

*Pilgrimage of Desire*

# Flow Exercises

## Introduction

Welcome!

The flow exercises that follow are taken from my travel memoir, *Pilgrimage of Desire*. I created this workbook so that you can print the exercises and do them at your own pace.

If you would like space for journaling on these pages, I suggest printing them single-sided so you can write notes on the back. Otherwise you can print them double-sided to save paper!

If you don't have your own copy of *Pilgrimage of Desire*, [visit my website for more details on where to purchase](#).

## About the Flow Exercises

“Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence.” — Lin Yutang



Sharing my story is a way of inviting you to create a road of hope with me. Hope beckons in our desires: the ones we walk toward and the ones we discover on the journey. The hope for happiness, for a life of truth and beauty, for the deep satisfaction of being ourselves.

The flow exercises I've designed for each chapter of this book are steps along the road of hope. They provide ways to move closer to what you long for by clearing away the brambles in your path. I encourage you to join me by doing the exercises and sharing what comes out of them. I'd love to hear from you — feel free to email me at [alison@gresik.ca](mailto:alison@gresik.ca). My pilgrimage is that much more meaningful in the companionship of others.

# 1 Handrail

Janice, the therapist who walked me out of the thickets of sadness, lived a few blocks from our university residence. Every two weeks we sat in her daisy-yellow study and I hugged a pillow on my lap while we teased apart my misery. I loved her soft voice and how she always wore purple so that you couldn't help but know it was her favourite colour.

Janice introduced me to the concept of intention. In the years since, my relationship with intention has expanded into a way of life, but Janice kept things simple for me in my despair-addled state.

"Think of your intention as a handrail," she said. "When you need to steady yourself, you can reach out and let it guide you." Since I felt tottery and fragile as I put my life and health back together, that image was perfect for me. I needed to stop grasping at whatever handrail presented itself, and instead choose the one that would lead me where I wanted to go.

I took my time creating my new intention. The process felt good because the task was so well-defined and personal, and because I had Janice to share it with when I was finished. So I would mull over ideas while I walked to work and washed dishes. It seemed that my unhappy state was marked by three things: self-deception, self-abuse, and anhedonia. I told myself things that weren't true, I neglected my needs or actively punished myself, and I took little delight from what the world offered.

The antidote was also three-fold. Here's the intention I wrote to show Janice:

*Every day I will  
Create art that tells the truth  
Make choices that honour myself and God  
Enjoy the pleasures of life  
So that I may experience myself as joy.*



Write your own intention, a handrail that will guide you true every day throughout your life along the lines of your desires. You could begin by inverting the negative states that you want to leave behind. You could invoke the qualities that mark your favourite days. Let the process be simple and take its own time. You will know when you have found the rail that fits your hand perfectly.

## 2 Open Hand

For years, I dreamed of the life of a writer, the whole kit and caboodle. I wanted hard-backed books I could hold in my hand, with my name on the spine. I wanted to put my signature on the title page. I wanted to visit primary school classrooms and talk to children about reading. I wanted an antique desk and a view of wildflower meadows from my writing shed in the backyard. I wanted to judge literary contests and win the Governor General's Award. I wanted an agent who would auction my manuscripts to eager publishing houses. I wanted to travel to Morocco for research. I wanted a librarian to lovingly preserve my literary archives. I certainly wanted other writers to admire me.

I wanted so hard and so much that I choked on my desire.

Martha Beck, the life coach who practically invented life coaching, says in her article [“The Formula for Happiness”](#) that “intense yearning is a form of attachment that can actually stop the thing you desire from reaching you.” I know what she means. When all of me was flooded with longing, there was no room for anything else to enter. My brain raced with schemes for fixing my life so I could write, my throat closed when I heard of a fellow author getting an award or a publishing deal, and my heart ached with regret as each month and year passed with no finished book in sight.

Beck goes on to say, “Recognize that yearning is loving something before you believe in it. The same may be said of jealousy, envy, disappointment and even despair. To love something deeply without believing it can be true is enormously painful.”

In the wake of my breakdown, I needed to let go of writing so I could clear space within myself for it to come back to me. This was a scary prospect — if I didn't write, was I still a writer? Without my word counts and publications, did I matter? I entered this time of no-writing without those answers, trusting that my writing would come around to me again.

(Spoiler alert: it did.)



Find a small object — a marble, a rock, a ping-pong ball — that can represent one great yearning of your life that hasn't come to you yet. Play with the object in your hand: roll it around, cup it in your palm, squeeze it tight and balance it gently.

Bring to mind the phases of your relationship to this yearning. When did you grasp it with all your strength? When did you loosen your grip? What made you shift your hold? What changed in your feelings when you clung or released? What happened to bring the object of your desire closer or push it further away?

With your beautiful object resting in your palm, let your heart well up with love for the thing you desire. Don't try to put this love into words, just feel it spread through your body, warm and tender. The pure power of this love is where you will find the belief that what you want can be true. Notice how your faith grows when you hold your desire with an open hand.

### 3 Dismantling Roadblocks

So much of my relationship with Shawn was shaped by our young selves: him the popular golden boy and me the awkward brainy girl. For years after we started dating, I could hardly believe he had chosen me over all the prettier, more athletic, and less neurotic girls available. And my insecurity set up a pattern of swallowing my own desires and going along with what Shawn wanted (or what I guessed he wanted). Not all the time, but enough that it distorted my perception of the kind of wife I needed to be to keep our marriage happy.

By the time we'd been married six years, one version of that pattern looked something like this. 1) I made plans in my head for writing. 2) Shawn, unaware of these plans, asked me to do something with him. 3) I agreed and felt miserable, or turned him down and felt like a bitch.

I didn't realize, until our therapist Connie brought it to my attention, that when Shawn asked for my company, I was hearing, "Do my bidding! Your interests are always subordinate to mine. Prove you love me by giving up what's important to you!" Turns out that what he really meant was, "I adore spending time with you. Let's have fun together."

Who knew?



Think of a loved one who seems to be standing between you and what you want. Write down three things that this person does or says to keep you from your dream. For example, "I'm trying to write in the mornings, but my husband complains when the alarm wakes him up."

Then consider the meaning you ascribe to each thing. What subtext are you hearing? What motive do you attach to those words and actions? For example, "I hear that his comfort is more important than my work. He's trying to keep me in bed so he won't feel lazy."

Finally, turn each thing around. For example, "My husband rejoices when the alarm wakes him up." Is there any truth to that statement? Is he happy to know that you are committed to your writing, even if he can't express that at 5:30 a.m.? Or what about, "I complain when my alarm wakes me up"? Are you experiencing resistance to writing that you're blaming on your husband?

The next time your husband complains about the alarm, you can say to yourself, "I know he supports my work, even if he's too grouchy to tell me right now." Or you can say, "I know how he feels! I don't really want to get up either. But I will because my writing is important to me."

This exercise shows you that the roadblocks you think others are putting in your way are more complex than they first appear. And in exploring their complexity, you can find a different way forward, or even dismantle the roadblocks altogether.

If you want to take this practice further, try the [Judge Your Neighbor worksheet](#), developed by Byron Katie as part of her process called [The Work](#), to inquire into the truth of how other people are holding you back.

## 4 The Meaning of Stuff

One of the ways I comforted myself when I was unhappy was by buying yarn. Something about the rainbow colours, the squooshy skeins, the possibility of new sweaters and socks, made me feel rich and warm. I made regular visits to the local yarn store and also discovered the intoxicating ability to order *any yarn I wanted* over the Internet. The entire universe of hand-painted and novelty, silk and cotton, lace weight and bulky, discount and luxury, all lay at the command of my credit card.

One day, my profligate ways caught up with me. A double whammy, two lots of designer yarn in one week, earned me some very reproving looks from my husband. Most of my yarn purchases were posted against the Clothing line item in our household budget, and yarn for me meant no new pants for Shawn.

So I decided to enter into a Yarn Non-Buying Agreement until I had knit everything in my stash. I made a spreadsheet and counted how much yarn I owned: 328 skeins. Enough to keep me knitting for three years or more.

I was surprised to find how easy it was to quit buying yarn. The need it used to fill no longer existed, the need for beauty and comfort, and I had just held onto the practice out of habit.

You get to decide what your stuff means to you. And that meaning may change over time. In the beginning, yarn meant reconnecting to a childhood skill my grandmother taught me. It meant creating beautiful things, learning new techniques, and giving precious gifts. At some point, buying yarn morphed into mindless, fruitless consumption — acquiring more purely for storage. When my knitting slowed after the kids came along, my stash lost almost all of its meaning. And then, as we were preparing for Hejira, it became a hassle, something I had to photograph and list for sale, regretting the lost money and unrealized projects.



Choose a significant item or collection of stuff in your house and ask yourself these questions: What did this thing mean to me when I bought it? What did it tell me about myself? What need did it fill?

Reflect on the lifespan of that item. Does it still have the same meaning? Has your understanding of yourself changed in relationship to it? Is it helping or hindering your creative life?

Your answers will tell you what to do with that stuff.

## 5 Listening to Love

Talking with Amma helps me stay in flow. I notice that I have the hardest time writing when I'm feeling down and full of doubt, when I'm beating up on myself for not being good or fast or disciplined enough. Amma offers me a source of unconditional love and faith that I am perfect just as I am. Her voice acts like a gush of meltwater to wash away the gunk inside. Her words have this clear, bracing quality that carries me along to a new place.

You can get a similar effect from listening to anyone who loves you: your partner, a friend, a coach, or an aspect of yourself. You can even tune in to the spirit of what you're trying to create — your book or story or painting. Love reminds you that you're doing your best, that you have something valuable to offer, and that you're not alone. When you remember those truths, you can prioritize your work and access your imagination more easily.



With a pen and notebook or on a computer, write down where you're at, how you feel, some of the thoughts running through your head. Write down what you want and why you can't seem to get it. Notice especially where you feel bogged down, where your joy and progress are halted by some belief standing in your way.

*I'm so behind! Everyone is doing bigger, better things than me, and I have no idea how I will catch up. I really feel like I've missed the boat.*

Now pose a question or simply invite God to share something with you. If you don't believe in God, you can imagine this response coming from any source of love: a benevolent mentor or your own wise, best self. You shouldn't have to strain to hear — just sit quietly and breathe until the words appear in your head.

*Darling, you haven't missed the boat. You are the boat.*

This is a good ritual to practice whenever you find yourself stuck. If you're trying to force things to happen all by yourself, you're not in flow. Remind yourself that you are in relationship, whether with God, your work, or another part of your self, and that there's an easier way available, and your energy will start to move again.

## 6 Who Are You?

Many people have a hard time saying, “I am a writer” or “I am an artist.” They think that they can only claim that identity when they have the real-world credentials to prove it: an academic degree, an agent’s representation, a published book, a royalty cheque, a full-time career.

Some tell us that our creative identities are determined by our actions. “Writers write,” they say, with the unspoken reprimand that if you are not writing, you’re not a writer. This maxim is meant to be motivating, but I read it as another way of policing art, making people prove that they’re walking the walk before they can gain entry to the writer’s club and exercise its privileges.

I believe that our creative identities are grounded in our desires. I was a writer before I ever set down a sentence because as a child I discovered that I wanted to thrill myself with stories I created. At age five, I lived for the afternoons when Melody and I built the Phoenix spaceship out of couch cushions and fought over who got to be Princess from G-Force. At age eight, we woke up early to play Lego before school, each day carrying on the serial narrative with mini-figures named after characters from *Anne of Green Gables* and the *Chronicles of Narnia*. At age eleven, I waited all day to go to bed so I could spin my infatuation with a boy into elaborate daydreams, feeling the shape of rising tension and climax in my belly as I constructed coincidences to bring us together and obstacles to keep us apart.

As a kid, my artistic desires morphed easily into actions. As I grew up, though, I learned to separate the two, to deny and downplay and dismiss these desires because they seemed frivolous. I would have abandoned literature altogether if it hadn’t been for my freshman poetry and drama class in college. Reading Ibsen and Herbert and Arnold revived my longing to tell my own stories and inspired me to change my major from chemistry to English.



Who are you? Is there a creative identity that you’ve hesitated to claim for yourself because you thought you had to be knighted or certified or in some way externally validated? Or have you harboured a secret identity since childhood but stopped yourself from making choices or changes that would allow you to live it out?

Today, tell one other person, “I am a \_\_\_\_\_!” and let your own voice and conviction remind you that it’s true. And tell them what one way you want to turn that desire into action.

## 7 Infusion

When we are in the middle of depression, illness, or burnout, or just emerging from these states, it's hard to truly gauge our ability to do creative work. We apply an arithmetic of scarcity that says, *Anything I add to my life will subtract from me* — from my time and energy, from my store of goodwill, from the identities I'm trying to nurture. If I take on something new, whether it's a job, a child, a course of study, a move, or a trip, there will be fewer resources available to me, and my capacity will diminish.

What we forget when we're making these calculations is that when we are doing creative work in service of our desires, there is a two-way exchange. The effort and positivity we put out comes back to us multiplied. We are happier, healthier, and stronger when we're doing what we want and love to do.

One of the ways I taught myself this new arithmetic of abundance was by doing Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* in the months after we arrived home with Lia. I wrote morning pages by hand in a pink striped notebook, I went on artist's dates, and I let myself dream and remember my imaginative, inspired self. And I learned that a little meaning went a long way to keeping me centred and filled up.

I also learned that caring for Lia didn't take nearly the toll on me that I imagined it would. When I was thinking about parenting in the abstract, anticipating the sleep deprivation, the expense, the huge demands a child would make, it made me very tired. But what I hadn't factored in was the particular person of my daughter. I gladly changed her diapers, fed her, and did her laundry because I loved her and enjoyed being with her. I had gotten so caught up in what I would have to do for Lia that I forgot about what she would do for me.



Set aside the idea of life as a pie to be divvied up, or even as Dr. Stephen Covey's fabled jar full of rocks, sand, and gravel. Instead, take a clear glass or mug and fill it with boiling water. Then drop in a teabag. Watch as the colour of the tea leaves spreads through the water. Let it steep for a good while until it's nice and dark. Then drink and enjoy.

The creative work you desire is like that teabag. Its flavour infuses and transforms what is already there, turning it from a ho-hum glass of water into a fragrant, sacred brew. Nothing is lost, and everything is gained.

## 8 A Dream to Catch Meaning

Why do we invent dreams for ourselves to chase? Why did I decide that I wanted to be a writer? Why did Shawn and I set our hearts on parenting adopted children? What was Operation Hejira for?

[Eric Maisel](#) talks about *meaning containers* as structures that hold the meaning we create each day. We do little things — writing for half an hour, filling out a form, saving a spreadsheet — and our dreams collect these actions and give them shape and purpose. Without a container, our minutes and hours might seem to dribble away, wasted, but when we have something larger to catch them, they add up to something grand and purposeful.

A bigger story holds all the little scenes together and helps them make sense. When I have a dream at hand, I can find all kinds of things to fill it with: a quote from a book, a song on the radio, a snippet of someone's biography. The world pulses with signs and symbols, fragments laid out for me to discover. Meaning containers can be a powerful stay against depression. Dreams are not just for future pleasure, but to give weight and value to our present.

I love how so many of my dreams are sparked by other people's stories. Friends who adopted from China years before us. The new parents we ran into on the golf course in Florida. *The 4-Hour Workweek*. A blogger sending her kids to preschool in Penang. Something I see clicks together with my own latent desires and suddenly there's a dream bucket at my feet, waiting for me to pick it up and begin filling it.

When a dream fails, does the bucket tip and spill? I know it feels like that sometimes, like our meaning is lost when we have to give up on a beloved goal or activity. But a more hopeful way to see it is that our bucket has sprung a leak, and we can pour our meaning into a new, more solid container. What we did and learned can now serve a new dream.



What dream are you carrying to hold your meaning? Create an actual container for this dream: a notebook, a treasure box, or a Pinterest board. In the next few days, notice when you do or find something — an idea, a picture, a quotation, a book or blog, a task for you to do — that feels extra meaningful because it's serving this project. Add these things to your meaning container and notice how they build your faith and joy in your dream.

## 9 Hold Onto Yourself

The night I read my mother's journal, a phrase kept coming back to me: "Hold onto yourself." It comes from the work of [David Schnarch](#), a marriage and sex therapist who teaches that an important task in relationships is to learn to *differentiate*, to maintain a sense of who you are and what you want even in the face of conflict. When you are able to soothe yourself and keep your self intact, you open the door to change and growth for you and your loved one.

This approach helped me a lot when Shawn and I were going through our various marital crises. The more I succumbed to the temptation to abandon myself to make Shawn happy, the more distance I had to put between us in order to keep from losing myself altogether (hence the parallel lives we ended up leading at Carleton). The lack of intimacy created more frustration and conflict. My Christian upbringing told me that I needed sacrificial love and empathy for Shawn to bridge the gap, but first I needed to define and hold my own boundaries so I would have an intact self to cross the gap with.

So "hold onto yourself" reminded me to wrap my arms around my edges and send love to all the wonderful and flawed parts of me instead of criticizing and rejecting myself for disappointing my mom.

Why is it important for artists to hold onto ourselves? Because that is where the art comes from — our ideas, desires, obsessions, and peculiarities. Our mistakes and patterns and enthusiasms. If we get too warped and compromised, we lose access to our source of truth and beauty, and that's when depression steals in.

David Schnarch doesn't call his approach *the crucible* for nothing. Holding onto yourself is damn uncomfortable. But it's also necessary for transformation.



Think about the last time you had a conflict with someone you're close to. Do you remember an impulse to disfigure yourself in order to make the conflict go away? Did you make yourself focus on empathy with the other person's feelings instead of owning your own? Did you try to get him or her to understand and affirm you? Or were you able to powerfully and gracefully state what you wanted and needed? (I often struggle with the graceful part because I'm so unpractised at being powerful. But I know it's possible.)

Now, create some art inspired by the conflict. Can you see that the inspiration and charge in what you make comes from your uniqueness? From the reactions that are sparked when your self encounters the other?

## 10 The Mother Wound

I know I am not alone in my struggles to make peace with my mother and all she represents.

In her article [“Why It’s Crucial for Women to Heal the Mother Wound,”](#) writer and teacher Bethany Webster describes the mother wound as “the pain of being a woman passed down through generations of women in patriarchal cultures. ... The mother wound includes the pain of comparison (not feeling good enough), shame (consistent background sense that there is something wrong with you), attenuation (feeling you must remain small in order to be loved), and a persistent sense of guilt for wanting more than you currently have.”

This is the wound Madeline knew I needed to heal, even when I couldn’t recognize it as the reason that I sabotaged my writing life and fell into depression. I was caught in what Webster calls the “double bind” between my mother and myself — “The daughter may unconsciously sense that her full empowerment may trigger the mother’s sadness or rage at having to give up parts of herself in her own life. Her compassion for her mother, a desire to please her, and a fear of conflict may cause her to convince herself that it’s safer to shrink and remain small.”

I believe this is why I encountered Amma when I did, because I needed a mother God who understood my pain but wouldn’t pass on her own. Amma could hold my whole self without feeling rejected or threatened.

The wound flared again when I became a mother to Lia. I still feared that having a child meant the obliteration of my self. I soothed the wound by continuing to write and look after my needs for rest and help while I cared for my new baby.

And this is the wound that required more attention in Penang. Stepping into a new adventure that took me even further from my mother and her path triggered pain for both of us.

Webster writes that, “The truth is that no child can save her mother. No sacrifice a daughter makes will ever be enough to compensate for the high price her mother may have had to pay or for the losses she has accrued over the years simply by being a woman and mother in this culture.” I couldn’t help my mother by staying home. But I could release my own guilt and grief so it didn’t come between us.

Unsurprisingly, my encounters with the mother wound are often accompanied by physical illness — the bronchitis in Penang, the months-long series of colds that started in Beijing when we adopted Lia, and the depression itself. Even though I railed against being sick at the time, I’m grateful that my body showed me I needed to slow down, pay attention, process my emotions, and take care of myself.

I suspect that the mother wound is particularly problematic for artists, writers, and other creatives — those who are especially driven to self-expression and who are more empathetic and sensitive to others. I believe the wound manifests in resistance to doing our work and in choices we make that restrict our time and energy in the studio. As Webster says, “The mother wound is ultimately not about your mother. It’s about embracing yourself and your gifts without shame.”



Here’s an exercise that Madeline taught me. It can stir up some powerful emotions, so it’s best to do it with a therapist, a coach, or a good friend who can support you through the experience. Make sure that you are centered and steady before you begin by saying a prayer, breathing deeply, or simply grounding in love.

Sit in front of a mirror and look at yourself. Take time to rest your gaze on each part of your face. Notice what you love about yourself and what is hard to love.

Now find your mother in your face. What emotions come up for you? Let them wash through you — feel them to the depths.

When I did this exercise, I was so filled with shame that I could do nothing but cry. I couldn't find any part of myself that I loved. When I looked for my mother, I saw her in my tears. Her pain and my pain came together. And I found that I could love my eyes, slick and shining, because they told the truth.

Like me, you may find yourself walking the labyrinth of your life and circling around to the same places again and again. Each time, you grow further, reach deeper, gain more wisdom.

If the idea of the mother wound resonates with you, let yourself investigate your next step along the labyrinth's path to healing.

## 11 Claiming Your Artistic License

I imagine most creative types have had people in their lives discouraging them from the arts because it doesn't pay well, isn't respectable or important enough, isn't the highest use of their talents. Some of us get subtle hints, others get outright disapproval, even threats of banishment. I devoured books like *My Name Is Asher Lev*, *The Diviners*, and *Lives of Girls and Women* for stories of how budding writers and artists dealt with this kind of opposition from the parents and spouses they loved.

And I think it's common for us to turn these questions on ourselves in moments of difficulty, failure, or rejection, when a partner complains that we're not spending enough time with them, when we're scrambling to pay the bills, when a child sobs and clings to our leg when we try to shut the door. "Is this work really worth the cost? Does it matter enough to justify the sacrifices?"

When these doubts plague me, I remember two scenes in the lives of writers I admire. One is the picture of poet Donald Hall in his book *The Best Day The Worst Day*, faithfully writing in the chair next to his partner Jane Kenyon's hospital bed as she fought leukemia. He claimed his right to work even in these dire circumstances, this forbidding place. Jane also wrote poetry as much as she could when her health permitted. They wrote in the face of death because writing meant life for them.

The second scene is of Alice Munro babysitting her grandchildren so that her daughter Sheila could work on her memoir *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up With Alice Munro*. Yes, the future Nobel Prize winner felt that her daughter's work was important enough to merit babysitting. No doubt she enjoyed the hours with her grandchildren and remembered her own years as a homemaker, stealing time for her stories. Sheila, in turn, allowed herself to take up that space, to accept that gift.

This is service. To the work, to the self, and to the world. This is life.



I'd like you to claim your artistic license. Could you let Alice Munro babysit for you? Could you write next to your partner's sickbed? Your right to write, to make art, to create, isn't granted by some external body — you bestow it on yourself. And that right comes from who you are: your gifts and talents, your desires, your personality, your personal history and culture, your need for meaning. You have the right to create simply because you are a creator.

Write or fashion an artistic license for yourself, whatever that looks like. The only requirement I ask is that you make this license valid for the rest of your life.

## 12 The Irresistible Current

In 2005, when I was in the iron grip of workaholism at my software job, I read Steven Pressfield's book *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles*, and I thought it was the answer to my problems. I'd been struggling to get a book done for years, flogging myself as a lazy undisciplined procrastinator who didn't have what it took to be a writer.

And here came Steven Pressfield with this demonic portrait of Resistance with a capital R, which had all this time been hell-bent on stopping me from writing. He compared Resistance to predators like the Alien, the Terminator, or the shark in *Jaws* — powerful, unreasonable, and destructive, focused solely on preventing creation from happening. I wanted to believe that there was a force outside of me opposing my every creative impulse, because then I could stop fighting myself and start fighting this universal enemy. Even if it meant buying into a lifetime battle.

I found it reassuring to learn that a bestselling author and screenwriter was constantly combating this terrible malevolent force because it meant there was nothing wrong with me. I was ready to turn pro and redouble my efforts in a life-and-death match against Resistance. Beat my chest and rattle my sabre! Never take my eye off the adversary! But to my surprise, Resistance grew stronger the more I fought. I was even more tired and discouraged. War was not a happy place to live. I needed a new metaphor, and I eventually found it in the irresistible current of flow.

"What makes a river so restful to people is that it doesn't have any doubt. It is sure to get where it is going, and it doesn't want to go anywhere else," writes Hal Boyle.

I needed to stop trying to push the boulders out of the stream and just slip effortlessly around and over them. Sometimes that meant finding the path of least resistance — probing around a project until I located the easiest way in. Other times it meant switching channels when I reached a dead end. Always it meant being willing to go forward in uncertainty, risking imperfection and failure. I was still putting effort into my writing, but instead of that effort meeting an immovable object, it was just speeding me along, like a kayaker paddling through whitewater.

Now I believe that when I take care of myself and design my life to support my art, I couldn't escape the flow if I tried. I get drenched in inspiration. Words pour out of my fingers like rainwater from a spout. I get up early, stay up late, whatever I need to do in any circumstance, because I love my work like crazy. And it loves me back. My books *want* to be written.



I would like you to lay down your arms and wave a white flag to end the war of art. Find some running water — in the woods, the park, the bathroom. Surrender your hands, your feet, your whole body to the current. Feel its insistent power, the way it chases itself headlong, plunging along in thrall to gravity. Name each of your rocks of resistance: "I'm afraid of wearing myself out. I don't know what project to choose. What if someone gets angry with me?" Then let resistance be engulfed in the flow.

## 13 Life as a Prius

Thinking about all the different parts of my life, it's easy to feel like I'm being torn apart, pulled in many directions by the competing interests of art, family, and finances. Or like I'm one of those plate-spinners, trying to keep everything aloft at the same time by frantically running between them, dreading the crash that happens when any one area is neglected for too long. I start to think that I'm failing at everything.

But chopping my life up into pieces like that is a fallacy. I'm one person, not a Frankenstein mashup of writer, wife and mother, friend and coach and freelancer. I'm creating one indivisible life, and everything I am, everything I do, is contributing to that whole, not competing.

What if I imagined myself as a hybrid car that runs on gasoline and electricity?

There are times when I'm puttering around town, stopping and starting, poking along the back lanes and side streets. That's when I draw on the battery to keep me going. These are the times when I'm playing with my kids, sightseeing, doing yoga, reading a book, talking to a friend.

There are other times when I'm zooming along the highway, crossing long distances, making great time. That's when I start burning gasoline. These are the times when I'm writing and working, juggling clients and appointments, going to parties and networking events, setting and reaching goals.

Whatever I'm doing, my inner hybrid engine knows which energy source to draw on to keep me going, switching between them seamlessly. Maybe we could call those two energy sources yin and yang. They work in tandem to help me run efficiently.

Do you know the signs when your yin and yang drives are out of whack? Maybe your battery isn't getting recharged or your gas tank is running empty?

For me, I know I'm lacking in relaxed yin time when I'm cranky and forgetful, when I'm wired, anxious, and jumpy, when I snap at my family, and when I feel overwhelmed and have trouble sitting still or going to sleep.

It's more rare that I'm missing active yang time, but when I am (like after a vacation or an illness), I feel bloated and dopy. Life starts feeling meaningless. I lose confidence. I don't know what to do or where to start.



Does your hybrid engine need recalibrating? Try this. Go for a little trip using whatever energy you want to engage. So if you want more yang, take a zippy car ride at top speed, pedal your bike down a hill, or go for a run. If you want more yin, walk through a labyrinth, take a paddle in a canoe, or drive a slow winding scenic route.

While you're on this trip, invite ideas of how you can bring more of this energy into your life. What activities can you start or stop doing to feel more settled and in flow?

## 14 Creating in the Middle

In his book *Coaching the Artist Within*, Eric Maisel talks about the importance of learning to create in the middle of things. In other words, don't wait until you have perfect quiet time and space, but write and make art while the flurry of work and cooking and children and friends swirls around you. I was reading the book while on vacation with my in-laws and fifteen-month-old Lia who was teething, so I both appreciated and chafed against the advice.

On one hand, I thought, why should I have to settle for creating in the middle of things? Don't I deserve the cabin in the woods, long days of writing and contemplation, walks and naps and cups of tea?

On the other hand, if I waited for those times, I wouldn't get much done. I knew that creating in the middle of things, a little at a time, was a skill that would serve me well if I could develop it. So I persisted, writing morning pages while Lia napped, teaching myself to get up early, poking away at my novel. Sometimes the noise and mess made me crazy, but I practiced tuning it out. I wrote in the car while the kids whined, I wrote when the laundry and dishes howled, I wrote on lunch hours and in bustling coffee shops. Slowly, slowly, creating in the middle of things got easier.

On the face of it, creating and running the *Pilgrimage of Desire* fundraiser while actively travelling in Europe seemed crazy! I wouldn't have chosen to time things that way, but they seemed to converge of their own accord. But the good thing about travelling while fundraising was that I couldn't get too obsessed with the campaign. When I did work on promotion, I brought the delighted energy inspired by the events of each day. Creating in the middle of things has a certain charm, the way it brings all the parts of one's life together into a jumbled and dazzling whole.



What do you need to create in the middle of? A demanding day job, chronic illness, toddlers underfoot, aging parents, depression?

Are you embracing or resisting creating in the middle of your particular brand of chaos? How can you reconcile yourself to the importance of creating in the middle?

And what can you do today to practice being in touch with your art no matter what life looks like?

## 15 The One Moment of Your Life

I have a very active mind, and I often find myself living in the past (mulling over failures and pining for lost joy) or in the future (spinning mad schemes and fretting over their outcome). It can feel good to let my thoughts run wild all over the place, like a kid tearing around a playground, but when I want relief from the dizziness and overwhelm, I bring myself back to the present.

I have a simple process I learned from Eckhart Tolle in *The Power of Now*, which is to get quiet inside and pretend that I have no past and no future, that I am just living this current moment for all eternity.

I found our time in Holland very intense because of the extremes of happiness and anxiety stirred up by our family visits and the fundraiser. And reining in my consciousness to the present helped me cope with that intensity. When a moment was so good that it was almost painful, like the afternoon we sat drinking wine and listening to music at the street festival, I allowed myself to forget that the moment would end and imagined instead that it would be my heaven, my forever.

When I was suffocating with worry that the fundraiser would fail or feeling overwhelmed by the many people, tasks, and emotions I had to handle, I closed my eyes, breathed, and asked myself whether I had any problems *right now*. And the answer was always no. I was safe, fed, and warm. My lungs were taking in oxygen and circulating it through my body. In the Netherlands, I was in a slow, beautiful environment, surrounded by kind people who loved me. Issues with money and career success and my children's development couldn't invade the present moment because they were all about the future. And even this moment, just sitting and breathing, could be a heaven.



When you are feeling dragged through past and future by your runaway thoughts, can you stop and draw a little box around this moment? Call it your eternity, a place without problems. Be a woman riding a bicycle, a man eating a sandwich, a writer holding a pen, until the end of time.

## 16 Love Letter

Writing a love letter to my work-in-progress is an idea I got from my first writing coach, [Cynthia Morris](#). It's a great way to air all the emotions swirling around a project and bridge the distance between us, to re-establish what I first saw in the story and why it's important to me. Writing a letter reminds me that I'm not alone, but that the work has a life and spirit of its own, and I'm just the conduit.

If I'm angry about what the story is demanding from me or hurt by its seeming failures, I can get that off my chest. If I'm bored and forcing myself to work on the project, the letter helps me revive the romance and remember that things work better when I can follow the thread of desire.



What kind of letter can you write to your current creative project? Something coquettish and inviting, to get to know it better? An apology for neglect or not giving your best? Or do you need to break up with a Dear John letter? Every relationship has its own shape and trajectory, and you can serve yourself and the work by bringing it to light.

## 17 The Path With Heart

It's one thing to make a decision between what you want and what you don't want. Choosing Operation Hejira was mainly about figuring out whether we could make it work, whether the risk was manageable. We *knew* we were going to pursue it if it proved possible. But how about when you're choosing between various good things, all of which you want? What do you do when the desire lines seem to diverge?

Poet and teacher [David Whyte](#) writes in *The Three Marriages* about the necessity of tending to your relationships with your partner, your work, and your self. These relationships are not competing but interconnected. Together they create a complex web of experience, support, and meaning in your life. Strengthening one can bolster the others. Neglecting one can weaken them all. So choosing between good paths involves a calculus of the heart. Which direction calls to you because it holds more good for all three of your marriages?

Vancouver was clearly beneficial for my marriage with Shawn because it would make him happy by serving his own marriage with his work and self. I could also see that Vancouver would be a good place to grow my marriage with writing and coaching, with the in-person opportunities that the city offered. And I knew it would challenge my marriage with myself by asking me to redesign my life yet again. Vancouver seemed to be the direction with the most heart, even though it meant the premature end of our world travels.



What desirable paths lie before you? Draw a map of their branchings and confluences. How would each route affect your marriage to your partner or family, your work, and your self? Don't think in terms of right and wrong choices, but in terms of where your heart tugs you. That's the direction of growth and healing.

## 18 Exercise Your Desire

I was fascinated to watch as Shawn and I navigated the logistics of our move to Vancouver. We had to make many decisions in a short time, often with limited information. The process was a master class in divining our desires. We knew that the life we were designing would be stronger and more supportive if we built it on a foundation of what *we* wanted, not what the world told us we should want.

Here are the things that helped:

**Clarity:** We had examined the previous incarnations of our lives to determine what we loved about them, everything from living car-free to a short, active commute to having the kids attend a neighbourhood school. We knew that we valued local community, natural beauty, and a simple but inviting living space. So we were able to transplant that old lifestyle into a new environment because we understood its essential ingredients.

**Intuition:** We didn't always reason out what would be the best direction, but listened to our instinct and the leap of our hearts. The beach and a seawall bike ride downtown were siren songs for Shawn. Something about the shopping streets and the library in Kitsilano made me feel at home. The little blue duplex instantly trumped every other house and apartment we'd seen.

**Signs:** We noticed and shared the little markers that showed us we were on track and drew encouragement from them. The desk and chairs that matched the ones I used to own. The fact that one of Shawn's coworkers lived around the corner from the duplex we rented. Our friends offering us a Groupon for a car-sharing service.



Every day, you get a chance to exercise your desire muscle. Make a decision today using your own clarity, intuition, and reading of the signs. Whether it's ordering a meal, buying a notebook, or picking an evening outing, try to choose swiftly and fluidly without much rational thought, and see how the choice fits. If you're happy (or not), what have you learned about what you want that you can remember for next time?

## 19 Tonglen

I'll admit it: part of me believed that Operation Hejira meant I would never suffer again. I was secretly betting that I'd reached enlightenment, that I'd cracked the code for happiness even in the midst of challenges. But life in Vancouver got hard and stayed that way. I kept hoping the problems would resolve quickly, but they didn't. My body was giving me messages that I didn't want to hear about grief and change.

What I know now is that this period in my life was not a sign of failure. It was not a punishment. It was just a turn of the labyrinth. Another spiral deeper into myself and what I'm here to learn.

I know I'm not the only writer or artist who has felt busy, disoriented, and smothered, whether negotiating a big life change or not. If you're there now, will you do this exercise with me? (Bridget gave me this to help me regain my footing — it's based on a type of Buddhist meditation called *tonglen*, which means giving and receiving.)



Close your eyes and imagine everyone around the world who is wobbly and wants to get grounded, who is tired and wants a break, who is lonely and wants to be seen. Reach out to all of those people and wish them peace and ease and connection from the bottom of your swirly, overwhelmed heart.

And then, imagine that all of us are sending that peace and ease and connection back to you. I am doing that right now. I am beaming you the rock-solidness of the mountains, and the nimble current of whitewater, and an enormous West Coast hug.

## 20 Your Heroine's Journey

I learned about the feminine counterpart to the hero's journey from [Victoria Lynn Schmidt](#). In her book *45 Master Characters*, she describes the nine stages that track the heroine from the illusion of a perfect world through the gates of judgment to the moment when all is lost, then back through rebirth and return. She writes, "Many women realize they're living a life filled with other people's goals and ambitions. They have no sense of what they truly want deep down inside until their world comes crashing down around them and they're forced to reexamine everything."

In addition to helping me with my fiction writing, these nine stages give me a way of making sense of my life and understanding how far I've come. The heroine's journey showed me that the painful awakening to depression and the stripping-away of my coping mechanisms were necessary steps in my story. I also gained strength to gather myself for the next stage when I saw how close I was to the end of this cycle of my narrative.



Where are you in your heroine's journey? (Both men and women can have a heroine's journey, just as both men and women can have a hero's journey.) Can you point to the inciting incident when you woke up to your unhappiness? Have you been shedding your weapons and defences? Have you encountered the eye of the storm? Have you experienced a death? Have you gathered support and come back to claim a new life? What's the impact of knowing where you are in your story?

**If these exercises were just what you needed and you'd like to do more, take a look at the [creativity coaching services](#) that I offer. I would love to support your art-committed life!**