

Climbing Mount Fuji - EFAM | Escape From America Magazine | EFAM

After an intense relationship break-up, I decided that it was time for a sea-change.

Take the Leap and Climb a Mountain

Having just turned 31, I had never experienced living or working abroad. Canada came to mind, as I had previously visited Vancouver during my days as a flight attendant and I'd loved it. London also beckoned and then there was Europe that was only hours away on top of the fact that I had relatives in France whom I could stay with.

For whatever reason ... I ended up in Japan.

For six months, I was an English language instructor in the land of the rising sun. Anyone who has ever lived in another foreign city will appreciate both the trepidation and the excitement that a new culture offers. Japan was an assault to the senses – Tokyo was a melting hot-pot of activity, mixing the traditional and the modern in sometimes chaotic and often mysterious ways. Teaching English was a delight, but at night I was plagued. I could not sleep. The frenetic energy of Tokyo pulled me into fractal waves of unsettling proportions. I often wandered the streets (where I lived in Azabu-Jaban) until the early hours of the morning.

After 4 months had passed, it was time to gain spiritual ground once more. With Japan as my backdrop, I felt it was time to conquer the holy and revered mountain of Mt Fuji. Many had attempted the climb before me and survived. 'How bad could it be?' I wondered. 'It was almost like an initiation amongst foreigners that one just had to conquer. Less than 1% of the Japanese population has climbed it themselves. Indeed, many who visit Japan attempt the climb for one reason or another. Most are driven by the challenge, some, because it's 'there'.

I wasn't sure what possessed me to climb – maybe a combination of everything. There is a Japanese saying: – "A wise man climbs Mount Fuji once in his life; only a fool climbs it twice". I knew I'd probably never get the chance to do again – I had 4 days off teaching. It was now or never.

A voice spoke, 'Vina, sometimes the opportunity is just there for the taking.'

Spiritual Lesson No. 1 – Take a leap of faith and just do it.

Early September is just outside of official climbing season. This means less people, less services and more risks. I had heard various accounts of other climbing experiences and was determined to have my own unique experience. In hindsight, if I had known what I would be going through, I think I might have thought twice about it, but I'm glad I persevered. A fellow teacher and flatmate nearly died of frostbite when she climbed it.

If you never go, you'll never know

That thought alone prevented me from even considering it for months. Yet I knew that families with young children and elderly folk had also conquered Fuji. That same voice inside me whispered quietly: "If you never go, you'll never know".

Teaching schedules meant that it was hard to get the same days off to climb with another fellow teacher. I researched as much as I could, borrowing some gear from an old high school friend living in Tokyo. I equipped myself with 3 large bottles of water, fruit snacks and then ventured off to conquer Mt Fuji. Maybe it was my restless and reckless tigress nature. I was ready to do this.

There are a few different trails going up. Most people start halfway up the mountain at the official entrance at the 5th Station - *Kawaguchiko*. There are ten stations that lead to the top of the summit. As it was two weeks outside of official climbing season, I had arrived late at 8pm via train and there were no shuttle buses to the 5th Station till the morning. My choices? Either sleep at the train station over night or find another way there. I had timed the climb to arrive at the peak around sun rise. Most people take anywhere from six to eight hours to climb from the 5th Station. I prayed for someone else to appear – just one other climber ... at least.

I couldn't see anyone and was just about to retire on a bench when I saw a western guy approach with a backpack. I asked if he was climbing Mt Fuji. He said yes. I was elated! Chris, from the UK, became my climbing companion for the next twenty two hours on that mountain.

We tried to get to the 5th Station but were told a taxi would cost 10,000 yen (\$100). We asked if he would take us to the base of the mountain that was a third of that price instead and we would split the ride. Unbeknownst to us at the time, we ended up hiking perhaps the oldest trail up Fuji – known as the **Purist's trail** and added an extra six hours to the climb – simply because we were outside of climbing season and had started at the foot of the mountain. **The Purist's trail** was usually reserved for dedicated climbers on spiritual pilgrimages back in the old days or for die-hard climbing fanatics.

Little did we know that the foot of the mountain had its own grim story!

Located at the foot of Mt Fuji is *Aokigahara* – a place known as the '**Sea of Trees**'. Due to the density of the trees and an absence of wildlife, the forest is not only known for being eerily quiet, but is infamous throughout Japan as a popular spot for those taking their final journey. Later I would discover that many Japanese people come here to commit suicide. *Aokigahara* is considered the most haunted location in all of Japan, a purgatory for *yurei* – the unsettled ghosts of Japan who have been torn unnaturally soon from their lives and who howl their suffering on the winds.

More than 500 bodies have been found there since the 1960s, but no one knows how many more bodies have gone undiscovered. Signs cautioned us with messages such as **“Please reconsider”** and **“Please consult the police before you decide to die!”**. Our warnings were nailed to the trees throughout the forest.

And so we naively trudged on one of the most dangerous paths a climber in these parts could take. If I had known this prior to my climb, there was no way I would have climbed from the bottom of the mountain. As it turned out, I didn't. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss.

Or is it?

Spiritual Lesson No. 2 – Sometimes you have to travel through the valley of darkness and the shadows before you see the light.

Pitch blackness and pristine mountain conditions – a stark contrast to the foreboding energies surrounding us. Save for my headlamp and Chris' torch, the night was completely still. Not a sound. Complete silence... It was hauntingly beautiful. The air was cool, the earth was dark and the forest, moist and lush; with a serenity one often witnesses in Asian martial art films.

Never ever ever give up

We began to chat about our respective lives and journeys in Japan. Fifteen minutes later, I began to run out of breath, so I decided not to talk too much and conserve as much energy as I could.

Along the way, we passed a few huts in dilapidated states and a few monkey statues. Chris made some coin offerings every time we came across a statue. *Bless his beautiful soul*, I smiled. As it turns out, his kind gestures may have invoked the hand of serendipity. Neither of us saw anyone else on that trail for hours and yet mysteriously, within half an hour of each other, two separate pairs of black climbing gloves miraculously appeared along our path. They looked brand new and never been worn – both pairs fit us both perfectly. I already had a pair that I borrowed from a friend, but these felt like a gift from beyond...

Spiritual Lesson No. 3 – Always be grateful for the little things.

For a solid hour, we were accompanied by a majestic white butterfly. We thought it amazing – perhaps it was attracted to the light from our torches... or perhaps it was sent to protect us along the path and guide us safely out of the **‘Sea of Trees’**. I have since read up on various meanings of white butterfly symbolism – commonly signifying past spirits and souls, but also suggestion that angels watch over us. In hindsight, it made some sense considering where we were in that part of the mountain. For me, it was just a sign that we were being divinely guided and protected along the way.

Spiritual Lesson No. 4 – Always be open to miracles and mysteries of the universe.

Hours later, we found a hut – the doors were open, but it was 1.30am and as there was no one there to greet us, we assumed that they were fast asleep. We were hesitant in taking shelter there so we rested for ten minutes, then made our way again.

After that, time ceased to exist.

We were in another dimension – it felt like the twilight zone. We saw lights up ahead and heard a recorded announcement in the distance. We were probably at the 6th or 7th Station by now and must have somehow passed the 5th Station without realizing it. Either that or we were on a completely different trail.

The trail of lush forestry turned into rocky loose gravel and stone as we ascended. Up until this point, we were the only climbers. In the distance was the flickering of another torch light. A lone elderly man ascending the mountain decked out in his hiking gear and backpack approached. It just so happened that he overtook us in the morning and put us to shame. We reminded ourselves that we had started at the base of the mountain and were **‘Purist’** hikers on a spiritual pilgrimage. Somewhere between the 7th & 8th Station, the sun came up around 5am. Chris took some amazing photos with his camera, but my camera and the new batteries I bought didn't work, so I had to rely on my phone camera. It was just amazing being above the clouds up so high! It was a pure adrenalin rush – despite getting slightly dizzy, going stiff and numb. We arrived at the 8th Station around midday. Fuji was getting steeper and steeper. We passed people inhaling oxygen masks and wondered why we didn't have any. Not only was I getting tired, but Mother Nature decided to then pay me an unexpected visit ... (*What timing!*) Maybe it had something to do with getting closer to the moon that conjured my cycle, but restrooms were few and far between and climbers had to pay to use them.

We took an hour's rest and shared a bowl of soba noodles before moving on. At this point, we looked up to see how much further we had to go – surely two more stations wouldn't take that long. BIG mistake! The distance was misleading. It seemed SO huge, yet so close. Like a mirage, we didn't know if it would take half an hour or half a day to get to the next plateau. The last 2 hours were probably the hardest – considering we'd already done sixteen hours of climbing, with only sporadic five minute breaks in between.

There were moments I thought I just wasn't going to make it and I honestly believed that I would die on that mountain.

But how could I give up? There was no turning back now. I had come this far. There was only one way back down the mountain but it meant making it up to the top first. The last twenty minutes felt like we were knocking on heaven's door. Chris had kept his English gentlemanly cool and composure up until this point but we were both close to breaking point. Hardly anyone climbs from the base of the mountain any more, and so we gave ourselves some credit and cut ourselves some slack.

As you ascend, the air gets thinner and you feel like you've got the worst hangover in your entire life. Bear in mind that pilots who fly in non-pressurized planes wear oxygen masks above 10,000 feet. Now Mount Fuji's summit is 12,388 feet above sea

level. When you're hiking up a mountain at a similar height, the altitude impacts you the same way I imagine kryptonite does Superman! No matter how powered up you are, your life force is simply brutally sucked out of you. By this point, we were so tired and must have been completely delirious. We were both hallucinating! I was seeing animal formations in the dirt and sand and Chris thought he saw a black cat sliding between his legs at one point!

Trippers, you say! Ha...

Spiritual Lesson No. 5 – Never ever ever give up.

We finally made it to the summit around 3pm. *Hooray!*

Actually, I was far from elated. It is customary to walk around the crater and I was kind of expecting an epiphany or something, but my body was sore and I was way too exhausted. We had to get down and make the last shuttle bus back to the train station before 8pm at night. We took a few photos and rested for ten minutes before making our way back down. All I could think about was getting off that mountain and soaking in an *onsen* (Japanese deep hot spring).

Fifteen minutes later, we were sliding down extremely loose lava, rock and stone. It is faster on the way down, but my feet and toe nails felt like they were about to come off. It took another four hours to get down the mountain (no breaks). We got lost, but were luckily offered a lift back to the station by two random Japanese guys – THANK HEAVENS!!!

Climbing Mt Fuji was the biggest physical achievement in my life to date. It taught me some valuable lessons that I still live by today. I sometimes shake my head in disbelief and often wonder how on earth I managed it – but I did! It gave me such perspective. Just when you think you've come to the end, somehow you get a second or even a third wind... and no matter how long it takes you, you just have to keep going... one step at a time.

One breath at a time – one day at a time.

With sheer courage and profound faith, keep climbing, knowing there is a divine plan – something bigger than all of us.

About the author Vina Von S – The Truth Vixen

Vina considers herself to be a mystic visionary of cosmic consciousness and love. A warrior spirit of radical truth, depth and integrity, she has been known to moonlight as a bohemian gypsy and a dark goddess during full moons and weird planetary transits. Endlessly following the erratic path of her soul has led her down many winding paths in various sojourns as a corporate slave – from marketing manager, flight attendant, teaching English, dance, co-contributing editor on other e-zines, to hosting her own radio shows in Sydney and New York, running an entrepreneurial speaking circuit, as well as dabbling in many other evolutionary, social and spiritual interests – at times – fine, dark and quirky.

The Truth Vixen

She's a post-Jungian analyst / psyche therapist with a Masters in Analytical Psychology and an Economics (Social Science) degree, but prefers her lifelong enrolment in the School of Heart Knocks, not Hard Knox.

Vina currently runs workshops on re-visioning Sacred Relationships and is also available for speaking engagements and keynote presentations.

To learn more about Vina Von S and read her Blog: [CLICK HERE](#)

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My Hot Pink Suede Suitcase - EFAM | Escape From America Magazine | EFAM

My new journey towards awakening began when I walked out of and far away from a life that I was very familiar with...

Kylei DeMole - Sinking into Oblivion

This life that I once lead felt relatively safe and stable, and yet I was far from fulfilled.

I knew there was so much more for me, so I walked away from it all; the husband, the home, the money and the job. I relocated to the opposite side of town and then found myself being drawn to an ocean escape.

And so I packed my cases and found myself on a plane heading towards Perth – remote, Western Australia. Perth was my first stop before I would make my way to Monkey Mia.

Monkey Mia is a popular tourist resort located about 800 km north of [Perth](#), known for its [bottlenose Dolphins](#) that have been coming close to the shore of its pristine white beaches for more than forty years.

Monkey Mia was a strange place, with a dirt road for the airport strip, oddly located in remote north western Australia.

It arrived in vivid color. The white sand, the Persian blue ocean and red dirt.

As I walked into the caravan park incongruously carting my hot pink suede suitcase, I was given my room key.

There began a journey in itself, wheeling my over sized suitcase through the sand paths toward the beach I realized then that my journey – a journey that I didn't understand, was about to take place.

I opened the door to my room, dropped my luggage and books off, then quickly changed my clothes and ran out to explore.

With the first exquisite moments of the sand between my toes, I knew that my adventure had begun. I felt that I was about to transform whilst not knowing what, when or how all this would transpire. Nor did I have a deep enough understanding of myself at this stage to really grasp the magnitude of what I had brought myself to experience.

I dove into the ocean playing like a mermaid, connecting with the water and enjoying the dance of mind, heart and spirit. As I swam, I found myself going deeper and deeper in the water.

Then for a brief moment I was frozen in time ... I felt the brush of something very odd around my feet ...

And time stopped.

Was this where I had come to die? Was this the place I had come to find the deepest peace within and with the world?

On many levels ... yes, it was the place that I had come to find peace. And here I would receive what I had asked for.

I sunk into oblivion as the innocent Dugong calf swam and gently nibbled around my feet. I felt a connection to the earth that I have never felt before. No words can do justice to this experience. Not knowing what was at my feet, paralyzed by what could possibly lay ahead of me and then in the next instant realizing that it was a young dugong calf coming to let me know I was going to be okay.

I found myself in a magical place ... in the water swimming with the young calf and his mother. The internal healing power and the power that came through them, nourished me. The magic of their touch and their beauty filled me with a great love. I felt such gratitude for what Mother Earth had given us all in that moment. She filled my heart with joy for all the years I had forgotten so much of who I was.

I liken experiences like this to a sacred journey to a temple. People go to places of worship to connect with and embrace that place within that is still and quiet. It is in this place that freedom finds it's meaning – that place of quietness where I can sit and be still and have the freedom to be clear of judgment and fear. That place that I came to understand myself and ALL that I am.

I am so much more than the limits imposed by others.

I began this journey feeling so lost. I had just left a rocky marriage filled with violence and disarray.

Yet upon my return, I was coming home awakened. I was brought back to life internally. I felt like I had gone home and touched a part of my spirit that had been closed for so long, reconnecting with nature and the earth in a way that opened my heart once more to the joys of being.

In the past, I was caught up in a world of money, fear and hate. Now I had returned to a place of non-judgment, a place of beauty deep within, with an open heart that was filled with love.

Too often we allow the external world to cloud our judgments and our perceptions. Yet perception is never the true reality of things, as everyone experiences things differently. We experience every moment as ourselves ... uniquely as ourselves.

It is when we understand this that we understand all. Love is the essence of who we are ! I am thankful for my visit and for reconnecting with my home, the ocean. I remember thinking, if only I hadn't swapped my tail for legs – I would not have felt all the pain that I had felt in this life.

Yet if this desire were granted neither would I be the woman I am today. I am a woman strong and full of heart. A woman that because of her experiences has allowed herself to reconnect with her Truth. A woman who now wants to share this Truth as many other people that will allow themselves the space to open to their hearts and embrace themselves for all that they are.

About the author – Kylie deMole: My mission, purpose and my Legacy is what is important. I will share those with you.

My mission is to awaken as many women as I can to turn on the burning flame within, to turn you back on, to help you remember all that you are without the limitations taught to you by life itself.

To break it down for you and then to take it a little deeper.

My purpose as a woman is to leave the world a better place than how I have found it. With that I mean this. We are constantly hurting one another, we go to war with one another, countries and nations, we fight and argue with one another, especially those whom we love and who love us, constantly causing pain and harm to one another. We kill those without a voice of their own for our own benefit; we kill our children and one another physically and emotionally. We destroy our lands and allow our egos to control us in many ways. Visit [My Blog](#)

Through love we nurture, through fear we hurt. The Legacy here is to help more of us remember this, to align the heart and mind and ask at all times, "Am I coming from love or am I coming from fear?"

Love is the answer, nothing else matters, "**Love is all there is!**" The greatest leaders of our time teach us this, Why do we keep ignoring it? It is the shortest journey we can take, to align the heart and mind, yet the longest one we take.

A Queen with a servants heart, serving humanity to understand the eternal laws of the universe, to incorporate them, live them and aspire others by doing so.

Life has taught me many things, the greatest gift I have learnt to date, is that of Love, Appreciation and Gratitude for all, and of all things.

The mind is so much more powerful than that we can imagine.

When we change our thought processes, our language and our behavioral reactions towards ourselves and others, we change the world as we see and feel it, therefore regaining the ability to alter the way the world responds to us.

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Love Lost and Found - EFAM | Escape From America Magazine | EFAM

I want to say that something profound has taken place.

I've found the love of my life.

Eva Clay - Protect the Forest

But a mystical experience often precedes love, and this is the story of what happened during a simple vacation two summers ago....

I'll start with this: 2010 was the most transformative and agonizing year of my life. It was the year of my divorce. I've come to realize that only those who've been through this harrowing experience can truly understand its complex and multifarious emotional landscape.

My divorce, which was a relatively smooth and amicable one, still felt like a spiritual disembowelment. Extricating myself from a life partner and soul mate of eight years was more than just an extrication, it's was about grieving the belief that soul mates last forever, and that there is such thing as ' **the One** ' (my modified beliefs on this belong in another article).

The hardest part was to stare at the broken shards of my assumption that I would grow old and die with Kevin, and that I would enjoy the love, security and support of our vows for the rest of my life.

I was really counting on it.

The second hardest part was when the memories would seize and attack at random (often in the middle of the night) and send me into an involuntary spasm of sobs. These mercifully lessened over time.

The third hardest part was wondering if I would find love again. I can say with certainty that I do want partnership. Or at least, for now, a friendly, fun and passionate lover to defibrillate my heart and my hope.

I consider this: I'm pushing 40 and the likelihood that I will have children is diminishing (I've made peace with this reality). And I factor in that my list of needs in a partner has grown increasingly specific and inflexible. He must be over 40, a spiritual warrior, devoted to being of service, super intelligent, and have just about every other characteristic that I've discovered is next to impossible to find in a man over 40.

My dream of romantic love has thankfully matured into a more realistic expectation, and I take this as a healthy sign of growing up. As my hero Roger Waters once sang: "*...I cannot put my finger on it now / but the child has grown / and the dream is gone.*"

Unfortunately the journey toward this new man has been...well...disappointing. This year has brought only a few short-lived, unfulfilling and mostly unrequited romantic interests. I've had nothing to help me believe that I'll have a relationship anytime soon. Not for lack of looking and hoping, mind you, but there has just not been a worthy suitor. As my wise (and divorced) friend Alicia once said, "All women going through a divorce deserve one pass for a crazy transitional love affair."... I took that pass with a tempest of a 25 year old, thanks, and really don't need another.

With that said, here's how it all happened.

The summer of 2010 led me out of the weeping, sobbing divorcee-den of my Los Angeles apartment to a family reunion in Virginia (and trust me, this LA girl would not have chosen Virginia as a vacation spot otherwise). The Clay family has a long legacy of colonial and political life stemming from the very first English settlement at Jamestown in 1607 where my forefather John Clay was a resident. The reunion involved a tour of the archaeological site, a clever outdoor exhibit of where the Powhatan Indians were settled when European colonists arrived. The two groups were neighbors on this land in tense cycles of trade and combat before warfare erupted, and one thing felt eerily sure to me as I strolled the grounds – I had been here before. I couldn't explain it but this place felt so familiar, in a way that my lifelong home of LA never had.

Joining us that day was a friend of the family – actually I think she's the cousin of my former uncle by marriage, or something. Anyway we'll call her Marla (she's asked for her identity to be protected), she's in her 60's maybe, and she has a glimmer of rebellion in her eye that only mystics and old-school hippies have. Her hair is short and grey, she doesn't wear a stitch of make-up, and she drives a truck with a sticker on it that says something like "Save the Whales". I liked her immediately.

Sensing a kindred spirit, she invited me to spend a few days on her rural farm on the Rappahannock River. I didn't hesitate at the chance to be in a forest and commune with the plant spirits, and in fact I can't think of a single thing I enjoy more than being alone in a forest. Seriously. So I agreed to finish my trip with a few days on her farm.

When I arrived my heart melted and I could feel myself softening into the breast of mother earth. Marla said her land had been home to some 15,000+ Powhatan Indians until the Europeans decimated them through disease, warfare, and starvation.

The outer ring of the farm has old-growth forest, but the interior of the property is stripped flat. Apparently during Marla's parents' generation the land was unsustainably over-farmed and infused with herbicides, pesticides and genetically modified crops. Marla has decided to convert this 200+ acre parcel from a corn and soybean farm to a nature preserve. She's replanting indigenous species of trees and other plant life so that a native forest will once again cover this land that she alone inherited from her parents.

She's doing it all on her own, and with her physical resources isn't sure how she'll make it happen. She has no surviving

family and she needs help on every level – especially with the back-breaking work of recreating an eco-system. The Native American history is evident, and Marla has an entire cabinet of artifacts – from arrowheads to stone axes to grinding implements that she routinely discovers as she’s planting trees. She told me these artifacts date back to 10,000 BC.

One night we went for a sunset canoe ride down the Rappahannock...and that night the river claimed my heart forever. As we glided down the river at twilight the soft and heavy air of an eastern summer night hugged me like a grandmother, and the stillness of the water made our oars slip quietly through the mystery of its surface. From a patch of floating lily pads came a concert of frogs and cicadas, singing some orchestration that I have no human ability to understand. I was enchanted by the metaphor of the river that night; mighty in its flow, solemn on its surface, and abounding with life underneath.

As we paddled toward the horizontal strip of crimson in the sky it seemed to promise that if you follow the light you will find your way to happiness.

The next day I sat meditating in Marla’s forest on a fallen tree, taking in the ancient energies surrounding me. Could my calling to this land be reparation for the deeds of my colonial forefathers? I prayed to the forest spirits, to the trees, to the insects and the birds. I prayed to my ancestors who walked this earth before me. I implored them all, “What am I to do?” Nothing short of a mystical experience happened next.

The answer came swift and sure: **“YOU WILL PROTECT THE FOREST.”**

What!

My Ego chimed in, “But I’m already doing service”. I run a shelter for battered women, I have a private practice in spiritual psychotherapy, and I produce a sacred dance workshop. More? Really?”

” **YES. YOU ARE NEEDED. HERE IS WHAT WE NEED YOU TO DO,**” said the Voice.

“QUIT WASTING ENERGY ON THINGS THAT HAVE NO CAPACITY TO SUPPORT YOUR PURPOSE.

QUIT POISONING YOUR BODY.

QUIT PURSUING SUPERFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS THAT DISTRACT YOU.

RISE ABOVE YOUR IMMATURE DILEMMAS, EVA.

SAVE THE FOREST. “

Sitting there on the log my life began to flash like a slide show in my mind, all the dramas of the last year – the parties, festivals, and the endless pursuits at distraction and excess. But almost everything that thrilled me for the past 9 years has taken a turn lately – even Burning Man, of which I’d been a die-hard fanatic – had left me feeling flat, exhausted and dissatisfied. While I watched my friends have wild and transcendent experiences, there I walked away wondering if I’m the only one who would’ve rather been at home reading National Geographic or doing sun salutations on the beach. This party girl is pooped.

The forest needs me

I realized this last year I’ve been operating mostly from fear, and from the core concern of “Holy shit, am I going to be ok?” From the space of my pain-body I’ve needed to feel as though I’m loved, that I have a place in my community, that I’m capable of taking care of myself as a single woman.

But in that Virginia forest I gave up my investment in it all and the desire for a man in my life was lifted. Gone. I can’t tell you what a relief this is for me to trust that I’ve been striking out in romance for a reason. A very good reason. The forest needs me.

And now a new Purpose larger than myself calls me to step fully into my power.

We are never given a calling without being given the resources to fulfill it. During my stay on the farm I had overwhelming psychic visions of the people who once lived in this forest. I felt the needs of the animals who are struggling to survive here, and every time I held an arrowhead from Marla’s cabinet I saw a movie behind my eyes, a story of the arrowhead’s maker and its journey into present time. The forest revealed new gifts to be used – gifts of vision, wisdom and clairvoyance beyond what I thought I had before. I understood that my gifts are not be squandered, dimmed or misapplied out of some egotistic need to expend energy on the next big party or in concerning myself with is-he-going-to-call-me?

I kneeled and atoned to the forest for my behavior the past year:

I’m sorry I’ve been so embroiled in my selfish dramas.
I’m sorry I’ve been preoccupied by my need for attention.
I’m sorry I’ve doubted my psychic vision.
I’m sorry I’ve compromised my body temple.

Lastly, I atoned to the forest for the trespasses of my colonial forefathers, who drove the natives from their land and commenced the historic rape of North America’s natural resources.

Exactly how I’ll be of service to the forest is yet to be revealed, but already ideas and visions are coming through that will sponsor native groves, especially there in Indian country. I understand that the forest has spoken through me in a desperate plea for help.

Now as I write this I feel wildly in love with our forests and am clear in my Purpose, my Promise, and my Mission. I remembered I am more than a decedent European settlers, I am a child of the earth, a Medicine Woman, a Healer, a Priestess, a Visionary, an Activist, and now: A voice for the forest. *I promise I won't forget this again.*

Thanks for bearing witness. I guess I needed to say all this. Let my life be of service to Earth and Her creatures. *Aho.*

P.S. Please help me in preserving our old growth forests. Your time and resources are urgently needed. Contact the 500 Year Forest Foundation at www.500YearForest.org, they directly support Marla's farm. Thank you.

About the Author: Eva is the creatrix and muse of LA's hit sensation Sacred Dance Live: a Tribal Ecstatic Dance Experience. She believes in creativity as a catalyst for change and eloquently marries the profound with the playful in all her adventures. She's a spiritual psychotherapist, community activist, and public speaker who spends her free time making mayhem on a dance floor. In addition to facilitating her therapeutic dance workshops, she manages a non-profit organization for battered women and has a private counseling practice for singles seeking their soul mate. Of late she's been crashing open mike events with her dangerously irreverent poetry.

Eva's not only passionate about being a shaman of dance, she also offers workshops on radical self-expression and speaks about the spiritual dimensions of intimacy, sex and love. Visit [Her Website](#)

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Waking up with Jessica - EFAM | Escape From America Magazine | EFAM

It was a dark, rainy, muggy morning.

I had just finished loading the rest of my belongings into my car. I had always thought that if something was meant for you then the path would be made for you to get there. And paths were certainly made for me to live my dream ...to pursue my career in the entertainment industry ... in Hollywood! People often fear big decisions and change, but I knew in my heart it was meant for me and I was thrilled!

Jessica Savano - Her Journey to Hollywood!

A friend of mine was supposed to drive with me to LA. However, I decided that it might be best to make the trip by myself. I wanted to make this a spiritual journey, to take my time, and to see the country. I saw this change of plans as a blessing in disguise, and punched my new Hollywood address into my GPS.

Only 2,027 miles.

I was so happy to have left Chicago. I was born and raised there and it was home to a very important change in my life. A drastic change.

I transitioned from male to female .

Now, Chicago is a big city, but it still holds the conservatism of the Midwest. To this day, I really don't know why I stayed there as long as I did. I guess, choosing not to move offered a false sense of security. Also, my transition was a process that took YEARS and several procedures to complete. So much of my time in Chicago was filled with deep loneliness. I was in locked in a grey cocoon. I felt alone, I felt misunderstood and I felt judged. I just wasn't happy.

On top of that, we had about three to four months of nice weather and the rest was dark, gloomy, cold, rainy or snowy. By then, I was just over it! I was over the weather, over certain people, over everything. It's odd to me that so many of my friends who knew me prior to my transition thought that they KNEW everything about me, and that they had the right to still call me by my old name. I had a new name and a new identity. A name that I had created and loved. And I really don't think they knew me at all, as my journey was such an intense experience that I did not share with many.

Now was the beginning of a new life. When my transition was complete, I was ready to tear through my cocoon. I felt like the caterpillar who finally became a beautiful butterfly...and I was ready to fly...To fly far, far away and beyond anything I could have ever dreamed.

Jessicas Transformation – from male to female

This was my time to shine. I had been through HELL. With everything that I had gone through during my transition, I began to view the world differently. It was a sad time. I saw how so many could be downright evil to me, simply because I was different ... and because I was changing. Many just could not handle the change, even if it had nothing to do with them.

But I had always seen my transition as something that I HAD to do ... I remember thinking at one stage during my darkest times, "Jessica either transition into who you really are or DIE...or continue to live a lie."

These thoughts of the past wracked my mind. Even though I was a new woman, I needed time to heal the past. I finally had the face and body that I had always wanted and now I would make sure I had the home and community and life that I yearned for.

With every border I crossed, it became more real to me that I was actually doing this...

From the mid-west to the west coast, I knew exactly where I wanted to be. Hollywood was on my mind like a call for freedom.

One night, I had spent the night somewhere in Nebraska, close to the Colorado Border. I got up early the following morning and headed out. I am truly a breakfast person and I NEED my breakfast in the mornings to be able to function. I drove about 50 miles out and found *Lucy's Cafe*.

Lucy's Cafe was somewhere in rural Colorado (way out in the middle of no?where). It looked like a small, local trucker's stop. I prayed that they were still serving breakfast as it was just past 11am. I remember feeling a little afraid to enter. Judging by the place and the people I saw standing outside...I seemed ... well ... different.

First of all I'm tall. I stand at 6ft 4 and I don't seem to blend in anywhere anyway...

But because I HAD to have my breakfast, I bravely walked in.

Everyone seemed a bit shocked by someone like me entering the establishment.

"How many Ma'am?"

"Just me," I said.

I was seated and immediately asked if they were serving breakfast?

"No ma'am breakfast is over at 10:30."

I said "Oh no, can you please ask the cook if he would make an exception?"

"Where are you from young lady?"

I replied "Chicago, I'm on my way to Hollywood!"

My waitress seemed so excited for me. She returned with a Yes! They would make breakfast especially for me!

I smiled and put my order in and started chatting with the locals. It amazed me how different we are while still all walking the same planet together. My waitress shared my story with a few employees there. They knew I was moving to Hollywood and came up to me to wish me well, warmly advising me to be careful on the rest of my journey while saying how wonderful it was for me to be living my dreams.

I enjoyed breakfast and the great conversation I had with these individuals whom I will probably never see again. But their well wishes stayed with me and Lucy's Café will not be forgotten.

Driving through the endless road, I found myself in deep thought for several hours, almost meditating in the process. Then, much to my dismay I realized I was being pulled over. Yes, I was getting a speeding ticket. I usually could get out of situations like this, but in Lincoln, Nebraska, things are a bit different. I decided to put the ticket away in the glove compartment and accept what had happened. I would not allow this ticket to upset me or ruin my journey. Neither would I take it as a bad omen. Instead, I saw it as a sign to be careful and didn't think anything further about it.

It's amazing how everything started to look more beautiful the further west I drove. I was now entering Colorado. I was so excited to see the steep mountains covered in snow. I was so high up, that I was in the clouds (literally!). I wanted to play in the snow. So I did!

I pulled off to the side of the road and very joyfully ran up onto the snow-covered mountain, picking up the snow and appreciating all of its beauty. I felt so joyous and free. Any thought that I had about being alone began to dissipate. I was not alone at all, for so much grandeur surrounded me. I was not afraid of being alone at night anymore, for the mountains were hugging me.

The calmness that I experienced while driving through Utah, Arizona and Nevada brought me such peace of mind. The mountains were beautiful, very different from anything I've ever seen before. I could feel divine energy and guidance. I knew that everything would work out well. I knew that all my needs would be met and my intuition told me that I was doing the right thing.

Once I finally arrived in California's state lines, I was elated with joy. I was still hours away from Los Angeles, but the excitement was enormous. I was also completely exhausted. I could not wait to go to sleep and be lulled into deep slumber.

When I woke up the next morning, I could not wait to get out that very same day and explore my new home. The Spirit guided me to Santa Monica beach, where I walked along the beach thanking God for creating ways and paths for me to be here and for getting me here safely.

I was so filled with gratitude.

Soon after my move, I started pursuing the acting career that was my goal. I signed up for a very intense acting boot camp, where I attended classes six days a week. It was a wonderful, busy time and I met so many beautiful people from all over the world who had moved here to pursue their dreams. Hearing all their stories was inspiring. It seemed that we all had very different backgrounds but could easily connect because of our similar goals and our burning passion. We did not just talk about our dreams, we actually made them happen.

Jessicas on location

It's been an amazing experience in Los Angeles, but I have had my share of disappointments that came with the fulfillment of this dream. I've auditioned for so many transgender roles where I was rejected for being 'too passable' as a female. Unfortunately the producers wanted to place actors who are clearly and stereotypically transgender. I felt like there was not really a place for me, as I looked so feminine. Honestly, I got tired of a lot of the bullshit that came with Hollywood. So, I made a strong decision one day that I wasn't going to waste any time with lower consciousness.

I started my own web-talk show 'Waking up with Jessica' where I interview guests who are making a difference on the planet. The guests who come on my show uplift humanity with their gifts and talents. The show has nothing to do with gender identity, race or sexual orientation, instead it reveals to people who they really are. Amazing, spiritual beings.

I was also cast in my first full-length independent film, 'The End of our Lives' with a gifted director and friend, Bryan Sandlin. This director saw me for my gifts and talents, and not for what was between my legs. That was such a gift. To be recognized as my true self.

There is still a lot of work that needs to be done to represent trans people in a positive way in the media. I feel like I am doing my part and making a difference, inspiring so many in the community to experience exactly what they want to.

You see, being born and raised in Chicago, having lived there my whole life, and then moving to Los Angeles, had really

opened my eyes. This moment in time was a new beginning for me. I left behind a lot of negativity and bad energy. I knew I didn't want to be stuck in the same place my entire life. I was clear. Yet the people around me thought I was crazy for leaving. And I thought THEY were crazy for not wanting to explore the planet and get more out of life.

Besides, my days of living most of the year without the sun and in the cold were OVER. So many people who yearn for more won't even consider moving because they have too much fear. But if you take the risk and listen to your heart, answers and solutions will come to you.

Take risks, because once they turn into regrets, it's too late.

Being here has exposed me to new people, places and situations, making me grow exponentially. By disallowing risk and exploration, you will significantly slow down your growth. You will never get the wisdom that the new and unexplored will offer you. Don't let fear hold you back and prevent you from having many wonderful experiences, from meeting the fascinating people who may change your life.

Looking back, I had to make the firm decision not to let my ego or people convince me that a sense of security was more important than adventure. By being here and doing what I love, acting and performing in plays, I have achieved success. I don't need to be famous or turn into a huge star to feel accomplished. I urge you, by following your intuition and doing what is really meant for your unique path, you will find fulfillment.

Over the past three years I have been here, I have found many life changing and enlightening places. I live a walking distance away from the Bodhi Tree bookstore, which has been THE spiritual bookstore for over 40 years. It's an iconic landmark. I have also recently discovered the beautiful Lake Shrine, which is a part of the Self-Realization Fellowship that introduced the Eastern spiritual teachings to America. Teachings that include yoga and meditation.

I also am a member of the Agape International Spiritual Community. Their services are always fun, uplifting and inspiring and I spend my Sundays in worship and gratitude. Having easy access to spiritual places has really raised my consciousness and allowed me to truly discover myself.

This new chapter of my life has been powerful. I have learned not to fear change, not to dwell on the past, or to worry about the future.

Follow your heart Jessica, says Spirit and don't ever let fear prevent you from fulfilling your destiny.

About the author: Jessica Savano is an American actress, model, advocate and inspirational speaker. In 2004, she appeared on MTV's "I Want a Famous Face". It was a historical appearance, as it made her the first transgender individual person casted on MTV. Being one who has successfully overcome challenges, creating the life of her dreams, she continues to break boundaries while educating and inspiring many. Jessica was born and raised a native of Chicago. In 2009, she committed to following her desire to live a bigger life by moving to Los Angeles to pursue a career in film and television.

Jessica Savano: Actress, model advocate and inspirational speaker

Jessica's mission lies in helping people love themselves and break free from dogma and mediocrity. She has empowered many through her remarkable journey by demonstrating how to truly live a life of fulfillment and joy. Visit [Her Website](#) [Her Youtube Channel](#)

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You Can't Get There from Here - EFAM | Escape From America Magazine | EFAM

Have you ever arrived at a destination, not having a clue at how you got there?

On a brilliant Sunday back in 2007, I had just such an experience. After 15 years of marriage, I was nearing the end of a difficult divorce that I had not wanted in the first place. Desiring something greater, I had been attending a Methodist church. I was looking for a relationship with Spirit.

Joe Comer - 1000 Steps

For most of my life, I have known that everything is interrelated. I've known that there is a relationship between all things ... a common thread of goodness that runs through all of us. I had spent years denying a Higher Power, denying myself the kind of deeply personal relationship that I was looking for.

I was afraid.

Afraid if I were to express my interest in such a relationship I wouldn't be considered 'cool' or accepted by my peers. But on that sunny day of 2007, I didn't care about being cool OR about acceptance. I was looking to accept *myself*, to accept how things had come to be and to accept a new future.

My life had turned into something I did not recognize: I was on antidepressants, miserably living in a small apartment. I had quit drinking alcohol and started smoking cigarettes. Basically, all I did was ride my bicycle, work out and struggle throughout my day to day existence.

Although I was in shape physically (for the most part), spiritually I felt anemic. While I was not quite aimless, I did have the knowing that I was searching for a deeper philosophical relationship. Still, I simply could not tap into what it might be. I did not possess the key to unlock the inner source of strength that I knew was always deep within me. It had to come to this. It took losing everything as I knew it, everything I had come to accept and see as ordinary and commonplace, every component I had created, to finally see what had always been there.

I now understand that my refusal to give myself permission to have that relationship with Spirit was but a chapter in my journey to self-acceptance. Just as all the other challenges (disguised as opportunities) had been.

I also knew that I was ready to begin changing myself, in order to become the man I knew was inside. A man who could have a future brighter than his past. For years I had been burdened with some form of incessant chip on my shoulder. It had developed over time, as I had fed it and nurtured it. This bitter edge had been holding me back and I longed to shed its baggage. I knew it was time to address it. And that if I did not do so, it would continue to weigh me down.

I intended to break this chain. And suddenly by this mere intention, everything was falling into place without my control. An invisible hand was helping me establish a new life within my life, a second chance, a do over. This was an opportunity to have a future not defined or dictated by the past. To create a future grounded in love, acceptance and understanding, that would enable me to share of myself with others.

I had come to know that miracles are real and that they happen to everyone, but still, I resisted. I was a closet believer. Yet that fateful Sunday was a valuable opportunity. Out of the blue, it hit me like a bolt of lightning: I had found a home. Throughout my journey, I had come to become aware that I, too, could have a personal relationship with God. I reveled in this realization and its implications on my life and my entire being. I finally felt I had some answers to the age-old questions we have all asked at some passage in time: **"What is God? Who is God?"**

It dawned on me that God is everywhere and *in* EVERYTHING.

God is Spirit.

God is omnipresent.

This self-realization would not have been possible had I not given myself the opportunity – the permission, to acknowledge this truth. Looking back, it was a simple (although elusive) exercise in unrestrained self-acceptance.

Now that I had found a spiritual place that supported what I felt I knew, I wondered what possibilities lay before me. At the time, I was caught up in my own personal drama, and I did not realize that the possibilities presented to me would be endless. Just as they always had been.

Home, for me, soon revealed itself. It was a Spiritual Center in Lakewood Colorado. Now I didn't get a sense of where my home would be right away. I did receive an "Aha!" moment of clarity, amongst several disguised opportunities to discover and act upon.

It all began a couple of months after my divorce had finalized. I had been attending my Spiritual Center regularly and was working towards healing (myself and those I loved). I had much to do. For years I had been a husband and father, but I had failed to demonstrate the patience, compassion and kindness that I felt I could have possessed. Yet I did realize that I now needed and was ready to cultivate a relationship between these components of my emotional self and my interpersonal relationships.

It was time...

The decision to take a divorce had not been mine yet I now saw my contribution to the demise of my marriage. I began to feel empowered. Revived.

I had a second chance, as a forty-year-old man, and I was not going to squander this precious chance to start over and get my life back in order. I was going to live My Best Life. A life laced with compassion, kindness, ease, grace and more!

Joe Comer – Living His Best Life

The real healing began as soon as I moved into a position where I felt ready to forgive myself. Forgiving myself for all the things I had been blaming myself for, all my feelings of inadequacy and failure. The soul-draining feelings of regret, despair and not being “enough”. This powerful, cathartic forgiveness allowed me to dig into all the other aspects of how and why things had turned out the way they were prior to that pivotal Sunday back in 2007.

I was now willing to cultivate a relationship with Spirit, unencumbered by a host of feelings that weren't serving (or deserving of) me. Not only were they not helping, they were CAUSING my problems, holding me back from being my greatest self.

There is a moral to my story: Do not be inhibited by self-defeating thoughts or your past life. Move forward in the moment you have. Embrace that moment, for that is all there really is.

This new liberated way of thinking and living has been very powerful and has delivered a myriad of positive side effects. My new appreciation for life, and self, has become infectious to others. Especially so in the community I have become a part of. Being with so many like-minded people has made me hold myself to a higher standard, a standard of Oneness. Knowing that all things and all people are in a precise relationship with one another. All the while, seeing that I am an integral part of it all.

Although my life is far from perfect (I still have many steps to take and opportunities for growth). I know those opportunities can only continue to help me to live my greatest life. The sea of change came when I embraced my problems as opportunities and made the choice to learn and grow from them.

I encourage anyone — *at any age* — to shed the illusion that the past defines what you are today.

It doesn't!

I urge you to embrace the challenges of today to craft a brilliant future.

Cultivate your personal relationship with Spirit. Nurture it with temperance, patience, love and understanding. Only then will you stand in the harvest of your own magnificence. Don't be afraid what others will think: Share yourself with them. Be patient with their skepticism and temper your desire to judge it.

Nurture them with love and know that you cannot change anyone, but the change is still happening *within you*. You will be surprised at the results and how much joy you generate, actively participating in your moment-to-moment choice-making. Seeing how it affects the rest of your life as well as the lives of those around you.

The future begins now.

You have the power to create the change you want to see — beginning with YOU. Reap the rewards of living your life now and know that the common thread of love and goodness runs through you and all of us...

Namaste'

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Widening Ties - EFAM | Escape From America Magazine | EFAM

Widening Tides

By Penny Dinn / Jan 12 • Categorized as [Living Overseas](#)

When my good friend Mahira, a well-known creative and sparkingly alive human mermaid butterfly, asked me to contribute my story on a spiritual journey for this issue, I jumped out of my seat and screamed "YES!"

Penny Dinn - Why am I Here?

And then I sat down and said, "Uh ... Uh Oh."

At first I got really excited and then confused, I then became somewhat stressed out, I asked for an extension on the due date. And then, I got help.

I called up a good friend, a treasured and rare peer. Someone who I know I can tell anything to. And so, since my writings tend to be very honest, brutal and sometimes a little perverse ~ let's respect her privacy and call her "Shannon". Shannon, being a writer herself, (and quite honestly a very righteous woman), likes to get straight to the nut of it. So over a buffet line of potent and various dinner conversation topics ranging from stoners to boners, she says to me "Ok, so in one shot – what's THE spiritual journey to you? What is it?"

I had no answer.

My thoughts stirred, my head ached and the moment sitting there together over sweet potato fries became like the point in an ayahuasca ceremony where the deck of cards of all your life's memories and emotions come shuffling in at high speed and you just want it all to stop. Stop it. Shut it up. Now. Please. It hurts.

I leaned in. And I noted this new approach, as spiritually for most of my life, I have chosen to back up and at times, well I would've just boned out.

"So what do I write about?" I ask myself. Do I talk about my first trip to Cambodia to visit my parents' homeland at age 23, when I faced my family history after a life of emotional abuse as the punching bag for my parents' pain and suffering? And do I talk about how, intuitively, I was ready for big change in my life, ready to live with purpose, yet I didn't know how or why? Isn't the young budding spiritual warrior exactly what the world needs and wants to read about? Ok, maybe I should write about that 30 day cleanse I did on nothing but liquids and super foods. After all, that commitment to my health sparked such a wealth of inspiration in the lives of others. I became so much clearer, and lighter, and as the 'spiritual people' say, I was "activated". No no, that's lame. If I'm going to do that then I will have to end the story with a re-naming of myself, branding myself with some sort of advanced probiotic or raw food restaurant.

Yes, I have it.

I will write about the shamanic journey that I so courageously went on. I mean, I, a young woman, at the age of 30 went into the woods ALONE, for seven whole days, in upstate New York. There, I relived my entire life through my (Native American) medicine wheel. I was so fearless – I faced it ALL – my past, my present, my future, my life, my death and as a gift, I found my purpose.

I went in with a bag that held only some green juice powder, a few avocados, some supplies for the wheel, a tent and a sleeping bag – and yet that bag felt like it held the weight of the world.

And it did.

It held the weight of *my* world- my experiences, the ones I recalled often, and even ones that I thought I had let go of. These memories had never actually gone anywhere. They were just tucked away and had turned into dust balls. *It was time to clean house.*

As I called on the four directions, and sang the songs that called my spirit back home, I cried, I laughed, and I let go. To release my biggest wound – I let go of all the words that my father had cut me with. I let go of all the years of being criticized. I let go of the friends who had not met me eye to eye, the past loves who had wronged me, strangers in passing who may have looked at me the wrong way! Most of all, in those days in the woods, in full connection with myself and Mother Nature- I forgave myself for any moment where I had allowed my own self to be treated poorly, for the times I had taken my pain and with it wronged someone else, hurt someone, and mostly for the times I had judged, criticized and hurt my own self. I even forgave myself for once crashing into an ex-boyfriend's truck and trying to run him up a tree after a very drunken and lonely 12 pack.

So yes, I have grown and I'm not crazy and pissed off anymore. Well most of the time anyway. And you know what, that's true spirituality.

So after seven, unforgettable days of kissing the wounds within myself – I walked out of the woods with the lightness of a child and crystal clear eyesight.

My reflection in the mirror, the memory of my father, another person, a tree, a moment – all things could and would never ever

be the same. I had found presence, clarity and true love for myself and all things.

Let's call it Gratitude.

So let's get back to my dinner with Shannon ... And again, who am I anyway? Why am I here? What is spirituality but the deepening, widening, and rising of my truest highest self to crystallite criteria? And can I do that, still have a good time and say bad words every once in a while? Stoner? Boner?

During a meditation in the woods with the question asked "Why am I here", with my back supported by a tree, I opened my eyes to see a mama deer and her two babies about 20 feet from me. I was so still that they did not see me. I watched in quiet tears of calmness as she nuzzled her young ones. I took away the clear message that I was here to love and be loved, to give, receive and nurture.

I have asked myself on occasion if I can constantly live in the "Wheel" and still be me – the funny, sassy, sarcastic me. Can I ride that edge? I can. Because that's ME, and that's where, how and why I want to be. And no one – not anyone – not my father, my brother, a stranger, a friend, a boyfriend, a lover or myself would ever tell me different again.

So is my best spiritual story the one where I traveled the farthest in the world, or the one where I fell to the ground and ate dirt the hardest? And I realize – it's all of it. It's in everyday, in every single perfect little moment. It's in the taking it all in and then throwing it all up. It's in being told you're not enough and in being hurt by that, and in by knowing that you are, very enough, more than enough.

It's in spinning around in circles with yourself, over and over again. It's in the detox and in the retox. It's in the crashing, the smashing, the blaming, the gaming, the loving, the flirting, the kissing, the teasing, the learning and the burning. It's in feeling like you'll never love again and that moment when you realize you can, and you will.

And the fun part? All of the moments that get you there. Enjoy the ride.

It's in the not knowing, and in the knowing that it's ok not to know. It's in just showing up, stepping out, rising up and blowing it all out. And then doing it all over again. It's in finding the sweet spot while riding the Edge of the Magic and Mystery!

It's the greatest, most luscious, romantic, fun, comedic love story every written. And as my very good friend Shannon would say "It's about being in your brilliance."

So, yes this is it – This IS the journey. And this is your story – I hope you ride it well.

About the author: Penny Dinn is a dreamer, a believer and multi-platinum achiever manifesto. She swings on vines by a river on a small paradise island and screams in glee when she green turtles by the sea. When she's not crying to old James Taylor love songs, surfing giggly waves at the Bay, or hanging with her friend "Shannon", she is busy being a professional lifestyle and travel photographer www.pennydinn.com www.pennydinn.tumblr.com She shoots beauty, weddings, families and kids, which means in a nutshell that she shoots LOVE.

Penny Dinn – a believer and multi-platform achiever

Penny is also a world traveler, humanitarian, philosopher, a soul seeking activist and passionately stewards the sacred feminine with her soul sisters at Shakti Rising www.shaktirisingnp.com

She believes that we all have a responsibility to educate, empower and engage, first ourselves- then others.

Penny believes in generosity, abundance and in walking through the world with beauty and grace, all while having a whole lot of fun.

Smile.

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A Walking Pilgrim - EFAM | Escape From America Magazine | EFAM

We walk alone; we walk a path worn by millions; we walk for ourselves and perhaps for Santiago—Saint James; and we walk, as he did, in honor of his teacher.

Christopher Staser – essentially we walk

Essentially—we walk.

This walking is the unifying force behind each and every pilgrim who takes the Way of Saint James. If you can trust the walking, you might just find what you're looking for along the path to Santiago.

To walk is human. It is essential. It unifies all. We carry only what we need, because anything extra would be a burden and there are enough burdens on the road, with the weather, with health challenges, the wear and tear.

And we are open, we are open to the companions we've yet to meet, to the hospitality we've yet to receive and yes, open also to being rescued and knowing finally when we cannot do it on our own. At those times of need, we as pilgrims, will reach out, or cry out if necessary, and ask only for what is needed.

Each and all, we are pilgrims. We are seekers. We pay homage. We are atoning for the past. No matter what our purpose, it is our time. We have made it and now we are taking it, talking the walk across the north of Spain—the very route that Christianized Spain and prior, lead to the Roman silver mines.

We will not be saved, nor necessarily transported mystically. Our lives may not look much different from how they started. You might return and people will ask: "How did it change you?" And you will ask yourself just the same. And then you might remember that you took it upon yourself to get onto this path and that alone was a miracle and each step, like each breath, is the next step and you will get where you may if you know where you're going, but just as much, it is *this* step when you choose once again to walk—to walk your way because you and only you can.

All this is prelude for a walk that my dear companion and I took over a period of 44 days in the late autumn of 2010. We walked 900 kilometers on the Camino Frances beginning in the Pyrenees Saint Jean Pied-de-Port and ending at the sea in Finisterre.

The following is a daily meditation on our walk, as I myself "re-walk" these paths, reflecting daily on that day's events exactly a year later. Memory still plays a trick or two, but it is profound, when I open up my guidebook and examine the maps, how that day comes to life in all its fullness! And I remind myself that while indeed extraordinary, that each day in our lives holds such potential to humbly walk upon with each turn holding promise for new adventures, friendships and spiritual insights.

Amongst the days I've written about so far, the first day feels the most sparse. This is because this day deserves the most energy and will clearly bring insights that will infuse clarity into the walk as a whole. Permit me to leave these remarks and the ongoing days for the next installment.

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Camino Day 1: October 24, 2010

St. Jean Pied-de-Port to Roncesvalles

A year ago today we began the Camino, passing through the Route de Napoleon. Much will be said about this first day and the adventures that followed in the forthcoming kilometers of our walk. Suffice it to say I am grateful, this day bowing to the sun, as I was a year ago, that I am alive.

Christopher Staser at the beginning of the walk

We reached the top of Route de Napoleon in the midst of a major storm. Little did we know that people have actually died on the first day. The only warning we'd had was that if there was bad weather, one shouldn't take this route. The weather started great. By this point, our ponchos were mostly ripped and destroyed by the high winds and we were drenched though all layers top to bottom.

Camino Day 2: October 25, 2010

Roncesvalles to Puente de la Rabia

With nearly everything soaked from the day before and still not dry by the morning. I figured that I'd just have to ask and get it dried by the hotel. This morning, I got to sit in the little rustic cafe with all its warmth against the cold, misty rain outside while the clothes dried, wearing only my little running shorts.

Nearly wanting to give up the walk, or at least pursuing it the same day... Still with our ponchos destroyed, we wrapped our bags fully in plastic and headed out through forests and scattered towns, including the same paths Hemingway once ventured. As we proceeded, the sky cleared and the hopeful sunshine found its place in our day.

Camino Day 3: October 26, 2010

Puente de la Rabia to Pamplona

A beautiful October sky followed us along the pathway, mostly along rivers that emptied out towards the city of Pamplona—the city made famous by Hemingway and the yearly Running of the Bulls. Ascending to the gates up the city, where pilgrims have been welcomed for a millennia, I felt the excitement to be in an urban center and all that it would have to offer. A small city with a population of 190K, it was the first sign of a major population center since the beginning of our walk.

The road brings us an Irish man today, who greets us with his gruff: “Hola, bonjour, hello, buen camino” while passing. It would be weeks later that we’d encounter him yet again as he was making his way back from the Camino.

He was the first actual pilgrim we’d encountered since the first day when we had passed a very relaxed German couple. I was so curious to walk with this man and soon learned of his athletic ambition—to complete the walk in about 14 days. It was my first brush with the non-contemplative approach to the Camino and it was provocative to think that someone would so rush through such an opportunity.

Camino Day 4: October 27, 2010

Pamplona Recovery Day

By the end of the third day, it was dusk and we arrived limping in the city of Pamplona. It was clear that we needed to rest a full day. Between my companion’s scattered blisters that had merged into one massive blister and my red spots on my legs we wore the proud ‘badges’ of our walk. I later learned that these marks were ‘cinches’ or bed bug bites. Suffice it to say our legs and hips and feet were feeling the pain. We spent the whole day leisurely walking the city in flip-flops, regardless of how ridiculous we looked in the Spanish streets—hey we’re pilgrims, ain’t it obvious?

Day 4 – a full day of rest

Plus, Pamplona is a really beautiful place! And so were the *tapas* (read *pinchos*) and wine. We made the point to enjoy the plaza as much as we could.

Camino Day 5: October 28, 2010

Pamplona to Eunate

Leaving the big city behind us, we headed towards Eunate, which was not a city but an ancient church built in the 12th century by the Knight’s Templar in the Romanesque style. With the mountains and streams behind us, our path became dustier whilst ascending the hill to the windmills and the pilgrim sculptural exhibit. On this golden afternoon we looked up to the Pyrenees for the last time and headed westward down the hill towards new land and the upcoming vineyards.

The pilgrim sculptural exhibit

The night in Eunate was one of the most memorable as we were received by our French hosts and accompanied by only one other pilgrim, our beautiful retired school teacher from Paris, who was walking for the second year in a row.

We arrived at dusk and were welcomed in to the stone home adjacent to the church. It was warmed with a blazing fire. We enjoyed the hospitality of a home cooked meal, over a conversation dominated by the French language. I found myself mysteriously understanding much more than I thought possible... The surprise came after desert, where we were invited into the church, over candlelight, to pray ceremoniously to the patron saint of the church and sit in sacred meditation, evoking an era so distant from the modern world. We slept in the cold home, maintaining the mysterious traces of our ceremony.

Camino Day 6: October 29, 2010

Eunate to Villatuerta

We left Eunate at the earliest time that we had left anywhere. We were operating on the Albergue rhythm, which had become our second clock. Breakfast was at seven and we were on the road by eight ... not far from sunrise.

The pilgrim sculptural exhibit

Our side diversion to Eunate put us on the other Camino, the *camino aragoés*, which joins with our *camino frances* here at Puente la Reina—where this beautiful Romanesque bridge takes us onward. This next land, with its chalky soil, is wine country!

We are told to target *Casa Magica*, the Magic House, for sleeping. It’s here, we are delighted to meet back up with our French pilgrim friend. Our Brazilian hosts tell us it’s the last day of operation of the season in this beautifully restored building. This night after dinner, we meet another pilgrim, Ariel, from Argentina—“caminoing” by bicycle or *bici*. Ariel with his full beard, skinny body, enthusiastic smile, becomes one of those fateful camino companions of the journey—he is also my same age. He spoke no English and enthusiastically reeled off his Spanish as if I got it all—and his confidence in me added to my own.

Oblivious to all pilgrim albergue protocol, we sat in the kitchen, with our wood stove keeping us warm while we did our first load of laundry since arriving in Spain. Here we shared wine, chocolate, beer and pieces of sundry food from our new Argentinian friend. A bottle of wine, several beers, and a bottle of laughs later, we tiptoed to the dorm room where we passed

out and were awoken after nine. The proprietor shocked us out of bed, as he was completely shocked himself that we were still sleeping!

Little did we understand how regimented the pilgrim albergue routines could be. We all scampered to start the next day under laughs for what good times we'd created the night before.

Camino Day 7: October 30, 2010

Villatuerta to Los Arcos

While leaving late, this was also a very long day as we needed to get to Los Arcos and there was a great distance between the villages. Add to that, the amazing generosity of the Irache Bodegas where they offer wine to the pilgrims. We emptied one of our water bottles and filled it with wine. The placard on the wall reads:

Pilgrim! If you want to arrive to Santiago with force and vitality, take a drink of this great wine that offers happiness. The fountain of Irache, fountain of wine.

This is not the Mormon attitude towards wine that I grew up in!

Camino Day 8: October 31, 2010

Los Arcos to Viana

Up until this point, we'd seen very few pilgrims. I can count them:

There were three that we had passed the first day, who must have stopped before the weather turned. There was a couple we saw in Roncesvalles who left while our clothes were still drying. That day we ran into a Swiss-German couple who had walked from their home -exceptional. The speedy Irishman. An English couple in Pamplona who had also walked the French camino (Chemin de Vézelay) and ended where we met them. Our French retired schoolteacher and Arial. We met our first American in the restaurant of Los Arcos, who had also walked from the French Camino. A French couple who passed us quickly the day before. Today, as we were leaving on a somewhat regular schedule, we ran into half of dozen pilgrims where we were actually *sharing* in the walk for the very first time. This was new. There was the pair of Polish, a Spaniard from Sevilla and the American from last night's dinner. Then we saw our first Korean group of three.

All had their own ambitions, the American wanted to return for Thanksgiving, having promised his wife as such. He needed to cover much territory, and planned 40 kilometers a day to make it back in time. We knew when he passed that that would be the last time ... as it was for all folks.

But for the Spaniard, the first we'd met, who appeared quite shy with all of these "foreigners" walking the camino around him, became very gregarious as I opened up our conversation. We tailed each other throughout the walk to Viana, which was really the mid-point for the day according to our guide.

Upon arriving in charming Viana, where mass had finished and the whole town appeared to be in the adjacent bar, Antonio invited us in where he treated us to Beer and Calimari and lively conversation. It was a breakthrough for my confidence in Spanish as it was 100% Spanish, but much, much easier than my last conversation with Arial.

Walking out of that bar, we decided then and there to stop for the day rather than heading for Logrono. After a siesta, we headed for dinner where a lovely group of children had gathered after their trick and treating. We were taken aback to see such a sight and not being shy, we started talking. Here we remained for the next twenty minutes enjoying the most magical of exchanges of culture and generations you could imagine—if I'd only had my camera on me!

Camino Day 9: November 1, 2010

Viana to Navarette

Logrono was to originally be our destination and you can easily see why the majority of pilgrims stay here. It is chock full of great culture. We were given suggestions as to where to go for tapas bars. Originally planning on hitting them at night, it was no matter, as November 1st is a major holiday in Spain, All Saints Day.

The signs of change started early.

Stepping into the province of Rioja was itself marked with it's crest, it's camino scallop logo, the vines abundant.

The outskirts where we entered, brought us immediately upon its cemetery. It was a surprise to see that this was really the equivalent to our memorial day. Thousands were dressed up in their finest and the graves were decorated abundantly with flowers.

Thus, when we came into the city, it was as lively as any Sunday afternoon, and the place we choose to try out the famous Logrono tapas was vibrant with large, beautiful looking families.

This year was an extra sacred year for pilgrims, as this is the Jubilee or Holy Year. This would mean that many more pilgrims would journey to Santiago with the chance to walk through the *Portal de Perdon* or Forgiveness Door in Santiago, which is only open on these rare years. The next not being until 2021.

The sign on the cathedral read:

HOLY YEAR: Journey towards the light on the tracks left by other pilgrims.

Navarette would be our target as we left the city and into yet more vineyards. Rioja is of course the most famous region of wine in Spain. The abundance rubs off on the city image of what has become a global brand.

Out in the countryside, we put on our ponchos on for the first time since we had purchased replacements for what was left of our cheap yellow ones of the first day. Purchased at *El Corte Inglés*, the major department store in Spain, we bought what they had, the last two ponchos remaining. They were designed for hunters.

Along the way, we had our first brush with Galicia, the last and final province of this journey, with a Gallego, who was on bike, but walked with us a distance due to the rains. He spoke an Irish-sounding perfect English, one of thousands who was forced to migrate to the UK in order to find work over twenty years prior. He spoke poorly of Rioja and looked forward to the inexpensive drinks, tapas and food of Galicia—and much more delicious food. We'd have to see.

Camino Day 10: November 2, 2010

Navarette to Najera

Today would be a short walking day. We didn't know it at the time, but we'd be eating from the vines and my companion likely ate a few unwashed grapes and started getting a sour stomach that turned progressively worse. I would be scouting for medicines at the *farmacia* in Najera, a beautiful town on a lush river with a cathedral connected to sacred caves.

This was also the day, a day I anticipated as I was writing yesterday, that we'd encounter the first of the camino friends that would "stick." The ones you just didn't share a few minutes of path, or even neighboring bunk, but rather, friends with the affinity that magnetizes you back to them time and time again.

It was today, as we stepped into the cafe in Ventosa (Population 150) for an early lunch and a respite from the cold, that we encountered Isabel and Sebastian, a couple in their fifties.

I was first taken with the delightful awakened eyes of Isabel—clearly not from around these parts. She had a vivid sensuality, a curiosity that was stunning. Her husband sat reading the paper, while she read her camino guidebook. They were the most relaxed of the pilgrims we'd met so far. I opened up the conversation on our way out just as a lone American woman came walking in, with whom we had spent a few minutes with.

Little did we know, after we'd found our hotel and rested up a bit, that we would venture into Najera center to the exact restaurant where the majority of pilgrims were dining. We sat at our own table, but introduced ourselves to the Scottsman, a couple of Germans and a few others. Halfway through our meal, this same couple showed up and were seated beside us—the first meal of many that might come.

Their English was excellent. They'd chosen to walk the Camino as a kind of cultural vacation since retiring. They were pilgrims who wore jeans, which is one of the reasons I'd mistook them at first. Jeans give you the camouflage to enjoy an evening without being immediately associated as a pilgrim ... a contrast to me, with my trekking pants and hunter orange jacket.

Camino Day 11: November 3, 2010

Najera Recovery Day

How lucky we were to be traveling with open tickets. Our destination was Santiago and as an extension, Finisterre ... but as to the day, we knew not when. In fact, we'd made a point to read only the guidebook for the day as we finished the current one or in the morning over coffee. We could not anticipate what great finds we just might encounter in the days down. We didn't know the names of the major cities we'd find. All that as we lived still in a kind of social isolation, staying mostly in hotels. When we did stay where other pilgrims might be, we shared only glimpses of each other as we lacked a common language.

Today would be a day of relaxation and sightseeing.

What a magical place to be, in Najera with its extraordinary Monasterio Santa Maria de la Real(1156) with its Royal Pantheon which housed the burial place of many of the illustrious kings, queens and knights of the kingdom of Navarre. This included the legendary statue of the Virgin Mary whom the son of Sancho the Great, Don Garcia, discovered upon following his hunting falcon into a cave. The Sarcophaguses on display were extraordinary and gave one a glimpse into the far off world of chivalry and also clearly expressed the mortality/immortality of all reigns.

Other highlights included eating *pulpo*, or octopus for the first time. We'd heard the legend of how good it could be in Spain. Of course being an exotic treat in this region, I paid doubly for it. Najera was a small town of 7000 people and despite its legendary founding, it was the first immigrant town we'd come upon. With the many Arab cultures apparent, I had to reflect on just how much things are changing around the world ...

About the author: Christopher Staser has assisted in the creation and launch of over 40 brands and several national award-winning films, videos and websites with his 15 year creative career in film, video, and branding. He is currently producing and writing a series of feature films inspired by his journeys in Spain. He is also actively developing a foreign language speaking system for wide market release.

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The Muse Awakens - EFAM | Escape From America Magazine | EFAM

The Muse Awakens

By Amoon / Jan 12 • Categorized as [Living Overseas](#)

I arrived in Antalya, Turkey...

Founded in the third century BC, the city reverberates with an ancient, magical history that permeates every aspect of Mediterranean life. As I wandered the stunning streets that poetically weave in, around and through the seaport city, my footsteps echoed with those who came before me. It took very little imagination to follow the call of the past and transport myself back in time. I was drawn to Kaleici, foldy know as Old Antalya, like a moth to a flame. Without question, my soul, my essence knew this place. The stone walls, the old houses built side by side in a charming topsy-turvy manner, the family owned shops offering delights for all the senses – it was all familiar. Navigating the narrow lanes with my internal compass, I decided to trust the unexplainable feeling of remembrance, and granted myself permission to be seduced by what had summoned me there in the first place – my heart.

Amoon - My soul began to sing!

Love and passion have always been my motivators, yet too often I would choose to ignore the subtle whispers of these messengers.

Wanting so desperately to find my place in a world I adored but seldom felt at home in, I gave precedent to my rational mind that would silence any voice that encouraged me to express myself. To sing out loud. Ironic, considering I am a singer. It was this internal struggle that set the foundation for my journey to Turkey. My heart had grown weary and bored of my fear of being fully seen and heard, yet I had no idea how to release it. This fear had become a part of my identity, and I had no idea who I would then be without it. Still, my soul was done with the story that kept telling itself in an endless loop. I had to decide between two paths. I could either find a new way of being in this world, or the spark of life within me would burn itself out.

These thoughts occupied my mind as I strolled around Karaaliogule Park, the gorgeous park that winds around the Gulf of Antalya, offering the most stunning views of the cliffs and the Roman harbor. I found myself asking the land, and sea and the wisdom of all the souls who came before me to give me a sign as to what I was to do. I kept asking the question, **“How do I live fully, how do I live free of fear?”**

Then up in the distance I saw the Hidirlik Tower. It is situated where the land and sea walls meet, and holds space on the edge of the cliffs. It once served as a lookout tower, and then later as a lighthouse.

All at once the symbology hit me and I was given my answer: **Be a light unto myself and all darkness will be illuminated. Allow myself to shine and all the world will brighten.**

Little did I know I would soon be given the chance to put this revelation into action. The next day I ventured east to the ancient city of Aspendos. I had never heard of this city before, and was hugely surprised to learn that it was the home to the most well-preserved amphitheater in all antiquity. The legend of how the Aspendos Theater came to be captivated me immediately:

The most well-preserved amphitheater in all antiquity

The King of the land had one child, a daughter. Desiring to preserve the peace and majesty of his kingdom and insure it would thrive with the next generation, he decided to hold a competition for his daughters hand in marriage. The man who created the most amazing service for benefit of all the people would have his daughter's prized hand and so would become King. Two engineers stood out. One built an unprecedented water system of canals that brought water to the entire city. The other built the largest amphitheater in the world, seating 7,000, with acoustics that allowed every single person in its audience to clearly hear.

The King was impressed with both, but was leaning towards the man who built the water system. Now legend has it that his daughter was in love with architect who built the theater. The princess asked her father to visit the amphitheater one more time before he made his decision. The King agreed.

He climbed to the highest seat in the farthest section and sat. Soon he heard a voice repeating over and over, “The King's daughter must be mine.” The King looked to his left and to his right but could find no one. Again and again the words came. Then finally his attention was drawn down far below to the center stage. To his amazement he saw the architect pacing and it was he who was speaking softly to himself. The King was so impressed he awarded the man the winner, and the architect and the princess, and the people of the city lived happily ever after.

As I entered through the grand archway of Aspendos Theater my breath caught in my throat. The open air, circular theater soared up and up and merged with the sky. My entire body surged with energy, chills running up and down my spine. Happy tears streamed down my flushed cheeks. I had been here before.

My soul began to sing!

So strong was the song, so brilliant and alive that I could not contain it. I could not hide it. I had to share the music; the desire was born of something greater than myself. To my absolute amazement, amidst all the tourists and commotion, I walked on

trembling legs to the center of the stage and closed my eyes. At once the seemingly dense reality of this world gave way to the guidance and truth of my inner sight. A profound knowing overcame me, and I was transported to place within myself that fully remembered the bliss and ecstasy of being ONE with all creation.

A symphony of the past, present and future came serenading through the channels of my heart. In an instant I surrendered my small, ego identity to the expansive unity and love of the Beloved. Knowing I was divinely supported I gave myself completely to the calling, and I began to sing.

The song was spontaneous and improvised. I had no idea where it would take me or which note would choose to spring from my heart, I simply trusted. I didn't know language, the words were foreign to me, but the feeling was home – Instead of me singing the song, the song sung me.

When the song was complete the entire amphitheater was in silence. I opened my eyes, and I was forever changed. For the first time, I could see. And for the first time, I allowed myself to be seen. Nearly every person present came up to me afterward in joy and awe. Each soul shared how much they longed to embody their talent and passion as I just had, and that witnessing me do so would forever inspire them.

The fear of following my passion, of embodying my purpose, of stepping out into the world and owning my voice will never again silence my inner calling. Nor will I ever again deny my brothers and sisters the opportunity to do the same. Before I left for Turkey, the world was reflecting to me that the time for transformation was now. Having returned from Turkey the message is the same, but now I am one of the messengers.

My message is simple: Be a light unto yourself. Allow yourself to shine as the miracle you are and the world will brighten.

By ~ Amoon

About the author: Amoon is a Tantric Metaphysician who creates beautiful, celestial music for healing, transformation and evolution. It is her purpose and passion to share the healing and mystical principles of sound and vibration as tools for the enlightenment of the soul. Amoon gives performances, sound concerts, ceremonies and workshops, and offers one on one counseling around the world.

Greatly influenced by Western Mysticism, Hawaiian Huna, Sufism, and the esoteric teachings of Mahamudra Tantra, Amoon's study and embodiment of music, sound and vibration have immersed her in multiple wisdom teachings from all around the globe. She emphasizes each person is an essential instrument in the symphony of life, and it is our brithright and our mission to contribute our unique vibrational imprint to the unfoldment of the One masterpiece.

Amoon invites you to embody your purpose, to speak your truth and live your bliss!

Stay intimately connected with her on Facebook at: www.facebook.com/MuseAmoon

Twitter: www.twitter.com/MuseAmoon

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You may contact Amoon at: info@museamoon.com

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My Spiritual Journey - Adrienne Schmidt - EFAM | Escape From America Magazine | EFAM

My spiritual self and its journey began at a very young age, with a childhood that was spent in Bellingham, Washington.

Be the change that you want to see

The journey to evolve continues to grow and unravel throughout my life ...

In the beginnings, I chose to hide my awakened gifts and abilities, keeping them quiet and largely under wraps. I was afraid of what people might think if they saw who I really was. Then all of a sudden, my inner potential seemed to blossom rapidly. It all happened a few months after I made a life changing decision. I gathered my courage and jumped on my very first plane ride, taking a solo trip across the ocean. I was flying far from my family, friends and my comfort zone to work and live in Maui, Hawaii.

Upon arriving in Hawaii I began to gain sacred knowledge. I learned about the Energy or "Mana". It is one of the Islands sacred magical powers. Its teachings are practiced as a way of life by the locals.

Mana by definition is the supernatural force believed to dwell inside a person or sacred object.

The Hawaiian shamans known as the Kahunas tell stories about how each island is said to hold the balance of a different chakra. These stories tell the tale of how each island also has its own reigning god and that the Island of Maui is named after the Hawaiian Sun god. Since Maui is the center island, it is known as the heart chakra island, connecting the vast Hawaiian Islands chain at their core. According to the Kahunas the different islands each held a different energy signature. Each island represented its crucial part of the Hawaiian island chain. Since I lived on the island of Maui its energy resonated to me personally.

When a person is sensitive to these energies decides to "visit" or "island hop" to another island in the Hawaiian Island chain you can seriously FEEL the change of energy when you first step down off the plane. When you first land on solid ground, you get the feeling "That You Just Know". That is the only way I can explain it.

You have an instant connection with the island and you can feel the peaceful and loving Mana from the island or in other cases you feel you should not be on the island at all. I have witnessed friends that did not believe in supernatural occurrences or anything out of the norm, step one foot on a different island and they could NOT shake an almost eerie feeling surrounding them that they didn't belong. Many friends have explained the same feeling from the different island energy. This is due to the fact that the Hawaiian islands have vortexes of energy all around and through them.

In my journeys I have learned that getting in tune with these feelings have helped my spiritual awakening greatly. This heightened awareness has helped me be able to be open up more and even talk more about what I have personally experienced. In Hawaii many of the locals on Da islands are "open" to speaking freely about strange occurrences like, knowing things you should not know. Feeling things that you have not felt before. People stopping you and telling you something that you needed to know at just at the right second. The islands help you get in tune with your spirit guides and in return help you on your spiritual path.

It was right there in Maui that a seed was born deep inside me with an overwhelming urge that I wanted to help people and be a part of something bigger than myself. Searching inside myself I came up with an idea to spread the "Aloha" by helping people feel and look their best. My partner and I set out on this journey by opening a salon and wellness center in Kannapali, Hawaii, This was our way of doing a daily "Pay it Forward" to anyone that visited our salon and wellness center. For over 4 years I made a little difference in our clients' lives by making each and every one of them feel special. Even if for a brief moment of time, while they were in the salon, it brought our clients joy and laughter to their everyday lives as well as the local community.

Even in doing so, inside my soul, I felt that it was just not enough and that I was missing out on what my real calling was in life. I mean how could my little salon have an impact on the world?? Then all of the sudden I was brainstorming with my friend and we came up with an idea that would change my life forever.

Every moment of everyday, we all have the opportunity to make a lasting impression, and to CHANGE our lives and the lives of the people around us. All of us have the power inside of us to make POSITIVE CHANGES for OUR FUTURE AND THE WORLD.

Wouldn't it be great to motivate people from around the world to inspire others by doing a **Random Act of Kindness** and leaving a positive, lasting impression on the people around us?

We wanted to show people, through a random act of kindness, that there is love and hope in the world. We may think that we are just one person in the world, but to one person, at one time, we are the world.

We discussed making a positive difference and experiencing the true power of giving by making a decision to be the positive change to the people around us. We decided that together, we can all make the POSITIVE CHANGE for OUR FUTURE AND THE WORLD!

And SO the Karma Experiment was born ... [Please watch my Video!](#)

The Karma Experiment Pay it Forward was created for the world, for every single person around the world, to be a part of and live pay it forward every day, however they see fit in their own life's journey and the people they come into daily contact.

Along with its new vivacious life came the constant battle of letting go; saying goodbye to dear friends, family, and the local community I grew to love and cherish everyday. A new beginning was occurring.

The birth of my mission allowed the new, improved version of myself to emerge. The feeling of a major transformation overtook me and before I knew it I was leaving the life that I had created in Maui for my next journey.

As I am writing this, out of nowhere, the skies filled with the chirps of baby birds! They are all singing and playing, swooping down in front of my window... A constant reminder and confirmation that I am on my right spiritual journey. I am crying and laughing at the same time listening to the little birds sing. It is almost like the birds are outside singing...

“You did it Adrienne!!! Congratulations! You see, you listened within... see what you can do! We ARE all connected and we ARE with you Always, just remember to PAY ATTENTION!!”

I have happy tears streaming down my face and I'm so thankful for the opportunity to have such experiences to share with you and to be able to be a part of the CHANGE we want to see in the world.

The Karma Experiment is now made up of people from all walks of life from around the world. As of the last count, the Karma Experiment has reached over 1,000,000 members and is in 39 countries with over 540 Karma Officers participating in the Karma Experiment.

Thank you for sharing this moment with me wherever you are in the world. Know that all places you visit on your spiritual journey are embedded inside you, and reflect your message out to the people around you and to the world.

Love to all, Aloha.

Adrienne

About the author: Currently, Adrienne Schmidt is the Co-Founder of The Karma Experiment that has over 1,000,000 members in 39 countries. Adrienne Schmidt is a Doctor of Philosophy in Metaphysical Science, having graduated from The Institute of Divine Philosophical Science. Adrienne Schmidt worked for the Karma Experiment for 3 years since its inception December 2008. As a student of The Study of Eternal Essence, Adrienne Schmidt has dedicated her life work to helping people from around the world. She has mentored thousands of people daily by teaching people how to incorporate daily acts of kindness into their everyday lives. Visit [Her Website](#)

Favorite Quote: Be the change that you want to see in the world, you, me, we, collectively.

Profession: Life Coach

Adrienne Schmidt's passion, dedication and determination, has touched the lives of millions people around the world each day. Her passion is to remind them that a simple random act of kindness to a complete stranger can make the difference in that person's life forever. This provides a living example that they can be the change they want to see in the world.

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Finding Peace in Prison

By Thomas McMurray / Jan 12 • Categorized as [Living Overseas](#)

TV cameras, SUV's everywhere, 9mm guns pointed at me, I am being arrested Panama in a spectacular mid-day raid in the heart of the Panama business district conducted by the FBI and the Judicial Technical Police (PTJ).

Thoman McMurray – A Journey through Addiction, Cancer, Prison...Peace

Abandoned in a dark Panama 10x10 dungeon with seven other men...ankle and wrist shackles...extradited from the Republic of Panama...

THOMAS E. McMURRAIN V. THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, charged with 153 counts of mail fraud, wire fraud, bank fraud, securities fraud and money laundering... more charges than Bernie Ebbers, Bernie Madoff and the Enron executives combined

Facing 25 years to life...my children, my wife...what have the f*ck have I done?

This is where my spiritual journey begins...

I punched the walls so hard in the Panama dungeon that my knuckles bled, the singing and yelling in Spanish went on 24 hours a day. Ancon Prison, Republic of Panama, Hell on Earth. I slept about every other day. I was bloated from years of heavy drinking two to three bottles of Jack D. a week, 270lbs and Bi-polar as hell. The detox was a bitch. 24 hour lock down, sleeping toe to head on a urine stained cement floor, two plates of rice per day, lentil beans and an occasional piece of cooked SPAM. Eight years later I still avoid white rice, lentils and I have never have like SPAM.

Truth: US Federal Prisons are like the Ritz Carlton compared to a Central American prison. If you have to go to prison, do it in the USA, and go Federal.

I waited in pre-trial for 10 months, no sun, no grass, just cigarettes, Honeybuns and Mountain Dew, I fought like a Barracuda not wanting to come in the boat, I cussed everyone, the Judge, my lawyer, my wife, the district attorney and anyone else I could. I am not a fraud – I never intended to hurt anyone! The biggest infraction I ever had was driving on a suspended license, how could I deserve this type of treatment? My lawyer told me that based on the dollar amount that I was only looking at 18-36 months, then why does it say 25 years to life? I would rather be dead than spend 25 years in a 'human warehouse', a term used by Wall Street.

Eight years later....

In retrospect, prison was one of the best things that ever happened to me. Truth be told, I was already in one even before being arrested. Maybe prison was my time under the Bodhi tree, my 40 days in the desert, what Viktor Frankl in his book "A Man's Search for Meaning" describes as an existential experience.

The joke was....everything that meant anything to me was taken, millions in assets, my Jaguar XJR, all my Penn fishing reels and Tuna Sticks, my resort, my 'Noriega' house, furniture, my fishing boat, oh and my family (I say this tongue and cheek).

How stupid I was to think that anything material had any lasting value. I had cancer in my early thirties, now prison at 36 years old...my thirties sucked and yet my family stuck by my side.

I owed it to them to come out a warrior...

The night before sentencing I lost it. I realized that another man, Federal Judge Hunt was going to determine how long I was going to be confined beyond my control. I dropped to my knees crying and I asked the universe for a miracle. If got 25 years I would quickly find a way to kill myself.

I was walking into court with an open sentence, my lawyer arguing for something less than sixty months – I got 87 months... Quickly doing the math in my head as my heart started to sink...my kids would be entering middle school before I came home, would my wife wait for me? 82% of released offenders get divorced. It was three times more than I was expecting.

In the federal system you have to do 87% of your sentence and you get up to 10% of your total sentence in a halfway house. So, I had already been locked up for 15 months so, 87 minus 13% good time takes it to 75 months minus 15 months I have already done takes it to 60 months... minus 8 months in a halfway house. So 52 months, just over 4 years...I can do this. To make it even shorter I qualified for a 500 hr drug and rehabilitation course that knocked an additional 12 months off my sentence – so all in all I am going to be confined for just over five years – 63 months to be exact....I counted every single one. (See Here)

I can do this....I will be 41 years old and I can rebuild my life...but I really need a better plan!

I think it was Einstein that said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them"...

Bulls-eye!

During my pre-detention I started reading books, something I had never done in my life. I started gaining some self awareness, the alcohol was out of my system, and my mood swings from manic to severe depression had reduced. I got off the sugar and I had been taking psychotropic drugs to help me sleep. Ultimately, I think they helped me gain awareness of what it was like to not have the hypomanic swings. For the first time in my life I started to feel content...in prison.

Could I actually find peace in prison?

I created a quote that has profoundly changed my life;

“Until you start asking the right questions, you will continue getting the wrong answers.”

Facing 25 years to life, being extradited, yeah, I would have to say that I was not asking the right questions! I truly believe that we are a product, a result of what questions we ask the universe. During my ‘incarca-sabbatical’, I began my journey for Self-Awareness and the battle with my horribly ignorant ego began.

The ego or the shadow as I call it (our alternative ID) is something that we spend many years building, we invest in it, we feed it and we justify everything it does. I fed mine alcohol starting from 6th grade, I built it into a deceitful machine to avoid the (in hindsight, justifiable) wrath of my father. I adorned it with expensive clothes, I was the most self-important person that I knew, a wrecking ball that left a path like a category 5 hurricane. I was heading down the wrong side of the highway with my eyes closed. I was a total sleepwalker...

I spent the last 18 year of my life running from the first 18 years and I landed in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary lost without a bread crumb trail.

After almost 18 months of very confined hard time, I transferred to the Federal camp in Atlanta. I went to the commissary and I spent \$300 buying real clothes, shoes, a walkman and real food. I remember stopping halfway across the gravel covered prison yard – catching a glimpse of the moon and stars, something I had not seen in a while. I sat down to enjoy the fresh air and the precious view and pulled out my new (very overpriced government issued) walkman, I inserted the batteries, pre-programmed the channels and put it on the local rock channel and U2 ‘A Beautiful Day’ had just started...I never cried so hard in my life – Imagine the circumstances and listen to the lyrics of the song.

That night I was placed in a cube with two other guys and the first thing I was offered that night after the 8pm count was a pint of Seagrams 7. I drank it and passed out. I woke the next day smelling with the heavy smell of bourbon around me and one of the worst hangovers I have ever had in my life... I hit bottom. I had no more tears...I had lost everything, most importantly the clarity I had tasted over 18 months of sobriety.

I had climbed what I thought was the ladder of success, only to find that it was leaning against the wrong wall and I plummeted to the ground face first. (I thank Dr. Stephen Covey for this awareness in such a profound quote)

In prison you become a number, you are no longer a member of society. Your clothes are chosen for you as are your meals – the guards are bitter and no one is paid to make your life easier – Prison is one of the worst places on earth. In prison every one pretends to be someone they are not – As a side note: before the ‘Crack’ sentencing reduction bill that Congress passed, everyone was a Kingpin drug dealer after the Bill was passed and the ‘King Pins’ realized they could get 24 months off their sentence they all became petty crack dealers. – We used to make bets on who we would see in the legal library tying up their motions. Snitches were hated, but most were at the Camp because they got reduced sentences for snitching out all their friends. If there was more than one person on your indictment and you were at a camp, you were most likely a snitch. My indictment with amendments was almost 80 pages long and I was the only person listed at the top.

In prison you learn the truth about human nature – you realize that without self-awareness most human beings act no differently animals, and in survival mode they are reduced to scavengers. In prison you see the true essence of the ignorant man.

I did however meet one very interesting individual; he had a deep radio announcer’s voice, one that was familiar to me. Everyone said to stay away from him, that he was pompous, an elitist and a bit of a freak. He was a freak with a big gray beard, he sat on his bed like Yoda and he eyebrows created snowflakes of dandruff on his glasses. But he had 4,000 plus books memorized in his head and a 220+ IQ. I introduced myself to him and he started peeling me back like an onion with questions I could not answer, simple questions that frustrated me. He challenged me to read books with names I could not pronounce like Boethius, Machiavelli, Prudentius, Bhagavad Gita, Polybius, Plutarch and Coehlo.

Here are five books that change my life:

- Principle Centered Leadership by Dr. Stephen Covey
- The Bhagavad Gita
- The Alchemist by Paulo Coehlo
- From Onions to Pearls by Santyam Nadeem
- A Diamond in Your Pocket by Gangaji

If you are struggling with mood swings I recommend Struggling with Demons by Manfred Kets De Vries.

Back to my Yoda friend....

He asked me one specific question that provided with the inspiration to pour through 400+ books looking for THE answer. I filled my mind with knowledge, the knowledge started manifesting in Self Awareness and peace ensued. Bliss was tasted when I put down all the books and stopped looking for the answer. I discovered meditation, yoga and Zen Buddhism as described by the author Christmas Humphries. Indifference and detachment became one of my greatest realizations. I was now able to bring the waves of the ocean to the surface of the mind and I could see clearly into my soul. It was awesome!

I could not count the days, so I would count the months. There were no classes to speak of so I talked the camp warden into allowing us to start a prisoner re-entry program called ITEA! – The program consisted of eight classes that covered Personal Development, Business Plans, Business Law, Logotherapy, Business Finance, and Spirituality.

We reached out to Best Selling Authors, like Robert Kiyosaki, Rick Warren, Rich and David Sloan, The Viktor Frankl foundation, Entrepreneur Magazine and Stephen Scott to contribute books and they responded in kind. Typically about 10% of the camp was enrolled in the classes and over 500 graduated from our program.

Teaching these classes re-centered me and taught me that unless you are helping other people grow that you will never reach your highest potential. I now see why teachers in public and private school systems do what they do for very little pay – the reward is in watching people grow.

Teachers might be the truest angels of all.

Looking back on the whole experience, I was simply Santiago, the shepherd in the Alchemist going through this journey searching for the treasure under the pyramid, only to find that it was located in the place that God originally put it – in my heart. One of the greatest gifts I gained in prison was the practice of meditation. I connected with the space between the inhale and the exhale and tasted the sweet nectar of bliss.

I spent four years carrying around the book of the dead, not wanting to get rid of my sheep and seeking the answer to my treasure.

My journey began with a question in an unlikely place, prison, where I found peace in silence, from someone nobody liked, a Guru – a spiritual being in a human warehouse

His question 'Koan' incase you were wondering was: What is the Absolute Source of Power? – A seemingly simple to answer question that can only be revealed when you can bring your mind to a blissfully silent state. Hard to do in today's world, yes?

In the present day – My girlfriend (wife) of 20 years is madly in love with me – my kids are my best friends and the irony – I am the global business development director for a top 1% ranked website in the world called of all things Escapeartist.

Whether you are desiring to escape from a country, a bad relationship, an addiction or a one way dead end job, my passion at [Escapeartist](#) is to provide you with the knowledge to:

"Live where you want to live, live how you want to live, love who you want to love, and make money doing it."

During my tenure at "Camp Fed" I gained an appreciation for the Lakota Sweat lodge ceremony, the Sacred Pipe written by Black Elk and the story of the White Buffalo Woman. I had the honor of serving the tribe for two years as a medicine man and I was given a Lakota name, "Man without Shadow".

Every week, I looked forward to Saturday morning. I enjoyed watching the egotistical 'tough guys' enter the Inipi laughing and cussing and see them leave crying for their mom. Few left the mother's womb as a warrior. I know without a doubt that I did. That sweat lodge and my fellow native friends changed my life forever. If the prison would allow me, I would go back every Saturday to conduct a sweat lodge ceremony. It brought me so much peace and it crushed my ego.

I learned what a warrior spirit was from Chief Yellowknife and Tim from Kentucky – they were the strongest guys I ever met in prison – they could endure heat and pain more than anyone that I had ever known. While guys were crying, gasping for air through the grass, Tim's prayers would come from the ceiling of the Inipi...because he was standing and enduring the most extreme heat. The extreme heat initiated the battle between the ego and the spirit and the only way you could make it through four rounds was to side with your spirit – the ego is really weak and will do whatever it can to avoid pain. The Ego is a p*ssy (forgive my French)

In the Inipi (Sweat Lodge) we had all faiths represented, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists and Native Americans. On the first round of prayers we prayed for the children, the second round, the women, the third round was an open round for each person to say a prayer of their own faith and in the fourth round we did a meditation round that turned into a warrior round where the Chief would continue to pour water on the hot rocks until someone yelled....

Aho Mitakuyase!

To this day I still pack the Canupa Wakan with prayers and I burn sage in my gym as it brings back many memories of a place where I left my terribly ignorant ego....prison, a great place for it.

I chased my shadow for 36 years and eventually caught it only to realize that it was no-thing.

Today, I live by a Haiku: " A tug-of-war, drop the rope, oneness is realized"

Thomas McMurrain is the global business development director for one of the largest international lifestyle websites in the world. He is responsible for the development and sales of the Escapeartist Media Bureau program, Escapeartist Home

Business, EscapeMD Medical Tourism, Investment Group International, EscapeBlogger and EscapeDates International Dating, Social and Business Network Marketing Community. His areas of strengths are in social media, search engine optimization and sales. His driving passion is to help people realize their greatest potential.

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