

Born to Quest

Donna Varnau, Edmonds WA

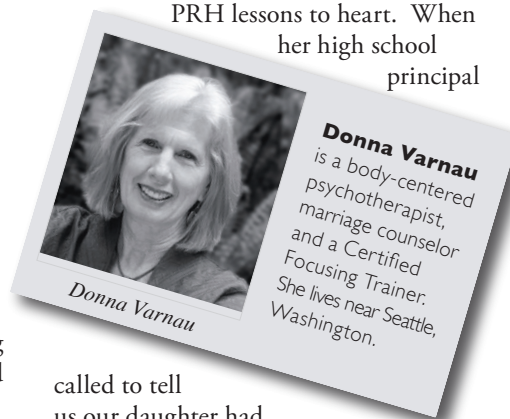
Evidently, I was born to quest. My two most urgent desires as a young girl were to know how to live well and how to feel loved. As I grew, I had occasional yet powerful experiences of a Presence that filled my body with a streaming, pulsating energy. These experiences opened me to a sense of wonder and awe about life. Curiously, this Presence seemed to care about me.

Life seemed increasingly difficult as I grew older. I felt insecure and afraid much of the time. My parents' divorce shook my foundations when I was 21. A sense of desperately wanting to feel better took hold of me. Spurred to find answers, I explored contemplative prayer, did Zen meditation, devoured books on spirituality and psychology, and sought support from a Jungian psychoanalyst.

In January of 1985 I began my fruitful journey with PRH Education. The first class, *Who Am I?*, opened the door to an inner world I'd had intuitions of, but didn't know how to access. For eleven years, I took every PRH class available, engaged in growth groups, and sought individual accompaniment. Eventually I discovered the peaceful yet alive sense that came into my body when I connected with my deep truth. I'd finally found the way back to my earlier childhood experiences of Presence! Over time, I began to experience a long sought-after sense of inner confidence and solidity.

What has been most personally satisfying about PRH Education is how it helped me create a healthy and happy home life. The sessions *Growing as a*

Couple, Helping My Children Become Themselves, and others that my husband and I attended, helped us custom-design our marriage and parenting approach. As our two children became teenagers, each appreciated taking *Who am I?*. Our daughter, especially, took her PRH lessons to heart. When her high school principal



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called to tell us our daughter had been skipping classes, we were shocked. She explained that her Being had told her it was "more life-giving" to be outside in nature than in the classroom! (Fortunately, upon further reflection, she realized for herself the wisdom of finishing high school.)

As I became more sensitive to the inner world of feelings by tuning into my body's messages, I more easily detected the next right steps in all areas of my life. I received an M.A. in Psychology in 1992, and opened a private practice as a body-centered psychotherapist and marriage counselor. These initiatives supported my desire to be of service to others, and to make a difference in the world. All I learned from PRH, and the vision it has for our potential human growth, served as a foundational model for my subsequent studies.

Two Mindfulness-oriented therapies have become central to my professional and personal practice: Focusing and

Voice Dialogue. These therapies invite "the radical acceptance of everything." When any part of us that we have rejected is allowed to be heard and felt, it changes. With compassionate presence to ourselves, what feels like a "bad part" is freed to reveal its positive dimension. Our entire personality actually reflects aspects of our Being, even the parts of us we most want to get rid of! Learning that change happens organically through compassionate presence rather than through trying to "fix" or "improve" myself has expanded my faith in the treasures that lie within my Being.

I am so grateful for the day my Aunt Cate suggested to me, her distraught niece, that I investigate PRH. I can't imagine where my life would be if I hadn't signed up for *Who am I?* so many years ago. I do know this: whenever I have paused to sit with anything in me that needed caring attention and love, it has always blessed me with more life. To help my life blossom, all I needed were the right tools. ■

In This Edition...

You will see how PRH Education often enhances other practices for living from the being. On page 1, **Donna Varnau** shares how — step by step — her personal and professional paths unfolded with help from PRH methodologies. In a similar vein, on page 2, **Ja Kim** observes the synergy between PRH methods and a meditation practice. **Heidi McCormick** follows with an inspiring story of gratitude, and how recent research on happiness led her back to PRH self-analysis. Finally, **Paula Evitts** offers a trio of books that remind her that change is up to each of us.

Why Not Both?

by Ja Kim, Vancouver BC (as told to Mary Kolb, PRH Educator)

“Meditation is like going to the gym to exercise my deep conscience,” observed Ja Kim recently. “It has helped me make decisions with more awareness.” After a decade of benefiting from PRH workshops and methods, Ja found herself wondering: “What is possible in the moment, when there is not time for written self-analysis?” Her curiosity, and a sense of being drawn into solitude, led her to participate in a seven-day, silent Vipassana retreat.

The meditation practice she began there—rather than displacing the PRH methods that have been so life-giving for her – instead have had a surprisingly “synergistic fit”. For one thing, the dharma talks described an inner journey that sounded strikingly similar to growth fostered by PRH Education. Ja found herself exclaiming “Yes, I know!” as she listened. Though the words and descriptions were different, she felt relief in the knowledge that so many others were in the same process and approaching growth from a different direction.

The process of meditation was strangely familiar. The inner quieting in order to perceive sensations inspired Ja to observe “Writing [a PRH self-analysis] is a type of meditation, too.” After some practice observing herself in the moment, constantly staying in touch with her body and aware of her mind, Ja was able to remain close to her being. Her mind, though still busy, developed a capacity to relax because she was able to receive it with tenderness.

Ja’s PRH training was especially helpful during the inevitable moments in meditation when painful sensations surfaced. From her experience of writing scores of PRH self-analyses, Ja could encounter pain

without panicking. She knew that if she could keep recognizing what was happening, the pain would dissipate and transform into something new.

Developing a meditation practice, for Ja, “validates PRH Education. If something is strong and true, questions and experimenting are not going to weaken it.” Ja has woven together two distinct practices for the most important goal of all: being fully herself, present in each moment of her life. ■



“If we were not so single-minded about keeping our lives moving, and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this sadness of never understanding ourselves...”

from “Keeping Still” by Pablo Neruda

An Experience of Meditation

by Ja Kim, Vancouver BC

Breath by breath, I walk inside myself. The quiet circles me and I move deeper inside my own mysteries. I call this place ‘my home of deepening, quiet solitude.’ From this place, I gently see the workings of my mind: list-making, story-making, and me-making. I experience the weathers of my emotions, arising and dissipating — past hurts and sweet memories that easily trip and trap me in a looping film.

When my mind wanders, I follow my breaths, and I find my way back to the deepening quiet. Each breath is a beginning. I am home, living the moment, fully in my body. From the depths of my heart, I experience waves of wonderment over our painfully beautiful world. I experience me, my body, and other living beings, as we hurl through space around our sun. The preciousness upon preciousness. This is exactly where I want to be.

I want to taste the ‘more’ of my life in each moment. I want the ‘more’ beyond our material world. Even my own limitations and mistakes add to the beauty of my humanity and of your humanity. Soft, warm, self-compassion embraces me. Compassion and empathy are the two cupped hands, opening in my chest. I love the vastness and freedom here.

My heart slows down. There is a diffusion of warmth, spreading outward from my heart center. Each breath, stretches into the sweetness of being alive. I do not grow larger, but softer and softer. I feel humbled by the beauty of this world, and all beings living within it. I feel joy as I take my place within the velvety folds of this world.

I long for the clarity of silence. It is no longer a space into which I must fill something. My center of quiet enters into my daily life, as I work, talk to my family, and make ordinary choices.

Stumbling Upon Gratitude

by Heidi McCormick, Helena MT

One morning at work I fell in love with gratitude. It was an ordinary morning, until I visited a rural nursing home to conduct a routine interview with Naomi, the 80-year-old mother of one of the nursing home's residents.

Naomi spent every single day there with her 42-year-old son Jason, who had sustained a severe brain injury in an accident two years before. A few months prior to her son's accident, Naomi had spent months nursing her mother through illness and death. "I was planning to retire, travel, and enjoy vacations after my mother died," she said.

Instead, Naomi moved from Maine to Montana and accompanied Jason through long hospital stays. She facilitated his transition



Heidi McCormick

to a nursing home, where he was bathed, toileted, dressed, and fed liquid meals through a tube. "During the first year he was injured, he used to say a word or two," she said, "but now he no longer speaks. Fishing was the love of his life, and we tried to take him fishing last year, even tugging on the pole to simulate a bite, but he didn't register any of it. That part of his brain is gone." She reached out to Jason and caressed his arm. "I know he'll probably never recover,"

she whispered.

Naomi's face shone as she spoke, her eyes twinkling, her voice peaceful, her gaze kind and carefree. Her loving, joyful spirit was so palpable; I wondered what enabled her to experience what appeared to be happiness. I also wondered what motivated her to spend every day with Jason.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Naomi continued, as if reading my thoughts. "I know I don't have to spend every day with my son. But when the weather is nice, I take him outside and we soak in the sunshine together. Sometimes I give him

messages. Sometimes I sit next to him, holding his hand and reading books," she said, stroking her son's hair. "I've always loved reading, and now I get to have time for it."

That night, as I drifted off to sleep, I wondered how Naomi could be so positive in circumstances so tragic. Naomi gave me her answer the next day. "I was thinking about our conversation," she said, placing a greeting card into my hand. "I want you to read this beautiful card that I received. The words in this card say why I am here." I silently started reading the hand-written card from her other son.

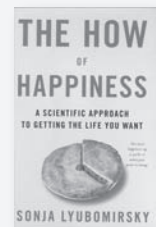
"I've been thinking about how you take care of Jason," he wrote, and described some of Naomi's positive qualities: amazing love, faith, devotion, bravery, encouragement, gratitude, generosity. He explained how her steadfast leadership had infused the family, down to the youngest grandchild, with a sense of purpose and meaning. "The words in this card say why I am here," she said again, her grave expression now the face of a wise elder. "I am a mother."

I looked into Naomi's eyes and wondered how she could express such gratitude and strength of purpose while enduring such personal trauma and grief. She never mentioned deep sorrow, nights spent in tears, or a pit of loss in her belly. Yet I was sure she had long-held dreams that were instantly destroyed. All I knew was that in the midst of tragedy, Naomi exuded an irresistible spirit of gratitude.

Challenged and inspired by Naomi's presence, I returned home, passionate about practicing gratitude, excited to see how I could grow if I got more serious about it. For gratitude-enhancing techniques, I turned to two recently published books: *Thanks: How the Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* by Robert Emmons and *The How of Happiness* by Sonja Lyubomirsky (see inset, this page). After trying a few techniques, I settled on my trusted friend, on-the-spot PRH self-analysis.

When I am feeling low, or whenever I think of it, I ask myself, 'For what am I grateful *in this moment*?' Then I relax, tune into my desire for gratitude, allow it to well up in me, listen to the answer, and savor gratitude, even for a minute. I am surprised by how effectively this practice transforms my mood, broadens my perspective, and helps me feel lighter and happier. I am also surprised by how often the object of my gratitude is an ordinary, routine event that transforms into a rich and meaningful one, simply because I stopped to recall and savor its gift. ■

In her book, *The How of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky describes scientifically proven activities for increasing happiness, including practicing gratitude, coping with hardship and trauma, cultivating social relationships, expressing random acts of kindness, learning to forgive, savoring life's joys, pursuing goals, practicing religion and spirituality, and taking care of your body. From decades of research she has concluded that while approximately 50% of our happiness level is inherited, only 10% is due to circumstances, leaving 40% within our power to change. This means that, regardless of genes or circumstances, our sense of well-being can be increased through regularly practicing specific happiness-boosting activities.



Steps to Your Best Self

By Paula Evitts, PRH Educator, Great Falls MT

I have observed a convergence in the area of growth and conscious living these days. Nearly every book I pick up, or little workshop that I attend these past few weeks, seems to have a unified theme: change is up to each of us! The artist Georgia O’Keeffe once said, “I decided that if I could paint a flower in a huge scale you could not ignore its beauty.” Three of the books I read recently paint the intuitions and disclosures of the being on a similarly large scale.

You Can Heal Your Life

by Louise Hay. Hay House. 1999

Louise Hay, now in her 80s and full of vigor (‘this is the best decade of my life’), advocates the use of positive self-affirmations. These positive self-statements have been scientifically proven to change the functioning of the brain. She suggests that we get to know the very best in ourselves and then live gratefully. “Living from the being” for me is daily delving into the best of myself and using phrases to gently change habits of negative thinking and behavior.

The Divine Matrix:

Bridging Time, Space, Miracles and Belief

by Gregg Braden. Hay House. 2007

Gregg Braden invites us to believe in the deep connective tissue, which he calls **The Divine Matrix**, that links us to each other. We are all part of the web of life, and we contribute to it on a daily basis whether we know it or not. Braden is a scientist with a vibrant interest in the “unseen”, including prayer and contemplation; he has recorded how such practices can change a person’s life. This book reminds me that connection to others, to the earth and to its creatures, is felt deep within myself.

Love As A Way of Life:

Seven Keys to Transforming Every Aspect of Your Life
by Gary Chapman. Doubleday. 2008

Gary Chapman, in **Love as a Way of Life**, offers exercises to connect one to the deepest gift, LOVE. The format of this book invites inner reflection. Chapman offers short applications that help one to live love in ordinary settings: within the family, at work, and wherever we find ourselves. “When humility is part of making love a way of life, our desire is to be all we were created to be – nothing more and nothing less.” The chapter titles are enticing: Kindness, Patience, Forgiveness, Courtesy, Humility, Generosity, Honesty, Making Love a Way of Life, Making Love a Way of Life in Parenting, Making Love a Way of Life in the Workplace, The Motivation to Love. As Emily Dickenson said, “All I know of love is love is all there is.”

The unifying theme in these books is the invitation to choose consciously the life of the being. This means to act from our unique gifts, our identity, sense of purpose, deep relational life, and an openness to the Transcendent. The parallel with PRH Education is obvious: we are invited to be fully ourselves and only ourselves as we consciously engage each opportunity life presents. It is in living fully and in conscious relationship that each person grows, society grows, and our planet becomes peaceful.

What stays with me after reading these inspiring books, is a sense of personal responsibility to make choices that move me forward in loving myself, my family and the larger world. Albert Schweitzer captured my conviction best, “One thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.” ■



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