

How Do I Live a Loved Life?

The coauthor of this book is a ghost. My grandmother was a midwife and healer. She sat with people as they entered the world and as they left it. She never set foot in a school and could neither read nor write. I haven't included her name on the title page because I never really knew what it was. I just called her "Grandma." Others called her "Ma" or "Dora," or by her husband's name, "Michael's wife," as if she were his possession.

As I am writing about her to you, she becomes alive again: a tiny woman with a fierce will. In the late 1800s, she ran across Russian potato fields to escape Cossack soldiers who had killed her first two children and brother during a pogrom, an attack on Jewish villages. She and my grandfather escaped to New York by boat, traveling in steerage. Driven by that indomitable will to foster life, she gave birth to eight more children in a two-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor of an old brick tenement in Hell's Kitchen.

One of her feet was planted on the spiritual side and the other on the pragmatic. But to talk about her in terms of one side or the other is inaccurate, because Grandma was always braiding together people, their resources, and the challenges of their lives so that they would be inspired to love their existence. Her prayers went something like this: "May Willie's ability to make money help Sammy, who has to sleep in a cold car because he can't afford to pay his rent. May they both love the life they are living. May they each live the life they love."

On the day when I am writing these words, the whole world seems to be teetering on a knife edge between right/wrong, either/or, us/ them. I have been asking myself several evocative questions for the past two years. They have midwived the pages you are now reading: How do I find a way to live a life I can love? How do I help make it possible for those who will come after me to do the same? What do I need to remember, as in "re-member," to bring together all that has been torn in two? How do I re-collect the wisdom earned through my own and others' challenges? What is the most effective way to pass it on? Is there a place inside me and between us where vanished wisdom secretly gathers?

My grandmother gave me one of the greatest gifts one person can give to another: she helped me to discover how my life matters. She told me that the moment I was born, Life made a Promise to the world that only I could fulfill. She inspired my search for what this could be by telling me stories of her own experiences and by asking me wide-open questions that would lead me to live a life I would love.

When people don't believe their lives really matter, they shrug, feel impotent, and disconnect from one another, slowly declining into what they most despise. Grandma used to kiss the unique marks at the very ends of my fingertips, calling them "promise prints." She said they prove that never before and never again will there be another such as me.

Understanding how each of us does and can matter is the most powerful force I know to make it possible for a human being to love his or her existence. Why don't most of us know this? So many of the people I have worked with for the past fifty years didn't. Whether it was as a psychotherapist helping groups of people heal sexual abuse and couples repair the ruptures between them, or as an advisor to CEOs and senior leadership teams, one person after another told me that deep down in the canyons of their bones,

they felt as if their lives didn't really matter. Why isn't this lack obvious to us? Why don't we know how to instill a sense of personal significance in our children and grandchildren so they can love being alive?

I believe there are three implicit forces that contribute to this:

1. The current dismissal and dishonoring of elders and their importance to the rest of us has resulted in this awareness being eclipsed. In many traditions, elders were the ones who pointed out a basic fact of human life to the youngest members of a community: that the

fingerprints at the end of our reach prove that each of us is a one-of-a-kind marvel that has never existed before and never will again.

2. Our educational and cultural systems are *deficit focused*—in other words, attention is solely focused on what doesn't work and what is wrong rather than on what does work and has worked (i.e., "You got four wrong on your spelling test" rather than, "You got twenty-six right.") Consequently, it is rare to find someone who is as articulate about the talents they have to contribute as about the flaws they need to hide or improve.
3. A major thinking strategy embedded in Western culture is domination rather than collaboration. What has been honored and respected, therefore, is power over rather than power with others. What makes this possible is culturally inculcating the belief that some people's thinking (and existence) is more important than others. If you can dismiss the contribution of a person frequently enough, he or she will shrug and believe that because they can't have an effect on an outcome, they don't matter. Conversely, if you create collaborative conditions whereby the stories of each person's life experiences and the resources embedded in them can be evoked and respected, both the individual and collective intellectual capital is increased, as is a deeper understanding of how each of us matters to the rest of us. It is this that makes it possible to love the life you are living.

I am a midwife as my grandmother was, but of possibilities within and between people. I've lived many incarnations in the past seven decades: as a teacher, psychotherapist, researcher, and organizational fairy godmother. When I have to fill out a form that asks for my occupation, I write "professional thinking partner." The Latin root of the word "professional" is *profere*, meaning to profess faith. I profess my faith by being present with others in such a way that what was broken can be made whole again. When I think in partnership with someone, I listen deeply enough to hear the question his or her life is asking. I am constantly wondering how to make connections within and between the best of a person and the challenges he or she is facing. Stories then rise in my mind, stories that synthesize, connect, and widen the horizon each is facing. It feels like a great melting, as if Life is saying, "Yes!" to and through me.

I also write books as a way of fumbling through this endless path of confusion we call a human life. Most of the ones I have written are rooted in a lifelong curiosity about thinking. In graduate school, I did research in cognitive psychology and intellectual diversity. None of that rational training helped much, though, with the personal relational and physical challenges of abuse, divorce, and cancer. My mind broke apart with questions that no one could answer: "How can I love this life while living with a 'terminal' disease? What will balance all the random acts of violence that are happening to and around me? What's unfinished for me to give? What difference have I made—and what difference can I make—in a world that seems to be growing crazier and more chaotic by the hour?" Since I couldn't answer them, these questions opened my mind to a state of wonder. And it was wonder and the stories that emerged from it which led me to discover the Promise of my life.

Grandma taught me that there is both perspective and wisdom hidden in our greatest difficulties. They can help us realize how we matter as well as what really matters to us. I learned from her that certain unanswerable questions can encourage one's mind to open and to wander like a kite in a wind, noticing what emerges rather than struggling helplessly to find a single answer on which to land in certainty. When I have done this, what often bubbles up is a story about something I've experienced. I have woven these stories with those of others into several books: *Random Acts of Kindness*, *Spot of Grace*, and *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life*.

I didn't know where the ideas for any of those books really came from. I had no idea anyone would want to read them. Winter in Vermont can be extremely stormy. When I first moved there, I frequently had to tie a rope to the back of the old farmhouse where I lived so my six-year-old son David and I could find our way to the barn in the blinding snow, feed the horse, and then find our way home again. The books I wrote were also a kind of rope to which I clung through the twin storms of losing my father and my diagnosis of terminal cancer.

In 1999, I withdrew to a tiny cabin on a snowy mountaintop to explore how to love the life that remained. Once more I turned my grief to ink in order to find my way through this storm of unanswerable questions. I had no intention of anyone else reading the words I scribbled. I was just writing myself home. In three months, I realized that I had written a book to help me explore the most essential questions I couldn't answer: How do I live a life I can love? How do I love the life I am living? I was habituated to questions I could answer. But *these* questions couldn't be answered, and something very different emerged in my mind. They lifted me and carried me beyond the image of myself that I had been holding onto so tightly. They floated me to a place beyond right or wrong, into an ocean of inner resources, stories, and wisdom that I hadn't even imagined existed. I came to understand that when faced with a grand challenge, as I was then and as we all are now, there is also a call to live from everything that is within you.

Six months after I withdrew to the cabin, the questions and stories that had emerged were published as a book, *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life: Discovering Passion and Purpose*, with a poem I had written after my father died printed on the back cover.

I began to get letters and emails from people who told me how much the poem had helped them. That wasn't my intent. I just wanted to learn how to love the life I was living and what changes I had to make so I could create a life I could love. Twenty years later, it is rare that a day goes by without one of those letters arriving either as an email or in my mailbox. A woman in New Mexico wrote an opera based on the poem, and a Canadian artist created a huge oil painting which now hangs in a Toronto museum. A woman in South Africa, Nomathembe Luhabe, took the poem all over her country and read it to crowds of people as she helped grow Nelson Mandela's movement to liberate their country. In 2004, she called me from Cape Town and said there was someone on the phone who wanted to ask me a question. In a deep resonant voice, Mandela asked, "What do you think the connection is between grief and the passion it takes to live a loved life?"

A year later, the Dalai Lama invited me to come to Dharamsala to meet him. He told me how the poem and the book had touched him deeply and asked me to sign his well-worn copy. My tears had indeed turned to ink. Inspired by an illiterate man born to an illiterate mother, the poem, carrying the transformative question, "How can I love the life I am living?" has circled the globe, appearing in places as far-flung as South America, China, Mexico, and Minnesota. Seeming strangers tell me a copy of it has been hanging over their desks for years, carrying them forward. The seed my father planted in my mother has indeed gone on to blossom and, through me, to fruit.

In these dark and fragmented Humpty Dumpty times, at a moment in history when possibility seems eclipsed and all the King's horses and all the King's men have convinced so many people that they can't and don't make a difference, I feel a great sorrow that so much innate talent and valuable life experience is undiscovered, untapped, and unloved. I long to inspire you who are reading these words to search for the reservoir of wisdom and capacity within you waiting to be discovered and shared with the rest of us. I know it is exactly the glue that can connect and help us create a possible world for those who will follow.

My grandmother didn't pass away from me, she passed into me. She saw things in people that they didn't recognize in themselves. When I was born, she looked at the palms of my tiny hands and realized that I was the one of all her grandchildren to whom she would pass on what she had learned. She told my father to bring me to her every Friday so she could teach me to birth possibility in people.

He must have rolled his sky-blue eyes and shaken his head, as all of her children did at her "old country superstitions," but her will was stronger than his. For the first fourteen years of my life, he drove me to Hell's Kitchen every Friday morning to be with her.

As far as I know, there is not one other living person on this planet now who has felt her warm dry lips place kisses at the end of each fingertip. There is no one who remembers her faded yellow apron with tiny red roses or who tasted the end slice of the golden bread she baked every Friday. There's also no one else alive who sat next to her on the rusty fire escape outside her living room, listening to the whispery wisdom that emerged

from her lips. It has nourished me in the leanest of moments. It has been sliced and served to friends, family, students, and every person with whom I have worked. They have licked the butter off their chin and said, "I wish I had a grandmother like yours." I kept promising them that someday I would write a book about her. Now I, too, am an old lady. If I don't serve her wisdom to you on these clean white pages, it will be lost forever. I once asked her why she kept teaching me each week. She replied simply, "So I can share my zava'ah with you," as if that should explain everything. Since no one in my family spoke much Hebrew, the word stored itself in the dark recesses of my unconscious mind until a few weeks ago, when it emerged in a dream where she was giving me a purple T-shirt. Emblazoned across the front in gold letters was the word "Zava'ah." The next morning, I leapt out of bed and looked up its meaning: "An ethical will describing the moral and spiritual understandings accumulated within a life. It is meant to be passed on to one's descendants in order to impart wisdom and inspiration from one generation to the next." I was elated as I realized that the book you are now reading is both her zava'ah and my own, a distillation of wisdom gathered as each of us searched to live lives we could love by fulfilling our Promise and making a difference in challenging times.

Because this book is essentially both Grandma's and my own zava'ah, we've shaped the stories the way she shaped her challah, a Sabbath bread. Each of its nine braids was yeasted by a question I asked her so I could discover how I matter. The first strand of each braid is a story formed from one of her teaching tales. It is written in the present tense so she can come alive for you. The second strand incorporates a personal challenge with which I struggled while trying to weave her wisdom into my life. The third story folds that wisdom into the current context through a narrative about someone I worked with as a thinking partner who was searching for how he or she could live a life they could love. After the loaf is braided, there are some evocative questions so that you can share them with those in your world.

This loaf of a book is created the way Grandma made her challah: yeasting, rising, kneading, braiding, baking, and sharing, because bread, gluten-free or otherwise, is the staff of life, basic to human nourishment. During World War II, there was a group of abandoned children in London who were gathered off the streets and taken to an orphanage. Most of them had been without love, caring, and nourishment for months. In the shelter, they were clothed, fed, and held. But there was a problem—they could not fall asleep. No matter what the caregivers told them, they didn't believe there would be food to eat in the morning. No matter what they did, the children insisted on staying awake. One night, a nurse had an idea. After tucking the kids into bed, she placed a slice of bread into each child's hand. Without fail, every one of them fell deeply asleep. Knowing they would awaken with nourishment to fill their bellies, the children could rest.

The discovery of how you live a life you love can be found hidden in the stories you tell about that life. Grandma and I are reaching out to you with wide-open questions and with slices of our own stories in the hope that they will yeast the Promise inside you. The inspiration we offer in the pages that follow is not in the questions or stories themselves, but rather in your encounter with them.

My coauthor says that if you never knew your grandparents or didn't like them, it's not a problem. She invites you to adopt her as your own. We are, after all, in this together. Each of us can be involved in the dance of spiraling generations in which the elders empower the young with their wisdom and the young empower the old with the energy of new possibility. Whether you are an "old soul" in a millennial body or an elder yourself, I pass the blessing of wisdom from her hands through mine into yours.