

# A Love Affair with Life



A Compelling Look  
at Choice and Change

Barbara Hyde

Chapters 1 and 2 from *A Love Affair with Life* by Barbara Hyde

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## A COMPELLING LOOK AT CHOICE AND CHANGE

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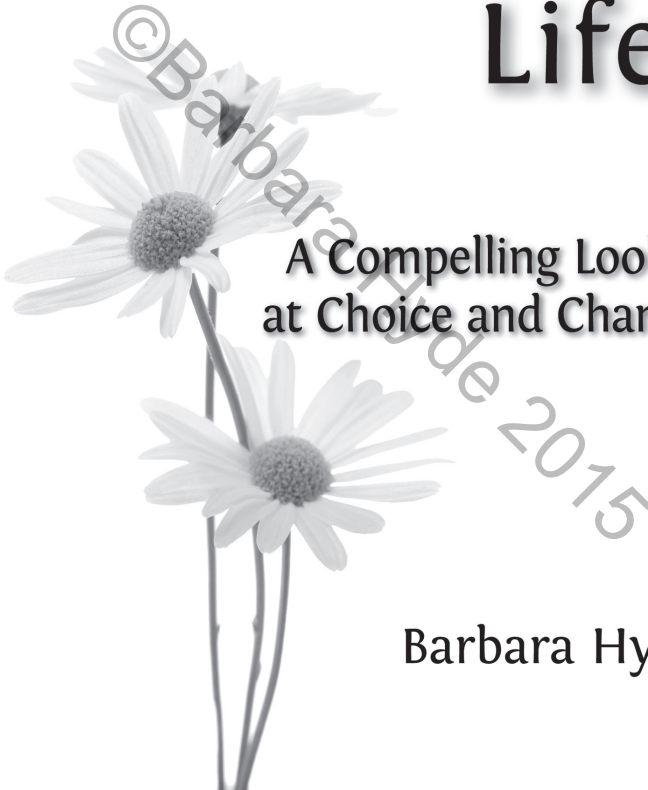
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# A Love Affair with Life

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# 1

## Are You In Love With Your Life?

*When you integrate awareness of your true nature with the necessary life skills to pursue your authentic desires, acting on your truth becomes an easier choice. A personal awakening to a love affair with life is then possible.*

*It's got to be easier, better, more satisfying than this!*

**H**ow many of us have thought or said that? In our heart of hearts, don't we all long for a love affair with life?

We try to live the best life we can, of course, but many of us still find ourselves in a world we can't make work for us in the way we would like. We want to choose well for ourselves so we can create the life we truly desire. When our life experiences are connected to our innermost desires, we feel vibrant and healthy and happy, but we just can't seem to make that connection often enough. And so many of us are overly stressed, unhappy, discouraged, disappointed, or just simply not experiencing life as we imagined it would be.

*A Love Affair with Life* offers a foundation for viewing one's own life from a unique perspective. The stories and commentaries which follow present information and viewpoints for experiencing the world that invite our indestructible and unique spirit—our truth—to freely express itself in actions that reflect better choosing for each of us. You will meet individuals who work through their issues and challenges, use their chosen experiences to develop themselves, and learn to trust their own inner

authority, their own voice. You will recognize how various life experiences may impact their sense of well-being as you observe who or what is calling the shots in their lives and the sometimes unknowing “life compromises” they make. You can learn from their personal evolution as they better prepare themselves to make informed decisions in pursuit of their true desires, “own” their lives and their decisions, and journey forward to a life well-lived, a life of their own choosing.

### *How did we lose our way?*

If we are doing only what we believe we must and should do, rather than what we truly want to do, we are most likely living a contradiction. When we do not live authentically, we compromise and “pretzel ourselves around,” creating excuses and rationalizations and becoming experts at deluding ourselves. Is it any wonder that eventually the cumulative effect could be that we become overwhelmed, disengaged, or perhaps even reach a point of pervasive sadness?

Disharmonious emotions can occur within us when we take on life experiences at odds with our true nature. Do we dislike our jobs or work-mates or find our marriages and relationships unsatisfying? Do we feel bullied into compromises? Are we at our wit’s end with parental challenges? What happens when we have feelings of ineptitude that sometimes lead to panic, when we’re frustrated, angry, experience distancing, or when we feel “less”? How many of us have had that feeling of disability where we just can’t quite cope the way we wish we could, can’t quite deal with daily life in a manner that makes us feel good about ourselves, can’t quite feel the joy we want?

This stress can have a profound influence on our bodies and our lives. Often, we don’t *want* to recognize that our discomfort has purpose—has value—and that our unhappiness can be viewed as a message from the body that something in our life isn’t correct for who and how we are. But if we choose to pay attention to what the body is telling us, we will be able to discern and interpret these messages. Do we feel listless and fatigued, unmotivated, crabby, or short-tempered? Do we sense our own resistance? Are we jealous, judgmental, or constantly comparing ourselves to other individuals? Unhappiness and stress, while not a diagnosis for a disease, comprise many signs of an unfulfilled life—a life that isn’t what we want it to be.

What if we feel stuck or we don’t know what we want? What if unsuccessful past attempts at change have left us concerned about “failing” yet

again? More importantly, what can occur when we believe we don't have choices or when we don't want to choose?

### A lost life...

We may risk accepting the identity of victims of circumstance. Like vegetables in a garden, we wait, passively stuck in the ground, to see if we are watered for our thirst, if there is sunshine to fuel our growth and strength, or if we are lucky enough to be pruned for our development. If moles come and attack our roots, if beetles come and nibble at our leaves, or if a dog comes by and pees on us, we are susceptible to damage or injury. That's what happens when we don't ask ourselves, "What do I want and not want? What do I like and not like?" We may find our humanity has become distorted or obscured because we have surrendered—even if by habit—our self-reliance and our dignity.

### *What makes choosing well seem easier for some than it does for others?*

We head out on this journey of life choosing an easier or a harder path. Once on a difficult path, some of us do not self-assess and self-correct so that we might change course to an easier path; it may be that no change is desired or perhaps different reasons exist to continue along a chosen path. Conversely, others of us, once we recognize the reality of any "incorrect choosing" for ourselves, begin with small steps to take actions toward experiences of better choosing. And then there are those of us who, once awakened to our reality, are equipped and able to bolt into action to cross paths with experiences we truly desire. We are all different, and we each find our own way. Uniquely.

Contained within our own selves—in our natures—are inherent, unwanted, and unwell behavior patterns; these come from our genetic history, our environments, and our experiences. Unique to each individual, these inhibiting factors can disable us from being who and how we want to be, from having the life we yearn for. We all have these behavior patterns, but some of us have more of them than others.

These unwanted and unwell behavior patterns can certainly mess with our lives. They are part of our character, that which exists in our nature *in this moment*. While wanting to be the better of ourselves and improve our lives, we can find the pursuit of our authentic desires disrupted; we may compensate, avoid, deny, rationalize, create excuses and stories, and allow ourselves to remain unconscious of our reality. When we restrict, limit,



and compromise ourselves in this way, we minimize the expression of our full being. And in so doing, we may stumble or struggle in our efforts to make the choices and take the actions needed for a more satisfying and happier life.

So we try to stay positive, often quoting phrases to remind ourselves to be kinder, more upbeat, or to be this or be that; while helpful, many who have tried unsuccessfully to make significant changes using that approach still don't feel peaceful and at ease.

### *What can we do to become more equipped to make better choices?*

To change these inhibiting factors in our nature, we want to encourage and pursue our own development. We cannot cease being who and how we are by simply willing it to be so. We may “manage our behavior,” but in order to free ourselves from our unwanted behavior patterns that limit us in having the life we desire, this capability—this development of our character—must be pursued. Why is this so important? Because it is our character—the “who and how” of us—that most influences our choices. This is not about our morality within the context of society; this is about our individual integrity—our wholeness within our own being.

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*How, specifically, do we develop the “who and how” of us—our character? Simply, and yet by our own choices, we begin to take action for experiences we want, owning the responsibility for those choices, however they play out.*

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### **Choosing well—a treasured life skill—can be developed**

Experiences just exist. It is we who imbue them with values. Some we view as being of desired quality, some not. Some lead us to a better life, some do not. While it is likely easier, more fun, nourishing, and rewarding to develop ourselves from joyful and satisfying experiences we want, *any* experience can be used to further our personal capabilities and life skills for making choices.

Understanding ourselves and what we want is key to choosing well. Our body—with its innate knowingness—tries to communicate our true desires within us. When we listen to and trust its messages, it can be easier to make choices and take actions for experiences that are connected to our innermost desires—our “whole selves.” These experiences give us a

sense of fulfillment, of satisfaction and harmony. We discover a freedom to choose more of those experiences that nourish us and make us smile. In this way, we come to better health and greater happiness and peace in our lives.

### *So, what's holding us back?*

Much of my professional career has been spent in the field of choice and change. I have assisted both companies and individuals in their change initiatives as an organizational consultant, educator, worksite wellness specialist, and facilitator. In all arenas, I have observed the same two critical barriers that may contribute to the frustration of those who struggle as they seek to move from the life they are living to the life they desire to live. Identifying and overcoming these barriers that keep people stuck is the focus of this book, and these messages are discussed throughout the stories and commentaries. If addressed, many may find themselves better prepared to bridge the gap between what *is* and what *is desired*, thus improving the quality of their lives.

#### **Barrier One: Difficulty in effortlessly determining what rings true for us**

Reasons abound as to why we can't hear and act on our authentic desires as our body tries to communicate them to us, or why this information may have become muddled for us. Maybe we have relinquished our foundations for living to misguided sayings and clichés or unconscious habits. Perhaps we've allowed ourselves to be confused by society's arbitrary standards, social mores, "proper" protocols, religious doctrines, unquestioned dogmas, government interventions, image concerns, or advertising. Could it be we have overlooked examining the cultural views, presumptions, and notions that inform our approach to our life and our own self-care? External systems—as with all the other qualifiers on our choices—can be so confusing that we may find we have delegated or passively surrendered our life choices to a variety of external authorities, be they institutions, spiritual leaders, teachers, doctors, self-proclaimed "thought leaders" and "experts," parents, bosses, partners, or friends. Perhaps we have avoided taking on the responsibility of making our own choices and that has simply become—as a default—our preferred way of addressing life.

When matters need our attention, we want to be able to effortlessly discern what rings true for each of us, but it can be difficult to make clear choices when we haven't consciously looked at who or what may be influencing us and how.

Is it possible some of us haven't even taken a moment to consider that our previous choices may no longer be the ones we want and that we are free to make new choices in keeping with who and how we are today? Have we, in our search for sense, relief, or peace, simply forgotten we are our own best "experts" of ourselves?

Many of us simply have not learned how to make—and trust—our own choices and hold ourselves accountable.

### **Barrier Two: Underdeveloped skills of self-reliance**

Inherent in our nature is a deep desire to be self-reliant—to be effective in our lives in any way we want. We, as a species, are compelled to move toward self-reliance in order to survive as our nature seeks its own fulfillment through our actions. As when a baby takes its first breath and its first steps, this self-reliance is developed as we learn to trust ourselves to pursue what we desire. Regardless of the actions we ultimately choose to take, we know we want to give ourselves a chance to try to figure it out. We give value to the word "try" as a positive expression of hope and find it rewarding and nourishing to attempt to take steps toward what we want; we experiment with various possibilities.

Operating from our own internal authority, we become involved in creating our own access—to people, to information, or to any other experiences that get us moving in a direction we value. Options are endless because we know that with the necessary life skills of self-reliance, we have the freedom to go for what we want, responsibly and with no harm to others. Naturally then, the byproduct of a self-reliant life is a sense of self-respect... that lovely manner of being where we tend to view ourselves, our lives, and all of humanity with more tolerance.

Many of us want to become well-equipped for this kind of life and may be baffled when we find we are not. We may be poised—ready and willing—to begin to pursue it, but we do not yet possess, or in some cases even have an awareness of what may well be a cornerstone of healthy human relations. This cornerstone is the important life skills of self-reliance and all that it comprises: a healthy self-interest, the capability to discern reality, a curiosity for self-discovery, the ability to operate from our internal authority, self-management, self-knowing including body knowingness, ownership of our choices and the responsibility for our actions accordingly, self-providing, self-awareness, self-expression, self-assessment, self-correction, and self-care.

And so, when we find ourselves *ineffective* in our relationships, with our communications, in our finances, dealing with emotions, in the management of our lives and in society at large, or in realizing our dreams, often

all we know is that we are not having a love affair with life. We know we do not adapt with ease and we are not feeling optimistic or hopeful about life. Without recognition that we could impact our lives positively with more developed skills of self-reliance, we give no consideration to this option.

### *The outcomes*

Only we can know what gives our life meaning. Whenever we suppress, surrender, or delegate our own internal authority, we compromise ourselves to something outside of ourselves, sometimes almost blindly so. In making this exchange, we deny ourselves the opportunity to develop the necessary life skills needed to prepare us for a life whereby we are curious, engaged, and have the mettle and motivation to care for ourselves. We deny ourselves the comfort to easily make choices to go for what we want, improving our own lives along the way. This puts the opportunity to have the life we truly desire at risk. How?

First, compromise is inevitable when we choose to remain irresponsible for our own self-care—incapable of supporting ourselves emotionally, physically, intellectually, financially, or in furthering ourselves in any manner that we desire—because, in reality, we have forfeited our autonomy.

Second, we hesitate to make any changes in favor of choices and experiences we may truly desire. We avoid taking risks on ourselves because we don't know ourselves well enough to trust that we can go for what we want, that we can figure it out, that we can handle the outcomes whatever they may be.

Many of us then enter the workplace, relationships, and other arenas, mistakenly hoping to extract from them what we cannot create in our personal lives. Without sufficiently developed life skills to manage our own experience regardless of what is presenting in any “less than perfect” environment, we attempt to manage the experiences of others. And when that doesn't play out the way we want, it seems reasonable to many of us to fault something outside of ourselves—not realizing that we cannot get from anyone or anything what we do not bring. And so, for many of us, our freedom of choice—and all the wonderful options that could be ours—eludes us.

We often spend our time, money, and talent endlessly ruminating over which choice is the better choice to make. In the process we may overlook asking ourselves a fundamental question: Am I prepared to take action for the experiences I want and own the responsibility for those choices, however they play out? The reality is that many of us are not likely to take a risk on ourselves—to go for what we want; we simply haven't equipped ourselves to

do so. And therefore, decision making will remain difficult and many of us will stay stuck where we are...in that place where we know we don't want to be.

### *How do we pursue the life we want?*

The pursuit of the life we want—of what we truly desire—is really a pursuit of our relationship with our own selves. We are an animated and evolving species, and everything that occurs with us occurs through action. We would cease to exist without movement and change.

All experiences inform us as we listen intently to our body's reactions to them. We want to awaken and engage with our body, developing an awareness of the way our own individual truth expresses itself from every cell of every part of it. We want to take an honest look at our current reality—to fully recognize it—and from that viewpoint, ask ourselves what we truly desire and whether our life is reflecting that. The body communicates; it is our partner in creating our life. Whether it is a whisper in our ear, a tap on our shoulder, or a knock upside the head, we want to fully respect and embrace the intelligence of our body as it speaks to us. It will not betray us.

We want to ask ourselves, “Do I want more or less of the experience I am in? Do I like myself in this experience?” If we do, we stay; if we don't, we go. We take a new action. We are calm, solid, peaceful. Choice is easier when we pay attention to our body's messages and take ownership of our choices, regardless of how they unfold; there is no argument. Our behavior comes into alignment with our heart's desires—our truth.

### *Is it really so difficult to own our choices and move on?*

Throughout the stories and commentaries to follow, you may often find—as I have—something within you relates to something about them. How so? Many of us have fallen prey to the victim mentality, claiming someone “did it to me” when betrayed by a friend, a lover, a business partner, or a manager—all who were simply revealing their true natures. Looking back, we can see that those behaviors of theirs were in place when we entered the relationships. But we—without consideration—chose to ignore, excuse, or deny seeing the reality of a non-quality experience as it presented itself to us, preferring not to take personal responsibility for our own choices, but to instead play the victim when all was later revealed. And haven't many of us played “nice” and followed the rules

when everything inside of us was screaming to take other, more responsible action for something we did or didn't want?

How many of us have stayed too long at jobs and in relationships or hesitated to move on to something we wanted, when we knew—every part of us knew—that it was time to leave? Did we instead submit to a mental pro and con tally sheet, thereby compromising ourselves and dismissing or ignoring the accuracy and strength of our own genuine desires as they nagged at us? And aren't there those of us who, in the wee hours of the morning, have lain awake feeling the shame that comes with wanting do-overs in life, with everything from falling flat on our face at one-time-only golden work opportunities or parenting moments, to saying all the wrong things while sitting at the bedside of dying loved ones—reliving over and over again what, in retrospect, we wished could have been said or done differently?

*A Love Affair with Life* is, above all, a love story about humanity written for people seeking to improve their lives. In reading this work, you are offered an opportunity to have an authentic and respectful conversation with yourself, to give regard to your own sensibilities, your own truth, and to be the expert of your own life. You may find yourselves, as I did, sometimes surprised or amused, but often deeply touched—in spite of their individual vulnerabilities—by the amazing resilience of those whose life experiences, in bits and pieces, informed this work. And you may find that when you embrace your own humanity, it is really not so difficult to own your choices and move on.

### *A gentle reminder*

If you identify with the material presented here and decide that you want to try to change some things in your life, be kind to yourself as you come to accept who and how you are today. We can't be more than "only" that in any given moment, and that "only" is a lot. There is enough suffering. While you will hear my opinions, you won't hear any shouting of directives at you to do, think, or be this or that so you will have success in your life. Haven't we been shouting at ourselves long enough to know that it may well be the least effective manner of approaching change? While straight-shooting messages may be helpful, I don't presume or profess to know what is best for you; and I'm not looking to arm wrestle with any individual, philosophy, religion, or opinion. I do not claim to know better than you do—better than your organism does—what your destiny is or ought to be. Your choices will determine that. Each of you is free to try;

each of you is free to choose; and I wish you every success in moving forward with your decisions, doing no harm to others.

*A love affair with life is about  
our own relationship with ourselves*

It is a tremendous responsibility to live the life we want, the way we desire to live it. That is not to say it needs to be difficult. The responsibility of choice—the privilege of choice—exists in the real world, and we can delight in self-discovery. We are always with ourselves; the path is a singular one. We come into this world alone and we go out alone. Do we want to journey with our best friend, our dearest loved one? If so, we want to nourish, care for, love, and respect ourselves. Pursuing our authentic desires—our own selves—requires a deep realization that everyone has a unique nature; it requires compassion for all humanity. As we bring ourselves forward, some of us may be ready to take back our lives, the lives we are just now beginning to see differently from the compromised selves we have created.

We do the boldest things when living our authentic lives, pursuing responsibly what we truly desire, developing who and how we are through our chosen experiences. There is an ease to a life lived in this way, and it won't matter what any individual, any institution, any religion, any book, or any philosophy thinks we should want from or for ourselves. It will be felt in—and emanate from—our very being. When we recognize that the nature of mankind is to continually refine itself—that any species is compelled toward its own evolution—then we can put our trust in our own nature, our nature that wants to be self-reliant, to be effective in whatever it wants. When we stay conscious and listen to our body—where our truth resides—it will inform us of “correct choosing” for ourselves. We want to open our mind, follow our heart, and move our feet.

From a spark of curiosity to a step of action of any size in a direction more to our liking, all movement creates shifts—from the seemingly inconsequential to the profound. We want to know ourselves and always be mindful that our ultimate responsibility is to the life experience we are seeking from our true desires.

*Uncover, be, and live your truth, with no harm to others.*

*—Karen Sontag*

## 2

### *Dinah's Story*

#### The Lioness Within

*I didn't know then that it isn't the negative or positive experiences that make us who we are, but rather, it is the choices we make of how we are going to try to use our life experiences to move toward greater ease and happiness.*

It was the mid-sixties in a small, rural town in Indiana. I lived at the end of the street in the last house in town, and my playmate Eva Wagner lived one block away. Eva was two classes ahead of me, but all the neighborhood kids played kickball together, shared sparklers on the Fourth of July, and joined together for rousing games of hide-and-seek after growing weary of smearing the glowing bodies of captured lightning bugs all over our arms after sundown. I guess you could say we were a tribe of sorts.

Eva and I had been friends since my family had moved to the town, the summer before my third grade, almost two years before this story takes place. We played cards and board games at each other's homes after school and I always felt comfortable at her home. Weekend sleepovers were frequent events. Her sunlit bedroom was off the living room; it had faded pink wallpaper and tall windows with wispy lace curtains.



My favorite time at Eva's was 4 p.m. on the weekends when Mrs. Wagner served tea. Once summoned, Dieter, Eva's older brother, and Eva and I would wash up and race to the table. Dieter, who was in high school and rarely around otherwise, kept the conversations going, sometimes sassing his parents, who seemed old fashioned and backwards with their thick German accents, dour composure, and no-nonsense ways.

Teatime was a foreign experience to me. Even being allowed to drink tea was unusual; we only had coffee at home, and that was for adults. But this black tea from a whistling, rattling tea kettle—steeped to flavor in a flowered teapot, served with sugar from a glass sugar bowl and tiny spoon, and poured into gold-rimmed cups with delicate handles—was a delight. The ritual included a meal of cheeses, meats, and Mrs. Wagner's delicious, hard-crusted, homemade bread offered on beautiful platters. The tasty spread often included more than one dessert, and she made the best German crumb cake. I can still smell the cinnamon, and my mouth waters just remembering it. When finished, we would all inquire in unison, "*Das ist alles?*" and Mrs. Wagner would reply, "*Das ist alles.*" That is all.

It was strange how it began. Dieter touched my foot under the table, and I moved my foot. Then his foot touched mine again. I adjusted my foot again, this time folding my legs at my knees and tucking my feet under my chair. I looked up at him as though to apologize with my eyes, and the look I saw was odd and unfamiliar to me. This happened a few more times at following teatimes. I became uncomfortable. At a sleepover, I was awakened in the middle of the night when he kissed me; he took my hand and led me into the kitchen. I told him I needed to go to sleep and to leave me alone. After that I did not want to go to Eva's house anymore. Dark came early in winter; and as I made continued excuses to Eva for declining her invitations and she moved into life in middle school, we grew apart. What had been a childhood friendship had changed.

I was no longer visiting the Wagner home, and Dieter began exposing himself to me from his corner bedroom windows upstairs, which was visible to me as I walked by to get to almost anywhere in town. He would either have his pants down or no clothes on at all. There was no sidewalk on the opposite side of the street, so whenever possible I walked through neighbors' yards to avoid directly passing by his house. I averted my eyes when approaching near his house and I never walked home from school that way alone, even if it meant leaving early or staying late and watching for someone I could join in going my direction. I knew very little about

sex, had never seen a naked man before, and had never touched myself “down there.” I was very confused. I didn’t know why he was behaving as he was and I desperately wanted it to stop.

One Saturday afternoon, heading over to a friend’s home, I passed by their detached garage. There he was, standing naked inside, the sliding door slightly askew, motioning for me to come over. How did he know I would be walking over to Dorothy’s house at that time? What was he doing in the garage? I wanted to throw up. Terrified and unable to make sense of what was happening, I bolted, fearing he would catch me and drag me into the garage. The close call only heightened my fears—even though I wasn’t quite certain what I was afraid of.



That seemed to be the end of it. In the late spring, I went to Eva’s house after school one day for a community project. We finished working at 5:00, the time I was due home. My mother served dinner promptly at 5:30 like clockwork. We were expected to be home for it without fail. I saw Dieter put on his coat and leave the house shortly before.

Every cell in my being warned me to be careful. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I called home and asked if I could be half an hour late. My father answered the phone; that meant no grace period. I begged, but it was useless; he said that my mother had dinner ready and I was to come home. Why I didn’t ask him to meet me, I don’t know. It was one lousy block, but I knew—my body knew; everything in the all of me was screaming at me to protect myself. I asked Eva to stay by the back door, telling her it was icy and I wanted to be sure I got home safe. It was pitch dark. I was shaking. About three quarters of the way home, I yelled to Eva, “O-K-A-Y!”

Out of nowhere, Dieter attacked me from behind, covering my mouth with his hand, telling me not to scream or he would hurt me. He dragged me off the sidewalk to the yard between two houses. I fought and we both went down onto the wet, cold ground. He said, “I don’t want to screw you—I just want to feel you up,” as he pushed his hand down the front of my pants and jammed his fingers into my vagina. Searing pain shot through me. I didn’t know what “feel you up” meant, but I was certain he was not someone who could be trusted. With his other hand he shoved my hand down to his penis and told me to rub it. I touched him tentatively. It was the first time I had ever touched a penis. It was warm. He said, “Rub it harder,” and he placed his hand over mine to demonstrate what he wanted. At that moment, his cheek was right near my mouth and I took my opportunity. I bit him with all the biting I had in me. He yelled, and hit me. Hard. He flung me off. I scrambled up and ran like the wind toward the street. Ran toward the light.

Ran across the icy street to my home, toward the comforting glow of the small porch light my mother had left on for my safety.

Shaking uncontrollably, I snuck into the back porch. My mom yelled, “Is that you?” I called back, “Yes,” stripped off my muddy coat, and headed directly for the bathroom. I sneaked past my father, who was visiting with a friend at the kitchen table—which I noticed hadn’t yet been set for dinner; this meant I had a few minutes to clean myself up and calm down. I was covered with mud from head to toe, even in my hair, so I yelled to my mom that I had fallen and was going to clean up. I thought I might not have to say anything...until I realized my glasses must have flown off in the attack. After making myself presentable, I told my mom about my glasses and she grabbed a flashlight and said she would go with me to find them. All I could think was “Oh no! What if they are in the yard away from the sidewalk!” Noticing my wet and soiled coat, she offered me another one to wear.

Once outside, my mother asked what happened. I started to tell her I had fallen, but then some voice inside of me just spilled out the truth. She kept asking, “Did he touch you with anything but his hands?” My mother could not say the word “penis,” she could not say the word “vagina,” but she could make sure she got her point across. After finding my glasses, she announced we were going over to Dieter’s house to speak with him and his parents. I had never seen my mother like this before—somehow calm but “on fire.” She was a shy woman. While she laughed openly with her dearest friends and those in our family, in public I had never heard her open her mouth. What was my mother going to say? “We can’t tell Dad,” I said, apparently stating the obvious. She quietly and firmly replied, “Of course not.” We both knew my father was a hothead, and no good could come from his involvement in this.

She looked straight ahead, kept walking, and quietly but firmly stated, “I can handle this.” I thought, “How?” Nothing more was said, and it seemed like a very long walk.



What I didn’t know at eleven years old was that within every one of us—male and female—there sleeps an animal of power, an awe-inspiring, ferocious animal that relies on instinct and cunning and strength. Some call it our “Lioness within.” This animal owns an unearthly sound—like you have never heard before. This Lioness rises in those awakened by the call from others loved as their own, or even from the call within themselves—the call that beckons for protection—*for life itself*. It can surface from within all those who smell *even a threat* of temperance and who will not subject or acquiesce themselves to social mores or societies’ needs for

good manners and proper protocols. It knows no fear in the moment. And clearly, this Lioness can rise from within parents who face square-on the reality of what it means to protect their young.



My mother knocked on the Wagners' door. Eva answered. Quite matter-of-factly, my mother asked her if we could come in and speak with her parents. We entered the living room, and my mother asked Mr. and Mrs. Wagner if Dieter was at home and could he be called to the room. Mrs. Wagner asked us to take a seat. We did not sit. No words were spoken.

I remember it like it was yesterday. As Dieter entered the living room, my small-framed mother metamorphosed, rising up bigger than God herself. Enormous. Humongous. Staring directly at him across the ten feet of diminishing open space, she asked him, "Dieter, do you want to tell your parents what you did to my daughter tonight?" Casting his eyes downward, he said, "No." Transfixed and trembling, I then observed, in fear and awe, my mother—the Lioness herself—growing ever-larger, filling every vacant inch of the room with her vast presence. Although her shape was obscured in a shadowy white light, I could make out her massive gnashing fangs and long, sharp claws flailing as she looked squarely down at him and snarled in a voice I'd never heard from her before or since. *"Look at me, you dirty son-of-a-bitch. If you ever touch any of my daughters again, I will kill you!"* Then in the same even-paced voice, she low-growled, *"Do. You. Understand. Me?"* Dieter shrank to the size of an eight-year-old boy and mumbled, "Yes." We walked out.



Dieter was eighteen then, and shortly thereafter he must have graduated and left town. I never saw him again. Ever. Even though he lived a block away. I never had a conversation with Eva about it either. I don't know what she knew about it. My mother and I never spoke about it again for at least another forty years. My father died, our secret safe from him.

Of course I wished that it had never happened, but wishing doesn't make it so. I continued to try to make a more peaceful life for myself, as I desperately didn't want to keep feeling fearful and victimized, and that is exactly how I felt when reliving the memories. What I came to eventually realize is that it isn't the negative or the positive experiences that make us who we are, but rather, with all the cumulative happenings—planned and unplanned—it is the choices we make of how we are going to try to use our life experiences to move toward greater ease and happiness.

My experience that night gave me two of the most nourishing gifts I would ever receive, and acknowledging them has offered me a more

peaceful life. The first was to always listen to my body—my body that communicates with me, *is* me—my nature, my truth, my partner—for its signals and to take action accordingly. To be receptive of its wisdom, to trust it. To encourage those I love to pay attention, to listen to their bodies as though their lives depend on it because it often does. The second gift came from witnessing my mother's actions. To see a ferocious Lioness, to witness someone who is so alive—so ready, so conscious, so responsible—is to know something very special about one's own nature. That nature that exists within us all.

## Designing Our Lives by Choice and Action

*Life comprises a multitude of possible experiences, available to us all the time. Through our choices and actions, our destinies unfold.*

You may have heard people say that “things always happen for a reason.” The first part is true: things happen. Of course they do. But when we try to find a reason, it is as though we are second-guessing the mysteries of life. Some things happen because we choose one way, and some things happen because we choose another way. Other experiences appear not to have been by choice, such as what occurred in Dinah's story.

All of us are vulnerable to being victimized. Even if it hasn't happened to us personally, we may know others who have dealt with painful experiences, some even horrific. However, we can observe that not all who have been victimized are victims. Taking upon oneself the *identity* of a victim is a choice, and cultivating this victimhood throughout one's lifetime is also a choice.

No one comes to earth the same as anyone else, but whatever we are dealt through circumstance or birth, we choose what we are going to do with our lives. We have the option to actively participate in our own betterment, and this can occur wherever and however we are. What if we have chosen and entered into experiences that are not satisfying, or as in Dinah's situation, happened to find ourselves in experiences that are even damaging? Suffering offers no virtue. All experiences—quality, non-quality, good, bad, pretty, or ugly—can be used to develop ourselves—to bring us to greater ease—if that is our desire.

Dinah knew this, most likely from witnessing her mother's strength and sensing it within her own self; and she made the choice not to live her

life taking on the identity of a victim. She chose to design a different life, and from those choices, her destiny unfolded.

### **Skills for living the life we want can be developed**

Some people seem to have the clarity and ability to make better choices. These people are able to more easily eliminate the dogmas, the fantasies, the illusions, the expectations, and the unquestioned rules that can bind us and imprison us—those inhibitors that keep us controlled and contained, unhappy and at risk for misuse by others. They are more readily able to act on their own behalf, regardless of who is watching or what anyone else might think. But any of us can develop the life skills to choose better. These life skills are the tools for designing and taking actions for the life we want.

Within each of us, uniquely as ever-changing organisms, an evolutionary and developmental process is taking place as we pursue our lives. Our genetic history, environment, experiences, and body knowingness all affect where we are on a developmental continuum, and many of us want to evolve and improve ourselves so that we can have a better life, a life that flows more joyfully and easily. We have the opportunity to influence where we are on our continuum by using our life experiences to develop ourselves further.

Everyone's life, from conception to death, encompasses a multitude of possible experiences available, all the time. Our task—should that be our desire—is to choose from among those possible experiences the ones we truly want. As we design our lives through our choices and actions, we want to observe and discover ourselves—to uncover and access our own truth—so that we can begin acting from it. In doing so we may begin to make choices that are better suited for who and how we are.

### **A rougher road or an easier road—which one?**

Constant and continual exchange occurs in the universe. Both experiences—those of ease or contention—are always available to us. We can look for trouble and discord if that is what we want, consciously choosing experiences that take us down that particular path, or we can consider something more harmonious. If we make choices and focus on experiences of contradiction, difficulty, and discord, we may discover that we want to remain in those experiences—some of which may be inhibiting or even destructive—and the more we attend to those, the more we will get.

People may consider or portray themselves as victims—moping and brooding over an experience—but an exchange is occurring with the experience nonetheless. As our choices can either nurture or compromise

our well-being, why would any of us choose a self-destructive path riddled with conflict? It may simply be lack of awareness that we have better options. Or maybe we have not seen healthy choosing exemplified in our midst. We may have in our unique makeup, a predisposition to unwell and unwanted behavior patterns that currently keep us from being who and how we want to be. We may even be stuck in—and surrendering to—a reaction to an experience that was only meant to inform us *at that moment*, and not realize that we can learn to use that reaction to move us forward with new choices.

Perhaps it is from habit that we sometimes choose to keep reliving a familiar memory, or staying with a familiar situation, however unacceptable we may find it to be. Or we may be caught up in rationalizing an experience with stories or excuses to convince ourselves to stay. If that is what we want our life experiences to be—rationalizing and making excuses for a life of conflict, contention, limitation or even destruction—then our life will look that way.

### **On our path of self-discovery, we always have the option to shift gears**

However, we may discover we prefer less difficulty and discord, not more; and if we want to choose to move away from destructive or discordant experiences, we may gravitate toward those experiences that are harmonious, nurturing, and supportive. We recognize what is happening, and we become consciously acclimated to noticing other experiences that are more to our liking. We begin to shift gears; we always have the option to shift gears. We may feel a sense of ease as we use these agreeable and pleasing experiences to support our healthy development—choosing them makes us feel good about ourselves—and we then design our bigger choices for continued harmony. In doing so, our life will begin to look quite another way—*indeed*. Yes, experiences of ease or those of contention are always available to us. We choose.

### **Aiming for imperfectly perfect**

Living life is not about seeking perfection, nor do *we* offer it. Nothing is perfect. There are problems with all people, all jobs, but we try to choose the best we can. When seeking our best matches for ourselves, you might say that we aim for *imperfectly* perfect.

By our choices and actions, we also design how we address responsibly the complexities and complications that can occur and that are ours to own. These are not to be avoided; however, these may have varying levels of difficulty. Sometimes life presents challenges.



Just as in determining how we wish to choose and act, we want to respect the life choices of others and allow for the responsibilities that belong to them, to be theirs. We want to be mindful not to use our own life experience to trail after, revel in, or over-attend to the complications and problems of others, giving undue attention and focus to another's difficulties and making another individual our "project." If so, we may risk becoming indulgent to that experience—using up our own life—rather than creating our own life experiences that we may desire.

As an evolving species, we will not likely attain a life of no difficulty, but we try to have life experiences that offer the greatest match for what is satisfying to us. Most people want life experiences with the least amount of conflict and distress. Differences between or among people may exist, but differences don't have to be difficulties. We want variance in our lives. Variance provides opportunity for life expansion and richer personal development; it can provide a sense of engagement and anticipation. What most of us don't want is a life filled with melodrama, difficulty, contention, and agitation.

### **The body will be healthier than the mind will allow**

In Dinah's story, we witnessed what can occur when we don't respond to, or act on, our body's messages in its attempts to communicate with us. Dinah knew—her body had informed her—that possible danger lay ahead if she stayed the course and walked home alone. Not being developed sufficiently, she did not persist to change that course. She succumbed to the unquestioned rules requiring her to get home by dinnertime, disregarding the danger she sensed. When we dismiss our own internal authority, we leave ourselves vulnerable to errors in thinking, in judgment, in deed, and in action. These errors do not represent failure, but rather they indicate learning opportunities, steps along the way in our ongoing development. Dinah chose to extract from the experience something that would guide her positively for the rest of her life. She made a choice that determined her destiny: she chose to integrate the experience and let it inform her as she sidestepped the option of victimhood.

### **Destinies unfold**

You will hear people speak of destinies as though they are something mysterious and pre-ordained.

*Consider this perspective:* The word "destinare" means "to stand." By way of the choices we make on a daily basis, we all end up somewhere. A destination reveals itself after the fact; it is the cumulative effect of where



the continuum of choices we have made along the way—those multitudes of choices we stood upon—brings us to a given moment. We can only know in the present moment, after the fact of choice and action, from the place we now stand, what our destiny is today. Through our chosen experiences, our destinies unfold accordingly. Multiple destinies are available to us relative to our choices acted upon. When we design our lives by choices and actions made from our true desires, greater connection is possible—things just seem to make sense—and life can be a lot easier.

### **All the cells of our body want the same thing—to express our truth**

When we move into experiences that fulfill our authentic desires, our nature expands—it develops itself. With this movement, more accessing of our fullest expression of our genetic potential is possible, giving us better opportunities to be able to live the kind of life we want. When we are in integrity—whole and integrated—there is a harmony, an openness to life. We are living our truth—our truth that is our deepest desires. With increased well-being, we feel stronger, more capable, and more alive than we have ever felt before. As we decide what it is that we want and don't want, we seek out harmonious matches.

This doesn't mean we won't choose poorly at times. After all, we are developing ourselves through each new choice and experience. But we self-assess, self-correct, and we figure it out because we are moving forward living our deepest desires as we know them at this time. When we choose from our truth, our body responds by thanking us with improved health, laughter, real love, and genuine joy.

### **Our accessible body knowingness**

Throughout our lifetime, there have been and will be more and different experiences available to us. With sober eyes, genuine hearts, and a respectful approach, we can clearly discern the reality before us, if we want to see it. We then simply ask ourselves, "Is this the experience I want?" and notice our body's reaction—our truth—and take new and different actions as our desires change. We have a partner in life, ready and accessible. A powerful and formidable Lioness exists within each of us, male and female—it *is* us—and we use this body knowingness to assist ourselves. This wisdom is reserved not only for times of possible danger; when we are conscious, we can hear ourselves concerning all awareness and alertness that prepares us for our unique "correct choosing" in the moment or many years later.

# A Love Affair With Life: A Compelling Look at Choice and Change



Born in Independence, Iowa, Barbara Hyde takes to heart our American liberty—that right of each individual to choose, with no harm to others—and the opportunities that liberty can offer.

In her roles as manager, facilitator, and educator, Barbara's interests have involved supporting individuals in recognizing and acting on the changes necessary to develop the life skills to go for what they want. She holds a Masters in Management from John F. Kennedy University and has both global and domestic experience in implementing large-scale organizational behavior change initiatives. Barbara is founder and president of Life Is Action, Inc., a communications company that supports accurate expression and furthers open dialogue.

A scribe, storyteller, and social observer, Barbara Hyde is a passionate advocate for a love affair with life. She makes her home in San Francisco.

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