



# GERALYN GENDREAU:

## Vital Catastrophes



**A** long-haired, elegant-looking man, whose voice came from somewhere behind his navel rather than his throat, stood at the front of the room wearing nothing but a royal blue Speedo. “They must be trying to mimic the weather pattern in Calcutta,” I thought. Ten minutes into the ninety-minute yoga class I began to fear asphyxiation and moved to open the window just a crack. Half the people in the class turned to look at me and scowl.

“Standing head-to-knee pose,” the teacher commanded. He stood on one leg, extended the other in front of him parallel to the floor, flexed and gripped his foot, and pulled his upper body down, draping it over the extended leg. Watching this, I began to wonder what in the world I had got myself into. And this was but the fifth in a twenty-three posture series.

*Suptavajrasana*, Sanskrit for standing head-to-knee, required all the strength and balance I could muster just to get into. When I heard the instruction, “Now hold for one minute,” a crotchety voice in my head said, “Right.” As the class wore on, the crotchety voice grew louder and louder saying, “Just walk out of here and never come back. They don’t know you, nobody cares.” When the class finally ended, I left the building wondering where I might find a yoga studio with a truly beginning-level class.

But as I walked up Columbus toward North Beach for a post-yoga cup of coffee, something unusual happened. Houses I’d walked by dozens of times captured my attention, enchanting me with their intricate Victorian architecture. Colors on the houses seemed unusually bright, as

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though the pigments in the paint were leaping off the building. As I walked across the grass in Washington Park, greeting people with a soft, easy smile, a lovely euphoric feeling pulsed through my body. The instant I stepped into the Bohemian Cafe and smelled the coffee, my desire for a double-shot latte vanished. I ordered it anyway, purely out of habit, but this time specified, “Decaf, please.”

I felt deeply relaxed the rest of the day and had more mental clarity than usual. By evening, a slight soreness had crept into my back and legs. I fell asleep easily, nonetheless. When I awakened at six o'clock the next morning—surprised at having slept through the night without my usual 2 AM snack—I found myself pulling on a pair of yoga pants. Thus began the draw of that ancient art and science, and my first step on the road to embodied morning prayer. Six—often seven—times a week for the next twelve months, I zigzagged down the famous Lombard Street for morning yoga class.

Once a year had passed, I stopped attending class as my body had developed a rudimentary vocabulary and wanted to speak for itself. Today, my yoga practice knows no time or posture limits, and flows together in an ecstatic yoga dance, but it is built on the foundation of attending hot yoga class every morning for a solid year. Spontaneously arising, on or off the mat, yoga is now a vital thread weaving through every day, making life itself a breathing prayer.

Making major lifestyle changes is not always easy. But inside each of us, there lives a pure genius, ready and willing to align and direct our vital life-force—if only we consent. We can show our consent—and fuel our intent to make changes in our lifestyle—by engaging in a daily morning

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 ritual. The yogic term for day-by-day integrative, self-transformational practice is *sadhana*. Most spiritual traditions suggest some type of intentional morning focus. It can begin with the simplest of disciplines: waking up in the morning and sitting still for twenty minutes of quiet time. At the start, participation in a group activity can be helpful. The support of a community—whether a health club, prayer circle, therapy group, or twelve-step program—can make all the difference. Old habits die hard, and sometimes our entire mindset needs re-vamping. Going it alone can be difficult, if not impossible. Regular class attendance was vital my first year practicing yoga. I had fallen out of the exercise habit, and my body was in the de-conditioned aftermath of a serious injury.

A body-surfing accident had left me with a crushed and fractured cervical spine. I was lucky to be walking. Prior to the accident, I'd been training for my black belt in Sun Moo Do, and eclectic Korean martial art that

blends Taekwondo, Hapikido, Tai Chi, Shiatsu, and meditation. On top of that, my goal to compete in a triathlon before turning thirty had me logging ten hours of cycling, running and swimming each week. Imagine the shock to my exercise-addicted body upon suddenly finding itself bolted into a “halo,” a traction device that not only immobilized my neck, but made it impossible to walk briskly or even raise my arms above chest level. Caged for five months, my muscles atrophied and my body grew fleshy. I lost all stamina and strength, but—worst of all—all interest in exercise.

Over the next several years, I exercised my mind instead of my body while training to be a psychotherapist. By the time I completed my masters degree and the three thousand intern hours required for licensing, I'd become alienated from my body and its natural rhythms. I weighed 175 lbs., quite a load on a 5'2" body. To make matters worse, I was diagnosed with an “incurable” thyroid condition. For some unknown reason, my body was making antibodies that attacked my thyroid gland. My doctor could give me no explanation as to why. All he could offer was a fancy name—Hashimoto's—and a prescription. The name of the disease was terror enough, conjuring up images of a samurai soldier holding his long, curved sword to my throat, frightening my poor little endocrine gland half to death. Thus was my state when I started yoga practice.

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One Saturday morning, my yoga studio held an open house to introduce a special guest physician from Calcutta. The doctor gave a talk on the health benefits of Hatha yoga, then opened the floor to questions. When I asked about my thyroid condition, his face looked grave. “This one very difficult,” he said in an Indian accent, “how often you practice yoga?”

“I've been coming every day for two months,” I said.

His face lit up. “Ah, this very good. You keep doing yoga daily, work deeply in throat in lying poses. After six months, you cut medication by one-quarter. Then every two months, cut by one-quarter again. You will be fine.”

Although the process was not as simple as he outlined, I was eventually able to stop taking synthetic thyroid. Like so many stress-related autoimmune disorders, my condition required a change in lifestyle. Understanding the body as a self-regulating, self-repairing, cooperative organism is crucial. If we view disease as a signal from the body that something has run amok, and we begin to listen deeply, illness can be a remarkable catalyst for change.

In my case, listening to the message of a hypothyroid condition led me to look deeply in to complex fear-based emotional, mental and physi-

cal patterns. I felt unworthy, unloved, and—at times—angry as hell. An undercurrent in my psyche of “I’d rather die” came into the light where it could be unraveled and understood. Finally, and most importantly, my slumbering will—the source of all power in the human personality—had to be awakened and rallied in service of my desire to live a vital, healthy life.

Since lifestyle choices readily become risk factors associated with heart disease, cancer and autoimmune disorders, it is important to consider how we move toward change. The “old habits die hard” admonition must be challenged. I offer clients this suggestion: “It takes twenty-one days to make or break a habit.” Initial efforts pay off as new neural pathways are formed in the brain. New habits begin to feel good in no time at all, allowing a natural momentum to take over. The progression from conscious effort to unconscious competence can take as little as three weeks. The activation and development of will is essential to progress when making lifestyle changes.

Whether the goal is healing a specific illness, improved overall health, weight loss, freedom from emotional and mental stress, or full self-realization, strengthening the will is a critical first step. In *What We May Be*

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(Tarcher, 1983), a practical guide to psychosynthesis techniques, Pierro Ferrucci states: “The will in its true essence can explain a host of human attainments, while its absence can account for legions of psychological disturbances.” I venture to add, a lack of *aware will* lies at the root of many physical problems.

Consider the condition of your will. Do you regularly do what you truly desire, from the core of your being, simply because you decide? Or do external circumstances and old habits keep you slogging around in the quicksand of indecision and half-hearted commitments? The discovery and development of will taps an under-used energy source that can provide the needed fuel to reach your goals. “The will is our greatest ally,” says Indian scholar Ecknath Easwaran.

Here are some simple, day-to-day practices for activating and strengthening the will:

- Do something you have been putting off
- Postpone something you do impulsively
- When presented with a simple decision, be decisive
- Eat slowly, chewing each mouthful 30-50 times
- Change a routine way of doing something

- Make a plan and follow through with it
- Do something you did not think you could
- Drive the speed limit on the freeway
- Do something difficult without complaining
- Say “No” when you mean it, but it would be easier to say “Yes”

One of the best ways to jump-start the day and engage the will is to get up out of bed immediately upon awakening, splash some cold water on your face and sit down for a morning meditation. Activating the will in this way gives access to it as an energy resource by starting the day with a jolt of its power. During this period of meditation, Easwaran recommends slowly reciting a chosen prayer. Repeating the same sacred verse day after day while quietly resting attention in the heart turns even the simplest prayer into a living spiritual spring, quenching many an un-named and un-namable thirst.

As someone who spent years debilitated by an “eating disorder” and periods of depression, I claim some authority about the intricate process of awakening the will. Few would disagree that to live our full potential we need an aware, awake will. Ferrucci says, “the will is, more than any other factor, the key to human freedom and personal power.” But will, by itself, may not be enough. I would amend Ferrucci’s statement this way: We gain personal freedom, unimagined power and effectiveness when the will is entrained to the heart, fired by passion, grounded in the body, and aligned with the highest good for all.

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From a body-mind-heart perspective, when changes in lifestyle are wanted, the will must be engaged in a powerful, even heroic way. Old habits are to lifestyle change as gravity to a rocket. Just as the space shuttle needs an explosive fuel source to break free of earth’s atmosphere, humans need a superior energy source to break free of die-hard habits. Genius is that superior energy source. Genius comes when will is fueled by desire and sparked by imagination in a ritual, day-to-day manner. Without an aware, awake will, desire and imagination can feed a downward spiral. We call this depression. Therefore, all three components become crucial: will, desire and imagination. Ritual activates this powerful inner trinity, contributing to the upswing in well-being and unveiling our genius.

Lest the word “ritual” bring to mind pictures of elaborate ceremonies conducted by candle light, let me clarify. Anything done repeatedly is a



ritual. Brushing your teeth in the morning is a ritual. The sequence by which you accomplish any repeated task is a ritual. What I invite my clients and yoga students to create for themselves are intentional morning rituals, designed to align their thoughts and actions with their innermost desire.

It is far too easy to get out of bed in the morning and fall head-first into the hectic stream of never-ending demands served up with the sunrise on a daily basis. The world at large is governed by the notion, “There’s not enough time.” Taking an interlude for prayer, meditation, and listening to the heart, we step into the timeless dimension. This sets a different tone, inviting tranquility to rule over frenzy. Morning quiet time becomes a vital and effective counter-balance to the weight of modern life. From there, we build, adding a series of sun salutations, or a brisk morning walk. Such rituals quickly become delicious soul food. The benefits reach into all areas of life: home, work, relationship, creativity, and spirituality. Establishing a morning practice is a beautiful way to become intimate with our genius.

Ending the day intentionally is just as important as how we wake up. Taking a few minutes just before bed to review the day is a lovely way to clear the mind for restful sleep. An exercise I often recommend involves

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sitting at the edge of the bed just before climbing in and reviewing the day’s events from the most recent backward in time to the first action taken in the morning. The review should take no more and no less than three minutes. For those like me, oft-times possessed by the monkey mind—jumping up and down and tearing up the bed the minute my head hits the pillow—this practice can pave the way to a night of restful sleep. We give the playful monkey a little bedtime romp through the day just passed and assign it three tasks—to highlight unfinished business, appreciate the grace and beauty of life’s little miracles, and express gratitude for any personal success. At the end of three minutes, make note of anything that requires future attention and lie down for a blessed night of rest.

I like to think of my morning meditation as a catalyst, my evening meditation as forming my overnight chrysalis. Grateful, appreciative feelings trigger hormonal secretions that are far more conducive to regenerative sleep than the biochemistry of anxious, unintentional mulling-it-over-into-the-night. A caterpillar goes into a chrysalis and liquefies before emerging as a butterfly. A bed-time plunge into the biochemical bath of gratitude turns sleep time into a period of subtle, conscious metamorphosis. I call it butterfly medicine: turning the spiritu-

al admonition “Die while you’re alive and discover how to live” into, “Liquefy at night and spread the wings of genius when you awake.”

Beginning and ending the day in an intentional way has a potent effect. Rather than being ruled by inevitable day-to-day challenges, we set a context of our own choosing. We approach each day as a canvas on which to express our life as art. Over time, this intentional focus generates a tremendous sense of awe at the promise each day holds.

But sometimes even the most carefully laid plans fail. Mike knew he had to make major dietary changes after being diagnosed with adult-onset diabetes at age forty-two. A first-time father to an infant girl, health and longevity suddenly became his top priority. An account executive in a high-tech company, he made a major stress-reducing change in his work life by accepting an assignment that allowed him to work from home three days a week. Doing his best to cut down sugar intake, he applied his gourmet cooking skills to keep the dinner menu interesting. He started on a walking program, and over a two-year period lost thirty-five pounds. But every time he indulged in his favorite forbidden food—coffee ice cream—he suffered tremendous guilt. To his way of thinking, eating ice cream was linked to potentially depriving his daughter of a father. Tears came to his eyes as he told me this. Then, at forty-six, he had the surprise of his life when a minor heart attack sent him to the hospital for heart bypass surgery. At four years old, his daughter came close to losing her dad.

When I began consulting with him, the hurdle in front of Mike was one many must face when attempting to make major lifestyle changes: gaining the full support of loved ones. Mike’s wife wanted nothing more than to help him live a heart-healthy life. But whenever she did the grocery shopping, she would buy their favorite ice cream as well as Mike’s other nemesis: cheese. Although incredibly supportive of his dietary changes, she saw no reason to give up her favorite foods. Looking into Mike’s reluctance to ask his wife not to bring home these particular foods, we found that he had unrealistic expectations of himself. His belief system said he “should” be able to resist the urge to eat the high fat foods his wife kept in the refrigerator. But experience showed that he could not. Recognition and acceptance of this fact was a “reality check” without which Mike could not see what he needed to do: ask his wife for her full support, and agree on what that meant in practical terms. Mike’s wife subsequently agreed to stop bringing home frozen desserts except when he was away on business, and to buy only low-fat cheese. She has since joined him in his morning meditation practice and now has a reason to look forward to his trips out of town.

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Deciding to redesign your lifestyle—or being compelled to, as the case may be—can present any number of stumbling blocks. Taking the bull of ingrained habits by the horns can backfire. Perhaps a diet is broken with a massive sugar binge. Perhaps a three-day cold usurps that new exercise regime and the couch potato within gains the upper hand. Perhaps our vow to live within our means to reduce the stress of unwanted debt is foiled by that credit card. What to do when the all-too-human tendencies toward self-sabotage, backsliding, or denial take center stage and hijack the momentum we have built toward our goal?

One highly effective approach I have worked with both in my own life and in coaching others involves taking time out for a “reality check” like Mike did. In *The Path of Least Resistance* (Fawcett, 1989), Robert Fritz says, “Those who have become fluent in naming reality have the best chance of moving to their next step and creating what they want to create.”

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Knowing “what’s so”—and *simultaneously* choosing what you really want—sets up creative tension. Imagination puts that tension to work when we assign our inner eye the task of painting a clear vision of what we wish to birth. The discrepancy between what a reality check reveals as true-here-and-now and the vision of what you really want generates polarity—and a unique, alchemical tension. We can harness that tension like a natural resource, or a supernatural resource, as the case may be. Fritz calls this dynamic “structural tension,” a distinct and superior structure to the merry-go-round of conflict so many people get stuck in. I have found his approach quite useful for igniting genius and attaining desired results.

In the upper corner of your heart is an anatomical structure known as the synoatrial node. It is the place where the heart beat originates, though the source of that pulse cannot be verified by science. In heart-meditation, I like to focus there, as though drawing near a doorway to the divine. Allowing attention to settle in this spot affords our genius a unique perspective, especially when absorbed in personal concerns. The juxtaposition of our desire for change with the unchanging, ever-present Source makes our efforts sacred and honors the paradox of what we are: an infinite soul within a finite physical form. Seeded by the Divine, life is a growing concern, and not only are we God’s favorite rosebush, we are “the love of God’s life,” as I wrote in this little poem:

And the words made flesh in your body are these:  
 All is well.  
 You may at times hit patches of confusion  
 wherein you cannot render this truth  
 and distortion takes over your knowing.

Fear not, or if you must fear, do so quietly and get some rest  
for your innermost can never be lost.  
You are love from skin to bone marrow.  
Be released from fear and not knowing.  
Live in the stream of grace that has always, always carried you.  
For you are the love of God's life.  
Embody this truth,  
it will lead you to freedom.  
This is your promise.