

Suck The Juice Out Of Every Moment!

(21 PRINCIPLES)

Mary H. Webb

INTRODUCTION

When I first read this gem of a book, Mary's voice in it was so authentic that I couldn't help but picture us at one of the countless restaurants we've haunted over our long friendship—absorbed in conversation.

Of course what's missing from *this* “conversation” with Mary is her passionate curiosity about you and your life and what she can learn from you and create with you which might become grist for her activism, creativity and community building.

One of my favorite experiences with Mary embodies many of the principles in this book. After a long stretch of rain, Mary and I went for a run in Tilden Park. We started out on a wide, well trodden path that was pretty dry. After a while this trail ended, funneling into a very narrow horse trail with clods of muddy earth torn up and deep gullies full of water. Without a moment's hesitation, Mary plunged forward into the muck, saying to me, “this will be great for our quads.” It was one of those moments that had I been alone, I never would have ventured into. With Mary, it became hilarious fun and a wonderful memory which I still (15 years later) think about and draw upon whenever I hesitate to take on a challenge.

Over the years, I have found myself sitting in her living room with a very diverse group of people talking about race and ethnicity in the U.S., playing a part in one of her plays despite the fact that I had never before been on stage, out on a street corner in a silent protest and following her down a waterslide.

After many years of close friendship and shared adventures, Mary's vitality, courage, generous and loving heart and sense of humor continue to inspire me. Her example has helped me to “suck the juice out of every moment” of *my* life. If you open your heart to what Mary suggests in this book which is based upon how she lives, you may find something quite unexpected coming alive inside you!

—Ellen Peskin, MFT
Oakland, California

HOW THIS BOOK WAS BORN

My friend Ellen Peskin and I were traveling up to Mendocino from the Bay Area, and I was talking about one of my principles for living. She encouraged me to talk more, and it is always flattering when a psychologist thinks that your principles for living are noteworthy. So I rattled on about my philosophy of life as we drove through the giant awe-inspiring redwoods and on to the sea.

The next morning, while I was in the shower—a great place, incidentally, for getting ideas—I thought this could be a book, and I could call it “Suck The Juice Out Of Every Moment.” Over breakfast, I told Ellen about it, and she thought it was a great idea and even offered to write the introduction.

I hope that you will find something in these principles that is helpful to you as you lead your life in these complex and difficult times.

But whatever you do, enjoy the journey that your life is and **Suck The Juice Out Of Every Moment Of The Day!**

—Mary H. Webb

PRINCIPLE #1

Suck The Juice Out Of Every Moment Of The Day!

This is my basic motto for life.

No matter what is going on in your life, you get to live each moment only once so why not make the most of every one? But, you might say, right now I'm feeling terrible. And my answer would be: make the most of that. When I am really angry, I yell or knock furniture over—obviously it helps if your furniture is “late garage sale” which mine happens to be, but you can find your own equivalent of knocking furniture over. If I'm unbearably sad, I cry inconsolably until I feel a little better. Sometimes it helps to go out and do something for someone else when you're feeling terrible. The world is full of tragedy and horror and unbelievable cruelty. But it is also full of sunshine and rain and the sea and the redwoods and the late afternoon light sliding down the wall of a city building. And children's laughter. And the taste of really good chocolate. I try not to miss any of it. When tragedy comes, I try to experience it rather than running away from it.

A lot of people say that life passes in a flash. I don't agree. They also say that as you get older, time “appears” to move more quickly. I do agree with that, but sucking the juice can alter the intensity of time moving quickly. I look back so far on a life that seems to me to have been exciting, intense, filled with living and worthwhile. I also look forward to the rest of my life and expect more of the same and some wonderful experiences that I cannot yet even imagine. I have tried to meet every challenge that has come my way, and, of course, I have sucked the juice out of every moment of every day!

PRINCIPLE #2

Take Nothing For Granted And Appreciate Small Things

When I was a little girl, I lived alone with a clinically depressed mother who also had lots of other problems. Sometimes we had boarders, and thank God for them, for they brought life into an old railroad apartment which had death on the walls.

As a child, I had many terribly sad moments, but I also had an intense desire to live. I often selected my friends according to who their parents were. A warm household with a loving mother and father always attracted me—and lox and bagels and cream cheese on Sunday morning was an irresistible bonus.

Every other weekend, I was at my father and stepmother's apartment in Greenwich Village and later at their house in Connecticut. Their household was utterly different from my mother's. There were writers and painters (they were respectively a writer and a painter themselves) and other brilliant intellectuals in and out of the house at all times. But there were, increasingly, problems there too. At an early age, I learned to see problems coming.

My two little brothers and little sister, however, were miracles to me. I loved being the oldest and seeing them as babies, watching them begin to walk, listening to them talk, holding them. I have always had great reverence for new life, new beginnings. In societal terms, they would be considered “half” brothers and sisters, but they have always been wholly loved by me.

So given this start and my intense desire to survive, I made a choice although perhaps not consciously. I learned to appreciate small things and to take nothing for granted. I can remember roller-skating

down the hill in front of my apartment house at tremendous speeds and absorbing the feel of ecstasy. I have kept the feel of ecstasy all my life.

Four years ago, I had a bad fall on the ice and hurt my knee. But recently, despite some fear, I took ice-skating back. Only last Saturday, after skating with my eight-year-old grandson at the birthday party of one of his friends, I left the rink for an hour to grocery shop because my boyfriend was coming to dinner. As I shopped, I felt this incredible wave of ecstasy as I realized: I have taken ice-skating back, and I hastened to finish my shopping so that I could get to the ice again.

So appreciating small things can lead to ecstasy. And satisfaction. And simply help you make it through a bad day. There were many bad days when I was a child but also many things to appreciate. I am a sun person (being a Leo), and I thank God every time I see the sun come out. I do not take it for granted. But the sight of raindrops on the huge fern outside my living room window can also make me ecstatic. And I love the sound of raindrops on a tin roof.

Other Small Things—But Are They Really? That I Appreciate

- Anyone’s laughter but particularly my grandson Jabari’s
- A fresh slice of bread, a good meal, sushi, mangoes in lime juice
- Water slides
- Music—John Coltrane playing “My Favorite Things”
- Jumping ocean waves—Nature (See Principle #5)
- Dark chocolate
- The insight of a friend about anything at all
- A funny movie
- The way light drops shadows across my floor
- That my car runs

We all take a lot for granted every day—for example, our voices. I lost mine recently, and for five days, I had to be silent. This caused some hilarity among my students since I am quite a talker. It was a challenge to teach five classes silently—writing notes and using an assistant—however, it was possible.

But the point is worth reiterating: we speak all the time, and we take our voices for granted. Voiceless, I was aware of how much everyone else was speaking, of how necessary it is. But, of course, some people are mute and must deal with this problem all the time.

In one class during my five-day silence, Lillian, a deaf woman, read her play with a cast of other students. She became deaf as an adult so she speaks normally. Her husband attends the class with her and takes notes for her so that she can “hear” the discussion. That night, he was giving her notes, and I, in my voiceless condition, was holding up big pieces of paper with notes for everyone to see.

Paper was fluttering all over the room, but the evening was a great success!

My experience during the five days of silence gave me just the tiniest taste of what a deaf or a blind person or any other physically challenged person has to go through every single minute of every single day!

I cherish my voice. I have to. I am a teacher. And I have not taken it for granted since I got it back. I will be elated about it—at least for a while. I rejoice in my voice!

Some Sidebars On Losing Your Voice

- A lot of people shout at you as if you were suddenly deaf.
- When you write notes to people, they often respond by writing notes back. I would write back to them: “No, *you* can talk!”
- When you can’t talk, for a lot of people, you become a non-person, less interesting in every way.

Remember, take nothing for granted and appreciate the small things! Lists cheer me up! If you’re at all like me, you might want to make a list of small things you appreciate and another of what in your life you take for granted. Then post them someplace where they’ll make you smile!

PRINCIPLE #3

Life Is An Adventure, And You're Bound To Get Some Bumps And Bruises Along The Way

This is actually something my son said to his wife Shirleyann when describing his childhood: “My mom raised me to think that life was an adventure and that you were bound to get some bumps and bruises along the way.”

When my son Alex was ten years old, we hitch-hiked through Europe and Africa instead of fifth grade. This was probably the most spectacular adventure we had together aside from the adventure of his being born. We were out of the country for eight months, and we spent four months in Europe and four in Africa. We visited: England, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Liberia, and we made brief stops in Togo and Nigeria. What we learned was worth at least ten years of fifth grade, and with a little summer school and a lot of actual schoolwork during the trip, my son went on to sixth grade the next year.

We got lots of bumps and bruises along the way. At one point, we were kind of stranded waiting on the border between Ghana and the Ivory Coast to change money and weren't sure what our next form of “transport” (as they say in West Africa) would be. Alex was hungry and grumpy and expressed it in the following way: “I thought you said that our hardest problem would be finding a boat back to Europe. This seems hard.” I comforted him and assured him that our problems *would* get solved and probably very soon.

Moments later, someone gave us fruit and bread, someone else explained to us how to change money and walked us through the process,

and before we knew it, we were in a car (a sort of taxi) driving through the magnificent bush of the Ivory Coast while talking to a man—a *perfect* stranger—who would invite us to stay at his home with his family that very day. In addition, we would end up in his brother's hospital room that night with a host of his relatives while they debated and decided what sort of medical care his brother should receive.

Another time, we left our friend Veronica, our host in Sekondi, Ghana—we had met *her* on a Ghanaian freighter—to take a trip north by train to Kumasi (also in Ghana and the home of the legendary Ashanti Empire). But Veronica is half-Fanti and half-Dutch and has never had any use for the Ashanti. She warned us not to go: “The Ashanti are dangerous,” she said.

History tells us that when the British came to colonize Ghana, the Fanti tended to accept them, and some even married them. The Ashanti, on the other hand, were militants, and when the British went north into their territory and discovered the golden stool, the supreme symbol of the Asantahene's authority, they wanted to have the stool—since it was gold—and so they asked for it. The Asantahene is roughly the Ashanti equivalent of our president, and so the request for the golden stool provoked war with the Ashanti who slaughtered many of the British, and the British learned that the Ashanti had to be treated very differently from the Fanti.

A trip on the train in Ghana at the time we went was an adventure in itself. The train rattled along the narrow railroad tracks into the bush. There were no windows in the train, only the window frames—holes cut out of the sides of the train. But there was no reason for windows because it was always hot. And the bush was all around us, and the brilliant, shining, green ferns and fronds so close to the train that you could reach out and pull pieces of their soft greenery from the stems.

We passed our time on the train sharing food with the men across the aisle who were Ashanti and told us we would love Kumasi and laughed when I told them what Veronica had said.

“Oh, the Fanti,” one of them said. “They are afraid of their shadow. To some, the spirits gave courage and to others, other gifts. And the Ashanti have all the courage. But then we have always been a proud people. We have no understanding of how the Fanti could accept the British when they came. But also we were in the interior, and they were on the coast, and so we had time on our side.”

We enjoyed our train trip because of the congenial company and also because of the spectacularly beautiful palms and ferns and plants we drove through. The bush is difficult to describe; it is an experience, dense with plants and vines tangled together and intensely green, but there are twenty different greens—all lighted by the West African sun which hits the land in such a way that it heightens and reflects color. And then when the rains come—curtains of huge, heavy, warm drops hang on the leaves. And when the rains go, the bush is radiant—soaked clean in its bath, the sun coming almost instantly to slide over the dazzling drops of water, for often the rainstorms in Ghana are quick and sudden.

And so we arrived in Kumasi where the trip rapidly became magical. Two bad things happened. My son got sick, and the international exchange was suspended. We had American Express travelers’ checks, but when the international exchange is suspended, the dollar is worthless abroad. The dollar had gone down in value by ten percent the day before, and so the banks were not allowed to cash our checks. We were outside the bank waiting for a bus to take us to the hospital where my son could get some medicine when the first of a series of significant events took place. I list the events in their chronological order:

- 1) A woman having overheard our plight in the bank gave us a cedi (the Ghanaian equivalent of a dollar)
- 2) A soldier standing nearby also gave us a cedi
- 3) A second soldier paid for a cab so that we could get to the hospital quickly
- 4) A doctor treated Alex at the hospital, and the medical care was free because we were relatively poor travelers, and there is socialized medicine in Ghana

- 5) The medicine was also free
- 6) Setch and Frank—the Ashanti brothers who were running the hotel while their father was away allowed us to stay at the hotel for free until the international exchange was no longer suspended. They also paid for our meals
- 7) Mr. Akiwumi, a man we had barely met at the hotel, offered to pay our train fare back to Sekondi

And a day later, we were back on the train, and the train banged along on its tracks taking us out of the country of “those dangerous Ashanti.”

PRINCIPLE #4

Laugh As Much As Possible (Lots), And Try And Find Humor In Many Different Situations

I heard recently on the radio that on any given day, children laugh much more than adults. Now this is, of course, very difficult to measure or quantify, but if we become aware of it and watch children and listen to them, we are sure to be convinced of its basic truth.

What makes you laugh? When asked that question, we probably all tend to think of funny movies or plays or funny books or comedians. But, in fact, you probably also laugh quite regularly with certain relatives or friends. “My Uncle Fred is hilarious! He just opens his mouth, and we all laugh!”

At one time, a group of us went straight from my house to Fat Apple’s restaurant in Berkeley every Tuesday evening after Creative Writing class. The basic group was composed of seven people: Kari, Me (Mary), Nancy, Paulette, Rosemary, Suni and Yofe. Other people in the class sometimes came and were certainly invited, but the seven of us were the rock hard center of the group. We came rain or shine, excited or disgusted by life, in good moods or terrible.

The group had a peculiar chemistry. It seemed that we were capable of laughing hysterically about almost anything, and the laughter might start because Kari looked at her soup and suddenly remembered her mother saying something about how she ate her soup when she was little; and Kari has an inimitable way of describing funny things that have happened. From there, we might move to other funny memories of our childhoods, and we’d be off!

I should say here that we had an incredible desire to laugh, and once we got started, there was no stopping us. Everything became funny. In retrospect, I think some of the waitstaff must have dreaded our arrival.

But I think that if you are a great laugher—which I am—you should learn to appreciate the laughter of other groups of people as well as that of your own, and I try to do that.

Some nights we were there so long that they were piling chairs on top of tables as we left.

So what happened? Why didn't it go on indefinitely? Because I'm sure you noticed that I prefaced this with: "at one time..." Well, first of all, the owner decided she needed to close the restaurant at ten P.M. on weeknights. That made it impossible for us to eat there since class ended at ten.

And the fates pulled restlessly at our little group tugging us apart with what eventually felt like winds of hurricane force.

Paulette died on March 23, 1998.

As I am writing this, it has been almost six years since she died, and I still miss her every day.

When someone is gone, you ask yourself: But what is it I miss most about her? Well, I guess with Paulette, it would be her laughter which was one of the most delightful sounds in the world. And her willingness to laugh about almost anything.

Paulette and I raised our kids together once Alex and I moved to California, and we were best friends for 22 years. We went through a fair amount of tragedy together as well, and while it is not considered okay to say so, there were times when we laughed—and laughed hard—in the middle of tragedy.

Kari became more intensely involved in her vocation as a prayer group leader. Since she lived in an outlying town, she was no longer taking my class. She had also been my assistant so it was a double loss for me.

Nancy dropped out of class to pursue other creative endeavors.

Rosemary has been in and out of my classes since that time and is currently out because her Ph.D. dissertation is due in a month.

Suni moved back to Florida somewhat permanently, and Yofe dropped out and is currently back in. I also take a yoga class from Yofe that has enough laughter in it so that I have suggested she entitle her class: Yoga With Yofe—Laughter Included.

Does the beat go on? It does. In the years since the Fat Apple group broke up, there have been other groups—sometimes designed by me—that have been formed partially for the purpose of laughter.

Another group: My son Alex and two of his closest friends—Morgan and Bill—formed a hilarious triumvirate.

One day, I was riding around with the three musketeers (as I call them), and they had a Boy Scout manual from 1916 from which they were reading aloud. I was falling off my seat laughing. Why was this so funny? Hard to say, but the fact that all three are actors by profession probably helps.

Later, Shirleyann (now my son's wife, then his girlfriend and also an actor) joined the group, and the four of them began to make videotapes for various members of their families and each other satirizing our idiosyncrasies. These were also hilarious.

But, of course, you may say, they are professionals. Well, that is true, but the group at Fat Apple's was not composed of entertainers; it was composed of writers who also did other things for a living.

And Ellen and I can do it by ourselves (as could Paulette and I). One time Ellen and I went up to Calistoga (famous site of California mud baths) and decided to take a special bath of enzymes in sawdust imported from Japan. This sawdust-enzyme bath was supposed to be good for you in every way; it would enhance your health and give you new energy.

The attendant got us into our adjoining tubs and piled enzyme-laden sawdust on top of us. It was all very ritualized and serious and, yes, pretentious. The moment the attendant closed the door, Ellen and I began to whoop, and I don't think we stopped for a half an hour.

Laughter is infectious. That is one of the beauties of it.

Because I teach Fiction Writing, I often have occasion to read a student's story at home and later hear it read in class where there is a large audience. I find that I am often mildly amused at home—perhaps laughing out loud once or twice—but that in class, when the piece is read aloud, we are all practically falling off our chairs. Of course, if a person is a good reader, his or her reading aloud is even more spectacular.

Hanging out with children absolutely guarantees you more laughter. My grandson Jabari and I play a game in the car that eventually has us laughing helplessly. We simply repeat simple words like spoon over and over and over again as fast as we can.

And, of course, laughter is good for your health! That almost goes without saying. The Reader's Digest feature: "Laughter, The Best Medicine" did not just have a clever title. And Norman Cousins' book, *Anatomy of an Illness* in which he literally laughed himself well in response to a serious illness provides the ultimate evidence.

It helps to notice who you have the most fun with. Then invite that group of friends to an event at your house. Try and create occasions for laughter among your friends!

Laugh a lot! You'll enjoy it!

PRINCIPLE #5

Nature Is Always There For You

I was driving down to the Bay Area from Mendocino three and a half hours to the North on an absolutely glorious sun-drenched day after weeks of huge apocalyptic rainstorms. Everything had been soaked in rain and was now resplendent in light. The light stained the redwoods and filtered through the branches creating patterns of shadow and light on the road.

I stopped the car and got out among the redwoods. I walked across the still damp earth and inhaled its deep rich aroma. I leaned against a moss-covered stump and gazed up through the magnificent trees to the stretch of blue sky above. My spirit soared.

The plum trees bloom later up North so there were allies of brilliant pink trees as I drove South and pale pink and white apple blossoms and fields of yellow daffodils and every imaginable shade of green. And the sea I had left in Mendocino was a brilliant turquoise with a strip of green close to the horizon.

We are immersed in nature and somehow often don't notice it. When my son and I were traveling through Africa, we were suddenly in cultures where people saw themselves as a part of nature. Nature in Africa is dense, intense, the bush a tangle of greens and reds, yellows and lilacs, the sounds of birds and insects and sometimes monkeys orchestrating a musical accompaniment to the incredible visual spectacle. African history and philosophy support the idea that we—as human beings—are a part of all this. Native American cultures in North America believe in the same concept.

But a way of life in which nature is a key player is open to all of us.

When I was a child, we lived across the street from a bank—not a bank which contained money but a kind of hill with rocks and trees—and in the Spring, forsythia bushes thrust upward from the earth and almost overnight blossomed into thousands of yellow petals of sunlight.

My friends and I climbed the bank, scaled its trees and hid among its bushes almost everyday.

One winter, there was a record-breaking snowstorm. Schools were closed, and our relatively short street was declared impassable, and for two days, there were no cars driving up and down. My friends and I were delighted and promptly built a huge fort in the middle of the street.

So I was a lucky city kid. But every city has parks, and one beautiful flower or the reach of one tall tree can change your day. The way in which we look at nature is what is most important. That's what Thoreau was talking about in *Walden*.

I think that when I was a child, my relationship with nature helped me get through a lot of difficult times. And it still does.

When you drive to Mendocino, there is a moment when you curve up a hill, and suddenly the sea is spread out all around you, and I always catch my breath at that moment. I never tire of it.

There is an old Sufi story that goes like this. A man said to the almond tree: "Speak to me of God!" And the almond tree blossomed.

PRINCIPLE #6

You Always Have A Choice About Your Attitude, And You Can Turn Something Bad Into Something Good

Ellen and I were jogging in the park after a big rain, and the ground was thick with mud. Each time we ran a step, we had great difficulty in actually getting our feet out of the mud so that we could continue to run.

“This is really good for our quads,” I said, and she laughed. “Why is *that* funny?” I asked.

“Because you always manage to make something good out of something bad,” she replied, “even in the most unlikely situations.”

That *is* the way I tend to think. Something happens that could be construed as awful, and I immediately begin to work on how I can change it into something I can live with, and I wonder if there are some hidden benefits that I can’t yet see.

When my son Alex was about thirteen, I got fired from my job as a secretary at a school. The school was not physically safe for the children. I had been complaining about that and about racism. As a result, I got fired.

I was worried about telling Alex because we didn’t have much money. He had been raised as a Civil Rights activist’s child so my losing jobs was not new to him, but he was older now, and I wondered.

When I got home that day, I told him, and he said: “That wasn’t any kind of a job for you anyway, Mom. Something better will come along!”

And it did! I began a plan to teach Creative Writing at various community colleges, a job I still hold today. Originally, I worked at three

colleges and was what is known euphemistically as “a freeway flyer.” Now I work at only one and teach three classes privately.

Those of us who were in the Civil Rights Movement or other political movements and lost jobs regularly as a result received invaluable training. We learned: 1) You can make it on less financially than you would have thought 2) There are many kinds of “jobs,” “work” out there and you are better off if you don’t restrict your thinking too much in terms of what you are “willing” and “able” to do to earn a living and 3) Being fired or laid off can often open a door for you that you might have been reluctant to even imagine before.

You always have a choice about your attitude! That doesn’t mean that when tragedy strikes, you smile happily and behave like an idiot. But even when tragedy strikes, you have choices—both about how you behave and about your attitude!

On 9/11, my goddaughter Whitney called me. It was early—six A.M. where we are—in California.

“Are you talking to Alex?” she asked.

“No,” I said, puzzled.

“Turn on the TV,” she went on. “Something has happened.” I immediately turned it on and watched the second plane fly into the World Trade Center. My son Alex, my daughter by marriage Shirleyann, and my sister Miranda all lived in New York at that time. So I had three relatives in New York plus friends. Alex and Shirleyann called me within the hour, and I was able to run interference for them by calling Shirleyann’s mom because they were having trouble making phone calls from New York. Later in the day, I was able to reach my sister, and I had pretty much assumed she was okay because she didn’t live or work near the World Trade Center.

But in the meantime, I had to plan my next steps. No one called to say that the college was canceling classes so I assumed that I would be teaching Fiction Writing that afternoon. I watched TV for an hour or so

and got the basics. Then I went to the gym because I wanted to be as calm as possible for teaching, and the gym calms me down.

That afternoon, in the Fiction Writing class, we began by making a large circle, holding hands and having a moment of silence. People could meditate, pray or just think, but we were holding hands, sharing our energy with each other in a moment of great tragedy. And then I taught.

Some people may feel I made the wrong decision, but if you are a teacher, you will understand that a classroom can often be a refuge for students, a source of stability—whether they are children or adults. I know this to be true because a lot of my students have told me it is.

In the ensuing weeks, my classes were often used—because they are Creative Writing classes—to process what had happened. One student had lost a cousin who worked at the World Trade Center. Another had actually been in New York, had relatives who were policemen and firemen and wrote a stunning story about her experience.

Small bad things like running in the mud or even losing a job can turn, with time or perhaps immediately, into something good!

And even during a tragedy, you have some choice about your attitude. Look at all the people who have taken a tragedy and turned it into a drive toward something good!

PRINCIPLE #7

Take Risks

I am not suggesting that you jump off the Golden Gate Bridge just to see if you can bounce! And remember—what seems like a small risk for you might be a big one for someone else! And vice versa. Each person has his or her own comfort zone.

But later in life, it appears, people who have taken almost no risks look back and regret it. And regrets don't seem to me to help people. So I *am* suggesting that if you are a person who has taken almost no risks in your life, it might be good to think about it and consider moving in that direction. Each of us has a life's journey that is out there for us!

At one point, we were living in Florida, and I took a risk. I felt it was time to leave Florida and move back to California. My son Alex and I started out in a beat up old car with our dog O'Malley planted firmly in a space on the back seat. We had \$5,000 in savings, no place to live in California, I had no job, and Alex was not registered in school.

We did have a place to crash in Berkeley—the apartment of a friend's friend whom we had actually never met.

As it turned out, she was extremely busy, and her apartment was crowded so each morning, it was incumbent upon us to be out of the apartment early. This was mostly our choice because she was also very generous and friendly. But we were aware that we were in a temporary situation there.

We found a coffee shop we liked near her apartment in Berkeley, and each morning we would order hot chocolate for Alex—and coffee for me—along with various breads and pastries. During our time in Europe, we had enjoyed the European breakfast of *café au lait* or *chocolat* with croissants, butter and jam, and this was a version of it.

Our breakfasts fueled us, and quickly, in retrospect at least, I registered Alex at a Berkeley middle school in eighth grade, we found an apartment where we were to actually live for only five months because our downstairs neighbor turned out to be crazy, and I got a job. But from that first apartment, we moved to the apartment (only ten blocks away) where we were “meant to live.”

At the second apartment, I met the man who later became my boyfriend for a number of years. We also made many other friends—most of whom I am still in touch with today.

Alex had been raised by “a village” in Florida, and now we again fell into a community where everyone looked out for him.

There were four apartments in the complex, and whenever anyone gave a party, everyone in the complex was invited. We planted a garden in the backyard, we had barbeques together out there, and often on Saturdays, the adults gathered in one of the four apartments to drink coffee and discuss art and politics—often for most of the day.

At one point, three of us spent eight hours helping a woman who was getting her MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute to prepare for her exam. We asked her every question that we thought the Art Institute faculty members might ask her. And many that they wouldn't.

It turned out to be an incredible time for learning things and our small multi-cultural group took advantage of learning from each other in ways which I found astonishing.

As for jobs, my first one in California was working for Mrs. Nora Vaughn at The Black Repertory Group, an African-American theatre famous in the Bay Area for its quality productions of traditional Black plays.

Mrs. Vaughn was a brilliant director, and in my job as Technical Arts Assistant, I had to attend rehearsals. As part of my job, I got to watch her direct!

At the time, I had no aspirations in terms of playwriting. I considered myself a novelist. Period. But since then, I have also written plays and was partially inspired by that experience working at Black Rep.

In addition, Alex—then thirteen—also worked for Mrs. Vaughn as a sound operator for the performances. He saw a lot of theatre that year because he was part of the productions. And today he makes his living as an actor. Alex later told me that had he stayed in Florida, he might never have gotten into soccer (and he went as far as semi-pro) or into acting.

The thing about risks is that you can never calculate in advance what the effect of taking one will be on your life. That is their nature.

But coming to California was, it turned out, a good risk for us to take!

So find the risks you are comfortable with or maybe a little *un*comfortable with and see how your life changes!

PRINCIPLE #8

Learn To Make Choices, Know That Your Choices Have Consequences And Learn To Accept That Fact— A Decision-Making Process Helps!

Choices! Decisions! These can be tough, but let me start with an example: A friend of mine recently told me that she had decided to take the California Bar Exam. In New York, she had been a lawyer, and now she is one of the directors of an agency that deals with issues of child advocacy internationally. She said that if she were able to practice law in California, she could be more effective as a child advocate.

In addition, she said that she would not be taking my Creative Writing class in the summer because she would be in a class getting prepped for the Bar Exam Monday through Friday evenings. I said that I hoped she would come back to class in the fall.

This all happened fast. I was *very* sorry to lose her as a student, but I admired her decision-making process. As far as I can see, she made *at least* three decisions very quickly—and probably more! 1) She decided to take the California Bar Exam 2) She decided to take a class that would help her in her preparation, that would virtually guarantee that she would pass and 3) She decided that she couldn't take my class because she would be absent from it too much while taking the other one.

Where did she start? With the goal—passing the California Bar Exam! And with the motivation for the goal—being a California lawyer would help her with child advocacy issues. Then she went to the steps she had to take in order to reach her goal. 1) She needed to take a preparation course so that she would pass the test and 2) She needed to *stop* taking

writing workshops with me (which she also likes) in order to spend time on the other course.

A little over a year ago, my son made a short film. It was set in his and his wife Shirleyann's apartment in New York and on the subway. Alex wrote it, produced and directed it, and he and Shirleyann starred in it. He hired a cinematographer and a soundman. He then taught himself how to edit the film on the computer.

Recently, after having his film rejected by 22 film festivals, he got it accepted by the 23rd. He was thrilled, Shirleyann was thrilled, I was thrilled. We were all thrilled!

During a phone conversation with Alex about this exciting development, he said repeatedly: "Mom, I could *never* have done this without you! I could *never* have even conceived of doing it!"

"What do you mean?" I asked. I sensed that there was something specific here, something that perhaps I needed to know.

"Mom," he said, "I watched you make so many decisions as I was growing up. First you'd say: 'There's something I want to do. How can we *imagine* that we could do it?' Then you'd talk about ways of doing it with other people. And then you did it!"

That *is* my process exactly! He's got it down!

So after our conversation, I thought about some projects I'd done in that way.

- 1) Soon after we arrived in Gainesville, Florida, I started an African-American dance troupe. (There was at that time no dance for African-American kids in Gainesville.) I expected it to be a summer project, but I ran it for seven years, and then my lead dancer, LaVern Porter, took it over, and it became *The LaVern Porter Dance Troupe*. Several years ago, I went back to Florida for a celebration of the dance troupe. It was one of the most wonderful days of my life.

- 2) I planned our educational trip through Europe and Africa including how Alex could afford to miss 5th grade.
- 3) I started an Emergency Loan Fund for clients within the confines of the welfare system. Initially, social workers gave up their raises, then we converted to bringing cookies and donuts to the welfare office and selling them to workers and clerks. Proceeds went to the clients' fund. Eventually, the supervisors decided to give us all the money from the coke machine for our fund. In the first year, paraprofessionals in the department were able to get back 75% of the money loaned out. This wasn't bad when you consider that the money had been loaned out to people who were on welfare.
- 4) In November of 2000, I hosted the first *Dialogue On Race, Racism and Ethnicity* in my living room. We had a potluck dinner first and then a discussion. People from all over the world attended. I figured if it didn't work out, I wouldn't have a second one. As of 2017 we've had these Dialogues for 17 years! We have never had fewer than 22 or more than 40 people, and we always start with a potluck.

Okay then! So the process of decision-making starts with a goal! A lot of motivation in relation to the goal helps! Then you have to figure out what your implementation process will be that will get you to the goal! That's really *all* you need!

Some people have trouble making decisions! I *do* realize that! Some people seem *almost to need* to make their decisions at the last possible moment!

I have a close friend who's like that! Since she is one of the best, most generous and warm-hearted people in the world, I have learned to

accommodate myself to her, but I don't count on her for certain kinds of events; and if there is an event that requires a lot of advance planning, I simply don't expect her to be part of it. I would say that her process works for her, but she is a spectacularly unusual person so I couldn't recommend her process to other people. If you follow that process on a regular basis, you may miss some events you'd like to participate in.

Which brings us to how you teach people to make choices! Start early would be my advice.

When my son Alex was two, he attended a birthday party. In those days, the parents went along with the child and stayed through the party so all three of us were there to witness a five year old almost literally having a fit over whether to eat chocolate or vanilla ice cream. He screamed, he fumed, he fretted, he threw himself around, and his mother attempted to calm him never suggesting that this was not okay behavior.

On the way home, I was angry, and I delivered a lecture on people who did not teach their children to make choices.

"You're making too big a deal out of this!" Alex's father said. "The kid's only five years old."

"Well, Alex is going to learn to make choices!" I said emphatically. Alex's father shrugged, and Alex just looked at me no doubt wondering what I had in mind for him.

So I started with Alex when he was two, and I started with my grandson Jabari when *he* was two. We can either do this or that but not both. And once you've made your choice, you have to live with the consequences.

I have enormous numbers of adult students who seem to go into a kind of paralysis when they need to make a choice. And I believe that if we don't learn to make choices and to follow our hearts and our dreams, someone else—usually someone in power somewhere—will pick up the slack and make our choices for us.

So if you are an adult who was not trained to make choices as a child, what do you do?

Well, I think that everyone's decision-making process is a little different, but following your intuition can, I believe, work wonderfully. If you feel that you don't know how to do that, you might want to take a course in developing your intuition or read some books about it or learn meditation to still the mind or self-hypnosis to focus it.

Okay, suppose you think all that is a lot of hokey, and you distrust your intuition and want another way. Then I suggest a sheet of paper with two columns, the pros on one side and the cons on the other. Should I Move To Cleveland and Take This New Job? might be the heading at the top of the page. So you list all the pluses and minuses that you can possibly think of. Do this late at night! Then read it over about ten times. Then go to sleep. In the morning, you should have your answer. This obviously also involves intuition. But maybe you can find a version of the decision-making process that doesn't involve intuition. Whatever process works for you—with the least anguish and nail-biting—is the one you should use.

My boyfriend—who has made some interesting choices in his life—said that the problem is not *getting* opportunities but being ready for the opportunities when they arrive! That means having your priorities in order.

In one lifetime, you probably cannot do all that you imagine you want to do/should do/are obligated to do, etc. So you have to make choices! You have to let some things go! And if you have a strong sense of your priorities, you probably won't mind too much!

Every minute counts—this doesn't imply you have to work all the time. If you're going to the beach for two weeks, make the choice to have those weeks filled with the most wonderful kind of relaxation! Decide to leave your anxieties and worries at home and let your work slide away. Otherwise, you might as well not have gone. And suck that juice!

PRINCIPLE #9

Life Is A Problem-Solving Operation

When Alex and I moved from Florida to California some years ago and found an apartment in Berkeley, it turned out that there was a crazy man living in the apartment underneath us. I can, of course, hear those of you who don't live anywhere near California laughing and muttering: "Well, of course, he was crazy! It's Berkeley, isn't it?" Well, yes it is, but actually, there are lots of us who are sane in Berkeley, and that's why we don't want to live on top of crazy people!

In August, we moved into the apartment, Alex turned 13, and at the beginning of September, he started 8th grade. I was working at The Black Repertory Group and was not always home. He was a mature 13, and I wasn't worried about him coming home alone, getting a snack and doing his homework. I would get home a couple of hours after he did and make dinner, and all seemed to be going well. *Until...*

I will call the man Fred. Until Fred started laughing hysterically and loudly. His ceiling was our floor, and all the partitions were thin.

One day in mid-December, we saw him outside downstairs, and he smiled and waved baring very strange looking teeth. "He looks like something out of one of my horror movies!" Alex said.

A week later, my mother arrived for Christmas vacation just to add to the mix. Not only did Fred laugh loudly and hysterically, but he pounded on his ceiling with a broom handle.

Somehow I got the phone number of his family and talked to his mother. She said: "We really don't know what to do because we're afraid Fred might kill us!" I hung up the phone—chilled—and thought: what are we doing here? I went and talked to the manager who assured me that Fred would be evicted at the earliest possible date. Probably in a month or two. Not nearly early enough to suit me!

“I have a thirteen year old son,” I said. (Which of course the manager knew, and Alex was standing right there anyway, but I was reiterating.) “He can’t do his homework with all of the noise, and I’m afraid to leave him by himself.” The manager shrugged but was sympathetic. “I’ll do whatever I can!” he said. But what he could do was not enough so we took action ourselves. We found an apartment, we moved, and we were in our *new* apartment by the middle of January, only a month after Fred had begun to get scary.

It was my son who reminded me of the Fred incident. I was talking to him recently, and I said: “You grew up with problem-solving as a way of life. What’s a good example of that that I can use in the book?”

“When we left the apartment with crazy Fred in it,” he replied. I told him that I was surprised that that had been so important. “Oh, yeah, Mom,” he went on. “It taught me that if you’re in a bad situation, there’s always a way out. And you made the decision so fast. A lot of people would have stayed there much longer thinking that the situation would probably get better!”

“It wasn’t going to get better,” I said. “Fred was crazy, and his own mother was afraid that he might kill her.”

So what happened here?

1) I defined the problem. We were living in close proximity to someone who was crazy and might, at any moment, become dangerous.

2) I quickly got past the phase that we all go through which involves thinking: I wish this had never happened, and: I’m sure the problem will solve itself or go away if I simply don’t think about it.

3) I followed the only possible course of action which would solve the problem.

First of all, I think it’s important to recognize that life *is* a problem-solving operation. And what *isn’t it*? Well, it isn’t a hayride or a

sleigh ride. It isn't a movie that you observe, and it isn't one lick after another of an ice cream cone!

When I hear people talking about their problems, I often hear resentment in their voices—as if they feel that they shouldn't have any problems. I don't know where that attitude comes from but probably from an unrealistic appraisal of life. Once you get the idea that—Life Is A Problem-Solving Operation—you can go: Oh, I seem to have a problem here! Now how do I solve it? You can skip some of the moaning and groaning phase of the process or perhaps all of it, and since moaning and groaning invariably take a lot of energy, you will then have more energy to help in solving the problem!

So to review:

- 1) Accept the fact that life is a problem-solving operation!
- 2) Define the specific problem that you are having!
- 3) Run through and eliminate impossible solutions to the problem!
- 4) Select the best possible solution to the problem available to you!
- 5) Begin to solve the problem as quickly and efficiently as possible!
- 6) Also: Don't be afraid to ask for help! People actually like to help each other!

PRINCIPLE #10

Develop A Sense Of Wonder About The World

*“There are only two ways to live your life.
One is as though nothing is a miracle.
The other is as if everything is.”*
—Albert Einstein

A famous scientist who is noted for his complex and difficult work makes an incredibly simple statement. You can have the attitude that everything is a miracle or that nothing is.

We can see what he’s talking about most clearly when we hang out with small children. When Alex was about one year old and we were out walking, I used to become impatient about how slowly everything was going—namely, us. And then one day, I tried to see the walk through *his* eyes. He would bend over, pick a flower, smell it, drop it and smash it. He would see a tiny stone and just stare at it for moments on end. He would look at the color of a car, at the color of the sky, at the sun, at me, and then smile and laugh loudly.

And after a few days of watching this really attentively, I thought: this is amazing! I can really slow down and experience the world that a one year old sees *if* I can relax and allow myself to do it. Today, I have photographs on the wall of Alex experiencing the world as a miracle. In one he is entranced by his image in the mirror. In another, he has been playing the xylophone, and he is still holding the xylophone stick in one hand and gazing out at the camera with a look that says: I have just invented music.

I am trying to repeat the experience with my grandson, Jabari. We often go places like the Lawrence Hall of Science or The Exploratorium in San Francisco where kids can experiment largely without supervision.

These are hands-on places. What astonishes me is the way a lot of parents, grandparents—whoever—try and encourage or force the children they are with to move on as if they are on a European tour that promised them a quick six countries in two weeks.

One time when Jabari was three, he became interested in a rectangular box that could be manipulated by means of knobs to tilt backward and forward and from side to side. Inside were two ping-pong balls that would roll into holes depending on how you moved the box.

Jabari wanted me to play this game with him. We each had control of one wheel, and we moved the box up and down, to one side and the other, by means of them. (When I'm out with him, I try to be on his clock with a few notable exceptions—I need to eat occasionally, I need to go to the bathroom, and there is a time when we have to go home.)

After a while, I looked at my watch and noticed that we'd been playing this game for twenty minutes. Was I bored? Yes, I was bored by the game, but I was fascinated by the length of his attention span and by his intensity. So I began keeping track of the time. We played that game for one hour and fifteen minutes.

Now what had we gained by doing it that way? He was immersed in his deep sense of wonder at how the world works. And he didn't see every exhibit at The Exploratorium that day. But does it matter? The Exploratorium wasn't going anywhere, and we could come back another day.

Now suppose you're not hanging out a lot with young children at this moment in your life. Well, you might want to read or *reread* Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* or the books of any scientist or nature writer who has lived in relation to nature in a very specific way. Loren Eiseley is a good person to read or Annie Dillard, particularly: *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek*.

Or you might simply go on a walk and tell yourself that you will take forty-five minutes to walk around one block. And just see what you experience!

Now back to Einstein's words: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is."

Obviously, I favor the second.

Every time a baby is born, it feels like a miracle to everyone involved.

Scientists say most of us use less than 10% of our brains most of the time. I would suggest that if people became a little more curious and involved in the wonder of the universe, they might be inspired to use more.

PRINCIPLE #11

Find Work That You Love And Pursue It

I can hear the objections to this one already.

“The economy is difficult.” “I have to pay the bills!” “I have kids, come from a working-class family and don’t have the luxury of finding work I love.” Well, it’s possible (as almost every artist knows) to have a day job and also do the work you love: dancing, acting, writing, painting, photography in your “free” time. I hear the objections again. “I have no free time. The kids...my husband...” Well, it doesn’t actually take very much time to begin the work you love. You may have to sacrifice TV or movies or a few parties. You may even have to tell your friends and relatives or the hundreds of people whom you don’t know but who want you to spend your time in a certain way that you can’t do it. If someone calls me and asks me to do something I know I don’t have time for (I’m talking about a stranger someone now), I simply say: “I can’t do it. I have thirty-nine jobs!” I pick out a large number at random. This usually stops them. Sometimes they say: “Thirty-nine jobs?” I say: “Yup.” And I’m off the phone in seconds. Now if this feels to you like lying, you can always justify it to by saying to yourself: “I drive the kids to school, one job; I do the dishes, second job,” etc. Remember in terms of getting art or science or whatever done—Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) was a full-time customs officer all his working life and managed to produce: *The Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus And Criseyde*, etc. in his spare time!

But there is another aspect to this. Try and love the work that you find yourself doing at any given moment. I knew a wise man named J.L. who worked in a parking lot and was full of wonderful bits of philosophy. He said to me one day: “There’s no point in worrying, Mary, because most of what we worry about doesn’t happen. And we can’t worry about the things we should have worried about because we didn’t know what they

were.” I looked forward to taking my car to the parking lot each day so that I could absorb some of his wisdom. He had made a wonderful job for himself out of something that might have bored many people to extinction. He also made friends and taught people a lot. He loved the work that he found himself doing!

One summer, I decided to work as an assistant to my friend Paulette who was a plumber. In the winter, I taught and wrote, and for five summers, I was an assistant plumber. It was very hard work. However, I loved it. I am physically strong, and this gave me a place to put my strength. I am also an outdoors person, and we spent a lot of time outdoors. And we got into people’s houses on a regular basis so I had the opportunity to see how various people live. And I learned how many bizarre people are out there. One man never got out of bed while we worked on his bathroom, and his bed was in the front room so we had to pass him innumerable times with our many tools. My point here is: I took this job to help out my friend and to earn some money, but I gave myself to it wholly, and I learned to love it—love the work you find yourself doing!

Also—when I was in my twenties, I assumed that teaching or whatever other day job I was doing was just a backup for my writing. I thought that soon I would be well known as a writer and that then I might give up teaching. Well, it didn’t happen, and it wasn’t meant to happen because over the years, I have begun to look on my teaching as an art form. And I have been thrilled to see my students learn how to say what is uniquely theirs to say.

Some people just don’t know what work it is that they would love to pursue. I suggest vocational guidance counselors whenever possible or talking to people who *actually do* what you are thinking of doing.

Also volunteer some place that is involved in what you think you might want to do. Or take a course at a night school or at your local community college. If you are an internet person, spend time getting information off that vast computer network.

No matter how unlikely it seems to you that you could do a certain kind of work, never give up on the possibility of it. People do amazing things all the time!

PRINCIPLE #12

Never Give Up

Never give up!

Cut to the chase! My own writing career! Has been difficult. After much effort, my novel *Dark Roads* was sold by an absolutely terrific, highly intelligent and sensitive agent named Toby Eady to a very prestigious British editor, Tony Godwin, who had left London because more money was available for publishing books in America. In the course of just three months, Toby Eady got *Dark Roads* in and out of three major publishing houses and got me the offer from Tony Godwin at Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich.

Subsequently, Tony Godwin died, and Toby Eady (who had never particularly cared either for American publishing or for New York—he was also British) decided to give lectures on American wildlife and African politics and stopped being an agent.

I have had other agents who gradually faded out or never faded in, but when it came time to get *The God-Hustlers* out there, I sent it to a few publishers, received a few rejections, and then my friends convinced me that I (or we) should self-publish. It was a long and grueling but very educational process.

We raised money by means of: pre-publication orders, gifts, loans and projects such as readings and raffles and a fabulous collectibles sale—basically, by means of anything we could think up. *The God-Hustlers* came out just ten years after *Dark Roads*. We were under-budgeted in every way, and I did as many radio and TV shows as I possibly could in order to publicize the book. It was a huge amount of work, but it turned out to be worth it!

Another example: *A Confederacy Of Dunces* was sold by the author's mother after he committed suicide. She never gave up.

The movie *Ray* about Ray Charles' life which came out at the end of 2004 to accolades might easily never have been made. Taylor Hackford worked fifteen years to get the money necessary to make the film.

If you care enough about your art form, your science, your hobby, your gardening, your passions—and by definition, you should care about your passions—you will never give up on them! Pursue them! Commit yourself to them! Follow through on them! Work on them! As Auntie Mame said: “Live life! Live life! Live life!” For it is there—rich, raw material like so much damp earth! And remember: *Suck The Juice Out Of Every Moment Of The Day!*

PRINCIPLE #13

Everyone Is A Human Being And Deserves To Be Treated That Way; Potential Friends Are Everywhere

Our society prides itself on being a democracy, but I notice huge numbers of class distinctions being made everyday. Some are based on money, some on the kind of work you do, some on what you look like, and some on what you sound like.

A well-known novelist friend of mine—William Melvin Kelley—once conducted an experiment. He went into various businesses, spoke in different ways in each one and noted how they treated him. In one case, he had an elegant British accent (and he does the accent perfectly); he was treated with deference and as if he were a foreigner. Next he spoke in a fairly neutral way: middle class, educated with a New York accent—the way he normally speaks. And he was in New York at the time. They treated him all right but not well. And third, he spoke in street slang with no attempt to make it eloquent and with no concessions to so-called “correct grammar.” Then they didn’t want to deal with him at all. They simply wanted him out of there. It should be noted that he is African-American so racism definitely comes into play here as well. But however you interpret the issues of class and race in relation to the outcome, it was an illuminating experiment. And they never got it right! They never knew who he was because they were not trying to *see* who he was. Instead, they were operating from a base of prejudice. Actually, he is a sophisticated, brilliant, Harvard-educated, well-traveled professional novelist. And that is only the beginning!

I try hard to treat everyone in the same way. If I am talking to the guy who runs the parking lot or to the mayor, it is all the same to me—they

are just people! And, frankly, I probably have a lot more to say to the guy in the parking lot than to the mayor.

People like to lock themselves into little prisons that contain only people who have the same job as they do. So lawyers socialize with other lawyers, and truck drivers go to parties filled with truck drivers.

“But,” you might say, “Where would I meet someone who doesn’t do the job that I do? I work, I go home, I see my family, and that’s all I have time for.” Well, actually, there are people all around you of all kinds every time you walk out your front door, and huge numbers of them have jobs that are different from yours.

Often the next question is: “What would I have in common with these people?” Well, the easiest answer and also perhaps the most complex is: your humanity.

Because I do *Dialogues on Race, Racism and Ethnicity* in my home, I often have thirty or forty people in my house who are not only from different ethnic groups but also from different countries and professions. I have been doing this since November of 2000 so I have had ample opportunity to watch these people mingle in my living room and kitchen. Sometimes I will glance over and see two people deep in conversation. Oh, of course, I will think, they are alike in such and such a way, or they are both interested in horses or art. It could be anything, but it is almost never that they simply have the same profession.

As you know, my best friend Paulette Jourdan was a plumber, and I am a writer and a teacher of Creative Writing. She took my classes and became a really brilliant writer and had several of her stories about plumbing published in national tradeswomen’s magazines. She also worked for me and helped me out in terms of my writing projects. She was stage manager for several of my theatrical productions, and when she became ill, her daughter Whitney jumped in and did an incredible job as stage manager under very difficult conditions—i.e., she took on the legacy.

And, of course, I worked for Paulette and learned some plumbing from her. We were in different professions, and we were best friends so we ended up blending our professions as well as our lives. She also was doing presentations in high schools about a year before she died, i.e., *teaching* plumbing.

Most people might find blending their professions an overly complicated concept, but they can still appreciate the pleasures and difficulties of what another person does. I met my friend LaVada in the drugstore. She was working there; I was a customer. We enjoyed talking so much that eventually we took it out of the store and began having brunch together. We still talk at the store (a different store now), but mostly, we enjoy having long brunches with lots of food in a lovely restaurant overlooking the Bay. We don't see each other nearly as much as we would like, but we have plenty to talk about. The problems that people have working in a drugstore are very similar to the problems people have working in a community college. LaVada and I have been close friends for over twenty-five years, and we met completely by chance!

You will have much more fun if you treat everyone as a potential friend. Snobs definitely have *less* fun because they must worry constantly about where they fit into whatever hierarchy they have constructed and where everyone else fits. They also have to "keep themselves up" so that they look, at least to themselves, better than most of the people most of the time.

What a chore! What a bore!

PRINCIPLE #14

Learn Experientially

Ideas and theories are all very well, but for me, the experience always comes first. From the time that we are small children, we learn experientially. No one gives us a theory about how to walk or talk; we simply experiment, and one day it starts to happen.

When I was first learning how to use a computer, a hypnotist friend put me in a relaxed state and said: “Go back to when you were five or six and learning to read. Remember what it was like when you looked at the letters and couldn’t decipher them, and then gradually they began to reveal themselves to you. Learning to use a computer is much simpler than learning to read.” I found that that helped me immensely.

When Alex and I traveled through Europe and Africa, we were learning thousands of new things on a daily basis. I did not do a lot of research before we took this trip. I thought: let’s just see what happens.

When you are constantly meeting people from different cultures and having new cultural experiences on a daily basis, you need to be open in order to *receive* the experience you are being offered. If you enter a country—especially one that is radically different from your own—with lots of ideas about what someone else’s culture is all about when you have only read about it, you will probably *never* be able to experience it.

Both my son and I found Africa to be an *incredible* experience and one that is best received if you can empty your mind of Western ideas before you leave the United States.

People tend to try and control their experiences by means of theories and ideas, and that’s impossible. However, it *is* possible to block the experiences you might have had by too much theorizing. Intuition seems to me to be closely related to living in terms of direct experience

and learning from it. Intuition prepares you to receive the experiences that are “waiting” for you. If you live intuitively, you will definitely live more richly and creatively. Trust your intuition!

An example: Alex and I were in Morocco, and we needed to get to West Africa. If you do not have the money for a plane, there are two ways: across the Sahara or taking a boat from Casablanca around the western hump of Africa to the western coast. My friend Nouredine and I walked to the tourist office. (While we did this, Alex was playing soccer with Nouredine’s brother Mimoun and his friends.) At the tourist office, we were told there were no boats from Casablanca to West Africa. In order to take the Sahara route, we had been told we would need visas for Niger and Nigeria and that to get them, we might have to return to Algeria. I told Nouredine that I did not think we should return to Algeria and that I needed one more piece of information before I could figure out what to do. “And what is that?” he asked me. “I don’t know,” I replied. “I just know I need one more.”

Now you might ask: how did you know that you needed one more piece of information? Well, it makes no sense in any but intuitive terms. I just knew. So the question becomes: how do you develop your intuition? Well, if you clear your mind of preconceived ideas, you make room for intuitive ideas that are often extremely useful. We have all gotten good ideas suddenly (the proverbial light bulb popping on in the head), and those ideas often come from a kind of intuition. So you can develop your intuition by allowing your imagination to help you solve problems instead of relying solely on reason.

We arrived at the Algerian Consulate and discovered that we would need another visa to return to Algeria in order to get visas for Niger and Nigeria. In addition, I really didn’t think that a trip across the Sahara would be good for a ten year old child. Luckily, or fortuitously, we ran into some English tourists at the Consulate who told us that there were all kinds of boats in Casablanca that sailed all along the western coast of Africa. So that was the piece of information that I needed, and we ended

up traveling by several boats and learned all sorts of new and wonderful things!

When people are doing a lot of theorizing about an experience before it happens, they also tend to do things in “expected” or “officially accepted” ways. So someone might have taken the word of the Tourist Office as an absolute and believed there were no boats in Casablanca. That person might have ended up going back to Algeria for additional visas—incredibly time-consuming—and gone across the Sahara which might have been dangerous for a ten year old boy.

If you’re not a person who learns experientially and uses your intuition readily, try an experiment. Take a class in something you know nothing about and don’t find out anything about it in advance. Or: take a short trip or meet with new kinds of people in some informal setting and try to empty your mind of preconceptions, theories and ideas, i.e. expectations of any kind before you go. Just let go and live it and learn from it what you can! You’ll also find that it’s a lot of fun!

PRINCIPLE #15

Do Things For Other People

This one is a no-brainer! Everyone knows that it's good to do things for other people. And yet all around the world, there are people who do as little for other people as they possibly can. And other people who spend their lives actively seeking to harm other people.

It's hard to get any kind of fresh perspective on this. But if I feel sad or discouraged or generally bummed out about the state of the world or my own life, I often think: well, why don't you do something for someone else? And often I do. And I then find that I feel much better about the state of the world or my own life, and, in addition, something has been accomplished.

Almost all religions and philosophies suggest this, and some people do it on a regular basis. But what if everybody did it? What would happen then?

PRINCIPLE #16

If You Can Get Rid Of Or Diminish A Worry By A Simple Action— Take It

I often look back on a worry and think: you were really worried about that (speaking to myself as I often do), but once you started actually *doing* something about it, it didn't turn out to be much.

If you think you have a tax problem, call a tax person or a friend who is more knowledgeable than you are about taxes. A phone call is often all that you need! People seem to be reluctant to pick up the phone because they think the problem will get worse if they ask anyone about it. Actually, it's more likely to get solved. Or e-mail them if you prefer.

I worry about getting poison oak when I'm hiking in the woods. I don't want to give up hiking, and I *am* sensitive to poison oak so my solution is to take a shower as soon as possible after hiking and to bundle up my clothes and wash them as soon as a washing machine is available. My friends *who have never gotten poison oak* feel that I'm overzealous, but I'm really miserable when I get it so this has proven to be a good solution for me.

If my car is making a strange sound, I take it to my excellent mechanic Dave immediately. If there is some big repair to be made and I don't yet have the money for it, I can at least find out what it is and consider a timeframe for getting it repaired. If it's a serious problem, I may also not want to be on a long trip on the freeway! Because, as we all know, breaking down out in the middle of nowhere is not fun. Unless, of course, you see that as a great adventure. (See Principle #4)

But by and large, worry is not good either for your psyche or your health! So to repeat J.L.'s statement under Principle #11: There's no point

in worrying because most of what we worry about doesn't happen. And we can't worry about the things we should have worried about because we didn't know what they were!

PRINCIPLE #17

What's The Point?

Now this one is very personal. It works for me, and it just might work for you. I was eating out with friends, and I said: “I don’t see the point of focaccia!” They laughed their heads off. What I meant was: there are all kinds of great breads—from my perspective—and I don’t really like focaccia so why bother with it?

I eat out regularly with this same group of friends, and over time, they pointed out to me that I say: *What’s the point?* a lot. It became a group joke—about me.

So what *is* the point of: *What’s the point?* Well, it simplifies my life. And my life is far from simple so it needs simplifying.

If someone tells me a story about someone involved in elaborate sorts of behavior for reasons that are obscure to me, I ask: *What’s the point?* Why are they doing this? Why are they spending their time and energy in this way? (See Principle #18) I like to know what the point is in relation to anything I’m doing. This doesn’t mean I can’t do lighthearted things—go to the water slides, laugh a lot over nothing—but for me, those things *have* a point. After a day at the water slides, I *feel* much better! It’s a great one-day getaway. And I’m convinced that laughing a *huge amount* promotes health, well-being and a better attitude toward life.

My grandson Jabari asked me recently: “Mary, how come people get these houses that are very, very big, and they can’t even live in all the rooms?” And I replied: “Well, they don’t need them, and often they don’t really want them. I think they buy them so they can show them off to other people and impress them.” He said: “You mean boast about them?” I replied: “And show them off.” His final word: “Well, that doesn’t make any sense to me at all!” *What’s the point?* Perhaps you’ve bought a huge

house and really need it—for visitors or business or whatever. Then for you, there is a point. But for me and Jabari, there wasn't. It's individual. But when you find yourself floundering in terms of a decision, *What's the point?* is a good question to ask yourself! It's a grounding mechanism!

PRINCIPLE #18

Balance Your Resources: Energy, Health, Time, Money And Imagination

Everyone has resources. Obviously, some people have more energy or more money than other people. And some people have better health, but everyone has resources.

If you have serious health problems, then everything shifts, and you have to take care of those before you can even consider anything else!

But if your health is pretty good, then every day is a challenge in terms of how you will balance your resources.

Often I will wake up and within the first half-hour of wakefulness, think: well, the first place I have to be today is at 10:30 A.M. so I have three and a half hours in which I can do...whatever. And then I prioritize. A cup of Irish Breakfast tea with honey helps my energy begin to flow, and sometime within that three and a half hour period, I will do either self-hypnosis or a combination of meditation and self-hypnosis. These techniques help me to focus my day and allocate my resources. I am a person who believes in breakfast—at least for myself—so I will make a smoothie. Then I shower, and I'm out the door by 10:00 A.M. or 10:15 depending on the length of my travel to my 10:30 appointment.

I believe that I am here—on earth—to do certain work so maybe I am particularly intense about time. I do not like to waste it, and since I was in my twenties, I have seen myself as a system for work. That does not mean—as I believe anyone reading this book will understand by now—that I do not have time to have fun! I have fun working, and I have fun: talking to my friends (on the phone or in person), going to the water slides or the beach, eating out, driving through the trees on the way to Mendocino, hanging out with Jabari and his friends, hanging out with his mom, Whitney, and his dad, Khalid, hanging out with my son Alex and my

daughter by marriage Shirleyann, hanging out period, sitting in a café writing in my journal, writing in general, swimming, working out at the gym, hiking, skating, etc.

As I am writing this, I have a sign on my front door that says: “Working! Not available! Please do not knock or ring bell! Thanks.” The sign does not contain my name. This makes it anonymous. It keeps lots of people away. It ensures my uninterrupted privacy while I work, and thus it helps me not to waste time!

Everyone tells me that I have a lot of energy so I have to accept that as a given! I cannot possibly tell other people to do everything in a certain way if it requires my energy. However, I do have one relevant statement. I believe that I use my energy well! Even if I have a lot, it isn’t endless. And I have to *choose how to use it!* When I feel that I am wasting my energy, I try to alter my life so that that is not happening even if it means no longer seeing someone who would like to see me.

With money, you have to decide whether what you are buying is 1) worth the price; 2) something you really need or want; 3) whether you will regret having bought it later on and 4) whether you can afford it. Will the lights be turned off if you buy this? Will your children be going without something they need?

And last: Imagination. Imagination is an endless resource! When all else fails, use your imagination! Make something up! Think up a way to do something that no one has ever thought of before. Sometimes my fiction writing students will say: “But she can write that because she has a great imagination. I don’t!” And I always reply: “Imagination is like a muscle! It needs working out. You go to the gym for your muscles. You have to spend time working your imagination for it to get better!” Imagination is also a great problem solver.

So my theory is: if you take care of your health as much as possible, spend time with your imagination and balance your time, energy and money, you will get more done and have *much more time for fun!*

PRINCIPLE #19

Find And Pursue Ideas, People, Kinds Of Music, Books And Habits That Give You Positive Energy And Make You Happy

Now I am not a person who thinks that everyone should be “happy” all the time in the American sense of the term where rich white American people get to be “happy” and the rest of the world is expendable.

But I am also not the kind of person who believes that in order to have serious ideas and do serious work in this world, you should be sad or depressed all the time and that sadness or depression is the measure of your seriousness.

No, I am a person who believes I am here—on earth—to do some serious work and that in order to do it, I need lots of positive energy and, yes, moments of happiness or even elation. I see myself as a resource in the world, and I need the fuel to put out lots of work, and fuel is more than food and water and sleep; it is positive energy.

Therefore, I look for people who will help me to stay positive despite the tragedy in the world. Look at Mahatma Ghandi or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They never ignored any of the tragedy in the world. In fact, they tried to transform tragedy into triumph with great success despite the terrible losses that have occurred since their respective deaths.

An example of an everyday occurrence; there is a woman whom I see fairly frequently in the town where I live, and if I can avoid actually having to talk to her, I will because it is guaranteed that she will have something negative to say—to anyone! Other people have confirmed my experience. You might be enjoying the beautiful day, and she will say: “You know, we will probably lose our jobs soon!”

Another aspect of this issue is—people need to do what appeals to *them, what gives them positive energy!* Don't bow to other people's interests or tastes; it doesn't matter what makes them happy or gives them positive energy. It's about you!

I remember I told a woman I know that my son was taking me to a concert and that I was excited about it. She asked me what the concert was, and I said: "It's Dionne Warwick." She was not only surprised. She was horrified! She had assumed that I would only go to a concert of classical music. As it happens, I like all kinds of music. But that wasn't okay with her.

In my circle of friends, if you're disturbed about life and need a boost, a good activity is Yoga with Yofe which I've already mentioned. Yofe's boyfriend David is the head of *The San Francisco Medicine Ball Band* and plays banjo and guitar and chromatic harmonica. The band plays in various spots around the Bay, and many of Yofe and David's friends end up on weekend nights at various cafés dancing and singing with the band. This is an activity that makes me very happy. In fact, personally I cannot say enough about singing and dancing. Taking a long hike through the woods to a waterfall also works for me. You simply have to learn over time and through experience who and what is good for you and what and whom you need to avoid if you're to continue to do good work in a difficult and tragic world.

Sometimes I am somewhere where I don't need to be, and I think: I need to get out of here. Often I will call my friend Naomi when I get home. She is brilliant, insightful, realistic, down to earth and funny. I will feel: I need a Naomi blast! She has never disappointed me.

To reiterate: the main problem in implementing this principle is thinking you *don't have the right to choose your friends, ideas, music and habits*. If you believe that other people have the right to steer you in their direction, this principle will never work for you.

But I can tell you that it has worked tremendously well for me in terms of keeping my positive energy up. And when I have ignored it and tried, for example, to endlessly accommodate people whom I had no business being around, I have lived to regret it!

So try it! And see if you like it!

PRINCIPLE #20

Appreciate Relief— It Is Underestimated

I felt relief:

When after my son Alex was sick in Kumasi, Ghana, he was well enough so that we could ride the train back to Sekondi!

Same trip: When the international exchange was no longer suspended so that our traveler's checks were good!

When after we had moved to California, we finally found an apartment that did not have a crazy man living under us!

If you have ever lost a job, needed one badly and then found one, you have felt relief.

If you have ever recovered from an illness—no matter how minor or how serious—you have felt relief.

If you have ever taken a test, worried about the results of it and then found out that you have done well on it, you have felt relief.

If you have ever worried about a loved one returning safely from a trip far away, and you are to meet them at the airport or the dock, and you suddenly see a smiling face that you recognize coming toward you, you have felt relief.

Since we all feel it fairly regularly, why do we seldom celebrate it?

Well, I am afraid it is because people (at least in America) tend to take a lot for granted. They think that their lives are supposed to be fine.

It's like when I was doing plumbing with Paulette. I noticed after awhile—because I had time to notice things since Paulette was doing the intellectual part of the plumbing and I was the muscle—that people would often be irritated with us or even angry *before we had done anything*. This

got worse, of course, if we were forced to open up the walls and had to tell them that the plumbing situation would require more parts and more labor than they had anticipated. Then they got really mad—*at us!*

Finally, I figured it out. Americans, in general, seem to think that their plumbing should be perfect at all times. So when something goes awry, they blame the plumbers—even if they have never seen them before! Ridiculous, yes? But that is how most of us live most of the time.

We take relief for granted in the way that we take plumbing for granted.

Plumbers *never* take plumbing for granted!

I try never to take relief for granted! And I raised my son to think that relief is one of the greatest human emotions! And I raised him to savor it and celebrate it!

PRINCIPLE #21

Be Grateful For What You've Got

Another basic one! Something everyone says! But Viktor Frankl, author of the amazing book: *Man's Search For Meaning*, built a therapy around it. It's called logotherapy, and he began his first session with each new patient by asking: What is it that makes you want to remain alive? In other words, the basics.

Make a list! Or don't make a list. But think about it! You are alive. Perhaps you have a job. Perhaps you volunteer somewhere and get something out of helping other people. Perhaps you have people who love you. Perhaps you had a good cup of coffee or a wonderful egg this morning. Nothing is too small to be grateful for.

As I sit here at my computer writing this, I am grateful for my computer—yes, Andre (my computer consultant), I am grateful for my computer! And for the sound of birds rehearsing various melodies outside my window! And for the sunny, shadow-stroked tree whose leaves try and crawl into my house.

And for my life, my health, my son, my daughter by marriage, my grandson, my brothers and sister, my godchildren, my boyfriend, my incredible array of friends, staff (present and former) and students who continually teach me things, point me in the right direction and allow me to hang out with them, my incredible acupuncturist, doctors, dentist, massage therapist and yoga teacher and for Dave and his father George who have kept my cars running for thirty years!

And for all of Nature—the ocean and the redwoods in particular—and for art which often saves lives, and for karaoke and the water slides and movies and theatre and good food in restaurants or people's homes and for potlucks and the smell of barbeque in summer and for any beautiful red slice of watermelon just cut!

Lest this seems too much—and it is only the beginning—I remember spending one Thanksgiving with the Enkoji-Busch family. Nancy (the mom) suggested that each person say what they were thankful for. We all did, each mentioning a few items, until it was three year old Miyoshi's turn.

“I'm thankful for my mom and dad and my sister,” she began, “And that Mary is here. I'm thankful for the food. And for the salt!” She picked up the saltshaker. “And for that butter!” She pointed at it dramatically. “And for that bread!” she gestured. “And for this tablecloth!” She pointed. “And for this napkin!” She held it up for all to see. “And for this grain of pepper that has fallen onto the tablecloth!” And on she went!

How much is too much? Who can say? In a world as painful as this one, can there ever be too much gratitude?

AFTERWORD

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead

We live in a world stunning in its horror. It has always been that way for people who were paying attention, but now there are many more of us crowding a small planet with limited resources.

So if you are sucking the juice out of every moment, if you are really living, you are making the world a better place! And you may find yourself surprised at what the future holds for you, at what you find yourself able to contribute to it!

—Mary H. Webb