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FIVE Lessons for a Life Fully Lived

You can't buy your way out of a dark hole...I tried!

At the end of 2013 I felt like I was in a big ol' hole. It was deep, it was dark, I was alone and it felt like I was walking in molasses. I had no idea why I was in that dark hole. Nothing was really wrong yet nothing was really right.

It was an overall feeling of blah...

I thought I was doing a great job of hiding the fact that I was in the grips of a darkness, however it was written all over my face...literally. My skin was a mess. I felt like I was reliving puberty with a face full of acne that pulsed and mirroring the pain I felt on the inside.

Most people only see what they want to; my bubbly cheerful personality was a mask that hid how I was really feeling.

This was not my first time in the hole. It had happened before, so much work each time and I was so, so tired. I wanted an easy way out, an easy fix or someone to fix it and make it better. In the past I found alcohol, drugs, shopping, work or other addictions that eased the discomfort of the deep dark hole.

Now, as a mom, wife and business owner I was not comfortable with my past strategies for coping.

This time I was opting for a new strategy. I was going to engage the services of a spiritual healer and we were heading to a sunny location for a healing journey. This would surely shine some light and love into that dark hole. I was excited about this strategy, to have someone join me, and, are you ready for it? To fix me!

Yep, I was going to go away; get real, cry, go deep and buy my way out of the dark hole. Then I would come back feeling amazing and surely fixed! Can you see how brilliant this strategy was?

Here is the catch, I was not in a financial position to do all this. This is where the real bat shit ego stuff happens...I created an amazing (I thought so at the time) elaborate plan to raise the money through crowdfunding, to finance my healing, record the whole thing and produce a documentary and share it with the world so others could learn from my story.

When you are not willing to face stuff you can see how the mind, the ego, works to protect itself from really seeing the truth. I was deep in the grips of my ego. Even as I am writing this my ego wants to protect itself from being outed...As painful as this is to write, I am.

After a couple months of planning the fundraiser and chatting with the healer and planning logistics around the journey, the fundraiser went live. Like most crowdfunding campaigns; it had a story and some pictures and I even did a soul baring video to sell this plan...I thought it was quite clever.

After a few weeks the fundraising was not going as planned (go figure) and it was evident that I would not be travelling with anyone to get fixed...Yes me, and my ego were terribly disappointed.

The results of the campaign came in and I had received \$750.00 of the \$12,000.00 I had hoped for.

There I was, still in the dark hole, with not enough funds to “get fixed”, however...On the other hand, I now had some amazing supporters who believed in this journey...They believed in me, and they shared their hard earned money to support my journey.

What is a girl to do?

Still go of course. The desire to get out of that hole never waivered, I just needed some adjustments to the plan. I googled ‘retreat locations nearby’, I found a place called, In the Stillness. It is a quiet retreat destination that is only 30 minutes from my home. Things were falling into place and I felt hopeful.

With cash in hand, childcare arrangements settled and a perplexed husband cheering me on, I booked a five-day retreat at In the Stillness on the shores of the Bay of Fundy in St Martins New Brunswick, Canada.

One of the other interesting parallel stories during this time is that I had just been accepted into a mentoring program and I had just had my first phone meeting with my coach. She had front row seats to my life and I trusted her enough to uncloak and share the real me and what was going on.

My coach was a great listener; she took detailed notes about our conversation and what happened before and after the retreat, then turned them back to me as life lessons. I am going to share some of the lessons that I learned from this time.

To provide some insights into my situation here is a snapshot of what was going on:

I had a business that I had poured my blood sweat and tears into...oh and I owed a shit load of money. My business partner and I were fully invested into a business that we started probably the same month in 2007 when the bottom fell out of the US market, and this business relied on US incomes. Yeah, by the end of 2013 I was pretty much bankrupt however I was not aware enough to see that or perhaps I was in total denial.

The children were heading to graduation one by one and leaving the nest

I felt like I had no purpose and I had a deep desire during my time on this Earth to be worthwhile not just to myself but to others as well.

That hole was a perfect storm of personal shit/molasses.

Here are five of the lessons that I would like to share from that five-day retreat.

LESSON 1: ALIGNING WITH OUR GREATER GOOD - Making time to align with our greater good is necessary to be in tune with what our soul is seeking

By the end of 2013 I felt like I was in an abyss... it was a deep hole and had no idea how to get out.

I wonder how many people feel like they're in a dark hole and can't get out, not because they don't want to but because they don't know how.

This dark hole felt sad, unfocused, unloved, disconnected, powerless, crunchy (yeah that's a thing), edgy and not fun....In addition to the emotional upheaval the turmoil in my life was showing up physically. My rosacea was back with a vengeance and I could not hide what was going on because it was literally-written all over my face. This disturbance in my life force, the call of the soul, a call that I was clearly not listening to, was obviously affecting my emotional, mental and physical well-being.

The only option I felt I had was to go away, alone, to get quiet and listen.

After months of planning I arrived at In the Stillness and it was worth the wait, I was thrilled about the space. It had a kitchenette with everything I would need, a wood stove, a comfortable bed that was lifted up with risers so while laying in bed I could see out the window that faced the water. Oh and no TV, no radio and no people. Alone with no distractions and sketchy internet. So guess what? Not a lot of Googling or Facebooking was going to happen, just time to be quiet and listen.

Before I went on the retreat I was not really afraid of being alone, I was afraid of what I would realize.

I listened, I heard and a lot happened.

Here are a few of the messages that came through loud and clear:

I thought I was an extrovert but come to find out, I am an extroverted introvert. I discovered this part of me by taking the time to be alone and quiet. They say extroverts get energized by being with others and Introverts reenergize by being alone. For my entire life I was sold on the fact that I was an extrovert. Yet here I was, alone in that cabin to do what I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it, and as any introvert knows: this alone time was having an energizing effect on me. Learning that I get energized while being alone been one of the most valuable insights I received.

I have the travel bug and I live for adventures and fun. Financially I am not in a position to be jet setting around the world as much as I would like to. Being at In the Stillness just 30 minutes from my home provided me with a clear message that adventures and travel can happen right in my own back yard. I now enjoy travelling locally, I visit places I have never been to before and I always have friends who are willing to adventure with me.

Being in nature and paying attention to it can bring some amazing insights. Watching the tides come and go and the awesome force of this has shown me that things do happen that you cannot control. I also spent time watching the birds and the animals of the forest. The one animal that had significance for me

was the Red Squirrel. They are constantly chattering, communicating with one another, building nests in the trees and leaving the debris wherever it falls. They have mastered the balance between work and play. Watching them, left me with a question. How can I balance my own energy, time and resources to live fully?

I also realized I needed to let things flow out of my life like the tide flowing out from the bay to the sea. The things that needed releasing; the need to be a victim, being afraid and closed to life, fear of being myself, the need to be in control all of the time, placing ego before love, taking life too seriously, believing I am not creative, needing to be right and the BIG one...searching for the answers outside myself. It was time to let all of these limiting thoughts and beliefs go and flow away with the tide.

What I heard in that cabin changed me and changed how I saw myself and I am grateful for that. Making time to align with a greater good is necessary to be in tune with what the soul is seeking so we can share who we really are with the world. At times it takes action, and sometimes, great courage to do this. Which leads to the next lesson.

LESSON 2: FORMING NEW PATHS - When we conquer our fears, new paths are laid out for us.

Fears, we all have them. Here are a few that come to mind; fear of spiders, clowns, heights, marriage and speaking in public. For me it was a paralyzing fear of being buried in snow. Sounds like an odd one but a fear is a fear, and fears are deeply personal. Living on the Eastern Coast of Canada winters include many months of snow with snowbanks sometimes as high as six feet. This fear was definitely making my winters and my life less enjoyable. It was also holding me back from really living life to the fullest.

I kept this fear to myself and I avoided winter activities by claiming a distaste for being cold. Then something happened that forced me to address my fear head-on...life has a way of doing that! In 2012 I was filming an episode of my TV show Simply Zen. We invited a knowledgeable travel guide to come and chat with us about how to enjoy winter. I thought it would help the viewers, and of course, me. Anyhow, he showed up all enthusiastic, I like that in a person. We had a chat about winter and winter fun and how having the right clothing and gear will make or break your outdoor adventures and then he said. "Here I have snowshoes. Let's give them a whirl over there on that wonderful snow bank". EEEEEKKKKK, that was not part of the plan. As I was freaking out inside we strapped the snowshoes on and we left the safety of the parking lot and went directly to what I felt was imminent death by smothering, in a snowbank!

This whole time the cameras are rolling, I am smiling and asking questions about the sport of snowshoeing. On the inside I am totally freaking out. I think to myself, *I will just walk around a bit and then take the things off...nope.* The young outdoor enthusiast had other plans and was heading to what looked like a mountain range with a ravine that was going to bury me and smother me on the spot.

But we were filming and I was being very brave and not showing my fear. Or so I thought. I was freaking out, he could see it in my eyes, he could see my absolute panic. That also makes him a great guide and coach in my books.

Conquering our fears is hard work. It challenges us in ways that are often paralyzing.

At that point I got honest with him and myself. I told him I was afraid of being buried in snow. He stopped and looked me square in the eyes and in a calm voice, told me about his experience in

wilderness survival and how he has had years of training and how he has helped many others through similar situations. With his confidence in me, and in my ability to tackle this challenge, he walked me straight through that fear and we snowshoed over the ravine and through that snow, and with every step I was leaving that fear behind.

Now we fast forward a few years later.

Here I am at my retreat, alone in a cabin, in the winter, in the woods after a heavy snowfall and I want to head to the spectacularly located outdoor Chapel. The only way to get there was by snowshoe. Without hesitation, I confidently strapped on the snowshoes and made my way to the top of the hill toward the chapel.

It was liberating and exhilarating and I felt so alive!

At the top of that hill in the middle of the winter, a hill that was covered in a deep blanket of snow, I was rewarded with an amazing view in an awe inspiring location. My heart was overflowing with gratitude for a moment in time from the past that released me from a fear so I could be in a place where I was free to enjoy a journey through the woods.

I was so inspired after the trek to the Chapel I wrote this;

Ode to the Chapel

I sat in silence
The cross in front of me
Alone yet not
The sound of the waves
The squirrels busy
The wind in the trees
The sun making long tree shadows
Like people standing guard
Watching, protecting...still, yet moving
A Vortex of Love

Moving past fears to a space of love is liberating and frees us up to all the wonderful blessings of this life. As I lived through this lesson of realizing how fear had held me back in so many ways I am excited to share the next lesson and how that has led to so many more amazing coincidences and experiences.

LESSON 3: TIMING IS EVERYTHING – Take the time to listen to your inner voice

Long before I entered that cabin I heard “The answer will be on the beach”. I was open to hearing the answer and to get to the beach just at the right time to hear the intended message. These synchronicities always amaze me. For several days I thought to myself, time to head to the beach...However, due to the extreme cold and wind chill I waited until this particular day the conditions felt just right so I made my trek.

I met a woman at the beach; we chatted for a bit about how lovely the beach is any time of the year, even on a day when it was -20c with a wind chill. We were both bundled up with warm coats, hats,

mittens and a scarf to protect our faces from frostbite... we were both hardly recognizable. Chatting and connecting through our conversation with only tiny slits of eyes visible through heavy layers of clothing.

We were chatting about the many creative people who live in the area and how they all love the energy in this beautiful seaside place.

You see, intuition put us there together at the same time so I could receive a message.

We have all been gifted with an amazing inner guidance system, however, with years of being told to listen to all of the authorities around us, we have forgotten that we know a few things about our selves.

This is a challenge for many and it was for me too. I grew up in the Catholic Church, with all that guilt for everything from fighting with my brother or sister (yeah that was my first confession in my first confession) to the big stuff, the mortal sin stuff, the stuff you end up in purgatory for.

From brick wall parents who want you to follow their every rule to teachers who made you pay attention and not daydream. Society and life can really tune-us-out of our inner guidance system to the point that we lose all ability to know our own truth.

Life is energy and vibrations, and our thoughts have a vibration. When we are tuned in, these vibes work for us in many ways.

When I heard, "The answer will be on the beach" it was my intuition speaking to me.

My journey back to my intuition and to my self has been an ongoing process that has taken practice and remembering. When I first started remembering I would play little games with it all. For instance, I would get an inkling to call someone and what I would hear at the other end of the line would be amazing. Things like; "I was just thinking of you", "your name came up in conversation just the other day", "Wow...I was just going to call you". These moments confirmed for me that by trusting my intuition to call someone when I was thinking of them, I was following a vibe and in fact they were thinking of me too.

I get these vibes all the time. I know you have them too.

I have always wondered if what I am hearing is intuition or ego speaking. It would be nice if the thoughts showed up with name tags to discern who is driving the bus on the thought, however the name tags are not visible and we need to figure out that too....so many lessons to learn.

After many years of working on my discernment skills and some valid research via google searches, I found some solid answers to help with this.

Our intuition comes from love and ego from fear. If the message has a *don't*, *not* or *no* attached to it you can be sure it is from ego. My message from intuition was, "The answer will be on the beach". Intuition always works in the affirmative. Another example would be when you hear "Take this specific way to work", instead of "Don't go this way". They are gentle nudges to guide you to be in the right place at the right time to perhaps have a conversation with a stranger that has a message for you.

And on that day on the beach, bundled up, was a woman I had never met and she said to me.

*"I know you, you are Elaine Shannon
I recognise you.*

I know who you are, I have heard about you”.

I told her I was there for a retreat.

She said

“I am not surprised; you seem like that kind of person.”

This might not seem like a message, however, when you are on the receiving end of a divinely timed message you can feel it with every fibre of your being.

Her words, the way we connected and the fact that it was all happening on the beach. For me the message was clear. It wasn't earth shattering; it was gentle and it caressed me like the waves lapping at the shore that day.

This is what I heard in my heart, “I am confident that the person I AM is in alignment with my purpose and higher self and right action prevails...goodness and truth shines through”. (This is the exact text taken from my journal)

I followed my intuition and that was real. I met someone who saw me authentically; she recognised me and who I am and how I am living. It is all in alignment and I am right where I am supposed to be. That was message enough for me. By following my inner guidance system, my intuition, the next lesson emerged.

LESSON 4: SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND – Our environment is always changing, even though you have already looked for an answer, look again it might be there now

I went to the cabin looking for answers and I wasn't even sure what the questions were. It was a time to get quiet so I could hear something without the busyness of life distracting me.

The beach, any beach, is a place I visit to enjoy the sights and sounds and to connect with nature. The water lapping against the shore, the birds so busy and beautiful and peace filled, gliding high above the shore, sea glass and driftwood treasures.

The beach near In The Stillness on the Bay of Fundy has the highest tides and some of the strongest currents in the world. When I say highest tides I mean highest, from low tide to high tide the tides in this area can reach a peak of around 16 m (50') — the height of a 5-storey building. This is many times higher than typical tides on the rest of the Atlantic coast! The huge tides expose the sea floor and shape the coastline. It is awe inspiring to see how in six hours an exposed sea floor can leave amazing treasures...The environment changes constantly with the tides.

What was there yesterday may not be there today...and what is there now will change tomorrow.

Every time you visit this beach there's something new to see. Like life, we see the world but do we really see what's there. The people we meet, the places we go and the experiences we have ... within our environment there are signs and messages that are always there to help guide us and lead the way. If we are willing to see.

Bundled up to protect myself from the bone-chilling cold, I made my way to the beach that day with a message that I would find the answers on the beach. I went with an open heart and clear mind about what I would find.

Moments after meeting the woman I was walking away, something caught my eye, I looked down and there was a beautiful Driftwood knot in the perfect shape of a cross. The Cross, an intersection of two lines, a center point...direction. The Cross is a symbol that has a specific meaning or feeling for each person and for me the Cross is a sign of God and divine timing, and this was a clear sign that I had in fact found the answers on the beach and that woman had just delivered them.

This lesson is one I learn over and over again. I have to remind myself to be aware of what happens around me, and as I learn and practice this lesson I know that life happens for me not to me.

As I become more aware of my environment and the ever-changing landscape of life, I am aware of my place in this world and how my presence does makes a difference. This leads to the last lesson I will share from the retreat and this one is BIG.

LESSON 5: INTERNAL DIALOGUE IS KEY TO SUCCESS – Thinking the thoughts that have the power to make things happen

During my first coaching call prior to the retreat I was sharing this thought with my coach “I WANT to make a difference.” I truly felt that I was not making a difference in the world. Being of service is important to me and as I watched amazing people in my community doing over the top amazing stuff for so many I felt totally inadequate. I thought that I was not doing enough or even doing the right things with my life to be of service to others.

When I met with my coach after the retreat my language had changed to, “I AM making a difference”.

So what happened during that time to change how I thought and felt about myself? Nothing much had changed in my external world. I was living the same life with the same circumstances. The bills were still there, the graduation plans in full swing and 49 was even closer on the calendar. Looking back, the circumstances of my life were not improved at all.

I had a belief that I wasn't making a difference, so just to reinforce the belief, I only saw the things I wasn't doing and I was blind to the things that I was doing.

By getting quiet at the cabin and shutting down the busyness of life I was able to see that my actions and my work were making a difference.

The more I noticed, the more I thought “I AM making a difference”.

My inner dialogue of negativity was definitely shifting.

Our internal dialogue is important; we're always and only privy to the movie that is constantly running in the background in our head. Only you know the truth of what is being said, even the people closest to us never experience this internal dialogue.

What manifests in life is the result of this internal dialogue. I know this to be true. I cannot hold two thoughts at the same time. I cannot think I WANT to make a difference and I AM making a difference at the same time.

These five lessons are not the only things that I received at the cabin. I have memories of the people that own the place who made sure my stay was comfortable. I got a delivery of fresh eggs and home baked muffins from the owner's daughter, I remember her kindness. I gifted myself with a relaxing crystal treatment that set the tone for a week of healing and rejuvenation. I enjoyed the company of a friend who came for the last two days of the retreat. Reminding me that you can be with someone in the same space, enjoying your own individual experience, yet in the same space.

Here it is a couple of years later, and I ask myself: how did this experience change me?

They say that hindsight is 20/20.

This cliché is one that I have used when I talk about that time in my life. To be honest I use it quite often, especially when the life lessons are ones that I would have rather not endured. However, life is like that, and lessons are a gift...yes, shit wrapped in pretty paper is still a gift.

Looking back on that time I can see (even without my glasses) from my rear view mirror and it wasn't pretty. It was a time of endings and beginnings, and it was too much for my kind heart and loving disposition to handle. At least in the way I was accustomed to handling challenges. Control gave me security, but I felt I was losing control.

Here is a snapshot of what was going on for me at that time:

I was entering my 49th year...49, the last year of my 40s. This upcoming birthday was taking the legs out from under me. I can tell you, for me at least, turning 50 was hard but it sure was easier than 49.

My oldest daughter was graduating from high school and my son the next year. I was sure that I would always be close with my girl because we have a great relationship. This was probably bothering me less than my son graduating and leaving the nest. With him, we had history, a history that only a mom of a child with any difficulties would understand. My son has Asperger Syndrome, and the fact that he was in grade 11 and he was doing well was nothing short of a miracle. I had worked so hard for so many years to help him grow and thrive and reach well beyond where we were told he would reach. This full time job of advocating for my son was coming to an end, at least to the extent during his first 12 years of schooling. My time mothering these kids in their adolescence was coming to an end, the nest was clearing out. What was I going to do with my life?

Business was in the shitter. A business started in 2007 when the US economy was collapsing. Hindsight would have helped then. It was awful timing and now seven years later I had a product that was not selling and the bill collectors were at the door looking for their money. Yep...shitter! I love business, it had given me so much. A business partner that I enjoyed working with, the process of creating an amazing product, an award during an International Professional Organizing Conference, travel and meeting so many amazing people. My work and this business were a distraction from the things I needed to be distracted from. I wasn't ready to walk away from all of that even though some hard decisions had to be made.

Menopause...yeah that was happening too. Midlife has some wonderful surprises, however, in the middle of molasses it was hard to maneuver or see the blessings.

I said nothing was really wrong. No one was sick, we had a nice house and clothing, more than enough food, and an occasional vacation. But in reality, nothing was really right.

Since that retreat in early 2014 I have been meaning to write about it. To share the experiences and the lessons with the beautiful souls who gifted me with money and support in so many other ways. Months went by and then years. I have been carrying around my journal and coaching notes from that time...back and forth, and back and forth to my writing group. It never seemed to be the right time to share.

Until now.

When the opportunity came up to share a chapter in this book I felt an immediate YES. Intuition told me it was time. Was I ready? NO, however, my motto has always been ready, fire, aim...so I did. (and no the order is not right, that's how I roll)

I would like to share some of the insights and *aha's* from my time after the retreat.

As I look back I can see how the need for simplicity and the complexities of my life were in conflict. In 2013 I shifted from full out vision boards to one word themes for the year. In 2013 my word was *simplify*. I love when this happens because it moves us to make changes and by the time I made it to the retreat in 2014 I was deep in that conflict, or molasses as I called it, and it was time to get things moving.

The word themes have continued each year and they all seem to build upon the previous years, and I learn more about life and my place in it with each new theme word.

LIVING...my word theme for 2014, in all upper caps and bold lettering and I did just that.

presence...my word theme for 2015, with a lower case p that felt soft and gentle as I moved through the year being present with others or in a place.

Creativity...my word theme for 2016. It is the filter through which I pass every problem, situation or otherwise...at least when I remember. I find when I remember that I AM creative the world works with me and for me.

The revelations and insights in the years since the retreat at the beach.

Epiphany: an illuminating discovery, realization, disclosure or insight. A moment of sudden or great revelation that usually changes you in some way.

I realized that I was not practicing what I was preaching. I am the host of a TV show about wellness and simplicity, a speaker, a columnist and mentor. My work, my passion, is sharing knowledge and wisdom on life, however I was not putting this wisdom into practice.

The reset button came out and the practicing began.

We have 168 hours every week. That is 168, one-hour time blocks in our seven-day week to spend on whatever. Sleeping, work, housework, play time, vacation, dancing, hanging with friends, volunteering, shopping. There is so much to do and so little time. Most people are time starved and energy deprived

from spending their valuable time on things that don't fill them up and get them jazzed. It was happening to me and over the past few years I have limited; as much as I can, activities that do not support who I am. I am say yes to spending time with amazing people, engaging in activities that I enjoy and working on projects that are good for people, the planet, for pleasure and for profit(I learned a thing or two from the lessons of the past).

I have been weeding the garden of my life with regards to relationships. People are like flowers, they are all beautiful in their own way, however some are weeds. Weeds have thorns that hurt and they take over and choke out the other plants around them. Weeding is necessary and it is liberating and it has made me a happier person. The other benefit is that it has made room for some pretty spectacular people.

And the BIGGEST revelation of all was that I did not love myself.

I know I can't give or receive love if I do not love myself. And, how can other people love me and I love them back if I don't love all of the aspects of me?

What does self love look/feel/sound like?

It's doing things that fill you up with laughter and happy-ness!

It is being present in the moment and being OK with that moment.

Being with people that make you feel great and lovingly letting go of the people that don't.

Doing work that you are passionate about and incorporates your skills, talents and knowledge.

Being as kind to yourself as you are to others.

It is taking responsibility for our shit.

Accepting our emotions and using them as a tool for self discovery.

It is taking retreat in a cabin near the beach to be alone.

I am grateful to the people who steered me on to a path back in 2014, to that retreat near the beach. The friend and healer who recognised that I was in a dark hole and planted the seed for the journey. The coach who listened with her ears and her heart and shared back to me what I was feeling. The financial supporters who provided the cash flow to make it happen. My family, the people who support me in every way possible.

I went to the retreat in the cabin near the beach looking for something; answers, clarity, peace and quiet.

What I found was me; sparkly, loving, loveable, creative me.