

# The Sequoia Seed

Remembering the Truth of Who You Are

KAREN WRIGHT

Foreword by Jim Warda



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Word Keepers, Inc.  
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970.225.8058

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For waking souls everywhere.

May your wings spread wide  
and your hearts soar.

## Praise for *The Sequoia Seed*

“Karen’s material stopped me; it seemed so fresh and powerful. Her inspiring book shares wisdom as old as the sequoia tree itself. Plant this uplifting message in your consciousness and grow the seeds of your own greatness.”

–Price Pritchett Ph.D., Author, Chairman and CEO Pritchett LT, Texas

“Strap yourself in for a deep, provocative, mind-altering, life-enhancing read from the mind and heart of a woman who lives her own life in alignment with the perennial truths she writes about.”

–John Scherer, Author, *Work and the Human Spirit*, Washington

“When you’re feeling lost and confused . . . when life stops making sense . . . when you know you can do, be and have more, and you need the practical answers that’ll help you make it happen . . .that’s when you need *The Sequoia Seed*.”

–Pat Lynch, Author, *The Five Secrets*, Arizona

“This is FANTASTIC! You sure do have a way with words! I LOVE what you write, the truth and integrity it carries and the provocative, emotive prose you use! You are just MAGIC, Ms. Wright!”

–June Hope, Director, Training Consultancy, Australia

“Your writing is like a literary river that slowly, but persistently, wore away my doubts, blame and anger.”

–Al Olsen, Financial Planner, Washington

“Your writing is refreshingly frank and you cut through the fluff with laser precision. It feels like I’m sitting across from a good friend at my kitchen table. I use your insight like a close friend’s advice.”

–Sonja Meline, Teacher, Minnesota

“Obstacles and frozen moments and frantic overwhelm. You have the antidote to all of those.”

–Sandy Kay, Writer, California

“It amazes me that one person can be blessed with such wisdom. You always seem to grab me by the scruff of the coat and give me a little shake.”

–Teresa Merryfield, Life Coach, Alberta, Canada

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Foreword by Jim Warda  
Author of *Where Are We Going So Fast?*

Karen Wright understands us, because she has looked deeply into herself, even the darkest places, and wasn't afraid to tell us what she found.

In *The Sequoia Seed*, like a kind and wise friend, Karen takes the time to sit with us, listens to our hopes and fears, and at the same time, gives us a good swift kick in the butt to remind us just how much we have to offer.

She believes in us and our ability to change.

She's an observer. She sees things in us we can't always see. She sees our strength. She sees our truth. She sees the things we want to hide, the sometimes shame, the sometimes regret, the oftentimes feeling that we won't be able to get it done. Yet she sees it all with caring eyes, letting us know there's nothing wrong with us. In fact, there's everything right with us.

She sees what we can be, and won't let us rest until we've become it.

*The Sequoia Seed* is a gift. It's Karen being the friend who calls on the phone at night, wanting to know how our day went, wanting to know what amazing things we accomplished, wanting to know what's been tough, wanting to help us stand up after a particularly hard fall. Then, when we tell her how rough it's been, she understands. When we laugh, she laughs. When we cry, she's just quiet and listens, which is exactly what we need exactly when we need it.

In these pages, you'll find her compassion. She understands we're all going through something, struggling to greatness, trying to be our best, wanting to love and be loved—forever and a day—and even a few minutes after that.

In these pages, you'll find her belief that we create our reality, and that we have the ability to punch holes through the walls of illusion we've also created to hide from the responsibility.

She knows there is dignity in the struggle, divinity in being human, divinity in losing our way and then finding it on a moonstruck night in June.

Her words are a poet's words—"To see truth, you must come from truth."

Her words are inspiring—"You are eternal. You are safe. You are stronger than anything this world visits upon you."

Her words are strong—"Ironically, what you heard was not, 'No.' It was 'Know.'"

Her words are clear—"Life is not in the answer business. It, forever and always, asks questions."

Her words are thoughtful—"Behave yourself into becoming the person you wish to be."

Her words are her words. Yet, they're ours, too. Because, in many ways, Karen speaks for us.

As you read *The Sequoia Seed*, you'll find yourself constantly amazed by how Karen seems to know you, because she does. She knows what we're all going through. She knows it because she's going through it, too. Her gift is that she can take that knowing and put it into words. Glorious, grace-filled words.

Thank you, Karen, for the gift of this book. It came from your heart. I can tell.

—Jim Warda, Author, *Where Are We Going So Fast?*

## Author's Note

It can grow taller than the Statue of Liberty and live nearly forty centuries. Ancient fossil remains show that its ancestors date back for 175 million years. The giant of its species is the most massive of all living forms on the planet. It would take twenty adults, holding hands with outstretched arms, to encircle its base. Yet, paradoxically, it begins as a tiny seed smaller than a flake of oatmeal. This is the mighty Sequoia tree.

Its egg-sized cone can lie undisturbed on the forest floor for fifty years before surrendering its seeds. Ironically, the forest fires that destroy other trees are friends to the Sequoia. Its four-foot thick bark chemically repels the flames, and the fire's heat opens the cone, to at last, release its seeds to take root.

Like the dormant Sequoia seed, our destinies are often set in motion by our own personal fires. A health crisis, the loss of a loved one, and the acceptance of a truth not before seen—these are the infernos that reduce our ideologies to ashes and give birth to new sight. These are the precious moments when we can release our grip on old realities and open ourselves up to the budding possibilities of a bountiful life.

This is the purpose of *The Sequoia Seed*: to cast seeds and embrace the fires—for they shall surely come, these struggles that transform our lives. The question is, will we bud or will we burn? Will we trust that life's abundance is our ever-present inheritance, or will we cling to the lie of unworthiness? Will we give this world our sacred gifts of contribution and passion, or will we die with our music still inside us?

Problems, difficult people, tragedies—these are our fires; these are our teachers. When the heat approaches we can choose to release or retreat. And that choice becomes our experience and fashions the fate of our lives. Each day we may choose again—to see with new eyes; to look beyond the illusion of limitation to the magnificence that we are!

This book's seeds lie in the inspirational and provocative insights of my on-line subscription-based e-zine, "Waking Up." For years, loyal readers throughout the world have received timely messages challeng-

ing them to give more, love deeper, and engage wholeheartedly with life. Hundreds wrote to tell me of their hurdles and their growth. Here, you'll read the stories of real people who've faced real dilemmas. People who have struggled with all the troubles you too may have faced. People who didn't have it all figured out, but kept walking anyway. Those who felt the pain and still got out of bed to take on another day because they learned to listen to their inner voice of wisdom over the barrage of world opinion. Life is not for the weak of spirit. It requires much. My respect and admiration for those who shared their stories with me is endless.

Because these chapters originated as individual stand alone writings, I have purposefully sought and created a sense of continuity to their sequence. However, each chapter remains individually focused and you may read them out of order and lose no value. Many readers like to review the Table of Contents and read the chapters according to what draws their attention. In this way, you can create your own customized experience.

Unlike lighter reading, *The Sequoia Seed* is best enjoyed with time between readings since each chapter is intensely thought provoking. Some chapters will present new ideas to contemplate; others will pose questions that may trigger personal soul searching. It's best to let a chapter ripen for awhile—let it germinate and take root. View your reading as a journey through your mind and life to unearth old forgotten beliefs and discover new insights. Some chapters will ask you to dig in and immerse yourself in exercises. I encourage you to get involved and not skip through these opportunities so that you will have a richer experience. Isn't that what you're after?

*The Sequoia Seed* contains a series of three acts or parts that parallel our process of growth. Act One: The Cone Awaits, contains chapters that ask you to notice the self-identity you've created and how you are demonstrating that identity to the world. Act One is the beginning of growth toward wholeness. In Act Two: The Fires Come, you dig into how you navigate the journey of your life. Act Two will sharpen your spiritual skills and simplify your daily challenges. With the spiritual skills of Act Two in place, you'll now determine how to follow your

heart and resolve your will. This is also a time of celebration and to remember what's most valued in this journey to wholeness. Act Three: The Mighty Sequoia Grows, our final section, glimpses destiny and explores the ripening of your purpose and path.

As you read, dare to question and to be accountable for the choices you've made and the life you've lived thus far. Owning your choices is the key to freedom. We can never really release anything until we fully take responsibility for it. This is where you'll begin to create with intention and return to the wholeness of your spirit.

On the path to spiritual evolution, what you do means far less than who you become. How did you manage your Self through the journey of life? Did you use your hardships to forge stronger determination and commitment? Did you learn that losses show up to prove that you never really lose anything that's truly yours?

Enjoy *The Sequoia Seed* time and time again. Each reading will prompt personal growth and in that growth you will find new insights in future readings. You'll see things that you'll swear weren't there before because you'll be reading with new eyes. I'd love to hear about your experience of strolling through the forest of these pages.



Act One:  
The Cone Awaits  
*-assessing your reality*



1

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## The Balancing Act

We are not human beings on a spiritual journey.  
We are spiritual beings on a human journey.  
—Stephen R. Covey

High above, the tightrope walker gingerly places one foot on the rope and wiggles his foot to find the just-right position before shifting his weight from the platform onto the taut rope. With one foot still firmly planted on the landing, the first step out is the easiest.

Then, when the feel is right, he moves his second foot onto the rope, bobbling slightly as he finds his balance on the slender strand he will traverse high above the crowd. Farther and farther away from the platform he inches; farther and farther from the steadiness of a securely anchored rope.

As the daredevil makes his way to the middle of the suspended rope, it begins to sway and bounce slightly. The rope is slack. It droops beneath his weight, and each step of his progress is now uphill. His sole's grip must be firm or he will slide backward. He concentrates hard to keep a single focus of calm and balance. As he makes his way to the distant platform, the rope becomes increasingly steady and sure. Finally, he leaps onto the solid platform and the crowd releases a long-held collective sigh.

If we consider this experience through the lens of metaphor, we

might glimpse a few very fundamental truths about our own journey through life—which you might agree can often feel like walking a tightrope.

Let's imagine that the platform represents our spiritual base. It's where we feel confident and secure. It is constant and unchanging, because truth is eternal. For this *is* a place of truth. Nothing is ambiguous or unstable. There is little risk. We feel self-assured and strong. There is no real reason to ever leave our spiritual home, but we humans often get restless. So, one day we step out onto the rope—toward a new experience.

No longer standing on the solid ground of what we *know*, we immediately feel a sense of apprehension—even fear. The ground is no longer still, and every move we make triggers ripples of increasing turmoil. It's tough to keep our balance, and we often overreact to the swaying rope, causing it to swing even more wildly. If we weren't afraid before, we are now.

Imagine that moving away from the steady platform is also moving away from our spiritual base. The farther we stray, the more unstable we become. The confidence and strength of living in spirit fades with each step we take. Risks loom large, and uncertainty plagues our minds. It takes great focus and concentration to keep our balance and not fall. We can begin to doubt ourselves and forget that we are always safe—no matter what. We forget who we are.

Rachel's courageous experience described below illustrates this metaphor with precision and humor. Having done a ropes course myself, I can attest to the authenticity of her fears!

A friend of mine owns an adventure company that offers outdoor experiences to businesses and organizations looking for unusual team building exercises. I visited his camp one day and he invited me to join a group of high school students who were just beginning their ropes course. A ropes course is a series of outdoor challenges that tests your physical strength as well as your mental and emotional control. Each task is usually very simple, but profoundly difficult.

I had friends who had participated in ropes courses before and they always spoke of it as one of the most powerful and self-reveal-

ing experiences they'd ever had. So, when my friend invited me to join in, I agreed enthusiastically.

It didn't take me long to be reminded that these high school students were about thirty years younger than I. Funny how the mind forgets age, isn't it? While they seemed to do each challenge with ease, I struggled to hide my obvious lack in strength and my mortal belief in danger.

In one particular experience, my fear got the better of me. I don't remember what the task was called. I think panic wiped everything out except the fear. I remember THAT vividly! The goal was to climb a twenty foot-vertical pole, stand on a platform at the top and leap six feet out to grab a hoop they called 'The Golden Ring.' What my friend didn't tell me was that the wooden steps hammered into the side of the pole were set in such a way that you couldn't easily climb up, or that the platform at the top of the pole swiveled! Or the worst, that when I jumped for the ring, the pole I stood on would sway backward, defeating my push.

It's a good thing I didn't know these things before I began. Oh, I almost forgot—I was wearing a harness around my body that insured I would not fall to my death! This is a little fact that my mind would conveniently forget for the entire length of my ordeal.

The climb up the pole looked like a piece of cake. I wasn't the first one to do this challenge, and I watched as kids one third my age sprinted up like it was no big deal. But it was a big deal! I got about halfway up and found that the foot I was standing on was also the one I needed to reach the next available step. After much jockeying, I reached the platform.

Here was dilemma number two. The platform not only swiveled, but it was bigger around than the pole I clung to. Which meant that I had to let go of the pole and hoist myself over the lip of the platform to get to the top. I finally did. None too gracefully, I'm afraid.

So, there I was, crouched on the platform with the students telling me to stand up. Remember, the platform swivels . . . and it also rocks. It's not a solid footing. Kind of like standing on a clipboard balanced on a little rock. Try as I might, I could not stand up. Squat was my position of choice, but I couldn't jump from a squat!

As I willed my legs to straighten, all they would do was shake. I

remember looking down at them and silently shouting, stop shaking! They didn't listen. When I got as upright as I figured I could, I finally took my eyes off my feet to see where the ring was. My God! It looked yards away.

I was exhausted, my legs wouldn't stop shaking, and all I could think of was, I'm going to miss the ring and fall to my death! Yes, I did have a harness on that would prevent that, but my mind wasn't convinced.

I got up the courage—well, it was more like desperation to be done with this—to leap off the quivering platform and grab for the ring. Only one fingertip touched it before I found myself falling to the ground. The harness stopped me, of course, and I was fine. As they lowered me to the blessed ground beneath I imagined all those youngsters thinking, the old lady blew it. Silently, as I crawled out of the harness, I chided myself for the hysterical thoughts of doom I'd had only moments before. It was humbling to realize how little control I had over my emotions, let alone my legs! But it was exhilarating to have faced my fear and to have done it anyway! —Rachel J.

Like Rachel knows so well, it's easy to forget we are safe when the world looks dangerous. And when we wander from our spiritual home we often forget that we are safely tethered. We may stray from our spiritual roots, but spirit *never* leaves us. We may forget our ever-present strength, but it is always there. We only need to remember who we really are—eternal spirits playing in a fantasyland of illusion.

This world is where we learn of our true nature. Through surviving experiences of seeming danger and tragedy, we slowly remember that these challenges are here to stimulate latent memories of our spiritual being. Of all the skills we could possibly acquire to ensure a full and meaningful life, learning to manage our fearful minds is number one. Anxious self-talk, doubt, worry, and distrust interfere with our ability to connect to truth. Challenging our thoughts allows us to see through their subtle deception.

We are safe. We are strong. All our frailties are products of our own imaginings. If we stop feeding these fallacies through our blind obedience to fear, they will wither. We are here to remember that we have created all we see, first through spirit, then through human endeavor. But every creation pales beside the wonder of our eternal spirit. Each fear is merely an illusion constructed by our unmanaged minds.



2

## The Great Illusion

We read the world wrong and say that it deceives us.  
—Rabindranath Tagore

**B**uddhism professes that enlightenment and peace come through detachment. It warns that the reality we believe we see is merely an illusion and not worthy of our devotion. It says that strong attachment to this illusion is the cause of all suffering. That to experience true peace, we need to be willing to have what we want, and be willing to not have it as well.

Detachment is a foreign concept for most of us. When we want something, we form a *strong* attachment to having it. We create a single-minded focus on achieving our desire—as our goal setting culture clearly upholds. To not have what we want is to feel that we've personally failed. We even begin to define our value by our possessions (as in *net worth*). If we have, we are worthy. If we don't have, we are deficient. If we get, we are fulfilled. If we don't get, we are empty.

We identify so strongly with the illusions of our world that we often forget we are *in* this world, but not *of* it. In the world of attachment, we define ourselves by our external world experiences but, in that belief, we are ships without anchors, buffeted by whatever conditions prevail. No wonder so many people feel lost. They think they *are* their circumstances and possessions. They are so preoccupied by the

world of illusion that they forget their eternal spirit.

We are not the *ship* on the ocean—we are the constant in a sea of change. We are the anchors—the unyielding spirit of the *I Am*. We are apart from the chaos and illusion, but also one with all that is real. This is no secret to your soul. Deep within, you know this, but our human minds are often confused between illusion and reality. The two co-exist almost without distinction. What *is* real and what *is* illusion?

First, understand that illusion does not refer to the physical world's existence. A rock is hard—the air is invisible. I cannot walk through a solid wall no matter how imaginary I believe it to be. While we exist in physical bodies and judge our world with physical senses, physical objects will be real.

The illusion resides not in the physicality of our world, but in our experiences, thoughts, and attachments to what we perceive. Objects are, by definition, objective. But illusion is born of our judgments and the meaning we assign to things and events. Those meanings are simply our mind's imaginings—stories we tell ourselves to try to make sense of the life we experience.

Life may appear complex and ever changing, but truth is simple and constant. That is our clue to what's illusion and what's real. Illusion is a chameleon. It adapts and varies to suit our awareness and mood. Real *Truth*, with a capital T, never changes from day to day or person to person.

Illusion promotes confusion and separation.

Truth brings clarity and union.

Illusion causes pain and destruction.

Truth acknowledges wholeness and perfection.

Illusion questions incessantly.

Truth answers.

Illusion clouds and obscures.

Truth reveals.

Illusion weaves complexity and uncertainty.

Truth simplifies.

Illusion lurks in the shadows.

Truth shines clarifying light.

Illusion imprisons you in fear.

Truth shall set you free.

How can you tell whether you are witnessing illusion or truth? Pay

attention to your feelings. Do you feel more scattered or more whole? Are you upset or calm? Do circumstances seem complex or simple? Are you weakened in your experience or strengthened? Are you attacking or defending, or are love and generosity powering you? Does chaos rule your emotions, or are you internally peaceful?

Don't misunderstand. Illusion can appear *very* real, and evidence and opinions may support its existence. Remember that illusion thrives in the external world. So, of course, physical evidence will align with the deception. Einstein insightfully declared that, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." Your physical senses and human understanding will not help you see the illusions of our physical world. You must look with different eyes—your real eyes. Perceive from the constancy of spirit. To see truth you must come from truth.

Below, June discovered the truth of her partnership and herself when a wake-up call shattered an easy, comfortable existence.

Five years ago, a friend posed a pivotal question that acted like a finely targeted poison arrow piercing my heart. He demanded that I define *life partnership*, and I realized I was not living the truth of my definition. The pain I'd long ago buried deep within surfaced again when his question shattered the illusion of my happy life.

My emotions swung from resentment, anger, and resistance to deep inquiry, as I could no longer ignore what was so. Fourteen years of togetherness had been pleasant enough, but there was no longer any intimate, deep connection with the one I called my life partner. What had gone wrong? Could it be rectified?

I walked for hours in nature, meditating, crying, and healing years of denying this reality and the death of my dream. My mind rationalized the situation and what needed to be done, and my heart was heavy with pain; but all the while my place of *knowing* consistently, without ever wavering, spoke the Truth.

I *knew* I needed to leave this comfortable, still loving, once passionate but now companionable relationship. I needed to be true to myself. Letting go was so hard, for I had worked so diligently to rebuild my bruised life after a previous divorce. I'd re-created myself

from total domesticity and motherhood to a successful professional businesswoman. To leave the comfortable and familiar and face being alone and starting again seemed overwhelming.

I did leave the relationship, though it took a year to gain courage, set my mind in order, and prepare my heart for what I knew would be yet more grieving. I sold my house, downsizing to live alone at a time of life when most people are starting to plan retirement. I sacked more than half my business clients, making life financially challenging, but psychologically more balanced.

I tried new, often-promised-never-done experiences to learn more about those hidden parts of myself: art, philosophy, singing, traveling, yoga, and clowning. I chose and committed to live by the creed: *Does this make my heart sing?*

Four years since, I have found a richness, happiness and serenity I never knew existed. I have less in terms of material *things*, but more of those things money just can't ever buy: love, peace, joy, and fulfillment. I have learned that giving and helping others brings more joy and love than receiving, and that happiness comes from accepting *what's so* rather than achievement of the illusion of what *might be*.

I have seen more of me than ever before, and I am very clear about who I am in the world. I live in integrity and authenticity and never compromise these core values. I am never a chameleon trying to please or win the work. I am never a victim and always take full responsibility for what I create in my world. I have created a personal world filled with loving friends, and beautiful, rich experiences that fill my soul.

Rebuilding my life has shown me that living in the flow of *trust* and *grace* brings a harmony that my planning self could never know. I set intentions rather than goals, but I'm no longer attached to their outcome. I don't need to control the process or the result. I now trust that my greater Self knows what my smaller self needs for this lifetime, and it brings it to me, exactly and perfectly for the growth and experience most appropriate to my evolvment in this lifetime. Truth is always available. It lives in the knowing place within. All one ever has to do is listen and step out of the illusion. –June Hope

June woke abruptly from her comfortable, but complacent, existence to realize how far her relationship had drifted. The reality that she'd been living was an illusion cloaking the desperation in her heart.

Don't be distracted by appearances. Look deeper—under every illusion is truth. Under the façade of happiness is often the truth of quiet desperation. Under the symptoms of your illness is the truth of your wellness. Under the harsh words from another is the truth of their fear and insecurities; and under that is the *Truth* they cannot yet see for themselves: the truth of their wholeness.

Remember, Truth is always simple. To master your experiences you must first learn to master your thoughts. Be vigilant and you will begin to recognize easily the calling card of illusion. It always brings doubt, fear, confusion, and separation; but these afflictions are a trick of your imagination. When first confronted by her friend, June initially felt resentment and fear, but she looked deeper within herself and recognized that she hadn't been happy in the relationship for quite some time. She saw the illusion of her fearful emotions and chose to admit the truth. Like her, dig deeper than the surface emotions you are feeling. Deeper even than the aching heart you may feel. For beneath all the emotion is truth. Let the hurt go. Watch it lift from you and float away.

In the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy and her companions finally reached the Emerald City and were granted an audience with the great and powerful Wizard, he appeared as an enormous and terrifying apparition floating before them. As his voice boomed forth denial of their requests for help, Toto, Dorothy's little dog, drew back a curtain to reveal a small and timid man running a machine that projected a Wizard that was only an illusion.

Illusion can appear convincing and even intimidating, like the Wizard. But it is an apparition made of imagined fears and unmanaged emotions. Challenge its validity, and when the veil is parted, you will see the truth that was always there. You are eternal. You are safe. You are stronger than anything this world visits upon you.



## Personal Inventories

The chains of habits are too weak to be felt  
until they are too strong to be broken.

-Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

Each year businesses take inventory of the stock in their stores and warehouses. They organize and count each widget and thingamabob to see what they have and what might need to be ordered or even discarded. You've probably seen them—employees with hand held electronic scanners and clipboards of product descriptions picking up and counting each and every item on the shelf. It's a painstaking process requiring a sharp eye and complete focus, and, in the end, the business knows exactly what it does and does not have on hand.

Perhaps we should borrow this practice to attend to our own inventories. How useful would it be to take stock of those habits and perceptions that constitute your own personal *being* inventory? To know what, in your *warehouse*, is overstocked and what is almost depleted. To toss out habits and perceptions that no longer serve you. To order up experiences and results that have been on back order for longer than you can remember.

Grab a piece of paper. We are going to do some work here. Go ahead . . . I will wait.

Okay, now down the left side of the page, with a few inches of writing space between them, copy down these headings:

1. Destructive Habits
2. Stinky Attitudes
3. Beliefs That Get Me Into Trouble
4. Neglected Relationships
5. Forgotten Dreams
6. Numbed-out Feelings
7. Flabby Health
8. Lost Ambition

Quite a list! It is inevitable that those neglected corners of our lives accumulate dust and debris when we are not looking.

Take a few minutes to consider your inventory for each category. What habits have you unsuccessfully tried to change? What attitudes are poisoning your days? What condition is your body in? What relationship have you all but forgotten? Take a good hard look. This inventory is what gives your life the color it has. It molds your experiences. It creates your future.

Taking inventory periodically gives us a chance to clean house, discard the old us that we have outgrown, and evolve all our natures. That can mean the difference between just being alive or really LIVING!

Mary Anne learned this lesson after years of self-sabotage and heartache.

I was raised by wonderful parents—parents who *never* fought, but when I was 13 years old, my parents came out of their bedroom and told us kids they were getting a divorce. I was devastated.

For the next fifteen years or so, I had trust issues, including self-sabotage, and I felt like I was damaged goods. The root of my problems—I didn't trust my instincts because how could I *not* see my parent's divorce coming? So anytime I was in a relationship and it was going very well, I waited for the bottom to drop out. If the bottom didn't drop out, I would see to it that it did.

Until finally, the most incredible man in the world came into my life. He was patient with me, kind, loving and sent from above. After several lumps, I cleaned up my act and decided to live each day to the fullest and be the best person I can be. We've been married two years today. Since I stopped believing that the worst always happens, my life has been full of love, joy, peace, kindness, and goodness.

—Mary Anne Butz-Belanger

Like Mary Anne, we have each learned, through our own hard lessons, that without internal changes, our external life stays about the same. Why is it then that we expect to live a more fulfilling life tomorrow when we keep doing what we have done for the last countless years? For things to change, *you* have got to change! Today! Now! Start doing something different—even a small step.

I know a small step does not seem to change much *out there*, but it is a huge step inside. Just driving to work a different way sends a message to your brain that “something is different.” And when one thing is different, you can break the mindless routine of old habits. You’ll wake up and begin to notice life again. One little change creates just

I think once you start making some changes and deciding on your direction, you just start rolling with it. The hardest thing is making the decision. But once you make the decision, you just keep going. The process just rolls and you realize the decisions you make from that decision are ok. —Marcie L.

enough momentum to make it possible for other, perhaps more important things, to begin to change too.

You see, there is no order of difficulty in change. A big change is no more difficult than a small one, because change isn’t about the thing you’re trying to change. Change is about a decision. It’s making a different choice . . . inviting other possibilities . . . thinking differently.

And here is where it gets even better. Small changes can lead to *huge* outcomes! Why? Because the momentum of life is cumulative.

Each day builds on the previous. Like a drop in the bucket that holds the totality of your life. Each drop, each day, seems almost inconsequential, but with each drop, the bucket slowly fills and suddenly, as if in an instant, it overflows and life shifts.

There is an ancient Chinese tale that illustrates this point. Into a serene rural pond a lily seed fell from a passing bird. It sprouted and blossomed into a beautiful white flower. No one witnessed the lone lily floating in the large pond. The next day the lily produced a second flower. Now two pads lay on the water. Still no one noticed the lilies. The following day the two lilies became four. No one noticed.

Each day the lilies doubled until one day, someone *did* notice. The lovely flowers had covered almost half the pond. Who could imagine the destruction they could cause? An alarmed villager did and warned his neighbors that something should be done. If the lilies covered the pond's entire surface, the fish below would die from lack of oxygen, and the fish were the main diet of the local villagers. The villagers vowed to meet the next day to discuss what to do but, you guessed it: the next morning the whole pond was covered with lilies, and dead fish lined the banks.

Your life is like that pond. Each day a lily blooms and shapes the future of your existence—lilies such as neglect, procrastination, busyness, excuses, and waste. One lily of neglect doesn't seem to make much difference. Not telling your child how much you believe in her today surely will not destroy her self-esteem, but years of neglecting to say you are proud of her or believe in her can ruin a relationship—and perhaps even a life.

One drop in the bucket, one lily on the pond, or one choice, can seem inconsequential at the time. It's easy to overlook the far-reaching

I'm a very positive and upbeat person. I encourage other people when they get down. But I can see that I'm not practicing my own preaching because I get very discouraged myself. What you wrote showed me that I've got to start tending to my own garden.

—Kathy Hageman

impact of a simple misstep. Yet, it is in that failure to notice that we surrender control of our lives.

Go back to the personal inventory list you started earlier and consider where you are in life. What destructive habits do you have? Does smoking one cigarette kill you? Does telling a little white lie matter? How about 10,000 cigarettes? Deceiving the one you love?

And what of your neglected dreams? What does it matter that you were too busy today to

plan for that dream trip to Alaska, to study French, to register for college, to call your mom? Missing one day cannot mean that much! Right? Probably not.

But, here is what *does* matter: you caved in to neglect today, and it will thus be easier to do the same thing again tomorrow. Pretty soon tomorrow is next decade, and putting it off becomes an unconscious habit. Procrastination and neglect are like mosquitoes. They anesthetize you while they suck your life dry.

Take stock of your personal inventory of habits, attitudes, and choices that gradually set the tone of your life. Look closely at the lilies covering your pond. Ignoring them is not wise. They are already shaping the quality and direction of your future. Ignorance is not bliss! Ignorance can be suicide. Choose to sort through your inventory and discard that which is destroying your dreams or your life. *Know* your inventory well. Only then can you do something about it. It may not be pleasant, but do it any way. It will be your defense against wasted opportunities to live an extraordinary life.



## The Power of the Question

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.  
—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Who are you, and why are you here? For many, these questions are yet unanswered, and unanswered questions of this magnitude often create discomfort and confusion. The answers can take years of simmering before we are clear about them. To deal with the persistent anxiety of not knowing such essential answers, we sometimes reach for the instant relief of a quick answer—not primarily to find the *right* answer, but to end the discomfort of confusion. We'll do almost anything to get out of the purgatory of the unknown.

Momentous questions like these do not come with tidy answers. Fundamental life questions like *Where did I come from?* *Who am I?* or *What's my purpose?* require room to breathe and develop. They herald transformational life changes that draw a line between your past and your future—where life irreversibly shifts. This is not the time to hurry or get impatient. Much is at stake.

Before seeking comfort, as is so often our habit, perhaps we should explore the value of *purposeful* discomfort. If you can be with the question and not resist its inherent murkiness, then you might gain the clarity to truly understand what life is asking of you before you rush to an

answer.

One of the questions that causes us the most anguish is one to which there is often no satisfactory answer. It's the most prevalent question we utter when we are hurt or wronged. "Why is this happening to me?" This heart-wrenching plea doesn't really seek an answer; it mostly wants justification.

You may have muttered it before, hoping for whatever *this* represents to stop. "Why is this happening to me?" is often unanswerable, and even if answered, provides little relief. Asking this question only serves to reinforce our status as victim. It leaves us feeling hopeless, indignant, judgmental, or even angry—not the most empowering feelings.

There *is* a question at moments like this which does have a real possibility of being answered. All it requires is a tiny modification to the wording. Rather than asking, "Why is this happening *to* me?" instead ask, "Why is this happening *for* me?"

Notice how you feel physically when you change that one little word. Lighter. Attentive. Your focus moves from judgment and resistance to curiosity and exploration. You begin to look at circumstances with an inquisitive eye. You examine rather than resist. Changing one word has changed your entire relationship with the unknown; and it has brought you strength, not fed your fear.

The quality of the question you ask yourself determines the richness of the answer available to you. Read these questions to yourself and notice how each makes you feel.

Why am I unhappy? *or* How can I become happy?

Why don't I know my purpose? *or* How can I become aware of my purpose?

Why am I so poor? *or* How can I make more money?

Why don't they understand me? *or* How can I be better understood?

Notice that each of the *why* questions above reflects a current condition, but that current reality is, in truth, a result of the past. "Why am I unhappy?" is a question you ask now, but it is based upon all that has

led up to now. You didn't suddenly become unhappy this moment. Unhappiness has probably been building for a long time. *Why* questions keep you focused on the past. They keep you stuck in the unhappiness, not exploring a way out, as this reader discovered.

I've gotten feedback from a mentor that I don't speak up in meetings, and he knows that I have a lot more to offer. My response was, "I'm usually thinking about how to articulate my thoughts without sounding like an idiot." Of course, this means that sometimes the opportunity to make a comment passes, and I wind up swallowing my words. We had to laugh because he's also Asian and understands the culture, but he told me that when he forced himself to speak up, even at the risk of sounding like a jerk, he was more successful in his

When you said to stop asking why something bad is happening TO me and ask why it's happening FOR me, a very, very, very large BONG went off in my head. It was a life changing statement. I was so into 'WHY ME?' that when the bong sounded, my whole body SHOOK as if an earthquake were occurring. Thank you for the opportunity to be released from THAT bondage. You are wonderful.

—Barbara Reynolds

career. So, lesson learned. Instead of thinking, "Why don't I speak up more?", a simple shift in the questions I ask myself can change the way I handle a situation. Instead of focusing on the past, by asking *why*, I can focus on the future by asking *how*. I get to ask myself, "How can I speak up more?" —A. O.

When you stop asking *why* and begin to ask *how*, you will move toward new possibilities and solutions. You won't agonize over what is already irreversibly done. You cannot change the past, no matter how much you want to. You can only change the present and, therefore, the future.

*Why* is often a rhetorical question that merely keeps you locked in an endless loop.

Explaining the past does not move you toward real solutions. It just conjures up possible justifications for your predicament. Unfortunately, none of those reasons, even when known, are likely to make you any happier.

*How* questions lead toward possible change in the situation. They ask your mind to think of options and solutions. They focus you on what you can do *now* to change the situation.

One of my *Waking Up* ezine readers faced a situation that could have easily made her a victim, had she focused on *why*. Instead, she chose to take control and employed the more powerful *how* to deal with her dilemma. This is her story.

I come from a logic oriented family. Both my parents were computer pioneers. Mathematics was always my favorite subject in school because there was one right answer and you could prove it. I wasn't really exposed to any 'spirituality' growing up, so I never understood the concepts of faith or trusting your gut. What was real for me was something I could see and touch.

I followed in my parents' footsteps and got my college degree in Computer Science. I began my professional life as a systems programmer, then a software developer, then a technical trainer, and finally a technical marketer. Each job was progressively less logic-oriented. I began to embrace faith in a reality I couldn't see, prove, or touch. My life experiences were shaping me to see that there was more to life than accepting only what I could prove.

About this time *Waking Up* also became a perfect element in my personal growth. I can see how instrumental it has been in shaping my character and preparing me for the next phase of my life. I liken *Waking Up* to my character workout. On a weekly basis it challenges me to look at life differently and to grow continually. I'm still logical, but now I pause during a life experience and reflect on it rather than just accepting it or not even noticing it. I now truly experience and direct my life.

I've recently left my job of 18 years to mother our daughters full-time. We also moved 1,200 miles from the area where I lived for 40 years to a place where I know no one. Once we were unpacked in our new home, we had hundreds of cardboard boxes on our front porch. My kids asked why we didn't just throw them away. I explained to them about recycling and how each of us can make a difference to save our environment.

Unfortunately, we moved to an area that isn't very environmentally conscious. A year ago, I would have gotten very disappointed with this town's lack of vision, and I would have just put those boxes

out for the trash. Instead, I spent hours finding a place that recycles cardboard. My children and I drove 20 minutes to the recycling drop and unloaded all of the cardboard boxes ourselves.

All the while, I was cognizant of the fact that my kids were watching me but also being taught by what I value. Those were the best few hours of my life! I've gone on now to start recycling centers here in Colorado. I contacted a recycling company who was willing to set up their recycle bins. They'll even pay \$10 to a charity for every time they get it picked up. I contacted a gal this morning about her local charity here. If we set up 20 drop-off stations in the area, we believe we can get about \$500 a month for her charity!

Just the other day, my six-year-old gave me a birthday card that said, "Thank you for your help in saving our environment." I was so touched to know my daughter had been so deeply affected by how I'd dealt with an obstacle thrown in my path. Now I will forever be grateful for that obstacle and how my response reflected so positively on someone I love.

You've told us before that our thoughts and actions define who we become. I just absolutely loved that! Now I think of that every day. Everything I come across, every thought that I'm thinking, seeing, doing: I'm just defining who I am! It's extremely self-empowering, and it makes me realize that my effort to live according to my ethics and to recycle those cardboard boxes also showed my children who I am.

Parents are such important role models to their kids. It's not what we say, but what we do that makes the biggest impression. Recycling was my thing, but I included my kids in something that was important to me by talking about it and sharing with them the opportunity to participate in it with me. I think in focusing on how my decisions form who I am, I'm also teaching my children how to be ethical and responsible adults. Rather than complain about what isn't, I hope I'm showing them how to *be* the change they want to see—to take responsibility for what they believe in and to show the world who they are.

—Sue Hoffman

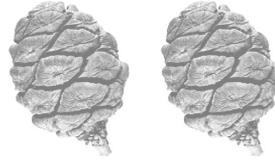
Pay close attention to the type of questions you ask when you are disappointed by life and when your expectations are not met. When

you catch yourself asking *why*, immediately transform the question into a more powerful opportunity for discovery by asking *how*. Make achieving what you desire a higher priority than your need to be right about your past.

Once, after listening to me grumble endlessly about how I had *been wronged*, a friend asked me, "Would you rather be right or happy?" Of course, I answered that I wanted to be right! It took me a few days to appreciate the full weight of his question. My need to have my way was making me miserable. I was choosing to righteously wallow in my indignation about what *should be*, instead of dealing with my reality. His question led me to see that my happiness and peace were more important than a past I could not change.

As you find yourself asking *why* questions, notice where you may be choosing to have your way at the price of having your peace. *Why* will perpetuate upset; *how* will end it. This is not about giving up or giving in, it is about prioritizing your happiness. What is it that you really want? What choice right now would best achieve happiness? Is this momentary issue more important than your sanity and peace?

Now, choose again. Choose sanity, not resentment. Choose possibility, not regret, even in the face of devastation. Because when all about you is falling apart, even then, you can choose your experience. Will you choose to let suffering impair your ability to move forward? Or will you ask a different question about what it all means? None of us relishes starting over, but new beginnings bring new possibilities and new growth.



Act Two:

The Fires Come

-sharpening your spiritual skills



## The Three-Headed Monster

You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience  
in which you really stop to look fear in the face.

You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

It is not easy to strike out on a path that diverges from the well worn highways of the uninspired, ease-seeking multitudes. Turning away from the beaten path and stepping into new territory is rarely encouraged. Oh, sure, you'll hear dream-inspired discussions espousing the bliss of living a purposeful life, but actually *walking* to the beat of a different drum is often looked upon with skepticism and contempt. These are very mixed messages. When we understand the personal stake others have in keeping us *normal* and predictable, then we'll begin to see the self-serving motivations of their concern for our *safety*.

I don't mean to make this all sound so sinister. Truthfully, most people who warn us of being unrealistic and starry-eyed in our life visions are doing what they think they must to protect us from the disappointment they themselves have experienced. They really do believe they are looking out for our best interests and are doing us a favor to reel our lofty expectations back to earth.

But, unconsciously, while they strive to protect us, they're also heeding the commands of three powerful forces to which they've

painfully acquiesced. We can see it in their eyes: submission. However reluctantly, they've already put away the dreams they had for their own lives, as a child leaves behind a favorite toy when he begins the task of growing up. They admonish, "There are dreams . . . and then there is real life." Though our hearts lovingly shelter the dream's faint ember, we grow up as told, and fall into step with all the others who pretend it was only a childish fantasy.

Why did so many give up on their dreams? What smothered the blaze of passion born in each of them? Three imposters are most likely to blame—three illusions—three insidious thieves that steal confidence, hope, and inspiration. No strangers to any of us, we wrestle with them almost daily: fear, doubt, and confusion.

We battle valiantly with these fiends, hope against fear, confidence against doubt, and insight against confusion. Sometimes we win, but the victory is rarely permanent. We'll contend with them throughout our lives each time we step into a new adventure.

Rather than fight these powers, if we understood their true purpose and potential contributions to our lives, we could put away the battle and be open to the value they bring. Feelings of confusion, doubt, and fear are just moments in the in-between place of transition, where the old way is fading out and a new way is about to step in. It can feel like you're losing everything that is familiar and predictable, but you're actually opening up to a higher level of life.

Fear is merely your survival instincts warning you of a *perceived* threat. Fear is the product of your limbic brain that provokes the fight or flight response. These mindless emotions are not thinking, logical reactions. They're purely instinctual and don't distinguish between degrees of threat. To your limbic brain, danger is simply danger, and the gut response is to run; but you cannot run away from yourself, and the fear doesn't live anywhere but in your mind.

The interesting thing about fear is that *it* is what we are truly afraid of. It scares us to death. Once established, the fear itself becomes the focus of our attention. Fear feeds on itself and paradoxically grows stronger in the process. When U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself; nameless, unreason-

ing, unjustified terror which paralyzes . . ." he could have spoken no truer words.

So how do you get the upper hand with this often unreasonable reaction? The way to stop fear is to befriend it. Befriend it? Yes. Step away from the emotion for a moment and just take a closer look at what your mind is telling you. Listen to its warnings of catastrophe and ruin. It's such a drama queen. Is what it's proposing logical? Is the disaster it's shrieking about likely to happen? Probably not.

Disconnect from the melodrama and try to hear the source of your fear's cry. It's trying to get your attention. It's concerned that you might be in harm's way. It's warning you, so that you may make a conscious choice. Listen and thank it. Reassure it that you are safe and that all is fine. Let trust hold fear's hand, and fear will relax.

One of my biggest battles with fear happened many years ago when I made a dramatic change in my life's direction. I was living in Cleveland, Ohio, at the time. A company I worked for relocated me there from Seattle, Washington, and then abruptly declared bankruptcy three months later! Now what? My then-husband and I decided we weren't crazy enough about Cleveland to stay, so we planned a move to San Francisco, California.

One morning, while he was at work and I sat idly watching a talk-variety show called *Alive and Well* on television, it struck me. I could do what *they* were doing! The hosts traveled the globe visiting fabulous vacation spots, they played cook in the kitchen with master chefs making tantalizing desserts, and interviewed extraordinarily ordinary people who'd found their calling in some hobby-turned-career. The three hosts had a ball. And why wouldn't they? They had a dream job. And it was easy! I could do that and (I smugly thought) I could probably do it better.

When my husband and I arrived in San Francisco, I determined that I would break into TV. What did it matter that San Francisco was the number five market in the nation and seasoned personalities in all the other ninety-five markets were vying like crazy to get in. I was bright, I was confident, I was sure the powers-that-be would see my potential and fall over backwards offering me lengthy, lucrative con-

tracts. Did I mention that I was a bit naive?

One at a time, each flabbergasted TV station receptionist I called laughed her head off when I asked how I could get a job as a talk show host. They did offer me some useful advice though. Something about starting in Podunk, Idaho, and paying my dues like everyone else.

My heart sank with each call, until I called an independent station and got a temp on the line. She actually talked to me. She told me the temp agency she worked for placed all the local broadcast jobs and that I should call them. It was a long shot, but about then I was willing to follow *any* lead.

Sure enough, the temp agency placed me at the CBS television affiliate as a two-week vacation replacement for the secretary in the news department. After a previous career selling tax-sheltered investments to very well-to-do business owners, my new duties of sorting mail, answering phones, and typing letters of apology to wannabe broadcasters (such irony!) was easy. They were so thrilled with my reliability that I was passed back and forth between news and engineering to cover the duties of several more vacationing employees.

I got up the courage one day to tell the news manager that what I really wanted was to host my own show. He had enough restraint to not laugh out loud, but instead told me that in the broadcast industry, videotape was your resumé. I needed to have a tape to get anywhere. It must have been a slow news week because he gave me one-hour use of the news set, a teleprompter, and one cameraman to record a tape of me pretending to be a news anchor.

I prepared for four days. I selected real news stories, wrote the script and rehearsed for hours in my bathroom mirror. All my gumption and bravado dissolved, flowing into the sweat running down my brow. My tongue had trouble navigating my mouth, and my mind was so distracted that I couldn't keep my place in the script. And this was just in front of my home mirror. Doubt and panic were rapidly gaining ground. My blustery confidence blew itself out.

What if I froze on camera? What if I lost my place? What if I stammered? What if I was so colossally horrible that the infamous grapevine announced my failure all over town and my chance for suc-

cess ended before it began? What if they even fired me from the temp job? What if I couldn't earn enough money to pay my rent? What if I ended up on the streets? I could die!

Do you see what fear does when unmanaged? It takes a fleeting thought of concern and magnifies it into inescapable doom—all in a matter of a few seconds! The truth was, I was not going to die. I knew that intellectually, but intellect does not govern emotions and never neutralizes fear. My fear was only saying, "Hey, you had better get a grip and nail this because you may never get a chance like this again."

Once I heard fear's *real* message and focused on my goal, it stopped terrorizing me. The day of the shoot, I read my stories with confidence and believability, and my tyrannical mind was silent.

So, did the dream happen? Well, I didn't end up with my own talk show, but I did get a shot at being a news reporter in the San Francisco area for a while—disproving the admonishment that I had to start in Podunk! Funny how keeping our eyes on the goal banishes fear.

Doubt, ironically, helps us learn to believe in ourselves. It challenges us to ask the really hard question: "Do I have what it takes?" Yes, you do! We all do. Each and every one of us has capabilities light-years beyond our wildest dreams.

People demonstrate this best when they face a crisis. Look at how strong people are. Look at how much ingenuity they have when faced with the unknown. The wealth of our personal power is lying dormant most of the time because we simply don't demand its presence. Life can get pretty ordinary when our extraordinary abilities aren't given room to play.

Don't be afraid of your doubt. Just like fear, it's there to protect you. But when you listen to the voice of doubt, do so with caution. Listen carefully to the feeble tales it weaves. Fear seems to be focused externally, but doubt is all about personal insecurity. It chinks away at self-confidence and plants seeds of uncertainty. Left unmanaged, doubt will paralyze you into a state of indecision.

Doubt is just your mind's way of asking the question, "Are you sure you can do this?" Remember all that you have done in the past? Look at how far you have come. You've handled horrific events and

grown stronger from the challenge. Never question your eternal power. You're far stronger than any situation you'll ever face.

Oddly enough, confusion is the fertile ground of possibility—a break in the routine that opens a door to new realities. When your mind is presented with something new, it can become cautious since it has no past experience to draw upon in dealing with the new situation. If there is no relevant past experience, it does not know what to do. So, it will convince you that doing nothing is the safest choice. It will pretend it's confused, and that, until it's clear, you'd best not make any decisions. Confusion is the mind's way of procrastinating, and yet the mind detests being confused, since its purpose in life is to figure things out.

If left in confusion long, the mind will lure your attention back to what it *does* know: the past. It will remind you of all the wonderful things about the past and conveniently downplay all that was not so wonderful. It'll lure you to retreat to what you already know. Even if it's not what you want, it will remind you of all that you will lose if you make a break from the past.

Don't be fooled into peeking over your shoulder at what you believe you are losing. You're losing nothing but the illusion of safety and comfort. And be honest . . . you weren't that comfortable anyway!

Picture confusion as a bridge connecting your *been there, done that* past, to your *sky's the limit* potential. Like fear, confusion's only power is to keep you from waking up and walking on. Confusion leads to more confusion—it's the snake eating its tail. Stay in confusion very long and fear and doubt will stealthily take up residence.

The only way out of this sinkhole is to take action. You must choose to not be mesmerized by the siren's song of this deadly trio. Fear, doubt, and confusion are only the unruly children of an unmanaged mind. They are self-created and have virtually nothing to do with your circumstances. Each can devastate you or act as your early warning system to wake up. You *must* decide on a course of action and take it.

In your weakest state you are stronger than the best they will ever throw at you. You only need to be alert to their presence and watchful for a loss in your momentum. Resolve to move forward, even if only in baby steps. Choice, decision, and action are the antidotes to fear, doubt

and confusion and will always defeat them. Any action, no matter how small, will disarm their spell. Successfully defeating these foes does not depend on the size of your step, but the power of your resolve.

Keep your eyes trained only on the light of your dream. Feel it, taste it. When doubt, confusion or fear come creeping 'round, get moving! Take a small step toward your light. Do it resolutely and quickly, and they will vanish.



Act Three:

# The Mighty Sequoia Grows

*-fulfilling your promise*