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Thank you for your cooperation and happy reading!

Monique Verpoort

Is This All There Is?

LIVING A LIFE
BEYOND OBLIGATION

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The intent of the author is only to offer information of a general nature to help you in your quest for emotional and spiritual well-being. It must be clearly stated that the use of EFT is certainly NOT a substitute for medical or mental health treatment and by choosing to read this book and completing the exercises within, you are assuming responsibility for your use of EFT.

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*This book is dedicated to my parents, Phia and Carl,
who taught me how to love.*



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Author's Note

The idea for this book was born out of personal experience.

It surfaced as a result of a real sense of unease within me that a large part of who I was had not been given the opportunity to express itself, that I was somehow not being true to who I was meant to be, and that I was only going through the motions. The restlessness I was feeling would not leave me until I was prepared to fully acknowledge it and start doing something about it.

My personal struggle with my purpose in life began decades ago. While others around me seemed to know where they were going after graduation and embarked on their journey towards becoming an adult, I agonized over what my path would be. I would periodically get myself into a funk and feel a sense of hopelessness about my future as I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do. I had this ball of potential waiting to be unleashed, yet I didn't know where or how to unleash it. Putting my life on hold, while seeing others forge ahead, would prove to be an undeniable source of suffering for me.

The only thing I knew for certain was that eventually becoming a parent would really fulfill me, given that the nurturing instinct within me was very strong. I knew this about myself even at fourteen years old. When I did eventually become a parent almost two decades later, being a mother was without a doubt one of the most joyful and soul-enriching experiences of my life. This, despite the almost constant preoccupation with my children's well-being while, like any parent, periodically wondering whether or not my parenting skills would leave any long-lasting damage.

It was almost immediately after the birth of my second child, at the age of thirty-four, that this familiar sense of dissatisfaction began to resurface. It had absolutely nothing to do with my parenting role, but it had everything to do with my yet-to-be discovered purpose. I berated myself for being in a position in which I still needed to ask myself, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” Fortunately, the further softening of my heart after the birth of my children had me thinking of a possible career choice that would involve working with people who were less fortunate than I was. And thus my journey of transformation began.

Throughout the latter part of my life, I still felt I wasn’t going where I needed to go and quite frankly, the words, “Is this all there is?” kept coming to my mind and were forever reminding me that something deep within me was waiting to emerge and needed to be given the space to do so. Those thoughts were getting louder and louder as time went by and becoming almost impossible to ignore. I began reflecting on what might be holding me back from finding whatever it was I was looking for.

The answer came to be in a very unexpected way and was the result of tragic circumstances that were brought on by someone other than myself. Someone who was near and dear to me made a poor choice that, although it did not involve me directly, did have a negative impact on me. The result of this situation highlighted the fact that I needed to do things that were nurturing to me and forfeit the belief that I needed to put everyone’s needs ahead of mine, while disregarding my own.

It was around this time that I located the National Emotional Freedom Techniques Training Institute (NeffTI), the premier Canadian EFT training institute for human service professionals who want to get better results for their clients than traditional therapy alone can deliver. I enrolled in a workshop in EFT to deepen my understanding and experience of meridian tapping.

I had developed a very keen interest in this modality several years prior and was experimenting with it as it intrigued me immensely and reminded me of a modality that seemed to be similar in nature, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) that I had been exposed to fifteen years earlier.

This decision to honour the yearnings of my heart was a turning point for me and one of the best decisions I could have made for myself. The extra benefit for me was that becoming certified in EFT would not only benefit myself but would also benefit many others as well.

With the help of an EFT practitioner, one of the many core beliefs that came to light that was holding me back from finding my bliss was the belief that I had nothing interesting to say and that by extension was not an interesting person for people to be around.

This belief was formed early on in my life and took hold deep within my psyche. As a result of this belief, I censored my words before speaking and mostly kept quiet, allowing others who were eager to voice their opinions (which I realized is the case for many people) to take the floor. This behaviour was especially apparent whenever I found myself in a group situation, whether these were with work colleagues or casual acquaintances. I never felt safe voicing an opinion or sharing anything personal about myself for fear of judgment and/or disinterest in what I might bring to the table.

This book is the result of the collapse of that belief. I have finally found my voice and know without a doubt that I have something extremely important to share with others and want to shout it from the rooftops! Working with a modality such as EFT has had an enormous impact on my self-concept and hence my experience of life. My intention is to no longer silence myself.

Instead, I am thrilled to introduce its healing properties with others who have not had the benefit of being exposed to it.

My sincere hope for anyone who is experiencing a sense of restlessness within their soul and asking themselves, “Is this all there is?” is to begin their own process of transformation so they too can embrace the yet undiscovered possibilities that await them.

This dear reader is meant for you!

—Monique Verpoort
September 2019

Preface

Who is this book for?

- Do you put everyone else's needs above your own?
- Do you have a restless soul and feel as though something is truly missing from your life?
- Do you feel you don't deserve a happier, more expansive life?
- Are you unhappy and sometimes feel that life has let you down?
- Do you compare yourself to others and feel as though they seem to have it together much more than you do? Are you overly self-critical?
- In short, are you looking for something more but don't even know what you're looking for or how to get it?

If any of these questions resonate with you, you are not alone! Many of us feel defeated by life in some way and see no way out of our current circumstances. We may have adopted the belief "it is what it is" and have accepted our lacklustre life as though what was true for us in the past continues to be true for us now and in the future.

Consider a different way of viewing your life

I invite you to consider a different way of viewing your life and examining why you may be feeling stuck and anxious and possibly lacking hope for a more expansive life; a life that gets you excited and opens up greater possibilities for joy and fulfillment regardless of what may be going on around you. By choosing to pick up this book, you have recognized

something needs to change and have taken the first step towards a more fulfilling life. Good on you!

Even though most of us are always looking outside ourselves to explain our dissatisfaction with the current state of our lives (e.g. our finances, our family members, other relationships, the weather, the state of the world, our employment or lack thereof, our never-ending responsibilities to others), it is really what is going on inside our mind that is blocking greater possibility for us as we may see ourselves as victims of circumstance and feel a lack of control over our lives, feeling helpless to change anything for the better.

It has often been stated that it is not what happens to us but how we perceive the event that makes all the difference in how we experience a situation. One person may view being let go from a job as totally devastating, while another may view it as freeing them up to change direction and follow their heart by perhaps starting their own business. An unexpected illness may bring us the gift of self-reflection and the opportunity to change the course of our lives, rather than be strictly viewed as the absence of optimal health.

I would take this one step further: the way in which we perceive any given situation is really driven by the underlying beliefs we hold. It comes down to two things: what we believe is or isn't possible for us and the degree to which we believe we have the power to positively influence our life circumstances. It is these beliefs that directly inform how much life satisfaction we experience in our day-to-day lives.

As a result of our lived experiences and our perceptions of them, the origin of these beliefs stem from events that we perceived as a threat to our physical and emotional safety, often originating in early childhood. These experiences were often traumatic. They may have been unexpected or sudden, at times dramatic or overwhelming and left us feeling isolated with no available strategy or support to deal with whatever we were facing at the time.

In those moments of helplessness and distress, we learned about ourselves and decided how we may have inadvertently played a role in the situation. This interpretation happened on a subconscious level. The conclusions we came to about ourselves based on the processing of that

earlier event or situation would now become one of our core beliefs or truths, determining how we currently see our worth and shaping our identity.

Our beliefs determine how we see ourselves

As you will begin to understand more fully, our beliefs determine how we see ourselves, others and the world and can either support or get in the way of us having a more fulfilled life. Beliefs that add to our insecurities undermine our courage and urge us to stay within the realm of the familiar. Doing otherwise puts us into a state of fear and anxiety and feels highly uncomfortable. Although our beliefs serve to protect us, they often restrict our freedom to grow and expand ourselves by keeping us in our familiar comfort zone. We want to know what we can expect rather than face the unknown.

What is the cost of not changing?

This is why aiming high with no guarantee of success poses too great of a threat to us and is often not a risk we are willing to take. It is only when we can no longer tolerate the feelings of unease, dissatisfaction, or immense suffering with its accompanying physical symptoms that we may finally have the motivation to look both inwards and outwards and consider the possibility that the quality of our lives can be transformed into something new and exciting. We also need to question what the cost is to ourselves of not changing. What great experiences might we actually be missing out on?

It is only by examining and dissecting how our beliefs are creating our current reality and experience of life that we can begin to imagine greater possibilities for how we show up and navigate our lives. In this way, we can experience more joy and life fulfillment and be more available to positively impact our world.

Your initial reaction may be, “easier said than done.” You may also be muttering under your breath, “Doesn’t this take years of therapy?” Fortunately, we live in a time when others have paved a path for us, providing us with effective tools to assist with the process of transformation.

These tools are especially impactful for those who are at a stage in their lives when they no longer want to settle for what is. They have made a choice to honestly look at their limiting beliefs. These tools are designed for those who are motivated to dismantle these beliefs and transform them into more empowering ones and then take inspired action to truly reinforce them.

One of those tools is called Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) otherwise known as meridian tapping, a powerful modality in which the body's energy is gently manipulated to increase balance within the mind-body-spirit by tapping on meridian points primarily throughout the face and upper torso. Tapping on these identified points helps to regulate a dysregulated nervous system thereby calming the body and relaxing the mind while at the same time dismantling limiting beliefs that have previously resulted in suffering and emotional pain. Doing so creates space for empowered beliefs to emerge, which then contribute to a greater sense of well-being. EFT is a modality listed under the umbrella of Energy Psychology, which will be discussed in Part Three of this book.

At the end of the day, what we all strive for is Emotional Freedom. Emotional Freedom is in part defined by our capacity to live our life from a place of acceptance and gratitude despite the unpleasant aspects of being human. It allows us to make choices in our behaviour rather than respond from limiting beliefs. Given the centrality of our emotions in all that we do and how we show up in our lives, Emotional Freedom is an indicator of our quality of life and how quickly we can reestablish our equilibrium in response to the daily ups and downs of our lives, especially in the chaos of today's world.

Like any other powerful modality, EFT needs to be respected and fully understood by the user and/or practitioner prior to its use. Although promises of positive change can be overstated at times by tapping evangelists, there is absolutely no doubt that it has transformed and continues to transform the lives of many for the better.

Introduction

Beliefs, or as Gary Craig – founder of Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) – states, “The Writing on our Walls,” are decisions or conclusions we came to as a result of our interpretations of early events and how those events determined who we believed ourselves to be. These decisions that helped mold our identity were often formed very early on in life at a time when we were exposed to beliefs assumed by others, usually those in authority, but that we ended up internalizing as our own.

As a result, the worldview of people other than ourselves established what was acceptable or not and as little beings we did our best to live up to their standards. We looked up to those who were meant to provide for both our emotional and physical well-being and did not question their judgment. After all, from a developmental perspective, we had no capacity or reason to challenge the caregivers tasked with protecting us from harm and safeguarding our well-being and safety. Doing otherwise would compromise our survival.

We derived our sense of self from those adults around us and learned about ourselves through their eyes, forming beliefs about our worth in the context of the family and the world in which we operated. In the social sciences, we label this as our “inner working model,” which describes the way in which we view ourselves, others, and the world to the degree in which we feel a sense of safety, both on a physical and emotional level.

For a child, it’s all about sensory experience

A child’s brain is very suggestive to hypnotic suggestion due to its predominant theta low-frequency brain wave activity, the same frequency

as rapid eye movement sleep, with the child's primary reliance on its emotional brain. How they make sense of their life is based on their sensory experience of it.

As human organisms, our physiology prioritizes safety and security. Safety is synonymous with self-preservation and needs to be present for us to be able to self-actualize once we've met our basic survival needs. As a result, our choices are always based on self-protection.

To better understand why this is so, we have Abraham Maslow to thank for providing us with his theory on the "hierarchy of needs." The most basic human needs – physical needs (e.g. food, shelter, sleep) and then safety (e.g. physical, financial, health, personal security, emotional security) – need to be addressed before a person can become motivated to reach for a higher level like self-actualization. Being self-actualized allows us to reach our full potential and explore and express those fundamental aspects of who we truly are meant to be and align with our life purpose.

Thus, we avoid the experience of physical and emotional pain or needing to deal with uncomfortable emotions. Many people are faced with situations based on geography and circumstance, political or situational, who struggle with their survival on a daily basis. These circumstances create a lot of misery for many whose number one priority is survival and providing adequately for their families.

Even for people who find themselves in more privileged situations, social angst and the bleak state of the world with its bombardment of negative messages and despair weigh heavily on most of us and affect our sense of joy and fulfillment. Regardless of how much we choose to avoid social media or television, there is no escape from the pervasive negative messages and on some level we are impacted by the heaviness that surrounds us daily.

Unfortunately, depression and anxiety are the lived reality for many people. According to *Time* magazine (Jan. 2019 special edition on Mental Health), 18 per cent of U.S. adults, which rounds to about 40 million people, have anxiety disorders, the most prevalent mental illness. Also, in 2018, the World Health Organization noted in its March report that depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide and is a major

contributor to the overall global burden of disease. It also posited that globally more than 300 million people of all ages suffer from depression and that more women are affected by depression than men. These numbers are staggering and most likely conservative in nature given that most people do not voluntarily come forward due to the ongoing stigma attached to mental health.

In energetic terms, people tend to toss around the word “depression” as an energetic concept. When someone states, “I’m feeling depressed today,” this really is an indicator that they don’t have much energy. The statement, “I’m anxious” implies that they have a lot of energy. As a result, staying within one’s comfort zone is an energy management conservation strategy.

Those of us who are fortunate enough to have our basic needs looked after and are generally living a peaceful, comfortable life naturally have a greater range of options available to us. We can look beyond our physical needs and envision something bigger for ourselves. What often stops us dead in our tracks though is fear and self-doubt. This is because the conditioning we encountered from a very young age still drives our decision making and our assessment of what is possible for us.

Playing it safe and living within our comfort zone may be boring but at least it is familiar and predictable, and low risk. With no guarantee of a positive outcome our brain searches for reasons why we should stay where we are while continuing to weigh the pros and the cons of any future action step or decision. Needless to say, we often err on the side of caution as the fear driving the “what ifs” seem to outweigh any potential benefits.

The quest for self-protection

This quest for self-protection mostly happens outside of our conscious awareness but drives most of our behaviour. Based on people’s interactions with us (seen by us as favourable or not), we draw conclusions about our value and our sense of personal power, both of which have a strong influence on our sense of possibilities for an enriched life.

Part One of this book explores common beliefs that helped form our self-concept early on in life and contributed to the parameters of what we believe is possible for our lives today.

A life of greater possibility is not narrowly defined as financial wealth, although, that certainly can be a part of it. Anything that brings joy and contentment, whether through experiences, spirituality, relationships, service to others, time in nature, or material things can be experienced as such.

An expanded life is all about allowing the contemplation of the possible rather than the probable. When greater life fulfillment seems so improbable and out of reach, we often find ourselves at a loss as to how to envision it. However, in order to make something materialize, we first need to know what it is. Then we need to try that something on and really feel it on an energetic level. This can be an almost impossible task when our actual experience is so far removed from what we would love to have – if we even know what that is! We may be so out of touch with our heart yearnings that we may be at a loss as to what really is possible for us. Our limiting beliefs are often at the root of this restricted version of who we believe ourselves to be.

Part Two of this book looks at dismantling your own story of unworthiness and powerlessness so you can create a larger life full of possibility.

Feeling trapped, stuck, or mired in limited thinking and emotion can interfere with our ability to attract people and circumstances into our lives that would normally excite us and fill us with a sense of vitality, wellness, and possibility.

Also, living small often has the unintended consequence of closing us off from others because our experience of life becomes restricted to those in our immediate family, friendship circle, or community. As a result, we may feel disconnected from the rest of humanity and distance ourselves from others' suffering.

How then do we become better attuned to what we really want from life? What is it that excites us and puts a bounce in our step, a smile on our face, and gratitude in our hearts? This question becomes even more relevant when we find ourselves in the role of parent or caregiver.

As caregivers, we've invested all our life force into others' well-being while often neglecting our own. After suppressing the uncomfortable emotions that distress us and cause us emotional pain, how do we begin to turn inwards to unearth what brings us joy and pleasure and acknowledge that pressing question, "What about ME?" Why wouldn't I be deserving of an abundant life that makes my heart sing rather than go through the motions of a predictable, albeit safe, but uninspiring life?

Making the leap into a new way of experiencing life requires challenging those beliefs we adopted early on in our lives. Those beliefs served to protect us from getting hurt but also kept us in a place that didn't allow for the exploration or expression of alternate possibilities or ways of being. Confronting and transforming those ingrained beliefs that no longer serve us can change the thought of, "Is that all there is?" to "How did life ever get so juicy?" It is only when we can begin to seriously take pause and challenge these so-called "truths" that we can begin the process of transformation in earnest.

Part Three of this book introduces for some and reviews for others, an exploration of the well-researched modality, Emotional Freedom Techniques or EFT (also known as meridian tapping) that has helped many people around the globe alleviate the suffering that accompanies their limiting beliefs so they can experience increased life satisfaction.

EFT is at the forefront and is one of the most highly research-supported modalities in the newly emerging field of Energy Psychology. Within the last decade, the research supporting its efficacy has grown exponentially and is gaining credence, albeit slowly, within organizations such as the American Psychological Association and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. As the field has evolved, substantial research is showing the effectiveness of EFT in transforming the lives of many for the better.

Although EFT has been in existence since the late 1990s it is now gaining popularity thanks to the Internet with organizations such as the Tapping Solution, which has hosted annual online free events such as The Tapping Summit since 2008. EFT not only calms the physiology but is also a mindfulness technique, helping people come into a more accepting space and creating a more peaceful relationship within themselves.

Although not a panacea for everything and everyone, there are a great number of people around the globe who have benefitted from energy work in a myriad of ways. You are encouraged to consider for yourself whether EFT is a wise option for you at this time. You may also wish to consult with a medical and/or mental health professional prior to experimenting with it.

EFT stands on the shoulders of therapies that have come before it such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) developed by Dr. Aaron T. Beck in the 1960s, while he was a psychiatrist at the University of Pennsylvania. CBT posits that our thoughts influence our emotions and our actions in the same way that our emotions influence our thoughts and our actions. EFT expands on this paradigm to include a multi-path MIND/BODY/SPIRIT approach.

The nature of our thoughts and actions influence everything, either adding to our distress or releasing us from a negative worldview. By changing the nature of our distressing thoughts into more realistic and helpful ones, and collapsing deeply-entrenched beliefs that restrict us from engaging more fully in our lives, EFT can aid in the process of positive transformation to increase confidence and vitality.

From a scientific standpoint, new empowered beliefs literally rewire our brain to create new neural pathways that support those positive beliefs and override negative outmoded ones. In essence, EFT provides us with the HOW of moving from one to the other.

Part Four of this book examines how our connection to the loving presence of a greater power (God/Source/Creator/All That Is), as relayed through our own inner guidance system, allows us to actively engage in the process of envisioning future possibilities for both ourselves and others.

Given we are spiritual beings first and foremost, the mind-body-spirit connection means that we need to explore the various parts of ourselves that make up the totality and fullness of our being. Only then will we begin to access the messages of our soul guiding us more fully towards the life purpose that we are meant to fulfill on this earth.

The expression of who we are truly meant to be will inevitably bring us the soul fulfillment we are seeking. The ability to access that inner guidance is dependent on silencing the voice of the Inner Doubter and Saboteur. It is only through greater self-acceptance that we can begin to pay attention to what our heart is seeking rather than focusing on the parts of ourselves that the ego insists aren't quite up to par. Being distracted by the noise in our head will always prevent us from finding what we are truly hoping to find.

Becoming more attuned to our soul's calling will positively impact not only us but also our loved ones and everyone around us. Trusting in the guidance and protection of a benevolent, loving power that has our back greatly accelerates our process of transformation from fear-based thinking to love-based thinking for both ourselves and others.

By enhancing our own life, we will become better equipped to offer resources to others from a place of strength, in a way that empowers us and maintains our integrity. Ironically, becoming better versions of ourselves will allow us to be more available to others as we lead by example and inspire others to do the same.

Boy, does our planet ever need you!



PART ONE:

BELIEFS:
WE ARE WHO
WE BELIEVE
OURSELVES TO BE

CHAPTER 1:

The Conclusions We've Come to about Who We Are and What is Possible for Us

“Rather than think you need to go on an archaeological dig into your personal history, just look at your life in the present moment to see what your past beliefs have created.” —Dr. Christiane Northrup, M.D.

At this point in our history, especially in the Western hemisphere, never before have there been more opportunities for personal growth, leisure, entertainment, information, and connection.

Our easy access to information, thanks to advancements in technology and with it the allure of new adventures and experiences for personal gratification, provided we have the means to take advantage of them, allow many of us to avail ourselves of resources that are meant to increase our sense of well-being and comfort in life. Easy credit and competitive pricing provide us with possibilities that were not so readily available to earlier generations. With all this immediate access, why then are so many of us reporting a sense of restlessness and unease with our life circumstances and wondering, “Is this all there is?”

Add to this, the quickening pace of life and sense of hurriedness that accompanies modern living as well as the negativity and frightening prospects for the future of the planet. Demands on our time contribute to stress and a pervasive sense of anxiety for many as well as our responsibilities towards others whether in the role of caregiver, employee, employer,

or citizen of the world. It is no wonder that we often feel as though we are carrying the weight of the world upon our shoulders.

This incongruence between increased comforts and a discombobulated life seems to be the new norm as opposed to the exception. How can we get to a place of feeling at peace and regulated as opposed to feeling like we're always living on the edge and never measuring up?

The question seems to be: *Are we really meant to live our lives in survival mode, barely keeping our heads above water, taking care of everyone else's needs while putting ours on the back burner and often wrangling with ourselves due to our sense of inadequacy?* How does one possibly move towards an optimal life that is enriching and fulfills the inner core of who we are? Is it even possible to allow the full expression of our authentic self, the part of us yearning for something more or is that asking for too much?

I would argue that feeling good in our skin, listening to our own intuition about what is for our greatest and highest good, honouring our own needs instead of solely focusing on the needs of others, and tending to our own physical, spiritual, and emotional health will increase our energy, compassion, wholeness, and enable us to offer more of ourselves to the well-being of others and the planet. Being a global citizen is imperative if we want to be part of the solution rather than merely a witness to its destruction.

The starting place in all of this is tending to the beliefs about who we are, our sense of worthiness, and the extent to which we believe we deserve good things in our lives, regardless of what is going on in our external world. Several key beliefs that many of us hold are:

*Belief: Great things don't happen
to unworthy people like me*

When self-doubt and self-judgment is your lived experience, based on a belief system that sees you as coming up short and is hard-wired into your brain like a familiar friend, it is a challenge to recognize that you are deserving of something more. Self-blame, guilt, shame, and poor self-image keep us in line and keep us stuck. Our emotions impact our thoughts just as our thoughts impact our emotions. Well-known therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or CBT demonstrate how our

thoughts and feelings impact the actions and choices we make; choices that can either contribute to our growth or keep us stuck in inaction or self-sabotaging behaviours.

There are many factors that contribute to our self-imposed limitations. Among them:

- Being socialized to adopt rigid gender roles that limit our choices and restrict our self-expression. Traditional gender roles can also lead to self-effacement, people pleasing, and insecurity resulting from expectations of success that are unrealistic and often misunderstood as we try to fit into society's definition as to what is acceptable or not. These outdated expectations of what it means to be male/female also exclude those who don't identify with a binary definition of gender and don't feel as though they fit into either category leading to a feeling of exclusion for many who don't fit the gender mold.
- Living within a patriarchal society that has been largely defined and dominated by white males, whose positions of power and privilege have determined the organizational structure in which our society operates with values that reflect that structure.
- In the age of social media when we witness others putting their best foot forward and seemingly living a life of joy and promise, feelings of inadequacy or perceived disadvantage are often magnified. This perception, although skewed, often makes the gap between having a happening life and our own reality even wider. FOMO or the "fear of missing out" is a reality for many. Actually, it is a curated and inaccurate look at other people's lives.
- A focus on how others might perceive us restricts our freedom as we try to downplay our perceived inadequacies in order to be more acceptable to others rather than relax into being ourselves and living from our place of truth or authenticity.
- Those of us with perfectionist tendencies (of which I am one!) can easily buy into the image of our idealized self – the way we want to be – and of course always falling short. If we don't measure up

to our idealized self (thin, good looking, outgoing, resourced, fit, smart, etc.) in various aspects of our lives, how can we possibly feel good about who we are at our core?

- As we've seen earlier, our thoughts influence our feelings and actions so thoughts of, "I'm not good enough, beautiful enough, smart enough, etc." make us feel shame and ordinary, as though we don't measure up. Shame, a very low frequency emotion can't coexist with high-frequency emotions such as joy and peace. Shame suppresses our greatness, keeping us small as we try to hide our shameful bits thus exposing only those more desirable parts of ourselves that we want others to see and admire in us in the hopes of avoiding judgment.
- Although our negative and self-defeating thoughts can feel real and truthful to us, they can also interfere with our ability to see possibilities for a more fulfilling life. This results in a narrow range of options for anything new or different. How can we be at peace with our so-called "shortcomings," which only we seem to pay attention to and judge harshly? It really is all about our self-judgments as others are too busy focusing on their own selves and may even be comparing themselves to us!
- The way we see our socio-economic status or opportunities in life – whether real or perceived – may inform our thoughts. So we tell ourselves things like "Life is hard, I'm not lucky; good things happen to others; I live in the wrong neighbourhood; I have no connections, etc." How is anything ever supposed to get better?"
- We may also be unable to forgive ourselves for past actions that we view as unforgivable (e.g. abortion, family disruption, handing over our power to other people, or poor choices that resulted in hardship or suffering for self or others) and tenaciously hold on to the beliefs that arise as a result of those choices.

As children, we absorb messages about our inherent value within the context of intimate relationships. When approval by adults is conditional on our behaviour, children learn to become people pleasers. When

children grow up with much criticism, they tend to become perfectionists (“I need to be perfect to be worthy” or “I am not enough”).

As a dependent, they are expected to play by the family rules and are acknowledged for their obedience rather than being recognized for who they are (unconditional acceptance). These messages are internalized such as, “If you do as I say, you are acceptable to me and worthy of love and care.” It can be a form of toxic shame when we have to play by the rules and our individual needs are not recognized or allowed to develop. As a result, the child may not be allowed to be in a natural or organic state.

As a child growing up with four other siblings and a father who was often away on business, my mother had to manage all of us and make sure things ran smoothly. Rules needed to be adhered to and being the eldest daughter, I was very aware that it was important to please my mother and not create any extra work for her. She would try to stay on top of everything concerning the family and control everything and make everything all right.

Playing in the mud or creating a mess was not something that was necessarily encouraged and tuning in to her needs was my *modus operandi*. This is not surprising as first-born children (in my case eldest daughter) are often raised to be the “responsible ones” and may gravitate to careers that involve caregiving. This heightened sense of responsibility left little room to throw caution to the wind. As an adult, one of the goals I strived for was to learn how to play and have fun (rather than focus so much on being competent).

As children, we may have been subjected to situations when others had power over us and we felt helpless; situations outside of our control in which we were and continue to be victimized and taken advantage of; situations of abuse in which we end up feeling diminished, devalued, and defective in some way.

Incidents of physical and sexual abuse and neglect result in an affront to our psyche and sense of safety in the world. The loss of innocence and mistrust of others stifle our self-expression and create toxic emotions such as self-doubt, self-hatred, and rage. Incidents like these have lifelong consequences and often define who we think ourselves to be. When we are not supported or believed when these incidents happen, our sense of

betrayal deepens our resentment and mistrust and negatively impacts or interferes with relationships (intimate or other).

Our goal is always self-protection and emotional safety so we seek to minimize further harm by keeping relationships superficial but also unrewarding and dissatisfying while having a difficult time trusting others.

As an adult in a caregiver role, we learn how to keep things going for the sake of keeping the family together. It is often only through sheer determination that we manage to pull it off. Those of us who were raised to believe that women can have it all often see ourselves as coming up short in one area or another, as we can't possibly measure up to that impossible standard. There is only so much time and energy available to us with our resources often going to others.

Feelings of inadequacy can block options that might otherwise present themselves to us. Self-defeating thoughts and feelings restrict expanded, out-of-the-box thinking and creative problem solving with action-oriented solutions that can contribute to an enhanced life experience. Rather than live from the dictate that it's better to try and fail than never to try at all, many of us live as though it's better to not try at all than to fail.

A spiral of feeling undeserving and inadequate can eventually lead to despair and seeking help for ourselves is of the utmost importance when this is the case. We need others to help us challenge our flawed thought patterns, address our self-loathing and assist us to recognize an alternate perception of ourselves based on our inherent value, much like a newborn who is worthy of love by virtue of being on the planet.

Finally, when we judge ourselves based on how we "should" or "should not" be feeling, we have a tendency to feel worse as the emotion of shame only adds to our sense of failure and inadequacy. The father of mindfulness, Jon Kabat Zinn, uses the analogy of quicksand to describe how judging how we feel only adds to the burden of our distress, pulling us down even further into ourselves.

*Belief: Putting myself first is selfish
(others' needs are more important than my own)*

When in the caregiving role, women especially are socialized to put others first. In most instances the priority is the health and emotional well-being of the family, in whatever way family is defined and is not restricted to the normative heterosexual family unit.

According to the Family Caregiver Alliance National Center on Caregiving website, an estimated sixty-six per cent of caregivers are female. The average caregiver is a 49-year-old woman who works outside the home and provides twenty hours per week of unpaid care to her mother. Although men also provide assistance, female caregivers may spend as much as fifty per cent more time providing care than male caregivers. This non-profit organization, which describes itself as “a public voice for caregivers, shines light on the challenges caregivers face daily and champions their cause through education, services and advocacy.”

According to them, women provide the majority of informal care to spouses, parents, parents-in-law, friends, and neighbours, and they play many roles while caregiving: hands-on-health provider, care manager, friend, companion, surrogate decision-maker, and advocate.

Given that female caregivers still assume the majority of the tasks related to caregiving, overwhelm can be a frequent companion. With this responsibility, women tend to shelve their own needs. This is even truer for women who find themselves in the role of solo parent, who may rarely get a break from their caregiving.

According to the Vanier Institute of the Family, of Canada's 9.8 million families, sixteen per cent lived in lone-parent families in 2016, with eight in ten per cent being led by women. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, while 69 per cent of American children under 18 years lived with two parents in 2016, children living with their mothers only made up the second-most common family structure at 23 per cent.

**A mother is only as happy as
her unhappiest child.**

It has been frequently said that, “A mother is only as happy as her unhappiest child,” which is very true, especially in this time of great global angst and uncertainty with children receiving bleak messages about the state of the world with exposure to in-the-moment events, which create much fear and insecurity. There is a sense of trepidation for what the future may hold, which is unsettling for both child and adult alike. This instability and unrest creates much anxiety for everyone and is fueled by social media, which permeates our lives. We often underestimate the impact these stories of doom and gloom have on our children and many of them suffer in silence.

Add to that the anxiety that children often absorb from the home environment by adults who are reportedly more and more stressed themselves for a large variety of reasons. Having the responsibility to mitigate and minimize these negative influences can take a heavy toll on anyone who is in the caregiver role or cares about children and youth. The secure and safe home base that is so necessary to raise healthy and happy children is constantly under threat and at risk of being jeopardized.

In terms of more serious mental health challenges that impact families, according to a December 2016 report issued by the Public Health Agency of Canada, mood and anxiety disorders are the most common types of mental illnesses in Canada and throughout the world and children are not exempt. Attempts to find help and adequate resources for family members are often frustrating and present a huge challenge for many.

Regardless of the quality of support, in most instances parents take their role very seriously and pour any energy they have into creating well-being and emotional safety for their children with the hope of helping them to reach their full potential so they may assume their rightful place in the world. This is a huge responsibility for any caregiver, one that brings much joy but also much worry. More often than not, parents try to do their utmost to shield their children from their own concerns and self-doubt, however from an energetic perspective are often unaware of the messaging that comes through to the contrary. Marina’s story is a prime example of how attuned children are to their parents, whether or not the parent is aware of this or not.

MARINA

Marina, a woman with a vivacious laugh who projects a heart-warming energy, is a self-described optimist, seeing her glass as half full and describing her world as a “good place with good people.” She is also of the mindset that she has control over her destiny rather than life being something that happens to her.

Interestingly, over the past several years she has become increasingly aware of a disconnect between how she currently views the world and her place in it and how earlier beliefs she formed about the world being unsafe and the people closest to her being untrustworthy (Inner Working model), continue to operate at the level of her subconscious mind, informing many of her thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Lately, her increased awareness of how these earlier unconscious beliefs are showing up today has been the focus of much of her personal development work, noting that these long-held beliefs are “hiding in my basement.” Upon closer examination, she realized that much of what was going on in her basement needed to rise to the main floor where it could be made visible and properly dealt with in a way that was compassionate and forgiving of herself and others.

Until quite recently, Marina believed she had come out quite unscathed from the painful events of her childhood. She had always been interested in and committed to doing personal-growth work and learning more about herself, reassured in her belief that she had resolved most of her significant childhood issues. By extension, she felt confident that she had not passed these on to her own offspring. However, after an open conversation with her adult children, they provided her with a somewhat different perspective referencing how her bouts with symptoms of depression had not gone unnoticed by them and had negatively impacted them.

For instance, she offered up that one of her children continued to struggle with anxiety. Upon greater reflection, Marina was able to make the connection between her own inability to deal with her anxiety, as well as her disconnection from many of her distressing feelings, which did not adequately provide her child with the required tools to deal with his fear-based emotions as this was not being modelled for him.

Although she thought of herself as a “super mom” with well-behaved children providing clear evidence, seeking to protect their emotional well-being at all cost by ensuring an amicable divorce with their father, she realized that this perception was

really based on a superficial level rather than her seeing things through the eyes of her children.

Caring for others can also leave many caregivers feeling depleted with little time or energy left over for themselves. Job stress and stressors from other areas of life often add to the sense of being overwhelmed. Add to this, worrying and caring for aging parents or other family members can often eat up even more of the little time women have left for themselves.

A 2018 online edition of *ZOOMER* newsletter dated April 4th cites the observation of Dr. Nasreen Khatri, a clinician associate at Baycrest's Rotman Institute. Dr. Khatri has noted that amongst the sandwich generation (those caring for both older children and aging parents) there are many who are also caring for other people, including siblings, partners, ex-partners, and friends. He remarks that these additional obligations naturally add to existing work stress.

As caregivers, women frequently tend to take on the emotions of the family and are energetically attuned to everyone else, feeling responsible for everyone's well-being as though it is their job to bring harmony back into the fold. They often feel responsible for others' happiness and attempt to fix things instead of letting family members take on responsibility for themselves. Repeatedly doing so can set up an unhealthy pattern, which can eventually lead to emotional and physical concerns and burnout.

These feelings of responsibility can often be amplified by earlier childhood experiences in which a child feels responsible for the well-being of a parent at the expense of their own needs being met. As a result, the child's innate need for nurturance, guidance, and unconditional acceptance with someone believing they are capable is thwarted. In essence, the child is robbed of the opportunity to develop a robust sense of self, lacking the confidence to rely on their inner resources. Serena's story clearly shows how this dynamic can play out throughout the lifespan.

SERENA

Serena grew up believing she was responsible for her mother's happiness. This belief was naturally taking place on a subconscious level and was not something she was consciously aware of. Decisions she made and beliefs she held about supporting

her mother seemed perfectly normal to her, and it wasn't until much later in her adult life that she had the awareness that she didn't know what she didn't know growing up as a dependent child within her family.

She was one of four children and held the position of middle child. As a young child, Serena believed she had to be a "good" girl and play by the family rules. Being good meant that she needed to avoid creating trouble by staying at home rather than play with friends or pursue any outside interests. Being in the "making Mom happy by not making waves" role also meant that she acquiesced to her mother's expectations and felt as though she was "sucking in all the negative energy" from her home environment. This resulted in her world being extremely small as she did not feel as though she was permitted to explore anything beyond the familiar world of home and family.

When Serena was nine years old, she experienced a significant event that would have a major impact on her life from that point on: her father passed away. This loss led to increased tension between her mother and grandmother. It was even more important as far as Serena was concerned that she not add to her family's strife so she did her best to monitor her behaviour and not be viewed as a "troublemaker."

Although she did what she could to not make waves, one particular incident seemed to be a defining moment for her. When she was fifteen years old, Serena was out with her friends. Her brother was tasked with finding her. When he was unable to locate her, she remembered that her mother "freaked out." As a result, she felt labeled as "the one who causes problems," when she felt like she was the only one who actually did not. This blaming and shaming only compounded her sense of not rising to the task of dutiful daughter.

At the age of sixteen, Serena was invited to a friend's party. She decided to stay out longer and upon her return her mother began screaming at her. She interpreted this incident as, "I am contributing to her upset by staying out late so I am therefore a troublemaker. I am responsible for making this smooth again." To further add to her feeling that she had somehow failed her mother because of her perceived lack of judgment, this particular friend no longer wanted further contact with Serena given the intense response she had observed.

This was yet further evidence that supported her belief that she was not permitted to do anything that would actually meet her needs for belonging and social

interaction, especially if they were at odds with those of her mother whose own needs trumped those of Serena's.

Out of a feeling of obligation towards her mother and contrary to her other three siblings, Serena remained at home until she was twenty-four so that she could be available to her mother in the way she was expected to be. Feeling as though she needed to take on this role also meant that there was no time or opportunity for cutting loose and having the kind of experiences that adolescent girls and young adult women are meant to have. Dating was problematic for her and did not provide her with an opportunity to relate to others and learn who she was in the context of a non-familial relationship.

This lack of experience inadvertently failed to provide her with a template that might help her determine how to better establish the necessary boundaries that are required to build healthy self-esteem within an intimate relationship. There were no valuable lessons for her to draw on that would provide her with clues as to how to navigate relationships that would not be in her best interest nor would she learn who she truly was at her core given that it is mostly through interactions with others that we learn about ourselves. Who was Serena in relation to herself? With no inner guidepost to lead her, she no doubt ended up making choices that were not in alignment with her sacred self and resulted in being involved with people who sought to control and abuse her.

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Caregiving, potentially one of the most rewarding life experiences, can also create much inner turmoil for parents. Feelings of guilt and shame are often part and parcel of parenting. We tend to question ourselves all the time as to whether or not we are making the grade. Are we a “good enough” parent? Are we providing enough opportunities for our child’s growth and future prospects? Is our child being stimulated enough? Are we providing sufficient opportunities to develop social skills and emotional literacy? Are we spending enough quality time with our child? Are we being consistent and predictable in our parenting? Are we making the right decisions on their behalf? Are we putting enough money into their fund for college or university? Dealing with these concerns can be all-consuming.

Unless we are in the enviable position of having felt as though we were raised by excellent parents, and even if that is the case, it is especially

new parents who can feel a great deal of fear and inadequacy upon finding themselves in the role of new parents. Karen's story illustrates how we may never find ourselves "ready" or have it together enough to take on this very important role.

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KAREN

Karen vividly recalls how she felt as a new parent well over a decade ago. She remembers not the pain of being in labour, but the panic of becoming a parent. As the youngest of three children, Karen never really had the benefit of closely observing how others close to her raised their own children. Like many first-time parents, having never been in this role previously, she relied on the "expert" opinions of others to guide her along the way.

When she became pregnant, she immediately bought a book on being pregnant (and quickly felt guilty for not eating the right things and worried about how her worrying was affecting the baby). Always looking outside herself for answers, she disregarded her own intuition and common sense when it came to decisions involving her children. Having absolutely no confidence in her own judgment she often asked herself, "What should I do now?" and always felt like she was doing it wrong.

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Adding to these concerns is the dichotomy of working parent vs. stay-at-home parent, both situations leading to self-doubt and inner conflict and sometimes polarizing one "camp" against another. A poll on Workingmother.com found that fifty-seven per cent of respondents (mothers who worked outside of the home) feel guilty every single day!

According to this poll and other sources, some common areas that parents identify as being stressful are:

- Feeling judged for leaving their families to go to work
- Feeling guilty leaving their child in someone else's care
- Going back to work too soon
- The pressure to be Super Mom
- Feeling guilty when taking time out for yourself during the day when at home rather than doing work chores

- Not contributing to the household financially especially when you invested in your education prior to having children
- Feeling like you are missing out and that you are sabotaging your chances of getting back into the workforce into a decent job
- Feeling guilty because you would like to go to work or want more from life
- Working women feel guilt about not spending enough time with their children

In other words, you're damned if you do and damned if you don't!

As a mother in my early thirties, I had opted to stay at home with my two children until they were old enough to go to kindergarten. I had known from an early age that stay-at-home caregiving was something that I really wanted to experience, given that my own mother had done the same, despite the financial sacrifices and credit card debt that choice would involve. Our household income was quite moderate and things were extremely tight with increasing financial stressors.

Given these were pre-Internet days, the library and the Oprah show at four in the afternoon became my main source of entertainment. The internal struggle between not wanting to miss out on any developmental phases my children were going through and fretting about our lack of money, as well as feeling like I was missing out somehow was very distressing, at times leaving me feeling conflicted about my day-to-day life.

At some point during this time, I was considering investing in my future and exploring what I really wanted to do once I resumed my working career. I had done a lot of soul searching and was really drawn to the humanities, in particular the social services field. I decided shortly after the birth of my second child that I would return to university in the evening to pursue a social work degree, which I did, one course at a time over a five-year period.

Needless to say, I was both excited and frightened by the prospect of being a student once again and wondered if I could hack it given that I hadn't been a student in over a decade. In hindsight, it was one of the wisest decisions I ever made as it was a stimulating experience and

quenched my desire for new learning, adult contact and feeling a sense of achievement that I hadn't necessarily experienced before. It also changed the direction of my working life as it was more aligned to what I really cared about: people.

It was during this time that our class was assigned a number of academic articles to read in a course having to do with Women and Family. These articles were all written from a feminist perspective, and I vaguely recall that the articles bent, or my interpretation thereof, was that being at home raising children was somehow viewed as devaluing and disempowering for mothers and that stay-at-home moms were in some way seen as being women who were oppressed by a male patriarchal society.

I was very troubled by these articles and somehow felt as though my decision to stay at home was being frowned upon and totally devalued. I normally felt extremely fortunate to be able to take on that role and felt it to be of great value for me personally as well as for my children. I also learned to respect that every woman's decision regarding working inside or outside the home when children were young was a very personal one and that it was not my place to judge.

Feeling quite offended, I approached the female professor after one particular class to tell her how I felt and being the highly sensitive and emotional person that I am, the floodgates opened and I shamefully let her know what was going on for me and that it would be helpful to have multiple perspectives on the topic. She sympathized with me, and I left wiping tears off my face. The tears continued on the forty-five minute drive home, and I could barely see the road. It was only at that moment that I realized the degree to which I had internalized the shame of feeling somehow defective given my strong desire to be home to raise my young children rather than being gainfully employed in the workforce.

Later on, once I was working full time, I had enrolled both my children in after-school care and needed to watch the clock so I would make it on time to pick up the children without paying hefty late fees and annoying the child minder. I was also very mindful of the incredibly long days both children were in care and the guilt I felt about that.

Self-care is incredibly important when we find ourselves in the caregiving role.

When the focus is solely on children, partner, other family members, and employers, our energy goes towards others and can deplete our own wellspring of energy and resources. With less physical energy and emotional availability, we don't have much left over for anything else. We may fully agree with the notion that on an airplane, we need to put the oxygen mask on ourselves first before our child, but how many of us have truly internalized that message? I would suspect it isn't the majority, although I would love to be proven wrong.

Self-care is incredibly important when we find ourselves in the caregiving role. It is essential to carve out moments in our day that we selfishly preserve for our well-being and sanity. Setting boundaries and holding our own space is vital if we wish to remain grounded. Getting so caught up in others' drama at the expense of our own health and well-being does not serve anyone. Putting ourselves last and robbing ourselves of emotional self-nurturance has been negatively linked by some physicians, such as Dr. Christiane Northrup, to physical issues that especially impact women.

The challenge is to maintain balance as much as possible rather than feeling overwhelmed so that our sympathetic nervous system does not become overtaxed, putting us at risk of burnout or more severe health conditions.

And also consider that our children do not benefit from weak parental boundaries and poor modelling of what it means to love ourselves enough to carve out time for our own rejuvenation and self-care. When all our energy is poured into others, we lose our vitality and are unable to share the best part of ourselves with those we love. Listening to and respecting our own needs and wants is not a selfish act. It is an act of self-compassion and provides an example to children that parents have needs and are not always available at their beck and call. This role modelling is especially important for our daughters as they look to us for cues on what it means to be female.

To do otherwise is a huge disservice to our children and others as they can grow up with a sense of entitlement, believing that they are at the centre of the universe and that the world needs to cater to them. Having rights with no responsibilities is detrimental to the child and robs them of the much-needed empathy required to become a participating member of society, contributing to a better world for all, rather than being concerned with only themselves and/or those in their immediate circle.

If your belief is that others deserve the best parts of you, where do you fit in? Do you even know who you are anymore? Are you out of touch with what you want from life? Does your life feel stifled, narrow? Are you out of touch with what brings you pleasure and satisfaction?

How can you contribute to global wellness while still finding fulfillment based on your soul's desire?

We all know children who grow up more quickly than we might like. For others, it may not be fast enough! Life can take a different turn once parenting obligations have been fulfilled. As the child individuates and the parent is no longer needed to the same degree in the life of the child, feelings of loss can result. One's identity as a parent may become secondary as the child leaves the nest to forge their own way.

In a dual parent family, when the sole focus has been on the child(ren), there can be a void or feeling of emptiness that develops between partners who may need to renegotiate and revitalize their relationship. In many cases, long-held partnerships may dissolve as the glue that held the family together is no longer the main focus of the union.

Without an established circle of friends, women can feel isolated and uninspired and those who have put all their investment of energy into their children can feel let down, lonely, and lost. In today's global society, children often move away and may not have frequent contact with their parents. Grandchildren or extended family may not live nearby. People often do not know their neighbours and may have no sense of community or connection to others. Nowadays, people are busy and have no time or opportunity to socialize with others or become involved in a more profound way.

Parents who previously had their children enrolled in sports, dance, or other types of recreational activities frequently had opportunities to socialize with other parents within the context of their child's extracurricular activities. Once the children outgrow these activities and move on, more often than not, these contacts naturally dissolve. As a result, an important means of connection is lost.

The thought of, "*Is this all there is?*" can result in women primarily feeling more isolated than ever without the constant distraction of having children present. A sense of usefulness and purpose may evade us as we seek to reevaluate the way in which we wish to move forward in our lives. We may lose our sense of identity and wonder who we are anymore without having children in our charge.

Nourishing our mind, body, and spirit in spite of our caregiving obligations is a necessity.

Add to this an ageist society that values youth above all else. This societal attitude is pervasive, even more so with social media, and can impact our sense of worth and perhaps make us question the degree to which we are viewed as contributing members of society as we become more mature. Much has been written about feeling invisible as older women are barely reflected in advertising, with the exception of anti-aging and beauty products, despite their massive purchasing power and demographic representation within society. Like other marginalized populations, this lack of visibility sends a strong message that women of a certain age and cultural background are not valued.

For these and other reasons, nourishing our mind, body, and spirit in spite of our caregiving obligations is a necessity if we are to stay attuned to our own emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being.

Belief: I have no right to want more for myself

Those of us who consider ourselves to be global citizens may espouse the belief that given our place of privilege as citizens of the developed world, we should be grateful for the circumstances we were born into

and should recognize those privileges and not take them for granted. I, too, believe this to be true and count my blessings regularly.

Media reports and images of refugees fleeing war-torn countries risking their lives trying to escape dire circumstances to provide a safe, albeit unknown future for their families, puts our own struggles into perspective. Exposure to the plight of others reinforces for us just how fortunate many of us are to have our basic needs provided for as well as the right to participate in a democratic society where exercising our right to vote does not pose a threat to our safety.

I recently finished reading an excellent book by Park Yeon-mi, who was born and raised in North Korea. She described her experience of needing to conform to a rigid and autocratic political regime in which the fear of being reported on by her fellow citizens was a constant threat to her and her family. She made the decision to flee her country at enormous risk to her life and sacrificed a great deal to help her mother and brother escape as well. This journey took over a decade to execute.

To a certain degree, I often need to remind myself of the freedoms we in the West tend to take for granted as part of our birthright. However, as mentioned, it only takes our tuning into the news that we are confronted with misery, disempowerment, and disenfranchised people, mainly women and children.

I consider these glimpses into others' lived experiences as gifts given they provide opportunities to magnify the gaps in my life versus someone else's and provide me with a renewed perspective of all the many areas in which I need to be grateful.

I used to hear my own teenagers identify things as being "first world problems," such as complaining about the longish lineups at the grocery store or a phone taking too long to load. We would inevitably laugh but nonetheless ponder this blatant truth, if only for a few moments.

Our inner dialogue may be chiding us with thoughts such as, "You have nothing to complain about. You've got it good." We may badger ourselves for something we're in distress about when we begin to compare how others have it worse off than us. While listening to the news, we may inadvertently be holding on to the negative energy permeating our

space, feeling a misplaced sense of guilt. As a result, we can easily stop ourselves from seeking more good for ourselves.

On the one hand, this comparison can have the positive effect of making us feel more grateful for our own lives. Conversely, when we find ourselves in a low mood or depressive state, we tend to judge ourselves for feeling the way we do and feel guilty about not feeling grateful when others seem to be in a worse state than us. Judgments about how we feel or should be feeling only add to our sense of despair and can end up making us feel ashamed.

Feelings of guilt can also carry over into our prayer life when we think, “Why am I bothering God with my minor problems when others are praying to Him/Her with life-and-death situations?” These thoughts may actually prevent us from even reaching out in prayer. We may brush our concerns off as being trivial, when releasing them would actually make us feel better and relieve us from our emotional burden while deepening our faith in a power greater than ourselves.

With more and more people reconsidering and questioning the institutions and beliefs they were raised in, it is not uncommon for some to renege on their spiritual practices, in essence throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As a result, holding on to our own emotional distress without an outlet for release can keep us stuck and mired in dissatisfaction with our own lives as well as amplify our issues, thereby increasing our state of anxiety and rarely finding the peace that only spiritual practices can offer.

People who are considered to be highly sensitive, defined as people who experience acute physical, mental or emotional responses to surroundings, people as well as to their own thoughts and emotions, often feel as though they carry the responsibility for all the suffering people in the world. Their caring and empathic nature means they may take on the negative energy and on some level don't feel they can allow themselves to be happy when human suffering surrounds them. Women such as Rue Hass and Dr. Elaine Aaron have written books on the topic of being highly sensitive.

Give yourself permission to enjoy life

This is something I struggled with for many years and have regularly needed to keep in check. Being highly attuned to others' suffering, I've needed to create boundaries for myself that serve to protect my sense of who I am and become fully responsible for my own emotions, rather than feeling overwhelmed by the strong emotions of others. Determining what parts I need to own versus those I don't has helped me find greater peace and joy.

Giving myself permission to enjoy life, while at the same time making my own corner of the world as uplifting and loving as possible, continues to be my focus. Through positive emotional contagion and being truly present with others, holding a vision for their greatest and highest good, while recognizing my own soul journey and life path, I have finally found a balance between being my best self and doing what's right for me while at the same time consciously contributing to a better world through my thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Belief: I have to be perfect to be loved

When we have been raised in an environment in which love was conditionally offered based on our fitting the mold of being a "good" son or daughter and not making waves within the family, we learn that love is only offered to us based on what we do rather than who we are.

The energy we put into being our best self to please our primary caregivers and receive their approval and acceptance results in the denial of the parts of us that we determine to be displeasing to them. Doing right by others becomes our main focus and trying to fit the mold of what "perfect" looks like results in us having an outward focus, always trying to assess if we are on track or not.

We therefore become hyper-vigilant and scan our environment for signs from others that we are either meeting their approval or are a source of disappointment. This external focus results in the belief that to be acceptable and worthy of our parents' love, we need to be perfect.

Belief: My value is determined by how I look

“To be attached to your physical appearance is to ensure a lifetime of suffering as you watch your form go through the natural motions that began the moment of your conception.”—Dr. Wayne Dyer

We are bombarded with messages of what it means to be male and female and are slotted into gender boxes that inform how our value is determined. Women are defined and given value based on their outward appearance and often measure themselves against a particular ideal based on cultural and societal norms that are largely defined by men but that women internalize as being desirable traits that provide them with value. Many females may not see themselves reflected in this unrealistic and narrow definition of gender or may choose to reject it altogether.

For women in particular, aging and the loss of physical and sexual appeal can be a major adjustment especially for those whose identity has been largely based on their physical attributes and who may no longer identify with the younger version of themselves. The booming business of plastic surgery and the massive weight loss industry confirm this to be the case.

Women often need to redefine who they are as older more mature woman, especially when they feel 15–20 years younger than their biological age. Becoming an enhanced version of ourselves often involves re-examining our inherent assets, reframing our merits, and recognizing our worthiness in a way that is lovingly unconditional. Recognizing and being grateful for our strengths and abilities can sometimes become overshadowed by the focus on what we have lost.

Growing up as a young woman in my teens and twenties, I often received compliments about how pretty I was. These comments naturally made me feel good at the time and certainly had a big impact on how I felt about myself. However, as I matured I began to realize the downside of these comments as I was gauging my self-worth on how I felt about myself when I looked in the mirror and others’ responses to me, rather than base my self-concept on what I had to offer others and the inherent value that I had.

The societal messages I was picking up from the media and others in my environment was that looking good and being attractive to the opposite sex was the main determinant of what it meant to be female. Looks, therefore, equated value. A natural conclusion for me, largely on a subconscious level, was that the loss of physical attractiveness meant I had less value.

Fortunately, aging has provided me with an opportunity to focus on deeper aspects of myself while fully accepting the “what is” of becoming older. The gift this awareness has brought me has allowed me to help my daughter focus on her intelligence, unique skills, and wonderful qualities rather than superficialities such as her appearance. Being so identified has resulted in a confident, creative, smart, and highly insightful young woman with much to offer the world and for whom appearance is not a key determinant for her of her value as a female.

As wisely stated by Christiane Northrup, M.D., *“Loving everything about yourself – even the unacceptable – is an act of personal power. It is the beginning of healing.”*

CHAPTER 2:

The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Looking for Reasons Why an Expansive Life is Outside Our Reach

“We’re always looking for confirmation that our beliefs are true.”
—Karl Dawson, Creator of Matrix Reimprinting

Thoughts that we ponder over and over again become beliefs. It has been estimated that eighty per cent of our thoughts are repetitive and fear-based in nature. Repeated thoughts create neural pathways in our brain that influence our worldview. Our beliefs determine patterns of behaviour that we repeat in different circumstances and often show up in our relationships and life choices. In other words, how we do things in one area of our lives often determines how we do things in all areas of our lives.

Our beliefs can therefore become a barrier to a more fulfilling life. They limit our perspective, much like a horse with blinders on. The horse only sees the road straight ahead. As we’ve seen, beliefs can either limit or stretch us.

Absolute thoughts such as, “I’m always ... Or I’m never ...” turn us into rigid thinkers. Thinking one way or another way does not allow us to see the nuances or access out-of-the-box thinking. It skews the way we see things, mostly leaning towards the negative and as a result we miss opportunities to notice the positive aspects of the situation we find ourselves in. We can all recall having had ten positive experiences happen during any

given day yet we tend to recall and ruminate on the one event that we viewed as negative.

There is good reason for this. As a result of evolution, human beings are biologically programmed with a negative bias. Our natural focus is to scan for problematic situations (or predators) in order to keep us safe. The difficult task we all face is the need to challenge our assumptions and self-judgment. We need to refocus on the positive, which is easier said than done.

These thoughts are usually unrealistic, unhelpful, and make us feel badly. We can therefore make decisions that are based on limited, fear-based thinking, which then hampers our ability to openly consider alternate ways of viewing a particular situation that may be more helpful and realistic. When we find ourselves in a stress-induced state, unable to access our thinking brain, we may not even recognize that alternatives exist given that anxiety-provoking thoughts set off our fight-flight-freeze response making this a largely impossible task.

Although these patterns of thought occur for everyone, women tend to have more ruminating inner dialogue often steeped in self-blame and more frequently internalize conflict than men do, which then leads to shame-based thinking and self-blame often indicated by the words, “I am _____ (stupid, weak, etc.)”

It is very important to find a sounding board

When under emotional duress, both men and women often lose perspective, which is the reason why it is so very important to find a sounding board, someone who has more of an objective stance, who can then help to challenge some of the thinking errors that we have espoused and provide a more compassionate, less judgmental interpretation of our perceived shortcomings and actions.

The stories we tell ourselves tend to define who we believe ourselves to be. Many of our stories have been passed down through our ancestral lineage and we adopt them as our own personal truth. Among them are:

I am unlovable

A person who views themselves as unlovable at their core is a person in deep emotional pain. This more often than not is the result of experiencing abandonment, either physically or emotionally, very early on in life.

Given that we depend on our caregivers for our own survival, it is no wonder that from a child's perspective it would be unfathomable to believe that the person who is meant to protect us and whom we depend on for our survival is someone who is ill-suited for the job of parent. If they are not to blame, we conclude that we must not be worthy of having our needs looked after. In other words, if it's not them it must be us.

This neglect is interpreted by the child as somehow being their fault and results in the belief that they have little or no value and must be unlovable. The result of this belief is that throughout their lifespan, well into adulthood, they never feel as though they measure up to either their own standards, and by extension, to the standards of others. A sense of deep shame is often a constant companion.

Self-judgment, feeling inherently flawed at their core and believing they are unlovable all lead to enormous emotional suffering and diminished life enjoyment as the focus most often involves scrutinizing perceived deficits rather than the recognition of strengths and resiliency. It is somewhat easier to dismiss the latter because we don't believe they count for much. When we do recognize their existence, we diminish them in our mind as we tend to compare ourselves to those who we esteem have significantly more to offer than we do.

For far too many of us, a deeply engrained and long-held belief that, "I am not enough" gets in the way of making choices that affirm our highest and loving self. Those who have experienced an absent parent or significant adult often grow into adults, fearful of reliving abandonment. As a result, the intense yearning for connection and acceptance by another often overrides the quality of our intimate relationships and has us settle for someone who is ill-matched for us.

Countless people undermine themselves with beliefs such as, "I'm not meant to stand out," "I don't count," or "Who am I to assert myself?" Beyond the early interpretation of how lovable or not a child believes

themselves to be, societal beliefs and norms only compound this belief due to factors such as socialization, culture, etc. For example, the racist legacy of colonialism and oppression is often internalized by those who have directly or indirectly experienced it. Marginalized people who have been excluded and demonized feel devalued given their status as second or third-class citizens. Even those who seemingly emit an air of confidence and capability are often telling themselves a different story altogether.

I am unworthy to receive

The degree to which we feel worthy of good things coming to us is directly related to the abundance we attract into our lives. Feeling good enough and deserving of an enriched life is essential to having the life we want. Unfortunately, many of us who may outwardly present as competent, confident people are often mired in insecurities based on internal messages that somehow contradict our openness to receive.

Much has been written about the universal experience of shame, whereby on some deep level, we feel defective or flawed at our core. Somehow, early messages or conclusions we made about who we are based on our interactions with others have been imprinted onto our psyche and drive much of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour.

A case of mistaken identity?

The thoughts we ruminate on that either build us up or tear us down, can be so pervasive that they seem to define who we are: “I am shy; I am stupid; I am selfish; I am not enough; I am inadequate; I am a coward..., etc.” and who we are not (smart, savvy, resourceful, industrious, attractive, valued, etc.). When we accept these thoughts as the truth, we do not even remotely consider the need to challenge these aspects of our self-image. We accept these “character traits” as immutable, never making an attempt to investigate whether or not this could literally be a case of mistaken identity.

An over-identification with the role we held within our family of origin, whether it related to birth order or was the function we served within the family system, can often determine how we currently see

ourselves and what we are capable of achieving or not. For example, if a child was seen as the academic within the family, the child can often be influenced by expectations that they should either follow a career path within a certain discipline or be discouraged from doing so.

History is not destiny.

A child who is perceived as being “bad” at math or science may adopt that opinion as being a fundamental truth in regards to their lack of ability in these disciplines, which then may limit their career choices. No reflection on the possibility of external factors or influences such as an inexperienced teacher who was not able to clearly communicate the subject matter may even be considered. The child may then interpret this unfavourable experience through the lens of incompetence and lack the motivation to give it another try. We have many examples in history such as Albert Einstein, who was considered a genius but who also failed the entrance exam to the Zurich Polytechnic when he first took it. Steven Spielberg was allegedly rejected from the University of Southern California three times and Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, was told by teachers that he was “too stupid” to learn anything. These examples clearly demonstrate that history is not destiny.

Older children who are “parentified” and tasked with looking after younger children within the family often find themselves needing to take on adult responsibilities before they are ready to do so. These children may build resentment towards their caregivers and siblings as they feel as though they are missing out on aspects of their own childhood. This heightened sense of responsibility for their continued well-being often stays with them throughout their lives.

A different child may have assumed the role of comic within the family to alleviate tension or make a stressed-out parent feel better, taking on that role in earnest as an adult and using comedy as a way to stabilize a situation that might otherwise feel unsafe or threatening.

Yet another child who was overshadowed by other siblings may adopt the belief that they have no voice and nothing of value to contribute. Left unchallenged, this belief can become internalized and lead to an

entrenched pattern throughout one's life where as an adult they may have difficulty forming and voicing an opinion. One's perception becomes one's truth even though other family members may have difficulty seeing it from that point of view. When we narrowly define ourselves by what we have to offer, we don't allow ourselves to consider or invite other possibilities into our lives.

I am a product of my genes

When we look at our family history and the cast of colourful characters that make up our gene pool, we may make the assumption that, "it's all in the genes." This thinking can be empowering when examples of brilliance, ingenuity, and courage make up our family tree. However, when this is not the case, putting too much credence on one's genetic inheritance can be very detrimental to the belief of what is possible for you. This is even more evident when family members have succumbed to fatal diseases such as heart disease or aggressive cancers at an early age. Believing this to be one's fate can be an extremely scary prospect and can have enormous impact on how life is lived, albeit on a subconscious level. Fatima's story illustrates how this can play out.

FATIMA

Fatima was not feeling particularly optimistic about the state of her physical health and her future prognosis in this regard. Her personal assessment of her condition was that she was "overweight, short, fat, and always struggling with diets." She also held the belief that "my family genes are weak" and that she would most likely get sick and die young, just as her mother had at the age of fifty-two. Further evidence to support this belief was her Type 2 diabetes diagnosis, love of carbs, and the fact that she was not currently in good physical shape.

*Her own health challenges began in 2009 with her diagnosis of diabetes. Several years later, after experiencing extreme discomfort in her stomach, she learned that she carried the bacteria *H Pylori*, often a main cause of ulcers, which resulted in a lot of inflammation as well as non-cancerous lumps in her stomach. For her, this was further confirmation of her unconscious belief that as a result of her genes, she was prone to poor health.*

Fatima also blamed herself for not eating properly and felt a sense of denial surrounding her health challenges as well as some resentment. She suffered through her illness for the better part of a year and a half with bouts of vomiting and stomach pain and several visits to the emergency room that made her feel miserable and which got in the way of her fully being able to live her life in the way she wanted to. She couldn't help but compare her situation to that of her mother who had needed to be treated by doctors and hospitalized on several occasions throughout her own lifetime, with Fatima now ending up in similar circumstances.

Miserable and in pain, with no answers from doctors, she decided to look elsewhere for medical care and returned to her native country in early 2016 for a second opinion where she ended up receiving treatment. An operation fixed her hernia and removed the lumps in her stomach and she reported feeling great. However, much to her chagrin, later on that year she experienced a new healing crisis when doctors discovered a blood clot in a main vein in her right arm. Fatima realized that it was time to explore other alternatives that might help her get some clarity on why she was continually being faced with health challenges.

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The science of Epigenetics has enormous implications

Scientists such as Bruce Lipton (*Biology of Belief*) and Dawson Church (*Genie in your Genes*), as well as others have popularized the science of Epigenetics, which shed light on and minimize the importance of genetics in determining our health and life outcomes. According to Lipton, Newtonian physics, which has long been the lens through which modern medicine is viewed, is beginning to be overshadowed by quantum physics, which is more about environmental factors such as limiting beliefs that turn on the genetic markers rather than the existence of the genes themselves.

This discovery turns former scientific “truth” on its head as we begin to understand that we fortunately are not victims of circumstances but have the power to influence our biology.

According to Lipton, rather than simply focusing on external factors such as the physical environment in which we live, he defines the environment as the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that reside in our energy field and have an impact on our biology.

This is also about energetic inheritance whereby issues that get passed on from our parents and ancestors get stored in our energetic bodies and are interpreted by us as beliefs about who we are and often define our limitations in terms of what we can become.

The science of Epigenetics has enormous implications for us in that we can choose to be the master of our own ship, putting ourselves back into the driver seat of our life rather than becoming a victim of circumstance based on our heredity.

The exciting aspect of this profound scientific discovery is that we can now become empowered beings who are able to choose how we think about ourselves and what is possible for us rather than having our disempowered beliefs influence our defeatist and limiting thoughts. The old family narrative that helps situate our location in life and the scope of possibility no longer needs to hold true for us if it doesn't fit who we are and where we want to go.

I come from a “dysfunctional” family

When we continue to look towards our early life experiences within the family unit we were born into or ended up in to explain the origin of our life dissatisfaction and limitations, we are really doing ourselves a huge disservice.

Although it is undeniable that our sense of identity is formed within our family of origin, however we choose to define it, and that the blueprint for the quality of our relationships is largely influenced by how our caregivers interacted and responded to our needs early on, using these early experiences to rationalize our stuck-ness in life only reinforces the strength of our limiting beliefs and makes it harder to see those beliefs for the untruths they are. They also provide us with excuses as to why we shouldn't move forward and expand our horizons.

As mentioned previously, these beliefs mostly operate on the subconscious level and drive our thoughts and actions. Staying energetically rooted in the past creates a heaviness within the body and spirit that slows us down both physically and spiritually. Resentments brew and are stored in the body's tissues and energy field and wreak havoc over time in

relation to our physical health as they can result in unwanted stress that is trapped within our body.

For years now, both the allopathic and complementary health professions are unequivocal in recognizing the stress-illness connection. Equally as damaging is the impact on our psyche and sense of emotional well-being. We can never be truly joyful and at peace while harbouring anger, hurt, and fear towards others. Without forgiveness, this ball and chain keeps us mired in the low frequency depleting emotions that hijack our life satisfaction.

I can't escape the influence of my heritage

Everyone has a story in which pain and pleasure have been part of their ancestral history. Each of us is connected to a lineage and cultural tradition, whether we are aware of it or not, when either our ancestors were subjected to grave injustices that could only be described as demeaning and created much suffering or in which they themselves inflicted hardship onto others. Neither of these roles may have been mutually exclusive. We would like to think that in any case, our ancestors most likely displayed incredible resilience in their quest to surmount existing challenges they were subjected to.

People who have been privy to this family or ancestral history are often in a position to integrate these stories into their sense of identity, for better or worse, either as a source of pride or a source of shame. A large body of research on Intergenerational Trauma clearly demonstrates how trauma is often passed on energetically from one generation to the next, often impacting our sense of identity as well as parenting practices, among other factors.

Canadian physician Dr. Gabor Maté, well-known for his numerous books and speaking engagements, has a special interest in childhood development and trauma with its potential lifelong impacts on physical and mental health. He has shared his story of being a Jewish baby in Hungary during World War II and how his incessant crying was due to sensing his mother's deep sadness and stress as a result of the loss of close family members and brutal treatment at the hands of the Nazis. To this

day, he still struggles to feel at peace and has developed an addiction to shopping in order to feel better.

People subjected to oppression in the past and/or who continue to be part of a marginalized population may internalize demeaning messages that they take on as part of the larger culture. Despite their incredible resilience in the face of huge injustices they may view themselves as inferior or flawed in some way given the prevalent attitudes of prejudice and discrimination from society at large.

Canada's continuing legacy of trauma among Indigenous generations

We need only look at Canada's Indigenous peoples to see a blatant example of the legacy of trauma inflicted on them through racist government policies and colonial legislation enacted in the mid-1800s and who continue to be treated as second-class citizens in society today. As a result of colonialism spanning centuries, First Nations peoples risk losing their connection to their ancestry as their languages and cultures are dying out along with the Elders, those who hold the oral traditions that were passed on to them over multiple generations.

Despite numerous community cultural programs, many Indigenous youth today still lack a real connection to their cultural identity as a strong and resourceful people with a sacred connection to nature, given that both cultures and people were decimated as a result of the residential school system operating in Canada between the 1870s and the 1990s, with the last school closing in 1996.

Government policy during that time was enacted to "take the Indian out of the child" in order to solve the "Indian problem" that was deemed to be a hindrance to colonialism. In a speech given in May 2015, then Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin referred to Canada's treatment of its aboriginal people as a "cultural genocide."

Marginalized and oppressed communities who are not considered to be part of the dominant culture (heterosexual, white-skinned, or able-bodied) and who are defined largely by the colour of their skin, culture, gender, and religious practices are acutely aware of their otherness and

the way in which they are perceived and excluded from positions of power and leadership.

The rules for some are not the same as for others

Painful experiences such as daily micro-aggressions and acts of discrimination resulting from harmful stereotypes, the lack of opportunity in regards to social mobility and employment and the over-representation of people of colour and other marginalized groups in the justice system are only a few examples of how the rules for some are not the same as for others.

From the perspective of wealth and income-earning potential, an article in the *Atlantic Daily* in June 2018 by Matthew Stewart addresses the fact that rising inequality in America is becoming increasingly problematic with its impacts on the economy, the destabilization of American politics, and its erosion of democracy.

According to Stewart, there is a new group of aristocrats who represent 9.9 per cent of the American population who hold the most wealth and power in the United States. This group does not necessarily recognize its own position of privilege despite their high net worth and other indicators of wealth such as having substantially lower rates of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity, a more stable family structure, better educational opportunities, and rich social networks that get passed on to their children at the expense of the children of the other ninety per cent of Americans.

The lack of representation and exclusion from mainstream institutions dramatically deprives marginalized and oppressed people of the opportunity to have their voices heard, especially on issues that directly impact them whether on an individual, community, or national level.

With the exception of leaders such as Barack Obama, individuals from these groups do not normally see themselves being represented in positions of power and influence. Even today, we are not seeing the diversity of our population being reflected amongst the political or corporate leadership nor are they represented in advertising to the degree they should be based on the demographic make-up of society.

The same can be said for families who have passed on to their offspring a certain way of being in relationship with other family members or who have assumed an identity that is far from empowering. Conformity to the familial “tribe” may require the suppression of uncomfortable feelings or the adherence to unspoken rules about not airing the family’s dirty laundry or speaking one’s mind. Seeking out emotional safety above all cost and avoiding any hint of rejection often means that we follow the rules that have been put into place by people other than us; typically those in authority, namely the adults within the home.

I am unlucky at love

A determination as to whether or not marriage or a committed relationship is a viable option is more often than not influenced by our lived experience as a child. Our witnessing and experience of the adult relationships within the home often influence how we relate to others within our own adolescent and adult intimate relationships.

We learn about empathy, affection, love, respect, conflict resolution, self-regulation, problem-solving, consideration, sharing, and self-sacrifice by watching our caregivers and the degree to which they model positive interactions with each other. When we have a positive template for what a healthy relationship looks like, we are better able to recognize one when we see one. We are also better equipped to discern and attract a partner that mirrors these same qualities, rather than settle for someone who is unable or unwilling to participate in a respectful and caring union.

The same holds true for someone who has experienced a relationship that has been hurtful and toxic. Growing up in a fear-based environment in which adults mistreat each other and anger and disappointment prevail, can either lead to a poor choice in mate (sense of the familiar) and/or an avoidance of intimacy (vulnerability is too scary). Fortunately, many hold themselves to a higher standard and have been able to dispel any erroneous beliefs that they are not worthy of a loving and considerate partner. A belief that they deserve better allows them to seek out relationships that counter the negative ones they experienced as a child without settling for anything less.

**Every experience, whether enjoyable or painful,
serves us in some way and helps us to know
who we really are...**

Regardless, we know there are no guarantees in life. Our choices, whether in love relationships or in other areas of our life, are all part of our soul's growth. Every experience, whether enjoyable or painful, serves us in some way and helps us to know who we really are, helping to guide future choices.

When we deny ourselves opportunities for self-reflection, we miss enormous opportunities to challenge our long-held beliefs and instead look for evidence to support what we believe to be our undisputed truth.

About the Author



Monique Verpoort is a registered social worker and trainer who has worked in the field of children's mental health for close to twenty years. She is a certified practitioner in the modality of Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) with both national (NefTI) and international (EFT International) organizations.

Her experience working with both clients and professionals as well as doing her own personal work over the years has provided her with a unique perspective on the way in which self-regulation techniques such as EFT coupled with focused action, can transform limiting beliefs into peace of mind, increased joy, positive transformation, and a life of unexplored possibility at any age. Monique has seen lives radically change for the better when subconscious limiting beliefs are transformed into empowered ones, and she continues to dedicate her life to helping women become emotionally free.

You can read the rest of this book by purchasing a copy of *Is This All There Is? Living a Life Beyond Obligation* at moniqueverpoort.com