

PRAISE FOR ERICA TUCCI
AND HER BOOKS

ZESTY WOMANHOOD AT 40 AND BEYOND: SECOND ACT, NEW ROLE

"Such a glorious way of expressing the renewal of feminine power that our world is experiencing. *Zesty Womanhood at 40 and Beyond* is a delightfully exciting collection of observations about the 40something woman who joyfully ventures into the next season of her life to find the treasures that await her."

—Antoinette & Richard Asimus, founders of www.TantraHeart.com

"There is a rising balance between the Yin and the Yang in the world through the increasing emergence of feminine energy and wisdom. Erica Tucci has captured this evolution beautifully in her book *Zesty Womanhood at 40 and Beyond* as she reveals how her own personal experiences as a woman returning to her center of power are a reflection of many women at the same crossroads in life."

—Rachael Jayne Groover, founder of *The Yin Project* and author of *Powerful and Feminine: How to Increase Your Magnetic Presence and Attract the Attention You Want*

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

"*Anything is Possible* is an engaging narrative of a life and love lived in accordance to one's own feminine inner journey. It is the story not only of an adventure embracing one's difficulty of external life, but of confronting the inner complexities of one's inner life, as well. It is the story that every woman should come to realize."

—Dr. Nancy Qualls-Corbett, Jungian analyst and author of *The Sacred Prostitute*

"What a luscious mystical tale Erica has written about two people living oceans apart and yet connected deeply in spirit. Theirs is a love so profound and with such passion, yet it must stand the test of time and transformation. As the novel is so appropriately entitled, *Anything is Possible!*"

—Antoinette and Richard Asimus, founders of www.TantraHeart.com

"I found reading the book to be a delicious experience like drinking hot chocolate in front of a cozy winter fire."

—Saqi Dosaj, www.wonderfulreadings.com

"Your story was so down to earth and easy to relate to. Your writing flows so effortlessly, I felt like I was living through it with you. But you kept me wondering what was going to happen next. You made me realize that if you really want something in life, you can make it happen."

—D. L. Briggs

"What a beautiful read! All these years I have been in love with the author Joy Fielding. Now I have you to admire. You have the creative gift. I hope there are other projects in the works. A talent such as yours should not be left stagnant. Keep the creative juices flowing! I hope I will be the first to get your next edition when it comes out."

—*T. Ferrara*

Erica Tucci

**Zesty Womanhood at 40
and Beyond:
Second Act, New Role**

Publish it Write
P.O. Box 2689
Cypress, TX 77410-2689
281.794.2168
<http://www.ericatucci.com>

We gratefully acknowledge the following for permission to reprint copyrighted material:
In Praise of Older Women from Suddenly Senior, a weekly e-zine, <http://www.suddenlysenior.com>, published by
Frank Kaiser.
Used by Permission.

Maralissa Lou, song lyrics by Eddie Coker, <http://www.eddiecoker.com>
Used by Permission.

Text copyright © 2011 by Erica Tucci

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher, except for the inclusion of brief quotations.

Edition ISBNs
Softcover – 978-0-9662451-3-4
e-book - 978-0-9662451-2-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Number 2011900175

Printed in the United States.

To all the women who have reached that phenomenal age of 40. May you enter the next phase of your life with such zeal and passion that you infuse the same in everyone you touch in mind, body, and spirit.

*I am the woman who holds up the sky.
The rainbow runs through my eyes.
The sun makes a path to my womb.
My thoughts are in the shape of clouds.
But my words are yet to come.*

Poem of the Ute Indians

Acknowledgments

This book was such an incredible experience to create over the years that it took me to complete it, and there are so many people that I wish to acknowledge for their support as I have traveled the journey of my 40s.

Actually, to all those who deserve great accolades, not so much for the support they provided me while I wrote my book, but for all the wonderful support they have provided me throughout the different phases of my life, which led me to write this book. My immediate family, my mom and my brother, deserve so much more than what I've been able to give them. I will never, ever be able to thank them enough for what they've done for me. And my sons...well, they are the light of my life. If it weren't for them, my life would be so much less fulfilling. And to all my very dear friends who have listened to all my ramblings and have even sometimes joined me on the roller coaster ride I've been on for way too many years. I think I may actually be finally ready to get off and touch ground again. Oh, please don't think of me as some crazy wild woman! I'm just a woman who has tried to embrace life to the nth degree and, in doing so, I have experienced the ride of my life...taking on the good, the bad, and the ugly. And guess what, it's really not over! I, as all women over 40, have a whole new life ahead of me.

And of course I certainly can't forget Joe Jaques, the graphic designer who made my book come alive through his design talent.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Personal Boundaries

Experiencing Love, the Universal Truth

Seeing Beauty through Older Eyes

Relationships as a Transformative Force

Awakening the Feminine Prowess Within

Letting Go of Old Behaviors...of Old Thoughts

Living a Life without Expectations

From Order to Chaos and Back to Order Again...Maybe!

Coming Full Circle

A Bit of Humor

Books of Interest

Notes

Other Books by the Author

About the Author

Introduction

“I dedicate this book to all women who have entered their fifth decade of life and who revel in the treasures that pour forth. For this is the beginning of the best years of a woman’s life. It is the time to reclaim the Divine female within.”

Turning 40 or thereabouts is a pivotal point in a woman’s life. What awaits us as we enter the fifth decade of our lives are new challenges and adventures to experience as we seek to reclaim our Divine right as a woman. Everything that we have done thus far in our lives has only prepared us for what’s to come.

Spring is the season of renewal and I entered my 40s in April 1999. Perhaps there’s some Divine intent for me being born in spring. I have often felt that every new experience is like a rebirth. My, my, that means I’ve been pregnant many, many times, giving birth to new and different meanings to my life each time, all sacred and precious because of the wisdom that I have gained.

To some people, reaching 40 is like death. It’s sad that these people have lived 40 years of their lives only to feel that now their lives are over, that it’s downhill from here on out. I want to shake them and scream at them for having their eyes shut, their minds tuned out and their hearts closed to the riches that are now theirs.

Instead we should look back over the first 40 years of our lives and see how every circumstance, every venture, every experience were scenes in the first act of our life play and how all these events set the stage for the second act.

Now the curtain has risen again, and the principal character stands alone, center stage, with a single spot gleaming upon her, reminding us that it is she to whom this play is dedicated. She is us and this is her/our life. I will be telling my story, but as I do, I feel I will be telling the story of many women who have reached that very special age of 40.

Join me as the events of the play unfold. There will be scenes on finding personal boundaries, experiencing love, seeing beauty through older eyes, transforming through relationships, reclaiming one’s feminine power, letting go of old behaviors and thoughts, living a life without expectations, getting out of chaos and coming full circle. And because life is meant to be full of joy and mirth, the book closes with something to leave you chuckling.

Please note that as you read each chapter, you may encounter some contradictions. This is because it took me seven years to complete the book and as I wrote each chapter, I reached a new level of growth and new awareness. I may have believed one thing one way at one time while writing one chapter, then after gaining more awareness about a situation, my perception may have changed. This is all part of the process we go through as we journey down that road of evolution.

I dedicate this book to all women who have entered their fifth decade of life and who revel in the treasures that pour forth. For this is the beginning of the best years of a woman’s life. It is the time to reclaim the Divine female within. My story is YOUR story!

One note before you begin the “second act”...At the end of each chapter, I have included an exercise to help you apply the meaning of the chapter to yourself. I suggest that you read the exercise and then journal your answer through “stream of consciousness” writing. You might be surprised at how cathartic this can be for you as you allow your innermost thoughts and insights

to be revealed on paper. I emphasize that you don't allow your ego or inner critic to get in the way of your free-flowing writing. Just write from the depths of your heart and soul.

Personal Boundaries

“It is truly important that instead of a woman’s life being like that of a pie cut up in an indiscriminate number of pieces, a woman must be the one who holds the knife to selectively slice her life into the number of segments she is willing to accept to set her boundaries.”

When I first began writing this book, I shared what I had written with Michael, a writer friend of mine. When I gave him the first two passages of what I had written – the “Introduction” and the chapter on Patriarchal Bondage (later replaced by the chapter “Letting Go of Old Behaviors and Old Thoughts”) – his first reaction was “Why are you laying yourself so naked?” Now, at the time I had only known Michael about a month or so and only as a “virtual” pen pal (we had conversed only through email). We hadn’t even met yet in person, so his reaction was probably warranted. “Why would you, a married woman with children, bare your soul to me, a married man with children, who was a stranger only a few weeks before?”

Well, my reaction to his reaction was first one of hurt. Then as I often did, I donned my female armor and began wielding my sword. I wasn’t going to let his “condescending” remark, or what I thought to be condescending, bother me. But THEN, I had an insight, a revelation that burst inside my throbbing brain. Has your brain ever throbbed because you don’t know how to shut it down? I still haven’t found that OFF switch yet.

The insight was this...I have no boundaries. I let everyone into my life. Well, having “bled on paper,” as Michael so graphically put it, I had allowed him into one of the inner recesses of my soul. I had psychologically undressed. But why? Why did I find it necessary to expose any of my inner secrets? And of course, they are no longer secrets once they are revealed to the world.

I have two ideas about how I can answer this question. Both I believe are very valid, one more spiritually based, the other more ego-based.

I’ll start with the latter, the one that’s more grounded in societal dictates. Ego-based, as I put it, because the ego is the part of the mind that houses our persona (the role in life a person is playing), formed by or molded by the expectations of our external world, our culture, our upbringing.

I’m directing this primarily to women since we are the ones who are looked upon as the caretakers of our children, of our spouses, of our community, of our world.

On the domestic front, we are the nurse, the coach, the homework supervisor, the teacher, the cheerleader, the launderer, the grocery shopper, the bill payer, the chef, the chauffeur, the housekeeper, the therapist and on and on. Within our community of family and friends, we are the volunteer, the neighborhood welcoming mat, the babysitter, the car pooler, the errand runner, the pet sitter...

This is not to say that there aren’t dads who share these responsibilities. It’s only pointing out that our society dictates that these are the roles primarily carried out by women.

And despite the advances of the feminist movement, which has allowed women more freedom and opportunities, it is women who typically fill such roles as nurse and teacher. It is also women who make up a large part of other professions that have a nurturing, “human” element to them such as psychotherapy or counseling, and positions held in non-profit organizations, whose missions are to serve others in one cause or another.

No wonder we're exhausted; we try to be all things to all people. We deplete our energy, we bleed ourselves to a near comatose state. This may sound morbid, but we are picked at and chewed upon by the buzzards of duty until nothing is left but lifeless skeletal remains. WE HAVE NO BOUNDARIES!

As a whole, I didn't consciously experience this lack of boundaries until I got married and had children. Before then, I had a fairly orderly, yet busy, life in which I really answered only to myself. I didn't yet feel like a pie sliced into a million pieces to be eaten up by all who craved a piece for one reason or another.

I went to school, trained as a ballet dancer, quit dancing, went to college, worked part-time while in college, graduated and got a full-time job. Then matrimony and child rearing shattered my life of "me-dom."

Perhaps I'm making it sound like I regret my decision to get married and have a family. On the contrary, marriage provided stability, and we have two beautiful boys. But what occurred when these male beings became a part of my life was that my identity became that of wife and mommy. I began to neglect my own personal needs as I attempted to accommodate those of my loved ones. I went from being free-spirited, ambitious, 20something, always flirting with life and adventure, to Mother Earth, the Madonna.

As a reflection of this maternal state, I continued wearing some of my maternity clothes long after I had already had my children. Even thinking about wearing something binding such as a pair of jeans or a shirt tucked in made me short of breath. And God forbid if I should get dressed up. Before marriage and children, I loved to adorn myself with funky attire and jewelry, making my statement that I was a unique individual, only motivated by my own expectations and desires, not by anyone else's, or so I thought. But I lost that interest quickly when I became a wife and a momma.

How interesting that I've used clothes as a metaphor for my character, or should I say, as a means by which I was asserting my identity. Could clothes also be a metaphor for the destruction of my boundaries? Binding clothes restrict; they create boundaries. Loose fitting clothes increase the size of the boundaries. My kids could probably fit their bodies in them along with me. Maternity clothes can accept a whole family within the boundaries, as full as they are.

It wasn't until my late 30s that I realized how I, and many younger mothers alike, give all of ourselves emotionally without expecting anything in return. Not to say that we should expect "tit for tat," but how can a person continue to give her all - her love, compassion, nurturing - if she herself is not replenished with the same?

"Women have been trained to be deeply relational creatures with 'permeable boundaries,' which make us vulnerable to the needs of others. This permeability...is one of our greatest gifts, but without balance, it can mean living out the role of servant who nurtures at the cost of herself."¹

So suffice it to say that a woman who has no boundaries - allowing others to enter her personal space at all times, breathing her air, claiming her energy - might now wish to create walls around her, inserting windows she can close when she wishes to inform others that she's not available, and doors through which others can enter only if she chooses to invite them in for a visit. Does this seem a bit harsh? Or difficult to accept? Perhaps it does but a woman needs to be able to tell the world that she has limits. She also needs to recognize this in herself. We are human and not indestructible as we often would like to think we are.

A few days after I began writing this chapter, I had an experience, a small one yet a significant one at the time, which challenged my ability to set my boundaries. I'd been laid off

and had the summer free from work, with pay. I really wanted the time to relax, reflect and spend time with my kids. Well, a former boss of mine called me in desperation. He needed an editor full-time for a month to replace his regular editor while she was on leave. I really didn't want to do it full-time nor for the contract rate he was offering me. Holding firm, I was able to negotiate terms that suited me. And in turn, I was able to accommodate his needs. I was so proud of myself for not giving in, knowing he really needed help. I could have easily said yes to his initial request. Of course, I might have resented it later and become angered for having allowed myself to be persuaded to do it against my wishes. I was able to set boundaries. Maybe turning 40 had something to do with it. I felt more in command of my life.

Another example I wish to cite shows how you can also allow events, not just people, to encroach on you. When I decided to publish my first book myself in 1998, I had six months to do so, since I wanted to have it available for Mother's Day and it was already October of the previous year. Six months isn't really a long time to publish a book, especially when you have no idea what you're doing! Well, I dug my heels in and got to work. At the time, I was working full time also so the only time I had to work on my book was at nighttime. I was up until at least 2:00 a.m. almost every night for six months. Oh, I was successful in realizing my goal...my book was ready for Mother's Day, but it really took its toll on me. I ended up having to take a leave of absence from work for about a month because I had depleted myself so completely. Fortunately, I had a boss who was very sympathetic. Since she knew how important my book publishing adventure had been to me, she didn't assign any new projects to me for that month, allowing me to return from the dead. How's that for a great boss!

See how we can let events, as well as people, impose themselves on our lives and cause us to compromise ourselves because we just don't know how to set boundaries to establish our own personal space? Perhaps you don't see these circumstances as I did; perhaps you see it as me pursuing something I had a passion for. And you have a very valid point. However, for me, although becoming a publisher had become a great interest of mine, I didn't need to "attempt suicide" to make it happen. I had set my goal on getting my book published by Mother's Day and I was determined to do it. Well, since my book is really timeless — there will always be moms with young spirited sons in the world, seeking solace and support from other moms — perhaps a wiser decision would have been to wait until Christmas of 1998 or the following Mother's Day. But no, my impatience and drive got the best of me. I didn't set any boundaries for myself. I just let the sequence of events necessary to publish my book consume me.

It is truly important that instead of a woman's life being like that of a pie cut up in an indiscriminate number of pieces, a woman must be the one who holds the knife to selectively slice her life into the number of segments she is willing to accept to set her boundaries. Actually, a woman's life might be described better as a wheel turning around its center and the spokes making up all aspects of her life. These aspects emanate from her core, the center of the wheel, providing the stability and strength needed as the wheel turns.

Equally crucial is a woman's ability to replenish herself with the same love and nurturing that she so freely gives to others. "If it is a woman's function to give, she must be replenished too. But how? Solitude...Women need solitude in order to find again the true essence of themselves: that firm strand which will be the indispensable center of a whole web of human relationships."² By finding a means to feed her soul, to renew itself, a woman can continue to give of herself, and with purpose.

Now getting back to the question at the beginning of this chapter about why I "psychologically undressed" myself by being so open about my life with someone I had only

known for a short time. As I said before, I have two ways of answering this. I've already addressed how we can easily be influenced by our upbringing, our society and its protocol, how we allow them to encroach on our personal space. But there is another reason for this seeming openness to the world. It has a much more profound spiritual meaning.

When a woman lets everyone into her life, on a deeper level she is embracing them and allowing them to sit on Mother Earth's lap, to hear stories of the Universe, to be absorbed by Universal Truth, that which connects us all in a "boundary-less" state. This maternal state is natural for a woman bearing children. Symbolically, Mother Earth is the Divine female who nurtures all that is living. By providing love and psychological nourishment to those around her, she infuses in them the inner dignity that helps them to seek out who they are, to experience their own essence in relationship to the world around them.

I suggest that a woman operating from her "Mother Earth" standpoint has no boundaries...she needs no boundaries. We, as humans, comprise mind, body and soul. On a soul level, there are no boundaries. "There is no place where one soul begins and another ends...It's all the same soul."³ At the subtlest level, all living matter, for example, our body, is nothing more than pure energy (this actually includes our mind also) vibrating at different speeds, producing different densities. This in turn manifests into discrete and different physical objects: a tree, a human, a flower, water...well, you get the picture.

However, the energy that produces these objects is actually the same at the most fundamental level, a level at which there are no boundaries. So how does this relate to a woman in her Mother Earth state?

I want to say that the Mother Earth female is spiritually operating, in a sense, at that most fundamental level, where there are no boundaries. Where the physical and spiritual levels meet, so to speak, she is operating according to natural law by which there is a constant exchange of energy among objects of matter created by this energy, objects in the form of human beings. As she so freely and naturally gives her own energy in the form of love, so does she draw the same to her.

This reminds me of my family's housekeeper, Elnora, who cared for our house for 25 years before she passed away. Although Elnora was what our society might define as poor – she was African-American, uneducated and had little money – she was probably one of the richest women I knew. But her wealth came in the form of love, love that she had in abundance and that she was able to spread everywhere. When she passed away, I attended her funeral along with my mother and oldest son, who was only six years old at the time. We were the only Caucasian family there, but everyone knew us since Elnora lived in a very tight community and they all knew that she worked for us. (I have to add, though, that she was truly a part of our family.) The people at the funeral services "celebrated" her death as if she was life itself. The love and respect those people had for Elnora was awe-inspiring. Her love had touched each and everyone there...including us, of course. Elnora was so special to me, I have dedicated to her a teenage novel that I've written in which she is one of the main characters. And what better role for her to play in the book but a spiritual guide of a young teenage girl? Now, I just need to publish the darn thing.

Love is the foundation of the universe. There is always enough to go around, for love is boundless. So, let me repeat myself, a woman whose Mother Earth archetype fills her will never be depleted of love, and all touched by her will be forever changed. The effect could be as subtle as having a momentary sense of fulfillment with oneself, or it could be as monumental as realizing one's own purpose in life, one's calling within the grand Universe in which we live.

Now, I would like to think that I have made a difference in the lives of those people to whom I am and have been very close. But perhaps that would be arrogant of me, and arrogance can beget insincerity. Of course, don't we all hope that we've made some difference in another's life, no matter how big or small the impact is?

Does this whole discussion on Mother Earth and the soul with no boundaries contradict what I discussed previously in the chapter, about how a woman MUST set boundaries and limits? Probably, but that is the Divine Dichotomy.

“Divine Dichotomy holds that it is possible for two apparently contradictory truths to exist simultaneously in the same space...As an example...In ultimate reality there is no such thing as good and evil. In the realm of the absolute, all there is is love. Yet in the realm of the relative you [humankind] have created the experience of...evil...You wanted to experience love, not just ‘know’ that love is All There Is, and cannot experience something when there is nothing else but that.”⁴

Egads, it can make your head spin.

I want to share one more experience that I think exemplifies the energy exchange I touched upon earlier, a fascinating way of seeing how one can encroach on another's boundaries. It perhaps is a good way to close this chapter.

Have you ever been standing near someone and all of a sudden felt like all life had been drained from you? I had such an experience with someone at a dinner party. It was a bright, sunny afternoon and we were sitting at the dinner table talking, casual and very boring chattering, I might add. This woman was talking about some family or work matter, I really can't remember exactly what she said since, to me, it was small talk, nothing like the spiritual, heady conversations I enjoyed. Forgive me if I sound a bit arrogant again, as I know she felt she was talking about something of great meaning. Nonetheless, I made every attempt to be cordial and listen to her. Well, the longer I remained seated close to her, the more I felt every ounce of my energy being siphoned out of my body. This was not just boredom; this was a serious energy exchange.

Envision waves of energy being drawn from my body and entering hers. This is exactly what I felt was happening. All life forms are nothing more than energy operating at different frequencies. As we interact with one another, we may deplete or increase the other's energy based on the amount of energy we have or need. One person may have such a low level of energy that she may seek out someone who can give her a boost, a “fix,” if you will. This is what I felt during the conversation at the table.

Bottom line...boundaries are what you make them to be. Perhaps you can have them or perhaps not, or experience both having them and not having them. Oh, there's that Dichotomy again! On a relative level, the physical level in which we live, boundaries exist. On a more absolute level, the level of the cosmos, there are no boundaries. We are of mind, body and soul, so whether we realize it or not, we do experience both levels.

What Kind of Boundaries Do You Have?

Take a look at your life, the past and present, and assess how well you have established boundaries...or not established boundaries...and then determine what may be necessary to restore the balance of giving and receiving in your life.

- 1.** Think about your teens first and reflect on what your life was like then...what were your responsibilities? To whom and to what did you have to answer? Did you ever feel overwhelmed by your responsibilities? If so, were you able to create “me-time” to re-energize yourself? In what ways were you able to experience the solitude or rejuvenation you needed?
- 2.** What about your 20s...30s...? Do the same exercise for each of these decades.
- 3.** And now, think about where you are in your 40s and beyond. Same thing...who and what do you answer to? Are you still overwhelmed by all that is in your life?
- 4.** Think about ways of establishing boundaries that work for you so that you can find a balance between your outer world responsibilities and your inner soul responsibilities. It's truly a beautiful thing to give of oneself, but it's also a wondrous experience to receive...for when you receive, you are giving someone else the opportunity to give and what better joy is there in life but to give of your heart and soul?

Experiencing Love, the Universal Truth

“The most fundamental principle of love is knowing who you really are, at the purest level of soul, beneath the encumbrances of human restrictions and limitations, in particular, not being allowed to indulge natural human emotions.”

I hadn't originally planned on writing a chapter specifically on love, but, as Grace would have it, I encountered a situation that gave me the insight to include one. And, then, once I made the decision to do so, there was so much I wanted to say about the experience of love that it was really hard to be selective from all the notes I had taken for this chapter.

Here's how it happened...

I was talking with a psychologist friend about relationships. I was explaining that having turned 40 had somehow triggered something inside me. For the first 30+ years of my life, I had strived to meet the expectations of society and its human institutions — education, marriage, family, career — and I had succeeded. I had gotten a college degree; I had established myself professionally; I had a family; I had a stable marriage; we lived in a nice home; we were financially stable. On the outside, my life looked perfect. But on the inside, things were not so perfect. There was an emptiness inside of me that needed to be filled...that left me wanting something but I wasn't sure what it was. All I sensed was that I didn't feel fulfilled; I didn't feel whole.

During my friend's and my conversation, I kept pointing a finger at what I felt was the reason for this emptiness. I kept claiming that it was a void in my marriage — a lack of spiritual fulfillment, intimacy and communication. As I continued to project the blame for my inner barrenness onto my marriage, my friend stopped me and said, “Erica, this has nothing to do with your husband or your marriage; this has everything to do with you. It has to do with love. You don't know how to love or be loved.” Wow, what powerful words!

Of course, donning my armor once again, I first pooh-poohed her statement, but then I thought about what she said as I had never thought of it that way before. She was absolutely right! It WAS about love. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I had never been able to truly love, to experience the kind of love that is unbinding. Nor had I been able to receive that kind of love. The big truth was that I found it difficult to love myself. And how can one who finds it hard to love oneself, love another? How could I find true love?

True love is centered in the heart and emanates outward. It does not start somewhere outside of oneself and move inward. It is like a pulsating energy from within every cell of one's being reaching out into the universe to embrace all other life. Love is the one universal principle that brings all of personkind (like that non-sexist term?) together and ensures the survival of the world.

So there I had it, the insight that I needed to focus on my relationship with myself, not my outer relationships, although healing my relationship with myself would, in turn, enhance my relationships with others.

Okay, so now I knew what I had to do, but how would I go about doing it? Learning to love oneself, when you've never experienced how to love is a daunting task. It frightened me so.

Now you may question such a strong statement — that I had never experienced how to love — especially since I have children whom I adore and I had been in a stable marriage for 16+

years. Isn't there love there? My answer is yes there is, but is it unconditional love, the kind of love we give and receive regardless of what we do or how we are, love without strings attached? "Unconditional love is understanding that no matter what we do or how we behave, God loves us, and is waiting for us to embody and demonstrate love at all times, under all circumstances."⁵ "It means selfless giving. Openness to receiving."⁶

I would really like to say yes to the love in my home being unconditional love but that's where I think I had fallen short in the experience of true love. I now had to look at my expressions of love to see if I had imposed conditions on them. "Love is a natural emotion. When it is allowed to be expressed, and received, by a child, normally and naturally, without limitation or condition, inhibition or embarrassment, it does not require anything more... Yet love which has been conditioned, limited, warped by rules and regulations, rituals and restrictions, controlled, manipulated, and withheld, becomes unnatural. Children who are made to feel...that it is wrong to express it...that they shouldn't even experience it – will have a difficult time appropriately dealing with love as adults."⁷

Had I expected my children or my husband to act or to be a certain way before I would give them love? What about myself? Had I only felt good about who I am, what I look like, what I do, if I met certain expectations?

I am one of those adults who had a tough time dealing with love. As a female warrior, I wielded the sword of masculine power for so long that there had been a suppression of the feminine, the basic source for human relationships and love. Masculine power subverts feelings, human relationships and love. I had to go back to my childhood to see where my expressions of love may have been inhibited or restricted, or where love may have been withheld for whatever reason. It was here that I might be able to find the reasons for which I imposed conditions on love in my life as an adult. Perhaps then I would be able to crack the shell of these limitations and be freed to feel loved and to give love unconditionally.

Now if you looked at my childhood from the outside, you might not see any "dysfunction." We were a solid family of four: two parents, two children. We always lived in a nice house. My parents were well-educated and made sure that my brother and I had the same opportunity for education and pursuit of our own interests. My parents often lived beyond their financial means so we could have nice things. They were most often supportive of what we wanted to do, yet their expectations of us were quite high.

In spite of all the outer comforts of my life, I felt an inward longing for something more. Even as a young girl, I felt like there was something missing, but I wasn't sure what it was. I struggled through the developmental stages of a child, while trying to meet the expectations of everyone, including my peers and my parents.

I never seemed to be able to establish close relationships with my peers. They often thought I was "stuck up." I often seemed to put up a wall between them and me so that no one could get too close to me. And yet, I yearned to be popular, to be accepted, to be the girl that the guys would most likely want to go out with.

I started smoking cigarettes at a young age because it was the cool thing to do. I drank and experimented with drugs because I thought that would initiate me into the "in" crowd. What an obvious indication of the lack of self-worth I had, hanging out with the kids you would find in the back of the school smoking, skipping school, being a little too amorous for a public place, often getting in trouble with the authorities. You'd never think I was like that since I'm now Miss Goody Two Shoes (a half of a glass of wine and I turn giddy). But I was trying to be accepted, which is a "normal" desire to have as a human, right? To fit in?

As I have looked back at my life at home during my childhood, I have seen that although I had a life of material comfort and general support from my parents, the most important thing that was lacking was the physical and emotional expression of absolute love. The love that I had experienced was that which was shown by the giving and doing of things. Now I can't fault my parents for this. They did the best they could. But they came from homes in which either they were shown love through material possessions and only if they were the perfect child (my father) or there was no love shown in any way (my mother). In their own way, my parents were demonstrating love the best way they knew how. My father was introverted to an extreme, and though he adored his family, he only knew how to express his love by offering "things" and criticism, just as his mother had done to him. My mother, wanting desperately to give her children everything that she didn't have as a child, tried to make sure that we did have everything she wanted us to have. She spent endless hours taking me to my ballet lessons, piano lessons, skating lessons and whatever else I was involved in. But because of her great desire to rise above her family's status (she came from Italian peasants), she also imposed her obsessive academic drive on me. She made sure that I maintained high grades. Making fewer A's than B's was grounds for punishment. Being punished for this only happened once in elementary school, but it was an incident that I've never forgotten. Children are impressionable.

What I really wanted was something much simpler, I wanted to be loved emotionally and physically. I wanted a warm embrace; a soft touch; kind, loving words, not critical ones, like those of my father's. I wanted to feel that I was loved just as I was, unconditionally, that the only expectation was to be me, not someone else's definition of me.

My mother did try to provide the physical and emotional support, but since she had none at all in her childhood, how was she expected to be able to offer it to her children? Perhaps this is the legacy she is passing on to me, to learn to love and be loved.

Think about it...my parents' legacies that I have inherited, steeped in patriarchal power where there is no room for feelings or love or relationship. Now with my father no longer of this Earth, yes, it has been my responsibility to clear my children and myself of this "cross to bear," as my mother, through her own very profound personal journey, has been making the way easier for me. If a parent resolves her own inner issues, then her children are released from carrying the burden.

I guess as I moved through adolescence and the teenage years into adulthood, I disguised my desire for love as attempts to live up to others' expectations, perhaps the only way I felt I could gain their acceptance, their love. I was perpetuating the feelings I had had as a young child, that I wanted to please everyone, to do as they expected me to do. And yet, just as I tried to meet these demands, there was also the inner rebellion against these demands. I would often put on my armor and carry my shield to protect myself. Is this perhaps why I never lived up to my fullest potential? Was it in reality a rebellion against meeting others' expectations?

When I think about it, I'm not even sure whose expectations I was trying to live up to as an adult. Was it still my parents'...was it my bosses'...what about my peers? What were my expectations of myself?

It only really hit me when I turned 40 that the only expectation a person should have is to be herself! But, oh, how difficult that is in this society when we are pulled in so many directions, by one's job, one's peers, one's family, one's culture.

To paraphrase something from *Femininity Lost and Regained*, by Robert Johnson, "we burden ourselves with a million different demands and expectations, which disguise our simple need of being or having meaning." Perhaps when we learn to love ourselves, we're able to let go

of all the demands we have imposed on ourselves and have allowed others to impose on us. But before we can learn to love, we must understand what love is to us. What is this thing that connects us in the Universe?

I believe that love is seeing who you really are behind your perceived self image – that image created by what others see you as or you see yourself as compared to others. The most fundamental principle of love is knowing who you really are, at the purest level of soul, beneath the encumbrances of human restrictions and limitations, in particular, not being allowed to indulge natural human emotions. “The model of behavior for centuries on this planet [Earth] has been to not ‘indulge’ your emotions...If you’re feeling angry, stuff it...if you’re feeling fear, rise above it; if you’re feeling love, control it, limit it, wait with it, run from it – do whatever you have to do to stop from expressing it...”⁸ Denying your emotions is saying that you’re not willing to accept them as an expression of being human.

We all comprise mind, body and soul, and it is through our human mind and body experiences that we can elevate our soul’s evolution to its highest level. That level is simply LOVE; Love is all there is. Within the experiences that the human mind and body offer, you are realizing who you are. “The purpose of the soul – its reason for coming to the body – is to be and express who you really are.”⁹

This clarity of who you are then reaches out to others around you where you also begin to see them for who they are. When you are centered in love, you can see beyond the human flesh and see that all others are also pure souls and that their human experiences, like yours, are helping them to realize who they are. “Give everyone a sense of their own worthiness as a person, a sense of the true wonder of who they are. Give this gift and you will heal the world.”¹⁰

Okay, so here’s the lesson...to repeat, in order for us to realize who we really are, our REAL SELF, our souls must have human experiences. By “interchanging between the embodied soul and the outside world” through experience, we nourish our soul. Feel the soul through one’s senses, living day by day, in touch with the world around you. These experiences lead us to the Ultimate Truth, which is Love. Through our human experiences, we learn to express love.

Know that as human beings, we have idiosyncrasies. Accept these as part of our character and don’t apologize or feel guilty. “Guilt is the feeling that keeps you stuck in who you are not.”¹¹ For example, see your body, your human flesh, as a shrine for the Divine female, the Goddess within, not as a combination of sagging breasts, flabby thighs, spreading hips and dimpled skin.

Show affection and nurture another person to help her feel connected to the Universe, to feel his own self-love. Feel the connection with all else that lives.

Be able to let go and stop trying to control one’s life. Be vulnerable. Experience pain, sorrow, grief, anger and any other human emotions. You cannot experience love if you do not allow yourself to express these human emotions. Denying them says that you’re not willing to love yourself even when you’re having these feelings.

Have faith in a Divine plan; believe that you and all others are children of God, all on a Divine journey. See yourself and others as following the path of that journey in the best way you know how, based on your own conscious awareness. Everyone is on a different path but with the same ultimate goal...to reach his or her highest potential as a Divine being.

Oh it all sounds so simple, doesn’t it? It IS simple, but it may not be easy. We’re human, remember? And to be human means to be confronted with life’s ever-changing challenges. But these challenges are opportunities for growth, and we must look at them with the same curiosity and enthusiasm that a child looks at anything new. Take it on with the innocence and fervor of

youth. In the beginning, a child knows nothing but love. This is where we must return. Recall what Jesus Christ said: "Only a child can enter the Kingdom of God."

I would like to close with the lyrics of a song, written by a artist who has dedicated his career to writing, producing, and performing music that deeply touches the souls of children of all ages. Lyrics are from the song "Maralissa Lou" by Eddie Coker.

"His name was Maralissa Lou. Yeah, I know, I thought the same thing too! What kind of a name is that? I was walking home one day, when he stopped me on the street and said, 'Hey, can we talk for awhile?' And he said:

'Now I know my ears are kinda big and my hair's a wee bit strange. But, that's the way that I was made, don't think that I can change. I really have a Mom and Dad like you, who've loved me from the start. And though my face is truly polka dot, I have a human heart.'

I didn't know quite what to say as I lowered my head and walked away. How could I be so mean? We used to laugh and run away, find a place to hide so he would say, 'Hey, why won't you play with me?'

Now I know his ears are kind of big and his hair's a wee bit strange. But that's the way that he was made, don't think that he can change. He really has a Mom and Dad like me, who've loved him from the start. And though his face is truly polka-dot, he has a human heart.

And his heart gets glad, and his heart gets mad. And his heart gets sad, like everybody else. He's just like me. He's just like you. A polka-dotted, little boy whose name is Maralissa Lou..."

And so it goes, love yourself, love all those around you. We are all connected in this great Universe.

What Is Your Legacy of Love?

- 1.** Did you grow up in a family of unconditional love? Was there a lot of emotional support? Physical support?
- 2.** Or did you feel empty and alone? Was there physical and/or emotional abuse?
- 3.** Were you allowed to express your emotions or were you shamed for “feeling?”
- 4.** Identify who the important characters were in your life during your formative years...your parents, your siblings, your relatives, others. What kind of emotional and physical support and love did you receive from them? Think about what their life was like when they were growing up and how that may have affected the way they were towards you. This is your legacy...their treatment of you was based in part on the environment in which they lived, and it laid the foundation of how you feel about yourself.
- 5.** If you feel blocked emotionally and have bouts of self-deprecation, what ways would help you move past these feelings?
- 6.** What could you do that would feel safe so you can allow yourself to express yourself?
- 7.** Can you reach out to those who may have created some of your inner suffering and forgive them, knowing that they were only acting out of their own level of awareness?

Seeing Beauty through Older Eyes

“Inner beauty isn’t simply the material “beauty” that we see with our limited vision...it’s an energy that one feels from within one’s heart and that embraces all those that one encounters.”

How do you feel about yourself? Do you feel “old and ugly” or “young and beautiful?” Or “young and ugly” or “old and beautiful”...or somewhere in between? Or does it even really matter? Beauty is a condition that we as women have struggled with throughout our lives. Our society is so beauty conscious that millions of dollars have been spent on cosmetic surgery to fix our physical “imperfections” so that we may always maintain our youth and beauty. And is it all worth it? Does it really make us beautiful? Does it help us to maintain our youth?

Well my answer to this is yes and no. I believe that it’s important that we feel good about ourselves and if cosmetic surgery helps us feel youthful and restores our beauty, then go for it. It’s okay to want a breast job or a tummy tuck if you’re doing it for you. I’ll admit that after two pregnancies that were unkind to my front end, I dream of the day that I have the money to have a front-end alignment. Yes, part of it is because I would like to look appealing to a partner naked. But the primary reason is because I want to be able to wear clothes that I don’t right now because, in my opinion, they’re not becoming on me. I would like to go bra-less and wear backless dresses or skimpy camisoles, but I feel uncomfortable doing so because of my sagging breasts.

Aesthetics have always been important to me and now that I’m older, I’ve become increasingly keen on keeping myself presentable and fit. And why not?? Just because I’ve entered “middle age” doesn’t mean that I should just let myself go. It doesn’t mean that I shouldn’t be interested in attracting someone of the opposite sex (or same sex, as the case may be). BUT, what it does mean is that with the wisdom and experience that I’ve gained over the years, I know that there’s so much more to beauty than what we see with the naked eye.

The most important thing about beauty is that you feel beautiful about yourself. When you feel beautiful about yourself, you can just be yourself. No more fears of what others think of you, no fears of rejection, no fears of failure. “No matter what you think you look like, other people are always going to think whatever they want to anyway. They love you, or they don’t – regardless of your opinion of yourself. That’s because your looks don’t belong to you. They belong to the beholder.”¹² And the most important beholder of your beauty is You.

Take a look at how we have valued beauty from the time we were a child to today as a woman in our 40s and see how our perception of beauty truly does change as we get older. It all aligns with how we attempted to live up to others’ expectations when we were younger and how, as we get older, we realize that we are the only one we need to answer to.

As a child, we wanted to be pretty so Daddy would love us. We wanted to be his little princess, and princesses were always beautiful. Though my father wasn’t able to show much affection or love, I was his “dollsation.”

As we got older, even as early as elementary school, we started thinking about makeup and jewelry and hairdos and clothes. Not only were we trying to look cute for the boys, but we might have been trying to outdo other girls. God knows, we wanted to be the prettiest, most popular girl around. I know I did even though I was too shy to be popular. And moving into our teenage years, it only got more intense, especially as we started “going steady” and dating. God forbid if

we got a zit! In college, if we attended, we may have continued our attempt to “walk down the runway,” hoping to be the next beauty queen. Yes, we were there to get a good education, but what about all those good-looking college guys that we wanted to attract?

Then, as we entered the beginning of our professional years, we most often had to have a certain image for our job. I remember my first job at IBM, first as a part-time marketing assistant, then as a full-fledged systems engineer. Man, what a change from having been in the “artsy fartsy” field of ballet for ten years. After I quit dancing cold turkey when I was nineteen, I went to college to get a degree in business. And then I set sail for the land of conservatism and computers. Go figure! Maybe I was trying to fulfill my father’s legacy...his unfulfilled dream of being a successful businessman.

At the time, blue suits and red ties were the uniform of the day at IBM...a very conservative environment indeed! But there was Erica in her Annie Hall suit...an ivory linen long full flowing skirt with a matching long loose-fitting jacket with sleeves slightly rolled up (it still fits me and I still wear it!). I can guarantee that I would never have been put on the “fast track” or groomed for management. Well, all I can say is that they got their suit even if it wasn’t blue, and a darn good employee, if I say so myself! And, by defiantly wearing clothes that made my statement of who I was, I was able to “maintain my identity” in that sea of blue suits and red ties. Fortunately, it only lasted for a couple of years since I changed jobs and went to work at Compaq Computer Corporation where it was a little less conservative.

And what about the “love and marriage” images that we wanted to uphold? We fell in love and got married. Of course, during our “courtship” phase, we likely tried to make ourselves look as perfect as possible. It was critical that we be able to melt our boyfriend’s or fiancé’s heart with just a smile or a wink and with the hormones really astir, we wanted to make sure that the “chemistry” was there! If it was and we thought of ourselves as compatible, we took the plunge and got married.

And the kids came along. At this point, for some of us, we became too exhausted to be overly concerned with our outer appearance. If we worked, we still tried to maintain our professional image, albeit with coverup on the dark circles under the eyes and perhaps larger clothes to accommodate our expanding waist- and hiplines. As we got caught up in the frenetic “whirlwind of life” with marriage, kids, career and anything else we were involved in, who had the energy and time to care for ourselves?

That was my case. I was so exhausted trying to be a good mommy, a good spouse and a good employee that I went from the Goddess of Beauty to the Goddess of Frump. Although looking good had always been important to me, I became matronly looking. I stopped wearing makeup; I continued to wear some of my maternity clothes; I didn’t make any attempts to get my body back in shape. My mother made repeated comments about how my looks had deteriorated since I had gotten married and had kids. It upset her to see how little I did to care for myself. She watched with great concern as I allowed marriage and children suck me into a life of what I would call mediocrity, compared to my previous life. Again, don’t get me wrong. Marriage was good to me while it lasted and I adore my children. It’s just that I had allowed it to pull me off center.

When I turned 40, there was a shift “in the air.” Something awakened inside of me and I finally pulled myself out of the swamp of mediocrity. I realized that I was older and wiser and that there was a Goddess inside of me patiently waiting to be transformed into what she was before. But this time, the beauty she sought wasn’t just the outer physical beauty that held her captive before she went the way of the “frumps.” The beauty that she sought came from within. It was a glow that began in her heart and radiated outward. It was a beauty that is synonymous

with love. She sought to become the Goddess of Love, drawing all of mankind into her energy, infusing in them a passion for life, a passion for love. It is this passion that nourishes the soul of a person and evokes her inner beauty to shine through, stretching beyond the limits of the physical body and into the vast expanse of the Universe, pervading everything. Inner beauty isn't simply the material "beauty" that we see with our limited vision...it's an energy that one feels from within one's heart and that embraces all those that one encounters.

Have you ever been in a state of depression or simply in a bad mood and have immediately felt uplifted after having been around someone, maybe by just their smile or by something they said or just simply by their presence? She or he seems to carry some sort of "charm" that pierces through your somber mood, leaving you feeling invigorated. If you remember in "Personal Boundaries," I gave an example of how one person's energy can affect another person. This energy exchange between two people can have either a positive or negative effect, depending on the circumstances between the two people. Think about how you feel when you are approached by a partner, one for whom you have great love and affection. You have a sense of comfort, security, love, support and devotion. You accept him with all his imperfections because, beyond those imperfections, you see the beauty that shines from his heart.

As we get older, we begin to look deeper into a person and see that what he or she looks like on the inside...the true essence...is what's important, not what he or she looks like on the outside. What's on the outside is often just a persona, a mask of sorts. The true beauty of a person comes from within.

So, let me ask you again...how do you feel about yourself? Do you feel beautiful? Well, you ought to! You have entered a glorious stage of your life and it only gets better from here on out.

I would like to close this chapter with lyrics that I wrote for a song about nine months before I wrote this chapter (but don't forget the exercise that follows). It seems to sum up what I'm talking about.

Healing the Hearts of Men

She can look them in the eye,
And see deeply in their soul,
The pain and fear they harbor,
And the false strength that they show.

The walls they've built around themselves,
To guard their fragile egos,
Are gently chipped away by the
Compassion that she shows.

For she is the goddess of love,
Healing the hearts of men,
Awakening man's own inner beauty,
To bare again and again.

She is the healing balm,
Anointing men's wounded hearts,
Infusing them with the wisdom of love,
Which she so fondly imparts.

The men who come to know her,
By her warmth they are embraced,
Nourished by her tender touch,
Their inner strength they taste.

She can pierce the veils of power,
To which men so aspire,
And reveal the hidden treasures
Of their true desires.

For she is the goddess of love,
Healing the hearts of men,
Awakening man's own inner beauty,
To bare again and again.

She is the healing balm,
Anointing men's wounded hearts,
Infusing them with the wisdom of love,
Which she so fondly imparts.

The goddess of love, the anointing balm,
The grief she does transcend.

Her timeless wisdom does prevail
In healing the hearts of men.

Time for Your Assessment!

Let's first repeat the first four sentences of this chapter. "How do you feel about yourself? Do you feel "old and ugly" or "young and beautiful?" Or "young and ugly" or "old and beautiful"...or somewhere in between? Or does it even really matter?"

- 1.** What is the most important thing about beauty to you?
- 2.** How do you define inner beauty?
- 3.** How do you define outer beauty? Go through your life starting with your teen years and identify what beauty was to you in each decade.
- 4.** Now in the fifth decade of your life, how do you define beauty?
- 5.** How has your definition changed throughout the decades?