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# THRIVING

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## Life Lessons from the Garden

Consider the dandelion. Reviled by many as an insistent, bothersome weed, it nevertheless continues to proudly display its pert, bright yellow self in lawns and gardens everywhere, thriving in the face of adversity.

*Thriving in the face of adversity.*

Where, in our own lives, do we face adversity? How do we carry ourselves through it: head down, beating ourselves up, or feeling defensive and resentful? Or head up and face open, like the dandelion, sure of our intrinsic worthiness, knowing our gifts to the world, even if the world doesn't necessarily recognize them?

For those who know how to look and wait, the garden teems with other such life lessons. As Spring awakens this year, turn your awareness to the wise teachings of your garden. If you don't have a conventional garden, a few potted plants on your porch or in your home still offer valuable lessons. Here are a few:

**It's OK to be imperfect.** Trying to grow the perfect rose, or the perfect cabbage, is an exhausting, never-ending quest for flawlessness. "Imperfect" roses are still beautiful and "imperfect" cabbages still burst with life, just like we humans. With our myriad imperfections, we still contribute our own beauty and zest to the world.

**Pruning improves growth.** Removing old habits that don't serve us opens new possibilities for growth in areas that *do* serve us.

**Pay more attention to your health than your appearance.** As author William Longgood wrote, "Over-fertilized plants may be beautiful but are otherwise useless, like people whose energies are devoted so completely to their appearance that there is no other development."

**Regular maintenance is important.** Isn't it so much harder to clear an overgrown jungle than to regularly

pull encroaching weeds? Think of the clutter that can accumulate in our houses, the extra pounds that are harder to lose than to keep off in the first place, the overwhelm or illness that can result from too little self-care.

**Have faith.** Plant a seed, water it, and trust that it will grow. Similarly, believe that the shifts you make in your life, the dreams you hold, will fully blossom if you nourish and protect them.

**Don't be afraid to try new approaches.** The garden is an incredible laboratory for experimentation. What new approaches do those old problems in your life need? Trial and error is one of life's best teachers. Not trying is the domain of hopelessness.

**Take care with predators.** It doesn't take long for predators to damage the result of your careful cultivation, in the garden and in life. What toxic relationships, substances and emotions are feeding on your energy and taking away from what you have to give to others? Eliminate them.

**Transform your trash.** The compost heap turns rotting plant waste into a treasure pile of rich, organic fertilizer. What negative patterns in your life can you work to transform? When we do this hard work of breaking these patterns down, the results are often rich and beneficial to our lives.

**Everyone is unique and needed.** Everything in nature has a function that is interdependent. As famous naturalist John Muir said, "When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world." Rock, plant, bird, bee—even bacteria in the soil—all occupy a vital place in life. What is your purpose, your gift to the world? Who do you depend on; who depends on you?

**Something important happens every day.** Take the time to notice the little everyday miracles in your gardens and in your life. \*



## Ways to Stay with Today

*"Most of the time, we are lost in the past or carried away by the future," says Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk and poet. Staying in today will bring a more peaceful, joy-filled life. Try these ten ways.*

- 1. Be present in the present.** Pay attention to the details: Notice the food you eat, the sun on your back, the quality of the light; literally stop to smell the roses.
- 2. Make a list of what you want to accomplish today.** List only the portion of a major project that can be completed today. Include pleasures as well as tasks.
- 3. Concentrate on the task at hand,** not the outcome. Give it your best, knowing there is no perfect outcome.
- 4. Write "morning pages,"** author Julia Cameron's method to empty your mind of worry and chatter. Three non-stop pages every morning, first thing.
- 5. Let thoughts and feelings come and go** without judging them. Neither cling to nor reject them.
- 6. Don't hang onto mistakes.** Fix what needs fixing, then move on.
- 7. Make notes to yourself.** When you think of something you don't want to forget, jot it down. Don't try to juggle everything in your mind.
- 8. Be where you are.** When you find yourself drifting off elsewhere, a gentle reminder to "be present" can help.
- 9. Take a moment to transition yourself** from place to place and task to task.
- 10. Let go of the past.** Make amends, forgive, grieve. Ask for help if you're unable to let go. \*

## JOIN A GROUP!



Group experiences can be a great way to work through emotional, family, workplace, or interpersonal concerns and life struggles.

Debra and Cindy offer **Writing for Self-Discovery** groups and workshops. Writing is a powerful tool for helping you know and understand yourself better, grapple with a life change or dilemma, and find deeper meaning in your life. Our group experiences provide encouragement, support, techniques, ideas, and energy in an emotionally safe place.

In addition, Cindy offers groups for people who are grieving. **Growing Through Grief** is a group for adults in their early or middle adulthood (generally 20s through 50s) who have experienced the death of a loved one. Other situation-specific groups are formed when there is sufficient interest.

Debra offers **New Mothers' Groups**. If you're a new mother, you're probably concerned about changes in your priorities, relationships or your work-life balance. Maybe you're feeling isolated, lonely, or struggling to get in a shower every day. Enjoy meeting other new mothers; learn that you are not alone! Babies are welcome.

Group work can complement your work in individual therapy or provide a different healing experience. Please don't hesitate to call or email either Cindy or Debra if you'd like additional information.

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**Groups forming now!**

## Do You Have the People-Pleasing Syndrome?

Pleasing other people—who could find fault with that? Isn't it a good thing to consider the needs of others, to be gracious, to be nice? By all means! But for many, the desire to please becomes an addictive need to please others, even at the expense of their own health and happiness. It takes a toll on health, relationships and quality of life, and it drowns out the inner voice that may be trying to protect us from overdoing it. "As a people-pleaser, you feel controlled by your need to please others and addicted to their approval," writes Harriet B. Braiker, Ph.D., in *The Disease to Please*. "At the same time, you feel out of control over the pressures and demands on your life that these needs have created." Take this quiz to see whether you can benefit from learning to say no to others more often—and yes to yourself.



### True False

- 1. I put others' needs before my own, even when the cost to me and my own happiness is great.
- 2. If someone needs my help, I can't say no. In fact, I often find it difficult to say no. And when I do, I feel guilty.
- 3. To avoid reactions I'm afraid of, I often try to be who others want me to be, to agree with them, to fit in.
- 4. I keep my own needs and problems to myself; I don't want to burden others with them.
- 5. It's my job to make sure everyone else is happy.
- 6. I always have a smile on my face and an upbeat attitude, even if I feel sad or angry or hurt.
- 7. I go out of my way to avoid conflict and confrontation; it's better just to keep the peace.
- 8. I am often on the go, rushing to get things done. When I take a moment for myself, I feel selfish, indulgent and guilty.
- 9. I should always be nice and never hurt others' feelings.
- 10. I'll do whatever it takes to get someone to stop being mad at me.
- 11. I hold back from saying what I really think or from asking for what I want if I think someone will be upset with me for it.
- 12. I want everyone to like me...all the time.
- 13. I feel like a failure if I've displeased someone.
- 14. If I don't make others happy, I worry that I'll be alone and unloved forever.
- 15. I spend a lot of time doing things for others, but almost never ask anyone to do things for me.
- 16. If I ask people for help and they agree, I'm sure they must be giving out of obligation; if they really wanted to help, they would have offered without my asking.
- 17. It's difficult for me to express my feelings when they are different from those of someone I'm close to.

The motivations for being a people pleaser are varied and usually quite unconscious. Transforming these patterns requires that we understand our pleasing behaviors and motivations, and heal the childhood wounds that usually underlie people-pleasing. Please don't hesitate to call if you would like to explore this or any other issue. \*

# Finding the Gifts of the Shadow

Imagine a resumé for your “shadow”—that unconscious part of us that holds all the feelings and beliefs we deny, discount, disown, bury or pretend do not exist:

Vengeful, easily victimized, lazy, bad, untrustworthy. Excel at hopelessness and rage; expert on greed. Not creative. Never finish what I start. Stupid, a loner, damaged goods. Nurture murderous thoughts. Definitely unlovable.

No one likes to admit to a dark side. We spend huge amounts of energy denying and repressing this shadow self. But the more we do, the more havoc it wreaks in our lives.

What many of us don't realize is that the shadow can be a loyal friend, bearing the gifts of depth, integrity, vitality and wholeness—if we choose to meet it and love it.

“Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once, beautiful and brave,” wrote poet Rainer Maria Rilke. “Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being something that needs our love.”

## How the Shadow Develops

Many forces play a role in forming our shadow selves: parents, siblings, teachers, religious leaders, friends, the culture all have their part. One example:

Little Elsie's mother suddenly entered the hospital two months before the birth of twins. When she returned with the newborns, the overwhelmed woman encouraged 2-year-old Elsie to “be independent” and a good big sister. Anger that erupted was severely reprimanded.

Afraid that her mother would leave again, Elsie learned not to rock the boat. She took care of herself, became a pleaser, kept her needs and feelings to herself.

## The Shadow's Gift Revealed

Today, Elsie, a single mother, is uncomfortable with much intimacy in her personal relationships. She smiles a lot and has trouble saying “No” to requests for help, works late into the night, and rarely takes a day for herself. She doesn't “do” anger publicly, but at home, she sometimes explodes at her children.

Working to integrate these lost and neglected parts of her is challenging, Elsie says. But doing so is helping her to commit to a deeply nurturing relationship, “indulge” in more self-care and bring more humor to her parenting.

“I'm realizing how much energy it has cost me to keep this stuff underground,” she says. “I'm trying to say ‘Yes’ more often to myself. And I cheer inside when my children tell me how mad they are!”

These, then, are the gifts of shadow work:

- More genuine self-acceptance
- Less guilt and shame associated with our negative feelings and actions

- Fewer emotional eruptions during our daily lives a clearer and more accurate picture of others (uncolored by shadow projections)
- The opportunity to heal relationships through more honest self-examination.

## What's in Your Shadow?

Awareness of the elusive shadow is always the first step towards the treasure box that lies within your shadow. Here are some effective detective tools:

### Examine your exaggerated negative feelings

**about others.** Look at the characteristics of the people in your life whose behavior pushes your buttons, at people you dislike or hate, at what irritates or angers you the most. When we are blind to our own shadow traits, we often “project” these traits onto others.

### Notice what you really admire in others.

Perhaps, growing up, it was not acceptable to be powerful, creative, intelligent or empathetic. We can also project this “greatness” onto others, not realizing that it is actually our own.

### Examine your impulsive and inadvertent acts.

A slip of the tongue can reveal shadow traits.

So can “forgetting” things or getting sleepy when it's time to talk about uncomfortable subjects.

**Study your dreams.** The shadow often appears in our dreams as a figure of the same sex whom we react to with fear, dislike or disgust. Observing this figure's actions, attitudes and words can help identify shadow traits.

**Examine situations in which you feel humiliated.** Keep an “over-reaction diary” to record when you are possessed by strong feelings of shame or anger, or when your behavior is off the mark in some way.

**Observe your distractions.** Do you work too many hours? Overeat? Numb your feelings with drugs or alcohol? What feelings are you avoiding?

**Track down the inner critic and victim.** Write the internal dialogue between the powerful, critical, demanding part of you and the weak part that apologizes and makes excuses. Both are voices of the shadow.

Ultimately, as author James Hillman says, the cure of the shadow is rooted in love.

“How far can our love extend to the broken and ruined parts of ourselves, the disgusting and perverse?” he writes. “How much charity and compassion have we for our own weakness and sickness? How far can we build an inner society on the principle of love, allowing a place for everyone?” \*



# Tending the Fences: Setting Healthy Boundaries

*Good fences make good neighbors.*

So goes the old proverb from the well-loved Robert Frost poem.

Likewise, good personal boundaries make for good relationships. Boundaries are those invisible lines of protection you draw around yourself. They let people know your limits on what they can say or do around you. Healthy boundaries give you freedom in relating to others. Make them too solid and you build walls, too weak and you allow other's actions to harm you.

It's not always clear where our boundaries are or need to be. Recognizing and studying the signs of ignored or ineffective boundaries is a good place to start, as these "symptoms" give clues to the needed boundary. See if any of the following ring true for you.

**Aloofness and distance.** When you are fearful of opening your space to others, or when you build walls to insure that others don't invade your emotional or physical space, this may be a defense against cruel behavior, abuse or neglect that you allowed to happen. A person with healthy boundaries draws a line over which they will not allow anyone to cross because of the negative impact of its being crossed. They recognize their right to say, "No!"

**Chip on the shoulder.** This kind of attitude declares, "I dare you to come too close!" and is often the result of anger over a past disregard of your physical or emotional space by others. Healthy boundaries mean you are able to speak up when your space has been violated, leaving you free to trust that you can assertively protect yourself to ensure you are not hurt.

**Over-enmeshment.** In this game, the rule is that everyone must do everything together, and must think, feel and act in the same way, without deviation from group norms. Healthy boundaries acknowledge that you have the right to explore your own interests, hobbies and outlets.

**Invisibility.** The goal here is not to be seen or heard so that your boundaries are not violated. Healthy boundaries are in effect when you stand up for yourself. Others can learn to respect your rights, needs and personal space.

**Disassociation.** If you "blank out" during stressful emotional events, it results in you being out of touch with your feelings and unable to assert your limits. Healthy boundaries allow you to assertively protect yourself from further hurt and to choose to end relationships with those who will not respect them.

With healthy boundaries, you can begin to feel your feelings again.

**Smothering and lack of privacy.** When another is overly concerned about your needs and interests, or when nothing you think, feel or do is your own business, it can be intrusive into your emotional and physical space, leaving you feeling overwhelmed or like you are being strangled. Healthy boundaries ask that others respect your uniqueness, your choices, your autonomy.

## Applying Boundaries

Once we see where our limits need to be put in place, we can begin to install fence posts to keep unwanted critters out. Here are some strategies for applying limits when your boundaries are intruded upon:

- Calm yourself and take deep breaths.
- Remember your right to set limits.
- In a firm and composed manner, tell the other person how you feel.
- Communicate clearly what your limits are, especially when you are extending a new boundary.
- Ask the other person to respect your boundaries.
- Make decisions about the relationship according to how the other person responds to your request. \*



A note from *Cindy Thelen*

*All of life involves change, and all change involves elements of loss. The death of a loved one, a divorce, serious illness, job/career changes, midlife and aging issues – losses of any kind can leave us feeling ungrounded and uncertain.*

Unfortunately, many of us are told to bury our feelings, to "be strong," to get over it and get on with our lives. The problem is that feelings don't disappear. Sometimes the complex and intense feelings that loss and change naturally evoke are just too frightening or painful to face on our own. I can help you create some space around the intensity of your experience.

**Cindy Thelen, LCPC, CT**, is a psychotherapist specializing in grief, loss and life transition therapy in Oak Brook. While she has a special expertise in helping people through loss and change of all kinds, her work is not limited to commonly defined "grief" situations, and naturally extends to working with people who are challenged by other concerns such as depression, anxiety, troubled relationships, and family of origin issues. Find out more about Cindy at [cindythelen.com](http://cindythelen.com) or call her at (630) 530-0405.



A note from *Debra Gilbert Rosenberg*

*Even the healthiest, most well-adjusted among us may find themselves out of sorts, confused, or seriously depressed on occasion. Even wonderful events (getting married, or having a baby) can cause emotional stress. And sometimes, for no obvious reason at all, you may feel blue, lack energy, find yourself enjoying life less, and realize that you are in need of emotional support.*

*If you or anyone you care about seems out of sorts, have changed their eating or sleeping habits significantly, lacks energy, or are just not managing life well, consider psychotherapy. I have been fortunate to have helped countless people, adults, children, teens and couples, to lead more comfortable, productive, and happy lives. Help is available.*

**Debra Gilbert Rosenberg, LCSW**, has a private psychotherapy practice in Oak Brook, and runs discussion/support groups, including those for first time mothers, as well as groups using writing for self-discovery. She is the author of two books about motherhood, and speaks at schools and businesses on a wide variety of family-life issues. Check out Debra's website at: [debrarosenberg.com](http://debrarosenberg.com) or call her at (708) 704-1208.