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Retreat

notes from a virtual mountaintop retreat

Christine King

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Credits

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For every one who has desperately needed a break but has not been able to get away...

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Prologue

After almost 60 years of trying, I'd finally had enough! Enough of other humans — and most of all, enough of myself and my endlessly frustrating habits that weren't getting me anywhere I wanted to be. I decided to “drop out” and take myself on a virtual retreat to an imaginary mountaintop for as long as it took.

That experience changed my life.

The mountaintop of my imagination was a vast plateau of bare, grey rock, with nothing but a small hut and a camp fire set a little way back from the top of a cliff. When I would stand at the edge, I was looking out over the treetops of an ancient forest which stretched as far as the eye could see. It felt like somewhere in South America, even though I've never been there and had no particular affinity for the place. Perhaps I'd seen something like it in a documentary. With no other human habitation and not even any wildlife in sight, it likely represented the most remote and isolated place I could imagine myself being.

At first I was there on my own, which was exactly what I wanted. A short while later, though, a cat suddenly appeared in the hut, curled up comfortably on the narrow bed where I slept, as if he'd been there all along. He was one of those svelte, lavender-point Siamese cats, which was incongruous and a little amusing because I've never owned such a cat; I'm not sure I've even met one! This cat, whom I still think of as just Cat, taught me perhaps the most important thing I've ever learned about the art of being.

After several days, we ventured down the mountain to get some supplies from the little town that I somehow knew was in the valley below, hidden from my

mountaintop view. I still wanted to have as little as possible to do with other people, so it was simply a grocery run. Cat came with me, riding along in my backpack when he didn't want to walk any further. (He really was a "precious" sort of cat. Funny that he's entirely a work of my imagination...)

On the way back out of the town, a young dog joined us. He was a skinny, flea-infested stray, probably only a few months old. Unlike Cat, he was a mutt, mostly white with brown patches. I suppose I could have given him a cool name, but I called him Dog. I loved him from the moment he joined us, but it just didn't feel important to give either of these wonderful companions a name. I didn't use my name with them, either. It simply wasn't important, as it was always clear who was who, without the need for name tags. In fact, we communicated everything without words — simple, direct, and clear.

Cat and Dog stayed with me for the rest of my retreat, and they remain with me still (as does my mountain "home"). Both taught me some essential things about the art of living, starting with the importance of rest and relaxation, the art of doing nothing (or at least, of *seeming* to do nothing). For many days after he first joined us, Dog did nothing but eat and sleep until he'd filled out nicely and his coat was smooth and shiny. Then he revealed an irrepressible appetite for joy, and for adventure.

A few weeks into my retreat, Cat, Dog, and I decided to explore the rest of our mountaintop. I discovered to my surprise that we were not alone up there; a few other people were living on "my" mountain. Each proved to be a cautionary tale about withdrawal and isolation; and one showed me the folly of looking outside of myself for spiritual experiences and enlightenment.

Some time later, a man showed up at the hut, looking like I probably did when I first arrived: exhausted, defeated, and longing for solitude. We barely spoke, other than

to acknowledge our shared journey. I knew that he needed to be left alone, just as I had done when I first arrived, so for the most part we didn't interact.

But there is one incident worth mentioning which occurred shortly after his arrival. Cat appeared in the doorway of the hut, and I was astonished to see that the man was frozen in fear: where I saw my now-familiar companion (a domestic cat), the man saw a jaguar! I found that fascinating. All a figment of my imagination, this incident was showing me, in entertaining detail, how my mind can conjure things to fear which are so far removed from reality, or from another's experience, that they can turn a friendly house-cat into a fearsome wild beast.

My other constant companion on this retreat was the formative and transformative energy of the universe itself — my (our) source, as I now think of it, which I most often appreciate as the space between things, whether those things are the millions of stars I enjoyed all around me late at night or in the pre-dawn hours while standing at the edge of the cliff, or the thoughts that continued to crowd and cloud my mind when I wasn't paying attention.

This book contains the notes I took along the way, and some needed commentary. For example, Cat communicated with a sort of clipped precision that made perfect sense to me at the time, but which requires some translation into everyday language. My (our) source likewise often conveys complete thoughts in an instant.

There are some recurring themes scattered throughout the book. I thought about grouping these notes together or consolidating them into a single entry. In the end, I decided to leave all of my notes in the order in which they were written, as they show the halting evolution of my understanding that might be helpful to others.

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Ignore everyone else

Ignore everyone else (including those I love).

Avoid being seduced by approval—disapproval.

— Commentary —

This is the first thing I wrote at the start of my retreat. It meant that I should ignore the *opinions and habits* of everyone else, and drop my need for their approval of me and my choices. It pained me to admit that I was caught in the endless loop of seeking others' approval and avoiding their disapproval. Freeing myself from this bind was long overdue, and it was *essential* if I was to continue along this path of retreating in order to advance.

In particular, I needed to ignore others' judgement and disapproval of my "time out" and apparent inactivity, along with my unavailability. I also had to drop my own judgement of *myself*, which was based on *anticipation* of their disapproval, because that old saying really is true: "You probably wouldn't worry about what people think of you if you could know how seldom they do!" My retreat needed to begin with a note to free myself from the opinions of others, real and imagined.

Cat says: *yes/no, yes/no, yes/no, yes/no*

Yes/No – no rancour

Yes/No – no judgement

Yes/No – no argument

Yes/No – simple as that

Yes/No – easy as that

Yes/No – no analysis

Yes/No – no explanation

Yes/No – no fixation

Yes/No – just preference

Yes/No – again and again

Repeat – again and again

— Commentary —

Cat seemed so “together,” so *content* with himself and his life, that I felt compelled to ask him his secret, because *content* I was not! This was his answer. He simply says *Yes* or *No* to everything he comes across. He doesn’t waste time explaining

or justifying his choice; he simply expresses his preference in every moment and keeps on rolling, toward the *Yes* and away from the *No*.

I find this approach profoundly liberating. It's the secret to peace in every moment. And as I later learned, it's also the secret to creating the life I want.

As I began to practice it, I realised how much time I've spent explaining, defending, rationalising, and even debating my preferences and aversions with myself, and how often I've talked myself out of what I really wanted, lest it displease someone else.

Sometimes I have to remind myself to look for things to say *Yes* to, because my default setting is to fixate on the things I don't like or don't want. When I look for things to say *Yes* to, I invariably find more than I ever thought possible! I discover that I'm already surrounded by things I love, but most of the time I don't realise it, I don't *feel* it. And when I catch myself hung up on a *No*, I look for something — anything — to say *Yes* to, no matter how small or unrelated to the current situation I find so displeasing. It's remarkable how quickly my mood lifts with this simple shift in focus from a *No* to a *Yes*.

Cat's advice has freed up a tremendous amount of space in my mind and a great deal of energy — even if my choice is simply to relax or go take a nap (which is something Cat does a lot).

Weeks later, Cat taught me more about this simple yet powerful approach. But first I had to understand a few more things about how the universe works, and how my habits of thought were gumming up the works.

From atoms to galaxies

From atoms to galaxies,
stability is the balance of Yes and No,
attraction and repulsion.

Change is the predominance of one over the other:
more Yes, and the system moves toward Yes;
more No, and the system moves toward No.

So, simply choose Yes to attract or move toward what you want.

To not choose either or to dilute Yes with No
is to get more of the same or even a move toward No
if it's the dominant vibration/state/thought.

— Commentary —

These notes were in response to a question I had about the process of creation; specifically, how to create or attract to me what I want and avoid or drop what I don't want. "It's all well and good," I thought, "for Cat to simply choose from the parade of things that come at him; I want to *deliberately* create the life I want."

(Yes, I know. I now see the error in my thinking, too. Cat *is* creating the life he wants simply by choosing some things and declining others.)

I'd long been of the view that the forces which hold all matter together and create discrete material forms are attractive, and the forces which separate things are distractive or repulsive (repelling). Whether it's an atom or a galaxy, stability or continuity is the balance of these two opposing yet interdependent forces.

So, applying this same concept to the process of creation made good sense to me.

But it also made me realise how often I dilute or displace thoughts about what I *do* want with worrying and even compelling thoughts about what I *don't* want or what I dread might happen, which in the moment feels like what *will* happen. Now I understand why these unwanted things so often *do* happen or persist.

I need to get into the habit of saying a clear and emphatic *Yes!* to what I *do* want, letting what I don't want simply fall away behind me; no need for debate.

This is a recurring theme of the retreat. Cat said it first, and much more eloquently!

Free yourself

Question: How can I stop worrying about money?

Answer: Free yourself.

It is an illusion that money = security.

Not enough? Insecurity.

Plenty, but afraid of running out? Insecurity.

Plenty, but afraid of theft or other loss? Insecurity.

Free yourself of any and all concerns about money.

There will always be enough.

Get clear. Stay clear.

— Commentary —

This one was a biggie for me. Concerns about money have been a through-line in my life, practically a constant from my earliest memories, imprinted first and most indelibly by my parents' concerns and mixed messages about money.

At this point in my retreat, I was worrying about the fact that I was not working and thus not earning any money. How was I going to survive when I ran out of money?!

During this meditation it became crystal clear to me that my (our) source – the energy which creates, maintains, and transforms worlds – cannot possibly be short of the resources it needs, because it is the source of all things. As I am made of the same stuff, a physical expression of this source, I can never really be short of the resources I need, either.

I can, however, *believe* that I am, in a misguided delusion that I'm a hapless little peon in a vast and indifferent, even hostile, world in which resources are sorely limited and competition is essential for survival. What a bleak landscape that is!

But I can rest assured, and feel secure, when I am mindful of my source and the unlimited resources at our disposal. I simply need to get clear about who I am and what I want, and stay clear, taking care not to dilute the *Yes* with a *No* – not to dilute this confidence with doubt or disbelief.

In this way, I free myself. What a relief!!

Since receiving this advice, I've taken to reciting this phrase whenever I catch myself worrying about money: *Free yourself*. Like magic, it frees me in the moment from my perennial anxieties about money. The more I practice it, the less I worry about money, and the easier it is to free myself when these worries do recur.

And with exquisite irony, my mother's will, which was settled during my retreat, delivered the money I needed in order to complete this retreat and write about it.

Be *kind*

Be *kind* to people.

They're just as *confused* as you've *been*.

— **Commentary** —

Enough said.

Cat says: *Trust us*

Trust us (animals).

We're made for self-preservation.

Yes, we may make mistakes that cost us our lives

— but are they really mistakes?

— Commentary —

This note was in response to a question I had about my responsibility toward the animals in my care, and to the wild animals with whom I may share space. I was sitting outside at the time, enjoying my afternoon ritual of “protecting” my lovely young hens as they foraged around the yard, blithely oblivious to all of the dangers (real and imagined) to their lives and limbs that occupied my mind. I was also thinking about the wallabies and kangaroos who would often be found grazing in our yard and paddocks at that time of day, refugees from the habitat loss and housing developments that were overtaking our area.

“But are they really mistakes?” Hmm... I’ll be thinking about that one for awhile!

Dog says: *be here now*

Be here now.

Live in the ever-present Now.

Pay full attention to what's happening Now.

Savour every bit of Now.

Give Now your full and undivided attention.

All of it.

Suck the marrow out of every experience.

Dogs are adept at experiencing and expressing great joy.

Dogs: the art of joy!

Cats are adept at experiencing and expressing great contentment.

Cats: the art of contentment!

Both: *the art of adventure, curiosity, interest, investment;*
complete saturation in, complete commitment to, the adventure!
... which is to say: complete commitment to the experience of life!

— Commentary —

I don't remember the exact circumstances that led to this note, but I probably asked about Dog and what he was bringing to the party. As both Dog and Cat are figments of my imagination, it's not lost on me that the twin themes of their presence are joy and contentment — two qualities or states of being that are so often in short supply within me. In fact, I habitually pinched off joy; it was always so fleeting that the elation never felt worth the deflation which quickly followed (not realising that *I* was the one deflating me). Same goes for contentment: it never lasted long.

As for adventure, that was another important lesson for me. I am not, by nature, an adventurous person. In fact, "adventure" fills me with a pale dread as I anticipate some fresh discomfort or disappointment. But Cat and Dog showed me that life is, by its very nature, an exciting adventure; and the more I invest myself in it, engaging my curiosity and interest, the richer the experience.

I found their *complete trust in life* absolutely compelling. It was both inspiring and reassuring. Now, for perhaps the first time in my life, I'm looking forward to more adventures, with Cat and Dog as my travelling companions and tour guides.

Lost World

Imagine a world where everything is conscious,
everything has consciousness,
everything is aware.

Now, live in that world,
having respect for all things,
being at peace with all things,
living in co-operation with all things.

And imagine a world where everything is responsive...
After all, we are all made of the same stuff.

— Commentary —

Lost World is a wild little valley in south-eastern Queensland (Australia). It is well-named: getting there is a bit of a trek and few people bother, so it's often possible to have the whole place to yourself.

One day in meditation I found myself there, listening to the wisdom of the ancient rock that forms the steep mountains which hem in this little world of irrepressible wildness. The mountains were indeed aware of everything that went on around them, on them, in them, above and below them.

They expressed an equanimity with all of it. Rather than their awareness being seen as impersonal or indifferent, it would better be described as impartial; they simply observed and appreciated it all, whether you or I might call it good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Rain or shine, hot or cold, windy or calm, people or no people, they saw and loved it all.

Over the years, I've often played around with the notion that inanimate objects are aware of me and are responsive to me, to the extent that they are able. For example, I imagine that my steering wheel knows my hands; and my whole car knows me and knows that I love and appreciate it for its size (perfect for my needs), speed, agility, and reliability. Having recently moved to a place where I don't know anyone yet, I realised as I unpacked that I *love* my things; they are like family to me, and they make my house feel like home.

Whether or not these notions are true, they change the way I interact with the world around me, and for the better. They make me softer, kinder, more tolerant, more patient, more appreciative, more co-operative... All of that does *me* a world of good, and it changes *everything* I experience.

We are all made of the same stuff

I can find great joy in anything
when I can see myself in everything.

Because we are all made of the same stuff.

— Commentary —

This little note is a follow-on from the previous one about Lost World. Sometimes I find it very hard to uncover the joy I know at other times is my true nature, being the fundamental nature of my (our) source. The more I remember that we are all made of the same stuff, that every observable thing is a “condensation” of source energy, the easier it is for me to find great joy in anything — even in the observation of inanimate things — because we are all made of the same stuff, and that stuff is inherent joy.

Wild things

Cat says (*about the wild things*): "We just want to be left alone."

Kangaroo (*a wild thing*) says: "Don't bother us."

Dog says (*about the wild things*): "Yeah, we got this."

— Commentary —

This note is a follow-on from the earlier one about my responsibility toward animals. It was particularly about wild animals. Our property had become an impromptu haven for wildlife as so much of the bush and farmland around us was bulldozed for human housing developments. (What irony: destroying the homes of one group to build homes for another.)

I really wanted the wild animals to like me as much as I like them, and to see that I am no threat to them, that I am a friend. But that's *my* hang-up. Both Cat and Dog gently instructed me to drop it; leave the wild things to their own lives. Harm none, of course; but otherwise respect their autonomy and their desire to be left alone.

The space between things

The space between things sparkles with joy.

It's filled with the very stuff of life.

It's where I find my peace, that lively peace I love so much.

*It's where I find relief, inspiration, creative juice, great ideas, insights,
expansion into a happy restfulness that is redolent with anticipation
of what comes next, of what wants to come through me next.*

Absolutely nothing more is needed right now.

Enjoy!

— Commentary —

Alan Watts is my favourite philosopher, most of all for his gleefully irreverent and at times iconoclastic approach to Religion and Spiritual Matters. He spoke a lot about the space which separates objects as an essential counterpart to the

objects themselves. I didn't appreciate what he meant until I discovered this lively space for myself. The space between things has become my go-to whenever I'm stressed, sad, lonely, confused, frustrated – any time I'm needing to feel the lively peace that I now associate with the space between things. And it's always accessible to me, as it's literally right before my eyes, wherever I am, whatever I'm doing.

I really enjoy looking out onto my back garden, to the space between all of the trees and other plants. That peaceful space is especially lively and really quite magical. There's so much going on in this space that I can't take it all in! I feast on it hungrily at every opportunity because I hope to at last be able to see and appreciate what's going on there.

I now know the space between things to be a pure and unobstructed manifestation of my (our) source, the source of all things. My understanding is that all things are formed from, and arise within, this space. So, bringing my attention to the space between things is a simple and direct way for me to reconnect with my source.

There's more I could say about the space between things, but words fall short – no doubt a problem Alan ran into, hence my hazy understanding of his teachings. The space between things simply has to be experienced to be appreciated. It is another recurring theme of this retreat, so I'll return to it in a bit.

Just let go

What would happen if I just let go?

What makes me keep thinking that I can stop
unwanted things from happening by resisting them...
by focusing on them to the exclusion of what I do want
and in the process blocking myself off from my creative source?

What would happen if I just let go?

Better to step out of the way of unwanted things
— step out of their flow —
by deliberately choosing a Yes instead
and getting into its flow.

— Commentary —

I've spent a great deal of time and energy resisting the seemingly infinite stream of things I dread or fear might happen, or that I have already and don't want. This meditation inspired the question, what would happen if I did the *opposite* of hanging on to these things, to these fears and anxieties, to these unpleasant and unwanted realities, and just let them all go?

For me, that's far easier said than done; in fact, sometimes it's downright impossible! These unwanted thoughts and things seem to have a stickiness that binds them to me like burrs. However, I do have an inherently analytical mind, so I approached this question as an intellectual exercise and decided to examine what happens when I just let go, for even a little while.

What happens is that I immediately feel light and free and expansive and energised; and solutions to intractable problems present themselves in the most unexpected ways — such as a kind yet authoritative voice telling me, “Oh, don't worry about *that!*” Astonishingly, in that moment I stop worrying about *that* (whatever it may be) and pretty much everything else. And when I stop worrying about *that*, it either works itself out somehow or a solution arises that I couldn't possibly have seen in my state of worry.

It's remarkable what happens when I *just let go*.

But of course, the habits of a lifetime can be very hard to break, so I had to circle back to this theme a time or two as well — starting with the very next day...

Start and go

Question: *Why am I feeling so out of order, so dark and heavy and frustrated? Why is nothing happening yet, and old problems are persisting or recurring while new problems (and obstructions!) are arising?*

Answer: *You're trying to start and go at the same time.*

Question: *START and go? Not STOP and go?*

Answer: *Yes. Starting something new, a new way of being, while operating from the old framework/habits cannot work.*

Drop the old, focus on the new — the start of a new way of seeing and being.

Do everything differently, with softness, lightness, awareness, and ease.

— Commentary —

I was a week or two into my mountaintop retreat when I had yet another “down” day, in which I just couldn’t shake the “stuck” feeling I find so frustrating and ultimately so depressing. Why was this still happening to me when I’d received such wonderful guidance already? What on earth is *wrong* with me?!

This depression recurred a few times during my virtual retreat (and for a couple of weeks after), as being swamped by these feelings is a well-worn path for me. What this meditation pointed out was the error I was making that I just wasn’t seeing: I was making fundamental changes to the way I am in the world, yet I was still trying to *make things happen* using my old habits of effort and struggle.

What would happen if I *just let go*?

What would happen if I did everything differently, with softness, lightness, awareness, and ease?

What happens is that things start to flow effortlessly — that is, until I mess with them by trying to steer them in the direction *I* think they should go, or to speed them up or slow them down — in other words, until I let my old habits take over and I once again try to “start and go” at the same time.

Cat sorted this out for me a couple of days later, in his inimitable style. But first, we went on the most extraordinary adventure...

Adventures on the mountaintop

Ayahuasca — no, thanks. I want to have these insights naturally and on-demand.

I don't want to become "addicted" to "peak" experiences that require external means.

Higher up — a person who was more like the mountain than a human. She had dissociated herself from anything human in her desire for isolation and separateness.

Cave dweller — also isolated by choice and disinterested in humans, animals, plants — any other thing but himself.

I belong back down the mountain.

I retreat to advance,

isolate to belong,

stop to go,

and drop my burdens to see them.

— Commentary —

Now, this was a fascinating experience! One morning I was feeling so good, so well rested and reset, that I was keen to explore more of my mountaintop home with Cat and Dog. They, of course, were up for the adventure, so we set out for the day to see what else was up here. I was surprised to discover that we were not alone as I had thought.

The first person we came across was a man who routinely used the psychoactive tea, ayahuasca. He lived in a little hut on the side of the plateau which overlooked a different part of the land below. People would trek up the steep mountain to take the elixir with him as a ritual or ceremonial event; it became an obsession with them, as it was with him.

The man insisted that I could not experience greater awareness without this special tea. He kept pressing me to take it, saying that I needed it if I wanted to experience expanded awareness. His acolytes would become addicted to the experience and as reliant on the elixir for those experiences as he. They too believed that expanded awareness was not possible without it, that it opened the mind in a way the body cannot do on its own.

But to me, that “awareness” was rather like looking at life through a kaleidoscope. Beautiful but useless. No, thanks. Awareness occurs spontaneously when I let it.

I left his hut with relief, and with some effort, as he was most insistent that I stay. A little further on, I saw to my surprise that the mountain rose steeply to a little rocky outcrop on which there appeared to be another small dwelling. There was no path upward, although I saw from a distance what appeared to be an old woman.

It was difficult to tell whether I was looking at a person or a human-shaped rock, but somehow I knew it was a person, someone who had lived up there alone for so long that they had become more like the mountain (which appeared cold, hard, and dark) than a human.

I found that I didn't want to climb up there. I felt fear and even a little dread when I considered climbing up to the hermit's hut to see what she had to teach me. But then I realised why I felt that way: I didn't want to become so un-human.

What the hermit had for me, and which she was able to teach me from a distance, was this caution: *turn back, lest you become so isolated that you can no longer relate to people, nor they to you.*

Heading back toward our own little mountain home, Cat, Dog, and I stopped briefly at the mouth of a cave in which another isolate lived. He displayed a disconcerting disinterest in anything but his own experience inside his cave. We left straight away; I didn't want any part of how he was living — and I didn't need that “cherry on top” of the day's revelations.

On the way back to our hut, I finally understood the purpose of my mountaintop escape: I had to retreat for awhile in order to advance, isolate for a time in order to find where I belong, stop what I was doing and how I was doing it in order to find a better way forward, and drop my burdens in order to really see — which is to say, *understand* — them and finally be able to leave them where they lay.

What a remarkable day!

Cat says: *what makes you think...*

Cat asked me, in a somewhat bored and exasperated tone,
“What makes you think you have to accomplish anything?”

Hmmm. Why do I feel impelled to accomplish something —
because I do indeed feel this way — but why?

Because I’m still trying to create and expand through doing,
through my own physical and mental efforts,
and I need to see immediate results — accomplishments!

But if I can just relax and be open,
when I am content to just be for awhile,
then the creation and expansion happen spontaneously!

Thank you, Cat. You are truly wise — and a little snippy with me 😊

— Commentary —

Here again, Cat cut right to the chase. I'd once again been feeling frustrated that I hadn't been able to accomplish anything that I thought was of value. I was still in the mindset that I would meditate to get clear or to get guidance (translation: *instructions!*), and then I'd get to it, creating the next thing I wanted and thus building the life I wanted.

Cat set me straight. This was just more of the same *old* style of operating, my "old world" thinking taking over again. And as I'd already learned, I would inevitably frustrate myself with this "start and go" modus operandi.

What *does* make me think I have to accomplish anything? It's because I've accepted the opinions of other people, who have led me to believe that I am worthless unless I accomplish something of material worth.

Yet when I relax, open my mind, and just "hang out" for as long as I like in this lovely, lively space — the space between thoughts and things — great ideas occur to me, the enthusiasm and energy to implement them well up in me, and the means to accomplish them appear all around me.

In other words, *great things happen when I stop trying to make things happen.*

Thank you, imaginary Cat, for pointing out the essential flaw in my thinking (again)!

More on the space *between* things

The space *between* thoughts is where new thoughts arise.

Really big thoughts require really big space in order to form.

So, giving myself this really big space *between* thoughts and activities is allowing — is necessary in order to allow — really big things to emerge, evolve, and be expressed through me.

— Commentary —

Cat's question about why I think I have to accomplish something prepared the ground for this note on the inestimable value of (*apparent*) inactivity or idleness. I'd been fretting about how much time I was taking on my retreat, and how little I had to show for it...

Now I'm far less bothered by the (inordinately frequent!) periods in which I'm not moved or inspired to do anything but sit and "idle." Because now I know that these "inactive" periods are *essential* in order for really big things — such as the life I want — to emerge and become a reality.

Hello darkness, my old friend

*Awareness is seeing it all and loving both
the lightness and the darkness equally.*

*The midnight-blue, velvety darkness is the deep, rich space
in which all things exist and from which all things arise.
Yes, the stars are lovely, but so is the darkness in between.*

*Hello darkness, my old friend,
you've come to talk to me again.*

What illusion have you come to dispel this time?

— Commentary —

For almost 20 years I struggled with bouts of depression that were often so severe, persistent, or relentlessly recurrent that they spawned suicidal thoughts. I just wanted to be free from the suffocating sadness of these dark times which always felt like they would never end.

I eventually, albeit reluctantly (translation: *kicking and screaming*), came to appreciate these episodes for what they show me about myself and the various illusions that have been holding me back. Invariably, as I would emerge from yet another dark period, I'll have shed some part of my psychological baggage and be travelling lighter than before. However, the lightness or relief I'd feel afterward seldom felt like a fair trade for suffering through the darkness, and I always dreaded, resisted, and resented the next round.

In desperation, and after nothing else had worked, I began paying attention to the "dark" feelings and to the thoughts that accompany them, patiently just experiencing (feeling, listening, not trying to argue with or change) each one until it has dissolved. The more I've done this, the fewer bouts of depression I've had, the more shallow and short they've been, and the less likely the same illusion is to return.

During this retreat, I came to see these dark times as uniquely useful in liberating me from the habits and beliefs that hold me back and keep me down. By grabbing and holding my attention so completely, these dark times have expedited the process of enlightening and freeing me from one illusion after another.

In other words, and to paraphrase Paul Simon's iconic lyric, the darkness revealed itself to be my old friend – the very best of friends, in fact. The darkness always showed me the light. And "The darker the night, the brighter the stars."

The illusion that needed to be dispelled this time was about the creative process; specifically, how I go about creating the things I want and ultimately the life I want. The message was simple: love what you do...

Love what you do

There is only one rule: *love what you do.*

This is the principle that creates worlds.

The simplest way is to *do what you love.*

Believing in something makes it true to you,
but it may not result in a reality that you like.

Drop the beliefs that don't create the reality you want to live in.

Create a *different reality for yourself* —
by doing what you love, by loving what you do.

— Commentary —

These notes follow on from the previous one about darkness, as this is the message illuminated by that particular period of darkness.

It is also about the axiom, “you create your own reality” — a hackneyed phrase that always bugged me because to me it was so manifestly *untrue*. This phrase is often tossed about as some trite truism by those with no idea of its true meaning. And it is commonly uttered as a veiled accusation: “If you don't like your life, then

that's on you, because you're the one who created it." That never felt true, and I despised those who parroted this New Age nonsense for their smug superiority and callous disregard for the state I was in, which always felt outside of my control and not something I ever would have chosen to create if it were up to me.

The way I understand it now is that what I focus on, whether wanted or unwanted, and the beliefs I hold, whether affirming or limiting, create my *perception* of what is, because we primarily see what we *focus* on and experience what we *believe* to be true.

During this meditation, I came to see that my habitual focus (on unwanted things) and the underlying beliefs have generally not been creating a reality that I've been enjoying. They have not created a reality in which I want to keep living.

Time to change all that. Time to change my habitual focus to the things I *do* want, to *Yes* instead of *No*, as Cat might say. Time to examine my beliefs and drop those that aren't creating the reality I want to be experiencing. Most of them aren't mine anyway; they were inherited from my parents, taught to me by others, or passively absorbed from society in general. They may not have *become* mine by choice, but now they *remain* mine *only* by choice.

Thanks to this meditation, I'm in the process of creating a life I love by doing only what I love. (Well, mostly; I'm still working on the faith part...) I learned more about the creative process a bit later. For now, it was enough to be "granted permission" (or so it felt) to do only what I love. It's taken some breathtaking daring on my part, as this advice flies in the face of pretty much all I've known and been taught up to this point. But I can't go on as I've done in the past, and I have nothing to lose – and everything to gain! – so here goes...

We play!

Question: How do you create?

Answer: We play. We play, we play,

WE PLAY!

— Commentary —

During this session, I asked my (our) source, that lively energy in the space between things, how it creates. This was the answer: *we play!*

In the same vein as “love what you do,” bringing a sense of playfulness — which to me means lightness and joy, full of love and laughter, enthusiasm and energy — to everything I do makes all the difference in the world!

Is there a universal language?

Question: Is there a universal language?

Answer: Yes; it's *love and playfulness*.

It's openness, invitation to come *play*!

— Commentary —

I asked this question primarily about relating to, and communicating with, animals. Is there a language that transcends not just human language barriers but also species barriers? What about things other than animals, such as plants and microbes, and even inanimate objects? What about my own cells?

Yes; the universal language is *love and playfulness*, an openness that invites the joyful spirit at the heart of — which is the source of — the other.

There's that *play* thing again...

Letting things flow

Why do I feel so tired, heavy, stiff, achy,
and completely lacking in energy?

It's because I'm putting too much effort into
making things go instead of letting things flow.

Any effort is “too much” effort.

Unpack all of those rocks in your backpack
and leave them where they belong: on the ground.

— Commentary —

This time, the “depression” was physical: no energy, tired after plenty of sleep, a sense of heaviness that defies any amount of effort... Here again is the advice to just let go.

Now I'm starting to get it!

Big and wide

The secret to communicating with animals:

Instead of intensifying my focus, do the opposite;

get as big and wide as the universe itself.

— Commentary —

Communicating with animals more clearly is a passion for me. This note was in response to a question about how I can more effectively communicate with them.

Instead of my habit of focusing intensely in an effort (there's that word again!) to understand them and get them to understand me, I need to do the opposite:

Get as big and wide as the universe itself — which is to say, be as open as I can possibly imagine and connect with that loving, playful, joyful energy of our shared source.

Yes/no, revisited

Yes/No,

Yes/No,

Yes/No,

Yes/No...

*From white/black, I can make smaller and smaller choices
from finer and finer distinctions.*

*This allows the most subtle Yes/No imaginable,
which creates the most diverse and interesting universe
I can possibly comprehend.*

— Commentary —

Some weeks after Cat first taught me this simple approach to a happy life, I began to understand that I can make progressively smaller choices from ever-finer distinctions when deciding on my preferences. When I do, it creates the most wonderfully colourful, richly textured, and utterly enjoyable life!

Rest

Rest for as long as you need.

Don't fight the need for rest —
and don't move too soon!

In resting, we regenerate
and become something new.

So, don't rush the process;
revel in it!

— Commentary —

Cat and Dog both taught me by splendid example the very great value of rest. They rest when they're tired and get up when they're done. And they either ignore me or look at me askance when I do my busy-bee thing, restless to be doing — but doing *what*, and *why*?!

I'm beginning to understand the importance of not moving (literally or figuratively) until I'm good and ready. It has helped me tremendously to realise that, in resting, I am regenerating and even becoming something new. That's exciting!

It also helps for me to recite as a little mantra, *don't rush the process*. I am quick and impatient by nature, and I like to skip steps to get to where I'm headed more quickly. *Revelling in the process* of becoming something new is a novel experience for me.

The sentience of all things

Slow down and enjoy

the sentience of all things.

— Commentary —

This little note takes me back to the wonderful (virtual) day I spent with the mountains of Lost World. When I hold the perspective that everything in the universe is aware, it makes for a much richer experience of life. Things work well and my day flows smoothly when I operate from this awareness.

Slow down is another phrase I often have to repeat to myself. What am I rushing headlong toward? And what am I missing out on along the way?

Right now

Right now, I am complete.

Be content.

Be still.

What beautiful, vibrant relief I get from being still.

— Commentary —

Enough said.

Ebb and flow

Why do I resist and despise the ebbs?

*I love that moment at the end of an out-breath
when nothing is needed.*

I don't need to breathe again just yet.

I feel complete and content.

*If only I could view the natural ebbs in my mood,
the flow of ideas, the feeling of enthusiasm and energy,
as I do that magical moment between breaths.
Because that ebb contains the seed of what comes next.*

*Enjoy the ebb as much as the flow,
because the flow can't continue without it.
The ebb is the still-point from which all else flows.*

— Commentary —

I was still bothered by the ebbs in my mood, inspiration, creativity, enthusiasm, energy. But what makes me think I should always be feeling “up”? That would be like perpetual noon or running everywhere at a gallop, wouldn't it?

Every time I align myself with my source, with the space between things, I feel great joy and a lively peace, but I don't always feel like jumping up out of my chair and getting stuck into some creative endeavour. Often, this tuning-in brings with it a sense of lovely restfulness that is most welcome and much needed. That's most likely to be the case when I've been “efforting” — a lifelong habit of mine.

When I can remember to do it, taking a few deep breaths and letting the out-breath take care of itself allows me to find that wonderful still-point at the end of each out-breath, before the next in-breath is needed. The more relaxed I become, the longer that still-point lasts, and the more I get to revel in it.

This theme, of slowing down and letting the process take care of itself, unfolding in its own good time, was one I revisited over several days. It's one of the most important habits of thought and (non)action I've needed to cultivate. So, the next few meditations speak more about it.

Trust the process

Have faith in the process of unfolding, expansion, fruition.

Some things cannot be rushed without spoiling them
or diverting them to an undesirable result.

Faith versus patience — what an interesting dichotomy.

Doesn't faith allow us to have patience?

Ah, but faith feels active, forward-leaning, anticipatory, preparatory;
whereas patience feels passive, static, my attention diverted
to entertain my restless mind while I wait.

Faith feels energising. Patience feels enervating.

Have faith: Trust the process.

— Commentary —

Trust the process is another phrase I repeat to myself as a little mantra whenever I'm feeling impatient or annoyed that things aren't unfolding as quickly as I want or in the manner I expect.

I often have to remind myself that the perspective of my individual mind (what I think of as "little mind") is finite and limited to only what I can imagine, whereas the perspective of our source ("big mind") is infinite. How my *finite* mind thinks the process should unfold is only one of many possible avenues and outcomes, and likely not the best one, given my limited perspective.

When I insist on things happening how and when *I* think they should — that is, when I try to manage the *mechanics* of creation — I gum up the works. I inevitably become more focused on what is not going "right" or hasn't happened yet, rather than focusing simply on what I want and then letting the source of all things bring it to me or create it through me. (*Bring me to it* is another option, and one I'm getting better at allowing...)

Relaxing and trusting the process sure makes me *feel* better, which is no small thing. And it likely speeds things up by making me a more co-operative component. I'm certainly more creative and inspired when I'm relaxed and open.

So, I will *trust the process*.

Ebb and flow some more

Zenith and nadir — the two go hand-in-hand.

*What other peaks and valleys do I accept as neither good nor bad,
but necessary halves of the whole?*

Day–night

Inhale–exhale

Wake–sleep

Activity–rest

Summer–winter

Spring–autumn

Sunshine–rain

Conception–completion

Flower–seed

... the list is endless!

And aren't these cycles more so than waves?

What makes me think I should always be happy,
always feel excited about something?
'Up' feelings must surely be accompanied by 'down' feelings.
Otherwise 'up' has no meaning.

Don't sweat the downs;
for what goes down must surely go up,
just as what goes up must surely go down.

This is the universe breathing.

— Commentary —

I'm still chewing on this one. While I wait to understand more, I have noticed that the "down" periods are nowhere near as deep nor as long as they used to be before I began this retreat. Or perhaps it's that I'm just not bothered by them as I once was, accepting them now as natural and necessary to my expansion. These quiet times are when my fields are fallow, resting in preparation for the next season's growth. After all, in rest we regenerate; in rest we become something *new*.

Be still

Be still, and wait for what comes next.

Let it happen in the stillness.

Let it happen from the stillness.

Let it flow from that wellspring.

*Because what goes down must surely go up,
and what goes out must surely come in.*

*And in the waiting, revel in the realisation
that what comes next will most surely come
and will be inspired.*

In the waiting, play.

In the waiting, enjoy!

— Commentary —

Here at last is the whole point of waiting, of not rushing through the still-point or riding rough-shod over it, of not forcing the next in-breath before its time.

When I simply allow it, what comes next *comes out of this stillness*. Otherwise, it's just more of the same — and boy, am I tired of that!

What fascinated me most about this note is that the waiting is not meant to be passive. It's meant to be full of playfulness and enjoyment — which is to say, redolent with the creative essence of the universe itself.

When I wait in this way for what comes next, I am revelling in the space between things, that magical space from which all things arise. *This* is how to create the life I want: from *stillness*. Who knew! (Well, OK I'm really late to the party... ☺)

Slow down

Slow down, and savour.

Modern life is exhausting!

— Commentary —

Here is that advice again: *slow down*.

Of all the things I remind myself from this retreat, this may be the one I repeat the most — and need to be reminded of the most! Whenever I slow down, my day flows more smoothly, even effortlessly, and I find myself spontaneously savouring the things around me, big and small, because I notice them more than when I'm rushing hither and thither to "get things done."

And isn't modern life exhausting!! It needn't be, if we just *slow down, and savour!*

The secret: *what brings me joy*

Why have I felt for so long that
I've been wandering and lost?

Because I've been focused on what I don't like
and what I don't want, so I've bounced around
from one unwanted (and even dreaded) thing to another,
like the metal ball in an old pinball machine.

Relief came in the space in between,
but I didn't recognise that space as the way through,
the way forward to things I do want.

The secret is to focus on what brings me joy,
on what I love.

— Commentary —

I have a painted wooden sign I've been carrying around with me from place to place for years. It says, "Not all who wander are lost." (That's a contraction of the second line of the poem in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which begins "All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander are lost; ...")

When I saw the sign in a funky little gift shop years ago, I teared up in the middle of the store, because *lost* is exactly how I'd been feeling for years. (I still think of the 2010s as "the lost decade.") Its painted message reminded me that wandering does not necessarily equate with being lost.

That sign brought me some measure of relief, because it resolved some of the guilt and resignation I'd attached to my lack of progress (in the conventional sense of demonstrable "success"). Perhaps I wasn't quite so hapless and hopeless after all.

It wasn't until this meditation that I realised I still had a way to go in understanding my wanderings. For many years I'd been faithfully following my interest wherever it took me (hence the wandering), but all the while I was more focused on bracing against the next blow than on creating the life I wanted to be living.

Here, I finally found the missing piece: look for the space *between* things (between obstacles, between concrete measures of "success," between others' ideas of how life should be lived); and in that precious, magical space between thoughts and things, cultivate joy by doing what I love, by doing *what brings me joy*.

This is how I now define success, although I don't even think of my life in such terms anymore.

Be moved by joy

Be moved by joy.

— Commentary —

Seven weeks into my virtual retreat, my sister and I completed the *massive* task of clearing out our family home of almost 50 years. I had moved back home a few years earlier and was helping my sister take care of our frail, elderly mother during her final years. After Mum died, the property had to be sold. Moving and cleaning was a *much* bigger job than either of us had bargained for, and I found it utterly exhausting — physically, mentally, and emotionally.

This simple little note, written in the throes of the final week, was in response to my question about how to accomplish what still needed to be done (which was heaps!!) with greater ease and with less strain and exhaustion.

But I didn't listen... I pushed myself to breaking point trying to get everything done in time, and as a result I ended up in hospital — in heart failure. (Oh, the irony!) I *thought* I was moving with joy because I would fall into bed each evening glad that I'd gotten almost everything done that I'd wanted to complete that day. But I was simply doing what I'd always done: letting my mind tyrannise my body.

The insight I received about my misadventure with the hospital system is next.

Move with grace and ease

Move with grace and ease.

— Commentary —

Ah. I had moved — literally and figuratively — with neither grace nor ease.

By the time my heart was shocked back into normal rhythm, I was so spent that I just let it all flow. Except for when I became sleep-deprived and cranky late that night, my new-found ability to just let it flow (which was really my inability to do anything else!) resulted in a series of wonderful encounters with doctors, nurses, and other staff who were kind, caring, attentive, and curiously unhurried — this, in a public hospital system that is generally described as being chronically underfunded, understaffed, and overstretched. My experience was overwhelmingly positive. Remarkable, from all directions.

Ever since, I have been practicing the art of moving with grace and ease. I still have to remind myself to slow down at times, and *grace and ease* is yet another little mantra I repeat to myself as-needed, but the more I do it, the less I need the reminder.

I have not had any health problems since, and have not needed the medication prescribed for the “next time” I am determined will not materialise. So far, so good.

Slipstream

*Get into the slipstream and just flow —
onward, toward my destination.
Relaxed, excited, joyful,
anticipating the inevitable arrival
of what I want.*

*When I'm tired, the space between things
makes everything easy because it energises me.
It's where the energy I need is to be found.*

— Commentary —

I wrote these notes at the end of the day, from meditations I enjoyed during the long drive of an interstate move. I love long-distance driving; once I'm on the highway, I find myself in a meditative yet alert frame of mind which allows me to focus on the road while letting my mind open as big and wide as the sky itself.

All together, I was on the road for a day and a half, so I had lots of time to ruminate. Toward the end of the first day, still feeling the after-effects of The Big Move and my

subsequent hospital adventure, and still about an hour's drive from where I planned to stop for the night, I found this "slipstream" and just cruised the rest of the way.

It wasn't a literal slipstream, as I wasn't following any other vehicle and I pretty much had the road to myself. It was more like finding myself in the middle of a stream, where the water is flowing the fastest and with the least turbulence. But to me it felt like being in a slipstream, and that's the word which came to mind in the moment, so it's the one I've stayed with here. It really did feel like I was being carried along effortlessly to my destination.

The other strange and wonderful thing about this experience is how relaxed yet energised I felt, where moments before I'd been feeling so tired and unfocused that I thought I should pull over at the very next rest stop. Once I found the slipstream, I knew I could safely and effortlessly make it to my destination.

The next day I did the same, even though I was well rested. This slipstream takes me effortlessly to where I want to go. It's a particularly fun sensation these days, when I'm driving on the winding roads in the ranges where I now live. Thankfully, it also comes with cruise control... ☺

Cat says..., Dog says...

Cat says: *There's nothing more to it
than that (Yes/No, Yes/No, Yes/No...)*

Dog says: *There's more, there's more,
and more and more — there's always more!*

*Dog's unbridled enthusiasm for life,
for adventure, is infectious!
It's exciting and joyful,
and makes me want more!*

*Cat advises me to keep it simple:
fundamentally, it's simply a matter
of expressing a preference and
going with the Yes!*

— Commentary —

Settling in to my new home, I felt the need to reconnect with Cat and Dog and see what there was to learn from them next. Cat repeated his advice to keep it simple, to simply express my preference in each moment and move toward the *Yes!*

Dog reminded me that there is always more to be seen and experienced, savoured and enjoyed.

Putting the two together, it's simply a matter of expressing my preference, over and over and over again, as life continues to unfold all around me, enjoying the experience over and over and over again, *ad infinitum*. Because there is *always* more!

What fun!!

Holographic human

By being open, getting clear, and staying clear,
I change everything —
because we live in a holographic universe
where every part reflects the whole.

So, why isn't discord and chaos just as influential?

It is — or, at least, it can be.

But the greater coherence — the bigger, clearer Yes! —
always prevails.

Today I will be a holographic human.

— Commentary —

This note has been very difficult to put into words. It was one of those times when a complete concept was received and understood in an instant, but to adequately describe and explain it with words is a challenge, and I've been able to merely *approximate* the experience here. (I'll keep at it...)

To me, a holograph was an artificially generated “three-dimensional” image, where two different views or perspectives of the same structure are overlaid or projected at the same time so as to create the appearance of a 3-D structure. In other words, a holograph creates the *appearance* of a whole structure.

In this meditation, I came to see the *holo-* portion of holograph from a very different perspective (if you’ll pardon the pun). The Greek word root, *holos*, means whole, all, or complete. I understood myself to be an individual representation of the whole.

As we are all made of the same stuff, and I now see every observable thing as a condensation of source energy into material form, then every observable thing, including me, is a representation of the whole (our source).

The image that has stayed with me was of myself as a human-shaped “cell” or unit, composed of that lively peace and joy I associate with our source. When I am open and clear (*i.e.*, not pinching it off), that energy ripples out in all directions as far as I can imagine, gently reordering any discordant or chaotic energy around me.

Looking at this from the outside in, the more open and clear I am, the less I can be influenced by any discord or chaos around me. This is how Cat and Dog, with much smaller physical presences than mine, could have such an outsized influence on me: they were vastly more open and clear than I was at that time. The greater coherence – which is to say, the bigger, clearer *Yes!* – always prevails.

(It’s not lost on me that, being products of my imagination, Cat and Dog are also me. Here again, the holographic nature of the universe is on display in the only-apparent fragmentation of my mind into “me” and “them.” From atoms to galaxies...)

Holographic universe

Past, present, and future are all present

in this moment.

Where will I place my focus?

— Commentary —

I want to close by describing a virtual adventure I had with Cat and Dog toward the end of my retreat. We stepped off the cliff and went for a wander across the earth (a strange experience in itself!), ending up at an ancient and long-abandoned castle built of stone. (Think King Arthur, and you'll have it.) It was cold, dark, and rather bleak inside, so Dog and I were reluctant to explore any further.

Cat, on the other hand, was transfixed. He showed us that he'd lived there before, when the castle was occupied by the king and his family. Cat had luxuriated on the bed of the young princess, who was his person (as cats do). His favourite spot was on her bed, which was covered by warm furs, a thick down comforter, and richly coloured silks. It was a surprisingly opulent scene, given the stark present.

To Cat, the past was just as real and as easy to access and appreciate as the present. That's when I finally understood that the past, present, and future are all just as *present* in any given moment. This is the real holographic nature of the universe and of perception: everything is accessible to our perception at any one time.

It is then up to each of us to decide *where to direct our focus*: on the past, on the present, or on the future (what we want to create) – that is, on what once was, what is now, or what will be (if we allow it).

After a few minutes of reliving his past, Cat decided that, as rich and enjoyable as the past was, he would choose the future, and so he turned us all for home.

The message to me was this: in any given moment, I get to choose whether to live in the past or relive the past; to live in the present or live only with what is; or to live in the future, to be moving toward what I want to experience.

I think Cat chose well. It's fine to briefly relive pleasant experiences, but being in the present, while heading toward the future I want for myself is the way I want to live.

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Epilogue

It's been 3 months since I began my virtual mountaintop retreat. In that time, I've closed one big chapter of my life and I'm well into the next. My retreat was such a profound experience that I didn't want it to end — so I haven't let it end. Not entirely. For even just a few minutes each day, I return to my mountaintop and sit around the camp fire or stand at the edge of the cliff, reconnecting with the vibrant peace of the place.

(It's a bit disconcerting how often I'm still returning there tense and restless, and once again in need of a reset... But then I remind myself that I've been at this for only a couple of months, during an *enormous* upheaval, and I'm steadily replacing the habits of a lifetime with new ones. I will trust the process.)

I also check in with Cat and Dog, and see what they're up to. They're still teaching me the fine art of simply *being*. Just bringing them to mind can be enough to make me smile, relax, and look forward to my next adventure.

I feel like I'm only at the start of something really wonderful...

Other books by Christine King

Equine Lameness (Equine Research Inc., 1997)

Preventing Colic in Horses (Paper Horse, 1999)

Preventing Laminitis in Horses (Paper Horse, 2000)

the anima Herbal Recipe Book (Anima Books, 2011)

Nothing More is Needed (Anima Books, 2011)

Feeding Miss Lilly (Anima Books, 2014, 2022)

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