry pushes us to accept that we need help and they have the solution. But there's aluminum in all of those products and it's causing tumors and cancer and death. We can't use them if we know this. So we have to NOT sweat under our pits. We have to reprogram our bodies to hold back on the smell and sweat production until after the meeting, after the wedding, after the trial. I just saw Cirque du Soliel for the tenth time. We can train our bodies to do anything.

You can also make your own deodorant – all natural, unprocessed, aluminum-free. Because you have so much free time. Because you want to get a big bowl and mix ingredients in it that are not for oatmeal and raisin cookies. Because you closed your meth lab and you are bored. Here's the recipe and ingredients I have found on the interwebs: coconut oil in solid state, baking soda, arrowroot powder, essential oil. Equal proportions of the first three and a dash of oils for nice smells

(optional). I would start with a ¼ cup of each ingredient unless you are making several batches for Halloween giveaways. Mash it all together in the bowl and pat it down into a jar. The whole experience takes about ten minutes. Then massage about a pea size of the mixture under each armpit. Allow it to dry as you would regular toxic deodorant. Then put your clothes on and audition for *America's Got Talent*. You'll do fine because you are protected.

## **Taking a Meeting**

No matter what business you're in, there are always meetings to be had. They might come after emails and phone calls and they require your full self – not just your fingers tapping, your brain spinning and your voice expressing. Meetings in the flesh are the real deal. You can't hide yourself behind a phone or screen, except if you're going into a confessional booth. You can hide behind that screen, but God still sees right through you like the TSA.

In a real, face-to-face meeting, you are in complete control. If you are prepared, showered, and put together – this is your shot. No typos, no bad connections. It's eyeball to eyeball. Behind every eyeball is a soul waiting to meet you, waiting for you to see them, speak to them, value them, delight them. Don't imagine a person in their underwear in order to relax and laugh to yourself. See them exactly as they appear and know that underneath all that they are wearing, they're completely naked, fighting gravity just like you. They want a reason to connect with you. Give them one.

**Clothes** scream so loud and can insult so many. That's why for business connections, my default is to stay neutral. For the last decade or so, I have been taking meetings for a non-profit I founded in 2000 called Artists for Literacy. The meetings ranged from artist meet-and-greets to foundation sorry-we-can't-help-yous. I think I have had 734 meetings and I only own one pair of black linen pants. No one has ever complained or complimented – the pants are power neutral. They hold my shape in a perfect flow. I float into the room buoyed by my pants and my Donald Pliner cloth stretchy shoes. I am innocuous style – for better than worse. I am Scotch served neatly. I am a guidance counselor ready to mud wrestle when given the chance.

Taking meetings should be nothing like dating. Dating is about announcing yourself in a way that serves your purpose – to get laid and/or get married. Dating is the playground for clothes that open easily. Taking a meeting requires a slow reveal at a measured rate of return. What you wear should not be the meal, just the nice looking waiter that serves you up and is soon forgotten. I'm not saying to look drab by any stretch. I'm saying don't give it all away with a sideways zipper that opens up to a zebra striped bra that lights up whenever you have a text message.

**Posture** – if it's bad – can kill your meeting. Never get so relaxed that your shirt slides up and the butterfly tattoo on your tummy is revealed. (So distracting.) Sit taller than you are. Remember the string to the sun. Let it pull you up. I have really bad posture if I don't think about it. I naturally have rounded shoulders due to scoliosis. I am perfectly imperfect. I compensate by wearing a lot of lipstick. That might not work in every case.

**Vocabulary** that comes out of your mouth should be your own. There is nothing more horrifying than listening to a person sprinkle their pitch with words they heard on NPR that day in the Puzzler segment. Stay in your power, in your zone of comfort, and speak from your center of knowledge. Simplicity relaxes people and invites their intelligence to map onto what you're offering. Let them fall in love with your authenticity, not your cleverness. Anyone can be pithy. No one can be your version of you. So if there's a choice between using a word that you can't spell and saying what clearly states your case – go for the candor, the clear, the concise. Trust the nature of what you're bringing to the meeting. If you augment your natural cadence and speech with words that don't flow, everyone will feel a clumsiness that they might not be able to put their finger on, but something will stink. Better to pace yourself, speak clearly using your tongue, teeth, and breath. Know that whomever is listening wants to be able to take what you've said and communicate it to one of their own, so the simpler the sound bites the better. And don't spit when you talk. That's gross.

**Listening** – no matter what side of the table you sit on – is what meetings are mostly about. If you are presenting a concept or business opportunity, the moment you are done speaking about the guts of your deal is the moment people in the room learn about your curiosity, humility and respect for them. Even if you are Richard Branson (to whom I owe many thanks for Red Interactive on your airplanes. Now the creep in 6F can ping me all 5 hours of my flight to Baltimore to see if I want to split a Twix bar with him), you can still invoke a sense of partnership with those present by listening to them after dazzling the room with a big speech. We are all truly just a mass of molecules trying to calm down, so the more we feel like we're all breathing together, the better. If someone senses that you're not listening to what they're saying, they stop believing in you. You're like the tooth fairy: you once had a place in the bedroom but now you can't even get through the front door. Don't mess up a meeting by not listening to every voice in the room. It's free education. Listening to others is a good, free drug. Listening takes you higher and higher. When you listen a lot you start to channel and then what you say is twice as brilliant. By the time the meeting is over and if you've listened well, you may have fallen pregnant. That's how powerful listening can be.

**Eating** during lunch meetings is deadly. If someone really wants to meet over lunch, go but just order water. Food is a threat no matter how benign the dish. Salad? Guaranteed green things in your teeth. Sandwiches? Could spurt out ketchup or pickles and no bite is small enough for you not to look like a pig. Soup? High alert for slurps and drips. Too risky. Steak or fowl? Chewing more than once is repulsive. Sushi? Are you joking? When is the last time a roll stayed whole on the way to your mouth? Don't eat. Stay slightly saintly and glow with hunger. Tell your party that you're on a cleanse until you get a deal for whatever it is you're meeting about. No pressure, you say, but that's just how you roll. You're that dedicated to your cause.

**Closing a deal** after only one meeting is the stuff of myth. I've never been able to really close a deal so soon, but rather open a possibility that our relationship definitely has a future. Closing a deal after you take a meeting once only happens if drinking was involved and someone accidentally revealed a dark secret and blackmail is now the new operating system. Then all bets are off and everyone is falling all over you to give you what you came in for. This has never happened to me. I've always yearned for it to.

Maybe approach meetings more like huddles. It feels less threatening. Going to a huddle sounds productive and fun, the way life should feel. If you huddle with people, there's a play that's being made, a field that awaits, and a post-game party, maybe.

### **The Job: Bring yourself**

You have to turn up the volume for a new job. Jump in, lights on, engage. Place one picture of each ex-lover on your desk. Show you have a history. Place trophies and animal heads around your space. You are a champion. Don't be shy about hosting a small cocktail moment at the end of your first day of work. Show your peers where you stash your gum early in your relationship. This creates respect and trust.

Work for a lot of us takes up a huge part of the week. So we tell ourselves elaborate stories about how work manifests life's meaning and defines our legacy and is worth the hours we put into it. If that's true, then we can't tip toe around work. We have to be there completely so we don't half-live.

If you run your own gig or company or food truck or brothel, then you're in the zone of personal passion and labor of love. It's your baby, your obsession, the thing that finally worked and is bringing in cash or the promise of cash. When you feel burned out, don't let that poison your product. You're burned out because you haven't yet surrounded yourself with people who are smarter than you. Go and do that. You know who they are. You might not want to be their best friend

but that's the point. You want their good thinking rippling through every aspect of your company. You want them to know what you're thinking at all times and make what you're thinking better with their thinking. You could care less if they make you laugh or not and more about how obsessed they are with the nooks and crannies of your operation. They are not you. You are high maintenance and need to find balance. The people you hire to run your show have their own twisted road to travel but when they are on your turf, taking your dollars, pushing your message out into the world – they need to have their 12 pistons firing all at the same time, all in the name of your glory, your vision, your empire. Avoid burnout by never working too hard. Make them work hard.

But if you are not the boss, if you are a cog in someone else's hamster wheel, life's a grind if there's no grease. So bring on the lubricant and glide through your day.

- Start each day with this Mantra: *I get paid to play. How cool is that?*
- Know that your boss's success is your success via the transitive property rule.
- Write your name on every brown bag in the communal refrigerator.
- Never pee next to a stall with a client or customer in it. They need to think you are not really like them.
- Only ask questions on Thursdays.
- Wear plaid clothing whenever possible. It leaves people speechless and gives you more time to be heard.
- Turn off your cell phone ringer. No one at work needs to know that you like operatic ring tones.
- On *bring your kid to work day* – don't.
- When attending meetings, nod at your supervisor at three-minute intervals and wink at the end while saying *I know exactly what you mean*.
- Collect vacation days in a jar like fireflies. One day, you will fly like Tinkerbell.
- Tell people it's your birthday so they can get you a cake.
- Tell people it's the anniversary of the death of your whole family when the car caught on fire and they all died except for you so they can get you a cake.
- Use your work address for all important bills. Accounts payable may accidentally pay them, too.
- Remind everyone everywhere that if there is a fire, they should run to your desk because it is fire resistant.
- Never ask people for a drink after work. Ask them to spend weekends with you. It's just a bigger, deeper way of connecting.
- Don't hum unless you know the words in case someone asks.

## Is It Hot in Here or Is It Just Me?

Be prepared. The world is melting but you are not butter – you are human and there's still a chance to stay cool. First, you need to accept the facts as they are. Don't be one of those skeptics who say the earth is just having a hot flash. Those people have never had a hot flash if they think it's such a benign event. If the planet was really going through menopause, then by all logical thinking that would mean the ground would no longer be fertile, trees and plants would stop growing and things as we know them would start shriveling. Oh. Perhaps they're right.

Mother Earth. Not father earth. Of course it's going through the change. The climate change. Call it what you want but caps are melting, seas are rising, plates are shifting, air is stifling, and skin is spotting. The Beach Boys might still be around but the culture of fun in the sun is gone. Everyone with pink skin is slathering white zinc on it. Insects that were here are no longer. Huge white polar bears are clamoring to survive. Twisters and tsunamis are on the rise and it's not because God is mad.

I'm still hoping we can all wake up and collectively stop the behaviors that are causing this hot mess, but as of this writing, the one billion cows that are farting methane into the atmosphere are showing no signs of stopping because we are showing no signs of stopping the McBurglar from taking our breath away. Greenhouse gasses and the Big Mac are directly related. It's now our job to cope with the results of this sorrowful marriage.

So how does one survive and thrive during times of orbital change? Our lives are going to change and I'm thinking there has got to be a manual on how to cope. We're not alone. Other planets must have destroyed themselves. It's how the universe has been expanding, as bizarre as that sounds. Death at the planetary level means implosions and black holes and new worlds shooting out through wormholes and announcing themselves like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. (Now I'm getting a little excited.)

***Dressing for Disaster.*** Flippers should always be strapped to your back for immediate access. The second you feel a rain drop, throw off your stilettos and don these plastic propellers. Flash floods are big these days. Flippers will help you steer around tall buildings. If you live in Manhattan, avoid Seventh Avenue even under water. Taxi drivers don't defer to pedestrians especially when they have the liquid right of way. Remember also that when dressing for greenhouse galas, there is still a chance that Bill Cunningham of the New York Times might take a snap shot of your outfit. Wear plenty of brightly colored scarves. They can help you in so many ways: as tourniquet for severed legs, Chuppah for emergency weddings, rope for sliding out of buildings on fire, blanket for spontaneous picnics on drying grass with dead fish beneath you, or to cover your head

from the beating sun as you trek across bridges in search of one last latte. Wear loose clothing to accommodate bloating, weight loss, weight gain, pregnancy, and hoarding food. Also, if you can score at least one of those vests with wireless connectivity and a battery pack sewn in, you can tweet and blog about your situation long after others have smashed their phones to the ground in a rage due to that short battery life.

***Air Supply.*** When the economy tanks, we blame government, bankers, Facebook. We want revenge so we hold up signs or hold hearings or hold each other deep into the night. Doing something always feels better than doing nothing. This earthly melting mess has us feeling helpless because it feels like such an enormous calamity. But doing one little thing can contribute to that warm feeling of progress. Even though we're too far gone to save the ozone, we still have time to save some actual air. You can find air in your house, in your yard, even in your local bowling alley. Get some zip-lock bags and fill them with air. Put them in your freezer – stack them so you can fit as many as the space will allow. Soon, you'll have dozens of baggies of air frozen, ready for you when you need them. Gold and cocaine may have street value now, but in a few years your bags of air will be worth millions of dollars. Dispensaries might become the legal way of getting air, but stay in the black market – underground. The second you hang a shingle outside in daylight, regulations are going to kill your business. A sure way to success is to sell your air with a subscription. Once people get hooked on your supply, they'll be loyal customers. You might even consider getting some promotional mugs made to sell as premiums or even to give away to people who buy more than five bags of air at a time. The trick is to get all the air now – while it's in good supply. If you run out of zip-lock bags, get the generic ones sold by your supermarket. The seal has to be good or else the air escapes and you're stuck selling empties. Now is the time to do this. Don't wait till it's on the 11 pm news as the latest craze. By that time, it'll be too late. Air today, gone tomorrow.

***Games to play while dying.*** How many times have you played that scenario game where you have to say what you'd do on your last day of life? Now is the time. We're dying, it could be any day, so every day should be *the* day. Think hard about the pretend future – the dreams you'd fulfill, the loves you'd have, the sights you'd see. Play truth or dare and tell everyone what you'd really like to do and then do it. Dive into an empty pool. Buy pizza and eat the whole pie without cutting it into slices. It's actually not that easy. Ring your neighbor's door and then run away. And then come back and make love – no matter who they are. Drive your car fast down a quiet road without a muffler. Finally learn the lyrics to *More than a Feeling*. Buy a little Fisher Price kitchen set and make a Caesar salad using only the utensils included. Take sleeping pills and try to stay

awake really hard. Use paintball guns to water the plants. Watch workout videos while sitting on your couch eating Doritos. Play Jax with armless kids. Carve pumpkins on your front lawn and invite others to join. The calendar year is now meaningless since the seasons are flipped out of order. Wear bikinis in the snow. Wear mittens in the heat of the sun. Play hide and go seek and forget to seek. Whoever is hiding is safer where they are anyway.

## **Food:**

### **The Gift of the Incas**

Anyone who knows me, knows quinoa. I serve it a lot. Probably too much. It started in 1989 in New York City. I used to go to this group dinner once a week in the bottom of a church to learn about healing foods. There were all kinds of people there, some with life-threatening illnesses and some with deep curiosities about how to eat better. Some also just liked eating with baby Jesus in dark, subterranean spaces. I came in wanting to understand how to get a better bang for my nutritional buck. I might have coined the term “super food” back then, but there’s no way to prove that. I was a location scout at the time for “Law & Order”. My meals were mostly eaten on the go, while I waited for film to process or for building managers to show up. I wasn’t feeling healthy. I also felt like a shlep, but that had more to do with being a location scout. Have you ever had that job?

So during that time, I spent my Tuesday nights chewing food (40 times for each bite) with macrobiotic people. I learned a lot. It was there where I got hooked on quinoa. (pronounced *ktphütis*) Years later, I even attempted to start a quinoa company with a distributor who was based in both Stanford, CA and Brazil. He had smooth tan skin, an MBA and reason to believe, with no basis of fact, that I knew the food retail business. At some point in our partnership, he cocked his head and realized we were not making money. The way he cocked his head was sweet. Like he saw me for the first time all over again. The mood was tenuous. The soundtrack swelled with oboes, flourishes of strings and a toy piano. I think I was supposed to say something at that point to talk him out of what seemed to be a growing conviction that we were screwed as a business. But I was surprisingly silent in what I thought was a pleasant sort of way. In my mind, we were a baby company just learning to walk and with great promise, soon to run. In his mind, we were a baby company with bad genes, bad luck, bad timing. Looking back, I do think it was about timing. Only now is quinoa the in vogue food for foodies.

Don’t try to cook quinoa at home. Not yet. Go to a really good nouvelle cuisine restaurant first, where they know how to make quinoa right. If you live in a small town with only restaurants that have spinning signs out front, I’m sorry. But in fairly trendy, gastronomically desirable towns, most up-and-coming chefs are using quinoa as the grain du jour. Why? Each little grain contains so many

minerals and vitamins and protein that other grains seem like packing material. The natural food craze is a 10-billion-dollar industry. This little grain heads the shopping lists of millions of people who want to reverse the impact of the horrid lives they've been living. Quinoa is being marketed as a super food because it is a super food. The Incan people fought off the Spaniards for hundreds of years by eating quinoa and cuddling. This grain gave them enough strength to lift their knives and throw their boulders and keep their culture alive. They only lost to the Spaniards when Taco Bell came in. Back then there was only one Taco Bell but it did a lot of damage.

The story of the Incas and the super grain quinoa has a lot to teach us about food and thriving. They are inextricably linked. Drinking three cokes every morning slowly eats away your stomach and without a stomach, you do not thrive. Eating quinoa, you are way more likely to thrive.

Food is feisty topic for people. I've had barking sessions with people about food. This was when I thought it was important to talk about food like it was some kind of great movie I just saw that now you had to see. This kind of proselytizing would elicit a bad response, with all of us taking righteous positions about food, eventually acting like we ourselves were the animals we were eating. Bad scene. I'm embarrassed. I've since learned that I need to stay happy on my own little hamster wheel and at a respectful distance, watching others eat packing material on theirs.

I have things I don't eat, things I do eat, reasons I eat them and ways I eat them.

*If what I'm about to eat is full of fat, sugar or salt – it better taste exquisitely good, be offered to me for free and only enter my system on weekends, holidays or friend's birthdays.*

*If what I'm about to eat had eyes before it died – I want to know it didn't have exposure to antibiotics, hormones, conservative talk radio, or travelling on interstate highways in a box smaller than its own size.*

So I've got some meals and a few recipes herewith hitherto and below. Wear goggles when reading this because I am typing with my mouth full and things can spray.

### **Breakfast. Turning sleepy stupid into perky and sharp.**

Bagels and cream cheese. Really? Jews should know better. White flour keeps you stupid. Whole grains that are recently sprouted? Much better. The bag will say something like *sprouted wheat*. Even better than bread is oatmeal for breakfast. Steamy hot, sweet or savory, oatmeal is like a sweater, a sweet song, food for the toothless. Even better than oatmeal is – yes! hot quinoa cereal. It comes in flakes at your local expensive health food store. Put a ton of maple syrup on it and you can pretend it's Fruit Loops.

Brain food in the morning is the perfect way to hit your start button. It's trendy to have 'no time' to eat in the morning. Rush, rush and get to your important desk and say something dumb and wonder why. Break the trend and tell your body that you're happy you woke up alive and not on some elevator floor, half-dressed. Celebrate foods that celebrate you. Yogurt has billions and billions of stars and probiotics that coat your system with I love you's. So yogurt and granola? Yes! You can even eat it at your desk while making a call. Chew, swallow, then speak.

White sugar in your hot drink sends you up but then down and makes you fat. Sweeten stuff with a really expensive square of chocolate or a dollop of honey or maple syrup. Agave is still under investigation. Rumor has it that it's laced with snakes and pesticides. But what isn't?

Protein makes me happy in the morning. I'm an egg girl, truth be told. Soft boiled. I get someone else to peel it if there's company around. I've read the perfect-way-to-peel-an-egg articles. They are written by patient people. I can't relate. I do a scramble when I'm feeling creative. I toss things in like shallots and mushrooms. I wear a linen scarf and glance at the camera as I tend the bubbling mass of eggs'n things. Viewers at home wonder how I do what I do with such grace so early in the morning.

But the best way to start your day and my day? A power shake. If there is one meal that deserves a shake, it's breakfast. It gives you everything you need to roll down the windows of your car and scream "*I am so fucking gorgeous today!!*". Haven't screamed that lately? No wonder. Just suffer through this shake and eventually you'll become happily addicted and be able to focus on new problems.

- a. Buy a high-powered blender. The kind that can grind pennies. A good one usually has a warranty which is more than you can say about your body.
- b. Add a handful of chopped kale or spinach, a cup of your favorite fruit, a tablespoon of yogurt, handful of mixed nuts: almonds, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, chia seeds, maca powder, and two dates. Then fill to the fill line with almond milk or coconut milk or (for those of you who are very, very shy) water.
- c. Blend for 30 to 40 seconds.
- d. Drink it all at once and don't blink
- e. Yes, you can add your own protein powder if you want.
- f. No, you can't add ice cream

The reasoning behind this shake is simple: it's got your daily requirements of minerals and vitamins and anti-oxidants. Why take processed expensive, horse-size vitamin pills when you can eat the live stuff for a quarter of the price? V8 commercials tried to tell us this a long time ago. V8 by the way has enough sodium to retain the water of four pregnant camels.

This brings me to thinking about the best life-giving, anytime food. Let's talk about pancakes. A tribute verse...

*Oh, when a plate arrives with pancakes  
I start to get a rise  
It's like I did some cocaine  
With no bathroom trip, no lies.  
Puffy but not too puffy  
the perfect width and height  
got to eat me some dem pancakes  
they give me such de-light!*

It's a Sunday night, a Wednesday afternoon, a Friday early dawn. Go for pancakes. I-Hop makes evil pancakes. I don't even think they are real. For real pancakes, find a diner with a chef in the back named Dale. Dale was born to whisk and cook and add just enough blueberries to make the hue of the batter slightly glow indigo in the pan. Dale has no adult shoes. Dale lives near you and has a crush on you but not the creepy kind of crush. He just knows when you come in before you know you're there.

For every rule about healthy eating, there is an anti-rule that celebrates foods that contribute to life-threatening illness. It's all about balance.

### **Lunch. The longest meal of the day...**

*Eating a light lunch keeps you from being sleepy.* Not. Eating a light lunch for me makes me aware of hunger all day long. But we're all different. Though if I really believed that, this book would be unacceptable. So let's make a deal. You and me? We're the same person with just slightly different hang-ups.

Lunch. Find a buddy and forage in the forest. Avoid poisonous mushrooms. Brightly colored berries are high in anti-oxidants. Bird poop makes a good base for clown make-up. Tree bark that peels off like paper once was paper. Strange noises in the distance belong to something that's out to get you.

I'm in line at the local juice bar. It's not safe here for the very hungry. Just the very thirsty. I move over to the bulk food section and here's where we should stay and talk for a minute. Lunch isn't just about eating. It's a time for ritual, reflection, and sharing. I don't think the store manager has eyes in the back of his head. And I think sampling chocolate covered almonds is part of this store's hospitality strategy. It's a competitive market out there – too many stores to choose from. I'm bound to have loyalty for the one that allows me to have a banquet of edible experiences before I make my final purchase.

Lunch as a concept is clever. The word actually comes from the verb *luncheon* which back in 1786 meant 'to take lunch' which turns out to be a circular definition. Not helpful. Upon further inquiry with the Queen, I have discovered that

in 1817, lunch meant a large piece of food. But here's what lunch means in the new millennium. Lunch is a chance to give yourself a huge break from the monotony of your monotony. It says to your body: *stop thinking, start eating*. Lunch can be extended for hours and hours with bits of food laid out just so. Sure, there's the restaurant lunch with salad, salmon, a fuss over whose expenses cover the bill. But lunch is better treated as a stretching out of the tired soul.

Never eat lunch on the same desk at which you work. Your body does not understand transition unless you make a transition. Then it takes the cue. Get up and sit at your boss's desk. Check all the draws. Find all the personal notes from his/her lovers. Snap photos. Make sure you don't leave drippings on the keyboard. Even a spec of a crumb nestled between the J and the H can cause system failure. And you know about the butterfly effect. When one computer goes rogue, a baby clear across the globe can get her eye poked out. Take responsibility for your lunch and vacuum up after yourself.

The nibble-as-you-go theory is really at the crux of my extended lunch plan. Start with a hefty mouthful but then taper off. If you start lunch at 1 pm, time your bites and treat them like contractions, but going the opposite direction. The farther apart the bites are, the longer the life-span of your lunch will be. Your mouth should breathe normally. Your legs should not be spread. If by some strange coincidence you do give birth during your lunch break, I'd like to know. It would be an honor to have played a small but significant role in the lifecycle of your child. If it's ok, I'd like to name my next pet after the child for whose birth I was responsible. So please contact me after you've picked a name. If you need help naming your child, don't be shy to ask. I spell my name with an 'ah' at the end. My fee for god-parenting will be waived. I just think that you paying me for loving the child I inspired to birth into this world is not appropriate. If you'd like to donate in honor of me, I have some charities I can suggest. There's a lot to discuss actually. We should just meet. I have no agent, so just send a letter of request to info@. It will get to me.

Best lunch to stretch till the sun goes down?

**White Salad:** cup of shredded white cabbage, a diced green apple, ¼ cup of diced fennel, juice from one lemon, tablespoon of honey, salt to taste, dash of olive oil.

**Ostrich Eggs:** 2, hard boiled, painted blue if they are not already.

**Hunk of German Black Bread:** stale

**Jar of Nutella Chocolate spread:** yes

Everyday is an adventure with this kind of lunch.

**Dinner. Darling...**

I know that dinner is the best, most social meal. It's the meal of romance, of deep conversation, of culinary exploration and experimentation, of excuses to drink wine and more wine in the name of 'pairing' wine. It's the meal that means "*I liked you when we met for coffee and now I want to sleep with you.*" I know dinner is a good reason not to kill yourself in the afternoon. One more thing to look forward to.

I once spent a summer in Lima, Peru. Dinner there starts at around 10 pm. Everything is so late it feels early. I was so turned around by the end of my stay, I decided to always wish people a good morning no matter where the sun was. I figured that at some point, my wishes would be applicable and appreciated.

Both you and I could say dinner is the favorite meal to cook for friends. We are among the millions who sauté, smile, serve and sip. This magazine article about us is a sensuous spread, dripping with drippings of foodie food. We look smart and deeply satisfied. Dinner. Yes! But a voice inside is loudly dissenting...

What about skipping dinner? Imagine the money saved, the time gained, the fat lost. Three amazing reasons to not eat supper. Fight me, throw me down and put your Converse sneaker in my face. I understand when the truth hurts. But what could be worse for our bodies than waking them up with work so late during the day? Pounds of food enter the lobby of our temple-bodies. All hands on deck. Alarm clocks ring for every enzyme like there's a fire in the factory. Blood pumps. Muscles undulate back and forth to push the food down into the vat of bubbling bile we call a stomach. By the time all the food is processed, it's 4 am and you haven't slept well because *somebody* was making a lot of noise. Your body was banging its drums, pounding its nails, revving its engines. It was so busy it worked up an appetite and now is demanding breakfast. It's stupid-simple to understand why the body acts out so much. It has no union to represent its many workers. Injustice is sitting its lard-filled ass upon their rights to any kind of liberties. And our bodies fight back all the time. Fatigue, gas, pimples, dryness, moistness, soreness. It's a battle, the battle of the bulge.

But skipping dinner is like trying to ignore a little baby staring at you. You can't. So tread lightly. Laugh heartily. Choose a different country every night to inspire your cooking and your global wisdom. It can be in the form of one ingredient. Just enough to make you feel like you're not trapped inside of a Tupperware factory and that you're part of a world that interests you. Let's go to Japan first. Four little courses that are easily served on one big plate.

**Cucumber and radish salad:** Slice four Japanese cucumbers very thinly. Mix with five thinly sliced radishes. Notice the green and red colors. Marvel at the loveliness. Splash in some Japanese Mirin sauce (it's sweet and thick like an illicit kiss). Splash in some Rice Vinegar. Dash of salt. Refrigerate while you make the other fine courses.

**Seared Tuna:** Get the sushi grade tuna. A quarter pound per human. I

think. I really don't know. Who does know? Accept the mercury poisoning of tuna as something that is real and true but ignore it for this meal. Into an empty bowl, put half a glass of orange juice, a tablespoon of fresh grated ginger, a tablespoon of white miso paste, a splash of soy sauce, juice from a lime, and a splash of sesame oil. Whisk it up and put the slab of tuna in – coat both sides. Say nice things to the slab before marinating it in the refrigerator next to the cucumber salad. Introduce them to each other. The searing comes a little later.

**Soba Noodles:** Boil water. Drop a stack of soba noodles in the water with some oil so they don't stick. Turn water down to a calm boil. You can leave the noodles in there longer than you think. Once I took a shower. The sauce for the soba noodles for this dinner should compliment the other dishes, so no ketchup. I chop up some fresh mint. I add sesame oil, soy sauce and lime juice. Sesame seeds with a little seaweed is a nice garnish. Someday, I'd like to write a book called *Garnish*. It will be about a Jewish cop who discovers a stash of gold while looking for God.

**Cabbage Surprise:** A hot vegetable is always an easy way to steam your face while you eat. The more water that is retained in the vegetable, the more steam rises from the plate and coats your skin with a nice layer of moisture. You glow more in candlelight. You look younger and more ready for adventure. You look like dessert. Cabbage has a lot of water in it naturally. This dish requires a half of a Napa cabbage, chopped finely. Put that in a frying pan along with Japanese mushrooms – they are called Bunapi mushrooms – little white beach mushroom, the kind that are thin and long and look like a bunch of penises excited about something. Add a ¼ cup of water. Turn the heat to medium and toss in the pan for a minute as the cabbage and mushrooms dance together and sweat and make promises they can't keep. Then add quarter of a cup of Asian Fish Sauce. It smells bad but tastes so good. You will recognize the taste because it's in everything. Even in bank statements you get in the mail. Cook only until everything wilts a bit and the party seems to be over. Remove from heat.

Take out the tuna from the fridge. Heat an iron skillet that is coated with grape seed oil. Drop the tuna in and sear both sides well. Then slice into ½ inch pieces. All of the dishes will play nicely together on an individual's plate. So for each plate, do a spoonful of cucumber salad, cabbage delight, soba joy, tuna mercury poison. Set the table with full plates. People will bow and compliment you. If you are eating alone, bow to yourself. Use chopsticks. This meal has ingredients that you can find at your local Japanese market. If you live in Lubbock, Texas you can substitute genetically-modified-to-taste-like-anything corn for all the ingredients. Enjoy!

## **Baggage and Other Things We Carry**

I watch me, I watch us. I notice what we carry. Purses, pouches, fannies, rollies, backpacks, man purses – we take stuff with us just in case we need it. Usually, we don't need anything but a toothpick, a credit card, lip or chapstick and an ID. And maybe a Swiss Army knife to cut off an arm if it gets jammed between two boulders for 127 hours.

In order to move through life easily, you can't be weighed down by poundage. If life is a frozen lake, it's the gliding smoothly across that gets you to the other side without any bumps and bruises and falling in and dying. So keep it light. Easy to say, hard to do. Except when you take a page from the great flood.

When Noah found out about the end of the world as he knew it, he built a boat. A big wooden bag to fit in only his precious items. He took two of everything, which made it twice as heavy as it might have been. But clearly he was a man of caution and didn't want to be left with only one otter or one pigeon. Then he'd have to keep them company. Doubling things up helped everyone stay calm and connected. He weathered the flood all right and when the movie ended, he let his live cargo go and off they went to procreate and build the new world of old, wet animals. When he looked back at his boat, it was empty save for his wife, whose name has been debated for centuries. Let's call her Nama. Nama had no possessions, no pets – just some wooden shoes and a floaty device in case things leaked while they braved the flood. I, too, have water wings. They are yellow and self-inflate.

Nama carried nothing but herself into the new world. She was washed clean by the flood. I call this the flood syndrome. It's a good kind of syndrome. It forces you to realize that anything you take with you could get washed away at any moment. This makes you choose what you take very carefully, for fear that if you bring it, you might lose it. So you don't bring it. Bring what you need to keep you afloat when the flood comes. Don't sink with pounds of stuff weighing you down.

As with the physical, so goes the metaphysical. Standing at the altar about to marry your life, you need to make one, fat promise. Promise that till death do you part, you won't confuse stuff with substance. Stuff is tangible meaninglessness that depletes your chances of feeling abundant. Substance is intangible meaningfulness that creates a sense of real abundance.

People who pack a lot of stuff really do pack a lot of stuff. Test the theory and you'll see its perfect truth. You'll realize that your friend who always bangs on about how everything is black and wrong is the same friend who asks you to put her bag alongside you on the bench during dinner. Yours hangs lightly off your chair. Hers leaves a divot in the leather. That's baggage.

Lightness is lightness. It even sounds light. It's movement and possibility and humility. It's the knowing that nothing is as interesting as being at complete

attention to what is being created right now. In kindergarten we learn this. And as all experts say – of which I am proudly not one – we forget all the important stuff we once harnessed so intuitively. So our carrying too much baggage around is just our fear of forgetting what we probably already knew we didn't need. Life is exhausting for those who carry the accumulation of it on their backs.

So next time you leave your house, it's a chance to claim your freedom from what binds you. Packing tips to live by:

***Beg, Borrow, Steal.*** If you're travelling with others, assume that they have packed some form of whatever it is you'll be needing. Pack nothing.

***Hello, Is this Seat Taken?*** When traveling by train or plane, pack a book so you can avoid all conversation and eye contact. Also pack some blue cheese. As you eat it, you'll feel as if more space is opening up around you.

***I'm Just Running Out to the Corner Store.*** Never bring a wallet when shopping locally. Help your neighborhood businesses create a deeper sense of community by running a frequent shoppers tab for you. Christmas is a great time to settle yearly tabs. The clerk feels like you are giving him a present. A win-win.

***Treks up Yonder.*** We tend to hire yaks or Sherpas. They bear our burdens. I think it's mean. Take only what fits in a fanny pack and leave those poor people alone.

***Business Tripping.*** Overnight business trips just require a nice suite and enough rope to create a makeshift hammock in your hotel room. Studies have shown that rocking gently creates a womb-like experience and balances your chakras. You'll be centered and powerful come time for your meetings. Bring the rope with you in case you suddenly feel the need to knit. Do not strangle people with the rope, no matter what.

### **Things to Keep in Your Car – In direct Contradiction to and defiance of the previous section.**

*Note to Manhattan Dwellers and other city folks in other cities that aren't really cities like Manhattan is a city: Subways are not cars. Please do not take what you learn from this section and apply it to subway travel. If you don't own a car, this section still might be helpful for general Armageddon preparation.*

Tissues and maps? Those are very 1970s. Stuff we keep in our cars these days is more like what the Pharaohs insisted on taking with them to their tombs. It's a highly organized part science, part religion, part panic-informed affair. It's

antithetical to the saying that *you-can't-take-it-with-you*. You actually can take it with you. You just need to make some room for it.

I think it was on that TV show *Let's Make a Deal* that ladies would stuff their purses with everything from hammers to tube socks just in case Monty Hall asked if anyone was carrying such an item. It's that random act of packing in the hope that life will bring on some thrill and change our destiny. I figure that every time I get in my car anything can happen, anywhere, at any moment. Assuming it's not an accident that leads me, winged, to the white light, the unknown of driving is exciting.

Winter, spring, summer and fall: those are seasons that used to come in order. Now they visit whenever they want to and only stay long enough to shock us. But it's not just weather that's unpredictable, it's life, and we have to show up looking like we expected what we actually didn't.

*Peds.* The little socks that forgot to grow. Perfect for shoe shopping so you don't get fungal diseases. Perfect for *no-shoes allowed* events when you haven't had a pedicure for six months. They can also be stuffed in the bra of your daughter quickly enough that, when the cop pulls you over while she's driving without a license, you can say she's much older and is mute and is taking you for a spin to the pharmacy to get your colitis medicine.

*Water shoes.* These can be big rubber Wellingtons or those little flat-toe shoes that look like monsters. Flash floods happen in a flash and you don't want to walk in mystery water wearing your fancy shmancies. Water shoes help you run for help in a downpour when your car has a flat. They enable you to park at a stream and take a serene walk right through it to catch a fish with your bare hands.

*Fancy-occasion shoes.* Whether you are male or female, a surprise occasion might come up while you're in transit that requires you to look better than you do. It's easy to pick up a better shirt or skirt, but harder to find shoes that immediately show that you're so put together there's no question about your capacity to take on anyone with a face. So always keep an extra pair of dress-up shoes in your trunk.

*Band-aids.* Blisters happen when you dance or climb in the wrong shoes. You've got to have tons of band-aids to create a *second skin* on top of the blister. Japanese band-aids usually come in a box with many colors to choose from. If you're wearing open-toed shoes, this could cause a fashion crash, so be warned. Cutting your face and hands while going into a roadside forest in order to relieve yourself with some privacy: band-aids are needed to handle that. Nails that break and can't be glued back together in time for your meeting with the Queen need to be covered up.

Band-aids also double as tape when you secure a note to leave on your car window that says *No Radio In Here To Steal. Just Band-Aids.*

*Ye Olde Sweater.* No matter in San Francisco or San Tropez or Siberia – the extra sweater in your car can save you from death. You can throw it on at a moment's notice. You can easily take it off while singing like Mr. Rogers. You can gently lay it upon the shoulders of the shivering stranger sitting next you at the concert in the park. Then ask for a glass of that Chardonnay she's brought to wash down her brie. Sweaters are soft friends that fold up nicely into balls. They are missed terribly when forgotten on the back of a chair in the Chinese restaurant. But they don't need to be coddled in a closet. The car is enough. They understand they are only there to be used when you need them most. No midnight texts will come saying that they feel you've lost interest or take them for granted.

*Tennis ball.* Throw it when a mangy dog attacks your car as you drive into a junkyard to meet a guy from Craig's List who's selling an antique birdcage. Sit on the ball during long rides to loosen up your gluteus muscles. Squeeze it when you're stressed out during a traffic jam. Write *I love you* on it and look at it every day. Assume you forgot who wrote it and imagine the best person who could have. Offer it to the Highway Patrol Officer in exchange for no ticket.

*A Sharpie Permanent Marker* to write *I love you* on your tennis ball. To satisfy a spontaneous need to get high legally. To graffiti the door that so rudely just shut in your face. To write a quick *Lemonade for sale* sign when times get rough. To write a quick *Will give you my car* sign when times get really rough.

*Tooth picks.* Nothing is worse – NOTHING – than having something stuck in your teeth. Wishing you had a toothpick when you don't is like wishing you could switch genders. It's that frustrating and impossible when locked inside a car.

*Zip-lock sandwich baggies.* When something is oozing, it needs to be contained. Lotion, peaches, melted chocolate kisses, pens – they need be sequestered just like the boy in the plastic bubble or you'll have trouble. Zip-lock baggies can also serve as emergency gloves to separate your hands from the blood of someone you are trying to save. It's great to be a hero but don't contract a disease doing it. Thank me in the foreword of the book that you write to tell the tale of how you saved seventeen children and four nuns from a burning bus near the Hoover Dam. And yes, zip-lock bags are needed to store air for when you really need it. Remember?

*Extension chord.* Yes. Do. It's the coolest thing you can keep in your car ever. You can be anywhere, day or night, and someone is sure to proclaim

out loud their need for an extension chord. Run out to your car, bring it back beaming with a smile, and hand it over. Be sure to point out how you wrote your name near the male end of the chord, in big, black sharpie letters, and request that they please remember to give it back to you. It's one thing to lend someone reading glasses that they forget to return. It's another thing to lose an extension chord. It's an extension of you, your preparedness, your community-mindedness, your ability to plug into any situation at a moment's notice. It might as well be your child. Don't leave it behind.

## Staycations

Planes, trains and automobiles -- they take us places far, far away from our lives. If life is miserable at home, it's really important to get away because when you return, all your troubles are gone and there's a big Buddha waiting for you in your driveway. Your bills have been paid, lawn's been mowed, toilets scrubbed. When you vacation, the angels get together and create a dream come true. They sprinkle stardust in your hair.

There are times to run away and hug elephants, learn new currencies, eat sundried tongue, and summit mountains. Trips that offer these adventures are what we call *trips of a lifetime*. They make great photo books and usually offer moments of epiphany. There's really no price tag for these kinds of trips, except if you actually get a bill and look at it. But don't. Stay in the enlightened trippy space as long as you can.

The other 99% of our lives is not usually spent globetrotting, but they needn't be devoid of vacation. Enter the staycation. These are trips that can save marriages and save you from your own boredom of a routine that only *feels* like a routine if you don't take care to go on the occasional staycation. These are trips to take alone or with a partner to places within twenty-five miles of where you live. They can even be three miles from where you live. Less than that and you might see a neighbor who distracts you, questions you, and ruins everything.

Choosing the perfect staycation doesn't take deep thought. You don't have to worry about time change, foreign exchange rates, vaccinations, civil wars. You just have to think about your friends. Who has a house that you covet?

My version of a staycation is not going to the W Hotel in Hollywood. I call friends with money. They have homes with empty guest rooms. The pillows on the beds get puffed up once a week by the maid, but seldom do human heads actually use them to sleep upon. If I had the proper clipboard, I would do a door-to-door survey of people with beautiful homes with guest rooms and ask them the last time they had houseguests. I bet the average homeowner would confirm that

they can't remember the last time some stayed over. Such a waste of good space.

There's no way you're going to receive a spontaneous invitation to come stay at a house just a few miles away. You have to help your friend get with your staycation plans by asking outright. Listen carefully to the words they choose as they stumble with a reply. They are clues for your next move.

*Well...geez...are you serious?* This swings a door wide open. Walk right through it while saying "Dead serious. Do you have an extra blanket? Let's cuddle. When is the last time we cuddled?"

*Um...funny you should ask. We've converted our spare room to a gym.* Yoga mats are amazingly comfortable and good for nocturnal spine alignment. It's not a problem. Tell them you'll stay.

*Our in-laws are coming this weekend.* This is when hotels.com deals come in handy. Show them online how cheap it is to get the in-laws a suite down the street, not to mention the mental health concerns that such a small investment would thwart immediately. As they dial the number, start bringing in your bags.

*We've had a recent leak in the guest bathroom.* It's a shame that plumbing isn't what it used to be. Commiserate. Orchestrate a quick solution. Become the domestic partner they wished they'd married. Solve not just their plumbing problem, but do a quick survey of where energy is being leaked in the house. Suddenly you will not only be a welcome guest, but you'll be mistaken for a helpful one.

*We'll be out of town.* Is that a symphony you just heard come out of a human mouth? Offer to water plants, protect the grounds – in fact, now is the time to share that horrible news you just heard about the increase in break-ins on their block. Discuss how it's no problem – you'd be happy to look after the place, no charge.

## **Amelia Airflight**

So gone are the days of dress-up for the airplane ride. It's Uggs and pajamas and flight attendants in khakis practicing their stand-up routines at our expense. Older folks still have a sense of in-flight style. They get up the morning of their travel day actually thinking about the outfit they're going to wear. It's a decent way to spend a few minutes. It speaks to a nostalgia for the times when we tried to bring a little ceremony to air travel. Now it's the doldrums of lines and pat-downs and delays. It's a Costco trip in the sky. It's wondering why the guy in the bathroom has been in there for such a very long time. Perhaps he's reading.

First class or no class, flying when you're not a bird is not natural, so I think approaching it like you would something supernatural is a good idea. Putting faith in any driver other than yourself is making a cosmic contract with gravity and God. This is why I'm excited about flying. I can't take control. Impossible. I'm not a pilot. So it's a letting go experience for me. It's allowing the supernatural to keep me from vomiting on my neighbor during turbulence.

I don't think we have to look very far to spot the eternal supernatural goddess sexy lady who is in charge of all of our flying fates. It's Amelia Earhart. She's not missing. She's in flight, in charge, incognito for so long that we just assume she's dead. That's the problem with the media. They kill people who don't show up by deadline. That's why they call it deadline.

If you feel nervous or nauseated or both while flying, conjure up the image of Amelia piloting your plane. She's wearing an updated version of her old flying uniform. This one is more of a brushed sage color and it has tons of zippers to nowhere. She's so chic and fabulous it's a pleasure to be her co-pilot. I just sit and stare at her while she pulls the throttle and pushes the buttons. I try to make out what she's mumbling under her breath. I think she's giving orders to the wind and the clouds. I think they listen to her. She's so in control I start to melt in submission. I order peanuts and begin to feel my heartbeat drop from 195 down to something normal. I'm floating in a boat of trust and Bloody Mary mix. I wonder if she knows I'm here. I wonder if I know I'm here.

I've never been on a big plane that had a close call. I have been on a little plane with just me and the pilot who said abruptly "*We've got to land back where we started because I've got a hose that's shot.*" At first, I thought he was incontinent and had to pee really badly. But then I heard him speak to ground control in Haines, Alaska, requesting permission to land, saying something about *leaking fast*. His pants didn't look wet. But mine soon were. I was scared. I started softly singing the national anthem. Funny reaction but it worked and got us down safely, so that's what I do now in most small-plane, close-call situations. I'm not an expert in aircraft repair but apparently my singing of the Star Spangled Banner kept us from burning up.

Flying is just what we do to get up and over impossible terrain. Landing is where the real heavy lifting of life begins.

### **Sweet Sorrow**

All kinds of experts say – and there they are again, out of control and talking big words – they say that people are taking a record number of pills to deal with the plight of being human. The reported result? Chemical imbalances are regaining their balance. Mood disorders are becoming orderly. Lows are swinging to highs. Prescription drugs like Paxil and Zoloft have found their way into hip-hop lyrics,

sermons, t-shirt designs, and vacation packages. It's not cool to be depressed. It's very culturally relevant to be medicated.

Let's consider depression at its core. Or let's work on our core while considering depression. Good abs are the bomb. Consider these truths, that seem to be self-evident:

*When left alone for too long, people get insular.*

*Mirrors are dangerous especially when they are well lit.*

*Staring at popcorn while it pops in the microwave is a depressing activity.*

*Wearing flip-flops without a pedicure is a sign of depression.*

*Lending money to a homeless person can lead to a depressing outcome.*

*Expecting good news to come via email leads to obsessive behavior and ultimate unhappiness.*

*Reading People Magazine in the doctor's waiting room can lead to false reports on how you are doing.*

*Theme parks are depressing.*

*Watching TV in the bedroom is a sure way to fall asleep depressed. Better to fall asleep depressed on the couch.*

*Carrying a dog in a basket or blanket while you are supposedly out to walk your dog is a sign of depression.*

*Going to a party alone is good! Going to a party and staying in the corner alone is sad. Before arriving, brush your teeth, leave your phone in the car. More on this later.*

*Wearing boat shoes when there's no sign of water teases your inner child and should be avoided.*

*Buying and installing new software and hardware can lead to severe depression.*

*Comparing your groovy hybrid car to a sexy sports car is delusional behavior that ultimately contributes to sad revelations about who you really are.*

*Licking the foam off the side of your latte is a public display of sexual dissatisfaction. Not sure why I listed that.*

*Thinking you are better than other people around you leads to disassociation and ultimate misanthropic tendencies that lead to self-loathing and killing sprees.*

The real miracle is that we're not all institutionalized at this point. I remember watching Seinfeld years back – the show about nothing that was really a show about everything. And the everything was really what life is: the fabulous mundane moments that have the power to delight or destroy us, depending upon our mental state. Everyone knows his or her secret sauce for happiness. But there does seem to be this cosmic shift in the joy factor, implying that it is more illusive now than ever. Surveys go out every few years to figure out the best cities to be happy in or the best professions to pursue for long-term satisfaction. But in our collective bellies, there is a deep knowing that it's not about looking for happiness. It's about the making room for a contentment that is in our systems already. It's like washing a car. The bird poop gone – now you see the shimmer and shine.

Little sayings get big play. On posters and mugs and bumper stickers, tight little truths punch out ah-ah moments for us. I love bumping into a quote that gives me a short cut to experiencing another good moment. There's meaning in life when you pay attention to what's swirling around you for the taking at any given moment. Even when it's taped to the bumper of a car or printed on a mug that can hold you together during the worst of times.

So now you can go into bed. It's ok. Just bring that mug with you. If it doesn't have a smart meaningful saying on it, get a sharpie and write your own. If you're stuck on what to write, write this : *If I was happy all the time, this cup would runneth over and there'd be a mess to clean up.*

## **Party Pointers**

### ***The Work Party***

It's not really comfortable to have those words put together. It's like jumbo shrimp. Just because we name it, that doesn't mean it's in God's plan. Unless you are a member of a rock band, parties with work mates have social rules no matter how dot com you are. It's all driven by the morning after syndrome. When genies come out of the bottles at night they don't get stuffed back in the next day. What's done is done, what's said was said, what you wore is burned into the memories of everyone who saw you take it off. So it's not a bad thing to be slightly aware of yourself at work parties. It's just easier to think twice before over-sharing about the foot fungus that you inherited from your mother. Because the next day, even your closest colleague will spend valuable brain energy remembering your feet issue and not listening as closely to what you are saying in the moment.

I have to stop here and say that as a freelancer for most of my career, I have at times been envious of people going to work-related parties – especially around the winter holidays. I'd hear about cramped calendars with triple-booked nights requiring attendance at one work party to the next. I'd wonder what that would be like, what routes I would take to avoid Santa's sleigh, who I'd drag along. I'd find myself pushed up against the glass of a frosted window, party-hopping in my mind. Me, the stranger in black carrying the stuffed, pink dog. Me, the Asian businessman who photographed the food before he ate it. Me, the cougar chatting it up with the bartender while stealing olives. Me, master of disguise party crasher.

A while back, before I had this twitch, I went to a work party thrown by a small production company for which I had done some consulting. I stayed outside in my car for a long time, parked in front of the house. I was nervous. When I finally got hungry enough to go inside, the scene startled me. There were only about sixteen people, most of whom I had met over the months I had worked on the product launch. They were all in varying states of decay. I had two choices it seemed. The first was to get each person to record a video message to themselves on my phone, so I could send it to them the next morning, or ask for a small fee not to. The second was to go in the kitchen and find better food than what was out on the table. I opted for the second choice. Boundaries were lacking in me. Going through cabinets, I made my way to back to the fridge and settled on cut veggies that hadn't been served. I felt like those cut veggies. Raw, in need of dip. As it turned out, the host came in and showed me this fondue situation that I had failed to see. I was eating what he was about to serve with 20 different cheeses blended together. He kind of snarled at me. I snarled back. I assisted in the fondue presentation, as if it was all choreographed ahead of time. I had a job. I felt like I was one of them. A worker with a job. I wished the night would last forever.

### ***Party after a Funeral***

I know, right? But humor is God's ibuprofen for any sad, swelling heart. There's no place it can't find a home. Timing is everything, also true for finding parking. It's all about insertion into a space that's asking for it. When my best friend Todd lost his mother in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, there was a gathering afterwards. Some people didn't go the cemetery, they just came to the house to pay their respects, eat and leave. Some people were dedicated to the whole post-funeral immersion. You might say *party* is the wrong word but – at least by Jewish standards of the 1970's – it was a party because it had food, brown carpet and kvetching.

Todd and I were the first to the table. As is tradition, there was a bowl of hard-boiled eggs, to symbolize the cycle of life. We both put one on each of our plates, and mine immediately fell off and started rolling around on the floor. I followed it, trying to catch it like a mouse. People started laughing – the first happy sounds

that to emerge from that street address for many months. I didn't want the laughter to stop so I made a bit of a deal about catching the errant egg. I called forth the spirits of Chaplin and Lucille Ball to guide my young body in a raucous fight for the egg's capture. When I finally claimed victory, the room felt lighter and I finally had the stomach to eat.

The Irish lay claim to inventing the party of all lifetime parties – the one at a wake. Sometimes they have the body in full view, as if it's just a passed-out guest in the corner, which is many ways it is, I suppose. They have music and group singing and drinking till happy red noses drop down and burrow into doubled chins. What's not to celebrate if death is a ride to a better place and a good pal of yours just got there? It's the more painful too-young-to-die deaths that make post-parties feel like walking on hot coals. It's just better to get those over with fast so you don't need to feel that searing pain any longer than you have to.

Misery loves company. So gathering to share some pain is a good plan but one with unpredictable results. Wasn't it *The Big Chill* that got us all hankering for a good death among us? I'm not claiming to be a fan of loss, especially when it's a person and not my keys. I've gone to too many post-funeral gatherings to wonder about them. They're raw to begin with but then offer fertile ground for something expansive to happen. A conversation that might be a game-changer. They happen there, at those kinds of parties where mortality takes a seat at the head of the table.

Parties after funerals aren't the kind you mark on your calendar ahead of time. They happen suddenly and call upon our compassion and our courage to show up and be sad if we need to be sad. They also get us out of our comfort zone and into a space that's almost otherworldly. Someone has left us. We'll never see them again. We don't know much more than that. But we feel like we're supposed to. Faith hovers around the room, over the cold cuts, waiting for you to choose to have some of it, too.

### ***Party for a life milestone like marriage, birth, sobriety, new wing in home***

When you're forced to celebrate something good about somebody else and not about yourself, it's just annoying after about twenty minutes. Then somehow it's got to be about you again. So for the first generous twenty minutes, it's imperative that you understand the art of doting. There are several ways to lavish a loved one with praise so they know you really mean it when you say *Congratulations!!*

*You make me so proud – today I spoke your name during morning prayers.*

*I need to pinch myself and you at the same time, just to make sure it's all really happening and not one of my self-deceiving moments.*

*This whole thing makes me consider making you a favorite on my phone. I think it's time!*

*You look how you feel and that is just gorgeous.*

*I want more time with you alone. This party is great but I want to spoil you with something where it's just you, you, you.*

*Everyone here loves you and supports you. Are you able to hold space for your own abundance?*

*I'm so happy for you but for one thing – you have food in your teeth – right there. It's taking away from the glory.*

*It's so good to see you celebrating. Misery is so last year.*

*I just have to pull you aside to tell you that I, for one, feel so happy to see you so happy. Not everyone has that capacity. I'm just say'n.*

*You feel like family to me. In a good way.*

*It's your party but I can cry if you want me to.*

*Mazel tov is not strong enough. How do they say congrats in Welsh?*

*I'm really glad I came. This whole party reminds me of what life is really about. It's about celebrating milestones that mark a fleeting moment, that once gone, leaves long shadows of doubt about whether anything really has any meaning at all.*

*I knew this day would come. You kept on telling me!!!*

### **The Holiday Party**

Deck the halls with loaves of fishes. Trick or treat me like garbage. Why is this night like all other nights? Fasting is for poor people. New Year's Eve is reserved for exhausted, post-season elves.

Parties thrown for any holiday do give caterers and valet companies a much needed break from the economic downturn. That's the good news. But holiday parties are force-fed celebrations. There's nothing magical or subtle when a host kisses you under a sprig of strategically placed mistletoe. It's just unsanitary.

But to be fair to happy people everywhere, I know that holidays by definition are cause for pause to note the passage of time, and the meaningful traditions that run us all ragged. And there's nothing worse than a Grinch. So we must all just shut up and show up. The biggest challenge of attending holiday parties is figuring out what to bring as a token of appreciation. Here are some thoughts:

A pineapple with a tag that says *I used to be a bottle of wine.*

Light bulbs with a note saying *We might break some tonight so just in case – I brought these.*

A big ball of yarn with a note saying *I once was lint, now I am yarn. Make my life whole again. Knit me into your dreams.*

The audiobook of Joseph Campbell in conversation with Bill Moyers with a stickie note on it that says *Let's Get Crazy.*

Designer measuring cups.

Pistachios. They give people something to do with their hands.

A lint brush. Just start using it on people to show the hosts how useful a gift it is.

A baby. People love to get babies.

Walk in empty handed but tell them that a guest left their car lights on but you went ahead and turned them off – no problem. That makes you look like a hero.

### ***Ways to get out of a party once you've shown up and hate your life for doing so***

You know that if you must leave, then leave. None of us are so important that we have to actually break into a conversation with the host, pull her aside and say, *"Sweet girl, this is so great but I have to go blah blah blah."* Just go. She wouldn't have noticed you leaving. But here you are, tapping her shoulder calling attention to yourself for leaving. In this case, just whisper quickly in her ear, *I don't want to waste your time with a story. Get back to your guests and I'll leave a message on your phone.* Then you call the phone and leave this message:

*Ok first off – coming to your party was on my radar all week. A beacon to look forward to, sort of. You know that I have this thing about parties. Part anxiety, part euphoria. It's like being a fan of the Beatles and waiting at the airport for their arrival when you have a horrid fear of flying. Emotions get jumbled, right? Anyway, so glad I came. You looked happy, alive, giddy almost. The adrenaline of lots of company – such a drug. I know, I know. But me? I came, saw you, saw some people and then just bottomed out. I tried to go into your bedroom to maybe change from my clothes into yours thinking that might put a zing in things for me, but your bedroom door was locked. Funny, right? I assume it was locked from the inside. Who – pray tell!! – was in there? Or did you not even know? Girly, wash your sheets just in case. You never know. That's the thing about hosting parties. You can't be everywhere all at once. You have to make choices. It's kind of a*

*stress. My place is too small for a big party and you know sometimes I'm grateful. I'm tempted to try to squeeze people and go for it but my better half – that would be my shrink – says it's better to keep gatherings small so I can go deep and connect and feel inspired. It's the shallow party talk that just sinks me so low sometimes. I'm not proud of it. I think that it's a bore that I get bored. Why can't I vibe like you? You are such a viber – so ok with everything as it is. Light, heavy, fleeting, messy – you'd make a good mediator. Me? I just like to dive and get into it, and big parties make me feel like a chicken bone in a bouquet of daisies. Just out of place and exposed to my core. When I know the truth is no one gives a shit about any of that. They are way happier than me. I'm a fucking mess. So I left. I left your party because I am a fucking mess. But in a good way. I really don't want to change that because that is from where I sprout forth each day – mess to non-mess. It's deep and delicious and hellish. It's why you love me. And thank you for loving me, for inviting me. I hope this message wasn't too long. It hasn't beeped yet. Oh! I forgot to tell you – I brought you a pineapple. I left it outside on your porch, next to the ashtray. You should eat it before it gets too soft. Love you.*

## **Money with Which We Buy**

My fingers feel heavy on the keyboard right now, as if they suddenly were told to do 25 more push-ups by an angry coach. It's not fatigue from typing. It's this topic. Money. I have to tackle it, make love to it, sacrifice it to the UFO that just came out of my dryer disguised as a rogue sock. To shy away from speaking of money sends a message that something about it makes me not flow like I flow when talking about quinoa. They both fortify, so what's the problem? No problem.

But it's not a bad idea to look at money as a sort of food. A staple. A building block for things delicious. Before we're old enough to earn money, we receive things bought with money by others, usually our parents and guardians. So we don't use cash that we didn't work for. Only the Tooth Fairy gives us money prematurely before we actually earn it. Losing a tooth is involuntary and not hard work that merits payment. Though some very poor kids pull out all their teeth at once to get the fairy's full payment ahead of time, foregoing the installments that help them learn how to save. It's a sad day in their histories when they are toothless and poor by their own blind faith in a fairy.

Pre-earning years are precious because although we have an awareness of money, it's not our job to work for it. Instead of getting cash or a paycheck, we play in sprinklers, stare at people who look different from us, and dream of lots of colored pens. We're unfettered, unmeasured, delightful imagination machines. In war zones, in ghettos, in opulent estates – no matter where pre-earning kids squat down to look at a two flies mating, they don't measure themselves by their earning power. They can't because the variable of money is not in the equation yet. Instead, they measure themselves by other kinds of currency, which we'll talk

about later, after you've finally shared some of that salad you've been picking at while reading this.

Paper routes and baby-sitting jobs start creeping in too early in our development. Once a kid works for her dollars, then she finally gets the value of them from a time/effort perspective. But she still has not figured out her own self-worth sans money in her pocket. That's why I'm wobbly on this topic. Self-worth is the lamb slaughtered in the marketplace everyday. It's a yucky sight to see over and over again, like Marcia Brady breaking her nose from the football slammed in her face, over and over again, because the editor of that episode had died and left his dead head pressing down on the loop key. Self-worth has to be established as early as possible – before anyone starts measuring their net worth. Didn't Marcia know that?

Look at coupons. You cut them out and present them to the cashier. She snaps her gum and scans the bar code. You go home an inch happier because through your effort of snipping and saving that piece of paper in your bottomless handbag, you saved some money. But you didn't make money. So your effort was deemed successful by what you didn't lose rather than by what you earned. That's actually very evolved. It's the kind of inner dialogue that leads to a pat on the back and a nod into the mirror at yourself. You know other people even dumber than you clip coupons 24/7. But they're not in the mirror right now. Just you.

What's hard to quantify is what is most important to qualify. If money and the lack of it makes us feel shitty about ourselves, it seems obvious to change the conversation, so we never equate the amount of money we earn or have saved with our self-worth. If I was a guru – which I claim not to be – I'd take this moment to ask you to go in your wallet, take out all the cash you have, and put it in an envelope. I'd ask you to seal it, and write the exact amount enclosed – no matter how small or large – on the front of the envelope and then mail the envelope to me, with your return address. I would then write you a certificate of gratitude – hand written, not digital – that affirms your abundance as it is connected to mine in perpetuity. I would then ask you how it feels to have this unified fiscal bond with me and encourage you to remember this warm feeling as it flows through your feet, loins and scapulas. I'd then welcome this ritual into our space on a weekly basis, to root us, plant us, establish a trust. I'd confess that banks would never return real interest to you. I would truly be interested *in* you. And as our bonds grew ever stronger, we'd call the trust Sunrise Love Trust and build a temple to house our glory. Our mutual self-worth would have extensions that reached twice around the globe. It would be like the earth itself was enveloped by our immeasurable wealth. This is really what I would do if I was a guru.

But I'm just a parched shepherd looking for a coke to drop from the sky. I'm on a quest to really get the gold ring around the rosie and a pocket full of shards of glass. I'm stretched across the pews of a different church, one that has spires of

liquid fire and frozen peas. Are you scared right now because you actually just understood that? Don't fight how weird you are. Hedge fund experts are way weirder. So are bills that say THIS IS NOT A BILL.

If money has you freaked out about stability and the lack there of, than redefine stability. I read that the average retired person has \$14,000 in their bank account right now. What the fuck kind of security is that? It's clearly now time for the wild wonderful world of be-nice-to-me. That's what's next up for all of us. Money allows people to use other faces to represent them (Franklin, Hamilton). In this new paradigm, we have to show up and get taken care of differently. The barter world is back but plugged in and turned up. Just surf the web for 4.2 seconds. It's organized and happening and a bright sign for the future. I feel like this next phase of our lives promises to be the most beautiful because we'll be forced to step out from behind our net worth and engage with our self-worth. You read it here.

### **Animals as Pets**

True, I used to dissect dead animals when I was a kid. Except for the opossum I *thought* was dead. I grew up on the Jersey shore and had a half an acre of land to explore. There were birds and rabbits and boys. There were fish that circled around and around our pond pretending they were on a chase for some higher good. We had frogs that showed up in the early 80's with big hair. There was something wild about my backyard that inspired in me a life-long love of things with faces that couldn't speak but said so much. Like potatoes, for instance.

I am a pet owner and have been one most of my life. Dogs have been my beast of choice. Loyal, soft, achingly honest, dogs have given me the chance to experience some of my most human moments. Hurray for dogs. Hurray for Finnegan, the dog wonder who breaks my heart because I love her so much. I love her like I love baths, eavesdropping, vanilla scented candles, Bjork, and squash baked with maple syrup and butter. Finnegan came to me as a rescue in 2008. She has a scar on her face from a wire that tied her mouth shut. Yes, I want to cause pain to the people who did that. I place an ad under 'missed connections' everyday asking them to meet me at the corner of Dante's Inferno and Hades Drive because I have a package for them. But Finnegan holds no grudges. She is the pit bull that could. She loves being alive the way waves love to crash. She is positive energy built up to explode every time she sees me. So it's no wonder I hesitate to make that appointment with the taxidermist now. It's premature. But it's on my mind all the time.

I know that the experience of loving animals is good for mental and physical well-being. But some people go entire lifetimes without having a relationship with a rodent, pig, bug, cat, horse, beaver, banker, dog, or bird. If you're one of these people, I know you have your reasons. I think it's better you don't find an animal with whom to work out your stuff. It would be result in abuse and resentment – on

their part and yours. But sometimes the relationships we have with animals happen to us, we don't choose them. It's those circumstances that we can trust. If it's meant to happen to you, it's going to happen.

So for those of you who had no intention to adopt the furry thing that just hopped onto your lap, there is an art to welcoming what fate obviously has in store for you. At least calling it art keeps it elusive and expansive enough to take many forms that will make things less hellish for you.

***Their poop.*** Everyone poops. Except Sigourney Weaver in all the *Alien* movies. But every other creature relieves themselves at least once a day. The best way to train any sentient pooping being on where to go is to use newspaper. The stock listings section is best. What's printed there is nothing too personal – just numbers and symbols that proclaim, disclaim and confuse. A little mess on top won't hurt NASDAQ's feelings. I had a beagle puppy growing up who helped us choose our investments in a very specific albeit scatological way.

You point to the newspaper and say to the dog or pig – “Read!” You need to say this every time you sense they are looking to drop a load. “Read!” Point to the newspaper. “Read!” Point to the newspaper. Eventually they will poop exactly where you point. They will also actually learn how to read. This is true. If you have toddlers around during this training process, it isn't a winning situation for them. Down the road, your kid will relieve herself every time she gets a homework assignment in English class. It's something to do with Pavlovian conditioning. Keep them away from these training sessions.

As your animal matures and you go for long strolls, there is no escaping the requirement of Poop Patrol. You have to pick it up. With a bag or an old sweater. Just don't leave it on the ground. Karma will spin right back around and whack you on the head. You'll be stepping in random piles of poo for the rest of your life. Poo will track you, find you, and nuzzle deep inside the grooves of your soles. Pick up your animal's poop. I will support you in this by coming on training walks with you. I love walking. It's like running but with dignity. Even, graceful strides. Long, deep breaths. Erect posture with a sense of knowing where you're going. I'll come with you, we'll talk – we'll even stop and smell the flowers. But only after we pick up the poop. The cool thing about the exercise of Poop Patrol is the deep knee bend. It's fluid movement that can strengthen your butt and thighs and improve your core balance. We'll study this movement through the lens of isometrics where teeny tiny muscles are the rock stars that can make you beautiful, curvy, and delicious. So this is why having an animal matters. It's all part of the multi-tasking trend of getting lots of things done at once. Poop Patrol and body sculpting.

***Emotional attachment.*** Unless you have a horse or an elephant who might out-live you, caring for a pet is like having a pact with the Devil. You know they're going to die eventually and you'll do anything to not think about it. You'll learn how to lay tile, join a Gregorian Choir, take up rock climbing – anything to take your mind off that awful day when the sky goes black, butter turns to stone, and all the softness of that unconditional love is gone like a whiff of perfume. One minute so sweet and the next so prickly with the reality that mere humans will never replace animal love. Is it really better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all? Yes. For the simple reason that loving an animal allows us to fall into a zone where our most basic sensibilities are at play. Our sense of touch, wonder, warmth, and loyalty. In this landscape, our strange human boundaries informed by protocol or fear have no place. Here, we tumble and toss balls. Here, we talk, knowing the answers back will never come. Here, we rub bellies and ears for hours, while the rain outside gives us the excuse we need. Loving an animal is about listening to them sleep at night and wondering if they dream like we dream. There's no telling how this impacts how we love other people. I know that for me, there have been times when my dog reminded me of my capacity to love. I needed to know that – more at certain times than others. Who doesn't?

Animals are not like children. But they involve the same responsibilities: school, food, beds, doctors, consistency, discipline, love. They don't write you cards that make you feel a profound DNA-driven connection to that brilliant face staring up at you for a response. Animals as pets connect us to a bigger ecosystem of caring, not a food chain. We love them up and eat them up in a different way.

In the best of worlds, animals would be among us in a more organic way. I know my friends in the Masai Mara of Kenya would laugh at this. They live among the animals – not the other way around. All things to all people ... to all animals.

### **Getting Heard; Listening Hard**

Emoticons are replacing words. Texts are replacing talking. Soon kissing will be too much and we'll just wave. So many pundits are out there talking about communication protocols in the new digital age. Shut up, shut up. Don't pretend to know what is best for everyone. Just admit that you are riding a wave of confusion and cashing in on it. That's honest.

Let me do a communication audit for you or your company. Sit still. Hold on. It will be fun and worth every penny you spend. I'm not claiming to know more than you about the plumbing of your network. Conversations between you and whomever are going on right now, I'm not privy to them. Wikileaks is. I applied for a job there because I thought I'd like to be part of an international spy network. They sent me a tweet back saying *@PardesTweets you are wearing the wrong color for your*

*complexion and no, you can't be a spy because you sneeze too loud.* They were right on both counts. I shut my computer quickly, realizing that it's true—the camera is always on even if we think it's off.

Most of us have two communication styles – one reserved for friends and family and the other for the outside world, conversations with business people, associates, public officials, dry cleaners and customer service centers in India. You can say that the latter is more formal than the former. But tone can be horribly misconstrued today, depending upon the means through which you choose to communicate. We have choices. We can tweet, text, send a Facebook message, write an email, leave a voice mail, talk on the phone, Skype, mail a letter, buy a billboard, have a face-to-face verbal conversation, speak through a mediator, or meet in the avatar world and have cyber sex instead of talking. With all these variables to consider, it's really important to deconstruct the elements at play for each choice. Then you can take responsibility for how you get yourself heard.

**The Tweet:** It's a public display of limited words that protects people with small vocabularies. In fact, if you use big words, people judge you for not knowing all the cool abbreviations and emoticons. It's not a good mode in which to ask for personal things like a divorce but it is good if you want to let someone know you're 'following' them. Which could be powerful and creepy.

**The Text:** Tones and intentions of texts are all too frequently misconstrued. You usually sound abrupt and impatient. Words in texts are also auto-corrected by the evil wizards in your phone. When you type the words "been wondering" the wizards change them to "bend worms." I think that might be enough of a reason not to text while driving. Especially to your gardener. You might land up paying for his time trying to bend worms instead of prune bushes. Texting should be reserved only for sexting.

**The Facebook Message:** I really have trouble wrapping my head around this one. I have been accused of being non-responsive because I didn't answer a FB message. FB is for pleasure – not productivity. Unless you are selling things via a FB page. Maybe that is what I should do. Note to self. But FB messages should not be of an urgent nature. So if you are trying to reach your doctor to learn about the results, it's going to be weeks before she checks those messages and you could already be dead by then.

**The Email:** Since the mid-90's, when fire and wheels were just off the drafting tables, I began emailing. I was so excited to show my friends what a good writer I was. Before that time, they never knew how indulgent I was, how many words I could blast out in 40 seconds. The email felt like liquid language floating down the digital river of possibility. It still does. It

can be for grandma and for the grand marshal of the KKK. Just don't hit send BEFORE you re-read and make sure you mean what you say, because people these days use emails for and against you – they are admissible as evidence. BUT email is still not guaranteed to arrive or to then be read. You cannot hate someone for not getting back to you about an email you sent that was really important. Emails get lost in spam filters. They get forgotten when a more important email comes in right after them. Emails are great ways to keep track of conversations but they are not really conversations. They are bits of code for what you intend to say if you could have a one-sided, face-to-face conversation as controlled and articulate as what you've put down in writing. Emails are wet nurses. They deliver the milk but it's not really *from your titty*. People under twenty would not agree with this. Their birth announcements were sent out via an email blast. But for the rest of us, emails still have digital uncertainties that cause us to pause before we assume the recipient really truly got the message.

**The Voicemail:** Leaving a voicemail causes some people to break out in hives or sweat or both. Think about it: the beep is really a big red neon flashing sign that says NOW RECORDING YOU SO STRAIGHTEN YOUR EYEBROWS AND SPEAK UP. Once you start talking, it's the start of a message that will live on in possible perpetuity. All the uhms and pauses and bad ways of saying what you think you meant to say are captured. There's lots of pressure to get it right. The default for leaving a voicemail is to never leave a detailed message. Just say who you are and that you're looking forward to speaking with them in person. You never know the context in which they'll be listening to your message, so the less information you leave, the better chance they'll call you back. Not knowing the details in this case is better. The less-is-more theory applies. Unless you are on a plane that is going down, in which case, please speak for as long as you can or at least until the beep.

**The Talk on the Phone:** Some people give really good phone. Their voices inhabit that sonic space just perfectly and their words swirl around the crevices of your ear like honey on a stick. You could listen to them speak for days. It's a dirty secret you should keep to yourself if you really love the voice of a superior – a boss or a mentor. Any aural pleasure you get from them should be countered by your recognition that they are not speaking to pleasure you. Boundaries on the phone are weird. People don't have to look you in the eye when they say things so they might be more bold or forceful and take risks that they normally wouldn't when you're staring them down. If things get too heated, suggest a meeting face-to-face to create some accountability. Talking on the phone with great friends can go on for hours for most of us. But if you have a high-pitched annoying voice, you should never talk to any of us on the phone. Text,

email, anything – just don't make us listen to the mistake that happened to your vocal chords. Whiney voices are nails-on-the-chalk-board bad. But here's the real power of the telephone call we can never forget: in this age of far-away people whom we love or close-by people who are shut-ins, there's nothing like picking up the phone to make sure someone knows you were just thinking about them. No cyber moment can come close to the sound of your voice in their ears saying, *Hi, I was just thinking about you and wanted to call and say hello. Can you lend me money?*

**The Skype call:** There's no rule that says you have to turn on your camera. You can keep it off and say that the connection is better without the picture. Don't tell your caller that you're in the middle of doing a full-body oatmeal mask. The wonder of Skype is that it's free and combines the pleasure of talking with typing messages too if you are crazy into multi-tasking. I like to Skype, lift weights, sew, and clean the toothpaste spots off my bathroom mirror all at the same time. The population most affected by the wonder of Skype is the elderly. Suddenly they are seeing their grandkids doing a show for them in the tub in real-time. It's heartwarming. Skype should be used to replace first dates. It's cheaper and instantaneous. If you're flirting with someone online and want to meet, do it through Skype first. Get dressed as you would if you were going out. But like so many news anchors do, you can wear your pajama bottoms if you remember NOT to get up for a full-body view. Remember to turn off the camera if you have an itch. First dates on Skype can be playful, deep, and surprisingly provocative. You can do finger puppet shows using socks or napkins. You can control the lighting so the date does not see your scars. Skype is sanitary. It's safe sex. It's something we always knew would be invented. We waited patiently for it to come. And now that it's here, we're already asking for the scratch and sniff model to be released. Can't we be happy with what we've got?

**The Handwritten Note in the Mail:** It's just about the most thoughtful thing we can do these days. It shows effort. It shows you can afford a stamp. It gives people a peek into how bad your penmanship has gotten since computers barged into our lives. E-cards will never trump real cards. They are another example of click and buy and hope for the best. Real, handwritten birthday cards make a huge emotional splash on the person receiving them. They show a thoughtful side of you. The side that took the time to browse through a ton of cheesy cards to find the one card that had just the perfect tone. I have to remember how I feel when I get a card or letter to remind me to pay it forward. But I rate a three on the scale of one to ten. I don't send out enough thank yous and thinking of yous. If you are reading this guide, I am so grateful that you spent the money and took the time. I need to show my gratitude with a card and a stamp and a mwah lip-mark on the envelope. What is your snail-mail address?

**The Billboard Message:** It's been done before. Talk about public displays of affection. I read about a guy who bought a billboard to ask his girlfriend to marry him. Rumor has it that years after they married, she bought space on that same billboard to post a huge picture of him having sex with a young girl. The sign said, "My mistake." Good for her. I think when someone has been ignoring you after you've tried so hard to reach them, renting a billboard on their usual route to work is not a bad idea. It's expensive. You could probably take a vacation for a month with that same cash, but some situations call for big actions. I've been thinking about buying a billboard near my old high school. It would be more of a warning sign. I'd post my face with the words: *Don't eat alone in the lunchroom. It will lead to a lifetime of indigestion.*

**The Face-to-Face talk:** It's becoming a thing of the past, this in-person, live, I-feel-your-breath-on-my-face kind of conversation. I yearn for it. The body odor, the brush of the gesticulating hand against my arm or thigh. It's never by accident. Touching while talking is the penetration that sends us reeling into connection with each other. It reminds us that we're not mannequins in the window. We're bone and skin and curls of real hair. We're not the words we speak. They are the mere puffs of breath we take in an attempt to make life less confusing. The dense matter that is our bodies – when they gather in the same physical space – is powerful chemistry at play. Any day of the week, I would choose talking with someone in person over any other way. It allows for kinesthetic possibilities. It adds all the other senses into the mix. I'm not even touching the huge topic of body language. I'm just loving the basic power of people physically together and the gravitational, chemical, eye-to-eye contact at work. It's just gorgeous, relentlessly honest and bigger than our words can ever be.

**The Mediator Talk:** I've been this person – the mediator. Yes, I am no expert. But I have been asked to help people and groups resolve issues by being the in-control, reasonable one. It seems like when people have gotten really, really far from each other's perspectives and contexts, communication is like walking through mud or sludge with shards of glass mixed in. This is when email, texts, roses, face-to-face-in-the-parking-lot moments just don't resolve things. It's important to trace back to when things got really messed up. It's usually around the time that people stopped talking and started relying too heavily on emails and texts. So this all comes full circle.

I'm a big fan of asking questions. I even have a podcast called Get Smart Radio which is all about asking questions in front of a live, drinking audience. If you're confused about how someone would like to hear from you – whether it's for business or love – ask them what they want. It's so refreshing to be given a

choice and not just get what you get. I recently learned that a friend I've known for years really hates the phone. She can't stand talking for more than three minutes at a time. It explains so much to me because I always felt like she was distracted, perhaps multitasking while we were talking. And she was. Not to be rude, but to deal with her annoyance that we were on the phone. I think she built a house once. These days, I just pop over when I want to talk with her. I nuke myself a sweet potato and have a good, fat chat. No text, no call. Just a knock, knock.

## **Groping with Goals**

As I veer towards the end of *Volume One* of this guide, I can't help but pet the elephant in the living room. The topic of goals – imagining them, setting them, reaching them – is a mammoth topic. Goals are the atoms that make up the molecules of success. Without goals, I think I would have been institutionalized twenty-five years ago. Goals – no matter what their nature and no matter how small or large – are as important as oxygen. They make our brains and souls expand. Before they manifest, they're like plants in little pots all around our feet. We can't walk an inch without being careful not to squash one. They need our attention so they can reach that part of the sky that has their name already written on it. If you believe in fate, that is.

Nobody knows what's going on inside your head, what angels and demons are fighting for time at the lectern of your conscience. It doesn't matter how many responsibilities are on your plate today and for the next ten years. Your mind imagines other things besides the obvious things or the safe things. So you can have kids, a partner, a religion, and a job. Or you can have none of those things and be splashed full of paint in a sun-drenched studio in Whitefish, Montana. Or you may have disappeared inside a mountain cave to think for three years. Goals are passports to keep you traveling and growing no matter what context you are currently in. Goals are free for the making every day.

Before I get too deep into this, I've got to answer that knock on the door about attention span and focus. So many of us say, off-the-cuff, "*I'm so ADD.*" It's becoming the universal excuse for forgetting things, for explaining your look of boredom, for pretending to be so brilliant that your own mind distracts you from paying attention to other, external things, like someone talking to you. Attention Deficit Disorder has joined organic food in the topics du jour. Yoga sits between the two saying, *You can have both as long as you do me in between.* It sounds sexy when it's put that way. It's obvious that so many of us who multitask chalk up our scattered behaviors to being part of global warming or something. But there's nothing external about our losing our attention spans. It comes from too many noises, too much chaos inside ourselves. It's like there's a big farmers' market going on in there. I'm not saying I know how to send the trucks away so

that there's just one carrot left on the ground. But it's clear to me that that lone carrot is a good starting point. Say hello to a goal. It's even shaped like a pointer.

So goals require focus. From point A – the inception, to point Z – the realization. This is nothing new, but nothing said in the guide really is. Why did you just point that out now?

### **The Nature of Your Goal**

I'm standing on the edge of your bed right now, bouncing slowly up and down, like I'm kneading the dough of your mattress. Let's say your goal is to get me off of your bed. I look defiantly back at you. There's no way I'm stopping. It's too fun, and aerobic to boot which is definitely helping me reach one of my goals, making sure I have thirty minutes of aerobic exercise every day. So why give this example? Sometimes, goals we set are not goals at all. They are reactions to things we want to change. Their nature is reactive, not proactive. Before you saw me pouncing all over your bed, you had no goal to get me off of it. That goal was formed upon your seeing me up here acting like an idiot. When you set your eye on a goal, make sure that the attainment of the goal is not solely dependent upon the behavior of others. It's a horrible starting point that makes time feel like peanut butter and your sense of forward movement severely compromised. Goals that are initially wrapped around the ill-conceived actions of others should be avoided. I may never get off your bed. Ever. I'm not saying you can't try to get me off the bed. I'm just framing this example to make sure the goals you set can be driven by your gut – things you want from inside you – not from external circumstances that take your attention far away from what is really worthy of your time.

We all need help reaching our goals. That doesn't mean you need to share them with a coach or a spouse even. It just means that you need to 'give it up to the universe' a little – as they say in more spiritual circles. The karma of goals is really interesting. Putting it out there really does bring something back to you. It's the law of attraction. Or call it whatever you like. It's something I am just learning about myself. I wished I had learned it sooner. I have flown solo on so many things all my life and I could have used a bit more providence in my routines. Thus my wanting to scream this from my rooftop now.

I live in the dream-making capitol of the world. Los Angeles is filled with some of the most driven people I have ever met. It's why I moved here in 2009 – for the people, their energy. What they say about LA being a tough town is true on so many levels. But life is tough. People are busy. Here in LA, energy is currency. If you have good energy, you can really find your place among things and you can start on a slow and steady trajectory forward. I think this is true for everywhere else, too. But it's fun and trendy to talk about Los Angeles.

Goal posts in sports are good markers for us. Men and women run towards them and usually fall when they get there. Reaching goals is not about grace – it's about letting go of the idea that balance reigns supreme. It doesn't. Messy moments make things happen. Think about the sports plays that you've seen that made your heart thump. Bodies tumbling over each other, grunting from excruciating effort. Every millimeter of every movement counts when stretching towards the end zone. It's the will that triumphs even over expectation. You might expect to cross the finish line after running a marathon feeling a little out of breath, waving and smiling. But you landed up shitting all over yourself eight miles back and you're now crossing that finish line with more guts and glory than you ever could have imagined. Sheer will pushed you over that line – a will you could have never expected to conjure. This is why the business world frequently uses sports analogies to motivate their sales teams. They are appealing to our basic belief that reaching a goal is glorious and worthy of monumental sacrifice. I don't work for one of these companies, but I've been to their sales meetings as the voice-of-god announcer. I've said things like "Introducing Salesman-of-the-Year and all-around team player ..." Reaching goals can get you announced, for one thing.

**Identifying a Goal:** If you don't set goals, life feels like an ocean with no islands or fish or boats. It feels too soggy to take shape. It feels too easy to give up on. Goals keep you believing that you are alive and have density and mass and meaning. This is why the process of identifying a goal needs to become second nature – so it happens all the time. Goals today, goals tomorrow. Setting a big goal is like shining a floodlight on your path for years to come. It sets a course for you, it keeps the roaches away because they hate light, and it gives you ideas about who you might become down the road. Little goals are like the brooms on that path. Without them, you can lose your way among the debris of lazy bones. Attaining little goals paves the way for the bigger ones to be reached, too.

*Little Goals to achieve in the very moment I set them:*

stretch, floss, read the news, puff that pillow, wear red, contact my local representative, eat nuts, find out what that noise was, turn around and walk the other way, thank God, swear-off playing with my food, hold my breath, stop checking Facebook, pass the salt, sit up straighter, take off my socks, hum Lennon's *imagine*, begin the beguine, open a window

*Goals that aren't huge but take some time to achieve:*

convince the NRA to pay for quinoa crops, get invited to be on a board, learn how to change my guitar strings without cursing, take my neighbor's garbage out to the curb to prove I'm not a bad person, stop making any faces that remind people of Jim Carey, find out why my toes sometimes really ache, leave well enough alone for a bit

*Goals that are long-term and give me a reason to live:*

shape government, open a savings account, prove that the Chia pet I grew

as a kid was really that huge tree that fell near my house in Hurricane Sandy, love a pony so hard it becomes a horse, find an agent, learn how to play the piano, find Nemo and not just talk about it, love deeper than I have ever imagined, hire a personal shopper for a weekend spree, make enough money to give really meaningful gifts to all the people who've been kind to me

Have you ever climbed to the top of your head, opened up the moon roof and screamed yourself into existence? It's what happens when you reach a goal.

### **Follow the Bouncing Ball**

I just got off the phone with my friend Ali. We've known each other since I was seventeen. We met at a baby shower. I was so bored there that I found myself slowly slicing cuts into a couch with a cheese knife. Ali was about ten years older than me and was clearly more engaged with the people in the room. She was friends with the pregnant lady who was my boss from the magazine at which I was interning. By the end of the shower, I was so grateful for Ali. She was bubbly and pretty. She had a good-witch energy about her which I loved. Five years into our friendship, I set her up on a blind date with a British guy I knew from my days as a tour guide down at the South Street Seaport on the edge of Manhattan. I went on that first date with them. At around 10 pm, I found my way to the door and the rest is history. They've been married for over twenty years and have a one-day-she-will-be-president-of-some-cool-company daughter. All because Ali and I met at a shower to which I barely made it in the first place. Sliding doors, colliding fates.

I know that those I've met in my life have undoubtedly shaped my life. And vice-versa. Our degrees of separation are so small that it's a lie to say I don't care. I do care about what you think. I ask you to tell me and I listen hard even when you see me cringing. I want to know about why you'd rather not talk about where you grew up. I know you think I'm over-thinking. I hear you when you say I should focus on one thing for more than a few weeks. I know you wonder why having your son has taken so much out of you. I can feel your anxiety about those lumps. I wonder if you sleep holding a pillow. I hope you see past my jokes. I see your photographs. They are beautiful. I watch you move around in your kitchen. The renovations were worth it. I know you didn't make it big as an actor but the skin in which you live is so you, I can't imagine you stepping out of it for anyone. I wish you wouldn't assume I'm going to figure it all out. I might not. I might need some of your sweet white lies to get me though.

It's was a sweet day when I realized that empowerment had nothing to do with grabbing hold of power. I was in my teens. I had written a song that I wanted my high school choir to sing for graduation in front of seven hundred parents and

teachers. I couldn't write the music down with the proper notes but I had the chords and the words. I sat with the choir director and sang him the song. Mr. Truntz set me out on an amazing journey that day. He said the song was the perfect tone for the occasion and agreed to teach it to the chorus. That's the day I stopped thinking about the symbols, the codes, the manuals, and the holy grail of how it's done. That's the day I knew something about my approach to life was going to keep me in the game for as long as I was willing to put myself out there. For every practical nugget of knowledge I've learned since that day, I've added too nuggets of creative thinking to go around it. A little method, a lot of magic.

I'm sitting on my couch right now. I'm not going to cut little scratches into it with a cheese knife. I don't even own a cheese knife. But I am going to put this computer away and pick up my ukulele for awhile. It's the perfect instrument to create the soundtrack for a successful life. A little bit of sad with a lot of happy. Just one finger can change a minor chord to a major chord. Just like that.

