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# Good to Me



***a roadmap to personal peace and power  
in hard times***

***shannon curtis***

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***Shannon Curtis***

**Good to Me**  
**A Roadmap to Personal Peace and Power**  
**In Hard Times**

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“Take It If You Want It,” “Sandstorm,” “From the Inside Out,” “Little Soldier,” “Be With What Is,” “Sweat & Butterflies,” “The Silent Sea,” “I Am,” “Serenity,” and “Good to Me” written by Shannon Curtis and published by Shannon K (ASCAP); lyrics reprinted by permission.

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# ***Introduction***

{ Early September 2022 }

Take a little trip into the recent past with me.

It's December of 2021. We're in the second winter of the coronavirus pandemic, and even though we've had life-saving vaccines for several months, we're facing a new, even more contagious strain of the virus, which seems to be eluding some of our antibody protections. That means we're still not hanging out with friends indoors, we're isolated much like we were the previous winter, and we're trying to scrape together a test-and-isolate strategy so we can at least spend some time with family over the holidays. We are so *over* this pandemic—which is so clearly not yet over us.

We're also, in December 2021, still less than a year past the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, during which members of a rising fascist movement in the United States tried to overturn the results of a free and fair election, in order to keep the authoritarian leader of their movement in power, in violation of the rule of law and of the Constitution. Contrary to what we thought might happen when we watched those unprecedented and horrific events unfold on

January 6th, the leaders of the party from which that movement arose have *not* repudiated the attempt at overthrowing our democracy. Rather, they have in fact doubled down on their strategy to suppress people's votes, gerrymander districts, and capture the courts with unqualified partisan judges friendly to their cause—all part of an effort to thwart democracy and establish minority rule.

We read pandemic-related news every day in December 2021, trying to keep ourselves informed, so that we can do what we can to keep ourselves and our fellow humans safe from a serious virus. We take in all the ongoing (and shocking) democracy-related news, too, so that we can stay up to date and do what little we can do about it, like calling our elected representatives to ask that they act urgently in defense of democracy.

And while we're keeping up to date with all of that, we also read stories about the accelerating climate crisis—dire predictions about where we're headed as a planet, and also coverage of real-time catastrophes in the form of unprecedented fires, floods, and famines—these catastrophes acting as undeniable evidence that some of the irreversible, global climate-related change is already on our doorstep.



*Perhaps healing ourselves is the first and best way that we can be of service to each other. Perhaps that's the smallest unit of measurement in the building blocks that will help us make a better world.*





All in all, life in December 2021 feels like a rolling, uncontrollable disaster. Like we accidentally ended up on the wrong cosmic timeline—one where a whole bunch of horrible things are happening that didn't have to happen, but for the greed and/or ignorance and/or tribalism of a minority of the population.

It's out of control. I wake up in the middle of the night churning it over in my mind. I feel helpless. Like when you try to scream in a dream and no sound comes out of your mouth.

And in the midst of all of this turmoil, which I'm experiencing in such a personal, visceral way ... I'm supposed to write a new album, because that's my job. And I'm practically paralyzed. *How am I supposed to open my heart and pour out its contents via music and lyrics in this state of mind?* Even if I manage to eke something out, what are the chances it'll be worth anything to the people who might listen to it, coming from someone as emotionally tapped as I am?

Also, when I consider the prospect of writing new music, it seems like a ridiculously insignificant act when compared to the real, big problems of our time. Like, who needs new songs to listen to when democracy is crumbling and the planet is on fire?

These are the thoughts in my head. And then—in a moment of welcome clarity, or inspiration, or something—it occurs to me: *what if I write my way through this emotional turmoil?* What if I pick up the tools I've previously used to find my peace and my agency, apply them to the circumstances that are currently distressing me and making me feel helpless, and funnel that personal work into my songwriting?

What I might end up with is a collection of songs that traces my own personal healing journey in this time. A journey that I obviously desperately need. And then I can share those songs with the people in my community, with the hope that they might see their experience reflected back to them—or even that they might use the songs to find their way to a healing journey of their own.

I realized, in December 2021, that perhaps the best way that I could be of service to my community in that moment might be to do some work toward healing myself—and then to use my own particular experiences and skills to hold the door open for others who need healing in this time, too.

Perhaps, more generally, healing ourselves is the first and best way that we can be of service to each other. Perhaps that's the smallest unit of measurement in the building blocks that will help us make a better world.



So, it's with that purpose in mind—amidst all of the ongoing chaos, turmoil, disappointment, and heart-break that are characterizing so much of our existence on this planet in this moment in history—that I offer in this book the results of that journey that I took last year to heal myself.

It was a step-by-step, intentional journey of nurturing my personal peace, of cultivating my personal power. It was the discovery and subsequent reinforcement of a commitment that I intend to make to myself every day—in both hard and easy times—to be Good to Me.



What you'll find in this book is a series of ten essays, ten sets of journal prompts, and the lyrics from ten songs.

The essays are drawn directly from the handwritten journal that I kept for this project over a period of about five months in the first half of 2022. You'll see that I've included in the subheading of each chapter title a general timestamp for the period in which each essay was written, so that you can place the entries in

the context of the real-world events that were happening at the time.

These essays were contemporaneous explorations of what I was thinking and feeling as I worked iteratively through my process of self-discovery. I shared them in real time with our community as I was writing them, and I have reproduced them in that same way in this book. So you'll see that, starting with Chapter 01, each essay is written in the present tense, despite often clearly having been written in the past—a real-time snapshot of my thoughts in that moment.

The essays are often word-for-word transcriptions from my journal—with a little grammatical massaging or formalizing here and there, in order to make the writing decipherable to readers other than the monkeys who live in my own brain.

The journal entries were my responses to a series of prompts I that I gave to myself, which were in turn inspired by principles in the Serenity Prayer, a mantra that has been a constant touchstone in my life since I began twelve-step recovery nearly eighteen years ago.

At the end of each essay, you'll find the song that resulted from the inner work I did on that step of the journey. You can read the song lyrics here in this book; and for an enhanced experience, you can use

the QR code that accompanies each song to listen to it on your smart device.

The most important reason for the inclusion of the journal prompts in this book is this: I want to invite you to use these prompts for yourself, in pursuit of your own personal journey through these concepts. Use them as you want, however you want. If you'd like some guidance about how to use them, I'll have some suggestions for you in the first chapter. But this is a choose-your-own-adventure invitation. There are no rules or expectations. There are only possibilities, which you'll unlock for yourself along the way.

I imagine that the particular circumstances that may be challenging your personal peace right now are wholly different than the circumstances that I identified in my struggle last year. We're all dealing with our own unique stuff, all of the time. So, while you'll read in the essays my personal responses to the prompts, the prompts themselves are not specific to any particular circumstance—they're generally applicable to any difficulty you might be facing, from the global and existential to the deeply private and personal.



One more thought before you get started:

You're reading this introductory chapter at the beginning of your journey; but I'm writing to you from the other side. *Hello, over there! It's me, waving to you from across the canyon.*

From this vantage point, I want to tell you that—even though the work was deep, personal, and at times difficult—I'm so glad I did it. It saved me this last year. It is still giving me grounding, perspective, direction, and even—wonderfully, impossibly—hope and joy. It's become a reliable companion as I make my way through a continuously fraught and beautiful existence in this ever-uncertain and gorgeously complex world.

I hope you'll experience something like that, too.

Holding the door open, with love—shannon



# **01 Thesis statement**

{ First of February 2022 }

Everything's on the edge. I feel it, every day.

In my teeth—I catch myself grinding  
through the days.

On my skin—pins and needles as I wonder how it's all  
going to work out.

*If* it's all going to work out.

The relentless, interwoven, swirling chaos we've made  
of the world—none of us needs reminding of the  
details. But for me, the things that can keep me up at  
night are some of the more slow-moving disasters.

Specifically, in this moment, the culprits of my sleep-  
less nights are twofold: the unfurling catastrophe of  
climate change, and the rise of authoritarianism.

Both of which are fueled by ravenous greed, wicked  
racism, and self-righteous bigotry; and both of which  
are contributing to the erosion of democracy and the  
diminution of our shared humanity.



So much beyond my control, out of my reach,  
way too big for any one person to fix,  
and still ... I feel it on my shoulders, crawling  
up my neck.

Where is the relief?

Where can I find some peace?

And what on earth can I do about any of it?

### ***A flashback ...***

Many years ago, I wandered into a room full of people working on something called “recovery,” because I’d heard there might be some answers there for me—a roadmap of sorts, to a place where a spiritual calm might overcome the bubbling mess of all the things in my life that I’d been desperately trying to control.

The more I had tried to control, the more out of control my life had become; to the point where my idle thoughts meandered into the perilous territory of “maybe it would be better not to go on at all.”

This group began each of their gatherings with a recitation that went like this:



*I learned that peace was there for  
the taking. And I learned that in  
order to take it in my hands, I'd  
need to make space for it. To let  
go of all of that which I'd been  
clutching in white-knuckled fear.  
To emancipate my hands from the  
snarl of reins that I thought would  
give me power over my life, but  
which only ever delivered constant  
tension and pain.*



***“god, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.”***

I was not interested in god; but I was desperate for serenity and for change.

For peace of mind, and for the power to participate fully in my own life—instead of being whipped around by my reflexive and controlling reactions to the people and circumstances around me. And so I stayed, and I listened.

I learned that peace was there for the taking. And I learned that in order to take it in my hands, I'd need to make space for it. To let go of all of that which I'd been clutching in white-knuckled fear. To emancipate my hands from the snarl of reins that I thought would give me power over my life, but which only ever delivered constant tension and pain. To release my grip, and to reach with open hands for the roadmap to my own peace of mind.

I let go of control, and received in its place genuine agency.

I let go of fear, and received peace of mind.



This ongoing meditation, this process of spiritual realignment, has become a stalwart guide for me in the years since. It's not something that I did once way back when and then never again; it's a daily practice for me. A daily choice. A set of tools for which I am so grateful. This practice is responsible for keeping me alive, for empowering me to live my life to the fullest, and for bringing me every bit of joy and contentment I've experienced since those earlier, darker days.

And also: I sense it's time for me to dive back again into a more focused practice, in a fresh way, and a little deeper this time. To retrace my journey on that roadmap with renewed intention, courage, and rigor.

I need to revisit this work now because there is so much wrong in the world in this time, about which I sometimes have so much fear, and over which I have no control. The enormity of it all often paralyzes me into inaction—*but I am not willing to succumb to it.* In fact, quite the opposite: I believe I can free myself to live at peace in the midst of the turmoil and the turbulence.

And—even more—I want to be a part of changing the world for the better. And I believe that practicing peace of mind empowers me to do that.

*It's worth mentioning:*

This is not a peace that lives in denial of the real struggles that I face.

This is not a peace that ignores or diminishes the troubles of others.

This is not a peace that encourages me to check out, or that absolves me of my responsibility to be part of creating a just and compassionate world.

*Rather:*

It is a peace that allows me to face my struggles—all of them—with courage.

It is a peace that makes me ready to accept my part in the work to change my life and change the world—with genuine agency.

It is a peace that fuels me to persevere when the struggle gets hard.

This is not a peace that will show up out of thin air. This peace requires deep work. It requires me to reach for it.

Make no mistake: *this peace belongs to me*. It is my birthright as a being in this universe, and I have the power within me to take hold of it. But I will need to choose to reach for it, to do the work to cultivate it, to grab hold of that power.



So ... I'm smoothing the creases of that roadmap that saved my life once before, and I'm about to go on a spiritual journey. Over the next several months, I'll be going on an in-depth exploration of the terrain of:

... *struggle*  
... *coping*  
... *powerlessness*  
... and *acceptance*,

and how those concepts point me toward the experience of:

... *courage*  
... *listening*  
... *agency*  
... and *serenity*.

I'll be looking at all of this through the lens of my own inner life, and from the vantage point of the

intersection that my life is experiencing with this particular, perilous time on planet Earth.

I'll be asking myself tough questions; digging deep for honest assessments of my feelings, needs, and motivations; sorting through what is in my power to change and what is not; nurturing the practice of letting go of things I can't control; making space for serenity; and cultivating courage to use the agency that is mine to change the things I can.

The tangible end product of my journey (in addition to all of the hoped-for benefits to my personal lived experience) will be a set of songs and a series of essays that arise from my meditations and practice around each of the concepts I explore as I follow my road-map. I'll be sharing those with you here, as I compose them in sequential order over several months, while I undertake this journey.

### ***Want to come along for the ride?***

Here's where things could get more interesting: I'd like to invite you to join me on a parallel journey of your own, if you're game for it.

*How this will work:*

As you read about me moving through my own process, I'll include for you the set of questions and prompts that I'm working through on each step of the journey. Here at the starting line, I don't even know exactly what they will all be yet! I have a general idea, but I intend to allow the process to inform the direction for a lot of this.

Nonetheless, wherever the path leads me, I'll share with you the guideposts that I encounter along the way, so that you can take the journey for yourself, too.

*How to use the prompts:*

You can use these prompts to fuel your exploration however you want to. Maybe you'll journal, or go on walking meditations, or channel your experience into a creative outlet. You can spend 10 minutes, or you can dedicate a longer practice to it—you're in the driver's seat of your own experience.



This kind of journey can be intimidating; but I'm choosing to allow my desire to experience serenity and to exercise my agency to be my inspiration as I take this leap. I invite you to set an intention



for yourself, too. And that leads us to our first set of prompts:

## **The Prompts:**

*What has drawn you to explore an experience with these ideas?*

*What's going on in your life, or in your experience of the world, that drew you to this introspection and work?*

*What, if anything, do you hope to receive or accomplish by going on this journey?*

This kind of work is very personal and solitary—it will be for me, and if you decide to make your own journey with it, it will be for you, too. But: knowing that we have openhearted community with us and around us will make us feel supported and loved through this process.

So, with that ... let's go get some peace of mind and unleash our power to make big changes.

## Take It If You Want It



Everything's on the edge  
Of falling into a black hole  
Falling out of my control  
I think I've reached the end  
Of holding it all together  
Of pulling at worn-out puppet tethers

Halted mid-spiral  
By a small voice who's been there

Come, and take it if you want it  
Ain't nobody holding hostage  
The peace of mind that belongs to you  
Here, it's all yours for the taking  
Let go and make space  
Open hands, let peace come to you

But haven't you looked outside?  
The fascists are ascending  
Disaster is impending  
So how can I sleep at night?

The world is a burning boulder  
It's crazy to take it on my shoulders

I'm useless for change  
If my spirit is broken

Come, and take it if you want it  
Ain't nobody holding hostage  
The peace of mind that belongs to you  
Here, it's all yours for the taking  
Let go and make space  
Open hands, let peace come to you

Clutching has cut off my bloodstream  
I'm dying for nothing  
Control is seductive—I'm letting go

Come, and take it if you want it  
Ain't nobody holding hostage  
The peace of mind that belongs to you  
Here, it's all yours for the taking  
Let go and make space  
Open hands, let peace come to you



## **02 The monster under the bed**

{ Mid-February 2022 }

### **The Prompts:**

*What, exactly, is the nature of your fear?*

*What, precisely, is the source of your pain?*

*What, specifically, is robbing you of your peace?*

It's tempting to avoid this topic altogether. To stuff the bad feelings, ignore the nagging discomfort, deny the existence of my worries.

*"Everything's FINE."* (Like the meme with the cartoon dog, smiling in denial while sitting inside a house that's on fire.)

It often seems like a practical way to cope. To plug my ears, shut my eyes, and pretend it will go away. Or to fill the hours with distractions to draw my mind away. To fill my head and belly with stuff that numbs me.



*Un- acknowledged,  
un- named,  
un- faced,  
shrouded in  
darkness and uncertainty ...  
that's when it's at its most powerful.*



*But it always comes back, doesn't it?* In unguarded moments, in dreams. In sleepless thoughts that metastasize in the middle of the night. In my joints and on my skin—bodily manifestations of subconscious distress.

*It haunts me like a monster under the bed.*

Un- acknowledged, un- named, un- faced,  
shrouded in darkness and uncertainty  
... that's when it's at its most powerful.

My base instinct tells me—*fools me*—that acknowledging its presence would increase its power over me. That naming it would allow it to make a permanent home in me. That facing it would destroy me.

But my higher self knows better:  
that turning on the light,  
and saying its name,  
and going face-to-face with this fear, this pain, this discomfort ...

... reduces its hold over me,  
... is the first step in taking away its power,  
... is necessary, if I'm ever to find peace.

So I'm throwing the switch on a spotlight.  
I'm calling out the monster by its full name.  
I'm describing every detail of its features that

I see illuminated in this first beam of courage  
I've mustered.

And then ... after that ... perhaps I can figure out what  
to do with it next.

Go deep.  
All the way in.  
With courage.  
Leave nothing uncovered.  
Let's go.

### ***It's like a sandstorm coming ...***

Here's what the monster looks like, in this  
time, for me:

Most days these days, I carry with me a constant,  
general discomfort. A nagging, sinking worry—like  
everything's about to get really bad.

*For the planet ...*

I feel it every time a swath of California forest goes up  
in flames, or when another record-breaking hurricane  
rips through the Gulf Coast.

My worry was acute in those weeks in the summer  
of 2020, when we couldn't safely breathe the outside

air, or even see the sun, here in Washington. I heard that the smoke cloud was so massive that it eventually stretched to the East Coast.

My worry roars to life when I see images of islands disappearing under the sea, or read about ice shelves the size of small countries calving from continents, or hear about famine-driven migrants being met with violent refusal as they seek refuge, or learn of the potential collapse of planet-regulating currents in the Atlantic Ocean.

*For our country ...*

I experienced Election Night 2016 like a punch to the gut. I was so overwhelmed with dread that I nearly threw up. It was as though my mind went instantly all the way down a long tunnel into our dark, diminished future, where we were going to be whipped around daily by sadistic abuse from a sociopath.

All this while a third of Americans cheered him on—because they'd been conned into believing that he was on their team. These people—often our own friends and family!—could not see him for the buffoonish avatar that he was, representing every oligarch who would gladly shred democracy to preserve and grow their own power and wealth.



And these efforts are being eagerly carried forward even now by an anti-democratic party doing everything they can to entrench one-party minority rule. “Government of the people, by the people, for the people” be damned.

On that night in November 2016—just like in the period of time when I first truly absorbed the crushing reality of climate change—I couldn’t make out the precise details of how disaster would come to us; but my stomach knew that it wanted more than anything to expel it. I couldn’t elucidate the specifics of how it would undo us; but my gut knew that the horrific realities we had invited upon ourselves would poison us, if slowly, in the years to come.

Lately, however, the picture has been getting clearer. The details of our destruction are coming into focus. Even though we’ve been running hard to avoid succumbing to it. Even though we’ve been working hard to buy ourselves a little time. The looming ruin of both our livable planet and of our freedom-preserving democracy often seem ... horrifyingly ... inevitable.



It reminds me of being on Interstate 10 in the New Mexico desert. There are periodic signs on the

highway there, warning that dust storms are possible at any time. I've traveled that road many times on tour over the years; but I've only encountered a dust storm once.

At first, it was just a distant, ugly, brown cloud—miles away. It grew in height—or at least in perspective—slowly, but steadily. It was far enough away for a long enough time that the sky above us remained crystal clear blue, and I wondered if it would ever actually reach us.

*Until it did.* Seemingly instantaneously, we lost all visibility. The warning signs on the highway had instructed us what to do: pull over, put your car in park, turn off your lights, take your foot off the brake. So we did that. And waited. Until the storm passed.

For me, this is the experience that comes to mind when I contemplate the impending threats posed to us by unmitigated climate change and rising anti-democratic forces in our country. I see them coming—sometimes still far enough off that my personal experience is still one of deceptively blue skies overhead—but they're growing closer, and bigger, and more imminent all the time.

I'll admit, there are days when I feel like the coming destruction is assured. That we will be consumed.

That maybe we have let our opportunities to stop them slip by. That maybe all there is left to do is to pull over, take cover, and ride it out.

*It's like a sandstorm coming, coming, coming ...*

That's what the monster looks like, for me.

## Sandstorm



Can I be real with you for just a minute?  
It's my sense our near future could be diminished  
If there's something I could do, I already did it  
We're at the limit

It's like a sandstorm coming  
A gradual consumption  
And baby, there's no outrunning this cloud  
Already can't see much, the sun's rubbed out  
All systems have succumbed, shut down  
For the sandstorm

The danger was imprecise when it was distant  
We bought a little time with our persistence  
The dust is now in my eyes; it is explicit  
How it'll get us

It's like a sandstorm coming  
A gradual destruction  
And baby, there's no outrunning this cloud  
We've already lost touch, the sun's rubbed out

All systems have succumbed, shut down  
For the sandstorm

And baby, there's no outrunning this cloud  
And I can't see how this will fall out  
Take cover with me, quick get down  
For the sandstorm



## **03 Is this working?**

{ First of March 2022 }

I have to say: as uncomfortable as it was, on the previous leg of this journey, to stay present with the source of my discomfort—to just sit with it and observe it, without immediately trying to escape into some facile “solution”—I’m glad to have done it. I can say now that I’ve faced, named, and described in detail the circumstances that are robbing me of my peace and paralyzing me into inaction.

So now what?

### **The Prompts:**

*What have my unthinking, instinctual reactions been to these circumstances?*

*What are the feelings I’m experiencing in the face of these circumstances?*

*What are my go-to methods of coping with any of these feelings that might be difficult?*

If I've not listed "peace" in the category of how I'm feeling, then I think there's probably more to examine here:

*If we begin with the premise that serenity and agency can only come to open hands, what feelings, reactions, or coping mechanisms do I find myself holding onto that might make me unavailable to receive serenity and agency?*

*Am I holding onto fear? Worry? Blame? Resentment? Regret? Self-blame? Denial? Numbing? Something else?*

*What's driving my impulse to hold on to these things?*

*In what ways have I hoped / thought / assumed that holding onto these feelings might improve my circumstances or otherwise help me?*

*Is that working?*

*Are my circumstances improving as a result of my holding on to these feelings / reactions / coping mechanisms? Am I getting what I need as a result of holding on to them?*

*What negative effects to my spirit have I observed as a result of my holding on? How do I experience those effects in my mind, my heart, my spirit, my body, my daily experience, my relationships?*

*How might all of this be related to an impulse to exert control over a circumstance that feels out of my control?*

## ***I'm on fire—and the kindling is my spirit***

For me, it starts with Fear. And it starts with Anger.

I fear how life on Earth might get harder. I fear that many people will suffer. I fear that we might be overcome with fire and smoke and storms and floods and droughts and famine. I fear that there will be more scarcity, which will drive people to become uglier to each other as they scrape to survive.

I fear that this scarcity will arm aspiring authoritarians with more opportunity to divide us and create the conditions of chaos in which they can entrench their power. I fear that we will slide all the way into becoming a fascist state. I fear that people who aren't a part of the historically-dominant group—those who aren't



white, rich, straight, cisgender, christian, male—will be increasingly marginalized, targeted, dehumanized, cast off, and left to suffer and die. It can happen here. I mean, who am I kidding? It's *already* happening here. I fear that years and decades of progress for humanity will be burned up like so many piles of banned books.

And I'm angry.

I'm so angry at the people who have brought us to this place—the power-hungry people who have been scheming on this outcome for decades.

But there's a more personal anger, and it feels hotter and brighter inside of me: I'm angry at the regular people who have gone along with, enabled, and supported those who seek to destroy both our planet and our chance at multi-racial democracy. So many people I've known, spent time with, loved. I feel so much anger toward them.

I'm angry that they allowed themselves to be convinced that such ugly forces were on their side. I'm angry that either they were too easily deceived, or that the fascism actually appeals to an ugliness inside of them. Ugliness that I'm ashamed to see in them. I'm angry because they should know better ... I'm angry because I expected that they would.

*“They should ...” “I expected ...”  
Hm ... I’m taking note of those words.  
I sense they’re worth filing away for  
future exploration.  
But for now ...*

## ***Fear & Anger***

What do they do for me, and to me?

On the one hand ... I think they can serve a necessary purpose in my life. Fear is useful in helping me to recognize danger. Anger is useful as an alert that something’s not right, and it can light a fire in my belly that impels me to act.

But they’re characteristically hot, short-lived emotions. They flare up in the face of danger or injustice like flashing signals that something’s wrong.

And dang! Even though they’re a reaction to something wrong, they sure can feel good, can’t they? Or at least something like it? For a moment, at least. That *rush* of adrenaline. That *surge* of rage. In a twisted sort of way, they make me feel like I’m *alive*, you know?

But, wow ... I can't stay for long in that red-alert emergency space in which Fear and Anger exist. My mind, heart, body, and spirit simply can't sustain it.

And yet, there are plenty of times when—for lots of reasons, related to my base instincts, coded in deeply-seated coping mechanisms that I've developed in response to difficult circumstances—I refuse to let go.

I convince myself that I need the fire of Anger to propel me. And so I have to keep stoking it.

I imagine that never taking my eyes off of Fear will somehow offer me protection from danger. And so I draw it closer.

I look for fuel, and I look for cover. And that brings me to ...

## ***Blame & Worry***

Blame is what I do when I need to feed the anger fire. I point my finger and say, “*YOU* did this!”—attempting to displace the discomfort of my Fear and Anger onto someone else's shoulders, onto the ones I think *deserve* it.



*It takes a tightly closed fist to  
properly point a finger, doesn't it?  
And all that anger I tried to direct  
elsewhere hasn't actually gone  
anywhere. It's still clutched in my  
hand. Burning me up.*



Blame feels great. *For one hot moment.* Which means I have to keep it up. Over and over and over, I stoke the fire. And it leaves me in a pile of ashes.

Because it takes a tightly closed fist to properly point a finger, doesn't it? And all that anger I tried to direct elsewhere hasn't actually gone anywhere. It's still clutched in my hand. Burning me up.

Worry is what I do when I think that keeping Fear close to me will somehow protect me from the bad things yet to come. I give myself the illusion of certainty when I keep the fear always front of mind. Like I think I'm getting ahead of the next shoe dropping. As if I'm outsmarting the system.

I hold on to Worry like it's a safety blanket. But it's a cheap comfort. Under that cover no light, no fresh air, can get in. And Worry only makes more worry. Eventually, it suffocates, traps, and paralyzes me.

So ... what have Blame and Worry done for me, and to me?

Nothing good.

After all this ...

... my Blame hasn't changed other people's disappointing behavior.

... my Worry hasn't altered any unsatisfactory outcomes.

Did I think I might be able to exert control over the circumstances? Or affect the actions of others? *By the sheer force of my most red-hot emotions??*

Perhaps I did. Or least I wanted to believe that I could. To believe that I could exert some semblance of power in a circumstance that makes me feel powerless.

But I'm here to report that this effort has been thoroughly unsuccessful. My attempt at control has not made me powerful. It has done the opposite. At this point, the only result of my grasping on to Fear, Anger, Blame, and Worry is ...

## ***Resentment & Despair***

I've learned from past personal experience, and I can sense it again inside me now, that this state of being I've been cultivating is not delivering me peace, and it's not giving me access to my agency to act for a better outcome.

Rather:

Blame upon blame upon blame grows into  
Resentment. And Resentment is a corrosive acid that  
eats me from the inside out.

Worry upon worry upon worry grows into Despair.  
And Despair is a void that swallows me whole.

It turns out that I've allowed my own spirit to be the  
fuel for this fire. In my Anger, I wanted to Blame and  
burn it all down. But I'm the one who's burning with  
Resentment.

And I've chosen a safety blanket that smothers my  
own joy, hope, and sense of possibility. In my Fear, I  
sought protection under the cover of Worry. But in  
this state of Despair, the air only gets stuffier, scarcer,  
heavier, until ... it's no longer possible to breathe.



I don't want to sacrifice the state of my spirit to Anger  
and Fear. I don't have to. I know I can choose some-  
thing else.

Like ... *what would happen* if,  
when those feelings come,  
I could really *feel* them,  
I could *receive* the messages they bring,  
and then open my fists,  
and *let them go*?



## From the Inside Out



My fear is looking for who to blame  
A lit match ignites an angry flame  
And when reduced to a smoldering  
It wants a hot flash of rage like kerosene

What's the harm  
If the fire keeps me warm?  
The catch is  
The kindling is my spirit

In the end  
I never burned anything down  
Only myself  
From the inside out  
In the end  
I didn't keep safe from the fallout  
It ate me away  
From the inside out

I hold it close like an enemy  
A fool's cover against uncertainty

Wrapped in a shadow that only grows  
It is a cheap comfort, this devil that I know

I wear despair  
Like a buffer from what's out there  
The catch is  
It's smothering my spirit

In the end  
I never burned anything down  
Only myself  
From the inside out  
The inside out  
In the end  
I didn't keep safe from the fallout  
It ate me away  
From the inside out

Oh oh oh  
I've got to let go  
The tighter I hold  
The more it's out of control  
Oh oh oh  
I've got to got to let go  
The tighter I hold  
The more it's out of control

In the end  
I never burned anything down  
Only myself  
From the inside out  
In the end  
I didn't keep safe from the fallout  
It ate me away  
From the inside out  
The inside out  
In the end  
I never burned anything down  
Only myself  
From the inside out



# **04 Powerlessness, control, and failure**

{ Mid-March 2022 }

At the end of the last series of prompts, I began to explore the idea of how my coping mechanisms might be related to an impulse to exert control over a circumstance in which I am powerless. Let's pick up there.

## **The Prompts:**

*Revisit the ways in which my unsuccessful coping strategies might be related to an attempt to exert control.*

- *How might they be attempts at controlling or manipulating the behavior or feelings of other people?*
- *How might they be attempts at controlling or altering a reality I don't like?*
- *Do I engage in minimizing, denial, or numbing as a way to control my experience?*
- *Do these tactics ever work in the long term for me?*

*What does it do to my mind, heart, body, and spirit when I fail to change that which I don't have the power to change?*

*What does a cycle of attempt to control → defeat → attempt to control → defeat do to my spirit?*

*When I fail over and over in this cycle ...*

- how do I internalize the fact of that failure?*
- how does it affect my beliefs about myself?*
- do I ever adopt a view of myself as a martyr to justify or give meaning to perpetuating this cycle?*
- what happens to my ability to hope?*
- what does it do to my ability to make vital connections with other people?*

*How might this cycle be like a trap?*

*Whose interests are served by me being trapped in it?*

*How is the attempt to control related to the concept of power?*

- Are they the same, or different?*
- Does attempting to control actually give me power?*

- *How might my attempting to control impede my access to real power?*

*What does the word “powerlessness” mean to me?*

- *If I have a negative association with the word, why?*
- *Are there things I can identify over which I am powerless?*
- *What do I think might be the result of admitting that I am powerless over them?*

## **A war I know I can't win**

In the last exercise, I wrote a little about the experience of coming up against my own powerlessness ...

*Did I think I might be able to exert control over the circumstances? Or affect the actions of others? By the sheer force of my most red-hot emotions??*

*Perhaps I did. Or least wanted to believe that I could. To believe that I could exert some sense of power in a circumstance that makes me feel powerless.*

*But I'm here to report that this effort has been thoroughly unsuccessful. My attempt at control has not made me powerful.*

And yet I hold so tightly to the idea of control. I keep trying the same strategy, over and over, as though it might work this time. How can I break the cycle? How do I identify and choose another way?

This phrase from the Serenity Prayer comes to mind ... *"to accept the things I cannot change"* ... and I know I need to examine my powerlessness.

## ***Powerlessness***

It's a big word. It's a tricky word.

On its face, it sounds like weakness or disempowerment; but I think that's wrong. Here's what I think that admitting my powerlessness *actually* is: it's an essential aspect of acceptance. It's getting a grip on what is real; not what I wish reality would be.

Because the truth of the matter is that I am not all-powerful. I mean, great as it might seem to be able, superhero-style, to conjure up the might to exert

my power over any circumstance or entity or person, and bend them to my will ... that is just not reality.

The truth is that there are plenty of things which I do not and will never have the power to change. That's just a fact. And yet: I resist that fact time and time again, every time I try to exert control over a situation over which I do not have power.

It's like taking the same running leap, over and over, into the same brick wall. The wall doesn't move, and I end up a little more broken.

It's like sending myself off to a war I know I can't win. I'm defeated, every time; but if I can't identify another, better way to cope, I'm doomed to repeat the same demoralizing exercise that does violence to my spirit.

You know the saying about how the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result? Well, I suppose it's possible that I'm driving myself to insanity by remaining in this cycle. But what I know I'm doing for certain—as long as I do not “accept the things I cannot change” (i.e., admit my powerlessness)—is that I'm driving myself to exhaustion, cynicism, martyrdom, and disconnection.



## ***Exhaustion***

When I fail to change that which I don't have the power to change, I feel defeated, hopeless, despairing.

I don't have the power to change how another person acts or feels, and yet ... in my anger I blame, blame, blame, to try to subtly or even unconsciously manipulate other people into feeling guilty for their actions and changing their ways. If I just lecture or debate them persistently enough, or cleverly enough, surely they'll see the light and do better, right?! (*Wrong.*)

I don't have the power to control or forestall bad things happening in the future, and yet ... I blanket myself in worry to create the illusion that I have some control over it. (*I don't.*) And wearing that blanket is exhausting.

My energy to do anything is zapped—even sometimes to do the most basic things I need to do to take care of myself and my life.

*This is not how I want to live.*

But in my exhaustion, I begin to believe that any effort is useless, and that leads me to ...

## **Cynicism**

“It’s all just a worthless effort.” I become cynical, nihilistic.

In my cynicism, I’m tempted to escape into my privilege. The relative safety and comfort that I enjoy, thanks to the pure luck of being born into the station in life that I was, could allow me not to have to deal with the difficult realities in the world outside that have been robbing me of my peace.

*Catastrophic climate change?*

Well, the place where *I* live hasn’t been affected too badly, yet. So maybe I’m good. Maybe I’ll just decide it doesn’t matter so much after all.

*Rising authoritarianism?*

Well, *I’m* not among the most marginalized groups. I’ll probably be safe, for a while at least; so perhaps I’ll just tune out the bad news and live in a blissful, unbothered ignorance.

I give myself a pass, and I look away from those who are suffering, allowing myself to stop caring so much—*as if it’s the caring that causes so much pain, and not the reality itself*. I allow my heart to harden

just a little—because a less tender heart can't be hurt quite as easily, right? (*Um, definitely wrong.*)

I become more calloused, less compassionate. And in doing so ... I cut myself off a little from my own humanity.

*This is not who I want to be.*

And so, sometimes—if I haven't figured out a better way to cope—I resolve that this is reason enough to go back to that same losing war. To march myself back into defeat, over and over again. And that sounds a whole lot like ...

## ***Martyrdom***

I have, at this point in the progression of my downward spiral, nearly fully internalized the notion that it's me against the world. That by sheer force of will, I must do what I can to rail (*or, really, flail*) against these unacceptable circumstances, even if that means sacrificing myself for the cause. *Because if not me, then who? Right?!*

(How dramatic. Insert *huge* eye-roll.)

But in that equation of me versus the world, there isn't room for anyone else. I'm a little soldier out here all on my own.

And out here, all on my own, I look around at other people. And I see a whole lot of people who don't seem to care nearly as much as *I* do. (*Big, self-congratulatory pats on the back here, Shannon.*) I pride myself in caring! Caring is good to do! But, to be (brutally, embarrassingly) honest, when I'm in this mindset, I am a big ol' judgmental jerk.

*Look at all those people who don't appear to care as much as I do.*

**See how much I care? Why don't *THEY*?**

(Like I said: it's not cute.)

(And also, wow ... when, exactly, did this become about *me*?)

*This is not who I want to be.*

But I've really created quite an island for myself here. It's an island called ...

## ***Disconnection***

When I don't have a strategy to process my feelings, I get trapped in them, and I can't connect.

When I wear myself out, and I don't have anything left to give to myself or others, I can't connect.

When I judge other people, I disconnect.

When I start centering myself in this story that is so very much bigger than me and in fact is not about me at all, I disconnect.

And, man ... *there isn't any power at all in being disconnected.*

I can actually see that there are others out there trying to do their part to fix all of this. But I can't genuinely connect with them, because I'm deep into a bunch of behaviors that interrupt my ability to make meaningful connections.

Every once in a while, I might find myself in conversation with another self-declared martyr, and we might bond for a short moment over how righteous we feel about being on the right side of history, or over our shared anger toward those who have invited all of this horror onto humankind.

But I know that that's not real, lasting connection—because I'm not making a genuine connection with someone if our bond is based on shared antipathy toward someone else. In the end, interactions like this leave me feeling more distrustful, more isolated.

I'm disconnected, and defeated; and there's no one but me around to help me get back up. I reach a point where I just can't do it ... and then I'm fully immobilized.

### ***The individualism trap***

Trapped in this spiral of exhaustion, cynicism, martyrdom, and disconnection, I also lose the emotional clarity to see how the really big problems that have been keeping me up at night were always way too big for any one person to take on by themselves.

In really looking at all of this, I realize that:

... if I'm immobilized in this way, and if others are also immobilized in this way,

... and if we have made ourselves into islands because we've believed the myths that we've built for ourselves, and the myths we've learned from our culture,

about how solving all of this is on our individual shoulders,

... then we have cut ourselves off from accessing the real power within ourselves,

... and we aren't able to build real power with others,

... and in that state, the status quo will always triumph.

The only entities that win in that scenario are the ones that already benefit from a status quo that is currently destroying democracy and killing the planet. *Why would I continue to fight that war on those terms?*

It's a losing mindset that will trap us all forever.

## ***Time for a new approach***

So, for me and my spirit, and in the name of actually accessing real power to do something about all of this: it's time to admit and accept that there are some things which I do not have the power to change.

Because here's the big, magical, anti-intuitive paradox about power: *there is power in acknowledging powerlessness.*



*Here's the big, magical,  
anti-intuitive paradox about  
power: there is power in  
acknowledging powerlessness.*





When I can lay down my weapons in this futile war of constant defeat—trying to change things which I do not have the power to change—then, perhaps, I can find my way toward serenity, and toward my agency.

I want to be done with my doomed, soul-crushing, isolating effort to grasp for power over anything or anyone.

What I want is ...

... to find my way to connection with others, where together we can build power with one another.

... and to get more connected to myself, where I can nurture the power within me.



Next time: it's time to do some radical acceptance.

## Little Soldier



I went to a war  
That I knew I couldn't win  
I know 'cause I've gone before  
And it always  
Comes to the same end

I march out alone  
It's not bravery, it's panic  
A contest for control  
Where I have none  
Perpetually vanquished

Pick your battles  
Little soldier  
Cause when it's futile  
Your heart gets colder  
It gets colder

I don't wanna fight no more  
I can't take another losing score  
I've taken up arms in the wrong war

And I don't want this fight anymore

I'm deployed with the truth  
And I come back a cynic  
Tell me whose position improves  
While I keep confirming  
There's no way to win this?

Pick your battles  
Little soldier  
Some are not meant  
For only your shoulders  
That's just torture

I don't wanna fight no more  
I can't take another losing score  
I've taken up arms in the wrong war  
And I don't want this fight  
I don't wanna fight no more  
I can't take another losing score  
I've taken up arms in the wrong war  
And I don't want this fight anymore

Pick your battles  
Little soldier  
Cause when it's futile  
Your heart gets colder

Pick your battles  
Little soldier  
Some are not meant  
For only your shoulders  
That's just torture

I went to a war  
That I knew I couldn't win  
I know 'cause I've gone before  
And it always comes to the same end





# 05 Acceptance

{ End of March 2022 }

Last time, I said that next time it would be time to do some radical acceptance. Well, here we are, and it's time ...

## **The Prompts:**

*Make as exhaustive a list as I can of all the things I do not have the power to change.*

*How are some of the items on this list related to the concept of personal boundaries—i.e., “this is where I end and another person begins,” or “this is my side of the street, and across the yellow line in the middle is the other person’s side of the street”?*

- *As I consider the concept of boundaries, is there anything I need to add to the list of things that I don't have the power to change?*

*How are some of the items on the list related to the idea of harboring expectations?*

- *How much of the dissatisfaction and pain that I experience arises from the difference between how I think things should be and how things are in reality?*
- *As I consider the notion of harboring expectations, is there anything that needs to be added to the list?*
- *Is it possible for me to release the expectations that I have for the items on my list, and to accept them as they are, without indulging my urge to judge them?*

*Create some kind of visualization exercise in which I can focus on each of the items on my list and let them go, without judgment.*

- *Walk through the visualization for each item on the list, one by one.*
- *What does it feel like to let them go—in my mind, my body, and my spirit?*
- *Are there hard feelings? What are they?*
- *Are there pleasant feelings? What are they?*

## ***To accept the things I cannot change***

Here is a list of everything I can think of in this moment that belongs on my list of “things I do not have the power to change”:

- other people’s actions
- other people’s feelings
- what other people think
- how other people live their lives
- what other people think about me
- how other people feel about me
- what other people expect of me
- the past
- things I’ve done in the past
- anything that has already happened
- the future (insofar as the only time in which I have the power to change anything is the present moment)
- things that will or won’t happen in the future
- the problems and injustices and suffering in the world



- the weather
- what other people say
- what other people believe
- getting old
- who my family is
- where I come from (i.e., my background and my familial and personal histories)
- ways in which I've been hurt in the past
- ways in which I've been wronged in the past
- ways in which I've experienced injustice or oppression or abuse in the past
- lost time
- the fundamentals of what I look like: my height, my body type, my skin color
- natural disasters
- traffic
- the economy
- the fact of pain in my life
- the fact of pain in the world
- the unfairness of life
- the laws of physics
- human nature



*Here's the rub: if I want to live in reality—which, spoiler alert, is the only place where life is actually lived—then I'm required to accept that which is real.*



There is so much that I cannot change. So much that is out of my power, out of my reach—not because of any personal failing, or a lack of effort—there’s just a whole lot of stuff that is beyond my control.

Some of it isn’t any of my business—things that don’t concern me.

And also there are things that *do* concern me, but which are not mine to change. No matter what category they fit into, all of the things on this list are things that just ... *are*.

And, here’s the rub: if I want to live in reality—which, spoiler alert, is the only place where life is actually lived—then I’m required to accept that which is real.

I am not an exception to the laws of physics, or time.

I am not immune to the weather, nor to the movements of the earth’s shifting plates and churning atmosphere.

I am not above or beside or outside of the reality of What Is.

In these examples—the ones defined by the basics of observable science—it’s sort of silly to think that I could ever operate outside of that hard-and-fast reality, right?

But, regarding the squishier items on my list—the ones that have more to do with the space between me and other people—I have often allowed myself to be fooled by a fictionalized alternate reality in which I imagine that I have power where I do not.

I've certainly *tried* in those spaces to will an unreality into being. An unreality in which I have the power to change minds, control others' feelings, manage what other people think about me, or manipulate the actions of other autonomous creatures. And ... it just does. not. work.

Not only does it not work, but when I attempt it, I create suffering for myself.

And then there are times in which I've learned and absorbed the fact that I cannot change something that is not in my power to change, but I am still not free of the suffering ... because I've gotten stuck in a pity party for the fact that I am powerless over it.

So, I might not be actively trying to change it anymore—and I might even be giving myself a big pat on the back for that—but at the same time I'm flailing around in an eddy of pathos, and whining about how those things *ought to be different* than they are. And that ... also creates suffering.

Pain is pain, and it happens. That is a fact of the human condition. But I do not have to allow pain to become *suffering* in my life.

*It is time to accept the things I cannot change.*

So it's raining, and I'd rather it be dry? Accept it. There's no point in fighting the sky.

So something terrible happened, and I wish I could go back and prevent it? Accept it. There's no unraveling time.

So someone thinks thoughts about the world that disgust me, and that are harmful, and I wish they'd do better? Accept it. It's ultimately impossible to manipulate the workings of another person's mind.

*I am accepting the things I cannot change.*

I'm saying those words to myself,  
over and over and over,  
for as long I as I need to,  
which will probably be forever.

Like a mantra, or a prayer,  
the words of which trace a new pathway in my brain  
every time they are spoken by my heart.

A line which deepens into a groove,  
and then a crevice, with every repetition;  
until, eventually, it's the deepest canyon in my mind.

The one into which all my thoughts,  
like water, can flow freely;  
replacing the old pathways  
that only ever ended up at dead ends,  
flooding my consciousness with bottomless pools of  
stagnation and suffering.

*I am accepting the things I cannot change.*

As for all of the big problems of the world that stress  
me out and cause me pain, I can say this: at least for  
now, this is the way it's going to be.

I'm not saying I like it, or that I approve of it.  
Acceptance does not equate to tacit approval—it's an  
act I do *without judgment*.

It's like a line I heard in the TV show Ted Lasso: "The  
truth will set you free; but first it will piss you off."



The truth.

*I am accepting what is true, even if it pisses me off.*

*I am accepting the things I cannot change.*

*At least for now, this is the way things are.*

“At least for now” ... because acceptance is an act I can only ever do in the present moment, *even if* it is possible that the circumstances may change in the future. *Even if* it’s possible that I may have the power to be part of making that change.

Because dwelling on “if” is not consonant with acceptance. Radical acceptance is an act that is detached from “if.” It is detached from the future, and from what may happen in the future.

It is detached, even, from hope.

*(Even though ... I’ve come to understand that acceptance is also, paradoxically, a necessary component of creating hope. Now there’s a mind twist. “The truth will set you free ...”)*

What Is ... just is.

I can make space for What Is.  
I can feel what I feel about What Is.  
I can do that without judgment or resistance or attachment.  
I can alleviate my own suffering.  
Serenity.  
To accept the things I cannot change.



There is work to do.  
There is work that *can* be done.  
There are things I *do* have the power to change.  
It will require courage to do those things.  
But first ... it will require me to Be With What Is.  
And that's a courageous enough act for today.



## Be With What Is



I've been pushing  
This mountain  
Like I can move it  
Unbound by the limits of physics

Suffering is born from  
The difference  
Between what just is  
And how I wish things would be

Well it might be raining  
I'd rather it be dry  
But it's crazy-making  
To try and fight the sky  
I think it could save me  
To be with what is  
Just be with what is this time

All of the badness  
I can't get off my mind  
That shouldn't have happened

You can't go back in time  
It eases the anguish  
To be with what is  
Just be with what is this time

It doesn't mean giving a thumbs-up  
To everything that's fucked up  
I'm just freeing myself from judgment

'Cause I have missed  
So much of life's gifts  
Not being present to what is  
And that's one thing I can fix

So it might be raining  
I'd rather it be dry  
But it's crazy-making  
To try and fight the sky  
I think it could save me  
To be with what is  
Just be with what is this time

All of the badness  
That torments my mind  
It shouldn't have happened  
You can't unravel time  
It eases the anguish

To be with what is  
Just be with what is this time

The mountain  
Is a mountain  
So I'll be  
I'll be a river  
I'll be the river  
I'll be with what is

Well it might be raining  
I'd rather it be dry  
But it's crazy-making  
To try and fight the sky  
I think it could save me  
To be with what is

Even all of the badness  
I can't get off my mind  
That shouldn't have happened  
You can't go back in time  
It eases the anguish  
To be with what is  
Just be with what is  
Just be with what is



## **06 Courage to change the things I can**

{ Mid-April 2022 }

Picking up where I left off last time:

I'm accepting the things I cannot change. I am letting them go. So ... now that my hands are empty, they are open and free. Free to act. Free to change the things I can.

*“Courage to change the things I can.”*

I wonder why courage might be necessary? Let's explore ...

### **The Prompts:**

*Make a list of things that I have the power to change; first in general, and then also specific to any circumstances that are currently causing me distress.*

Trying to change hard things in one's life can be a fraught exercise. It can feel vulnerable, which I know from my experience can make me feel exposed. Like

a raw, sensitive nerve. Which can be a scary place to work from! So I want to be sensitive to that as I work through these thoughts.

*With this idea in mind, does the notion of acting on any of the items on my list make me feel vulnerable? That is, are there any actions on the list that make me feel uncertain, that feel risky, or leave me feeling emotionally exposed? If yes, explore in more detail what that vulnerability feels like.*

*What are the risks to me in acting to change what I have the power to change?*

*What are the risks to me in not acting to change what I have the power to change?*

As I work through my list, I also know that I am going to need courage—because working through vulnerable thoughts and feelings can be really scary. So perhaps it might be a good idea for me also, while I'm here, to take a good look at what courage in action might look like for me as I contemplate this work:

*Go over my list and, with each item in mind, complete this phrase with as many endings as I can think of:  
“Courage is \_\_\_\_\_.”*

## ***Fear of heights***

Things I have the power to change:

- my actions / my thoughts / my reactions / my choices
- what I say / what I do
- how I take care of myself
- how I treat others
- my own boundaries
- my yeses / my noes
- taking responsibility for myself
- making amends when I've wronged someone
- what I eat / what I watch / what I read
- who I spend my time with / how I spend my time
- to what or to whom I give my energy / to what or to whom I give my attention
- how I spend my money

- when I rest
- whether or how long to stay in a space / in a relationship
- who to trust with my story / who to trust with my heart
- in whom I invest my love / my friendship
- my own understanding / my own learning / my own growth
- discovering, determining, and defining what I value
- acting according to my values
- how I use my privilege / my voice / my power



OK ... can I just say this right up front? *All of this feels vulnerable.*

Why? Because this list is proof, in black and white, in my own handwriting, that I can't pass the buck on my own experience any longer. This list is *full* of ways in which I have the power to step up in my own life. This list is for no one but me.

If I'm to "change the things I can" ... to *act* ... to take responsibility for my own life and my own experience



*It's dawning on me that  
grabbing hold of my own power is  
one of the most vulnerable things  
I will ever do.*





... then I've got to simply *do* that. I've got to dive right in. And in doing so, I don't get to blame anyone or anything else when it hurts, or when I get it wrong, or when it goes off the rails ... because these are the things that are within *my* power to change.

That feels *extremely* vulnerable. It is the heart of uncertainty. It is risky. In each of these actions, and in the more general sense of showing up in my life, I am totally exposed.

I know I can no longer point a finger at anyone else for my own discontent, my lack of peace, my stagnation ... because ... my goodness ... *look at that list!* There is *power* in that list. And it's all mine.

It's dawning on me that grabbing hold of my own power is one of the most vulnerable things I will ever do.

I could take the risks and fail. I could swing for the fences and miss. *And that might feel embarrassing. Humiliating.*

I might rustle other people's feathers if I act in a way that doesn't match what they expect of me—either because I'm acting differently from ways that I've acted in the past, or because I'm thwarting

expectations that our culture has put on me (or on people like me). *And that might be uncomfortable.*

I might attract the attention, and the criticism, of others, if in their view I speak too loudly, or honestly, or if I take up too much space, or if I appear to ask for too much out of life. *And that might hurt.*

I may lose or fundamentally alter relationships that were based on a no-longer-relevant version of me. *And that may cause me to experience loss. Grief.*

### ***But if I don't act ...***

I risk living an unrealized, unfulfilled life. I risk not living in harmony with my values, and therefore I risk letting myself down. I risk failing myself.

I risk not experiencing genuine love, connection, or belonging; because if I never live my truth on the outside, if I never allow my true self to be seen, then people aren't connecting with the real me.

I risk becoming withdrawn, isolated, and disconnected.

I risk not experiencing meaning in my life.

I risk my own sense of freedom and joy.

I risk stagnating in an unsatisfactory status quo.

I risk not being part of making the world the just and beautiful place that it can be.

## ***Courage is ...***

... leaning into vulnerability.

... doing it scared.

... feeling uncertain, knowing I can't control the outcome, and showing up anyway.

... acting on my values.

... being aligned in my speech, my actions, and my presence with what is true, even in the face of potential criticism or rejection.

... doing what I'm compelled by truth to do, even though I risk failure, embarrassment, criticism, or humiliation.

... choosing to stay engaged even after getting hurt.

... choosing to stay engaged even after getting it wrong.

- ... knowing I'll experience failure, and jumping in anyway.
- ... multiplied by others who love me, and with others who are engaged alongside me.
- ... standing tall.
- ... speaking from my heart.
- ... examining myself, my assumptions, and my blind spots.
- ... making amends.
- ... taking care of myself.
- ... making, knowing, and defending my boundaries.
- ... standing on what is true, on what I value.
- ... saying yes when I want or need to say yes.
- ... saying no when I want or need to say no.
- ... owning my own life and taking responsibility for myself.
- ... doing my work (my personal, internal work).
- ... creating.

... feeling my feelings and listening to the messages  
they bring me.

... acting to meet the needs that those feelings reveal.

... reaching out for connection.

## ***On the other side of courage***

There are two chapters in this story: there is my life  
before courage, and my life after.

Before: it is small, scared, stuck,  
disconnected, unsatisfactory,  
and characterized by suffering.

After: it is big, and full of possibility.  
It's still terrifying, but now also exhilarating.  
It's meaningful and fulfilled.

I'm connected with myself,  
I stand tall as I live my truth,  
I live in harmony with my values and with who I want  
to be.

I feel all the feelings,  
and I use them to educate myself about what I need,  
and to point myself toward how to act.

On the other side of courage are all of the things I long for, all of the things I want in my life.

I visualize this Before and After as existing on either side of a deep but narrow canyon. Narrow enough that it is possible to make a running leap from one side to the other.

But there's just one problem ... *I'm afraid of heights.*

I steer clear of the edges of things when I'm hiking, or when I'm exploring a tall building.

Whenever I'm watching an action movie where the hero is dangling off the edge of something, with a big drop below—even though I know it's just a movie—my palms get sweaty, and fear flares up as a physical reaction in my belly.

And that is why this visual metaphor is so apt for me. Because the chasm that lies between Before and After is filled with ...

... failure, embarrassment, criticism,

... humiliation, judgment, rejection,

... loss, change, and discomfort.

But all that said, I've evaluated and enumerated the cost of remaining on the safe side, and it's too high. It's much greater than all of the risks that lie below.

*Courage is calling me to leap over to the other side.*



I want to be brave. I know it's the only way to show up in the world as fully me. I know it's the only route to being connected with myself and with others. I know it's the only path to exercising my agency. I know it's the one and only road to every good thing that I want in my life.

And so ... courage.  
This is why I need courage.

To leap.  
To show up for my life.  
To change the things I can.

## Sweat & Butterflies



This day will be etched into my history  
A hinge on which everything will change

There's my life  
Before this moment  
And my life moving forward  
That's defined  
Only by my will to be brave

Watch as I leap over  
To the other side  
With failure on the line  
It's always on the line  
But I won't fail myself this time  
I'm not fearless  
No one is who makes this flight  
No one is spared the fright  
It's all sweat and butterflies  
When showing up for your life

It's only myself now that could stop me  
Just me and the snakes inside my head



Don't look down  
The drop is endless  
All around  
Critics, relentless  
Drown it out  
And choose your life before you're dead

Watch as I leap over  
To the other side  
With failure on the line  
It's always on the line  
But I won't fail myself this time  
I'm not fearless  
No one is who makes this flight  
No one is spared the fright  
It's all sweat and butterflies  
When showing up for your life

There is no love without exposure  
There is no daring that is safe  
But I'm not turning back, I'm not turning over  
The power I have to change  
What I can change

Watch as I leap over  
To the other side  
With failure on the line

I'm not fearless  
No one is who makes this flight  
It's all sweat and butterflies  
When showing up for your life





## **07 Where do I start?**

{ Mid-May, 2022 }

I'm recalling the steps I've taken so far in this journey.

- **NAMING** the circumstance that is robbing me of my peace.
- Identifying my reactionary **COPING** mechanisms to the feelings this stimulus brings up.
- Coming to terms with the parts of the situation over which I am **POWERLESS**.
- **ACCEPTING** the reality of what is, and also the reality of what lies beyond my control.
- Choosing **COURAGE** to act in the areas in which I do have power.

Having done the work to identify the monster under the bed, to reject coping mechanisms that don't serve me, to identify the areas in which I am powerless, to accept the things I don't have the power to change, and to choose courage to change the things I can ...

... I arrive at this next phase, where I'll have the opportunity to **ACT**. To actually do something. "To

change the things I can,” with a whole lot of junk and mire cleared out of the way.

That. Feels. Great.

And I’m ready.

LFG.

And yet ... I find myself at the starting line of this next leg of the journey asking the question, “*How on earth do I know what to do?*”

The answer—ironically—leads me to loop back to territory from a few steps back in the journey. Back to those feelings that I’m experiencing in the midst of this circumstance.

But the difference this time around is that I’m aiming the new, clarified focus that I’ve cultivated in myself toward exploring those feelings in a deeper way. *A way that actually serves me.*

Because those feelings contain something that I need: a roadmap that can help me figure out what to do.

And the key to deciphering the roadmap ... is the act of ***LISTENING***.

## **The Prompts:**

*Describe my relationship with feelings.*

- *Do I welcome them? Do I avoid them?*
- *Do I know how to sit with them? Do I numb them?*
- *Do I know how to process them? Do I linger or get stuck in them?*
- *Do I trust them? Do I fear them?*
- *Are they useful for me? Do they define me?*

*How do I listen for what I'm feeling?*

- *What are the practical things I need to do to be able to listen?*
- *Do I need quiet?*
- *To go for a walk?*
- *To create something?*
- *To write?*

*What are the things that get in the way of listening?*

- *Distraction?*
- *Numbing?*
- *Avoidance?*
- *Other people?*

*Let's practice identifying my needs.*

- *Get myself into a space / environment / headspace where I can listen.*
- *Listen.*
- *What am I feeling?*
- *Can I connect each feeling to a specific need?*
- *What do I need?*
- *Which of these needs exist in the realm of “things I have the power to change?”*
- *What am I going to do about it?*

*More practice—identifying my values.*

- *Get myself into a space / environment / headspace where I can listen.*

- *Listen.*
- *What am I feeling?*
- *Can I connect each feeling to a value of mine, to something that matters to me?*
- *What is it that I value?*
- *What does this value tell me about what is the right thing for me to do?*
- *What am I going to do about it?*

## ***The most powerful force in my life***

There was a time, back in the days before I found twelve-step recovery, in which my feelings were the most powerful force in my life ... but very much not in a good way.

I had nurtured a belief that my feelings defined my existence. I often felt like I was living at the loose end of a long whip—thrashed around in my life willy-nilly by the force of whatever I was feeling at any given moment, with no agency in the matter.



*(And, in my codependency, those feelings were often directed by the vagaries of whether I was experiencing the acceptance, approval, and praise that I so desperately craved from other people.)*

It was a terrifying way to live. I was constantly fearful of experiencing the bad feelings, constantly fearful of losing the good feelings. I was fearful all the time.

Until I learned in my recovery that ...

... first: I am not my feelings.

... second: my feelings don't have to be labeled as being "good" or "bad."

... and third: instead of being a source of constant dread, *my feelings can actually be extremely useful to me.*

I learned that feelings are messengers, sending me little bursts of emotional Morse code, which can point me in the direction of what I need and what I value. And if I can identify what I need and what is important to me, then I can determine what actions to take in order to meet those needs and to act on those values.

What I'm saying here is: my feelings can help me find my *POWER*.



*What if, rather than getting stuck  
in the vortex of fear and anger, and  
allowing them to fuel self-defeating  
coping mechanisms, I instead used  
my fear and anger to help me  
identify what I need? To help me  
gain a deeper understanding of  
what I value?*



That's what it means to me to be empowered:  
to know what I need,  
to know what is important to me,  
to identify the tools I have to address my needs,  
to identify how I can live a life of integrity, in which  
my actions align with my values,  
and to give myself the opportunity to do some-  
thing about it.

That, for me, was the beginning of engaging with the  
experience of my existence in a way that has, every  
day since then, allowed me to create a life that I want  
to live and am proud to live.

***“... and she lived happily  
ever after?”***

Ha! If only that's how it worked. The fact of this big,  
amazing, life-saving and life-giving discovery that I so  
gratefully stumbled into seventeen years ago does not  
mean that I don't still have the capacity to fall back  
into old patterns. I do, all the time. It's just part of  
how I'm wired.

And that's why maintaining my recovery, which  
includes the practice of working my way through the  
elements of the Serenity Prayer, like I'm doing here, is

something that I aim to do in my life on a daily basis. It helps me excavate myself from the mire, and it points me toward my power.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

I mean ... the entirety of the inspiration for this project, this journey, is the fact that—here in 2022, with a whole lot of big, bad stuff happening all around me—I've been finding myself failing to experience the peace of mind, and failing to embrace the agency, that I know are possible when I'm using these tools properly.

So ... back to the beginning of this journey. I described the circumstances that have been robbing me of my peace. I named climate change and the rise of fascist authoritarianism in our country. I dove into my feelings about those circumstances, and I identified fear and anger.

What if, rather than getting stuck in the vortex of fear and anger, and allowing them to fuel self-defeating coping mechanisms, I instead used my fear and anger to help me identify what I need? To help me gain a deeper understanding of what I value?

For instance, fear ... can help me define my boundaries. It's a flashing signal that points to my need for

safety. It can help me to know what is okay for me, and what is not. I can use my feelings of fear to help determine and establish boundaries that protect my spirit.

And anger ... can alert me to something that is important to me. It's a flare that draws my attention to injustice. It reminds me that justice is a deeply-rooted value of mine. I can use my anger to help decide where and how I can act to promote justice where I feel it is lacking.

Now that's some tangible, helpful direction! And I found it ... *inside of me*. That's incredible. And powerful.

Choosing to listen to my feelings like the messengers they are sets me up to reclaim my internal peace and to use my agency in powerful ways—even as I continue to live amidst unsatisfactory and difficult circumstances.



## ***So ... to listen.***

For me, it means getting still.

Clearing out distractions, like:

input from other people  
the “shoulds” in my own head  
expectations I’ve placed on myself,  
or that others may have of me.

Slowing my breath.

Closing my eyes.

Paying attention to how I feel in my body.

Concentrating my thoughts on the center of my spirit.

Opening my mind to whatever floats to the surface.

Sometimes it helps for me to scan a list of feelings words, and notice when one snags my attention. (The Center for Nonviolent Communication has a feelings list published on their website that I keep handy and use frequently.)

Taking a pencil to paper and just writing, without thinking, judging, or editing.

Strapping on my shoes and getting on a trail, staring at the water, or communing with the trees.

Sometimes it helps to make a song.

The mechanism for getting there doesn't really matter, as long as the result is that I've allowed myself to tune in to the bell of truth that rings inside my spirit.

I know it when I've heard it.

No one else can tell me what it sounds like, because it is only mine:

*This, here, is what you need.*

*This, here, is what matters.*

*Now go, use the power within you, and decide what it is you're going to do.*

Look at that: my feelings very well might still be the most powerful force in my life. But now in a good way.

## The Silent Sea



Hold still  
Don't say anything  
Listen for the ringing  
Tuned for your ears

Don't run  
Be with all you're feeling  
This is the revealing  
Of your power within

Don't be afraid of what you'll find  
When all is quiet inside your mind  
The ships arriving on that silent sea  
Carry the message of what you need  
Keep listening  
On the shore of the silent sea

It's you who knows what to do  
Truth is lighting up the avenue  
You can trust it  
(You can trust you)



Don't be afraid of what you'll find  
When all is quiet inside your mind  
The ships arriving on that silent sea  
Carry the message of what you need  
Keep listening  
On the shore of the silent sea

Hold still  
Don't say anything  
Listen for the ringing  
Tuned for your ears



# **08 Power within / power with others**

{ End of May 2022 }

The previous stop on this journey revealed how the act of listening is the beginning of unlocking my power. So ... what does this power actually look like? What does it mean? How does it feel? How does it work?

## **The Prompts:**

*What does it mean to me to have power within myself?*

- *What does it feel like, in my mind, my body, my spirit?*
- *How do the choices I make impact my power within?*
- *How does living in harmony with my values impact my power within?*
- *How does doing my work (my internal / spiritual work, that is) impact my power within?*

*What does it mean to have power “with” others?*

- *How do we build power with one another?*
- *How might “power with” create a scenario in which circumstances bigger than me can be changed?*
- *How might “power with” upend oppressive systems?*
- *How might “power with” change the world?*

*How does cultivating the power within myself contribute to the effort of building power with others?*

*How does building power with others contribute to my effort to cultivate power within myself?*

*What impact does all of this — building power within myself and building power with others—have on my personal sense of peace?*



*Every time I choose courage,  
and act in ways that protect and  
nurture my spirit, act in ways that  
align with my values, I add to my  
power within.*



## ***I know who I am***

*{ The following is the stream-of-consciousness response that I wrote in my journal to the prompts above. }*

Standing tall  
balanced equally between my two feet  
palms open and aiming forward at my sides  
head held high  
breathing is easy, full, and deep  
my eyes are wide open and accepting of all that I  
see around me  
my heartbeat is strong, slow, and steady.

I feel strong, steady.  
I know who I am and who I want to be in the world.  
I know that I am worthy of love and belonging.  
I understand in my core that I have value and that I  
have valuable contributions to make in the world, in  
the lives of others, in the experience of the  
people I love.

I know that nothing—absolutely nothing—that  
happens to me or around me can diminish in any way  
my worthiness, my humanity, my wholeness.  
I AM.

Every time I choose courage,  
and act in ways that protect and nurture my spirit,

act in ways that align with my values,  
I add to my power within.  
It's a positive feedback loop, and I never want to  
get off it.

When I practice acceptance,  
when I let go of things out of my power,  
when I listen to my spirit and act to meet my needs,  
and act in the world according to my values,  
and accept responsibility for  
my own existence,  
my own experience,  
my own choices,  
my mistakes,  
my own learning and growth,  
my own connection with myself and with others—

—when I choose those things,  
I pour into myself all the goodness that allows me  
to stand tall, breathe deep, and know who I am.

When I can connect to the power within myself, I  
gain new eyesight with which I can see other people  
who also are connected to their power within.

I'm drawn to them like a magnet.  
My spirit has an undeniable drive to connect itself to  
their spirit.

It's like attracting like.  
It's chemistry.

When I know my own worthiness, I can more clearly  
see other people's worthiness.

When I know my own power, I can see the power that  
others embody.

There isn't any competition or hierarchy in our inter-  
section—because we're both standing tall, breathing  
deeply, knowing and loving ourselves.

*HOLY SHIT.*

That, in and of itself, is a powerful, paradigm-shifting  
reality. When we can approach each other in all the  
fullness and wholeness of our own realized power  
within, we are—in a microscopic, person-to-person  
way—*DISMANTLING* hierarchical systems that  
oppress, harm, and destroy.

Healing ourselves dismantles the hierarchy,  
and heals the world.

And all of this is true  
before we even begin to talk about  
the ways we build power with each other  
when we join forces,  
strategize together,

act together,  
encourage each other,  
have each other's backs,  
and do big things together that make  
tangible change on big issues in the world.



When I can connect with the power within myself, I  
give myself the power to connect with others. And the  
power we build with each other contributes ...  
... to my ability to keep standing in my own power,  
... to our effectiveness in changing big things for the  
better, together,  
... to increasing my own sense of peace and purpose  
and agency—even when I, we, are still in the middle  
of difficult circumstances.

I think this may be how we change the world: we heal  
ourselves.



## **I Am**



That's right, I'm standing  
Tall, balanced, feet on the ground  
Open palms by my side  
Shoulders back, head high  
Breath is easy, deep  
Eyes wide to receive  
All of what is—I'm ready  
Heart strong, beat steady

I know who I am  
I know who I want to be  
I know I am worthy  
Of love, of belonging  
And I know that nothing  
That happens to me or around me  
Can diminish my worth  
My wholeness  
My humanity

Because I am (Standing, breathing, owning, loving)  
I am (Balance, healing, know belonging)

I am (Standing, breathing, owning, loving)  
I am (Balance, healing, know belonging)

I have choices  
I choose actions  
That align with my values  
My needs  
Which I learned from listening to  
The song of my own spirit  
Finally my ears could hear it  
When I released what was not mine  
And I owned up to my own life

I know who I am  
I know what is good for me  
There is nobody but me  
Who can take responsibility  
And I'm not looking  
For the path of least resistance  
I do the work for the goodness  
That affirms my own existence

Because I am (Standing, breathing, owning, loving)  
I am (Balance, healing, know belonging)  
I am (Standing, breathing, owning, loving)  
I am (Balance, healing, know belonging)

And yeah I see you now  
You're all connected to your own power  
And it's drawing me in  
Like water attracts water  
There's no higher or lower  
Or competing over resources  
'Cause we know how to love ourselves

We are a flood  
And holy shit, isn't that a total shift?  
In this microcosmic scene  
You and I, we are dismantling  
The ranked system status quo  
That oppresses and harms  
We'll make a whole new world  
Because you know who you are  
And I know who I am  
I know who I am

I know who I am  
(Standing, breathing, owning, loving)  
I am (Balance, healing, know belonging)  
I am (Standing, breathing, owning, loving)  
I am (Balance, healing, know belonging)  
I am



# **09 Peace in the midst of struggle**

{ Mid-June 2022 }

## **The Prompts:**

*How does everything that I've discovered on this journey function to cultivate peace of mind in the midst of struggle?*

- *Make an inventory of all the tools I've discovered and describe how they help me make peace in my spirit.*

*Must I be removed from chaos in order to have peace in my spirit? Why or why not?*

*What does the answer above imply for how I go about cultivating peace in my everyday life?*

## ***What's in my tool belt?***

An inventory of my tools:

**NAMING** the monsters takes away their mystery, and therefore also removes some of the power that my struggles have over me. When the struggle is both nameable and named, I'm no longer spooked by the potential of what lurks around every corner.

Looking at my go-to **COPING** mechanisms, and understanding how they may harm me, helps me to get unstuck—helps me get my wheels out of grooves that keep me on an unproductive path when I'm in the midst of chaos.

Understanding what I am **POWERLESS** to change, and coming to terms with the futility of engaging in battles that I can never win, frees me from that cycle of defeat.

**ACCEPTANCE**—this is the big one. Being with “what is” steadies my heart, allows my chest to expand for deep breath, quiets my mind. I don't have to *do* anything. I can, and must, *just be*.

Choosing **COURAGE** to act focuses my energy toward something positive. It harnesses and concentrates my desire to do something, and channels it into

an outlet that will actually be productive and good for me, for my relationships, and for the world.

**LISTENING** is a still activity that requires a quiet spirit, and reinforces quietude in my soul—because when I listen, I get the downloads that I need to know where to focus my energy. It feels like I’m in sync with myself, and that’s a harmonious, peaceful feeling.

Owning the **POWER** within myself, recognizing that power in others, and building power *with* others gives me a feeling of groundedness, of belonging, of purpose. All of this brings calm to my spirit.

### ***The bill always comes due***

So, to the question, “Do I need to remove myself from the chaos in order to use these tools and cultivate peace?”

Like ... *a permanent vacation*? While that might sound appealing, it isn’t a realistic possibility. Life is always there, waiting patiently for me upon my return from any place I’ve run to try and escape it. Not that vacations, or time for self-care, aren’t great things to do for myself when I can! But escape hatches



*The choice to pursue peace is available to me every single day, in every moment, regardless of my circumstances, and regardless of the choices and actions of other people—it's available to me all the time, if I choose to pick up my tools and cultivate it.*



aren't any kind of sustainable long-term solution, you know?

I was having a conversation with a friend recently, and we were talking about the ways in which we sometimes try to avoid the hard stuff of life. We talked about how a lot of us manage to escape into our coping mechanisms of choice—and how it can sometimes feel like we've successfully avoided it all for a while!—but, also, how the bill always comes due.

I suppose—and there isn't any way to know this with any certainty—that in death I'll escape the chaos forever, and experience peace in its place. That is, if the myths from which I've borrowed in my meek attempt at understanding the mysteries of the universe, and of life and death, resemble anything like the actual truths of the universe, life, and death.

We'll just have to wait and see, though. Because I'm far too interested in living, and in life, to experience the answer to that mystery anytime soon.

So, at best, removing myself from the chaos is only ever temporary. But I'm okay with that. First of all, because it is what is. But also because I believe—and know from past experience—that having peace in my heart is possible in the midst of the struggle.



## ***Life is like the train***

So, what does all of this mean for the cultivation of peace in my spirit? The implication is that the choice to pursue peace is available to me every single day, in every moment, regardless of my circumstances, and regardless of the choices and actions of other people—it's available to me all the time, if I choose to pick up my tools and cultivate it.

I recently saw an interview with Jay Shetty, author of the book *Think Like A Monk*. Shetty once trained to become a monk, and he shared in this interview a story from his training experience.

He and his teacher went on a 72-hour train trip in India. He explained that, in the monastic life, you don't buy first-class train tickets; you buy the least expensive ticket, and travel in the least desirable place on the train, in an effort to detach from your sense of comfort in material things. As a result, the car in which they traveled was pure chaos—crowded with people, and animals—just loud, hot, and full of distractions.

So, at every stop, Shetty got off the train to find a quiet place to meditate. After one such stop, his teacher asked him why he kept getting off the train.

When Shetty explained why, his teacher asked, “Do you think life is like the stops? Or is life like the train?” And he realized that his teacher was helping him learn that what he needed was to be able to find, cultivate, and receive the stillness of meditation in the midst of the chaos—precisely because chaos is the nature of life.

I thought a lot about that story with regard to my cultivation of spiritual peace during difficult circumstances.

I realized ...

... if I have to get off the train to find peace of mind, then I’ll never have peace in my real life.

... and, if I have to get off the train to find peace of mind, then I’ll never go anywhere.

My task is to learn how to be in the struggle *and* have peace in my heart. It’s on the train where I move forward in my life, where we move forward together in the world.

On the train—with all of its chaos and humanity—is where we live and progress.



## ***An opportunity to practice, in real time***

Rising fascism and climate change are what I identified at the beginning of this journey as being the two main circumstances that were robbing me of my peace—and those are, without a doubt, still present and on my mind.

But the world keeps throwing into my path all sorts of other circumstances that cause me worry and pain. During the span of time in which I was preparing for and writing this song, we experienced the mass gun murder, at the hands of a white supremacist terrorist, of Black people buying groceries in Buffalo, New York. Ten days later, even before the Buffalo victims' funerals had all been held, we witnessed another mass gun murder, of fourth graders and their teachers in Uvalde, Texas.

I imagine that your spirit, like mine, felt shattered in that time. Feels shattered, still. It's just one horrific, unnecessary tragedy after another, coming at us in a kind of rapid-fire fashion that we should not in any universe be expected to endure. And this is not to mention all of the other tragedies that occurred in that span of time—both personal and public—which

were equally as devastating, but didn't make the evening news.

One after another after another.

It seems like they're coming faster and harder these days.

I don't have the answers. But what I do have is an inventory of trusted tools, that I'm finding myself needing to pick up *every single day* these days—in order to keep my head above water, wrap my spirit in the peace it needs, and give myself a fighting chance at using my power to make a difference in this hurting world.

So that's what I'll do. I'm on the train. Heart open. Tools ready. Let's go.

## Serenity



Even though I've a new script  
This play's not ending with  
A happily ever after scene  
Already another curtain  
Rising on a tragedy  
Even before the last is grieved

How many times have you heard me say  
Get me off, I want off this train  
Thought I could make a great escape  
To serenity  
But now I know that I've got to stay  
Inside the struggle, it's the only way  
To move forward  
The serenity is within me

Maybe in death the chaos  
Fades into endless light  
If our myths can be believed  
But I'm too in love with living  
Through the beauty and the fight

Here in the mess I'll make my peace

How many times have you heard me say

Get me off, I want off this train

I thought I'd make a grand escape

To serenity

But now I know that I want to stay

Inside the struggle, it's the only way

To move forward

The serenity is within me

I've got to stay

I want to stay

On this train

I'm on my way

How many times have you heard me say

Get me off, I want off this train

I thought I'd make a great escape

To serenity

But now I know that I've got to stay

Inside the struggle, it's the only way

To move forward

The serenity is within me





# **10 A commitment to myself**

{ End of June 2022 }

## **The Prompts:**

*Having been through this journey, and having discovered tools to help me cultivate peace inside myself and access my agency to act, what can I say about where my peace and my power come from?*

- *What is the relationship between my circumstances and the source of my peace and my power?*
- *What is the relationship between other people and the source of my peace and my power?*
- *Who is responsible for my peace and my power?*

*I began this journey with the idea that I wanted to cultivate my peace and power during difficult times. But ... how does this work apply to times that are not difficult?*



- *Can I describe a time in my life when circumstances were objectively good, but during which I was not experiencing peace in my spirit, nor a sense of my own power?*
- *How might doing this work have changed my experience during that time?*

*What commitment(s) to myself do I want to make here at the end of this journey, as I move into the future of my life?*

## ***It's only ever up to me***

The conclusion that all of this work brings me to is one simple, profound truth: my peace and my power will never come from anywhere other than inside of my own spirit, cultivated by the work that I show up to do for myself.

This is how I take care of myself. This is how I can be good to myself. No one else can do the work inside of me to tend my spirit but me.

My circumstances won't bring me peace and power. Another person can't give me them. Even someone



*No one else can do the work inside  
of me to tend my spirit but me.*



who loves me a lot, and who wants good things for me, can't do this for me. It's an inside job.

Realizing the peace that is mine,  
and unlocking the power that is mine,  
will always ever only be up to me.

If I want it,  
it's my responsibility to create it,  
to grab hold of it.

It's mine; but it won't ever be *given* to me.

### ***In all times***

I began this journey with the intention of finding peace of mind and grabbing hold of agency in difficult times. But I've been reminded in the process that it is in *all times* that this work is relevant.

I've known plenty of days where my circumstances were good, where people in my life were treating me with love and kindness, and yet I was experiencing discontent inside my spirit, was feeling angst about my existence, was caught in a web of powerlessness ... because I wasn't showing up for myself in the ways I now know my spirit needs in order to have peace, and to be living in my power.

In the future, even when circumstances are good, or even if they become worse, my peace and my empowerment are always ever only up to me. Not dependent upon circumstances. Not dependent upon other people.

In this moment,  
I'm holding in my thoughts  
the incredible power of this work  
to bring transformation to my spirit  
*in good times and bad.*

It brings to me a subtle, yet sublime, sense of possibility and hope. My eyes widen, my breath deepens, and my heart swells when I ponder what an awesome, open, joyful, loving, courageous, bold, connected, beautiful life is mine for the taking, *IN ALL TIMES*, if I commit to continue doing the work to bring this goodness to my spirit.

I'm not a religious person, but this sounds divine.  
Like heaven on earth.

### ***A solemn oath***

So, here I am. Standing with palms open, chest lifted, heart still.

I'm committing to myself ...

... to adopt a new pattern.

... to name my struggles, fears, and worries when I feel them.

... to recognize things not in my power to change.

... to let go.

... to embrace the freedom I receive in acceptance.

... to pay close attention to my feelings, my needs, my values.

... to choose courage.

... to use my power to change the things I can.

... to seek out others who are doing their own work and living in their own power.

... to build power with those others.

... to stick with this work, in good times and in bad; even in the midst of struggle, chaos, pain, and hardship; and in those precious moments when the sea of my circumstances is calm.

I'm committing to myself that I will make these habits a part of my daily life, because I'm committing to being good to myself, and this is how I can do that.

A healthy body requires daily attention in order for it to remain healthy—eating good food, moving, stretching, getting enough rest.

And a peaceful spirit requires daily attention to remain peaceful, too: acceptance of what is, courage to change the things in my power to change, letting go of what needs to be released, standing in my power.

This is my oath:

*“Shannon, dear one, I promise you:  
I’ll be good to you.  
I’ll be good to me.”*



## ***Now, more than ever***

When I started this project in January 2022, I identified rising fascism and climate change as the circumstances that were robbing me of my peace.

In the time since then, the progression of each of those circumstances has accelerated in ways more profound than I was prepared for—especially in the realm of rising fascism in the United States.

This last week (*late June 2022*) we experienced, *for the first time in American history*, the removal of legal protections for a fundamental human right, when the

Supreme Court issued their decision that effectively overturned *Roe vs. Wade*.

The removal of legal protections for a human right has never happened here before. Up until now, our government has been in the business, albeit sometimes infuriatingly slowly, of consistently *expanding* protections for the inalienable rights we each have as people—not eliminating them.

But in the spaces where minority rule has been entrenched in our government by this rising fascist movement—spaces like the current United States Supreme Court—those with power are pulling out all the stops, in a rapidly-accelerating fashion, to force us all to adhere to immoral and undemocratic laws that enforce a social hierarchy that serves their white christian fascist worldview.

This is a watershed moment. Although I've been aware of the threat, I felt a significant shift—something of a tipping point—this past week. It's terrifying, and so, so sad. Our country has the potential for so much more than the course these small-minded, dark-hearted, power-hungry fascists have in mind for us.

Over the course of history, in countries where those in power have reversed course from democracy,

and turned toward fascism—turned down a road of removing protections for human rights—those democracies have declined, and then failed.

I wish it weren't so, but I expect that things may get worse here. I don't say that lightly, nor to be alarmist; I'm just trying my best to face with clear eyes what is already here, and what's been promised to come, directly from the mouths of the leaders of that movement themselves. I don't know precisely what form that "worse" might take. But as it currently stands, the minority have already entrenched their power enough that there isn't any immediate remedy to their destructive actions.

When starting this project, I did not expect that I'd be required to confront so soon the possibility of fascism taking root here, nor that living in a society ruled by fascists might define my near- and long-term future. I think I thought that it was a rising threat, but that somehow we'd pull through and defeat it. And ... we might still! I hope we do.

But over the course of this project, and in the last couple of weeks in particular, I've found myself having to sit at the foot of the possibility that the future may, indeed, become even darker than it is now. And what am I going to do with myself then? How



will I live? How will I define my own experience and presence in a world like that?

The answer that keeps coming back to me, again and again: *keep doing my work*. Cultivate my own peace. Grab hold of the power that is mine. Seek others who are doing the same. Stand together. Live with the dignity and beauty and freedom and serenity and power that are *mine*, no matter the circumstances.

That's my commitment to myself.

Other courageous people, in previous moments in history that were as difficult or worse than the moment we're facing now, have managed to do it. They have set an example of the gorgeous possibilities intrinsic to the nature of humanity. And if they could do it, so can we.

## Good to Me



There isn't any savior on the way  
The sky's about to shatter any day  
Here under the cracks, my heart is still  
I'll be okay

Even if a miracle arises  
And present tribulations fade to silence  
I'd still daily dip into this well  
To tend my mind

The hard times will come and go  
The darkness may even grow  
My heart made this solemn oath  
That I'll be good to me

I know you'd move mountains for my comfort  
But finding peace is a quest for one  
My feet know these trails in the dark  
I've already begun

The hard times will come and go  
This charge is nobody's but my own  
My heart made a solemn oath  
That I'll be good  
I'll be good  
I'll be good to me

Hard times go  
My heart made this solemn oath  
I'll be good to me



# ***Epilogue: wrapped in gratitude***

{ Late September 2022 }

In this moment, as the words of commitment I've made to myself are fresh on my tongue, my heart is folded into deep, profound gratitude.

First: I have gratitude for the people in my life who modeled all of this for me, and who showed me what's possible before I knew how to have peace and power in my own life.

I think specifically of Nancy, an elder member of the first Codependents Anonymous fellowship I was a part of in my early recovery. I saw her at the meetings every week. I heard my story in her story. But she had something I hadn't yet known in my life up until that point: serenity.

I can close my eyes even now and see her face as she sat in that circle of chairs. I can see the peace she'd cultivated in her spirit softening her eyes, playing around the upturned corners of her mouth, resting on her relaxed forehead. I can see the evidence of the

ways in which she had shown up for herself—in her language, in her body, and in her story.

The gratitude I feel is centered on the idea that an ancillary outcome of her having been good to herself is that it helped to illuminate the path for me to discover my own peace and power. What a gift she gave me.

Second: I have gratitude for myself. For choosing to take care of myself. For showing up for myself. For being good to me.

Third: Jamie and I share enormous gratitude for the steadfast support of our Misfit Stars community. We literally couldn't have made this without you, and we hope it proves of lasting value in your life.

Lastly: I have gratitude for all of you who are doing this work, too. For the honor and joy of joining hearts and arms with you. Thank you. It's a deep honor to be walking in this time with you, and I'm so grateful that we have each other to turn to.

Love—shannon



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