

Subject: Sermons – A Series of 6 talks series on Iyanla Vanzant's book, "One Day My Soul Just Opened Up." called The Honor Series.  
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### THE HONOR SERIES 1: HONORING THE DIVINE

Today I'm starting a six-week series that I'm calling "The Honor Series." I borrowed the idea from a book written by a woman many of you are familiar with, a delightful, spiritual and slightly "irreverent" woman whose name is Iyanla Vanzant. She's written a number of very good books, been on Oprah, does the metaphysical talk show circuit. Before that, she was a defense attorney and a talk show host. She's a powerful lady, a lot of fun to listen to, and to read. But the main reason I like her is because she not only talks about life in a spiritual way -- she talks about spirituality in a practical, real-life way. She doesn't brag or preach; she's been there, in the chaos and the fear and the dark night of the soul, and she's willing to talk about it, honestly and without whining. She has accepted responsibility for her own life. That's the kind of "Life wisdom" I like to listen to, because I can identify with it.

A few years ago, in 1998, she wrote a book with the intriguing title, "One Day My Soul Just Opened Up." That title came from a poem written by her daughter, Gemmia. I don't normally do this, but I'd like to read this poem to you, because it touched me, somehow. I think it's because it seemed extremely relevant to everything we're doing here, which is learning to connect our heart and our mind, to connect our body and our spirit, learning to connect with each other and to connect with this power that flows through us as Life. Here's the poem; if you like, sit back and close your eyes and listen to it as a guided meditation:

One day, my soul just opened up.  
and things started happening,  
things I can't quite explain.  
I mean, I cried and cried like never before.  
I cried tears of ten thousand mothers.  
I couldn't even feel anything,  
because I cried 'til I was numb.

One day, my soul just opened up.  
I felt this overwhelming pride  
(what I was proud of, only God knows!),  
like the pride of a hundred thousand fathers  
basking in the glory of their newborn sons.  
I was grinnin' from ear to ear.

One day, my soul just opened up.  
I started laughing,  
and I laughed for what seemed like forever.  
Wasn't nothin' particularly funny goin' on,  
But I laughed anyhow.  
I laughed the joy of a million children playing in the mud.  
I laughed 'til my sides ached.  
Oh God! It felt so good!

One day, my soul just opened up.

There were revelations, annihilations, and resolutions,  
feelings of doubt and betrayal, vengeance and forgiveness,  
memories of things I'd seen and done before,  
of places I'd been (although I didn't know when).  
There were lives I'd lived, people I'd loved,  
battles I'd fought, victories I'd won --- and wars I'd lost.

One day, my soul just opened up,

and out poured all the things  
I'd been hiding and denying and living through  
that had happened just moments before.

One day, my soul just opened up,

and I decided I was good and ready!  
I was good and ready to surrender my life to God.

So, with my soul wide open,

I sat down, wrote Her a note ---  
and told her so.

Even though she uses a little of that old-time terminology about God as a person existing "out there" (which is not an idea her mother supports in her writings --- I'll be talking about that later), I love the imagery her language brings to mind. Because it touches on so many different aspects of the many different things we are, all of us. We aren't just a body or a soul or a brain. We aren't just a bunch of different characteristics, our age, our job, our family, our financial situation. We aren't our race or our gender or our sexual orientation. We are each a unique blend of all the many, many different ways that the Creative Power of the Universe is expressing itself in the world. That's why we have so many different thoughts and emotions, and create such different experiences, just like the different colors on an artist's palette, or the different letters of the alphabet, can be combined to create any picture or any book. The only reason our lives don't always positively reflect this blend of all the wonderful things in the world is because we forget what we have. In other words, here we are, we've got this fabulous box of 64 Crayola crayons, and we're only using eight colors.

How does this happen? We get distracted, we get confused, we get fixated on the drama going on "out there," and we close ourselves in, more and more. But the core message of this book --- and the reason I like it so much --- is that as soon as we allow our soul, our heart, our inner spiritual essence, to open up --- we remember. We remember what we've got. And then, if we use this new (or re-awakened) awareness intelligently, good things start to happen, no matter what the circumstances are that surround us. In the final paragraph of her introduction, Iyanla says it this way: "When your life is working, there will be an absence of drama. In the absence of drama, conflict and chaos --- lasting change is given the opportunity to take place."

So today, and for the next five weeks after today, I'm going to talk about honoring six of the major elements of our life, six of the major components that blend together (for better or for worse) to make up the whole. But while we're doing this, let's also remember, these areas can't really be separated. Because they all work together, they're all part of the Oneness that makes up all of Life. The only reason to examine them individually is, if we can understand and affirm how important each one of them is on its own, and then work with

them all (individually and collectively) as effectively as we possibly can --- then we can probably make the whole package run a lot better. Think of it this way --- the engine and the tires and the transmission on your car are all different, but together, they all make up “the car.” Each one needs a certain, special kind of attention, so it can play its part in the smooth operation of the whole unit. But none of them can do much for us all by itself.

There’s one more thing I want to point out, before we get started. Iyanla separates her book into six sections, honoring different aspects of our being. I like that a lot. That’s why I’m calling this “The Honor Series.” I like the word “honor” when it comes to spiritual matters, because it brings to mind feelings and attitudes like recognition, and respect, and appreciation. It brings the two parties closer together. Compare that with the old traditional word “worship.” Most of us were brought up being told to worship God, or to worship the sacraments, maybe even to worship the church we belonged to, or to worship the Bible. “Worship” is a word that brings to mind feelings like subservience, and helplessness, and authority, and separation. It’s something a “lesser being” does in deference to “a greater being.” We don’t use the word “worship” here because we don’t believe it reflects the true relationship between a loving God and its own perfect expression of Life (which is what we are).

But aside from that, here’s something even more interesting, for those of us who like to look at how our ideas of religion evolved. Dr. Eric Butterworth, in his book “The Universe Is Calling,” points out that the word “worship” pre-dates even the Old Testament. It came out of the time when people would lie on their face in fear in front of a stone idol, hoping that their fear would make the gods happy. In fact, in ancient Hebrew, the word “worship” means “to lick at the heels like a dog.” I don’t know about you, but that’s not the way I want to feel about God, or about my relationship with God. It gives a whole new meaning to those ads that invite us to “come worship as a family.” Just like you, that’s one of those ideas I decided to leave behind when I started out on my own spiritual path. So the word “honor” is especially appropriate for what we’ll be talking about over the next few weeks.

Today, to get things started, I’m talking about “Honoring the Divine,” about understanding how we can best honor this Presence which is In, As and Through us. And because it’s the most important element of Life, the most basic, creative, spiritual part, we’ll end up touching on it briefly each week as it relates to all the other elements, because it really can’t be separated completely. In the following weeks we’ll also look at honoring Our Self, honoring Others, honoring what we Feel, honoring the Process, and honoring Life as a whole. In each one, we’ll talk about a number of different attitudes and emotions and concepts that we need to consider as we “dust off” each particular part of our existence, each segment of our life experience, and tune them up a little bit, like a musical instrument or an expensive car. By the time we finish, we should all be running as smooth as silk. That’s my intention, anyway.

For many of us, I think the most significant idea in our spiritual development --- the thing that changed everything else, because it wiped out a lot of our old beliefs just by showing up --- was when we finally became aware (and became aware that we were aware) that God is not a person “out there somewhere,” but that it is a single, unified presence which is everywhere. That was the biggie, spiritually speaking --- at least it was for me --- when I finally accepted that THAT was what I believed. Once that shift occurred, all the old beliefs started to fall like dominoes. I no longer had to look for God or hide from God. I no longer had to be afraid of God, I no longer had to wonder what God wanted from me. I didn’t even have to try to ignore God anymore, because if It was everywhere, then I couldn’t ignore it. Once I got that idea, I decided my best bet was to make peace with this Power, in my own heart and mind, and to stop fighting it, mentally and emotionally --- because trying to fight against a

fundamental scientific principle which is the essence of what you are --- didn't seem to be a very intelligent thing to do. So when I finally accepted this idea (because it made perfect sense), much to my surprise --- it was a whole lot easier than I thought. Because it was no longer a matter of believing in God --- it simply became a matter of accepting this thing that everyone called God as a predictable, logical and very user-friendly source of everything that existed in the world.

I hate to admit it, but I had been in this teaching several years, and had taken several classes, before it "clicked" in my mind that THIS is the Truth that sets us free, this awareness of the true nature of God. You see, I was looking for a specific answer, when what I really needed to find was an all-encompassing Life Principle. I didn't realize, as Dr. Holmes wrote, that the Thing I was looking FOR was the Thing I was looking with. Or another way of saying it is, the desire in me to find God --- was the presence of God in me, making Itself known.

The Baha'i faith (some of you are familiar with it) says that we must each do our own independent investigation of Truth. Because that's the only way we can get hold of an idea and honestly see how it resonates with our own intelligence, our own intuition, and our own deep, inner awareness of what makes sense to us. That is how our spiritual awareness grows. Because whatever God is, whatever we end up calling it, or however we decide to describe it --- it must be the complete Truth, "the Absolute," the Ultimate Answer --- but for it to mean something to us, it has to be true for us. That's why God is called the "absolute" truth in so many faiths, because it's not "relative" to anything else. Which means that it doesn't depend upon any external circumstances, or any previously known physical facts. Because those things change as our understanding changes, as our awareness changes. In other words, our Divinity is what we grow into as we use our creativity, which is the way that Divine Intelligence works through us.

If you think about it for a minute --- this is a really interesting and revolutionary idea --- that means God needs us as much as we need God. Because we are the way It expresses in the world (we'll talk about that more next week.) Think of God as the ocean, with us as the waves. Waves are the ocean being expressed in the form of waves. The waves need the ocean to exist. But the nature of the ocean requires it to create waves so it can churn itself, which oxygenates the water so life can exist in the ocean which keeps the ocean alive. The ocean also needs the waves; that's why it keeps creating them. That's a great metaphor for our symbiotic relationship with the Divine. That is why we should honor it, and respect it, and appreciate it as an essential part of our ability to live well. But in many ways, our relationship is a mutually beneficial one.

There's another story I'd like to share with you, one which demonstrates this interdependent relationship between us and this Power which creates through us. It supposedly takes place a number of years from now, when the scientists of the world decide that they have learned so much, they've become so competent and so knowledgeable, that they don't need God anymore. They can heal any disease, they can grow life in the laboratory, they can clone anything. So the leading scientists of the world, after a long discussion, select one of their most prominent members to go to God and break the news. They figure it's the least they can do.

So, the scientist goes to see God (remember, this is a metaphor), and he says, "God, we really want to thank you for all the help you've given us through the years. But at this point, we've talked it over, we've looked at the facts, and it is our professional opinion that we are now capable of going it alone. So, you can feel free to retire and relax, go create another universe, play golf, whatever you want."

Well, God listens, and nods his head, and then he says, "I see. Well, I have tell you, I think that's great. But before we do this, let's have ourselves a friendly little contest. Let's

both create a human being. And just to make it even more interesting, we'll do it the old fashioned way. If you folks can do that, completely on your own, with no help from me at all, then I'm convinced. I'm outa here, no questions asked."

The scientist smiled, and said, "You've got yourself a deal." Then he leans over and picks up a handful of dirt --- at which point God says, "Oh no, wait just a minute. . . You guys are gonna have to get your own dirt!"

Once we recognize how this power works --- how it is there to be used, but to be used intelligently and respectfully as It's nature requires --- then we need to figure out how to adjust our thoughts and emotions and behavior to work in harmony with it. And one of the most basic ways for us to do this is to trust this power to be exactly what it is, all the time; to be available to us, all the time; and to be a perfect expression of the best Life has to offer, all the time. Notice, this DOESN'T mean we are "putting our trust IN God" --- it means that we are trusting the nature of God. There's a big difference. Trusting God demonstrates an awareness and a knowingness and a confidence that we can depend upon it to support us in creating whatever we need. "Putting our trust IN God" is a statement of dependency --- it's a belief that this Power will independently do things for us that we can't or won't do for ourselves. Trusting, as a way of thinking, like faith, keeps us in the picture, it keeps us as an important part of the relationship.

The best way for us to do this is through prayer and meditation, and a willingness to be open. Someone once said that prayer is the way we talk to God, and meditation is the way we listen to God. In either case, they are both expressions of our deep awareness of what God is. Prayer doesn't get God to do anything. If we do it right, it is simply an active demonstration of what we know God is already doing for us. Iyanla says it this way: "Prayer brings us into alignment with what already exists within us and opens our mind to the revelation of this existence in the outer world. In other words, what we pray for, we already have; but in most cases we are not aware of it." So prayer is simply a clear and confident affirmation of the Truth which already exists. And meditation helps to get our busy little brain --- our "monkey mind," as the Buddhists call it --- out of the way, so that we can hear the Truth as it speaks to us, which it is always doing. What she calls willingness is our deliberate decision to see the spirituality in every physical situation. Which allows us to come up with a creative, loving and peaceful solution to any problem we might be dealing with.

Finally, we need to recognize that two of God's most powerful characteristics are not something that society normally looks upon as strengths. These are peacefulness and simplicity. If we can understand --- I mean REALLY understand, at a gut level, at a heart level --- that this Power which surrounds us and fills the world is always at peace, and always ready to act in the simplest, most uncomplicated and beautiful way --- then we can allow our life to work that way, too. We can quickly resolve any conflict we're caught up in, we can get rid of all the convoluted rationalizations we seem to come up with, we can stop trying to find a shortcut, we can begin to live the way we are meant to live.

You see, all this stress in our life that seems to show up because of the problems we continue to have, is NOT there because of our problems --- it's there because of the way we are dealing with those problems. It comes from the fear and the anger and the control issues that we interject into problems that we should be able to solve very easily. The Truth is, there is always a very good answer, to every question, and (in the end) --- it is always a spiritual answer. That's why Emmet Fox, the great spiritual teacher, said, "Don't think about the problem; think about God." That is the answer that comes to us when we allow our soul to open up, when we get back in tune with the Divine. Being aware, being open, getting our "bloated nothingness out of the way," as Emerson so beautifully put it, is the only way that our life --- no matter who we are or what we're going through --- can ever become simpler and

more at peace, and more like the nature of this loving, spiritual energy which created us out of it's own substance.

This is the Truth in your life. And this is the Truth in mine. And so it is!

## THE HONOR SERIES 2: HONORING YOUR SELF

Today is the second talk in a series I'm doing about honoring all the different components of this one single spiritual experience we are all having: this thing called Life. I borrowed this idea from the book, "One Day My Soul Just Opened Up," written by the fabulous Iyanla Vanzant. As I said last week, I love to use the word "honor" when we're talking about spirituality because it's a word that is respectful towards everyone and everything with which we have a spiritual relationship. Of course, as we all know, the Truth is that ALL our relationships are spiritual, because all of Life has behind it an energy, an essence, which is completely spiritual.

When we honor something or someone, what we are really doing is recognizing, respecting and appreciating its value in our life without minimizing our own value. We're honoring their reflection in us, and our reflection in them. We're admiring all the wonderful things that person or that idea represents, we're honoring all that it has to offer. But at the same time, we're also making the unstated assumption that both we, and that which we are honoring --- and the whole world, for that matter --- are better off because of our mutual connection, because of our relationship, because of what we are bringing into the world together. We aren't really honoring something we want but can't have, or something we'll never be able to achieve --- we are honoring someone or something which is showing us how much better we all can be.

Last week, I talked about how this more thoughtful and open-minded way of spiritual thinking requires some interesting changes in the way we look at God, in the way we see this power which created us and creates the world and creates our life experiences, in, as and through us. Instead of seeing this power --- whether we call it the Universal Consciousness, or the Power of Life, Buddha, Allah, whatever --- instead of seeing It as a mysterious supernatural being that we need to please, or as some Religious Father Figure who is both arbitrary and unpredictable, based on his mood for the day --- by honoring God, instead of worshiping God, we accept this Creative Source as a partner, as a co-creator with us of our Life experiences. We see it as a supportive Presence which always works in dependable, predictable ways that we can use any time we want. That puts our relationship with God on a much more mature and constructive footing, because it creates a relationship based on love and respect instead of guilt and fear. In fact, I believe, if we could just change the way the whole world sees God (without having to change anything else), people everywhere would be much more willing to accept and to include this Loving Intelligence in their daily lives and to apply it to the world at large. That's why Honoring the Divine is something we all need to learn to do more of.

But the next subject on our list of things to honor is the person we look at every day -- in the mirror. That's why today's talk is entitled "Honor Your Self." The reason this is so important is because of the position we hold in the creative process itself. In other words, quite simply, we are the channel through which intelligence creates form. We are the filter the divine light shines through before that light can appear in the world. So what we believe about ourselves, what we allow ourselves to be --- the intelligence, the passion, the courage, the love, the creativity we allow ourselves to express --- is the only thing that determines how large or how deep our life is going to be able to grow. That means, if you think about it, that the world isn't being held back or messed up by problems that we are unable to solve --- it is being shortchanged by solutions we are unwilling to contribute.

Since the 1960's, especially in the Western World, there has been a shift in the thinking of a lot of people, and that shift has resulted in a massive amount of attention being focused on the individual. "My" inner child, my aura, my spirit guides, my mantra. My guru. All that stuff. Call it the Shirley MacClain syndrome. As a result, many of the so-called "New Age"

teachings (which this is NOT) have been accused of being self-centered (and the term is NOT meant as a compliment.) Unfortunately, the New Thought teachings, such as this one, have been carelessly lumped into that same category by people who know nothing about this way of thinking. That is a misconception that we need to change, and it actually is changing, with every person who comes in these doors and eventually figures out what it is that we are saying here.

You see, we are not a self-centered teaching. We are a God-centered teaching. The confusion (not in my mind, but in the viewpoint of those who stand outside of these teachings and criticize) comes in the way we teach the relationship between God and us. As I talked about last week, we do not believe that the Creator and Its creation are ever separated. They can't be, because they are One and the same. So that means that each one of us is a unique, individual expression of the only Power there is. We are each a perfect idea in the One Mind we call God. "We are not all of God, but God is all we are." That sounds pretty straight-forward, but think about what it really means. It means that any respect or appreciation or honor that we give to the Divine, we must always be ready and willing to give the same respect, appreciation and honor --- to ourselves. (We also need to give it to other people, but we'll talk about that next week.)

The problem is, by the time we are old enough and mentally aware enough to examine ourselves and to discover who we really are --- we find that the decision has already been made for us. Of course, it wasn't the right decision, and WE didn't consciously make it, but it's been made just the same. In some cases, we may even find that we have a very specific picture in mind of who we are, and who we are not, of what we can and can't do, and of our overall place in life from now until the day we die. Psychologists tell us that by the time we reach age two, 50 percent of what we believe about ourselves is already formed. By the age of six, it's 60%; by the age of eight, it's 80%. By the time we reach our early teens, fourteen or so, over 95 percent of who we think we are has been firmly established, almost all of it in response to what we have been told by the people around us who were responsible for our mental and spiritual initiation. Unfortunately, many of those people who, during our formative years, laid this supposedly "helpful and loving" information on us --- did not think very highly of themselves, either. Because they went through the same process when THEY were growing up.

I realize this isn't true for everyone. Some of us were fortunate enough to grow up among positive, open-minded people who had somehow learned to think well of themselves, and insisted upon teaching us to do the same. I've met people who grew up that way, including some of you, and people who grew up surrounded by that kind of consciousness are different. They almost glow. That's what Judy Jackson and her volunteers are teaching the kids upstairs right this very minute in the Youth Church.

But if we didn't grow up that way (which is the case for most of us, I'm afraid), we are probably very much aware of the almost constant dichotomy, the conflict, between what we feel is true about us at the level of Spirit --- which we tell you here, over and over again --- and what the world tells us is true. In many cases, those two messages are extremely different. That's why, when we finally decide that we are ready to make a mental and a spiritual change --- when we are finally ready to quit thinking of ourselves as some poor, untalented, unlovable, victimized being, and we start to proclaim, fearlessly and joyfully, by our thoughts, words and actions, that we are perfect potential, ready to express infinite possibility in every part of our life --- that's why some people around us get a little bit nervous. Socrates once said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." But what he DIDN'T say is that the examined life not only takes an extraordinary amount of honesty and commitment --- it can be really, really scary, too, both for the people going through it and for the people around

them. You see, There are a lot of people out there who like thinking that they already know who they are --- even if who they think they are is a whole lot less than who and what they could be.

When it comes to honoring our self, our fears get in the way of our ability to see and to appreciate our spiritual magnificence. In her book, "A Return To Love," Marianne Williamson wrote a powerful passage which some of you have heard before, but it applies so well that I want to read it again.

She says:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,  
talented and fabulous?"

Actually, who are you NOT to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

There's nothing enlightened about shrinking,

So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

Then comes the part which applies to what we'll be talking about next week, which will be "Honoring Others."

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously  
give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,  
our presence automatically liberates others.

One of the most insidious ways we fail to honor ourselves is by lying to our self. We lie about our dreams and desires, we lie about what we really want from people, we lie about what we need, or think we need, to feel fulfilled. Now, these aren't necessarily conscious or deliberate lies, but they're just as deceptive, and the results can be just as damaging. Frequently we do it so that we can appear "socially acceptable." We say things like, "It was nothing; anybody could have done it. No, I don't mind; I didn't want that promotion anyway. It's all right; I wasn't good enough for him or her anyway." When we tell people things like this, two things generally happen, neither of them very helpful to our personal growth.

First of all, people begin to treat us in accordance with the way we talk about ourselves. If we keep saying things which reflect a belief that we're not important, that other people's needs are more important than ours, that we don't deserve to be loved, paid, rewarded, whatever it happens to be --- other people are very likely to treat us like dirt and give us very little respect. They're not being mean or cruel; they're just giving us exactly what we ask for. But even though we're asking for it, we still get resentful, and we keep carrying around that festering anger until it poisons our body, our relationships and everything else we touch.

The second thing that happens when we fail to speak well of ourselves is that we begin to believe our own lies. That's when all that anger and resentment we feel gets aimed in here, at us. And it is extremely destructive when we are unable to give ourselves the love and respect that we deserve. Because if we can't express love and respect for ourselves, no

one else is going to be able to give it to us either. And we also won't be able to give it to any other person. That's a perfect formula for living a very lonely life. That's how so many people end up shutting themselves off from all the possibilities for growth which are always abundantly present in the world, taking whatever little bit of joy that comes to them, and they still don't know what to do to make things better. That's always a very sad situation to be in.

To grow beyond this kind of self-imposed limitation, there are several things we have to do. And the first and most important thing we have to do is --- to become aware of who and what we are. That means seeking, finding and understanding the power present in us as spiritual beings. In the Science of Mind, Dr. Holmes says, "It is only through the revelation of the self, to the self, that we understand life; that we approach the power which is at the heart of God." But once we recognize our spiritual self, then we need to look at how our inner spiritual self is being expressed in the physical world. Because that is where it's going to show up. That is the mirror that shows us what we are wearing. And it isn't always a pretty picture. But whatever our life looks like, whatever we have done or whatever we are doing, we still need to see it for what it is, whether it's good or not-so-good.

You see, we need to honor ourselves, NOT because we do everything right all the time, not because we don't have any problems or because there's absolutely nothing about ourselves that we want to change or improve. We need to honor ourselves because we are capable of recognizing what needs to be healed --- and because we are capable of healing it. That means, when we look at ourselves, if we see something potentially upsetting or embarrassing, it doesn't do us any good at all to judge ourselves, criticize ourselves, or to tell ourselves how bad or stupid we are. As long as we are willing to take responsibility for our temporary flaws (and they're all temporary), and as long as we are willing to use our power to choose and our passion for life to do whatever needs to be done to change those things --- then we are actually expressing the greatest power there is in the world. That's nothing to criticize ourselves for. That is something to celebrate.

We all have our own deep, dark secrets about ourselves, things we wouldn't want anyone to know. Here's a news flash; most of it ain't that big a deal. It just feels like a big deal to us because we've been beating ourselves up for so long. While we're at it, here's another news flash --- there is nothing we can possibly do which is not already forgiven and forgotten by God. Our real problem is that long list of things in our life that have not yet been forgiven -- - by us. BY US! Once we become open and aware of the things in life that we want to change, once we stop hiding them, we can begin to accept them and (in the process), accept ourselves. And then we can choose to change them or not, at our own pace, without worrying about what God or anyone else thinks about our perfectly normal and "healable" faults. You see, God doesn't worry about our faults, and no one else's opinion matters.

The "growth" part of this process of self-love and self acceptance, because that's what we're talking about here, comes when we use our intelligence, our love of life, and our freedom to choose, to make decisions which demonstrate love and respect for our self and for every other person. We sometimes forget that we have complete power over our ability to make choices. We can make them, change them, or just put them on hold. And we can always learn something new from every choice we make, no matter how it turns out. Refusing to make a decision in some area of our life, whether it's in a job, a relationship, a medical decision, whatever it happens to be, because we are afraid of making the wrong decision --- does not show respect for our ability to learn and grow from our mistakes and our failures. We have to stop thinking less of ourselves just because we make mistakes, or because we're doing something that society doesn't consider normal or acceptable. Elbert Hubbard, the philosopher, once said, "The greatest mistake you can make in life is to be continually afraid that you will make one." I like that philosophy.

In her book, Iyanla writes this: "The willingness to make conscious choices is another way of demonstrating that you are ready to find new ways of living and being before you are forced to do it. When what we do, and the way we do it, no longer fits our purpose in life, we must choose to do something else. That means we are aware of our patterns, and no longer choose to embrace them. This becomes the choice to grow." Then she says, "When we consciously choose growth over stagnation and fear, the divine spirit of the universe will support our decision by bringing our lesson gently and lovingly." In other words, when we learn to treat ourselves gently and lovingly --- the universe treats us the same way.

Finally, we not only should learn to think better of ourselves --- we need to treat ourselves better, too. That means to take care of ourselves, mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually. The first step comes when we learn that it's OK to pamper ourselves, to slow down, to give ourselves a day off --- for no particular reason, except that we want to. And we reach the graduate level when we refuse to let anyone else steal or tamper with our time, our energy, or our ability to enjoy life. This kind of change, like every lasting change in our life, has to come from the inside out. For example, when we give ourselves permission to slow down, then it's much easier to keep other people from rushing us. When we learn to stop criticizing ourselves, or punishing ourselves with emotions like guilt and shame, for any reason whatsoever --- we stop allowing anyone else to make us feel inferior. In fact, one of the best ways we can honor ourselves is to keep away from people who do not honor us or others. As it says in the Desiderata, these people are "a vexation to the spirit."

It's a sad thing to say, but some of us have even forgotten how to have fun. We've forgotten how to play. Experiences which encourage joy and laughter and playing are spiritual food for our soul. Recess should not stop just because we're not in elementary school anymore. Somebody once told me, they believed that every time they laughed, they added ten minutes to their life. I'm not sure that there's any scientific evidence to back this up, but it sure sounds good to me. Even if we don't live any longer, it will make the time we do spend here a whole lot more enjoyable.

The Indian Guru Swami Muktananda wrote this verse:

Honor your own self.

Meditate on your own self.

Worship your own self.

Kneel to your own self.

Understand your own self.

Your God dwells within you --- as you.

This is not arrogance. It isn't some cosmic ego trip, either. It is simply awareness. It is enlightenment, in the purest, most beautiful sense of the word. It is a recognition of the spiritual truth of what we are, and an acceptance that we are always learning and growing, because we are the way God learns and grows. That is why we're here. You are somebody special, and so am I. That is why we deserve all the love and honor and respect we can ever give to ourselves, unconditionally, all the time, in every way possible. And next week we'll take it one step further as we talk about Honoring Others.

This is the Truth in Your life. And this is the Truth in mine. And so it is.

### THE HONOR SERIES 3: HONORING OTHERS

This is Week Three of our series on honoring everything within us, everything around us, and everything else that exists (I think that covers just about all of it, don't you?) In the book I've been talking about, One Day My Soul Just Opened Up, by Iyanla Vanzant, she separates all of life into six different aspects, six different areas which are all intertwined, but each one of them has its own particular characteristics that we all have to deal with. And each one of these characteristics affects each one of us in a slightly different way. Some of these things are second nature to many of us, like freedom, and simplicity, and prayer. But others require some real effort on our part, like awareness, and compassion and forgiveness. She has a total of forty different characteristics, and if you just read through the list (like I did the first time I read the book), and think about how the way in which you have dealt with each one of them has been either a help or a hindrance in your life --- you just might find (as I did) some very productive areas to work on, especially if you've made the decision to pay more attention to your spiritual growth. (I assume most of you here are in that category; we tend to attract a lot of spiritual seekers here.)

I also like the order in which we're covering these six areas, because it's kind of a "building block approach." The first three weeks deal with honoring those relationships which are important to us, beginning with our relationship with the Divine, that energy of God or Life or Nature, whatever you want to call it, that makes the world work the way it does. It's what Emerson calls "The Oversoul." Some people call it "The Buddha Mind" or the "Christ Consciousness." It's all the same thing. That was Week One. Then, last week, we talked about honoring our Self, honoring our awareness that we are one of the ways the Divine expresses in the world, the way it creates and loves and evolves. And we are THE way that Power works in OUR life. That awareness may give us a real sense of peace and personal empowerment, but it also tells us that we are responsible for how we choose to use this Law of Mind, this Universal Consciousness, to create all our experiences. In other words, once we realize that we and God are co-creators of everything that happens to us, then there isn't anybody we can blame anymore. Our "victim" days are over.

Today, I'm going to talk about the third phase of our relationship with life --- I'm going to talk about Honoring Others. And by "others," I'm not going to go too much into our relationship and our responsibility to the whole human race, because that's what we'll talk about in Week Six, when we wrap things up talking about Honoring Life.

Today we're going to talk about the people who affect us most directly, whether it's our family, our partner, our spouse, our co-workers, our neighbors. Because these are the people we interact with on a real, emotional, face-to-face level, every day. So this isn't just some theoretical discussion about human beings in general. These are the people who make us crazy, the people who make us cry, the people we would die for, if it came down to that. And they'd do the same for us, too. That's why so much of our energy is tied up with them, because we love them, we care about what happens to them, we care about what they think about us. When we're upset with each other, our whole life feels like it's falling apart. When we're happy and enjoying each other, we feel like we're on top of the world. Now I know you've been told many times, frequently from this stage, that we should be able to find our own peace of mind within, and we should --- but it's a whole lot easier and a lot more fun when we are surrounded by people who love us and support us. I like what Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote in his book When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough. He says, "A life without people, without the same people day after day, people who belong to us, people who will be there for us, people who need us and whom we need in return, may be very rich in other things, but in human terms, it is no life at all." Though it partially depends upon what kind of a day you're having at home, I think most of us would probably agree with him.

So honoring the other people in our life is an important part of making our life worthwhile. Unfortunately, even though most of us can understand why loving and respecting and appreciating the people who are close to us makes life easier --- it's still one of the most complicated and confusing things we have to deal with, day in and day out. People who deal with other people well, especially family --- people who always keep their cool, people who never criticize or judge other people --- as far as I'm concerned, these are the most enlightened beings on the planet. I've always wanted to know their secret. And after years of being immersed in a very wide assortment of spiritual and metaphysical writings, I think I've finally found it. I haven't got it "in here" yet, but I think I know what it is.

People who always relate well to other people, are people who have learned to see and to accept the presence of God --- as Love --- in the world, in themselves, and in every other person. They have learned to honor others, no matter what. That's it. That's what the Buddha taught, that's what Jesus taught, it's even in the Koran. But for many of us, that's easier said than done. For example, when you have a brother you grew up with, as I did, who is killing himself with alcohol, losing good jobs, destroying what could be an excellent marriage --- and when you confront him, he tells you to mind your own business --- it's hard to honor either him OR his decision. Because I knew --- from my position as the successful, self-righteous older brother --- that he was wrong, and I was right. And I could not understand why he wouldn't just admit it and start fixing his life.

Not to make a long story out of this, what I had to eventually learn and to accept was that I am not responsible for other people's decisions --- even the people I love. Even if their decisions are what I or the world might consider to be bad decisions. That was a very difficult thing for me to accept at the time, because (I can see in retrospect) I was high control, I was extremely disciplined --- and I was very judgmental. (I still am, but I think I'm a little healthier than I was.) For those of you familiar with that collection of character traits, that's a pretty dangerous combination. And what it did was this: it caused me to put a lot of pressure on myself to make his life different. I felt a little guilty, I felt angry, and I even felt partially responsible. Not for putting him where he was --- but for not getting him out of it. What I finally realized was --- that I WAS responsible. Just not for the things I thought. Instead, I was responsible for loving him, I was responsible for treating him with respect as a perfect expression of God, and I was responsible for being there if he asked for help. Oh yes, there was one more thing I was responsible for --- I was responsible for honoring all the decisions which he had made up to that point, whether I agreed with them or not. In other words, I had to honor the Truth about him, however he was allowing that Truth to manifest, or else I would be unable to honor any new decisions he made if he decided to turn his life around. Which, unfortunately, he never did. And he died at the age of 34.

Anyway, that was a long time ago. But it was one of those life lessons I keep going back to, because it was such an important revelation to me. The reason I brought up this story, which is very similar to the story the author tells about her own brother, is because it shows why we have to be grounded both in God (as the Source of all the Intelligence and Love in the Universe) --- and grounded in God as Self --- before we can hope to deal constructively with the deeply emotional and highly challenging situations which always seem to occur in our closest personal relationships. By that I mean, trust and faith in a God of our understanding is the only possible basis for our ability to accept who we are. And everything we learn to love and accept as true about us --- must also be true about everyone else. It has to.

The key to opening ourselves up to others is compassion. The Dalai Lama once said, "It is my belief, for the world in general, that compassion is more important than religion."

That's true, if for no other reason than that no one ever started a war arguing about compassion. He also said, "Compassion is, by nature, peaceful and gentle, but it is also very powerful. It is the true sign of inner strength." So we have to be strong to be truly compassionate because we have to be able to give whatever we need to give, without feeling drained. But we also need the strength to be able to withhold what we have, even in the presence of great suffering, because giving it may not be what's needed.

You see, showing compassion does not mean giving everything we have so that we can feel better about ourselves. And it doesn't mean that we join in and help someone feel like a victim by helping them to blame others for their problems. Compassion requires strength, intelligence and discretion. It's hard to watch someone suffer, especially if it's someone we love, or someone we care about. But sometimes working their way through their suffering is the only way they'll ever figure out how to take care of themselves. It's not just about giving people help --- it's about supporting them as they heal and grow. That way, we can honor the Divine Wisdom in us by honoring the Divine potential in them --- until that same Divine Wisdom is finally expressed through them.

To do this effectively and constructively, that means we have to be willing to set boundaries, and that's something many of us have a lot of trouble doing. Any former lifeguards out there? (I never was, but I dated one or two, back in Florida.) Anyway --- one of the first things a lifeguard learns is that the person you are trying to save is almost always going to try and drown you before you can save them. It's not intentional. It's just that a person who thinks they're drowning is so desperate, they'll grab on to anyone. And if you don't know your own strengths and capabilities, and work within them, you'll both go under together.

That's what boundaries do for us. Just because we love someone, and just because we happen to have our life in pretty good working order, doesn't mean that we can't say "no" when the situation requires it, or that we shouldn't stand up for ourselves when it's necessary. If we are clear about how God works in our life --- and if we are completely certain that we are being loving and generous in a way that supports us both, in a way that doesn't make us feel used or manipulated or resentful --- then we can draw very clear boundaries and not feel guilty about our decision to work within those boundaries. We can love and support someone completely, and still say "no." We don't have to justify ourselves, we don't have to get angry or self-righteous. We can just be present with them, and let them know what we are willing to do for them, and what we are NOT willing to do for them. If that's not enough, if they get angry and strike out at us, or even if they leave --- that is their decision. And we can honor their decision without giving in. It may hurt to see them hurting, but it doesn't mean that we love them any less.

Marianne Williamson writes this in her book Illuminata: "We don't have to decide whether to love others at the expense of ourselves, or ourselves at the expense of others, because ultimately we are all one." In other words, we can help others more, and support our own growth at the same time, when we are calm and clear about what we are willing and able to do.

Probably the greatest obstacle to our ability to feel compassion for others, and to our ability to set honest and unselfish boundaries, is our tendency to judge other people. Instead of being open and receptive, our tendency sometimes is to be closed and critical. This is especially a problem when we mis-use the wisdom of this teaching to justify our judgmentalism by saying something like, "Hey, our thoughts create our experience. They created this problem. They can un-create it." That's like a fourth grade teacher who says about her students in math class, "Hey, they got it wrong. Let them figure it out." We are all here to help one another, we're all here to teach and to learn from one another, if no other

way than by our example. If we can simply observe what other people are doing, without interjecting our ego, our perceptions or our own personal preferences, we not only might be able to understand why they are doing what they're doing, and offer them a positive role model, or some positive reinforcement --- we might even learn something about ourselves.

I think sometimes that too many of us work so hard to understand the Truth of our own being, to understand how to use this power in our life --- then we proceed to act as if every person around us is incompetent or ignorant. We criticize and judge everything they do and how they do it. We step in without being invited, to try and make their decisions for them, to do their thinking, to shape their lives in our own image and likeness. We know that the answers we need FOR US are inside of us --- but we can't seem to trust the same wisdom when it expresses in, as and through them. And it IS the same wisdom.

When we recognize, at the deepest level of knowing, that God is truly all there is, and that it is everywhere present, which means in every person we meet, then we can begin to release others to their own greatness. Or to their own Godness, whatever that looks like for them. Whenever we judge someone based on our expectations, or when we try to impose an answer on them, we are trying to impose our own individual answer. That won't work, anymore than it does when someone tries to impose THEIR answer ON US. The people we love have the same Wisdom flowing through them as we do, and they have the same Divine ability to choose that we have. There is something in them that is guiding and directing them on their spiritual path. They may or may not know what it is . . . yet. But we don't have to know. We just have to accept this as their Truth, and to honor them by releasing them to their own journey. We don't have to abandon them; we can just support them, like a parent who's teaching their child how to ride a two-wheel bicycle. Eventually, we have to let go, or they're never going to learn.

This brings us to forgiveness. We talk about that a lot here, because it's a common theme in all the great spiritual traditions. How do we forgive someone close to us who hurts us, or hurts themselves or others, especially if they keep doing it over and over and over again? That's something we all find hard to deal with, even if we know that we need to do it. The interesting thing is, if we are able to truly feel compassion, to set our own personal boundaries, and to stop being judgmental --- forgiveness takes care of itself. It becomes a non-issue. Because, if we're not judging, then we don't see their behavior as bad. Because our boundaries are firm, we don't feel resentment or anger. We don't feel responsible for them. And because we feel compassion, we know that we love them no matter what they've done. So there's nothing to forgive.

Notice, however, that I did NOT say that we approve of their behavior, or that we don't mind if they do it again. We may need to have an intervention and put them in detox. We may need to move out until they figure out what monogamy means. We may need to protect our children or freeze a bank account or call the police. But we don't need to do any of these things with a feeling of vindictiveness, anger or reproach. It doesn't have to be a conflict, where someone wins and someone loses. We can do all these things from a place of love, while still honoring them. We'll talk about that more next week when we talk about Honoring Our Feelings. You see, forgiveness is about letting go of our negative attitudes and emotions, not for the other person's sake --- but for our own.

In the book, Iyanla Vanzant writes this: "When you cannot move beyond the memories of what someone else has done to you, and those memories keep you hurt, angry, or in any way limited in life, it is time to forgive. When the only thing you remember about someone is what they did to you and not the fact that they are a human being prone to make mistakes, it is time to forgive. If you don't like yourself, it is time to forgive. If there is anyone, anywhere

on the planet you can honestly say that you do not love, it is time to forgive. Start with yourself.”

The key word we must keep coming back to, especially when we are dealing with the people who are closest to us, is healing. There is no relationship, and nothing in any relationship, that cannot be healed by love, appreciation, and respect. Healing comes from a word meaning “to bring together.” Only when we are strong enough to finally release any anger we may be holding, to release any expectations of how others are supposed to live, and to release the power anyone else’s behavior has over us, will we be able to honor the people in our life, and to accept the gifts that they bring to us. Some of those gifts will be gifts of love. Those are always nice. But some of those gifts will be lessons, sometimes painful lessons, whose value we may not see until years later. In either case, we should simply be grateful for everything we learn --- and then let it go. Only then can we let the healing begin. That is the way we Honor Others. And next week we’ll talk about Honoring What We Feel.

This is the Truth in your life. And this is the Truth in mine. And so it is.

## THE HONOR SERIES 4: HONORING WHAT YOU FEEL

A lot of people have been telling me how much they like this “Honoring” series I’ve been doing, based on Iyanla Vanzant’s book “One Day My Soul Just Opened Up,” and I have to admit that I’m enjoying it, too. I think it gives a very warm perspective on how to look at all the different aspects of our life, and how to deal with them without beating up on ourselves, which is something we do way too much.

In the 12-Step programs, they say that life is about progress, not perfection, and we’ll be talking about that more next week when we look at Honoring the Process. But I think most of us realize that the reason we’re here isn’t to reach Nirvana or Satori, or to find Salvation; it’s to learn the things we need to learn so that when we get to wherever it is we’re going, we’ll be more prepared to do whatever it is we’re going to do. I believe this is a classroom, and we are all students. And, at the same time --- we are all teachers. So whenever any one of us learns how to act in a more powerful, a more creative, or a more loving way --- and we begin to teach others by our example --- we all benefit. The whole world moves forward. We may contribute a little, or we may contribute a lot, based on our own individual growth and spiritual practice. But we all contribute something, even if our only contribution is to be a bad example.

The last few weeks, I’ve been talking about the three most important relationships we have, and we ALL have them. We each have a relationship with the Divine, what many people call God, whatever our idea of God happens to be. We each have a relationship with ourselves, where we decide (either deliberately or by default) how powerful we believe we are, and how much value we believe we can contribute to Life as a whole by expressing our Divine characteristics. And we each have a variety of relationships with all people everywhere, but especially with the people closest to us. That’s where we decide not only how our life might affect theirs, but how much their life will affect us. Those three relationships, if you think about it, determine how we go about creating our future (both individually and collectively), based upon our inner spiritual awareness about the present, and our beliefs and decisions about our past. If we add to that the understanding that we are all connected at the spiritual level --- that we’re all One at the God level --- then we can even start finding ways together to heal the problems we’re facing in the world around us. That’s what most of us want, because we’ve figured out that we don’t live in our own individual little worlds (though there are still some people who think they do); what most of us want is simply a better life for ourselves and a better world for everybody else, too. That’s where this teaching is bringing us, and where this community is going.

Today, in Week 4, our subject is Honoring What You Feel. At this point, we’re moving beyond just the awareness of our relationships, into the active part of our life, into the part where this power we feel inside --- this constant flow of thoughts combined with emotions --- is being constantly expressed, so that our thoughts and our beliefs are now directly affecting our actions. Of course, it works the same with either positive or negative feelings, but most of our challenges seem to come whenever we get caught up in the negative feelings (like fear, anger, guilt, shame, that kind of thing). What we have to realize is, if we don’t understand what’s at the core of these feelings --- that is, if we don’t recognize them for what they are and deal with them intelligently and thoughtfully and spiritually --- then we will probably end up creating some very undesirable results which not only serve to exaggerate our original feelings --- they will also create more negative results, until it becomes a cycle, with us feeling like we’re stuck in the middle. Unless we learn how to recognize how we got there, we may end up living our life constantly reacting to unpleasant experiences that we ourselves keep creating. And even though that is the way a lot of people live (and die) in this world --- it’s not how most of us want to live.

This is not just an emotional or a psychological problem; it's primarily a spiritual one. Because our feelings (or our emotions as we call them) are the most powerful energy we have. Our feelings are the way we show how important something is to us, they're the way we state to the Universe how powerful or powerless we feel over the circumstances of our life. Listen to these quotes from Dr. Ernest Holmes in the Science of Mind textbook: he says, "Feeling is at the center of the Universe and, reflected through our consciousness, sheds its glow wherever our thought travels." And this one: "The creative power of God responds to feeling more quickly than to any other mental attitude. Therefore we should try to feel the reality of what we are doing when we state our prayers or affirmations. This reality is felt as we become more and more convinced that Spirit responds to us."

Dr. Holmes, and many other spiritual teachers, tell us that our thoughts are definitely creative, but they are powered by the feelings behind them, and our desires will always manifest in direct proportion to the strength of our emotions. In other words, the more feeling we put behind our thoughts about something, the faster more of it is likely to show up. Of course, we also need to consider the direction of our thoughts. Most of us have seen that honest, open, unconditional love attracts more love into our life. That one's easy to see. But in the same way (because it's the same law at work), "blah" emotions like apathy and indecision, with little or no emotion or deliberate thought attached, will just keep us wandering aimlessly, while giving in to intense fear or anger or shame, for example, will only create situations and experiences which encourage more of the same. That's why it's important for us to use our conscious power to choose --- to select not only which emotions are to receive our greatest energy and attention, but where and how we want to focus them.

Most of you know, there's plenty of scientific evidence which proves that our body chemistry changes whenever we feel a strong emotion. The acid level in our blood changes, our breathing and heart rate accelerate, we start to sweat. In fact, the chemical makeup of our tears is actually different for tears of joy than it is for tears of sorrow. But there's also a lot of anecdotal evidence which points to the fact that angry people attract more hostility, and fearful people attract are more frequent victims of violent crime. So there must be more than just a physical change; it must be an energy change, or a shift in our vibration.

Eckhart Tolle, in his book, *The Power of Now*, says that, "Emotion arises at the place where mind and body meet." In other words, he's saying that emotions are our body's reaction to our thoughts. That means, if our body is responding to something, whether it's an unpleasant event or a nasty comment somebody made, then there must be a thought and belief behind that physical response. And since it's a thought WE must be having (because nobody else can have our thoughts), not only can we figure out what that thought is --- we can change it. We can change it! If it's a thought about something in our past, we may not be able to change the past --- but we can certainly change the way we are thinking about the past. Whatever it is in our mind, as we change our thought or belief, that affects the emotion -- which creates a new experience. It takes a little practice, but it's something anyone can do, no matter how tied to our emotions we think we are.

You see, our emotions are not imposed upon us from the outside --- they arise from our thoughts and beliefs about what we think is happening around us, and how we think we'll be able to deal with it. That's why two people standing right next to each other can have the same experience --- and one person is completely terrified while the other person doesn't even notice. Or think about two people on a roller coaster, or a ferris wheel; one of them is excited, the other is scared to death. Same experience, different response. So the difference is only in consciousness.

In the book, Iyanla Vanzant says that our emotions are energies that move us in response to our thoughts and experiences. That means, because our emotions are only a

physical response to a thought, they are actually neutral. For example, depending upon the person, the actual physical experience of speaking in front of a large crowd could be the same as the physical experience of driving in fast traffic (like GA 400), or getting up the nerve to speak to that gorgeous hunk who sat across the aisle from you last week.

That means that what we feel can only have whatever emotional meaning we assign to it. We may think our emotional response has a specific reason. We got scared, we got hurt, we got angry. But what we really do is, we assign a meaning to our emotion based on one or more things which happened to us in the past, or maybe to some belief we have adopted about the world. Which is why our emotional outburst may not be about what's happening to us right now; sometimes it's just a cumulative response to things that may have happened to us years ago, or it could be a reaction to some foolish idea that (for some strange reason) we have come to believe is true. One of the most popular beliefs in this category is the belief that "The world is a dangerous place." A close second is the belief that "People can't be trusted; they're always trying to screw me over." People who are firmly attached to these beliefs see everything as dangerous (so they're always afraid), or they think everyone is out to get them (so they have to be on guard all the time.) Not only that; they also constantly reinforce those emotions which support their belief, by framing everything that happens in their life so it fits their preconceived notions. What they end up with is a perfect justification for a very miserable life.

Once we understand how this works for other people, we can begin to see how most (if not all) of the negative emotions WE experience are the result of distorted thinking. For example, when we feel angry, even when we think we know the reason, it isn't necessarily because we've been attacked or injured; it may be because our ego got hurt, or it may even be because we don't understand what really happened. How often do we get furious when someone cuts us off in traffic, when the truth is, maybe they really didn't see us? We could easily give them the benefit of the doubt, but we don't. Instead, we keep hanging on to that anger, and we go home in a snit and yell at our partner or kick the dog. But we don't have to respond this way IF we would only choose to think about the situation differently.

The same principle holds true for other emotions. If we're disappointed in people all the time, it really isn't because of what they're doing or not doing. It's because of our expectations of what they should be doing, and those expectations have nothing to do with them --- they're based entirely on our thoughts and beliefs. Or if we feel guilty or shameful about something we did, that feeling isn't really coming from what we did. It's coming from our thoughts and beliefs about what we believe other people think about what we did. I could go on for awhile, but you get the point.

Now --- the question for today is --- how does this translate into honoring what we feel, especially when what we're feeling also makes us feel unhappy or out of control? And why should we honor feelings like loneliness and confusion and anger and fear, when we're trying to grow spiritually and become more evolved beings?

The answer is really quite simple. We need to learn to honor our feelings, especially the negative ones, because they allow us to learn things about ourselves that we probably aren't going to learn any other way. They help us to learn things like tolerance and respect and self-control. They help us to learn how to re-frame our relationships, or to look differently at the things that happen in our life, so we can see the silver lining instead of being obsessed with the dark cloud. They show us that any situation, no matter how miserable it seems, can not only be overcome; it can be transcended. These are all qualities of self-awareness which are essential for our spiritual growth. Of course, we could certainly learn any of these things without going through all these self-induced personal disasters. But most of us don't seem to be that smart (at least I wasn't); we seem to prefer doing it the hard way. Which is fine; God

doesn't care which way we choose, or if we choose to grow at all. It is the responsibility of this Power that created us to provide us the opportunity to grow; it's our decision how we choose to do it, or whether we choose to grow at all. What I want you to go away with today is, first of all, the renewed awareness that our emotions stem from mental, emotional and spiritual choices that we have made (in the past), are making now, and will continue to make in the future. That's first. We've already talked about it.

But the second thing we need to understand is that there are no right or wrong feelings, there are no good or bad emotions. Any emotion we can ever have is perfectly valid; never let anyone tell you otherwise. They're part of our make-up as spiritual beings having a human experience. It should never be the purpose of any spiritual teaching to teach us to ignore our feelings, or to lock them out. On the other hand, it should never be the purpose of any spiritual teaching to manipulate us by using our own negative emotions against us, whether that emotion is anger, guilt, shame, or any other. These feelings we have are wonderful tools that can teach us so much, if we can only learn how to respond to them. We are entitled, as a part of our spiritual birthright, to feel any way we want. And we also have the right to act on those feelings in the best way we know how. But as intelligent, spiritual beings, we still want to learn to express our feelings in the highest and best way possible for everyone concerned. In other words, if our actions related to our emotions are a reflection of who we are and what we believe to be true about ourselves (which they should always be), then our actions should always be carried out in such a way that they transmute the negative energy of our original negative emotion --- into a positive result.

History gives us some powerful examples of what this can do. When Mahatma Gandhi watched the British army machine-gun an unarmed crowd of people who were protesting peacefully, I have no doubt that he felt anger and despair. But his response was to meet violence with peaceful resistance. It's the same with Dr. King when the State Police brought dogs and clubs and fire hoses to use against an unarmed group of Freedom Marchers. Of course he was angry. But he also knew that his actions had to be far enough on the opposite end of the scale --- they had to be peaceful and loving enough --- to balance out the anger. Otherwise, the anger would have continued to escalate and the hatred they faced would never have been healed.

Our truest feelings are always a perfect indicator of what is going on in us. But they may or may not be an accurate indicator of what is going on in the world. We have to realize that. Which is why we should get into the habit of not acting on any emotion, especially a negative emotion, at the moment that we are feeling it. I like what Thomas Jefferson once wrote: "When angry, count to ten. But when you are very angry --- count to 100."

You see, our emotions can be extremely powerful, especially in that first surge when our brain seems to disengage and we respond almost by reflex. Have you ever been there? I sure have. The reason we need to examine our thoughts about our emotions during the in-between times is, if we have learned to become spiritually grounded at least most of the time --- and we can all do that, with just a little practice --- then all we have to do when something happens is to choose to become an enlightened, balanced observer instead of a wild raving lunatic. The author says, "We must elevate what we are feeling to the highest possible expression." We don't have to deny it, we can just see it for what it is, and know that the first big wave of emotion will pass. Personally, and I haven't been keeping track, but I would be willing to bet that at least 95% of the stupid things I have said or done when I got angry took place in the first thirty seconds after the event happened (maybe even the first ten seconds).

The Truth is, because we are creative beings with the power to choose, we are always in control of how we respond to the world around us, or at least we are capable of being in control. If we learn to say to ourselves, when our body starts to crank up and we start looking

around for a big stick to hit somebody with, "OK, God (in, as and through me), what's really going on here?" --- and we listen to the wisdom that's always there --- we will be amazed how often we can fairly quickly see a much better and more balanced way to respond.

Most of our unproductive responses to negative feelings come out of a sense of confusion. It happens when we aren't clear about what is really going on, inside or outside, when we have so much stuff swirling around in our head and our heart that we forget what's true and what isn't, and we think we have to do something NOW. No matter what the situation is, the simplest and most effective solution is always to get very clear about what is true for us --- not just when everything's going along smoothly, and everybody is being nice and friendly --- but all the time. Even in the middle of chaos and confusion, the Truth is still the Truth. And just in case you've forgotten, the spiritual truth about us --- and about life --- is that there is an infinite power for love and peace and perfect healing, and it is always completely present, in the heart of every person, in the midst of every situation, and in the solution to any problem. When we are finally ready, willing and able to feel that awareness "in here" --- shining bright, solid as a rock, no questions asked --- only then will we be able to honor every feeling that flows through us, because they will all come from that one deep emotion which the New Testament calls "the peace that passes all understanding."

This is the Truth in your life. And this is the Truth in mine. And so it is!

## THE HONOR SERIES 5: HONORING THE PROCESS

“Week Five --- The series continues,” from the book “One Day My Soul Just Opened Up,” by the fabulous Iyanla Vanzant. We’ve been talking, for the last month or so, about “honoring” all the different aspects of our existence: honoring the Divine (or God), honoring Ourselves (or the presence of God in us), honoring the people in our life (and the same presence of God in them), and (last week) honoring what we feel (that is, the way we choose to express our spiritual essence in the physical world). So far, we’ve been talking about things in life that we can focus on specifically, even if they aren’t material things: God, self, people and emotions.

But today is going to be a little different, because today I’m going to be talking, NOT about specific elements of our life, but about honoring the actual process of living and being. In other words, once we have an awareness of what is important in our life --- that is, once we really understand the nature of this Power that fills the Universe (that IS the Universe, actually), and how our human nature, with all our thoughts and emotions and relationships, is really this fantastic opportunity we’ve been given to use this power to practice making our life and our world a better place --- what do we do then? What does “living this way” look like? I mean, it’s not like there’s an instruction manual, or a Yellow Brick Road that says “this way to enlightenment.” You could be able to name every part of a car, and describe what it does, and still not know how to drive. So today I’m going to talk about what we might call “the process of living well” and why we should honor that process by learning how to use it.

As we all know, there seems to be a “glut” of spiritual information on the market nowadays, some of it the same old traditional stuff, and some of it brand new. There are a lot of different self-proclaimed spiritual leaders and organized religions and New Age “gurus” out there who want to tell us exactly what we’re supposed to do, what we’re supposed to think, and how we’re supposed to live. That’s why it’s very frustrating when we start looking for spiritual answers in our life, because everybody seems to have one. But there’s a large number of people out there (myself among them, and probably many of you), who don’t want somebody else’s answer; we want our own. Because, when it comes to spirituality, I believe that one size does NOT fit all --- there has to be room for personal growth and exploration. That’s what attracted me to this church in the first place. We have an organized community, which allows us to share our thoughts with others, but we’re also extremely open in our beliefs.

You see, most people who are attracted to teachings like this one are people who are tired of being told what to think. When anyone tries, we tune it out. We prefer to make up our own mind, we don’t want to be closed into a box and spoon-fed religious dogma. We want to hear a broad range of spiritual ideas, we insist upon formulating our own belief system, and then we alone decide how to apply what makes sense to us --- that is, we decide what fits the life we’re living on a daily basis (or at least the way we want to live). There’s a very interesting book by Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson which refers to such people as “The Cultural Creatives.” (That’s the title of the book.) For those of us who fit this category (and I believe many of us do), it isn’t so much about WHAT we believe --- whether it’s spiritually, politically, environmentally, or any other part of our life --- it’s about how we go about expressing our belief as an active and on-going part of our daily life, whether it’s individually or with like-minded people. This idea of spirituality as a process is not new. There’s a saying in Taoism, one of the great spiritual teachings of the world, going back over 2500 years, which states, “The path does not lead to the goal; the path IS the goal.” In fact, the word Tao means “the Way.” And the Roman philosopher Epictetus, who was the teacher of Marcus Aurelius 2000 years ago, wrote a wonderful little book about everyday spirituality and ethics, and he called it “The Art of Living.”

I think that's a great title for something we should all want to achieve; we should all aspire to become geniuses in "the art of living." Now, this isn't a criticism of setting goals. We can certainly set and achieve some wonderful goals, even as we go about becoming experts on how to live well, whether it's achieving health, love and prosperity in our own life --- or eliminating war and disease and discrimination in the world. But our most important success, as spiritual beings, is going to come, not so much from the achievement of goals like these (as wonderful as they are) --- it will come when we realize that we are the process which results in their achievement. In other words, we will become certified, card-carrying geniuses in the art of living when we finally recognize and accept that we ourselves are the Divine process working in the world. I think Mahatma Gandhi said the same thing when he said, "We must be the change we wish to see."

Of course, living as if this were so can be a real challenge, especially as we go about trying to function as well as we can in the middle of all these distractions we've created. I mean, how can I see myself as the process of Infinite Possibility at work in the world, when I've lost my job, my partner just walked out the door, and my doctor left me a message to "call him back, it's urgent"? And what about the state of the world? What about Iraq, and the stock market, and that psychopathic sniper in Virginia? It's this kind of stuff that drags our attention away from the spiritual. Sometimes it may even feel like we're sitting in the middle of a theater with four disaster movies playing on all four walls. That's why we end up asking ourselves, how can changing the way we think and feel about all this stuff possibly make a difference?

As I stated before (in week two), we have no idea how powerful we really are. On one level, we aren't sure anymore that God can solve all the problems we've created, or even that God wants to get involved. And at the same time, we also don't feel connected to our own spiritual energy, we don't feel that we have access to our own inner wisdom. Oh sure, every once in a while, usually by accident, we seem to get a burst of creativity, we seem to experience this tremendous surge of confidence and spiritual well-being which permits us to accomplish something fantastic, and maybe even feel, just for a few brief moments, like we can do anything. That's when we feel like we're in the flow, like we're connected to some power greater than we are, but it's moving through us so quickly, so powerfully, that we can't tell whether we're using it, or it's using us. We've all felt this way at one time or another.

Even though we don't feel this way very often, one thing we can tell about this power is that it doesn't seem to have any limits. We've all heard stories about a mother who lifts a car to rescue her child, or a man who dives into an icy river to save someone. It's the same power at work. No matter how it shows up, or what it does, that confidence and courage and strength obviously comes from somewhere, but it still has to come through someone. It isn't like some giant hand comes down from heaven and pushes people aside, then reaches over and pulls somebody out of the water. It can only work through us. So it works through us at whatever level it needs to work --- but only at whatever level we allow it to work. But the really interesting part is, in virtually every case --- all of a sudden, for whatever reason --- the connection to this power just disappears as quickly as it came, and we find ourselves right back the way we were before. One minute we're Superman; the next, we're Clark Kent. So, from a metaphysical perspective, the question we have to ask ourselves is this: Where did it go? And if it didn't go anywhere, if it's still there, then what is it that determines whether or not our connection to this Infinite Power --- is available to us? The only reasonable answer has to be --- there must be a perfectly normal and knowable process at work that we can learn and use. And that is something to really get excited about.

Just think what it would be like if that same powerful spiritual connection stayed open -- twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week --- for every person on the planet. Or even for

one percent of the people on the planet (which would be 60 million people). Do you think that could make a difference in the way we live? I certainly do.

The Truth is, there are a lot of people right now who ARE living this way, and they're all making a positive difference in the world. We all know people who always seem to be happy and positive and enthusiastic. They don't get frightened or discouraged, they always seem to have this reservoir of energy that never runs out, and they pour it all over everybody they meet. These are people we all like to be around. Because the people I know who fit that description, including some of you here today, have exciting, interesting lives. Sure they have problems, just like the rest of us, but they deal with those problems in a positive, healthy, constructive way. Most of them have accomplished amazing things, and I have no doubt they'll accomplish more.

We're not just talking here about people like Thomas Edison and Helen Keller and Dr. King and Jesus and Gandhi. There are people around us living this way every day, some of them famous, some of them quietly and anonymously making a difference. Look at Jimmy Carter and his Nobel Prize this week --- the man's almost eighty, and he's still changing the world. Here's the point: people like these --- as powerful and amazing and interesting as they are --- are only different from you and me in the way they choose to practice the art of living. Most of them aren't trying to be famous. They're just so connected to the infinite abundance and joy and possibility of life that they can't avoid being famous, because (as sad as it is to say) the rest of the world would rather live through them vicariously than create fabulous lives for themselves. For these cultural creatives (which is really what they are), it isn't about what they've accomplished; it's about how they constantly love to express all the power of life within them, all the time.

As we begin to look at these people as examples rather than exceptions, one of the lessons we can learn from watching how they live, is to recognize that they never try to be someone they are not. They are what we call "authentic." That is, they realize that they are unique in their talents and their skills (as we all are), but they also realize their uniqueness includes both their strengths and their weaknesses. And with no apology for the good OR the bad, they put all of it to the best possible use. When confronted with any situation, whether it's a personal problem (which they all have) or a problem on a worldwide scale, like New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani on 9/11, they do the best they can with what they have. If it isn't good enough, or if they make mistakes, they don't blame other people; they simply accept the lesson and move forward.

The reason this is important is, whenever we try to avoid responsibility for our actions or our decisions, because we think it's going to make us look bad, then our decisions will be made by looking "out there" instead of "in here." And we cannot connect with this power "out there." Strength and wisdom and confidence are inner qualities. We tap into them through our heart, through our soul --- through our spirit. And they don't come to us if we're trying to imitate someone else, either. Honesty and authenticity are absolutely essential for us if we want to open and maintain a constant flow with this endless supply of energy that's waiting for us in here, in our heart. Think about it this way. It's like a faucet. If, every time we wanted water, we thought we had to start looking around for someone else to turn on the tap, we'd probably end up being pretty dirty and pretty thirsty a lot of the time. However, if we learn the process, if we learn how to do it ourselves, we can use the water as much as we want, for anything we desire. It doesn't matter what we end up using it for --- but we'll know that we can always get all the water we need, any time we want. That's why understanding the process is always more important than achieving the result, because it is the process which makes the result possible.

Which leads us to the quality of “faith” as another important part of the process of living well. Now faith is one of those old, traditional religious words that makes some people nervous, so for those of you who haven’t been here too long, let me explain how I’m using it, because it’s different than what you may have heard before. We believe here that faith is NOT blind acceptance of some idea or belief that nobody can explain. Instead, we define faith as a logical and intelligent belief in something that makes perfect sense, because it works through well-defined mental and spiritual laws which work for anyone who uses them. In a way, it’s a measure of how much we understand and trust the operation of the Universe. The author says it this way: “When we know and understand the laws of the spiritual universe, we have faith that they will work on our behalf. When we do not know the spiritual laws, we place our faith in the belief that something or someone can cause something to happen or keep it from happening.”

It isn’t a matter of having faith or NOT having faith. We all have faith. The only variable is what we have faith IN. Some people, those who are living their life in the best possible way, have faith in their ability to use this Power which is always available to them to accomplish anything they desire. On the other hand, they do not have faith in anything outside of them which can keep their dream from happening. They have the clear and complete intent and expectation that they will experience the best life has to offer, all the time. Once again, it’s more about believing in the creative process than trying to achieve a specific result. These people aren’t necessarily any smarter than we are. They simply understand that their thoughts and beliefs create their world. That’s how life works. That’s how they think, all the time, no matter what is going on around them.

So once again, faith is nothing more than a way of thinking. It’s part of a process. The same is true about being authentic. They don’t guarantee that we’ll get what we want. They do, however, make it easier for us to do what needs to be done, to make decisions and take appropriate actions which produce logical, predictable, intelligent results. It’s simply the Law of Cause and Effect.

Two other qualities which serve us well in creating a consciousness of ease and confidence and calm expectation as we go about our daily business of creating life --- are patience and discipline. I like to think of these two as being both sides of the same spiritual coin. A lot of you children of the 60’s don’t like the word discipline. But discipline is not about following somebody else’s rules; it’s the ability to do what we know needs to be done, when it needs to be done, in the way it needs to be done. Or, it is the ability to keep from doing what hasn’t worked for us in the past. For most of us, we’re pretty clear about what works and what doesn’t work for us in our life. We’ve probably got the bruises to prove it. But the biggest problem most people have isn’t exactly a lack of discipline --- it is procrastination. Either we keep putting off doing what we know we need to do, or we keep delaying making changes in our life, even when we know very well what changes need to be made. This is what we’re doing when we say things like, “I know I need to quit drinking or using --- I’ll start next week. I know I should go back and finish school --- I just don’t have the time. I know I need to get out of this relationship --- but I can’t deal with it right now.” Here’s something to remember, especially for those of us who have put a lot of time and effort into our own personal spiritual growth: a person who knows how to use this process and doesn’t, is no better off than a person who doesn’t know how to use it at all.

The most difficult thing about developing mental and spiritual discipline, the reason we tend to avoid it whenever possible, is that the only way to do it --- is to practice it. It’s like landing an airplane or driving a car. Eventually, you’re going to have to do it, all by yourself. That’s why the most exhilarating and empowering event of a pilot’s career is the day they fly solo for the first time. Here’s some encouragement. When we begin to honor the process of

living --- and we do this by honoring our Self and honoring the power which expresses through us and everyone else --- discipline stops being a matter of outside authority, about doing all the “shoulds” and the “oughts” and the “have to’s” --- and it becomes a matter of personal pride and self-respect. At that point, it’s no longer about following rules, it’s about joyfully surrendering to a process that we know works. It’s really about finding the courage to make a commitment, to ourselves or to someone else --- and to keep our commitment, simply because we know that keeping it makes life deeper and richer for everyone involved.

Now, what about patience? I use to have a lot of trouble with that one. Patience, I have found, is a logical outcome when we are living honestly, believing confidently, and staying on center spiritually. When we begin to think this way, in every part of our life --- when we stop being afraid, when we stop looking “out there” for answers, when we start trusting the process --- then waiting for things to happen becomes exciting, because we know that whatever it is we’re creating will only make our life better. And if our life is better, then the world and everyone around us has to get better, too, because we’re all connected at the level of Spirit. When we allow ourselves to use the wisdom available to us --- that is, to believe that there is always a solution, that there’s always something better in every situation --- and to have complete confidence, not only in the way life works, but in our ability to work it --- then we can move forward on our chosen path, knowing that whatever happens, we have the mental, emotional and spiritual tools to handle it. This is the way we Honor the Process. And next week, we’ll finish the series by talking about Honoring Life.

This is the Truth in your life. And this is the Truth in mine. And so it is!

## THE HONOR SERIES 6: HONORING LIFE

Today we finish our series based on Iyanla Vanzant's book, One Day My Soul Just Opened Up, and we're going to be talking about honoring what Dr. Holmes calls "This Thing Called Life." Of course, in a way, that's what we've been talking about all along, because Life is made up of everything there is. It's kind of a "closed system" that includes both us, and the power that created us, and continues to create through us (what we usually refer to as "God" or the Universal Mind). It also includes all the people in the world, including those closest to us, and the emotions we feel when we interact with those people. And finally, Life is the actual process itself, of ALL these things working together in a way that we can all understand and use in order to live the way we truly want to live.

You see, there are two common elements that link together all of these different aspects of our life --- and those two elements are Love and Intelligence. Love and Intelligence. Not just the amount of love we personally manage to experience in our own life, and not just our own level of intelligence as we function in the physical world on a daily basis --- but Love and Intelligence as the basic fundamental Principles which guarantee that the universe (and everything in it) will grow and evolve endlessly because --- that is the nature of Life. Which is also the nature of God, because God and Life are the same thing. That's all the meaning there is; that's all the meaning there needs to be. "Such is the nature of Life that all it asks and all it wants is the opportunity to appear." WE are that opportunity, WE are that desire of Life to appear. And because we are Life's perfect expression in the world, then that same Love and Intelligence which empower all of life --- must be the inherent spiritual qualities which all of us can use to make our own life more joyful, more prosperous, more interesting --- and much more rewarding in every way we can imagine.

There's a saying I've heard many times, and I don't recall who said it, that says, "Life is God's gift to us; what we do with it is our gift to God." That's a wonderful philosophy, IF we understand what it means. The first part, of course is very straightforward --- the opportunity for us to be here is a gift more precious than anything else in the world. The very fact that we can think and breathe and laugh and cry, and make conscious choices that transform our life and our world, and give and receive love, is absolutely incredible, if you think about it. And we got it with no strings attached; we didn't even have to sign anything. But it's the second part of this piece of homespun wisdom where some of us may get confused. Because "what we do with our life" is not a matter of how much we accomplish in our 70 or 80 or 90 years on this planet. It's not about how much money we make, or the rewards or recognition we receive --- most of us are pretty clear on that.

But it's also not about how much we suffer for the greater glory of God. And it's not about how much we give away to other people, or how much we sacrifice for others. In fact, those things really don't matter at all to God. The true purpose of our life is simply to express love and joy and passion and creativity in every single thing we do --- whether it's something we choose to do for ourselves, for the people around us, or for the world as a whole. The purpose of our life is also to combine our talents and our desires --- that is, the things we do well and the things we love to do --- in such a way that we not only bring something unique into the world ---- but that we do it in a way which feeds our soul. Whether other people like it or not, whether they approve of it or not, whether they agree with us or not, is not important. What IS important is that we allow Life to express through us in such a way that both we and the world grow and evolve into something greater than they would have been without us. That is how we honor the power and presence of Life as it appears IN, AS and THROUGH us.

In order to do this well, the first thing we have to realize is that Life is designed to work in our favor. I like to say that we live in a user-friendly universe. Because we are Life's own

expression, and Life is too intelligent to get in the way of its own good. Which means, if this does not appear to be the case in our own particular life situation, the most spiritual thing we could ever do is to recognize and to accept that our problem is not just “a fact of Life” --- it’s a logical result of the way we are expressing it. Because Life never does anything TO us --- it only does things THROUGH us. Understanding this puts us in a place in consciousness where we can start to consciously use this Power for Good to make things better, which we are ALWAYS able to do, whether we realize it or not.

You see, just by the very fact that we were born --- just by the fact that this unique spiritual energy field brought together all the material to make this particular body --- we have free tickets to this show, to this banquet we call Life. But as the lead character said in the play, “Mame” --- “Life is a banquet, and most poor fools are starving to death.” In other words, instead of Honoring Life, why is it that so many people seem to see it as either a struggle or a curse? That’s the question we need to ask ourselves. And how we answer that question will determine what our own individual experience of life is going to look like. You see, if we view life (as some people do) as an obstacle course, as a constant battle, as just one damn thing after another where we never seem to get ahead --- the only thing we’re ever going to get in life is TIRED. But if we choose to live every day as if this were an exciting growth opportunity, as if we’ve been set loose in this giant playground with a genie in our pocket that grants our every wish --- then it’s quite possible that we will get more joy and satisfaction out of every minute of our life than some people get in a lifetime.

Let’s talk for a minute about what it means to feel joy in our life. I mean, it sounds nice, but this idea that we can be joyful all the time may seem a little far-fetched to some people. In fact, some people may even say that it’s ridiculous trying to be joyful all the time, because sometimes bad things just happen. Which is true; bad things do happen, and sometimes they happen to good people (like you and me). And even when we know that we had a part in creating our experience, and that we have the ability to change it, it can still be very painful. But as the old saying goes, “Pain may be mandatory, but suffering is optional.”

In other words, there’s nothing in this teaching that says we’ll never have any problems, or that everything’s going to be rosy all the time. But we have to be careful not to confuse joy with happiness. Because there is a very significant difference. The author says it this way: “Joy is an internal process grounded in knowledge of spiritual truth, the ability to trust the wisdom of the Divine, and faith in the perfect process of Life. Happiness is generally a mental and emotional response to temporary external stimulation, in response to a perceived need. Joy is a state of being. Happiness is something which relies on a series of events which may or may not occur. Joy is emotional stimulation in response to spiritual inspiration. Happiness is mental inspiration in response to physical stimulation.” That means joy can actually be a permanent sense of inner satisfaction we consciously and deliberately choose to feel no matter what is going on around us, while happiness is temporary, it comes and goes, because it’s based on externals, it’s based on conditions. So that means, even if we aren’t happy about what’s going on in our life at that particular moment, we can still feel --- “in here” --- the joy of being alive, the joy of being connected to God, the joy of being able to choose how and where our life is going.

Of course, this ability to feel joy also calls for the ability to feel gratitude; the two are very closely connected. I don’t want to spend too much time talking about gratitude, because we’ll get into it a lot more in a few weeks as we approach Thanksgiving, EXCEPT to say that it is one of the most powerful spiritual principles there is. For example, whenever we want to truly honor someone, we usually give them a gift or some sort of recognition which expresses how grateful we are for what they’ve done, or how grateful we are that they are a part of our life or a member of our community. But for it to be truly meaningful, as part of the creative

process, gratitude has to be more than just something we give in exchange for something we received. It has to be a constant feeling we have, it has to be something we experience as an integral part of being alive, no matter what is happening around us. Gratitude connects us to the invisible part of life, so that we can attract what we desire "in consciousness," in such a way that it appears in our experience. It's not just a responsive thought AFTER the fact --- it's creative BEFORE the fact. And the stronger and clearer it is --- the more grateful we feel as a constant state of mind about all of Life in general --- the more we will attract into our life to be grateful for.

The reason this is important is because, when we finally develop both an inner sense of joy in living and an attitude of gratitude for just being alive, it helps us to keep our life in balance. I think one of the biggest reasons that a lot of us have trouble enjoying Life is because we like to do the things we're good at, and we don't like to do the things we're not good at. As a result, we end up doing more and more of what we already know, and less and less of what we're not familiar with. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if we do this long enough, we're not only going to stop growing (except in one small area) --- we also stand a good chance of missing out on some parts of life that we might really enjoy, without even knowing what we're missing.

What makes it even worse is when we consciously or unconsciously choose our life's direction based on the approval or disapproval of other people, whether it's our friends, our family, or society as a whole. For example, many of us were brought up in a society where we were taught how to work, how to learn and how to give. "Work hard, pay attention in school, help those less fortunate than you." But we weren't taught anything about how to play, how to teach or how to receive. It's all important, because the flow of life never goes in just one direction, it never dwells too long on just one thing. Look at the world around us. The ebb and flow of the ocean tides, our body's need to inhale and exhale, summer and winter, life and death. If any one of these got out of balance, the result would be disastrous. But together, in perfect balance, they work.

When we learn to live in balance, our life works better, too. For one thing, we stop trying to force things to stay the same, because we recognize that the pendulum has to swing both ways. We also stop pouring all of our energy into just one part of our life, because we look around and see how much more of life there is. And we stop judging things as good or bad, because we learn to see them as two sides of something greater which includes them both. Once we adopt this way of seeing the world, it becomes a lot easier to practice being present, to not only put our energy and our attention on whatever it is we're doing at the moment, but also to make sure that every area of our life receives its fair share of our energy and attention. That way, instead of worrying about which door to open next in our life, we can choose to throw open all the doors, and all the windows. We can tear down the walls. By consciously choosing to experience more and more of what life has to offer, we allow ourselves to grow, we allow ourselves to expand spiritually without pushing or struggling. We end up Honoring Life instead of fighting it.

When we learn to see ourselves as something greater than our outer appearance --- as more than just our job, or our family or our bank account --- as more than just our age or education or race or gender --- and we begin to see the universe as something much broader than our own little corner of the world --- then Life (which has no limits) can proceed to do everything through us that it always wanted to do, that it's always been TRYING to do --- using us as its vehicle. Because, instead of trying to stop the flow, or redirect the flow, we will have taken our rightful place IN the flow.

Now, just because we're "in the flow," doesn't mean we have to just lay back and go wherever life takes us. (We could go over Niagara Falls. There is an order to the flow of the

universe. It's not pre-determined, but it's there, it's the way the process of Life unfolds. And it's as true for the tiniest atom as it is for the largest galaxy. Harmony, growth, expansion, evolution --- these are all scientific principles which respond through the unfolding of specific, understandable mental, spiritual and physical laws which always proceed in perfect order. For example, we grow from embryo to child to adolescent to adult. A plant grows from seed to plant to flower to fruit. A butterfly has to be a caterpillar first, then it has to go through the cocoon stage, before it can fly around and enjoy the flowers. You may have heard the old saying that "order is the first Law of Heaven." It's true. It is.

This means two things to us. First, as much as we would like to, and as much as some people try --- we cannot jump straight to the butterfly stage. Like it or not, we're going to have to be a caterpillar first. In other words, we need to build a foundation, we need to crawl before we can walk, and walk before we can run. This is true in every area of our life, but it is especially true in the spiritual arena. There have been very few individuals throughout history, if any, who managed to achieve instant and complete enlightenment. Even Jesus and the Buddha had to grow into their Divinity. For most of us here on our own spiritual path, we need to go through a process, in order, which includes steps such as waking up, searching for answers, releasing our old ideas, trying on new ideas --- and practicing a better way of thinking. If we do it right, we usually keep returning to step one, only at a higher level. But if we try to skip a step or two --- we'll just keep stumbling around, until we finally decide to get with the program. We're not being punished for trying to get ahead, and it isn't a sin; we just aren't going to get anywhere. It's like trying to drive your car without turning on the ignition. It isn't that your car is mad at you --- it just doesn't work that way.

The second thing we need to realize is that sometimes order, from our limited perspective, doesn't look very orderly. In fact, it may look a lot like disaster, chaos, or the end of the world. It may even seem disorderly, illogical and irrational. But it's not; it's simply Life changing from one level to another. When things look really bad (and they sometimes do), this is what we need to remember. If we can manage to keep calm and centered, if we can just focus on the next best thing, and maintain our faith in the presence of God and the process of Life working through us --- then we can simply stand patiently in the midst of the storm, and wait for order to be restored, as it always will be. Eventually, the Phoenix always rises from the ashes. And once again, if we're doing it right, we'll find ourselves at a new and better place than we ever were before.

The one purpose of this teaching, and teachings like it --- the only purpose, in fact --- is to tell whomever will listen, that we are Life's perfect expression, and that the only thing which ever holds us back is our failure to believe in our own ability to create something better. If you think about it, it's really about our ability or our inability to express "unconditional love." When our life doesn't seem to be getting better, it's not because we're bad. It's simply because (at some level) we don't believe that God loves and supports us unconditionally; we don't believe that we are able to create whatever we desire unconditionally --- and we don't believe that we can love other people, or that they can love us, unconditionally.

If we are ever going to make a better life for ourselves --- if we have any desire to create a better world for ourselves and for the people who come after us --- we are going to have to learn how to be open --- and we're going to have to allow ourselves to be open. Just knowing how isn't enough; we have to let it happen. That means opening our mind, opening our heart, and opening our soul. We have to stop feeling so scared and vulnerable, we have to stop trying so desperately to protect ourselves from all the things we fear. Because any walls we build, whether they're mental, emotional or physical walls, always stop the flow. They stop the flow of communication, they stop the flow of understanding, they stop the flow of sharing --- and they stop the flow of love. What this book is telling us is what every spiritual

teacher has been telling us for a long time now, which is that our life and our world, as complicated and crazy and confusing as they may sometimes seem, will be completely transformed --- it will be completely healed --- on the very day, at the very moment, that we allow our soul to just open up.

This is the Truth in your life. And this is the Truth in mine. And so it is.