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Introduction

Saying Yes to Life

This book has one primary purpose: to help you find freedom, health, growth, and spiritual solidity during even the most challenging physical condition by helping you become aware of your inner teacher, our undisturbed core and depth that is always available to us and is the source of true well-being, when we learn to listen to and trust it.

I call coming to that awareness *saying yes to Life*.

What Is Life?

You'll see that I capitalize the word *Life*. I do that very deliberately to distinguish it from *life*, meaning simply existence. *Life*, capitalized, is a power greater than ourselves yet also within ourselves. *The power of Life is the power in which we were created, and that power remains the core of who we are.* This power does not change according to what we have done or not done or due to the current state of our body, though we can create obstacles to experiencing it.

Life is our loving, gentle, and wise inner guide who knows the way to what is most important. Especially during the most challenging health issues, Life knows our deepest desires and the decisions we need to make every step of the way through our health challenge. Life is full of infinite possibility at any given moment. It is made up of energy that is forever moving

and that we can tap into, align with, and have work within and around us.

This same power that is both within and greater than ourselves can also be called *Love*. Though when Martin Luther King Jr. said the following words, he was referring to the health of a nation and humanity, they succinctly capture my definition of *Love*: “When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life . . . the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. . .”¹

Dr. Karl Menninger, one of the founders of the world-famous Menninger Clinic, said, “Love cures people—both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.” Responding to our health challenges through Love is another way of saying yes to Life.

Who Can Benefit from Saying Yes?

This book is for people in a variety of physical health situations. You may be currently ill or have recently had a serious accident. You might be healthy and want to stay that way, or you may want to develop the tools that will help you to grow during even minor and common ailments. You may want to prevent or reduce stress-related diseases and conditions or just prepare yourself for the inevitable health challenges that we will likely all face. You may also be a health-care professional or caregiver, or a friend or family member of someone who is ill or challenged physically in some way.

1 Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” speech delivered at Riverside Church in New York City, April 4, 1967.

To address these many readers, I use the term “health challenges” to include all illnesses (physical or emotional), recovery from accidents, or other disabilities.

What Can Saying Yes to Life Change in Your Life?

In the simplest of terms, saying yes to Life or Love offers us a way to positively and effectively deal with what is happening in our lives now or what may happen down the road.

During all the upheaval that comes with a health challenge, we can easily become obsessed with our bodies, worried about the future, and caught in a downward spiral of confusion, bewilderment, depression, and perplexity. It is easy to forgo our inner wisdom and guidance—even repress it or altogether ignore it—when we are distracted by health challenges and the fear that can surround them, especially if we identify ourselves as being only our bodies. Freedom, which is an aspect of health, remains impossible as long as we perceive our bodies as a complete definition of ourselves. Yet our bodies and their challenges, such as illness and injury, can actually help us discover Life—our inner wisdom, which continues to exist and wait for us to turn within and find it again—and, by extension, discover or recover health. When the mind no longer sees itself as a body, forever in bondage to the physical, the mind can be free. This book shows you how to find that freedom.

Henry David Thoreau said that the degree to which we are true to ourselves is the degree to which we pay attention to inner intelligence. By saying yes to Life, we say yes to this inner intelligence and to making it central to our healing. Saying yes to Life is a means of getting to know ourselves—who we *really*

are—during the most challenging of times. The single most important discovery I made on my own journey from illness to health was *Let what you are experiencing teach you. Let who you are heal you.*

Saying yes to Life invites us to address all of who we are, including and especially the power of our thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. Recent research has suggested that one of the most important things we can ever learn is the connection between our thinking and our health. Good health seems to be most people's highest priority, yet most of us have very little or no education about how our ways of thinking, beliefs, and state of mind affect our health every moment of our existence and even less education about how to direct our mind toward health.

Within this book, *health* doesn't refer to just the state of the body, but also the state of the mind, which affects the body. The results we want to accomplish with our physical health require some level of intention and conscious direction with our mind. The good news is that all of us have the ability to direct our own mind. Like most important skills, learning to direct our mind takes practice and motivation. Our health challenges can provide us with the motivation to learn to command our mind with intention, direction, and awareness, and no matter what is happening with our bodies, this unparalleled achievement will bring us peace of mind, a central component of health. In fact, optimal physical health can be defined as an extension of peace of mind, or the natural state that occurs when we learn how to say yes to Life.

Although health and healing are not defined as the absence of physical symptoms, there is a direct physical benefit from achieving this trustful and peaceful state of mind. Research

demonstrates that when individuals are less stressed and have a positive attitude, their physical health improves. In fact, those who suffer the most physical problems, including a reduced ability to recover from illness, have a difficult time moving beyond anger, resentment, and worry.

The old, habitual, seemingly automatic ways our minds function out of fear are what keep us from saying yes to Life. So like someone who has practiced a sport for years with ineffective technique, we have significant unlearning to do as well.

But do not mistake saying yes to Life as merely “positive thinking” or New Age healing. To the contrary, saying yes to Life is based on extensive research in health psychology, a field concerned, in part, with understanding how emotional and cognitive factors contribute to physical health and the prevention of illness. Don’t worry; this book is not cold, clinical, and full of research citations. Instead, it offers you very real and concrete examples, ideas, and exercises that you can use right now.

No matter what health challenges you’re facing; no matter how much fear or pain you may be experiencing; no matter how little control over your health and happiness you feel you have; no matter how worried you are about family, finances, and future; saying yes to Life will not only help you with what is going on now but may also even give your life new direction. Saying yes to Life will help you with your mental, emotional, and spiritual reaction to what is happening physically. It can take you from fear and confusion to clarity. As hard as it may be to imagine right now, you will even find ways to grow from what is happening.

There is no situation, no matter how catastrophic, from which we cannot learn and grow. I know, because I have negotiated several personal health challenges in my own life. And I

have learned how saying yes to Life is the difference between suffering through a health challenge and growing into a better person because of it.

I see each health challenge I have experienced as a class in what is true and fundamentally important about life. Though I am not in any hurry to go through another health challenge and am enjoying life in the fullest, I am grateful for what each of my health challenges has offered me. Looking back, I know I would not be where I am today if not for the lessons I learned from each experience. For example, as I recovered from an illness that brought me close to death, I learned how to truly receive love, and a troubled relationship was healed. When I lost my hearing, I learned a multitude of lessons—from the many ways to “hear” other than with the physical ear to having the courage to follow my passion vocationally.

When I faced my first health challenges, it was certainly not with smiles and gratitude. My initial reaction was a mix of intense emotions, numbness, and even denial. However, because I gradually learned what it meant to say yes to Life, I am not only alive today, but also a happier, stronger, and more compassionate person.

Saying yes to Life takes us from fear and feeling as if life as we know it is over to seeing even the most challenging health situations from a place of clarity and options—even a place of growth and a deeper awareness. Instead of ruining our lives, it is possible that health challenges may actually enhance our days, no matter how many or how few we have. Saying yes to Life during a health challenge sets us on a course of being Life-centered in all situations, and as a result, we begin to see the opportunities for growth and healing in every area of living.

In essence, saying yes to Life during a health challenge takes us from the worst place we have ever been and delivers us to the most meaningful place we can imagine. With this book, I invite you to join me on that journey.

Some of the central ideas presented in this book are a continuation of my earlier works, adapted and expanded here to address health challenges. Certain concepts paraphrase my earlier material, some of which utilize the principles of *A Course in Miracles*. The information and descriptions in the vignettes about people have been altered or combined in order to ensure confidentiality. With the exception of stories about myself, or where a last name is given, all names, identifying information, and other factors have been changed. Any resemblance that you may find between the vignette and somebody that you know is purely coincidental.

PART I

Laying the Foundation

CHAPTER ONE

My Journey

“This can’t be happening. There’s got to be a mistake.”

My mind raced, jumping frantically from one thought to the other, trying to make sense of what was unfolding.

“Pay attention,” I said to myself with some force. I tried to stay focused on what the doctor was saying, but the sound of my heart beating in my temples and the sinking feeling in my stomach were winning out. I didn’t want to pay attention. I wanted to run and not look back.

Then, suddenly, I wanted to puke.

The doctor left the room for a few minutes, leaving me sitting alone in my hospital gown. The sterile environment of the university hospital exam room filled my every cell, every pore. Aware of little more than my bare butt cheeks against the cold steel of the exam table, I stared blankly at the floor, shaking my head. “Shit,” I said.

Ten minutes later, the doctor entered the room again, looking at my chart as though I either did not exist or was somewhere between the pages of his notes.

“More tests will be needed to confirm and to rule out other causes,” he said. He spoke as matter-of-factly as a car mechanic discussing a needed tire rotation. But the phrase *other causes* echoed in my mind and landed another blow to my gut. Then I went numb. I’m sure I looked as if I was

listening, but I could not remember anything else the doctor said.

I had come into the hospital with what seemed like normal, everyday health problems. Now I was sitting on the edge of the exam table and on the edge of my life as I knew it. My life might be forever different and possibly a lot shorter than I had planned. It simultaneously felt as though this were not happening and as if it would be over in a moment.

I was here. This was happening. And I thought there was not a damn thing I could do about it.

Living Unconsciously

Before my visit to the hospital, I had spent a fair amount of effort to get and keep my life “together.” I had done a good job of convincing myself that I was living my life effectively and consciously. I thought of my health challenge as severely and abruptly interrupting my conscious, together life; it certainly wasn’t contributing any sort of good. If I could get rid of this seemingly insurmountable problem, I thought, I could get back to my life as I believed it was *supposed to be*.

I did not want to admit that I really wasn’t living a conscious life. I didn’t realize I had become a bit computerlike, with my programs preset. There was little need for me to have much conscious awareness as long as everything was running more or less smoothly in my life. But when things went “wrong,” when I became ill, my circumstances woke me up. Even then, I hit the snooze button the first few times and just focused on getting my life back to “normal.”

The truth is, until I became aware of the ways I habitually thought about my life and health, how I automatically

responded in preset scenarios, how I unconsciously and instantly reacted to a multitude of situations, I was unable to make any real and meaningful choices about my health. As long as I made health decisions from fear, I was making unconscious and lousy decisions.

It was only with the third or fourth health challenge that I finally got the message. Then I actually started to live more consciously, with more awareness of Life. I realized that I could wake up more permanently, more intentionally, more consciously, and more proactively; make more conscious choices; and move through my health challenge more effectively.

Posttraumatic Growth

As a psychologist, I have always been less interested in the pathology end of my field, which primarily focuses on what goes wrong, and more engaged by the situations where, despite terrible circumstances, individuals are able to heal, grow, learn, give, and become better people. In everyday language, I'm interested in the question, Can an individual be taught how to turn a negative into a positive? This question is the basis of what I believe will be an emerging area of increased study, *posttraumatic growth*.

If you look at any severe health challenge, you can easily find people who have faced it and encountered nothing but setbacks and suffering. However, if you look hard enough, you will also find people who have emerged from the same (or a similar) health challenge wiser, more compassionate, and more appreciative of Life.

How can we choose what kind of experience we will have in the face of a health challenge? This is a very important question

to answer, because most of us will, at some point in our lives, be faced with a health challenge.

University of North Carolina psychologists Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi describe posttraumatic growth as “a positive change that comes about as a result of the struggle with something very difficult. It’s not just some automatic outcome of a bad thing.” My work is based on this. Specifically, our struggles with tough health challenges can bring about positive change, but this change is not automatic. This book can be your stepping-stone to this positive change.

Researchers have found—and my own health-challenge experience, as well as those of many of my patients, confirms—that those who undergo posttraumatic growth are first confronted with the barrage of details about what happened or is happening. At some point, they experience strong emotion, often including fear and anger. Then they begin a much more intangible and subjective process of finding some higher meaning in what has happened. This book is concerned with the second and third of these stages.

My Personal Search for Answers

In addition to being a psychologist, I know firsthand about illness and its effects on every aspect of life. In my fifty-four or so years, I have had my share of health challenges. As a young man, I lived in body casts month after month in the hospital. In my teens and twenties, I was in the throes of addiction. Early in my career as a psychologist, I went deaf from an autoimmune disease. I had the male midlife scare of prostate surgery, and just a few years ago, I was not far from death due to severe bacterial pneumonia.

At different times, my body has been poked, prodded, cut, and invaded in more ways than you would want to hear, including with surgery, chemotherapy, and high doses of steroidal treatment that affected my mental status. I've had bedsores and aching arms that looked like pincushions because they'd been pierced by innumerable needles. Weight loss, constipation, diarrhea, and vomiting alone in the dark hours of the night are all experiences etched in my memory. Meanwhile, I felt fear, anger, loss, and despair, and I wondered how I would pay the hospital bills and support my family when I wasn't able to work.

As I sought a means of dealing with my own health challenges and the stress and emotions surrounding them, it seemed to me there were two main approaches: traditional medical approaches, which left out the emotional, mental, and spiritual components of dealing with a health challenge, and approaches that largely abandoned science. Few approaches seemed to address the very real, very overwhelming emotional reactions we experience during a health challenge, what we can do with our thoughts to help our physical and emotional condition, or how our challenge can lead us to grow.

Yet hard science from institutions such as Stanford University tells us that our lifestyle, attitudes, behaviors, emotions, and thoughts can not only help us recover from an illness, but also serve as very strong preventative medicine. This research has shown us a simple yet extremely powerful fact: Our psychological and emotional states play central roles in our physical health. Studies have shown, and few medical professionals would dispute, that problems ranging from minor aches and pains to high blood pressure, and even heart disease and cancer,

can be caused by a lack of emotional well-being. Further, though many doctors are reluctant to discuss the role of love in health, in private many report believing that there is a deep connection between our health and how much stress and upset we have in our lives, or, put more positively, how much we experience the calming effects of love in our lives.

In my own life and in the lives of the many people with whom I have worked, I have found that the effects of our emotions, attitudes, and thoughts are far-reaching. They affect our general level of energy and our productivity in all areas of life. In the January 24, 2005, issue of *Fortune* magazine, Dr. Norman B. Anderson, CEO of the American Psychological Association (APA), was quoted as saying, “Businesses used to think productivity was only a function of how motivated the employee was. Today research is showing that a person’s physical and emotional well-being is often a more accurate measure of how productive he or she is going to be.”

The idea that the mind affects the body is becoming mainstream. For example, the APA has a public education campaign “to raise awareness that tending to emotional health and well-being of individuals can not only have a direct and positive impact on physical health, but can have an equally positive impact on organizations as well.” When we also add the care of the soul and spirit to this raised awareness, not only our physical health, but also our work and our relationships benefit.

Life-Centered Consciousness versus Fear-Based Consciousness

This book discusses the ways in which universal spiritual principles such as compassion, forgiveness, and love can help

us work through the hardest of times. But I purposely do not always apply spiritual terms, and I try to use language that is as neutral as possible. When I do use words such as *love*, *spirit*, and *inner wisdom*, I am not promoting a singular or closed belief system. On the contrary, all these terms point to the common thread that runs through all spiritual traditions and religions: the belief that there is a power greater than ourselves that can lovingly guide us on our path in life, including during physical and/or emotional challenges.

When we are in line with this power, we are in a state that I refer to as *Life-centered consciousness*. When we are not in this state, we are residing in *fear-based consciousness*. By extension, our thinking is also either fear-based or Life-centered. *Fear-based thinking* and the physiological responses that result from it create or contribute to a host of problems and to a state of *dis-ease*.

What keeps us from saying yes to Life when our body says no is, always, fear. It comes in many forms, disguises, and textures—fear of loss, fear of pain, fear of how our situation will affect our loved ones.

Growing beyond the fear I experienced during my later health challenges took venturing beyond my old thinking and beliefs. Without examining my beliefs about my condition, I continued to stay where I was, mostly afraid and increasingly depressed and angry. My health challenge required me to approach life in a way entirely different from what I was accustomed to and in a way that very few doctors even mention.

The first step was to ask what I was telling myself and believing about my health challenge, and what my thinking and beliefs meant about how I would live each day. My second

step was to make room for my emotional reactions without overanalyzing them, which meant I needed to let myself be a mess sometimes.

I wish I could say that I got some profound answers during this time, but most of my thinking contained some form of “This sucks and isn’t likely to get better anytime soon—maybe never.” I still felt scared. I felt like a victim with no choices. My illness was not what I wanted, that was for sure.

But somewhere along the way came a quieter realization, one that said, “This does not have to mean the end or only a bad situation. I can become a better person from this.”

Exercise: Planting the Seed

Saying yes to Life is a means of going from “This is horrible, and I am about to lose so much or suffer endlessly” to “There is something here for me to learn, some wisdom and meaning from this trial.” This one shift may not seem like much—and from where you stand now, it might not even seem possible—but I assure you that it is everything, and I am living proof it is possible.

Even if you don’t yet believe your health challenge can be an opportunity for growth, you can, right now, plant the seed for this awareness to grow. Ask yourself the following questions, giving yourself time to contemplate and elaborate on each:

1. What are my beliefs about my condition, my body, and what it will mean for my life? Is it possible that my beliefs are not accurate?
2. What are my feelings?

3. Am I willing to be a mess some of the time while I deal with this news?
4. Is it possible for me to become a better person through what lies ahead?