

Living the Shift

by Joan Bird



Notes from the Journey

I've moved.

*Let me send you my
change of address.*

*Better yet, let me draw you a map,
Though your way and my way will
not be the same.*

*There are places I've been I hope
you do not have to go.*

*And yet, had I not passed through
them, would I have arrived here?*

*So I will share some notes
from the journey,*

*And if you find yourself lost in the
underworld,*

Immobilized by despair and grief

Crushed heart barely beating,

Maybe I can offer some comfort.

Or perhaps you will find

we have traveled parallel paths,

And now I live next door to you.

The theme for our 11th Annual “Celebrating Women” retreat was “*A Frequency of Joy*,” an intentional double entendre. My quest to understand why we are here had taking me into consciousness studies and quantum physics. I was beginning to understand that everything is energy, vibration, dynamic — and has a frequency. Spiritual teachers and scientific researchers were echoing the same message: joy, gratitude, and compassion were the paths to healing of self and others,

to conscious evolution. My goal was to help us become more aware of our individual frequencies, and to learn how to make joy more frequent in our lives.

Years before, a teacher suggested that what we accomplish may not matter so much as holding a positive vibrational frequency that ripples out to everyone and everything around us. A radical thought, and one that I did not immediately embrace; but somehow it found residence in the back of my mind and hung out there like a squatter on disputed land.

At the time, I was wrestling with a sense of failure, lack of “career”, and confusion. Programming by my family and culture gave me a model of success I was not meeting. Harangued by self-doubt, and tormented by a sense of urgency, I felt like a horse with spurs in its side but with no sense of where to go.

Clearly, joy was not my dominant frequency. Not that I *never* felt joyful, but I had to confess it was not where I lived. Not where I *dwelled*. (A word that sounds so delightfully like what it means: “Dwell.” I first learned its meaning in the 23rd Psalm, “And I will *dwell* in the house of the Lord

forever.”) I was definitely not dwelling there. Where I dwelled was in tension, striving, irritation, resentment, judgment; occasionally I visited peace and joy. That realization was when I decided I needed to move.

Shortly thereafter, it began to occur to me that some of my partner’s characteristics that I found so intolerably irritating might, be a *little bit* true about me. I did not like considering this thought. But I knew enough about projection to know I probably needed to take a look with the help of a good couples therapist. So began the descent.

At another Celebrating Women event, this one called “Changing Woman,” Ann Kreilkamp spoke of the varying definitions of “crone.” The definition she preferred was “when we begin to eat our own shadow.”

I have been chewing on that ever since. In fact, I’ve entertained the idea of writing a “cookbook” for this process, and have started saving recipes. Here’s my first two.

1. Practice being wrong.

Most of us like being wrong about as much as cats like being wet. In our long lives we have been humiliated at home, in classrooms, in relationships and in public. We clam up and shut down, desperately trying to avoid

the sound of the “wrong” buzzer. We’re programmed to believe that “she who is never wrong, wins.” But one of the most important things we can learn is that we’re not always right, and the humility that comes from that particular insight is a great spiritual gift. It enables us to listen, even to those we disagree with, and it softens our hearts toward our sisters and brothers who, just like us, make mistakes.

Most importantly, we learn to stop flogging ourselves for being wrong and recover an innocent part of ourselves, a place of “not knowing.” In a world that is bafflingly complex, multidimensional and mysterious, this can be incredibly helpful and freeing.

Some time ago I started playing the “Oh, I get to be wrong again!” game. You laugh. It does get easier; once you experience some of the benefits, it is really not so hard to play.

One way to embrace your mistakes is to think about all the times you’ve been glad you were wrong. A personal favorite was when my then-husband bought a green horse after I told him not too. Luckily he ignored me and Ranger turned out to be a magnificent being who was one of the great loves of my life. Those words were fine eating.

Being wrong can bring unexpected joy. Another favorite mistake happened while I was

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visiting colleges with my son. I wasn't feeling so well, and listened to our petite tour guide from the back of the crowd. I was surprised to hear she was majoring in Asian Studies and Trapeze. I had a lovely time imagining her swinging through the air between classes. Relaying the day's events to a friend, my son corrected me, "Mom. It was Asian studies and *Japanese*." My chagrin turned quickly to belly laughter; even my son had to smile. As the old adage goes, "Those who can laugh at themselves will never cease to be amused."

Not long ago, I visited my cousin and her two lively boys. The youngest was singing his favorite song, "I'm Not Perfect!" I wish every child could grow up with that song, perhaps there would not be so many of us who have hamstrung our aliveness in futilely striving for perfection.

2. Take Back Your Projections

The whole point of projection is to protect the ego from the shadow. The fastest way to meet your shadow is to look at what you find most annoying, distressing, and hateful in others. Surprise! You won't like it one bit. Neither did I. (Many stop here. "I'd rather keep my ego defense mechanisms, thank you.")

One of my first therapists suggested that the reason I was so intolerant of authoritarian males was because this was a part of me. I decided he didn't understand women's issues, and left in a huff. Later, after leaving an authoritar-

ian boss and a dominating husband, I moved in with a gentle, somewhat passive man. To my dismay, I turned into my ex-boss, my ex-husband, and, no surprise, my father: I was critical, impatient, and difficult to please. Ugh!

I liken this process to deconstructing a wall, brick by brick: behind the wall is your shadow. After a whole lot of demolition, what I found was a fearful, insecure child who was certain she was unlovable and fatally flawed. In starting to integrate her, I became her. It was the hardest inner work I have ever done. While in this Underworld, my primary relationship became incredibly painful. I needed to give up my irritation and my judgment, because I was just as guilty as he, and yet it was still there, now aimed at both of us. I was beginning to ask myself, am I imprisoning him with my negative thoughts, immobilizing him with my projections? Add a hearty dose of guilt to the stew.

Other factors thickened the mix. I had abandoned my career in science, a path chosen in honor of my father's value systems, and now felt like a failure. I experienced crippling fatigue, depression, and an inability to think rationally. I had wandered away from old friends and social circles while flailing about for new direction. One of my most loved companions exploded in anger after weeks of chilly treatment. She barraged me with accusations and cut off all contact. My worst "fatal flaw" fears confirmed! In the mid-

dle of it all, a horse I loved dearly died in an accident, something I felt I could have prevented, had I not been such a wreck. What had been a cautious tiptoeing toward my shadow began to feel like a cement-shoe free-fall.

This descent into the underworld is required to dismantle our illusions, narcissism, and flawed sense of separation from others. Hanging out with the disowned parts of ourself is an initiation. I was Innana hung on the meat hook by her angry sister Erishkegal, Queen of the Underworld. I drifted in-and-out of this limbo for months, self-loathing running in my veins like mining waste.

Yet I sometimes found myself pulled from my gloom by glowing clouds at sunset, the long-awaited blooms of the pink lilac bush, the cat's soft purr against my belly. Something was untouched by all this perceived suffering; some sense of who I thought I was began to dissolve. Grace reached me in the teachings of Eckhart Tolle, calling me into the present; Yogananda's autobiography called me back to meditation, restoring an abandoned connection to Spirit; Pema Chodron and Tara Brach taught me loving kindness, especially toward myself.

In 2006, my eighty-nine-year-old father was diagnosed with colon cancer. I felt resentment as I scrapped my summer's plans for the unplanned daughterly duty of being with him before and after his surgery. I had fought most of my life against his gender stereotypes, so I took Tara Brach's book *Radical Acceptance* with me and

clung to it like a life preserver.

Sitting in the hospital room, seeing him white-haired, weak, and so terribly vulnerable, the flood of compassion I felt startled me. I felt again like that innocent child before the walls were built. She, who was no longer entombed, had so loved her father. Simple love was back, without blame, anger, resentment. I felt blessed and grateful just to be there to feel the love. The hard work of shadow eating had changed me: I could see him without blame, love him without judgment, care for him without resentment. I could once again see his strengths; his good mind, and wry humor, his need for love and acceptance. I could not recall him ever being quite so handsome. This was a test, and I was passing. This place of love and acceptance was where I wanted to build my home. It was so much more pleasant than anywhere I had dwelt before.

I am still not enlightened and I get regularly lost in fear, derailed into resentment (one of my deeper ruts) or sunk in feelings of inadequacy. But this happens less often; I'm getting better at recognizing when I am lost and finding my way back home. My heart is my compass, and it is all about honing in on that frequency. It might be the most important thing we can do to lift the planet. For now, it's a good place to start. ☺

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