

# Chapter 5

## The Power of Inclusion

### **Allow**

There is no controlling life.  
Try corralling a lightning bolt,  
containing a tornado. Dam a  
stream and it will create a new  
channel. Resist, and the tide  
will sweep you off your feet.

Allow, and grace will carry  
you to higher ground. The only  
safety lies in letting it all in –  
the wild and the weak; fear,  
fantasies, failures and success.  
When loss rips off the doors of  
the heart, or sadness veils your vision with despair,  
practice becomes simply bearing the truth.

In the choice to let go of your  
known way of being, the whole  
world is revealed to your new eyes.

—Danna Faulds

### **THE RIVER OF LIFE**

Healing is bringing mercy and awareness into that which we have held in judgment and in fear.

—Stephen Levine

Imagine that Life is a river. Most of us are trying to control this river, hoping that we can make it do what we think it should do. So we head our boat upstream, furiously paddling against the current, trying to make Life into what we think it should be. All the while we are struggling with Life, not only does the majesty and the mystery of the river completely escape our attention, but we are also unable to dance with the powerful flow of water.

Going upstream, we live in *what should be* and *what is not*. In this mindset, we don't notice that the pull of the river is more powerful than our attempts to control it and that all the while we are

furiously paddling, it is taking us down the river of our lives backwards! Unable to see where we are going, the rapids and waterfalls catch us off guard, and we spend a lot of time cold, wet and shivering in the face of these powerful forces. What we truly long for is to allow the boat to turn around and follow the current of Life.

As we turn our boats around, we learn the art of showing up for the river of our lives. Rather than just relying on our own limited intelligence, we now have the force of the river at our disposal, taking us turn by turn to our destiny of becoming aware.

The two main skills that allow us to maneuver down the river of awakening are focused attention, which I call curiosity, and inclusion, which is the activity of an open heart that doesn't argue with *what is*. These are the two components of awareness—the deep curiosity that brings us into immediate engagement with Life and a spacious heart that knows how to make space for *what is* rather than resisting it. They come together in a mind that is compassionately curious about *what is* right now. This kind of focus births us out of the labyrinth of the struggling mind, opening us into the joy and wonder of being truly alive.

We explored the skill of curiosity in the last chapter, accessing it with the words *what is*. Now we are ready to explore the second skill, inclusion, and the phrase we will use to help us work with inclusion is *this too*. The power of inclusion has been alien to most of us. We are geared toward controlling, denying, fighting, resisting, managing or understanding *what is*. As we begin to come out of the fog of separation, it becomes evident that we have continually struggled with what we think is too much and too little, too big and too small, too painful and too boring, too loud and too quiet, too fast and too slow. We have believed we're both too much and too little at the same time! And most of the time we've thrown most of our lives out of our hearts.

Inclusion is the opposite of the struggling mind. It is the ability to move beyond struggle and meet *what is exactly as it is*. It is the art of meeting everything in our lives, especially all of the formerly disowned and disliked parts of ourselves, with deep mercy. This *allowing* is magic for as long as we are resisting what we are trying to change, we stay stuck to it like glue.

The phrase *this too* mobilizes the activity of inclusion. As we say *this too*, we let go of struggling with Life and become *present* for it instead. This allows us to maneuver through the rapids, waterfalls and whirlpools of our journey rather than spending energy resisting them. From a place of inclusion, we can make skillful and creative choices about how fast or slow we need to go, about how much we need to rest and about which rapids we will ride and which we will portage around. *This too* is not about floating limply in the river. It is a place of engagement with the forces that have created the river and us. It is about being responsive *to* the river rather than trying to control it.

While working with this river analogy in my Awakening groups, some people decided that they would like to go river rafting for a weekend. After having checked out a number of companies that could supply us with boats and guides, I narrowed it down to two possible choices and set out for a day on the river to check one of them out. It was to be a day of discovering deeper levels of the power inherent in compassionate curiosity, the combination of *what is* and *this too*.

I awoke with feelings of trepidation. This was compounded by the fact that I was not feeling very well and was not all that certain that I wanted to take my body on a wild ride that day. For the first few minutes of my morning quiet time, I was lost in reaction. When awareness kicked in, I immediately asked, *what is?*

My awareness went to an aching muscle in my body that contracts only in the face of terror. This

confused me because I wasn't particularly afraid of river rafting. Even though it was something I had never tried before, I have always liked adventure. As I dropped into what this muscle was feeling, staying with the actual physical experience, it became clear to me that what I was afraid of was being a nuisance, a core part of my childhood story. The story said, "What if I get sick on the river and am a bother to everyone else?"

Having seen *what is*, I began to make space for it by using *this too*, saying, "I can allow this to be part of my experience right now." *This too* moved me beyond struggling with what I was experiencing so I could bring it my attention. I literally talked to this muscle and to the old story that had caused it to contract. I asked it what it needed from me that day, and what I heard back was *inclusion*. "Don't abandon me. Please make space for me and listen to me."

With this connection, I felt it wasn't necessary to cancel the trip. In fact, it made sense to me that this was a day to make space for these feelings, even allowing them to be there for the entire time, if necessary. My mind had expected an entirely different day. Before the fear made itself known, I had imagined a day of wonderful experiences. When the fear began to take over, it imagined a day of horrors. Now I was willing to show up for exactly what was appearing. In making space and connecting with the uncomfortable, I began to feel better.

The willingness to include rather than resist what was appearing transformed my experience. Even though a feeling of discomfort was still in my body, by including it, I stayed in a larger space. My heart was full of joy and my mind was available for the adventure. Even when the guide said, "When the waves crash over you..." and "If you fall out of the boat..." I did not contract.

About half an hour into the river, a different muscle in my body began to spasm. I contracted. This particular cramp had caused all sorts of havoc in my life. The only way I had ever been able to get it to let go was through hot baths, deep massage and lying down. None of these were available and I was trapped in a boat, sitting in a position that further tightened this muscle. The panic of *no way out* began to build and the fear of *being a bother* tightened its fist around my heart.

In the middle of my reaction, I began to hear "*What is?*" whispered from the core of my being. When awareness kicked in, I took my attention into the muscle and began to soften around it. My heart immediately said, "*this too*." I literally talked to this cramp, asking what it needed, becoming as attentive and spacious as possible. Again it said, "Can you meet me without hatred and fear?" My heart flooded with the words, "I'm here," and "This is workable." My reactive mind quieted down and was replaced with conscious connection.

The cramp let go about 15 minutes later, never to return that day! I had met a big rapid in my inner life, a place that I had been very afraid of for my whole life. Now, rather than meeting it with resistance, I stayed conscious and connected and discovered the joy of riding through this rapid in a spacious and attentive way.

Inclusion is magic. It can make bearable and even heal the hardest heart, the deepest grief and the sharpest pain. *This too* makes our journey immeasurably easier as the energy that was formerly caught in the judging, resisting and struggling mind is transformed in the spaciousness of the heart. It also invites us into the knowing that in order to discover the deep peace that is always within us, we need to learn how to not fight what lies over the top of it.

As we combine *what is* with *this too*, we are brought back into the healing of the heart and then on to engagement with Life the moment it appears out of Mystery. We then can flow through the river of our lives with curiosity, compassion and trust. This is where both in our returning practice and throughout the day we can give ourselves the gift we have longed for our whole lives – our own

interested attention. So let's take a few minutes now to explore what this looks like.

## ☯ An Invitation ☯

After you read this paragraph, put down the book and allow in a few deep breaths, softening your belly and focusing your mind. To hone your awareness, ask the question, "What sits here?" *What is* the living experience of your life in this moment?

Start in a more global way, discovering what, of all of the possible human experiences, is happening right now (sitting, lying down, standing). Now become more focused. *What is* your body feeling? Allow your awareness to be like a flashlight, highlighting the experience (tired, exhilarated, content, upset, uncomfortable).

Now go to one particular sensation, something that is speaking louder than all of the others (a headache, a sore back, an overall feeling of fatigue) and begin to explore it, allowing your awareness to be like a finger, discovering exactly *what is* there. Say to yourself, "*This too*. For just this moment, I choose to include this as a part of my journey. I let go of resisting, controlling and wanting this to be different than what it is. For this moment, I allow it to exist as a part of my being."

Stay there for at least a few minutes, returning when your mind drifts away. Don't expect any great healing. It takes time to reweave the severed threads of connection and communication, but with every moment of seeing *what is* and including it, we take another step into our healing.

## THE ART OF LISTENING

It is not about what is happening in our lives. It is all about our relationship to what is happening that is the difference between struggle and freedom.

—Jack Kornfield

We can now see that it is in being curious about *what is* showing up (*what is*) and including (*this too*) rather than trying to change what we are experiencing that we become truly free. These two aspects of awareness bring us into the ability to compassionately listen to ourselves, giving what we were formerly ashamed of and afraid of the focused attention it needs in order to be set free. Listening to our immediate experience is a powerful tool. Just think about how healing it is when someone meets our anger with an understanding attention rather than reacting to it. The same is true for the contracted and disowned parts of our bodies, minds and hearts. Just as we all respond to wise, kind, interested listening, so do all of these parts of ourselves. It doesn't matter whether it is a physical sensation, an emotional feeling, a very intense thought pattern or a combination of all of these, they all respond to deep listening. They open and reveal themselves to an awareness that is truly willing to hear *what is* trying to be communicated. This isn't about analyzing, lecturing, assumptions or pat answers—*it's about pure, undivided listening*.

Beginning to listen to all of the parts of ourselves that we formerly hated and feared is like reconnecting with a dear friend with whom you had a major falling out and haven't spoken to in a long time. As it becomes clear that both of you want to mend the relationship, you realize that the

love and care is still there, but it is caught under layers of distrust, anger and grief. Each of you needs to be heard by the other without judgment.

The story inside of us with its concepts, sensations and feelings, needs to be heard in the same way. It is full of beliefs about who we are that were created when we were very young, for it is said that our core beliefs about ourselves and about Life were formed before we were six years old. These beliefs then became characters in our stories—terrifying ghouls, scared children, struggling elves, rage-filled dragons, helpless princesses, arrogant knights and self-absorbed prima donnas—and every single one of them is an essential part of the community that we are.

Think of the colorful array of characters found in fairy tales. The truth is that they all live inside of us! They all play essential roles in the grand theater of our awakening. But most of us try to ignore, deny, put down or hide the unpleasant characters that are in our stories. This only gives them more energy, allowing them to run us underneath the level of our everyday awareness. They are like little children left in a room by themselves. The longer no adult is present, the deeper they go into chaos and confusion. And over time, they have a tendency to get louder, crying out for the healing of our attention.

Just like the monster in the living room, in the previous chapter, they not only need to be seen, they also need to be heard. Making a connection with what we formerly resisted, ignored, hated and feared is a major step towards our healing. As we open into communication with them, doors that we didn't even know were there reveal themselves.

What we are exploring here is compassionate listening. Imagine a child running to a parent after a playmate has called him or her stupid. There are several possible responses. The parent can ignore the child, respond with annoyance at the interruption, or agree with the assessment, telling the child that he or she really is stupid. In these reactions the belief is given energy. Another possible response is that the parent listens, allowing the child to express all of the fear and the anguish that were brought up through this encounter. Through being validated and heard, the belief that he or she is stupid has far less of a chance of gaining a foothold in the child's story.

The same is true for our deeply rooted beliefs. They too respond to this same kind of compassionate listening. And the most important person we need this response from is ourselves. A woman in one of my Awakening groups had an epiphany last week. She was able to express to the group her deep fear that nobody liked her. As with most stories in our heads, the exact opposite was true. She was a deeply appreciated and respected part of the group. In being this honest about her fear, allowing this belief from childhood out into the light of day, it was much easier for her to see how young it was. She left group full of respect and compassion for herself.

A few days later, she had an experience of scheduling two different things at the same time. Rather than simply rescheduling, she began to fall into the old story again. "I never do anything right. They will hate me because I am so inept." In a flash, she became curious and was able to listen to this voice with great curiosity and compassion—not hating it, not fearing it, simply allowing it to speak without becoming identified with it. She not only met the unmeetable with her heart, but she moved another step beyond having this fear be in charge of her life. The freedom that she felt from those few moments of listening to herself was enormous.

A returning practice is the place where you can learn how to relate to *what is* going on inside of you rather than believing what your inner voices are saying. When you notice that you are paying attention to the thoughts in your head rather than your focus, take a moment to ask, "What feeling is here?" You can pretend you are from another planet and have been given a few minutes to be inside of a human being so you can describe what it is like when you go home. This little trick of

imagination can help you deepen your curiosity. There could be all sorts of feelings showing up – boredom, self judgment, impatience, contentment, irritation, restlessness, happiness, anxiety. Then you notice a feeling, say “(name of feeling) is here” rather than “I am \_\_\_\_\_.”

To meet these different characters in our story—to include them, allowing them to express the beliefs that were frozen inside so many years ago—is an act of enormous healing. These parts of us have waited our whole lives for us to gain enough awareness that we could finally meet them without identifying with them.

In the beginning phases of responding rather than reacting to the parts of our story, inclusion can be like magic, quickly dispelling the conversations in our head. But as we move further into awakening, it becomes evident that there are characters in our story that won't be so easily dispelled. Irritation will often dissolve the moment it is seen, but the ancient rage we have all carried since childhood is an entirely different matter. We not only have deep reservoirs of rage, but also of terror and grief. It takes time to build the bridges that we burned through denial, self-judgment and fear. It is the work of a lifetime, but the payoff is enormous. Every time a pattern is met in the attentive heart, the energy that was formerly locked into it is freed up and becomes available for the rapture of being alive.

## THE POWER OF QUESTIONS

Live in the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

—Rainier Maria Rilke

An important key to a healing relationship with the formerly hated and feared parts of us lies in asking questions. As in the analogy of healing a relationship with a friend, as we listen to this person, it is important to ask questions: What were you feeling when we parted ways? What was triggered inside of you when this happened? What were you trying to communicate? These questions give your friend a space into which she can speak her experiences. The same is true for every part of our inner story.

To ask questions of *what is* showing up in our lives puts us into direct relationship with it. We usually run and hide or try to change what we don't like. Neither one of these allows for direct contact where we can heal and be healed. These patterns not only need our undivided attention, they long to speak their truth to us.

To ask questions gives us moments when we are not caught in struggle. They also allow us to respond rather than react and it is in response that healing happens. It doesn't matter if this only lasts for a second. Just like throwing a small pebble into the middle of a huge lake, the ripples eventually make it all the way to the shore. One question sets things in motion, moving us farther down the path of awakening.

The true power of questions doesn't work in a linear way—ask a question and get an answer. Answers will come in their own time and their own way. If we focus on the answer, we break the power of the question. *The power is in asking questions.* Looking for answers just flips us back into the controlling, analyzing, planning and comparing mind. Questions make space for the sea of Intelligence that is waiting for an opening.

We will explore questions more deeply later on in the book. Until then some of the most powerful questions to ask when you are turning toward what you are experiencing are:

- Who are you?
- How do you see the world?
- What are you trying to communicate?
- What do you believe to be true?
- What is it you need from me today?
- What is the treasure that you hold?
- How have you served me?
- How are you healing me?

The flavor of these questions is compassionate curiosity, the combination of *what is* and *this too*. It is the art of approaching these mind-body states in an accepting and curious way. Again, ask, but *don't look for an answer*. Answers will come in their own time and their own way. To keep our questions open-ended is to understand that *challenges come with the solution woven into them*. The solution comes as we pay attention, listen and live in questions.

I really learned the power of asking questions when my mother was dying. As I explained earlier, I had broken my ankle. The first day I was up on crutches, I went to be with her. I had my daughter come and pack for me the night before and my son pack the car the next morning. Arriving in Victoria, I was exhausted. I had forgotten what a challenge it is to maneuver around on crutches, especially with a newly broken ankle. The next morning, after a night of intense throbbing pain, I woke up into the fear that I didn't have the strength to be with my mom. In my meditation, as I stabilized on the breath, awareness said, "*What is asking to be met?*"

I dropped into my body and touched with attention the actual place that was holding my fear. It is a few inches above my navel and felt as if someone had pulled the energy plug and everything had drained out. This feeling was a predominant part of a debilitating illness a few years ago, and it could still terrify me. Instead of running away, I went to it. "I recognize you. What is it that you need from me today?" This question moved me into non-resistance. It also signaled to these feelings that I was willing to listen and learn rather than resisting and denying them.

Instead of spending energy fighting this feeling, I softened and opened, feeling a shift in my body closing the energy drain. By not running away from what was happening, I was able to stay in contact with myself. Many times throughout the day I asked my body, "What is appropriate now?" Rather than getting caught-up in the role of "support person" for my mother, I paced myself, allowing my body to say when it was time to rest. Before in my life I would override my weariness and continue with whatever I was doing because I believed I "should" perform up to a imagined standard of perfection. Now I was listening and staying in balance.

At the beginning it may not be easy to connect with what is presenting itself. We then simply ask the question, "What wants my attention?" or "What is asking to be met?" Know that if our mind is agitated and upset, underneath that an old pattern is usually asking to be seen.

## INCLUDING THE BODY

The body is solidified mind.

—Stephen Levine

The stories that we get lost in—that deeply need our attention and our compassion—move through us as thoughts, emotions and sensations in our bodies. It is oftentimes much easier at the beginning of our awakening to bring curiosity and mercy to the parts of the stories when they show up as sensations in our body. Caroline Myss says it so well when she states, “Biology is biography.” In other words, the entirety of our story is held in the very tissues of our body.

Absolutely every state of mind—terror, joy, longing, rage, to name a few— manifests in our bodies in a particular way. Think of a sexual fantasy and notice what happens in your body. Think of a person you are having difficulty with. Notice how the energy in your body shifts. Now think of someone you love very much. It changes again.

Different emotions affect different parts of the body. Rage is often stored somewhere around the solar plexus. It is in this region that the liver (I am livid), the gall bladder (that really galls me), and the spleen (venting my spleen) reside. And grief often shows up with tightness in our throats (a lump in my throat) and constriction in our chests (a heavy heart.). Some people can even read the story of your personality by looking at all of the lines on your face or noticing your posture. How we walk, move, sit and stand all say volumes about the stories that we live in.

Using the body to pay attention to our story is also facilitated by the fact that it has held our confusion and pain all of these years, but it can only do this for so long. The parts of our story that keep us lost in delusion—whether it be our fear, judgment, sadness, grasping or resistance—affect the energy flow in our bodies. We can usually function with constricted energy flow until our 30’s or 40’s, and then the tissue surrounding the cramp will become affected.

A good example is the stomach. If you think of times when you were very afraid and had narrowed down into the contracted world of fear, you may recall having a knot in your stomach. You could be at a party, completely oblivious to how anxious you are, when all of a sudden your stomach begins to signal you. In paying attention, you can then become aware of the fear pattern you are being run by, and in that awareness you have the choice to do something about it.

The gift of this tissue breakdown is that it grabs our attention. We can no longer live unconsciously in our old patterns for they are calling to us directly from the living tissue of our bodies, revealing the struggles that we haven’t yet seen and freed. As we pay attention to the area of discomfort, first recognizing it, then feeling it and finally dropping into it, it will reveal to us the story in our minds that goes along with this energy constriction.

In my own life, whenever my stomach tightens, I am usually experiencing dread, one of my core patterns. Underneath this tightness is often a sense of shame that I am not doing my life right, combined with a sense of terror about what price I am going to pay for these “mis-takes” (it’s usually some theme of “they won’t like me.”) As I am able to meet the fist in my stomach and then explore the underlying feeling of dread, I am able to see the old conversation in my head that is always there when my stomach tightens up. Now when it shows up, because I am familiar with it, I don’t have to identify with it. In that compassionate curiosity, my awareness is then freed to be *with Life* rather than with my old conversation *about Life*.

The two components of compassionate curiosity—*what is* and *this too*—intimately engage us with



the stories in our bodies that are asking to be healed. *What is* brings attention out of the restless, wandering mind and focuses it in the present. *What is?* signals my mind to pay attention—to stop leaning forward into Life or leaning back away from it.

Another way I access this focused place is to ask, “Knowing that all the millions of moments of my life have led me to this one, what is it like?” At the beginning it may be hazy and even difficult to feel anything. It is helpful to start globally with an overall sense—describing the room you are in and the general feeling of being in a body—and then finally coming into direct contact with *what is* asking to be met. It may be vague and formless at first, but slowly allow *what is* to reveal itself to you and *listen*. Go back again and again to the question “*What is* right now?”

As we discover *what is* there, the body will graphically teach us. The opposite of *this too* is *not this*. When we respond to a discomfort in our body from *not this*, it causes the muscles around the discomfort to contract, becoming a breeding ground for more pain. When we can physically soften with *this too*, we generate the opposite. It takes away the fuel for continuous tightening and also allows us to make space for the healing energies to flood in. This is also true with our emotions and our thoughts. Fighting and constricting around unpleasant ideas and feelings creates more pain, while cultivating the spaciousness of *this too* opens the doors to healing.

My sister called one night, caught in a web of fear. As our mother lay dying in another city, core patterns that each of us took on in our childhood were rising to the surface of our awareness in order to be seen, accepted and moved beyond. One of her patterns is free-floating anxiety. She is four years younger than I and thus experienced our mother’s journey into paranoia at a very young and vulnerable age. On the phone she was lost in the fear of this anxiety, becoming almost paralyzed in the process. She was in complete reaction with no ability to respond.

I asked her to pay attention to what was happening in her body. As she described the tightness in her chest and the pounding of her heart, she was able to see that this was her anxiety pattern. With great trepidation she moved towards it, feeling this fear that had been such a predominant thread in her life. As she was able to be with it rather than fight it, she began to sob from the depths of her being. The last thing I said to her was, “You grew up in a sea of paranoia, and there was no one there to acknowledge and hold your fear. This anxiety has waited your whole life for you to see it without falling into it and to meet it with tenderness and mercy.”

When she called the next day, she said that after the phone call she lay on the floor, brailing her way into the anxiety as it lived in her body. For moments she became bigger than the anxiety itself and was able to relate to it rather than being lost in it. The racing of her heart slowed down, and the constriction of panic let go. Into that spacious attention, the truth of her perfection and wholeness became clear to her. It so profoundly shifted her perspective that she was able to move through a chronically resistive place with her husband later that evening, a place they had been trying to get through for a long time.

As you learn how to listen to your body, seeing the story of the struggling mind that is manifested in your tissues, allow what wants to reveal itself to you to show up in its own way and its own time. Your job is to generate over and over again a sense of curiosity and mercy. Trust where you are. Whatever is grabbing your attention, begin to explore and describe it to yourself. You can take this as deep as you like. You may describe it with only one word, “Pain,” or you can go onto examining it in minute detail—tight, full, warm, throbbing, pushing, pulsing, shooting. Describing it is an important step, for it not only puts you into direct contact with *what is*, but also every time you name it, you are relating to it rather than being lost in the middle of it.

Eventually you will be able to listen to even deeply disliked parts of yourself, giving them the

compassionate attention they need in order to be healed. At whatever level you can be present for *what is here*, say, “*This too*. For this moment I allow you to be a part of my experience.” The ability to be present for even a moment in a compassionate and curious way starts dissolving your stories so you can know who you really are without your mind clouding your experience..

## THE HEALING OF THE HEART

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

—Rumi

We have grounded ourselves and we have opened. We have cultivated paying attention and awakened to the art of inclusion. We have explored the power of asking questions. All of these steps are moving us into the place of allowing these formerly feared and hated parts of ourselves back into our hearts. That is where our healing lies because the heart can hold the opposites of the struggling mind.

My journey into awakening has brought me into tenderness and mercy. At one of the ten-day retreats I went to every year, I made a list of all of the parts of myself that I had formerly hated and feared that were now woven back into my heart. I cried tears of gratitude and mercy for I saw how deeply I had been locked out of my own heart and how this very prison of self-judgment had pushed and pulled me along the path of awakening.

When we discover the power of allowing the disowned parts of ourselves back into our hearts, we may at first meet them in the hope that they will go away. They will become more manageable with every meeting, but they won't go away. The good news is that they will be transformed into our allies when they are finally embraced as welcomed guests.

It is the most unwelcome parts of us that hold the power for awakening into the healed heart. I discovered this at a retreat titled African Drumming, Dancing, Ritual and Art. “Aha,” said my mind,

“that sounds like a weekend of rhythm, music, opening and fun.” Well, it was unlike any retreat I’d ever been to. Instead of being fun, it was an unbelievably painful but ultimately freeing experience that finally allowed me to embrace a core part of me that I had always run from.

On the first evening, I began to get an inkling of what I was in for. There was no schedule, no idea when meals would be. A transformer had blown just before we arrived, so there was no hot water, heat or lights in the cabins and very little warmth in the big, drafty hall. A number of people left during the retreat, and at times I wanted to, but I stayed, for I knew that discomfort always brings up the next layer of *what is* ready to be seen.

The second night, we began a ritual with very little preparation and with no guidance about how it was going to unfold or how long it would take. At 3:00 in the morning, after having gone through many phases—some scary, some boring and some enlightening—the leaders sat us in a circle of stones on the wooden floor with the admonishment that if anyone left, the ritual would be compromised for everyone. (Two people had tried to leave a few hours before, and we were sternly told they could have opened up the circle to dark forces). The leaders then left without any indication of when they would return.

Up to this point, I had checked in with myself over and over again and had gotten the sense that it was important to stay with the retreat. But now, in the middle of the night, exhausted and cold, sitting on a hard, cold floor with no end in sight, I wanted to leave. Panic began to build in my body and mind as I was pushed to my limit and my body felt like it was going to explode.

My awareness was obscured by a mixture of terror, despair and self-hatred. “I can’t handle this. When is it going to be over? I should have left. You are so inept and besides, you’re such a wimp,” my old voices screamed at me. Then awareness kicked in. I asked *What is?* and my attention came out of reaction and back into the living experience. I recognized that I was simply sitting on a cold, hard floor with 50 other people. Moving out of reaction, I remembered that my life is a journey of awakening where everything is *grist for the mill* of becoming conscious. I then asked, “What is asking to be met?”

I began to see with deep curiosity and a heartfelt compassion the feelings that were ricocheting through my body. As I made contact with the feelings flowing through me, from the depths of my being came flooding memories of other times in my life, mainly in childhood, when I had the same experience of feeling caught in an overwhelming situation with *no way out* and no end in sight. But this time, for the first time in my life, someone was there meeting me in this indescribably painful place. And that someone was me.

I began to talk to this core feeling of *no way out*. It was too enveloped in fear to respond to questions. But I could say, “*This too*. I include you as a part of this experience.” As my heart opened, I could say to the terror, “I see you. I want to get to know you. You were a core part of my childhood, and I’m not going to abandon you or get lost in you. I’m here for you.”

Rather than becoming caught in reaction, my heart cradled these feelings with a deep sense of tenderness and mercy. This softening and opening of inclusion warmed my body. When sensations of cold or panic began to seep back in, I found myself repeatedly returning to the warm glow of compassionate curiosity. As the room became colder, my heart became warmer. What had been an indescribably painful situation was transformed into one of the major healing experiences of my life. I knew as I packed to leave later that morning that I had been deeply opened and now trusted myself to the core. I saw that even when I am pushed to the maximum, I was now capable of being there for myself when I most needed myself.

My ability to be that present for myself on that cold floor in the wee hours of the morning came from the accumulation of many moments, both in meditation and in my daily life, where I met the core parts of my story rather than putting them out of my awareness and out of my heart.

Because this was the first time I had ever been present for the experience of *no way out*, I now needed to begin meeting this core feeling when it showed up in my everyday life. At first, I could only be present for a moment before I would flip out into reaction again. But having learned from many skillful teachers that going towards a state that controls you is the way of freedom, I returned again and again to *what is?* and *this too*.

Over time I was able to sit with this fear both in my returning practice and during my daily life. I would watch what would bring it to the surface, what words it would use, and how it would manifest in my body. At the beginning I would notice, after the fact, that fear had been present. But gradually I began to enter it, going through layer after layer so that when it was present, attention rather than fear would be triggered.

In order to bring the amazing power of inclusion into your life, be willing to spend the next 24 hours working with *this too*. Whatever comes up—whether it is indigestion, a cranky child, a sleepy body, an agitated mind—be willing to recognize it and then say, “*This too*; I can include *this too* as a part of my life.” If there is something that the mind refuses to stop struggling with—a bad cold, a major meeting at work, a difficult relationship—ask it, “Can I let this be as it is for just this moment?” Another helpful response is “It’s okay.” As the mind begins to let go of trying to turn this into an emergency, you can go back to cultivating the inclusion of *this too*.

As we begin to stabilize our minds by strengthening our ability to pay attention and opening into compassionate listening, we discover that whenever we really see with an inclusive heart, it is a profoundly healing moment. This is not the *quick fix* we’ve been taught to believe is healing—just give me a pill, a positive thought or a dose of denial and everything will be okay. It takes time to learn to truly meet what has been formerly cut out of our hearts. But this is the pathway to freedom. Every time we go towards something rather than away, we have another opportunity to lessen our identification with these contracted states, freeing the energy that is locked in them so that we can be more available for the living adventure that is Life.

## FIRST-AID KIT

When the demons become unmasked, you may feel you are going mad or doing something wrong, but in fact, you have finally begun to face the forces that keep you from living in a loving and fully conscious way.

—Jack Kornfield

Creating a relationship with our disowned parts is an art. There are times when our attention is not yet as strong as the pattern that is asking to be met, and we find ourselves *falling into* the feeling, experience or sensation rather than *relating to* it, or we find ourselves running away to our distractions like busyness, compulsions, and even trying to understand. At such times, when compassion and curiosity feel light years away, it is beneficial to have a first aid kit. This kit is filled with skills that allow us to bring a sense of spaciousness around these challenging places in order to gain perspective. Then, from a more spacious place, we can become curious again and, when we

are ready, touch whatever we are experiencing with our heart.

There are a number of things that can be done when the clouds of unconscious reaction have enveloped us and there doesn't seem to be any way to awaken in the midst of them.

## Asking for Help

One of the most important "First Aid Tools" is to ask for help. Remember, there is a loving Intelligence that permeates and penetrates absolutely everything. When we are caught and struggling, unable to see *what is* there and unable to access any space outside of the struggle, asking for help from the Intelligence that is always with us opens the door wide enough for it to get a word in edgewise. In fact, it could be said that all of the challenges of our lives are here specifically to bring us to this place where the only choice we have is to let go and ask for help.

The contemplative priest and author Thomas Merton said that true prayer begins when prayer doesn't work. For a good portion of our journey, we have used prayer to stay in control, asking for what we want and trying to get rid of what we don't. There is a point in the journey when we realize this only keeps us separate from the Living Presence—the sacred Intelligence of Life. When asking for help, we don't have to feel we are in contact with this Intelligence, we don't have to see any great transformation after we ask, nor do we have to hear an answer. Just asking is enough. *Help will come in its own time and in its own way.*

What works for me is to simply say, "Show me the way through this." It is also sometimes helpful to have a physical symbol that reminds us there is something bigger than ourselves that is in charge. I often light a candle and keep it burning all day long in my kitchen, a place where it is unusual to find a flame. Numerous times throughout the day, when I come around the corner and see the burning candle, I remember that I am not alone. When I am away from home, I will carry special rocks in my pockets or wear sacred gifts around my neck.

## Shifting Attention

When we are visited by a heavy state, and it feels unmeetable, the most basic thing we can do is shift our attention. If you have ever been a parent, you have probably relied upon this simple but powerful tool when your children are getting out of control—you place their attention elsewhere. It is wondrously amazing to watch a two year-old winding up to a full-blown temper tantrum, and when you invite them to watch a lady bug on the window, they immediately shift from anger to fascination!

I find cleaning house can help take the focus off the struggle. A movie or a good book works, too. Talking to a friend who will simply listen to us can also calm down the struggling self enough that we can then meet *what is* stirred up inside of us. Even if we stay distracted for awhile, know that the deep inner work continues even though we are focused elsewhere, for when the struggling mind isn't busy trying to get a word in edgewise, integration can happen in a much more effortless way.

## Lightening Up

It is good to remember not to take ourselves so seriously. The mind loves to turn the littlest thing into an emergency and the slightest mistake into a major screw up. "You grow up the day you have your first real laugh at yourself," said Ethyl Barrymore. When a group of people over the age of 100

were interviewed, a common thread in each of their lives was an ability to laugh at and with the ups and downs of their lives.

I love that moment in my consciousness when my mind is gearing up for a big “drama trauma” melt down and awareness kicks in with “Oh, the problem-factory is at it again!” and then laughs. I also ask, “Is this really going to matter tomorrow or next year?” And usually the answer is, “No.” Of course, there are things in our lives we need to take seriously, but most of the emergencies we face are mind-created horror stories, and a little lightening goes a long way toward breaking this addiction to struggle.

A friend of mine shared with me the phrase she uses which combines the sense of how challenging Life can be with the knowing that it is here for us, no matter *what is* happening. Loudly and with great vigor she says to the process, “Fuck you very much!” My heart immediately explodes in mirth and joy when I hear this. It includes both the resistance of the personality and the openness of the soul that knows it is all an adventure. So, lighten up. Tell good jokes to yourself while you’re in the car. Look for the humor. It is all a matter of perspective.

## Movement

There are many states that are asking to be met that won’t let us shift our attention or lighten up. We can then use movement to cultivate the opposite of this particular state of mind. If I am caught and struggling, I love to move in a way that is the exact opposite of what I am feeling. If I’m lost in self-judgment, sometimes I’ll cradle my heart. If I’m caught in a disempowered mode, I’ll put my hands together in front of me and forcefully chop down to the ground as I yell, “Ha!” If I’m feeling foggy and unresponsive, I take a power walk with head held high, arms swinging and long, strong strides. Putting on music and allowing whatever is coming up to be expressed is also very freeing.

It can also be helpful to go outside in order to get energy flowing again. To feel the sensation of rain on our face, the warmth of the sun, or the wind caressing our hair helps immensely. Nature can remind us that we are the Earth awakening and are a part of a greater process. Also, beauty is literally food for the soul. Something happens to every cell of our being when we immerse ourselves in the beauty of nature. I also love going to a place where I can see for a distance. (In a pinch I’ll even use my roof!) It is very healing to the nervous system when our sight can extend beyond *what is* right before us.

At times, when a particular state of mind has been around for a while and I find myself unable to stay attentive, I will ask myself what is the opposite of this mind/body state. I will then act *as if* I am experiencing it. Let’s say fear is present. I will then cultivate strength and courage in my walk, words and actions. This is not to rise above the feeling or to get rid of it, which result in staying caught in the pendulum of reaction. This is using the energy of the opposite of *what is asking to be met* in order to cultivate the stability and the clarity necessary to be present with it.

Another way to work with difficult states of mind is to enhance them. There is something magical in allowing an energy pattern to express itself to its fullest. In that very act of nonresistance and welcoming, it becomes much easier to weaken our identification with it and turn it into an opportunity for awakening. If I’m irritated, I’ll feed the smoldering fire inside of me by allowing myself to get very angry. I’ll stomp around and yell and sometimes even pound the bed. If I’m sad, I’ll rent a sad movie or read sad poetry. Stephen Levine teaches a technique in which you press your fingers deeply into your breastbone between your nipples. This is the grief point. As you press, you begin to wail and moan. At first it can feel artificial, but this technique has the ability to bring up the grief that is resting under our sadness.

## **Impermanence**

It can also be freeing to cultivate the recognition of impermanence. Nothing stays around for very long—absolutely nothing—not planets or people, countries or civilizations, joy or depression, pain or bliss—not even the difficult state of mind that is saying it will last forever. When heavy states move through our body/mind, they are usually accompanied by the belief that they are the totality of us and that they will be there forever. And yet, if you think about it, no state of mind has ever stayed “forever,” not even the pleasant ones. Just like the weather, they all arise and pass away. Through cultivating the truth of impermanence, it becomes easier to allow these states to flow through us rather than to identify with them and get lost in their content.

## **The Power of No**

One of the most powerful tools in the first aid kit is the ability to just say, “No.” There are two levels of a skillful *No*. The first happens when we can’t get any space around our story. During those moments when a heavy state feels like it is pressing in from all sides, we can say, “No. I’m not ready to deal with you.” This is not denial. It is the ability to put the experience on hold, for sometimes we do not have the strength, the time or the ability to deal with what is arising right then. It is important to watch the intention of our *No*. If it is done from an angry or fearful place, it can actually feed that state of mind or body. But if it is done with a caring firmness that realizes it is important to meet what is asking to be met, but that this is not the appropriate time, it will give us much needed space rather than throwing us deeper into contraction.

The other level of *No* comes when we have seen enough of our story that when it captures our attention, we can firmly but with great heart say, “No. I don’t need to identify with that.” This is the place of empowerment in which we recognize that we fully have the choice about what we are going to pay attention to.

## **Honor Resistance**

At times it may be impossible to do anything. This is when the state of mind we’re caught in rebels at even the thought of doing anything at all and cannot remember that there is something beyond our story that is supporting us every step of the way. With the depth of the heavy states that I’ve known, numerous times in my awakening process I’ve had moments when I became paralyzed and any attempt to make a shift was met with resistance. Luckily, my mentor was able to show me the power of not resisting resistance. In fact, she taught me how essential it is to honor it. Resistance is the guardian at the threshold of our growth. It says that to open any more is to enter the territory where we do not yet have the skills to traverse.

## **Patience and Support**

There will be times where absolutely nothing can penetrate the contraction of our story. No matter how far along in the journey of awakening we are, we can know this place where no light can penetrate. But when we are on the path of awakening, states that used to last for days or months and sometimes even years move through much more quickly and bring in their wake gifts that help us move out of our story and back into Life. In those years when awareness could not yet connect with the core parts of my story, I was helped by a quote from Rainier Maria Rilke:

“I urge you to be patient toward all that’s unsolved in your heart and try to love the

questions themselves—like locked rooms and like books that are written in a foreign tongue.

Do not seek the answers, because you are not yet able to live them and the point is to live everything. Live the questions now.

Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, awaken into the answer.”

So be patient. The process of awakening is organic. It has soft summer days and raging winter storms. But the constantly changing kaleidoscope of our experience unfolds in an orchestrated manner, as rhythmic as the changing of the tides and finely tuned as the dance of the seasons.

## **The Phases of Awakening**

The final tool in our first aid kit is the awareness that awakening is a living process. Just like a plant, it sets down roots and then grows the support system of stem, branches and leaves. Only then does it have the capacity to blossom.

We could say that awakening happens in three phases. The first is the one of being asleep—the normal consciousness of most people. It is the phase of holding onto and resisting Life, caught in the endless cycle of struggle.

The second phase is when we realize that something else is happening here beyond our narrow everyday focus. It is the spacious truth of our being that is present in every single moment of our lives. We begin to understand that in seeing our struggles rather than always trying to fix them, we discover something beyond our ordinary mind. Our daily lives become a dance of reconnecting with Life and of getting to know the story that takes us away. We still spend most of our time in the labyrinth of our minds, but the moments when we can see the story of struggle and then connect with the spaciousness of being that resides beyond it become more and more frequent.

This brings us to the third phase when, having seen enough of our story, we become awake and consciously aware of being a part of something greater. Then the center of our being resides in awareness. We find ourselves in the labyrinth at different times in our lives, but we are willing to be compassionately curious about what our stories are doing and then we easily come back to present time, available for Life the moment it appears out of Mystery.

At moments in this process, it can feel like our fears, desires and confusions are stronger than before. This happens because whatever we pay attention to becomes more alive. But paying attention to something we have previously denied or ignored does not make it bigger. Rather it is more like a flashlight flooding a basement that has been in the dark for years. When we turn on the light, it is easier to see the cobwebs and the junk so that now they can be cleaned up.

It is very helpful during the second and third phases of awakening to have a person or a group to share with that understands the awakening process. The pull of the story is so strong that we need to be continually reminded that who we are is something bigger than our story. Also, in having a place where we can share whatever is happening without it needing to be fixed or changed, the grip our story has on our attention can soften. It is reassuring to hear where other people are and discover that everybody else has the same struggles in their minds. This can help us to see that the darkness that we carry is not unique or horrible. Instead, we realize we are meeting the delusions that everyone has, meeting them for the healing of all beings.

This first aid kit is essential in the process of awakening. As soon as we move into another level of awareness, the next layer of what has not yet been included in our compassionate awareness will



surface to be seen. And even though the action of inclusion and curiosity becomes easier to access over time, our initial response will still usually be resistance. For in meeting many of the divorced parts of ourselves, we will need to take a few steps forward, only to retreat, drawing upon one or more of these tools that can help bring forth equilibrium again. Slowly and surely, we will gather enough curiosity and compassion to meet these states without falling into them.

## KINDNESS—A FIRST AID KIT UNTO ITSELF

It's a bit embarrassing to have been concerned with the human problem all of one's life, and find at the end that one has no more to offer by way of advice than "Try to be a little kinder."

—Aldous Huxley

We have been exploring how to meet ourselves with curiosity (*what is?*) and compassion (*this too*). But sometimes when we are caught in the deepest parts of our stories, it can be practically impossible to cultivate kindness for ourselves. When we find ourselves this contracted, we can take the focus off of ourselves and place it on another. To be kind to another human being is not only a wonderful thing to give to the world; it also is healing for us. It opens the doors of our own heart, allowing us to be present for ourselves again in a spacious and merciful way.

In order to live a life of kindness, we need to understand that we are all in this together. We are accustomed to seeing everything outside of us as *other*—separate and disconnected from us. We see things and people as objects in our minds, objects that can either enhance or detract from the experience of our lives. Something very radical happened when Einstein and then Hubbell discovered the expanding Universe. It began to seep into our collective awareness that absolutely everything came from the same place and that the dance of the Universe is an interconnected web of unfolding. There is no *other*.

One of the most skillful ways to cut through the illusion of separation and struggle we live in most of the time is to act in our lives as if everything were a part of us—for it truly is. There is so much more that we have in common than we have in differences. Your skin color, your religious beliefs and sexual preference, and possibly even your whole view of Life may be different than mine, but we come out of the same ground of being and share the same air, water and planet. At the root of our existence we also carry the same fears and desires, the same confusions and hopes, whether we live in a tribal village in Africa or a high rise in Manhattan.

Think of a newborn child. Include Hitler, Bin Laden, Florence Nightingale and Abraham Lincoln in this vision. We are all born in innocence, with the urge to love and be loved at the core of our being. As the cauldron of daily life molds and shapes us, differences become more apparent, but still nestled in the heart of every being is the desire to be happy.

The heart truly begins to respond when it realizes that pain and sorrow exist in absolutely everyone's life. There is a story about a woman who lost her young son, her only child. When she approached the Buddha, overcome with grief, she said, "Master, please bring my boy back to life." The Buddha replied, "I will, but first you must go into the village and get me a handful of mustard seeds from a home where no one has lost a loved one to death." She went from house to house,

searching for the seeds. But when she asked if anyone in the home had died, the answer was always “yes.” Finally, she realized that what had happened to her happens to everyone—that all who are born will also die and that all people experience loss.

The heart truly opens when it realizes that not only does death happen to each of us, but also upset, loss, heartache, craving, grief, judgment, confusion and despair, and that each of us is doing the best we know how. Understanding this, we can respond to all that we see with kindness

There are many books out now about the art of kindness. In fact, the whole concept has taken this country by storm. A newspaper article once called it “guerrilla goodness.” To consciously commit to being kind, can literally transform the world.

One story tells of a young woman who was at the end of her rope. She had broken up from a long and very painful relationship and had moved to a new city—without friends, without vision and without hope. Every day she would come home from work and just stare at the walls, sometimes crying, but mostly just sitting and wondering if she would ever know joy again. One night upon returning from work, much to her amazement, the red light of her answering machine was flashing. When she played the tape, it was a wonderful male voice apologizing for calling the wrong number. He said that her voice on the message had sounded so sad, and he just wanted to tell her that it was okay to be sad, that to be able to feel that sadness was important. His message went on for almost twenty minutes, talking about going through pain instead of running away from it and how even though it probably seemed impossible now, things would get better. Even though she never learned who the person was, this message was a healing catalyst in her life.

The most powerful gift of kindness you can give is the expression of caring. Holding this intention as we hand our money to the clerk or listen to another’s problems with compassion is one of the most transformative powers in Life. True healing comes not from doing anything. It comes from *being with*, whether it is a health condition in our body, an upset friend or a voice on the other end of the phone.

We cannot even begin to imagine the ripple effects of small acts of compassion, support and kindness. In some very deep way, these acts are the physical representation of the awareness that we’re all in this together with common needs and fears and that each of us is doing the best we know how.

One of the most wonderful things about kindness, and why it is a first aid kit itself, is that we cannot give it away without it affecting us. To leave smiles and kind words in our wake is to fill our own being with joy. The poet William Wordsworth said, “We are made kind by being kind. That is the best portion of a good man’s life—his little nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.” Acts of being present for others in a spacious and inclusive way automatically move us out of our contracted, struggling mind back into connection with Life.

## ENTERING THE ADVENTURE

Follow, follow, follow, follow,

follow the yellow brick road.

—from the film “The Wizard of Oz”

As we begin to show up for the unfolding of our lives, using *what is* and *this too* to remind us to be present for *what is* happening causes trust of the process to arise. Everywhere we look we see Intelligence, whether it is in the DNA nestled at the heart of every single cell in the world or in the exquisite timing of the seasons. This Intelligence exists in the dance of our daily lives, as well, and yet we usually don't see it. There is an ordered unfolding in this dance—whether it is the chaos happening between countries or the confusion in our minds. We don't see it because we haven't been taught how to pay attention. It is as if the instruction booklet for the living of each of our lives is in front of us every moment, and we're not reading it.

Paying attention reminds us over and over again that we are a part of an interconnected process and that unseen forces are with us every moment of our lives. The pieces of our puzzle are being spoken to us through symbols and dreams, bits of conversations overheard on the bus and lines from spy novels. But when we are caught in struggle, it is hard to see this, let alone to trust it. Cultivating compassionate curiosity allows us to step back from the multi-piece mosaic and see that it all fits together to make one picture. In that seeing, it becomes easier to belong to the unfolding that is our lives.

A woman I know was boating up a river to a weekend retreat, deep in the heart of small, somewhat primitive country. The boat in front of her was filled with people from a church in the Midwest who were sponsoring this retreat. Part way into the journey, her boat broke down, and they watched the lead boat disappear around the bend. Left stranded and alone, they made their way to the dock of an old hut on the shore and waited for help. Eventually the other boat did return, and in checking out the problem, the leader said he would drop off his people at their lunch place and be back in fifteen minutes.

Watching the boat disappear again around the bend, fingerlings of fear began to nibble at the edges of her story. Here she was, stranded on a river in the backwater of a foreign country. She shook off the fear with the response, "I can handle this." A half-hour went by and then an hour. An hour and a half and finally two and nobody came. As time slid by her story got stronger, moving from frustration into anger. "I wouldn't have left people in this way. Why didn't anybody in the first boat say they wouldn't go on until we were with them again? How could they continue, knowing we are stranded?" Fear finally got a foothold in her mind.

Eventually, a small boat arrived with a man who spoke very little English and who was evidently supposed to fix the problem. Discovering that it was beyond his capability and with darkness beginning to arrive, he rounded up another boat, loaded the people in, and off they went in search of the other group. Upon arriving at the retreat center, nobody, including the retreat leaders, said anything about what the people in the second boat might have been experiencing. It was as if it didn't happen. Without any support to be conscious, she got lost in the struggling mind's arsenal of weapons:

Rage—"Why isn't anyone acknowledging what happened?"

Helplessness—"I don't know what to do."

Self judgment—"Everybody else seems to be fine. Why am I making such a big deal out of nothing?"

In her childhood, an uncle who had molested his daughter had sexually molested her too. He was an important part of his church and was respected by his community. When she shared the violation with her mother, she was discounted and told to keep it to herself. The feelings of being violated, betrayed, abandoned and unheard became frozen parts of her story, and she lived them out unconsciously for most of her adult life. Then came this dramatic experience in a primitive

place (the abuse was also very primitive), that was perfectly orchestrated by Life to trigger these core parts of her story.

She was not able to stay conscious of this on the trip. The feelings were still too strong for her awareness. But after the trip, when she came to the Awakening group I lead, all of us, including this woman, realized the perfection of what had happened. It took an abandonment way out in the wilds of a primitive country for her to bring up and meet all of the feelings that were locked away in her story by the double betrayal in her childhood.

Everything that happened to her on the river, including the different parts that everybody played, was a necessary experience in the theater of her awakening. Everything was there to trigger the common illusions of struggle and separation that had so completely overtaken her life. Being able to see this experience as an invitation to awaken out of her story rather than just a traumatic event that happened on vacation brought all of us in that room into greater curiosity about our own lives and a deeper trust of the process.

She had also said that the predominant feeling she experienced while searching for the other part of her group was a deep sadness. Upon digesting all that we had talked about together, when we met again the next week she was able to make space for this grief. She shared with us that in being given permission to meet all of the feelings that came up as a result of this experience, she could see that they all converged together into one sentence, “I don’t matter.” Nestled underneath this was an ocean of sadness.

It became evident to her that most of her life experiences were touched by the belief that she didn’t matter. Before this shift, the grief was so embedded in the core of her story that it had been impossible to see. Making space for this feeling to be there, she was able to see it and say, “*This too*. I can include *this too* as a part of myself.” In that connection, she then said to this feeling, “You matter to *me*.” She gave herself the attention that was denied all those years ago. In compassionately meeting this feeling, she took a huge step away from it running her life underneath her everyday consciousness.

The Presence of Life that permeates and penetrates absolutely everything wants us to awaken. In fact, it yearns for this even more than we do. And it uses absolutely every moment of our lives (even a boat breaking down in a far off country) to move us farther along in the journey to connection and communion. Life is *for* us. Another way you can say this is that your life is your path. There is no accident who your boss is, what happens on your vacation and what type of body you have. And there is no accident what this all triggers inside of you.

To open to our lives allows us to get glimpses of the astoundingly creative adventure that each of us is on and to learn the art of trusting the process. It is only from a spacious perspective that we can begin to perceive the awesome Intelligence that weaves the seemingly happenstance experiences of our lives. It will use all kinds of occurrences and situations in order to lead us to the bloom of awakening. Our job is not to try to understand it all. It is to notice *what is* happening so that we can bring *whatever is* back into our hearts. As we notice with compassionate curiosity, understanding wells up within us as automatically as salmon swim upstream. We then know the joy of belonging to Life and belonging to our own lives.

To become fully available to the living moment of Life is a journey. We have all taken on a struggling mind, gotten lost in it, and are awakening through it. In the next four chapters, we will explore some of the core structures of the separate mind that keep us caught in its web—fear, self judgment, resistance to pain and addiction to control—and we will see how we can move through these to a place of spacious awareness.



May we become deeply curious  
about whatever is happening in our lives.

May this practice awaken deep compassion  
for all of the parts of us.

And in this inclusion, may we re-enter  
the living adventure that is our lives.

**Core Intention: This too**