

Stories From the Sea of Life

Wayne C. Allen

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*Inquiries should be addressed to
324-55 Northfield Drive East
Waterloo, On N2K 3T6*

DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to the people who have taught me
through their life stories.*

It is especially dedicated to my best friend, life-mate and
teacher, Darlene MacNaughton.

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Introduction

In the Fall of 1993, I spoke at an Elderhostel gathering. I spoke about the power of choosing to live your life gracefully and with love and happiness. As is usual when I speak, I told stories—stories from my life and from the lives of friends and clients.

Following the talk, a wonderful person came bounding up to me and said, “Where’s the book?” “The book?” I asked. He replied, “Those stories should be in a book.”

I realized that this was a terrific idea, as I tell stories all of the time. Picked up the habit from a carpenter friend of mine; I have been following him for most of my life. My stories, like his, have a point. A message. A punch line.

They are all true stories. About all I do is round them out, shorten them down, and let people in on what I think the point is. I also attribute stories to people who have given me permission to do so, and disguise the identities of those who haven’t.

I understand that some might think my telling a story is breaking confidence or putting people down. I was at a training event in the Winter of 1993, and I started to tell a client story. A rather pained look came over one of the women at the table. She informed me, in no uncertain terms, that she was a client of a therapist and she didn’t want to hear me tell any client stories. I stopped. She left the table anyway. The rest of the people at the table asked me to finish the story. I did. It is to the “rest of the table,” then, that I dedicate this book. If you’re like the young woman, read no further. If you haven’t bent the cover, they might even give you your money back.

Being a practical sort, much into organization, I contemplated moving the stories around as I wrote them, with the goal of setting them into a pattern or developing little themes. Then I remembered how I actually use stories.

I’ll be sitting with a client, listening to them, and into my head will pop, usually unbidden, a story from my past. I learned long ago not to analyse the process—I don’t have a clue how all of this works. Same thing happens when I’m addressing an audience. I’ll have notes and a list of appropriate stories in front of me. Suddenly, though, I’m heading off in another direction, and if I yield

to where I am heading, almost instantly a new story will emerge that will illustrate my point.

Stories have the power to entertain, to explain, to illustrate and to heal. Some uses of stories are superficial, some are powerful. Perhaps the most powerful usage is to make a point without offending.

Clients, for example, are quite vulnerable, and therapy is a threatening thing. Clients risk everything—their identity, their heart and soul; their imperfections are out in the open. Good therapists tread softly as they help their clients learn to make better choices.

Therapists may choose to directly confront the belief system of a client; for healing to take place, the belief system **must** change. It is, however, extremely aggressive behaviour to directly challenge a belief system, even one clients may know is getting them nowhere. It seems to me that this is the place, the perfect place, for a story.

The story allows the person some breathing room. They can observe the actions and interactions of the people in the story. They can guess at the outcome. They can, *if they choose to*, see the connection between the story being told and **their** story. This frees them to gain insight without taking a body blow to their egos.

I am amazed (not really) at how quickly people see the way out of a dilemma for the people involved in the story. They will quickly say, “Wow. That person really was trying to manipulate her husband. Maybe she should listen more.” Then, a small smile will cross the person’s face, as the reality of what they just said hits home.

So, gentle reader, what might this mean for you? Well, the stories I’m about to tell you have the power to heal... if you will let them. They have the power to clarify, to guide, to gently chide... if you will let them. But why stop there?

There is nothing more important in your life than *your story*. There was a time, long ago, when monumental events led to a name change for the person involved (this still happens after vision quests embarked upon by Native People). A new name symbolizes the radical transformation that comes with true change.

Today, we don’t change our name—we change the way we tell our story. The data of the past, as we understand it, changes to fit

Stories from the Sea of Life

the new reality. Thus, if we are abandoned by a lover, we may forget successful past relationships and only remember the failed ones, confirming to ourselves (and to anyone who will listen) just how unlovable we are. If you think back to the big events in your life, and if you allow yourself to remember who you thought you were prior to the event, you will soon see that the way you tell your story changed, too.

Stories, then, are living things. The details are flexible, and the meaning ephemeral. Think about your story. Listen to how you talk to yourself. . . what you tell yourself of **you**. The way you describe yourself to yourself is who you are. Your behaviour, from that point on, will match your story. This is the meaning of “a self-fulfilling prophecy.” More on this in the stories.

If you want your life to be different, the story you tell yourself must **change**. You must be willing to *write or craft a new story that leads in healthful directions*. Otherwise, you simply remain a pawn to an old story.

Another use of this book is to help you to recognize the usefulness of stories as a **communication tool**. Study your ways of communicating with those around you. Do you lecture? Yell? Give them “the silent treatment?” Put them down? Put yourself down? Or do you speak to others with compassion? Do you treat others with respect and offer them dignity?

Good communication means that both you and the other person feel heard, valued and understood. Rather than immediately jumping in with long speeches aimed at “getting your way,” you might try using examples, tales, fables and experiences. In this way, you show that you heard, but are not judging or rushing in with a Band-Aid solution. You provide a window on the situation, and leave the person with the opportunity to look out, or not. You move from a position of superiority (or helplessness) to a place of compassionate response.

But, you say, I have no stories. Well, of course you do. You just haven’t spent any time remembering and cataloguing them. As you read this book, you will often see yourself or someone you know and love peeking out from under the words. Learn the story in a way that is appropriate for you. The details don’t matter as much as the flow of the story. Jesus, teller of tales and bringer of peace and wholeness, used to say, “What do you think?” He would then tell a parable. Try it. It works.

Then, find a way to remember stories as they happen to you. I decided, twelve years ago or so, to remember stories. They float

around in my head, waiting to pop out. As I've gotten older, I've added brief notes to my computer's data base, to remind me of infrequently used stories. Works for me.

Is it worth the effort? I would suggest to you that nothing is more important in life than to find ways to communicate so that healing happens and people are encouraged to embrace wholeness. Stories teach and clarify. Stories heal. That alone makes the learning and the practice of story-telling worthwhile.

I invite you to sit back, turn the page and listen. I encourage you to invite the storyteller in you to pay attention. At the very least, you'll be the life of the party.

**Boarding the Train of Life
is better
than waiting at
the Station.**

Climb, Baby, Climb

My wife Darlene and I love hiking. As a matter of fact, back when we were dating, a hike was our first vacation activity. We decided to hike South from the Northern end of the Bruce Trail, a system of trails that runs through Ontario. The Northern end is rugged and treacherous; with warning signs posted and everything. We're both experienced back-packers and we survived with nothing more serious than a damaged toenail.

On day three of the expedition, we came across a hole in the ground. The handy, dandy Bruce Trail Guidebook told us that one could climb into the hole, climb down a wall and emerge on a path that led to a secluded beach. We dumped off our packs and looked into the hole. Blackness.

We had no flashlight along. I started worrying about a descent into the darkness. I whipped open my pack, and started to haul out all kinds of climbing gear—ropes, anchors, **stuff**. I decided to lower the packs down first, then find an anchor point and lower myself down on a rope belay.

Actually, I was afraid. I'll climb anything... so long as I can see where I'm going . . . so long as I can think about it for a while. My back was to the hole, my head buried in my pack, my mind racing, trying to find a good reason... excuse... to use to let Dar know that I thought that we shouldn't climb down. Maybe later, or tomorrow... or in a couple of years.

In the midst of my reverie, I heard a voice from afar off. I got up, looked around, and noticed that Dar was missing. I looked down the hole. She was 30 feet below me, and the small amount of light down there was glistening off of her smile. She said, "What's taking you so long?"

That was the moment I decided I'd be with Dar for the rest of my life. I quickly climbed down. I also did an incredibly difficult climb back up, but that's another story.

Life is about getting on with what needs to be done. There are a million and one reasons for not starting, for turning back, for staying put, for being "safe." At the end of the day, however, nothing will have changed. Far better to risk, to dare, to climb.

**If We Choose
to Believe
That Something is True,
Sooner, Rather than Later,
IT WILL BE!**

On What We Want Versus What We Need

Once, a couple came to see me. Their marriage was in trouble. She was a professional person. He was in the construction trades. She didn't think he cared about her. One example she gave was that he was always late coming home. He argued that it was summer and you had to work hard while the weather was good.

She then said that he should call to let her know he was going to be late. He reminded her that few construction sites have phones. She berated him for lack of interest in her and the marriage. He sulked.

I suggested that they buy a cellular phone for his truck.

They did.

Two weeks later, they returned. They had installed the phone. He had called eight times out of ten working days. What did she say?

"I really hate this. You're not going to believe how inconsiderate he is!!! He didn't call twice!!! He doesn't love me!!!"

Sometimes, we get so caught up in our pain and our own world view that we miss what's really happening. We want so much to believe the horror stories that we tell ourselves that even blatant, eight out of ten evidence to the contrary will not convince us to revise our way of seeing. In a sense, although we have "proven" our belief, we have actually proven something we do not want to be true. Silly, but a popular activity.

**To the Observant,
Beauty is Always to be
Found.
The First Step
is to Look.**

As a counterpoint to that story, “dig” this:

Violets Don’t Mind What Dog Doo Does

In 1992, we bought our dog. (Her name, by the way, is Nishka, which is short for “Nishkamakarma” – which is Hindu for, “Do your duty, with faith in God, without attachment to the result of your action.” I have a poster of this word hanging in my office.) But I digress.

Nishka spent the Winter of ‘92 doing what dogs in Canada do. She pooped on the snow. It melted in and got covered over with more snow.

Come Spring, I went out to our backyard in my duck boots, with shovel in hand. I wandered around, and was amazed at the twigs, branches, paper, wrappers and poop that seemed to be everywhere. In fact, I calculated that our four month winters are composed of 120 days. That means between 120 and 240 piles of poop. What a concept.

But while thinking of this, I was looking around.

As I looked closer, poking out of the grass was a riot of little, purple violets. I was transfixed, even as I picked up the poop.

Life may provide us with poop to shovel, but if we choose to look around, there is also beauty, order and wonder all around. As any farmer will tell you, what’s poop to one person is fertilizer to another.

**Without a good deal
of work,
we are simply the sum
of our prejudices.**

Understanding is Limited by what we think we Heard...

I have worked at lots of things, one of which was counselling in the hinterland of Ontario. One afternoon I answered my phone, to be greeted by the voice of a male senior citizen. He said that he had read an article about me, and that I was doing really good work. I thanked him.

He then said that he wanted to share something with me. I allowed as that would be OK. He said, "Do you know that all of your clients have **devil** problems?"

Well, being a liberal theologically, and having a real aversion to "the debbil made me do it" kinds of thinking, I thought,

*"Oh no. One of **THEM!** I'm in for a long session. Boy do I hate this. How do I get him off the line? Poor me!" I said, "No, I've never noticed that."*

He said, "You've got to be kidding! Don't you know that all the problems people have are **devil** problems?" I *knew* I was in deep trouble then. I decided to be firmer.

"No," I replied. "As a matter of fact that's never been a problem for any of my clients in twelve years of counselling! I've got to go now!"

He said, "Don't your clients have teeth?"

I stopped. I stared at the phone. Then I stifled a huge laugh.

He said, "Don't you know that **bad teeth** cause all of the problems people have? I want to send you some information."

I realized that, far from thinking everyone had "devil" problems, what he'd said was, "**dental** problems." Turns out he was a retired dentist.

Even when you listen carefully, your prejudices have a way of confusing you. Listen again, with a clear heart and mind, and you might hear something different.

And take care of your teeth, you hear?

**"Victims" often lead
with their
butts
(but... but...)**

Safety versus Risk

I had Nishka out for a run the other day. She's an Australian Shepherd, and she loves to run and jump and madly dash about.

One game we play is "Duck and Cover". When she's not looking, I hide in the tall grass. She sees I'm missing, comes charging along and jumps over me, then comes back and nuzzles my neck.

This particular afternoon, she was snuffling through the grass, and I decided to "Duck and Cover." I got down on my hands and knees, but as I went to lower my head, a reed poked me in the forehead. I lifted my head, and in the process, lifted my butt up a bit. At precisely that moment, Nishka got there, and jumped.

Her chest collided with my rib cage and we both ended up in a heap. She was fine, I was a bit bruised. She had a look on her face that seemed to say, "Hey, dummy! What happened? You didn't do that right."

I ruefully thought, "Some days, stuff happens that you don't expect. If you don't respond instantly, you get hit by a freight train. Ouch."

I'm not sure what the moral is here. I think it's that, for fearful people, the only way they think they can be perfectly safe is to live their life face down, butt covered, head in the grass. They're afraid that any time they stick their heads up, they might get clobbered.

Or, the paradoxical view: If you stick your butt in the air without telling everyone you've changed the game, you might just get it kicked. That's the risk we take to do things differently.

This one is your pick. Nishka won't tell me what she thinks.

**Who Holds
the keys
to Your
Life?**

Your Way is Usually the Right Way... For You

I was leading a seminar at an international conference for THEOS, a Christian support group for the widowed. A participant said that her sons thought that she was not grieving the recent death of her husband *properly*. They hated her attitude, the fact that she cried often, that she wasn't baking, that she was changing their favourite recipes. The sons, by the way, were in their 30's.

I had suggested the titles of a couple of books on grief. She said, "Do you think it would be all right if I left a copy of one of the books out on the coffee table, so that maybe they might pick it up and read it?"

I replied, "No. Buy three copies. Mail it to the buggers and tell them not to bother coming home until they come to terms with their own grief."

"They're choosing to focus on you, as a way to avoid their own grief feelings. You are grieving in your own way, doing what is necessary for you. Your sons' focus on you clearly is meant to suggest that they know a better way... for you. It's up to you to decide whether to believe them or not."

The woman smiled, then laughed. Healing happened in that moment. The woman was truly relieved, as she had just about been convinced that she was ready for a mental hospital for not grieving "properly."

People are reluctant to look at themselves when they confront some difficulty with another person. It is far easier to blame others for their own misery or anger or confusion.

When conflict arises, people judge others. Rather than simply finding others "different from me, but doing the best they can" they judge them "wrong." We have enough to do working on ourselves . . . there is a lifetime of work inside . . . let's get to it!

**If You
Don't Define Yourself,
Someone Else
Will be Glad
to do it
For You.**

Being OK is a State of Mind

To show you how easy it *can* be to find wholeness, let me tell you about a thirteen year old I worked with this past Fall. Let's call her Shelley. She was living with her father and stepmother. She was having trouble with her natural mother, whom she described as, "Prone to mood swings, drinks entirely too much, and hits, verbally and physically." Shelley had just spent a terrible weekend with her mom. (Her sister lives with the mom, and she was abusive too.) All in all, a lot for a thirteen year old to deal with.

Shelley didn't want to go back for another "weekend from hell." I talked about her self-worth—that she did not have to go where she felt threatened. I suggested that she write her mother a letter, listing appropriate behaviours for her mom: 1) no drinking, 2) no hitting and 3) no yelling and put-downs. Mom was to agree to this, or Shelley wouldn't come back. Additionally, she was to get her dad to agree to come and get her on a moment's notice, should she go and find herself in a bad situation.

Shelley came back the next week, having done all of that. Her mother had received the letter. She had called and yelled. Shelley hung up. The mother called back and discussed it and eventually agreed to try.

Shelley went to visit mom. They had a good visit. They talked further about self-worth and about ways to show love, a conversation that had never happened before.

Shelley felt good enough about herself, after this visit, to begin working on other things. For example, she went to her dad and asked him to hug her more—an issue that she wanted to resolve with him.

Because of Shelley's growing self-worth, the following happened: Shelley felt tons better about herself. Her father and stepmother started hugging her. Shelley started to include herself in family activities. (Prior to this, she and her bad self-image had been hiding in her room. She came out and joined the family.) Her natural mother and her sister started therapy, as they saw how positive the change had been for Shelley.

Respecting yourself—loving yourself, can change the world, one step at a time.

**The Lessons of Life
Cannot be Avoided.
They Can be Greeted
as the Friends They Are.**

On Trying to Avoid the Lessons of Life

Many of us try our darndest to avoid learning what life is all about. I've decided that life-issues, God, vocation... are things that call to us until we choose to answer.

One Sunday night, I realized that I was coming down with the flu. I decided that what I needed most was rest. I am not good at ignoring the telephone, and ours has the most annoying habit of ringing. Fortunately, all of our phones are equipped with a switch to turn off the bell. So, I ran around the house, clicking off the phones, assuming that in this way I would not be bothered.

Monday morning, I was awakened quite early by the softest of clicking, right near my ear. It turns out that our bedroom phone chucks when the ringer is turned off. No matter how hard I tried, the call got through. Ain't that the truth!

It is clear that we all have issues we need to work through.

They are the things that “ring our bells” or “pull our chains.” If we do not learn to deal with the things that affect us, we are assured of that same issue occurring again and again, each time with more intensity.

The mature person is not a person without problems... the mature person is the one who quickly resolves problems, while at the same time doing the most good (or the least harm)...

**The Truth of
Who we are
is Found
in the Depths
of our Being.**

On Looking Deeply

I had a friend back in Buffalo when I was in my late teens and early twenties. (Actually, I had *several* friends...) He worked for my dad at Radio Shack, and he was an operator from the word go. He was always cooking up schemes to make money.

When Spring came, he would buy up a group of cars from one of his buddies over at the Chrysler dealership. He would end up with one good car for himself, and a bunch of wrecks. Selling the “reconditioned” wrecks paid for the good car, and kept him in caviar.

First of all, he had to get them running. This would involve all sorts of shenanigans with grease, and rolling back odometers, and sawdust in the transmissions or something. Then, he’d turn to the bodies.

Here, he really excelled. Newspaper was crumpled up and stuffed into gaping rust holes. Tin cans were cemented to the paper. Lots of fibreglass putty was pasted on. Then, out came the sander and the paint sprayer. Two days—brand new looking car. His dad would then sell the car, saying that it had belonged to his dear old deceased mother.

People would buy the cars. The car would break down, they’d call up and demand their money back, but in the end, this guy’s sweet smile and cherubic face won the day. People ended up convinced that they had broken the car. “Oh, if my grandma knew what happened to her precious car, it would kill her all over again.”

Again and again, life tells us that what we see is a poor indicator of what’s really there. We are all suckers for a sad tale and a hole full of paper and putty. The truth of a person or a situation is always found in the depth. It takes effort to see clearly by looking deeply, but this is effort well spent.

**Life is About
the Walk,
not About
the Destination**

It's not the Race, it's the Training

One Fall, I decided to ski the Muskoka Loppet. It's a 30 km. cross country ski race. I read about it in a magazine. At that stage of things, I had been skiing for one season. I decided I knew enough about skiing to do thirty clicks, as I often hike that much in a single trek when backpacking.

Winter came, and I decided that some training might be in order. I decided upon a rigorous training and jogging regimen. I jogged... oh, twice. Did a bit of stretching. Did an awful lot to convince myself about what great shape I was in. Good endurance and all that. No problem.

The day of the Loppet dawned cold and grey. I knew I was in trouble when I found out that the first km. was a dash across a frozen lake. The next 10 km. were all up-hill, as we climbed out of the lake's valley. Then downhill, on a sharp, 2 km. run with lots of turns. Then uphill. Then down, jumping logs and roads.

This silliness went on, for me, for four hours. (The winner completed the race in around one hour.) I discovered muscles I had only read about. Each breath was a rasp of ice-cold air through a moustache and beard caked with several inches of ice. My legs were numb from the cold and hot with pain at the same time. I realized I had not taken my training quite seriously enough.

I crawled into bed that night, and vowed never again to be so foolish. Of course, I have been, and every time it has to do with lack of preparation for what is to come.

Many people seek enlightenment, faith, peace... but do not want to pay the price. "It should be easy," they cry. To achieve focus and order and stability requires a lifetime of practice. As we've said, life provides many deeply difficult challenges. These "dark nights of the soul" are meant to be transforming experiences. They are, however, almost impossible to learn from without training and practice. That practice comes as we deal with the normal obstacles of life, thoughtfully provided by all the people you don't like, and quite a few that you do.

You Don't Do It...
You Be It.
Gloria Taylor

It's Refreshing

Pete from Iowa was one of my freshman roommates, in 1968, at good old Elmhurst College. He introduced me to the idea of meaningless and superficial refreshment.

The town Pete came from was so small that the chief entertainment for teens was to jump into their pickups and cruise around the block, which just about circled the town. Then they'd go over to the A & W, have a root beer, and check out the girls. They wore an "outfit"—crew cut, black jeans, white tee-shirt with a pack of smokes rolled up in the sleeve . . . and cowboy boots.

Pete liked to feel refreshed. All the time. He told me that. Repeatedly. I thought that meant he showered a lot. Wrong.

I noticed that he had brought along to College what for me would have been a lifetime supply of the industrial size cans of Right Guard Aerosol Deodorant. Initially, I was glad that he was so conscientious, as it was a small room with no air conditioning, and I therefore considered deodorant to be a direct gift from God.

About a week into the Semester, I was lying abed studying, when in rushed Pete. "Boy oh boy, guy," said Pete. "Shore is a hot 'un out chere." And he grabs a can of Right Guard, lifts his arm heavenward and sprays a goodly dose of the product on the appropriate area. One small problem, though. I noticed that he had neglected to remove his white tee-shirt.

Ever the kind soul, ever willing to illuminate this backwards kid from Iowa, I pointed out the error of his ways. To which he replied, "We always do it that way back home. Cools ya right off." I think it was then and there that I began to hate the expression, "We always did it that way."

This little trip to the aerosol can took place not once a day, but every time Pete left the room. I began to wonder how he was able to raise the arm of his shirt.

Refreshment (becoming fresh and alive again) has more to do with a state of mind than it does with taking a day off.

It is an attitude, not a technique. It can't be bought and applied. It must be lived. It is an internal choice, and thus is not about vacations, relaxation, exercise or eating right.

It is about a change of heart and a change of mind.

**Your Life is Yours.
No one nor no thing
impinges on your
right to choose.
Except You.**

Where's the Problem?

Some time ago, I got bitten by the genealogy bug. As my mom's family pretty much hung out around Buffalo, New York, I focused on them. One of my great-grandfathers was Fredrich Zimpfer. In the course of my explorations, I discovered that he'd fought in the U.S. Civil War.

This revelation led me to spend a day at the U.S. National Archives in Washington, D.C. They actually had a box devoted to my great-grandfather. It was chock full of letters and reports.

My favourite section started with a letter grandpa Fredrich wrote, asking for more pension money. He claimed that sleeping out in the rain during the war had given him arthritis, and that the canons he fired had made him deaf.

The problem was, he was well over sixty when he made this claim. The Army had a tough time attributing arthritis to his fighting in the war. After all, they wrote, he had been in his 20's when he fought. They reasoned that it had taken him a long time to start aching. They politely suggested that maybe the arthritis could be from old age. They did raise his pension by five dollars a month, though, probably for creativity.

They sent Fredrich to a doctor to check out the deafness. Turned out he really was almost totally deaf. Except that the doctor popped out a couple of forty year old ear wax plugs, and immediately after a miracle happened and he could hear a watch ticking from across a room. No points for creativity that time.

Ever look around to see who's (or what's) to blame for the problems you think you have? Want a fast solution for virtually all of them? Figure out what or who has to change to make you happy.

To help you figure this out, go buy a hand mirror. The next time you're troubled by something, pick up the magic mirror and look deeply into the shiny side. Voila! There's the solution to your dilemma!

**Life is a Classroom,
Dedicated to Teaching You
What You Never Thought
You Needed
to Learn.**

Consequences, Consequences!

I endlessly promulgate the idea that the cosmos provides us with exactly the lessons we need to learn. Lots of the stories in this book point to that idea. Once in a while, though, something happens that just simply points out how interesting life can be, and how funny, if only we'll notice.

I got a huge stack of mail the other day. I was sitting and sorting—tossing the junk and saving the good stuff for last. (Scott Peck would be proud of me!) I came to an envelope that was from a company that sells newsletters. The envelope had lots of little blurbs printed on it, designed to get me to open the letter, rather than do what I *should* have done with it.

What caught my eye was, “Are you over 40? You could be missing out on the best sex of your life!!!” Now, my sex life is pretty good, thanks for asking, but I am over forty, so I thought I'd better leave this one on the “keeper” pile, for a later perusal. Just in case.

The very next item on the mail stack was a folded, coloured sheet of paper. I opened it and read, “Who is going to pay for your funeral expenses?”

I wondered if there was a connection between “sex over 40” and funeral expenses. I trust the two pieces of mail were not sent by the same source.

I'm not sure if I'll risk sending for the “Sex over 40” newsletter.

There are no coincidences.

**Life is Full of
Sticking Points.
Our Goal is to Learn
to Get Unstuck.
Quickly.**

Getting Unstuck

I've mentioned the Muskoka Loppet, but I didn't tell you about getting there. Northern Ontario gets a lot of snow – the plows couldn't keep up with it all. It seemed like, in the North, you always drove on top of packed, sanded snow.

I was heading for Muskoka, not particularly watching what I was doing. I glanced out my side window, and immediately dropped the right tires onto the shoulder. The shoulder was solid ice, grooved by the tires of other idiots who had done what I did.

You probably know that one of the worst things you can do, when driving 100 kph, and finding your right tires stuck in a groove on an icy shoulder, is to whip the wheel to the left. I was not in full possession of my faculties, so that's what I did.

I exited the icy rut at 100 kph... sideways. I over-corrected. The car's back end started to come around, and threatened to overtake the front end. I over-corrected the other way. I sailed along on the packed, sanded snow, never diminishing in speed.

Back and forth, back and forth, my life spinning before my eyes. Finally, I lost control completely. I slid across the road and headed for the median, which fortunately had 10 feet of snow piled up in it. I whooshed into the midst of it and was immediately buried up to the hood.

Having stopped screaming, I climbed out of the car. I was really trapped. I'd never get out. No people around. No houses. This was pre-cellular phone time. I'd have to hike out. Or ski out. Or just climb back in to the car and wait for Spring.

A car pulled up. A big guy got out. "Nice driving, dude," he said. "Been watching the performance from a way's back."

Out of the car came three other incredibly big guys. They walked to my little car, and, I kid you not, LIFTED it out of the snow and onto the shoulder. They then jumped back into their car. The driver rolled down his window, "Have a good day, dude. Keep the rubber on the road this time!"

Angels, I guess, come in all sizes.

We get stuck through inattention. Often, others help us get unstuck. The object is to learn, so as to avoid getting stuck again.

**Life is Complex...
Until You Stop
Wasting Time
and Start Walking.**

Spinning . . . Spinning . . .

So, do you remember the 1994 Olympics? I promise not to say a single word about two women skaters from the U. S. of A. (Where else?) I think one of them is named Lilly Hammer, but I could be mistaken. I want to talk about spinning.

Ever notice how fast a skater can spin when she draws in her arms? A blur. When one person in a pair spins, all the other person can do is watch. Touch the spinning person, and you get a brush burn. Their sparkles and glitter cut. They're all elbows, sharp edges and bones.

When the spinning person stops spinning, the partner can stop looking, and can come up and skate with the former spinner. And make something beautiful in the process.

Spinning people grab the limelight. Centre of attention, spinning on their centres, covering no ground but certainly being *seen*. Their view of things, however, is a blur. And they stand alone, untouched by life.

To create real beauty, the skater must stop spinning and start skating. A programme of spins is boring.

To spin is to be stuck in a rut (see previous story!). No one can help a spinner. The spinner must halt the mindless movement, step out of the limelight, (and the little rut they have made), and join with others who can help them on their way. For each skater there is a coach; for each skater, there is someone else to teach.

**Life is About
Doing What Works.
You Can't be More Right
Than Right.**

Speed versus Focus

I once worked with a wonderful, creative client who thought that she never quite got it right.

She ran ad campaigns, and was under a deadline to submit just the right “look” for her company. She raced about for weeks on end. Every assignment ended the same way. She would submit several campaigns, rather than just one; on the off-chance someone might not like the first one.

Also important in her life was the problem of not being able to get pregnant. She and her husband had done everything, right through to fertility clinics, with no luck.

As I sat with her in the first session, my whole body felt like it was shaking. I was clearly picking up “vibes” from her, and she was really agitated.

I finally interrupted her and helped her to calm down. I jokingly suggested that it was no wonder she couldn’t get pregnant... she was expending so much nervous energy she was shaking the ovum loose. Fortunately for me, she laughed.

We worked on her style, and she learned to reign herself in. She was quick to notice that people loved her work, and always picked her first submission. This helped her to discipline herself to do only what was needed. By the end of six sessions, she was almost calm; she was certainly focused and less worried about perfection.

Within a month, she and her husband got pregnant, the “natural” way. They had a lovely baby girl.

Sometimes, in a relentless pursuit of perfection, we can get so twisted out of shape that everything stops working. We have to recognize the power of patience, stillness and calmness. As we find ourselves slowing down, we find ourselves with time to do what is necessary... elegantly.

**What you say and a dollar
will get me a cup
of coffee.**

**If you say it,
mean it,**

AND DO IT!

Life is as Complex as You Make It

One of my favourite clients is an intellectual. She has an amazing grasp of life in its complexity . . . and boy, is her life complex.

Many have been the sessions where we have discussed how she might find peace in her life. We have seen changes come and changes go as she has worked toward this new way of being.

You'd think that finding a new, healthy and centred reality would be something she eagerly seeks. Instead, she describes this new way as "a vast, empty, white place."

Which doesn't exactly seem inviting, although it sometimes describes Canada.

Where she is stuck is *where many people get stuck*. She is stuck in her head, trying to *understand* things, while life becomes more and more complex around her.

Each time I suggest that she change her viewpoint and discover a new way of seeing things, she says, "Then what?"... as if there is something more important happening on some other channel.

My client has two daughters. The good news is that she is learning from both of them. She is interacting with them in a mature and healthful way, and this is changing her perspective about the rest of her life. It's a struggle, because of her desire to understand, rather than change.

Complexity is a defence against change—nothing would be scarier for my client than for there to be nothing to worry about. Her eldest daughter summed it up, "Mom, you need to laugh more... and to get a life."

Life is about acting in a way that is consistent with your most deeply held beliefs and understandings. You can't teach peace by yelling... you can't solve things through chaos.

The job of life is to become consistent, persistent and resistant.

**Always believe
what you promise
and
promise
what you believe.**

A Promise Needs to be Valuable Before it Becomes Real

In my first year at Elmhurst College, I sent my parents tapes instead of letters. I guess that, as time passed and I became more of a Freshman, my language deteriorated until my mom sent **me** a tape and offered to wash out my mouth with soap. I replied, “I get the message, and I sure as hell won’t swear again. OOPS!”

Sometimes, it’s hard to keep our promises. Sometimes we make promises not worth keeping. And some promises are worth our very lives. The joy and the mystery in life is trying to tell the difference.

**Just because someone
told you something
once upon a time,
does not make it
true.**

Changing a Lasting Image

Beth came to see me after many years of therapy. She comes from a large and quite dysfunctional family. Most of the problems she's experiencing originated with her interactions with her dad.

Dad took great delight in criticizing each of his kids. He'd criticize them for whom they were, and try to force them to be something else. In this process, he was able to stifle the personality of each child, each in a unique way.

Beth learned to think of herself as a failure. No matter what she did, it was wrong. Her tried to escape the criticism was by "disappearing." She'd hide, keep silent, run away. As a result, others saw her as both shy and intellectually slow.

At every point along the way, she has sabotaged her successes. Because of the strength of her "adopted from father" self-image, she assumes she cannot succeed. Her father's voice echoes in her head before an alternative view can take its place.

In our therapy, Beth has come to trust me. I have been quite enthusiastic about everything she does. I have congratulated her on decisions, complimented her on her understandings, and focused on her strengths. At first, she thought I was nuts.

It's been seven sessions, and Beth is now reporting that life is different. She is able to measure her own successes. Her language has changed; for the most part she is using positive language to describe both herself and her activities.

Beth is not finished yet. The habits of a lifetime, however, of proving her father's negative description of her to be "correct," are coming to an end.

Many people and things have influenced our understanding of whom we are and what we are capable of. Interestingly enough, precious little of what we believe about ourselves is "real." Our objective must be to examine what we hold to be "true," to decide if it is accurate. Those things of little value are left behind by adopting other "truths," and making them our own through what we say and what we do.

Give Up Later

Batter Up

Bill was an interesting client. He was thirty-four years old, and his first and only job began at age seventeen. He'd worked himself up from the bottom to upper middle management. Then, the owners sold the business.

The new owners wanted everyone to devote their lives to "the company." Bill was uncomfortable with that, as he already had a life. They could not fault his work, so they started criticizing his dedication. They pulled every psychological stunt they could think of to make his life miserable. They made it clear that they would break him... that he was going to quit.

Finally, he ended up on a disability leave. That's when he showed up on my doorstep. He described life at work, and the depression he found himself in. He despaired ever finding another job. (A recession, you know...) His life was over.

I asked him what else he did, in his spare time. He said that he coached little league ball. I asked him what he told a kid in a batting slump. He gave this impassioned pitch about playing the game, keeping on swinging and not getting upset. I said, "Good advice. Why not take it?"

He said, "I could be my own coach!!!"

We worked together for five more sessions. He went from zero resumes to fifty sent out in a week. He made calls to friends and others in his line of work. Lots of calls. He refused, very politely, to meet with his bosses on a Monday morning, when they would be fresh, instead taking meetings with them on Friday afternoon, when he would have the advantage. He let them know he'd be off disability when he chose to be.

A friend offered him a partnership in a sign maintenance business which already had a major municipal account. He left his former employer with a six-month's severance package... and the contract to maintain their outside lights and signs.

Life is as we make it. Many successful enterprises start when the signs are "all wrong," simply because of the attitude of the principal people. It is important to define who you are, what you want, and how you want to be treated. Then, treat other people the same way, focus your energy and direction on the goal. And start.

**Never compromise
on getting it
right.**

You Always Get What You're Willing to Pay For

You'll remember my story about my friend from Buffalo, and his car business. The guy also did electronics repairs. One day, he received a call from a local Country Club. Their amplifier was on the fritz. He took me along for the ride. Which was pretty spectacular.

We hopped into his "woody" station wagon, lovingly restored with the profits from his automotive endeavours. As we hit the Country Club's driveway, he reached under the radio and flipped a switch. Red lights popped up and started turning. A police siren wailed. What an entrance!

The amp was on its last legs. Johnny suggested replacing the unit, for \$300.00. The owner balked. He wanted the old one *fixed*.

Johnny quickly changed gears. He said he could fix the old one with a unit that "*rerouted the signals coming in, using a line processing amplification and resonance unit.*" Bafflegab 101.

Back at Radio Shack, Johnny grabbed the parts. A case. A one watt amp. A power supply. And a Goofy Light Kit, which made six lights flash randomly. Johnny drilled six holes in the box. He wired it up – a one watt amplifier with six Goofy Lights.

Back to the Country Club we dashed. He installed the unit ahead of the amplifier, creating a one watt pre-amp. He'd increased the power of the signal, so the tired old system now sounded healthy. It wasn't.

He called in the owner. He intoned, "These five (Goofy) lights are monitoring the performance of this delicate instrumentation. As long as *only* five lights are flashing, everything is fine. If this last light comes on, that means the system needs repair. Call us, and we'll come right out." Of course, *that light was not connected*. We left, with a cheque for \$250.00. The owner had what he'd asked for. Or, **got** what he asked for.

Halfway measures are never enough. All you end up with is the same problem, glossed over. For a while. You can be sure, though, that something will happen, and you'll be right back where you started. Far better to pay the cost, to do the work and to get it right... the first time.

**Change, and
the World
Changes
With You.**

A “Passionate Encounter”

The daughter of one of my friends came in for counselling one day. After assorted pleasantries, Carol said, “Wayne, all of the passion has gone out of my relationship with Will.” (Carol had been with Will for eleven months.)

I asked her what she was doing about it. Carol replied, “Every night, I say to Will, ‘Will, all the passion has gone out of our relationship.’ But nothing ever changes.”

I asked Carol if she’d be willing to play a game with me. We would pretend that we were in a relationship. She agreed. I said, “Carol, all of the passion has gone out of our relationship. What are you going to go about it?”

Carol said, “Well, I’ll make you dinner, and then we’ll drink wine in front of a roaring fire and fool around on the couch.” I said, “Carol, that was a fine dinner, the wine is great and you really know how to fool around, but Carol, all of the passion has gone out of our relationship. What are you going to go about it?”

Carol said, “Well, I’ll buy a sexy nightgown and give you a back-rub and we’ll take a shower and then make love.” I said, “Carol, that’s one heck of a nice nightgown, and my back feels great, as does the rest of me, but Carol, all of the passion has gone out of our relationship. What are you going to go about it?”

Carol said, “Well . . . damn it, what do you want?”

I said, “Maybe Will is wondering the same thing.”

Lots of people, when they fall in love, think that the other person should be able to figure out what they want, because they think that’s what happens when you fall in love. Nope. Relationships take time and effort. Most of all, what’s necessary is the willingness to simply describe what you need. Make it easy on the other person. Fill them in. Leave the guessing games for TV game shows.

***Giving up is easy.
Being down on yourself is easy.
Neither accomplishes a thing.***

Walking the Ledge, part one

When I was a kid, I went to church camp once a year, for a week. The camp was right on Lake Erie. In the old days, people swam in the lake. By the time I went there, a pool had been put in, for convenience and because even the alewives couldn't live in Lake Erie in the late 50's and early 60's.

You could still get to the beach. At the end of the beach was a bluff that stretched up 50 feet or so. Right where the water hit the bluff was a ledge, about 4 inches wide. A person could walk that ledge, which was wet and slippery, and end up a half mile along at the other end of the camp, where one could climb the bluff and hop a fence and return to the camp.

Needless to say, such behaviour was frowned upon, especially when the wind came up on Lake Erie.

I walked the ledge all the time – alone, and in groups. I was never scared, because I knew the secret. The key was to be prepared.

You had to have the right shoes. You had to wear a shirt, to keep from getting scratched. And you had to have the right attitude. The right attitude was: "It's not how often you fall off of the ledge and into the water. It's how quickly you get back up and continue the walk."

Falling off of the ledge was a part of walking the ledge. Sometimes (see the next story), you fell off a lot. Other times, the walk was pretty easy. If you only concerned yourself with falling off, you'd never start.

Falling off is a part of everyone's life, if you try in the first place, as opposed to giving up before "whatever" begins.

Getting back on after you fall off is the mark of the persistent hero.

Those who fall off and simply bob in the water gain nothing but wrinkled skin.

**In every life,
there will be times
when you really need
a hand.**

Walking the Ledge, part two

Sandy was my first girlfriend. We broke up when I went to College. A few years later, I ran into her at our Church picnic, held (where else) at our church camp... the one with the ledge.

Sandy had blossomed, if you catch my drift. I was enamoured all over again. After much giggling and making out, we wandered down to the beach. Just before things got interesting, a bunch of our friends showed up. They wanted to walk the ledge.

Normally, I led such expeditions. I wanted to hang out with Sandy, so we volunteered to take the rear and rescue stragglers. As it turned out, this was a good thing, because a storm was blowing in across the lake, and the waves crashing over the ledge and smashing on to the bluff were peaking at 3 feet.

Somebody decided to persuade a young woman to join us, for her first ledge walk. The “first timer” left with the group. Sandy and I started walking a minute later.

As we came around the first bend, we saw a huge wave knock the young woman off her feet, toss her into the bluff, and then drag her 20 feet out. I dove in and pulled her back onto the ledge.

By the time she got half way, she had been knocked off three more times. Each time I'd gone swimming and pulled her out.

That was enough. She wanted to go back. I told Sandy I'd take her. She was terrified of standing on the ledge, so we swam back, fighting the tide and waves. I saw her safely to the beach, dove back in, and swam.

By this point I was beat from getting kicked around by the waves, swallowing water, and from hauling the “newbie” around.

I decided to get up and walk the ledge. No sooner did I get to my feet than a huge wave knocked me back in. I went under, hit an undertow, and when my head popped up, I was 50 feet out and heading for Canada. I figured I was dead.

At that moment, a hand encircled my wrist. I was flipped onto my back, and Sandy towed me in. She'd waited for me.

No matter what you know or what your strengths are, there is going to be water that is over your head. Cultivate friends. You will need them. And they you. Take the help offered. What goes around comes around.

**Remember - -
It just might
not be
what it says
it is.**

A Long Road to Nowhere

One time, I was down in the state of Virginia, heading from Washington, D.C. to Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, one of my favourite presidents. As I had never been there before, I bought a map.

The map showed two routes from point A to point B. The first was a thin, black line, approximately straight, from Washington to Monticello.

The other road was slightly wider, red, and had a couple of wiggles and squiggles. It was called something like “The Blue Ridge Parkway.” I assumed it was called that because it went through the Blue Ridge Mountains. I have always been clever at figuring stuff out.

I was also in a hurry. My experience with maps led me to conclude that a wide red road called a “Parkway” just **had** to be faster than a skinny black road with no real name at all. So off I went on the Blue Ridge Parkway, for a drive that the map said was about 100 miles.

Well, the road went up a little hill and down a little hill. Around corners. It spiralled up to the mountaintops, which I immediately identified by their blue ridges. I believe that I saw, first hand and up close, each and every one of those blue ridges. After three hours of driving, I had covered, oh, 30 miles.

At a junction that finally showed up, I pulled off and reconsidered the map. The other road was running narrowly and blackly 5 miles away. I decided, ever quick, that I must not have reached the *parkway* part of the parkway. So I continued to drive the wide, red line. Two hours later, I was 50 miles along.

So, I turned. Headed down the connecting road to the skinny black road, and an hour later pulled into Monticello. The trip home, on the narrow, black road, took slightly less than two hours.

Conventional wisdom is not always right. Things called parkways may not be the best routes. It is better to consider alternatives than to continue down long and winding roads. Always remember that things are what they are, not what they claim to be.

In Theory, it's simple.
In Practice, it's hard.
With Practice, it becomes
simple again.

On Holding a Shinai

My Sensei, Master Lai, teaches the ancient Martial Art of Ninjitsu. He reminds us that pain is a part of learning. Once you accept the reality of the pain, you can move past it to the training.

Good Martial Artists do as they are told, without fully understanding *why* they are doing something. The “why” becomes clear through the “how.”

A shinai is a bamboo sword which weighs two pounds or so. Early on, as you train with one, you spend what seems to be eternity standing still, holding the sword *just so*.

Which means out slightly from your body, pointed upward at a slight angle. Your hands are parallel to your navel, the tip of the sword at the level of your eyes. This gets tiring, especially when you hold it that way for thirty minutes, accompanied by the occasional squat, while holding the sword at the same angle.

To achieve mastery of this, you must practice. You must move through the pain. It does not sound difficult until you try it... until your muscles rebel and you must control them. Then it is hard.

Sensei calls learning to do this “Warrior’s Mind.” The person who perseveres, who gets the job done, simply and efficiently, possesses this trait. To pass through the gate of pain leads to the realm of understanding and ability, *despite* the pain.

There is no such thing as no pain. This is especially true as we grow and change. If you simply stop each time you touch the pain, you will remain where you are. The rule is: argue for your limitations, and they are yours.

All new things take focus and dedication... and pain. The key is to start... and then to see it through.

**The Wise person
notices
what's really
happening.**

A Season for Everything

I had a nurse for a client, and she really thought she was depressed. Had depression down pat... the look, the walk, the words. She made it clear to me that she intended to do nothing but come for therapy and that it was my job to keep her alive.

I refused.

This did not sit well. She explained that, for all of her life, people had been keeping her alive. Her friends in nursing school took turns watching her when she studied for exams, lest she kill herself. I asked her what she did for her friends in return. She did not understand this question.

Summer intervened on our therapy. She went off to be a nurse at a summer camp. She came back tanned and relaxed and happy. Terminated therapy, she was so happy.

The next April she came back—sad, sagging, mopey. I suggested that she look at the choices she was making in her life. She replied that she didn't want to talk about herself. From that point on therapy was not a good experience. For either of us.

Finally, June came along. I made a prediction that, when she returned to summer camp, she would be happy and having fun within a week. She vigorously argued against my prediction, stating that she knew herself much better than I did. She was not sure she'd survive the summer.

In September, she returned for her last session of therapy. It lasted five minutes. She said, "Damn you! Five days into the summer and I was happy. I was even happy after I remembered your prediction. I just had the best summer of my life. If I listen to you, I'll have to change everything and be responsible for my moods and my direction. I'd rather be taken care of. You won't do it, so I'm out of here!"

Depression is real. Almost always, though, the sufferer has to change something in their life, in order to take control of the situation. In this woman's case, the depression was a ploy to ensnare people into her life—to take care of her. It takes incredible courage to learn to take care of yourself.

In the end, your life is your own.

**What's real
is quite often
different from
what scares us.**

Reflected Fear

I made a major presentation last Spring, for a project I ended up not getting. Nonetheless, I left the meeting thinking that I had made an excellent presentation, and had formed a couple of meaningful relationships.

As I walked out to my car, I was reviewing in my mind what had gone on in the meeting. I was feeling pretty good about the whole thing. The review continued as I climbed into my van and started the engine. I put the van into reverse and started to back out of the parking slot, remembering some witty thing or another I had said.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I caught the motion of a large vehicle bearing down on me out of nowhere. I slammed on the brakes, knowing instinctively that it was too late.

The van shuddered to a halt. No impact. I turned my head and looked toward the motion. There, staring at me, was my own face, caught in the mirrored windows of the van parked quietly in the slot next to me.

Life provides enough of its own little surprises without our succumbing to the shadows of our minds. The shadows are more readily seen if we focus in on the reality of the situation we are actually a part of, rather than on the movie of past glories playing in our heads. Life, after all, is best played in the real world.

Saves a lot of imaginary accidents, too!

**Arrogance only lasts
Until it catches
Up with you**

Doin' the White Guy Shuffle

Arrogance knows no boundaries.

While the history of Canada is less violent than that of the country to the South, both countries have shameful records when it comes to dealing with Native People.

Darbella and I were on holidays “down east,” and heard an interview on the CBC. The guy being interviewed was from Quebec, and was the head of the department that decided upon place names for towns, rivers, and the like.

He mentioned that, last century, at the height of the “let’s bring civilization and Christianity to the “natives” movement,” headed mostly by W.A.S.P.s, (W.F.C’s in Quebec) some bright white light decided to Christianize the names of cities in the far North—the home of the Inuit.

One renaming of note recently caught everyone’s attention. There was a town called Quantik.* It had been renamed Notre Dame du Quantik.

Some years later, someone deigned to ask the Inuit what Quantik meant. They discovered that the arrogant bright white light had named the town, in English, “Our Lady of the Intestinal Worm.”

* This is what the name sounded like. I’ve been unable to find the town on a map, to check the spelling.

Doesn't matter how smart you are. If you think you know more than someone else—that you're civilized and they're not—watch out... you'll pay. Maybe not today... but soon... and well.

**If you are going
to follow in someone else's
footsteps,
it pays to find out
if they knew where
they were going.**

Finding Fido

I mentioned some pages ago that Dar and I love to hike. One Summer, we were in Newfoundland. We hiked a coastal trail, and had lunch overlooking the ocean. We had a map, kindly provided by the Newfoundland Department of Tourism.

As we headed off, Dar noticed a large pile of rocks that looked like a big dog. She called the rock stack “Fido.”

We walked for two hours. We arrived at the ocean, which was spectacular. We wandered around on the beach, then had lunch. We sat on a ledge and looked at the map. It was 2 p.m., and the map showed that we were half way around the loop. We had to decide whether to turn around or press on. Being the adventurous sort, we pressed.

We were soon confronted with hills and valleys and a trail that wound around and back upon itself—the trail kept crossing a river that led to the ocean. Each time we rounded a turn, we assumed that we were on the home stretch. Each time, our hopes were dashed. Our spirits began to flag. Our legs ached, as did our stomachs. Soon, it was approaching 7 p.m.

We had no food and were only wearing day packs. The, the fog began to roll in. With the onset of dusk, it became impossible to rush. Dar began to flag. I didn’t want to spend the night huddled under a tree, so I turned into a drill sergeant.

Finally, I was sure we were beaten. We rounded a corner. I was ready to stop, when a foggy, blurry object flashed past me. I expected a bear, so that my life would be complete. Imagine my shock when I recognized the blur as dear Dar. Her cute little back end... er... backpack disappearing into the Newfoundland fog.

What, I wondered, could have caused this miraculous reincarnation? As if through the mists of time, a voice drifted back to me, “I see FIDO!!!!!!” We were saved.

It’s truly dumb to depend upon the maps, paths or directions of another, if you are not willing to analyse how well they fit with your needs, plans or desires. All we ever know for sure is that something worked for someone else. We can base our own unique maps upon the work of others, but in the end, the map we draw is our own.

**The persistence
of the water
defeats the rock.
Every time.**

The Tone-deaf Louie Two Step

Back when I spent more time in Toronto than I do now, I was a frequent visitor to the St. Lawrence Market. Loved the baking. One of my favourite people down there was this old guy—a rather grizzled old man I dubbed Tone-deaf Louie. He played the harmonica and the spoons... needless to say, not at the same time.

Louie was something. First of all, no one would ever have confused Louie with a musician. That's why I called him ***Tone-deaf*** Louie. Second of all, his harmonica playing technique consisted of sucking and blowing on the same hole, time after time, with an occasional riff thrown in for effect. Third, I've seen people in comas with a better sense of rhythm.

And then there was his appearance. I never saw him in any other garb than a threadbare suit. Of shiny polyester dayglo green. Under which he wore a brown Hawaiian shirt which probably began life another colour.

He stood at the entrance to the Market, sucking and blowing, with intensity and fervour. The most remarkable thing was that people continually walked past the real musicians and put money in Louie's cup.

Actually, you had to be pretty sure of yourself to walk past him and give him nothing. If you tried, he'd glare at you with an intensity that could melt lead. He would then follow you, bleating on his harmonica. If you continued by, he would usher you out of his turf with a disgusting sounding riff, reminiscent of an elephant who had eaten too many beans.

Here was a person with no observable talent for his chosen profession, and yet he was thriving. Why? Because he believed in himself.

Success at the beginning of any new enterprise is almost totally predetermined by the way we see ourselves. The internal picture we make is the picture we live. Imagine what even a little talent would add to the equation!

**All Things,
Even Bliss,**

In Moderation.

The Agony of De-feet

Just thought I'd tell about summer camp and being dumb. I was about eight when this happened. I couldn't swim then, but the camp had installed a shiny new pool and I wasn't about to be left out. So I decided that if I couldn't swim, at least I could jump off of the edge of the pool into the water. In the shallow end, of course.

Well, that was fun, so I did it again. And again. And again. I guess I probably jumped off the edge of the pool a hundred times or so.

About half way through this incredibly exciting experience, I started to notice that the bottoms of my feet were tingling a bit. Never one to stop mid-stream, especially when I was having fun, I kept jumping. And ignoring the increasing sense of tingling.

Finally, I was exhausted. I climbed out of the pool, stepped off the smooth tile onto the rough concrete, and just about passed out from the pain. I had almost completely stripped off the skin from the bottoms of my feet, on the rough bottom of the pool. I also remembered I had neglected to bring shoes along.

Let me tell you, blades of grass hurt when you step on them with raw feet. I got about half way back to my cabin when I decided to give up and die right there. Suddenly, though, I was air-borne. For a fleeting second I thought God had taken me seriously. Then, I found myself perched upon the shoulders of a 6-foot 2 inch counsellor, who smiled, said some extremely comforting things, and took me to the camp nurse.

***Even in the midst of pleasure, there is the element of pain.
Too much of anything leads to a reaction. It is essential
that we monitor our entire body, mind and spirit as we
walk through life.***

***The things that befall us are seldom, really, a surprise. We
just chose not to pay attention to "the tingling."***

**The only way
to get a thing done
is to start it.**

The Blame Game

I spent a year counselling students at the University of Guelph. Mike was an interesting client. He came in for help in January, having flunked the first semester of his first year. In the course of the conversation, he revealed why.

He had met a girl in September; they had moved in together, had discovered the joys of the “horizontal mambo,” and came up for air in December. Both had flunked.

The girlfriend, however, was a Dorm Rep., so she HAD to pass the year. Being wise, she dumped Mike to concentrate on school. Mike was inconsolable. All he could think about was her... about her body... about... well, you get it.

I'd ask him if he wanted to stay at school. “Yes!!!” he'd shout. Most important thing in the world, he assured me.

Had he studied? “No!!!” he'd snuffle. Too busy thinking about his ex-girlfriend.

I would remind him that, in order to pass, he had to go to class, do his homework, and pass the exams. He'd agree. The next week, nothing was done.

Each week, we'd cover the same ground. “Yes!!!” “No!!!” Description of how one passes. I then began to lay out a study plan. No go. Too blue about the ex-girlfriend. I suggested he go and get an application for Burger King and learn to flip burgers, because that looked to be his only career choice.

In March, he dropped two courses. Now, He HAD to pass the other three. Did he want to stay in school? “Yes!!!” Had he studied? “No!!!”

In MAY, he fairly flew into my office. He said, “Guess what I figured out. If I want to pass this semester, I have to study and prepare for my exams!” I danced him around the room and sent him off to study.

I got a note from him in July. He'd passed.

Sure, life is hard. There are bad breaks we create and bad breaks that just happen. Nonetheless, the only way to achieve your goals is to begin—to take the first step. Sounds easy, but it takes discipline. Is it worth it? “Yes!!!”

**Fear is multiplied
by inaction.
Peace is found
in action.**

Bobbing Boats

Dar and I love our Kayaks. We've been in class-four river water with them, and have paddled in both oceans. I actually find ocean paddling the most challenging—I think that's because rivers have shores close by and oceans are vast.

One summer Dar and I paddled off the coast of Victoria, B.C. We found a little cove to start paddling from, and that's the easy part. You hop in the boat, start the paddles paddling, and you very quickly are heading out to sea. Then the trouble starts.

Because in front of you, outside the protection of the bay, is a wall of seething, rolling water. This particular day, we had three to four foot whitecaps. In a later discussion with Dar, I discovered she was thinking what I was thinking: "What in God's name am I doing out here in this little boat, in waves that are twice as high as the kayak?"

What I did first was to point my bow into the waves and panic a bit. As in, my muscles stiffened up and I got scared. Then, I paddled, heading further out into the ocean. It was either that or turn tail and run, and I almost never do that.

Darbella was right behind me.

A curious thing happened. I suddenly felt more comfortable. I got into the rhythm of the waves. They'd crash over the bow and I'd get a bit splashed, but the boat was fine. I then turned sideways into the waves, and all that happened was that the kayak rode over the top of the waves, up and down, up and down, like a cork.

I realized that the comfort and safety I was feeling was a direct result of having chosen to do something positive. Getting scared accomplished nothing. As a matter of fact, my fear and stiffness would have likely resulted in the boat tipping over. In motion, all was fluid and safe.

The moral is simple. When in doubt, do something. Problems tackled head-on seem to dissolve before you. When you act, you are too busy to be scared.

**Knowing something
proves intelligence.
Doing something
actually changes things.**

On Knowing versus Doing

Some months ago, a friend in another province suggested we do “E-mail therapy”. We both have Internet connections, and can send messages back and forth cheaply and relatively quickly. Seemed like a neat and 21st century thing to do. Besides, I really like her.

Ever since I’ve known her, I’ve noticed her putting up with great pain while waiting to understand *completely* why her life isn’t working. This, as opposed to doing things differently. This pattern runs deeply through every aspect of her life.

Recently, she wrote, “...I feel like I’m gathering enough strength to keep my mind set on these things, and then (some-one) just has to say one thing and I’m back at the bottom again.”

Many have been the times, as we’ve talked together, that my friend has expressed frustration—she *understands* something differently, yet the situation remains the same. When I suggest to her that she actually *change* something, we suddenly find ourselves discussing the weather.

Because of our scientific biases, we assume that, with any problem, *understanding* is all that is necessary to find a solution. We spend inordinate time and money searching for an explanation for why things are as they are. This is especially true in the areas of interpersonal relationships, and our way of coping with the world.

What’s missing in this approach is **action**. If we do all of the work in our heads, we build artificial strength; then someone huffs and puffs and blows our house down. The problem with this approach is that we never figure out whether what we are thinking in our heads will work in the real world.

We have not made a *real* change.

What would happen, we must ask, if I actually did things differently? If I decided to manifest my new understanding about myself, as I relate to the people around me? What would happen, of course, is that the situation would change, and others would have to deal with a new reality.

**Where does
enlightenment live...
for you?**

Finding Peace

Dar and I love to travel. It's been several years since our last trip to British Columbia. As our bones were getting older, we decided to stop tent camping and buy a used tent trailer. Like the brilliant people we are, *for our first trip* we hitched the thing up and towed it across the continent. And back.

We were on Vancouver Island, and Darbella wanted me to see the big trees. She'd been there before, so she was the tour guide. The National Park with the big trees is on the main road.

Parking is interesting. You park along the highway. Or try to. There are some perpendicular angle slots, but those don't work if you have a trailer hanging off your back end. So, you drive back and forth until you find a slot big enough to wiggle into.

As we did this manoeuver with a non-compliant trailer "back there," every idiot in the world magically appeared, and they were all driving cars. Horns blared. Hands shot skyward, giving us the "V" for victory sign... minus one finger. Several times my parentage was questioned, as was the sex life of my trailer.

I did get parked, but the whole experience left me quite off my feed. I found that my heart was racing, my blood pressure was up ten or so notches, and I was busily looking around for something inanimate to kick. Dar pointed me in the direction of the glade of trees.

I walked in, barely 100 feet, hardly 30 meters from the road, and everything stopped. I looked up as far as I could, and I couldn't see the treetops. Those trees were wide enough to hide a bus behind.

Great, huge, massive trees, trees that were 800 years old. All the road noise went away, and I was pulled upward and out of myself and my petty concerns, and into this incredibly gift filled space.

I can, then, with reasonable assurance, tell you that the first sign of enlightenment is 30 meters away... all you've got to do is to walk away and walk in.

**All that this life
is for
is to practice
living well.**

Hitting the Target

One day, when I was ten, I noticed that my next door neighbour had set up an archery range. I was intrigued. I tried it. I couldn't even pull the bow string back.

I got stubborn. I decided I'd learn to shoot a bow. I persuaded mom and dad to fork over the bucks for my own set. I put the target up in a corner of the yard. I stood in the other corner. I shot. Plink. Two feet. I shot again. Plunk. Three feet. I kept at it.

One day, I bounced an arrow off the target. A few days later, the arrow stuck. A couple of days later I hit the coloured circles. And a week after that, bulls-eye!

Soon, I could routinely put seven of the nine arrows into the bulls-eye. By the end of the summer, I won a playground championship, and a week later became the Junior Archery Champ for the City recreation department.

I shot a bit through High School. In University, I needed a P.E. credit. Archery was listed. I traded some stereo equipment for a 49-pound fibreglass recurve hunting bow. Shot it once or twice. Really hard pull. I put on my quiver and my guards, and carried my bow onto the field for the first class.

The little old gym teacher looked me up and down, and decided I'd show the class how to shoot a bow. I stood at the line. I cocked an arrow. I drew the bow. I sighted. I held my breath, steadied the bow and released the arrow. The arrow leapt from the bow, flew straight and true. Thud. It buried itself... in the ground, 30 feet in front of the target. Undaunted, I tried again. Same result. It took me three classes to get to the point where I could hit the bull's eye. Talk about embarrassing.

It is easy to forget what we do not practice. It is normal to lose sight of the target if we are distracted by details. It is especially easy to get distracted if we think we have all the answers, and forget we lack the practical skills to actually do the job.

Nothing is learned once, for all time. The plain truth is, if you don't use it you will lose it.

**No one uses you
without
your permission.**

Being a Liberal

When I was counselling at the University, I had a couple of counselling sessions with a young woman. She was mostly concerned with her sex life, which was not turning out as she had planned.

We discussed it at length, because there was no depth.

She was in her first year, and she wanted to be in an adult relationship, and be loved. So, she had been picking up men in campus bars. She'd see a guy, think he was cute, start a conversation and end up in his bed. Or hers. The few men that hung around past morning rapidly lost interest in her, or started cheating on her. In bars.

We discussed the possibility that men in bars, on average, were not there looking for the woman they were going to marry. They were looking for a one night stand. She thought she should be able to change their mind. She agreed, after a bit, that maybe context and location was important. After all, you don't buy lumber at plumbing stores.

By the next session, she reported she'd managed two weeks without going to a bar. This, she thought, was good, but had certainly diminished her chances for a relationship. So, she had joined the campus Liberal Party. She had gone to a rally. She had bumped into a guy who was cute. They talked, had a sandwich. They went back to the rally. He stood behind her. His hands wandered into her clothes. She thought, "I've found true love!" She took him to her room. They had sex. He left in the morning.

I asked her why she'd consented to sex on the first date, with a stranger. She replied, "Because I'm a Liberal." I said, "Pardon me???!!!!" She said, "If you're a Liberal and someone asks you for sex, you have to say yes. You obviously don't understand." End of therapy.

The only way this situation can change is for the young lady to decide to change her understanding of what she will allow to happen in her life. She needs to watch out-comes and notice patterns. She needs to stop equating sex with love, and take responsibility for her life. Otherwise, she is doomed to change partners, but never change her level of personal self-worth.

Plunge Ahead Slowly

Up the Mountain

Lest you think I am totally committed to rushing ahead blindly, changing this and changing that, let me talk a bit about preparation, by introducing you to Edmund.

One year, Dar and I spent New Year's in Venezuela. We took a group trek into the jungle, in land rovers. On the tour with us were three young nursing students, one of whom kept reaching inside her blouse, pulling off sunburned skin and singing "Peelings! Nothing more than peelings!"

Watching her with barely concealed lust was Edmund, an extremely portly sixteen year old, who was on the tour with his mommy. Momma was always bellowing "ED...MUND!!!" at the top of her lungs, because he was always late getting back. What a voice. Birds would fly away in panic. Animals ran themselves into extinction.

Anyway, one of the places we stopped had this amazing waterfall, with a deep pool of water at its base. Dar and I are avid rock climbers. I, for one, have climbed some pretty impressive rock walls, and have never once fallen to my death; to the best of my knowledge, neither has Dar.

Dar decided to climb the waterfall. She got a ways up, and Edmund noticed that the peeling nurse was watching Dar. He loudly announced that he too would climb the waterfall. Never mind that it was almost time to go, that Dar had reached the top and was now scampering down. We all left him to his climb.

He arrived at the land rover, thirty minutes late, battered, bloody, and missing a toenail. He sniffled that it was a lot harder than he thought.

It was. Dar had worn shoes. He had not. Dar is small and lithe. He was not. Dar had experience. He did not. Dar has brains... He sent the rest of the trip trying to persuade the nursing student bandage his toe. She remained disinterested.

Climbing a mountain is a wonderful thing. Change is a wonderful thing. But you had better be prepared. Ask questions. Seek a guide. Find the proper equipment. Have a sense of what the climb entails. You have to be ready.

Question Everything!

You See What You Choose to See

Ever since my mom and dad came to Canada in 1982, dad's been doing the driving. Mom had a pretty long list for why she couldn't drive. It centred around her bad back, and her knee replacement. Dad liked driving, so the arrangement worked.

Just after dad's 80th birthday, a blood vessel popped in his "good eye." This left him blind in his good eye and with limited vision in the other eye, which had a cataract. Needless to say, dad's driving career screeched to a halt.

Mom lasted all of two days without wheels. She had always renewed her licence. Now, with booster seat in place, it was up to her. Gamely looking through the steering wheel, off the two of them went. Mom, who couldn't drive, was driving.

Dad finally got to have a cataract operation. It was a great success. Almost perfect vision in the former "bad" eye. But, he was now eighty-one, and Ontario requires yearly testing. Because of the eye stuff, that meant the written exam and a driver's test.

Dad, to my surprise, announced he couldn't memorize the answers to the test. Too hard. Too old. No way. This went on for some time, despite my suggestions that he study and try and see what happened.

One day, as I was standing in line at the bank, a friend leaned over and told me that a lady in line had just passed her yearly driver's test. She was ninety-three at the time.

I called dad, and told him the story. Three days later, dad had his driver's licence.

And, of course, mom can't drive anymore. Something about her bad back, and her knee replacement.

The way we choose to see things influences everything. Our bodies often listen. If we continually tell ourselves we can't, we will be proven right. If we focus on illness, we'll have it. Of course, the positive side is this: change your thinking and all else will change, too. You may still have the physical complaint, but it will lose its significance.

**The long view
is priceless.**

On Moving Things Off of Dead Centre

I just remembered the one and only time I ever cheated in school. I was in University, my first year, and our class had the dubious honor of taking this stupid thing called “Common Course.” Common Course was a non-grade, pass/fail, required course that was supposed to help us understand the politics and literature of the 60s.

My roommate, Randy, was in a different Common Course Section from me. His Prof. assigned a three-page paper on some stupid topic or another. I can’t remember what it was about.

Randy agonized over that paper. For days. He couldn’t figure out what to write. He desperately wanted to “get it right.” I kept telling him that the course was pass/fail. All he had to do was submit three pages about anything. He blocked. He refused. He got depressed.

It was amazing to watch. He did no work on his other classes. He was falling behind. He spoke less and less. He talked about dropping out. I sat there, looking at the situation, and couldn’t see what the fuss was about. Write a three-page paper and be done with it.

From my perspective, there was no problem. From Randy’s perspective, the problem was the size of Mount Everest. Finally, it was the night before the paper was due. Randy was getting nowhere, so he went for a walk. I was pretty annoyed with him.

Suddenly, I was transported into Randy’s head. Somehow, I could taste his pain, his frustration... even though, at a logical level, it still made no sense to me. I focused on *Randy*, not on my pat solutions. The answer appeared.

When Randy came back, there was a three-page report sitting on his desk. He read it, and his depression lifted. I got a lesson in being non-judgemental, and how much more important actions are than words.

Don’t try to get others to agree with you. Help them to find their wholeness. Extending yourself for another doesn’t cost. It pays.

**Take time
to celebrate
the mysteries
life brings.**

Splat

One holiday to the States, Dar and I camped outside of Boston, one of our favourite cities. We were near other campers, but not so near as to be too close.

I have this thing about watching people, as you never know when you might gain a story.

Across the way was a family consisting of two parents and a couple of teenage girls. I tuned into them as they were packing up their trailer and breaking camp. As they had been there for a while, this was a major undertaking.

I was impressed with how well they seemed to know their jobs; the packing was going swimmingly.

Suddenly, the eldest daughter pulled up short and pointed to the tarp she was untying. Mom walked over. Soon, they were both talking and pointing at something on the tarp.

Their voices carried—they were looking at some sort of cocoon. Mom and daughter then engaged in a lively game of speculating about what kind of bug would be inside the cocoon. Finally, they decided to call good old dad over, no doubt to receive the final, definitive, male opinion.

Dad, beer in hand, wandered over. The women pointed. Dad stared. The women began to ply him with questions. He appeared to hear nothing. He refused to enter into the enthusiasm. He reached out, swatted the cocoon off of the tarp, squished it with his foot, and went back to trailer disassembly, having spoken nary a word.

The women found a couple of other cocoons, but they didn't tell dad.

Isn't it sad? Something new, some mystery, some wonder—swatted into oblivion by someone more interested in cranking down the top of his trailer. No matter what the others wanted. No matter that this was important to them. Slap. Splat. Another dream bites the dust.

Far better to stop, to listen, to truly see. Wonder of wonders, wonder is everywhere, if we take the time to notice.

**The key to life
is found in
subtle, joyful change.**

Last Things First

Well, we've come to the end of volume one of Stories From the Sea of Life. Where do you go from here?

Well, I'm using a word processor to type this document. I use keyboard equivalents, whenever I can. They do what the pull-down menus do, but much faster. Sure, I have to memorize obscure key combinations to get things to happen, but doing so saves time and effort in the long run, once the key combination is memorized. Then, I learn another. And another.

Lots of people are intimidated by word processors, especially complicated ones like Word. They'd rather use a manual typewriter and white-out than try to master such a complex thing.

Others watch people like me use word processors, and they sadly conclude that they could never master all of the steps and processes that go into using word processors well. They assume that only special people can do this, and they **know** they are not special. So, they never try, and they feel bad about it.

Others load the program and type. They figure out how to get the thing to print. Looks like hell, but it's a start. They refuse to experiment, because who knows what might happen if you do the *wrong* thing?

Others discover the pull down menus. They discover that they can change fonts, reformat the text and they have even found the spell checker. They are adequate word processors, but still find the whole thing daunting and too much effort to become expert.

Then there are those who choose to master their word processor. Those who choose to learn the best way to "word process" have freed themselves from fear, and in this, they create excellence.

What shall you do next? It's all in your willingness to learn. It's all in the effort expended. And it's all in the story of your life, well told.