

Hi, I'm Lars the Hiking Biking Viking, Mister Car Care, and The Dharma Cowboy. Welcome to my world. I have had a very interesting and transformative life I'd like to share with you. I have learned many, many priceless and profound lessons that have led to great healings, passion, and meaning. It is my hope that hearing about my life will help you with yours. I will start with my parents and family because of the huge impact their lives had on mine for better or for worse.

My father's family moved around a lot. His father was a preacher and would make trips across America and back to Norway on preaching tours for long stretches. His mother was a nurse, and at times a live-in nurse so he didn't get enough time with his mother or father. He moved around a lot, living in perhaps 15 places before he was eighteen. At one point he was sent to live with another family for a year and a half. He then went to live with his sister and brother in law on their farm in Minnesota. He had an argument with his brother in law so moved to Milwaukee to work for awhile, but soon went to California to attend college.

My mother grew up in Milwaukee. Her parents divorced when she was two, then remarried at seven, but he died when she was twelve. Her relationship with her mother was very difficult, as her mother had many boyfriends that told her and her mother what to do. They had a lot of arguments, and her mother had her arrested and sent to juvenile hall twice. When she graduated high school at sixteen her aunt sent her to a business school in Minneapolis. She was glad to get away but it wasn't a good fit, so she went to work.

They met at the boarding house where they lived in Milwaukee. When dad got to California he asked her to come, and they married soon after. He worked a number of jobs while my mother had the children. I have two older sisters, one younger, and the youngest is a half brother from when my folks separated for a short time.

The point here is it was hard for my parents, as they not only didn't get all the love and support they needed, but things were difficult. They somehow managed to become very decent people, and very kind and caring. Yet the lack of support they experienced somehow passed onto me. I received many gifts from them, but missed out on much as well. It took me a long time to realize just how much support and mentoring I missed.

For instance I could have used more help with education, relationships, sexuality, spirituality, housekeeping, self care, finances, and many, many other skills. The losses stacked up over the years, so the trajectory of my life turned out to be much lower, much smaller than what it might have been. Had I not found recovery and other healing paths, it surely would have been much, much worse.

Perhaps the most important support I needed was some of the most simple. These are "The five A's of; attention, acceptance, affirmation, affection, and appreciation. Although these are simple needs, I have found their impact, or lack of, to be profound. If I pick any one of these and imagine it applied across the range of experiences I have had, and then across my twenty years growing up at home, a very different picture of how things could have turned out arises.

I still struggle to see how I feel like I ended up lost and alone in the family. For some reason it seems like my parents were one unit and my sisters another, but I was alone. I had friends but the relationships seemed to be based on activities like riding bikes or hiking rather than a deeper personal bond. The same was true for my family even though my little sister was intended to be a playmate for me. Actually she was the closest, but nowhere near what might have been.

I describe my family dysfunctions as clouds that hung over us, and we had many of them. A cloud fits the description for me because our problems were amorphous entities we couldn't really pin down or see the substance of, yet they were there, dark and foreboding, so overlaying an air of anxiety and doubt. The clouds of

dysfunction prompted me to search for a safe place to rest and relax. I think of this as a foxhole, and a fitting analogy for people I've met whose home life was a battle ground or prison camp due to alcohol, drugs, or other obsessions and dysfunctions.

It seems I was lonely and uneasy then, not surprising as I don't feel I got all the love, attention, guidance, and other things I needed to feel cherished, confident, and comfortable. This cloud follows me still as a shadow of doubt and anxiety that gives me fear of authority figures, confrontation (especially with angry people), and drives my bent towards people pleasing to avoid confrontation and gain approval. Everyone judges people to assess if they are a friend or a threat, but I believe with me it bordered on obsession, and often kept me at a distance from others unnecessarily.

An image arises here for me of digging in and pulling stones up to make a wall and fortress to protect me. But the hole got too deep, cold, and lonely, and the walls too high and solid to access life on the outside. I had made a prison for myself in my head. Even in my relationships I was scared and alone. I looked and acted "okay," but it felt like real life and real love were on the outside.

Even so, my parents were fairly happy, and the kids too. When I look at old family photos I see a lot of smiling faces. There was grace and life enough to enable me to see beyond the walls, and later tear them down one stone at a time to make and take the steps to break out and break free. Inside that prison I couldn't see the sunshine, the pulse of life, and the laughter and singing on the other side. It took a lot of safe, sane, and loving people to break through.

It felt like my safe place was working on things in the garage. I also enjoyed riding bicycles, and later motorcycles rides and trips in cars. My family liked to get out in nature and take vacations, and I feel that those are two of the greatest gifts I received. I feel a beauty, calm, and reverence in nature that feels like sacred ground. Nature has always been a huge comfort and salvation for me, and bicycles, motorcycles, and vehicles give me the freedom to go on adventures, and to reach and enjoy nature.

I have come to realize the rides and drives had a dark side too, as the fun often escalated into risky and dangerous behaviors. First off, we would put on helmets, jackets, gloves, and boots like warriors going off to battle, and we were. We then would drive as fast as we possibly could in drag races, or rip up and down canyons on the edge of crashing at high speeds. A few of my friends were killed or seriously injured in this pursuit. It is only by God's grace I survived my countless rides and numerous crashes.

This warrior image and mentality meant it was appropriate to armor myself against the supposed onslaught and battle of life, yet in quiet times I found the masks and armor was hiding bandages and binding up festering wounds upon my heart and soul. It hurt too much to face the pain of cleaning and tending the wounds, so I bound them up again and soldiered on for years and decades. My image and understanding of what it means to be a warrior has changed completely, but more about that further on.

I really was a bike nut and car crazy as I have owned 50 motorcycles and 48 cars as well as countless bicycles. Many of them were "cool" and high performance, but many were also sad stories of dysfunction. For instance; a shiny black Ford Falcon with gold flames across the hood and down the sides that my buddy talked me out of after owning for just three hours, a 1965 Mustang convertible I traded for a dirt bike, and a Dodge Hemi Super Bee much like the star car in The Fast and Furious movie I bought with a bad engine, but sold as soon as I finished fixing it. Such was the story of my life, not worthy of the best life had to offer.

Physically I developed well and become the top player over my junior high school tennis class, as well a team member on a champion summer softball league in high school. My first day snow skiing I was going down the most difficult runs although I never took lessons. At my peak I was running three miles a day no problem. It was probably bicycling that gave me so much athletic skill. I felt happy most of the time, but I am told I would get very frustrated and angry as a small child, and I remember smashing things when frustrated as a teen and adult. I was holding something in and down, and the pressure was building.

I have a much better understanding of this now because I see how I (and all of us) have a tremendous amount of energy, of power at my disposal. Each day I put out great effort with great results in my work and play, yet this energy, this power can go either way. I can spend my time and energy creating things that are beneficial to life and other people, or use my God given powers to divide, condemn, and destroy. My outlook on life has determined which way the energy and resulting creation or destruction has flowed.

All five of us kids got married and had children, but problems caught up with us from time to time and manifested in various ways. We all struggled in school, no one earned a degree, all our marriages ended in divorce, and most of us declared bankruptcy at some point. Many also had children conceived or born out of wedlock. There was also neglect and abuses I don't wish to mention, some of which we passed on to our children.

I had trouble finding my place in the world and my own skin. My parent and sisters felt distant and they couldn't figure out how to get through to me, so I drifted and feel I was lost and alone most of my life. My dating skills were so pathetic it pains me even still to think about it. I wanted love but didn't really know what it meant or how to do it. Something kept me trying to create intimate relationships, however poorly, and despite the havoc I caused. I now understand intimate relationships as a deep friendship that blossoms in other ways.

My love of motorcycles led me to a job at the local Honda dealership at seventeen and have been with Honda ever since. After a few years in motorcycles I was called over to the car service department and made an assistant manager. The work at Honda was enjoyable and gave me the money to move out at twenty. In college I took classes to be a police officer, but when I was denied a position as a police cadet I gave it up. I then started taking business and marketing classes thinking I would become a manager, but I could see early on car dealerships are often quite dysfunctional and I had no helpful mentor, so I never stepped up to it.

Somewhere inside I knew had personal problems, so I took all of the psychology classes I could at the local college trying to figure things out. I had dreams of becoming a psychologist or psychotherapist but again lacked a mentor and guide to support me in the endeavor, so that didn't happen either. I later took classes to complete my high school education and get a diploma, but again couldn't make it on my own. I sure wish I had someone to help me through, as I know I could have gone so much further and achieved so much more.

The psychology classes taught me a lot about how humans, animals, and even plants think, act, and behave. Understanding how children learn trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, ego identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and ego integrity vs. despair helped me see there are a lot of factors in play that have a huge impact on our happiness as children and through-out our lives as we resolve these issues or possibly get stuck there for years, decades, or a lifetime.

One of the classes I took was psychology for supervisors. It was there I learned about the Milgram experiment. It was an extremely powerful study that changed my life. In short, average Americans would submit to an authority figure to "teach" another participant, even if that submission asked them to hurt, torture, or quite possibly kill someone with electrical shocks. The other participants were only pretending to suffer and scream,

but were very convincing. It is hard to believe how far so many people went. I then realized just how much power and control others can have over us. Perhaps more importantly, I also discovered how much we deserve understanding and forgiveness for our transgressions.

My next breakthrough was when I read *Original Blessing*, and found that the angry, punishing, jealous God I didn't like was preceded by a time when God was sky, water, fire, earth, and life. I was instantly home again, for nature was always my home, a haven, and now heaven. Michelangelo said "My soul can find no staircase to heaven except if it be by earth's loveliness," and I couldn't agree more.

Now I can't stand to be away from nature for very long. I live near the ocean and mountains so make regular visits there. I also make trips to the beaches up and down the coast of California from San Diego to Monterey, also the deserts of Palm Springs and Palmdale, the local Santa Monica and San Gabriel mountains, and further afield to Big Bear, Sequoia, Kings Canyon, Mammoth and June lakes, and my favorite place of all, Yosemite. In the mountains I feel like I am on top of the world, in God's crown, in heaven, and with angels wings.

Because of this deep and profound connection to nature, I came into a loving and intimate conscious contact with my Higher Power, and this has changed my life completely. I now know and feel God's love every day in so many ways. I try to live at God speed, because God knows and understands. This is the higher truth and law that makes my life work when I recognize and submit to it. I know all of this God talk will turn some people off to what I have to say, but please hear me out.

Many of my friend's have been mentally, physically, and sexually abused so many times they can't help but lose faith and be angry with God, and I can understand. All I can say to them is go ahead and rage at God if you must. Yell and scream and swear and get it all out. God is big enough, strong enough, and kind enough to take it all. Beyond that they may find it wasn't God, but the lost connection with God that brought on all the sadness, sickness, and insanity that manifested, and from which they suffered. Perhaps they too will find the strength, kindness, and forgiveness to also find healing and well being.

At 27 I met a woman with two daughters from different fathers, and we hooked up and married a year and a half later. For some reason she was in a hurry to have another child, so we had a son a couple of years later. Unfortunately it was a loveless marriage, so I asked for a divorce two years after that. This marriage was one of the worst and best mistake I've made, as I can't help thinking she would have been better off if she had never met me and added to her troubles, and yet from our imperfect union a wonderful and kind person, my son Jonathan was born.

In my quest for understanding and healing I went searching for support groups. Not finding much I advertised and started my own. A handful of us would meet once a week. It went on for a year and a half and we became good friends. We celebrated birthdays and holidays, and took trips together for years after the group dissolved. My search then took me to A Course in Miracles and their meetings. I found a group that met every Sunday morning to meditate and read spiritual books together. It was a popular meeting often attended by 25-30 people. We also celebrated events, took trips together, and became very good friends.

Most of them were also twelve step people. I started dating a woman from the group and she took me to a Co-dependents Anonymous meeting that I found to be a real pleasure so I started to attend the different meetings two or three times a week. Although the Course In Miracles meetings gave me a good sense of community and friendship I found the teachings esoteric when I needed a real life, gut level experience to break through my

dysfunctions. In twelve step I now found people who talked about and understood things I could really relate to, and a safe place to share my deepest pain and fears without judgment or criticism.

I also started going to an Adult Children of Alcoholics retreat in the spring and fall. It was much the same thing but these people had extreme stories of abuse and neglect from alcoholic and addicted parents and family members. After eight years in Co-dependents Anonymous a friend started a new ACA meeting and asked if I would come to support them. I soon found the emphasis on family dynamics was just what I needed, so it took my recovery to a much higher level.

This has been vitally important for me, for as I was growing up the life got squeezed out of me, or perhaps more accurately the pressures, losses, and grief squeezed me out of my feeling body and into my head. I left behind my inner child, which is my heart, and at a gut level, at my center and essence, my felt connection with all the power, presence, and wisdom that is my Higher Power. Imagine that for a moment. My two best friends, dead and buried. For a time I was even angry at God, as I told people I didn't believe in God, rather in good.

Around this time I read *The Artist's Way* and got turned on to journaling. I use simple spiral bound notebooks and have done 40 or so now. I start out good morning/afternoon/evening Lord, whatever the case may be. I write whatever is on my heart as if talking to a best friend, as I feel my Higher Power is the best friend possible as everything I do, and am is a result of God's grace.

It may seem silly to write the details of my day but it gives me the sense of an intimate relationship that is very important to me. Also taking the negative stuff that is racing around my head takes it off my shoulders and puts it on the pages so I can have perspective and peace. This was another great step to mend my relationship to my Higher Power as each entry is on some level a personal and heartfelt prayer.

Because of my felt sense of God in nature and the workings of the world I am glad to say I feel God in every cell of my body and everything around me. I now put God first, self care second, then care for others, opposite my previously dysfunctional orientation. This relationship is primary and all important, and takes the weight of the world off my shoulders and leaves it in God's care.

Over the years I have done the twelve step study a few times. Here I went through a workbook that goes deeply into the steps as they related to my personal situation with the emphasis on family of origin. The first time we started with 22 people and finished with 11, but I feel the workbook rushed us through, as spending just two weeks on each step with so many people there was little time to share and dig deep. Ever since I go through with just one person and we take the time to share read and share on every step, question, and personal experience for as long as we feel we need to.

It usually takes us a year and a half meeting this way once a week for a couple hours, but it is time well spent, and well worth it. We go very deep, so intimacy and love have time and space to unfold and blossom. It may have looked odd two men hugging and crying in a common area at the mall, but we sure didn't care, as we were really living for the first time, and these friendships often last a lifetime.

Here I learned about my character defects and strengths with great clarity and compassion. When I get stressed or triggered I know to watch out for my dysfunctional survival traits. This is profound breakthrough because now I know where to avoid pitfalls, especially in times of weakness, and should I act out and make mistakes I also know where I need to make amends and reparations. Acknowledging my strengths is also very helpful so I can focus energy building those muscles and don't beat myself up for my defects

I now see life and my thinking and behavior to be a spectrum from unconditional loving kindness on one end to horrific neglect and abuse on the other end. Growing up I learned a "set point," or go-to that became my mindset. All of the things I learned right or wrong became my truth and voices in my head telling me what I was and where I belonged. Unfortunately due to abuse some people are told, and come to believe, they are a piece of shit. Others, through neglect come to feel and believe they aren't worth a shit. It seems I learned lack of self worth due to my loneliness. It usually takes a lot of time and hard work to change, but it has helped me grow and blossom like a well tended garden.

Taking a good long look back at my youth in meetings, step studies, and retreats it seems I learned basic trust in the world, as I wasn't afraid to venture out in nature or on rides and travels. Unfortunately I did have trouble trusting people, especially confrontation with authority figures and angry people, as I didn't have experience in those areas. Not much experience with intimacy either, which is crucial to building and maintaining deep and meaningful relationships. It seems I retreated into myself as I isolated and became overly independent. I had friends but nothing very deep or lasting. Probably because of this I lost contact with all my childhood friends.

Knowing my weakness for passive aggressiveness and the attending boundary violations and dishonesty I now realize it is much wiser for me to be upfront, open, and honest. Awareness of my workaholicism due to people pleasing tendencies have led me to Workaholics Anonymous meetings and much better balance in those areas. I have attended many other twelve step program meetings as well to understand the issues and how I might gain from their wisdom.

I was so hungry for even the basics of a functional life I bought poster paper and wrote words like love, peace, joy, and beauty on them with big colored markers and hung them in my bedroom. I also imagined them standing thousands of feet high across the horizon, and still do, that's how important they are to me. I wanted them so bad I hoped that writing them out really big and posting them where I could see them every day would attract them to me. It took a while, but I think it did. I now call these my "super powers." More about these further on.

The greatest life changer and inspiration for me is you, my fellow travelers, my angels. It is your lives, your stories, your suffering and joy that have made all the difference. You got me out of my head and back into my heart. Thinking and isolation were my go-to for a long, long time. Without your love I would still be there. That's why in twelve step we say "keep coming back," because we are coming back to connection, community, and compassion. Eastern philosophy has a very wise concept of the "three jewels" of the teachers, the teachings, and community. I consider community the most valuable and precious of the jewels.

I then started collecting quotes from people I consider wise masters (the other two jewels). Einstein, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, John Muir, and many others have lead extraordinary lives and said incredibly wise and powerful things that have moved me deeply, and continue teaching me how to live with integrity and courage. When I hear their stories and words I believe there is reason for hope and provide a great examples of virtuous thought and behavior we so desperately need in these difficult and troubled times. These people live on in my heart and mind and are some of my best angels in times of trouble and need.

A few years into Codependents Anonymous at their retreat I had a another big breakthrough. I was in a workshop and got to thinking how my son seemed to be a lost boy. He struggled through school just as I had even though he is very intelligent. That made me realize I was a lost boy too. That was it. The dam broke and my emotions came pouring out. I was sobbing to myself in a room filled with people. I'd had many years, perhaps decades without crying, but now I finally could. Things could finally touch me deeply so that I could access the grief and other emotions to let them flow.

One of my greatest breakthroughs was during my sharing time at meetings, as I would share how we are not only allowed to have fun, but supposed to! At that I would whip off my jacket to expose a superman shirt and cape hidden underneath. I then explain how I'm not superman, I am Surrender Man! Why? Because my control and manipulation issues would only yield when I finally really let go and let God, so surrender became the first and perhaps the greatest of my many super powers.

I absolutely consider surrender to be a super power, yet there is an important distinction here, for although I have super powers, every bit of them come not from me, but from my Higher Power. I now realize all the power, presence, and wisdom of creation is within me, and access it through my Higher Power. Now the immense power of love, peace, joy, beauty, and all the other forces of life and creation are mine, and yours to enjoy.

Surrender Man has led to a recognition of other personas and super powers I employ on a regular basis, such as a magician who brings wonder and magic into my life on a daily basis. A holy man image and persona help make reverence, holiness, and a deep spiritual connection real. The warrior of course evokes strength, courage, justice, and determination, yet also a tender and open heart. A farmer or mother persona celebrates caring for life and the earth, as well as supporting, nurturing, and protecting. Lastly the regal king empowers ruling my world with dignity, wisdom, and also justice.

Churchill said "All the great things are simple and many can be expressed in a single word: freedom, justice, honor, duty, mercy, hope." I certainly agree, as words like love, peace, joy, and beauty carry a power far greater than a few letters on a page would indicate. It's like splitting an atom, as tremendous energy is released suddenly and powerfully in an explosive manner, or slowly and carefully as in a nuclear power plant. This is true for "negative" energies such as hate and aggression as well, as the fallout can be devastating.

I have also become extremely fond of slogans. In eastern wisdom these are the Lojong slogans, which simply means mind training. These are very short, simple, and succinct phrases that carry a lot of power and wisdom like: "be still and know," "love conquers all," and "live inside out." I have collected these for years and now, and print them out one per line, and five or six to a page in various fun colors and fonts. The point is to gently remind myself in a clear, direct, and meaningful way what I believe in and stand for.

I have found these so inspiring and helpful they have become a favorite tool I go to often. I scan through them slowly to see which ones strike a chord in my mind and heart in the moment. From there the possibilities are endless. I may look up quotes or lyrics, play a song, get out the markers or crayons and draw, or just meditate on the flow through sitting walking meditation, or on a bike ride. Chanting these slogans through-out my day is "enchanting," as it adds an air of magic to further enable the often miraculous and healing transformations that occur on a regular basis for me.

Many are icons like: surrender Dorothy, life is good, and love conquers all. A lot are song titles such as: Love like crazy, I believe in love, and live out loud. These often trigger a mental replay of the song and lyrics that takes the inspiration even further. Some are simply wise sayings or phrases that mean a lot to me like: Be a work of heart, loving kindness, and authentic presence. Lastly, there are short quotes from my favorite teachers like: "Peace is every step," "Dare greatly," and "Never, never, never give up." I really wish I could show you the list here to inspire you to create yours, because that is really the point.

My love of nature went to an even higher level when I learned about sacred geometry, for as Galileo said; "Mathematics is the alphabet by which God has written the universe." It seems that all creation is structured by very exact, and beautiful laws we see every day, but don't realize. The curve of waves, rivers, human ears, shells, animal horns, galaxies, and many other forms follow a precise formula that pervade the universe. Similarly the

patterns of sunflower and other seeds, pine cones, pineapples, and other forms also follow a precise pervasive calculation.

Behind many of the things we find most lovely is a mathematical structure that is truly amazing. These are the fingerprints of God on creation and there are many intriguing and delightful images, videos, articles, and information on the net if you are interested. One that really got me inspired was a magazine article entitled; Science Finds God I always recommend. I was so taken I wrote out an in-depth study with related images, as well as links to many favorite videos (See Mother nature at cowboydharma.com). My favorites are a short film called Donald Duck in Mathmagic land, and a short and beautiful video Nature by Numbers by Cristobal.

Another in-depth study, breakthrough and writing came from a book on happiness by Robert Holden where I learned that many facets of happiness that could be contrasted, such as uncommon, rare, elusive, and unusual, special versus common, ordinary, everyday, here and now. Then I looked at how twelve step thinking is often similar, for example we may think of ourselves as bad, broken, and flawed, or whole, perfect, complete, and beautiful.

The lists lacked life, so I also wrote out a narrative to flesh out the contrast in a real life way. It is called Recognizing Happiness Within: The True Self, and that is just what I use it for. I like to hand it out to people so they can also see the contrast in what we came to believe versus the true nature of life and ourselves (also available at cowboydharma.com under personal passions).

During an Adult Children of Alcoholics and Dysfunctional Families (ACA) retreat workshop I had another breakthrough during an inner child visualization. I imagined all of my 5, 10, 15, year old inner boys, and 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, and 50 year old inner men meeting with me one at a time from the youngest to oldest along the stream where I grew up in the foothills near Los Angeles. We talked, hiked, and played together for a good long time.

Again the grief, and this time joy, came pouring out in a flood of tears. At the end all of the boys and men melted into each other from the youngest to the oldest, and then into me. I now carry them with me wherever I go. I take good care of them and they take good care of me. The spot along the stream has become my "happy place" ever since. I stop by there regularly to visit, or simply imagine it to bring me calm and peace when I need it. I was even lucky enough to be there on a rainy day and catch a picture of a rainbow springing up from the trees.

Another break-through ACA workshop had us make two circles of people with the inner one looking out, and the outer one looking in, face to face. This workshop came towards the end of the retreat so we had come to know each other somewhat over the weekend. We each took turns telling the person opposite us some kind words, affirmations, and support. After a few minutes we took a step to the side and repeated the scenario. Once we had made our way around the circle we switched the inner and outer circles and started over. Again the emotions and tears came in a non-stop flood. I at last heard what I needed to, and wish I could hear every day and minute of my life.

The emotions release workshop has also been very powerful, and a break-through for me too, as emotions overwhelm the person sharing and many participants. I have cried and sobbed through much of the workshop as abuses, grief, and losses are shared with brutal honesty and passion. Witnessing such intense suffering and pain has given me great feelings of compassion and forgiveness. Friends sometimes say they are afraid to break through to that kind of grief because it feels overwhelming and they are afraid they won't be able to stop crying.

When I practice expressing grief I think of my son, wives, family, and friends, and again the dam breaks and the emotion comes pouring out. I cross my arms across my chest to hug my inner boys and men, or whoever I am grieving for at the moment and let go. Often I drop to my knees to really give in and give up, and let the tears flow. Quite honestly heaving sobs and a clenched chest sometimes go on and on until I roll to my side or back completely exhausted and emotionally spent. Love breaks through. Yet it is also such a relief I sometimes break out in smiles and laughter.

It reminds me of Lucy in the comic strip that likes to say "good grief Charlie Brown!" Good grief indeed, because frozen under all that pain and suffering is a vast well of joy and enthusiasm that has also been unexpressed for years or decades. I know it sounds crazy, "crazy love" perhaps, but the real insanity is holding it in and down until it manifests as anger, hatred, and misery for ourselves and others, or is manifested as addiction, bad behavior, or myriad other mental and physical illnesses.

Once at the camps closing circle a woman who had been had recently been through chemotherapy was sharing how imagining surrender man had helped her cope with the chemo. I usually wear a small kids super hero cape during the camp, but I had been hiding my big knee length red silky cape waiting for my turn to share and instead ran up and put it on her. She happened to be wearing all white, boots and all, so she really looked the part. It was hilarious and heart-warming.

She was so inspired that the next year when she was in charge of the retreat she chose "A Twelve Step Guide to Becoming Your Own Super Hero" as the theme. Instead of the usual t-shirts we got as part of the retreat we could have a super hero cape instead. All the workshops were super hero/super power themed, and I have one of the retreat banners with Integrity, Humility, Willingness, and Love emblazoned across it. It hangs on the inside of my front door and is a prized possession.

It is still hard to believe my playing with words and the power behind them could lead to a weekend of 100 people exploring the possibility of tapping into these energies, but I really shouldn't be surprised, as I know in my heart how helpful and healing these energies are, so have made it my life's work to share and expand them. It is said good things come in small packages, and now I know *GRRREAT* things do too!

I'm glad to say, much of the retreats are about fun and play. This has also been a break-through and is important for me and others as I access the inner child I buried and left behind long ago. We play volleyball, ping pong, board games, basketball, tetherball, and others, as well as archery, hiking, swimming, tai chi, drumming, and others. I now have a big box full of toys such as sidewalk chalk, frisbees, bubble wands, kites, slinkys, kaleidoscopes, coloring books, play dough, kazoos, and so on I bring and spread out on the patio for everyone to play with. These retreats are like summer camp for grown-ups and a pleasure that is hard to fully convey.

It is also hard to tell you just how wonderful and important my inner child (and boys and men) is to me now, for I now have ready access to a joy and enthusiasm, as well as grief and sorrow that was lost long ago. Just walking past the toys, crayons, and markers in the store makes me smile, and I often stop to enjoy them or add one to my collection. Riding bikes, dancing, singing, flying kites, drawing with sidewalk chalk, and other fun activities now happen in my life with a regularity that adds a real and felt happiness I love to enjoy as often as possible.

On Saturday night at camp we have a talent/no talent show and a DJ dance with fog, laser lights, and great rocking music. I was so socially anxious I stayed in my room for a few years, but now do skits, comedy, and even sing rock and roll recovery songs acapella! Others play instruments, dance, and also sing, do skits and comedy, as well as silly things like bird calls and magic tricks.

The usual tension of finding partners is overcome as we dance as one big group. Most of the time I have my eyes closed as I feel the groove much better that way. I used to be afraid to dance, until I heard that it isn't the light that shines on you, but the light that shines from you that counts. I have such a good time someone once remarked; "I don't know what you're taking, but I want some!"

I often facilitate an inner child workshop with toys spread all over the floor and I bring my king or queen, magician, super hero, wizard or wizardess, capes, crowns, or hats, and a Jedi monk/knight robe. It is a wild affair at times with balloons, balls, and spinners flying around the room, as laughter and silliness breaks out often. Each person has a chance to share as their child or adult selves. For many it is the first time in years, and for some the first time they could ever have toys or play. Others now bring their own toys and costumes to play with and share. The workshop is usually late at night so it has also become a pajama party.

Some of the most simple parts of twelve step are also the most powerful. The one adage that means the most to me is the often unspoken family of origin rules of don't talk, don't trust, don't feel. To this I like to add don't look, don't listen, don't heal. The fear of trusting others enough to talk about my issues only cemented the denial and family secrets in place. Not being able to talk about the issues made me think my beliefs and feelings about them were wrong or bad, if not crazy. It took years of trusting, talking, and feeling with safe and supportive people to really heal. We each get a few minutes to share our story in the meetings, but because we are breaking these old rules of silence and denial, instead of sharing I like to call it truthing.

As for the second part of this slogan; don't look, don't listen, don't heal, I find that by not looking at my past and problems, or listening to my heart and the hearts of others, the truth was lost and a false self arose. My favorite teacher Thich Nhat Hanh promotes deep healing by asking me to look deeply and practice deep listening through prayer and meditation to find my true self once again. All of these are something I do continuously as things come up and get processed through-out my days.

This true self is made up of all the good things that I have learned and found were within me all along. For me, this is what is "recovered" in twelve step recovery. This is my original self, the one intimately connected to all others, all life, all creation, or in one powerful word; God. Many, if not most twelve steppers have a critical inner parent that took over and created an actively abusive false self. For me, I didn't feel the attacked like that, rather the more passive abuse that is neglect. I now have a loving Higher Power, inner parent/adult, and wonder child that guide and help me through life's difficulties.

Seeking to improve my conscious contact with my Higher Power through prayer and meditation is very important for me so worthy of illumination here. As I mentioned journaling is a prayer book for me and how I connect with God on a regular basis, but it is also something I do through-out my day as a loving and caring voice in my head I can speak to and relate with at any time. Abraham Lincoln said; I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." This has been my experience in times of trouble in particular. I have a footstool at home that has been my alter and received many a desperate tear.

My meditations take two directions; first I often sit and listen for the still small voice of my true self and Higher Power, or secondly, I leave words and thoughts behind and go to perception rather than cognition. The first method clears my mental palate by recognizing issues seeking (or demanding) attention and sitting with them for time in acceptance and caring. This eases their grip on me while honoring and acknowledging their energy. I often do this with journal in hand and make notes as I go. Again, this really takes the burdens of life off my shoulders and heart and leave them on the pages and in Gods care.

The second meditation I practice is a preverbal space of pure feeling and experience as I feel my breath, the breeze on my skin and hair, hear the sounds around me, and so on. If I begin to think about things I simply label them thinking, let them go, and move back to perception. This is a very calm and pure space I go to with Higher Power, and thus all life and creation in quiet communion. It is a very relaxing and restorative place to be, so a real pleasure and satisfying endeavor to practice. The key here is being, not doing or thinking, rather just sitting, just breathing, just being.

Another hugely helpful meditation is authentic presence, as I submit to where I am and how I feel at any given time and place. I feel the weight of my body, my breath going in and out, and whatever sensations appear. This is grounding, and great relief from mental madness that has me chasing after desires in the future or reliving past regrets. Here and now I am usually okay. Here and now I can just be and enjoy life on life's terms. This is God speed, or as I like to say; "moving at the speed of life."

Once I start to feel at home in the moment, I can take inventory of all my blessings and take on an attitude of gratitude. I start with my body and the many, many amazing functions it performs constantly and usually flawlessly, such as balance, digestion, circulation, and elimination of waste. Then when I think of how I can hear a symphony, taste a juicy peach, smell a fragrant rose, see a gorgeous sunset, or feel a warm and loving kiss, I can't help but be grateful.

It is easy to carry this further, as I have clothes to wear, a roof over my head, food in the fridge, a comfy bed to sleep in, and a job I'm good at. Next I consider all the loving and helpful family, friends, pets, and others who make life a joy and a pleasure. Then I consider how abundant, diverse, beautiful, and tenacious life is, as it has covered the earth in every crack and crevice it can across the earth and over billions of years. Lastly I think of the really big picture of the wonder of cosmos, and how it came into being and become habitable for life and humanity.

All of this gratitude helps me feel I was raised in the blessing, as opposed to those who seem to have been raised under a curse and are in a living hell. I do have roots in some of these dark places, but I also have legs, and I like to think wings, that can carry me out of the pit of despair and desperation to light, life, and really living. Because of all of these realizations I can really believe that the cosmos, life, and humanity is basically good. This is a huge comfort for me as it gives me peace and a confidence in life and my fellow man that is sometimes difficult to find or feel in our often rushed, chaotic, and seemingly selfish modern world. This allows me to relax and feel at home in my world and my soul; safe, sane, and happy.

Basic goodness also allows me to live with gusto and have enthusiasm for life. My initials are L.G. as well as L.R.G., both acronyms for large, so that is a motto for me also, LIVE'N LARGE! A favorite song reminds me "I just want to celebrate another day of living, another day of life!" I also have a favorite Tony the tiger t-shirt that says his iconic phrase "Grrreat!" across the front that is how I prefer to see and experience life. It is certainly not always a celebration for me as you know by now, but a very important part of the real, true, full, and passionate I choose.

This mentality is actually a bold proclamation, as it is all too easy to dwell in negativity and fatalism. One of my favorite books; Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior taught me that like the American Indian warriors we call "braves," I must be brave enough to shun the dismal "setting sun" mindset and embrace the "rising sun" basic goodness of the phenomenal world all around me as well as in my body, mind, and heart. This orientation is actually quite radical in these times but just what I (and we) need to overcome the depression, hatred, and apathy that all too often pervades life.

The twelve steps and traditions themselves are my best guide for how to live my life sanely and with meaning, passion, and purpose. I would love to go through them one by one and explain how they change my life and make it work on a daily basis, but I'm afraid it may come across as preachy or boring and turn you off to them, so I will leave it to you to see if you are interested and willing to look further or check out a meeting.

A small thing that makes a big difference for me is that the ACA big red book states in a few places that I am DOOMED. Doomed to repeat the cycle of insanity, sickness, and dysfunction unless I seek recovery and find healing. Otherwise I will continue to seek out people who match family of origin in an unconscious attempt to reach back in time and fix all the crap that happened. Unfortunately I would seek out the same personalities that are the least likely, able, or willing to heal past wounds. Pretty disheartening until I realized and overcame the patterns.

I really enjoyed learning all these wonderful tools for getting my life working well and connecting with others so I started collecting them in my computer as my "sanity files." My wife thought it would be good to share these so she set up a website and blog where anyone could see what has worked so well for me in hopes of finding their own sanity, well being, and a fully functioning life.

She named it Cowboy Dharma because I'm somewhat of a cowboy with all my bicycle and motorcycle riding, and cowboys exemplify the west. The west has also made many great contributions in healing through psychology and twelve step, so that is also honored on the cowboy side. Dharma basically means cosmic law and order, or the right way of living in eastern philosophy, so Dharma ties in the 5,000 years of wisdom that the east offers, and I so much enjoy.

My music files consist of playlists such as jazz and blues, inspire, rock and roll, joyous, dance, praise, relax, and of course *SUPER SONGS*. Many of my favorite slogans are song titles from these files, as they contain great wisdom in just a few words or lines of lyrics. No wonder "muse" is the basis of the word music, as I find myself tremendously inspired so very often due to music's influence. Music can trigger powerful emotions within seconds lifting me up in glorious praise and joy, or sobbing in grief and sadness. There always seems to be just the right song somewhere in my files to fit just how I feel.

I use music to celebrate the various aspects of my healing as song title slogans are grouped first; Love, then Higher Power, Fire (as in "start a fire in my soul"), and others. Many favorites focus on other aspects of recovery such as inner child, surrender and acceptance, and awakening. I listen to these songs when I walk, ride, and work. If I'm having a particularly difficulty, I will sometimes hook up my music device to my car stereo or boom box to crank it up and rock out.

I have been known to dance around the living room, streets, and forests in exuberant joy, or fall to my knees touching my deepest sadness and grief. Most of my songs are upbeat or rock Christian and country music with a sprinkling of classic rock and pop, but sad songs are a favorite as well when the mood strikes. I wish there was room here to share all the great music I enjoy, but can say that music has been great comfort, joy, and inspiration.

Another set of sanity files that has been a great help for me is images. It started with photos but thanks to computers and smart phones I have a huge number of images close at hand. I have always been a visual person, and as such I rarely get lost because of the mental maps I carry. Now I have extensive image files on my phone and computer for art, cars, bicycles, and motorcycles, family, homes and gardens, inspiration, trips, and others. Then there is the nature folder, and related ones for trees, flowers, sunrises and sunsets, high sierras, and

pollution. Some might think this is attachment to forms, but It is such a pleasure, and I respect and honor the transitory impermanence of form.

This applies to people, places, and possessions as well, for many are held dear, and are surely a part of me like a hand or tool. Forms are my connection to this world and much of what I hold dear, so worthy consideration and honor. When I take a simple thing like a fork and consider how simple but useful, even beautiful it is, it makes me pause and see the sacred in the most mundane of things. How I use a fork tells me about my world both inner and outer. Do I have reverence and respect for it or use it carelessly as only a means to an ends. Such is the nature of all things that inhabit my world.

Yet I know that all things are of a nature to change and pass like clouds in the sky. Getting older, this has become quite apparent as I see my bodily systems slowing and breaking down until one day the systems fail and I pass on. This has given me some comfort for the fate of humanity, as we may see our social and environmental systems breakdown and humanity return to the great spirit all too soon. Until then I intend to celebrate the dance of form and spirit as my heart and soul direct me to. This leads me to a few stories of how my life view has changed.

One day I was in the garage and took a look around at the bicycles and motorcycles and realized what an awesome life I have had. I have been on so many epic adventures it is astounding. If I had video of all the great drives and rides I have been on the show would go on for months, maybe years. I also started to think of all the other good times during holidays, races and other sporting events, birthdays, weddings, graduations, and vacations. Then I thought about all the great meals, walks, talks, trips, music, books, shows, concerts, sex, and so on, and I realized how supremely blessed I am and we all really are. Another epiphany right there in the garage.

Another day in the patio and garden I got to thinking how the plants were like the parts of my life, some beautiful or thriving, and some poisonous or dying. They also start from tiny seeds and if nurtured properly can come to life and manifest hugely, even magnificently branching out full of flowers or fruits. These flowers can be intensely colorful and attractive, or death traps. The fruits can be sweet and delicious, or sour and bitter. Much the same with the many varied aspects of life and recovery.

Plants are really an amazing analogy as they have so many incredible attributes. Some trees live thousands of years, reach great heights, and are intimately connected underground or through chemical communications. Simple blades of grass are considered the most prolific life form springing from every possible crack and crevice. I like to say life is diverse, abundant, intelligent, and tenacious. So too many aspects of my physical, mental, and spiritual life. It seems many of these can take on a life of their own and strangle off others like a creeping vine.

It would be easy to think that all I want to grow is love, peace, joy, beauty, and other "positive" things like these, but think again. How much joy would I feel if I had no sorrow? How could I exercise my courage if I had no fears? And how deep would my love be if I didn't know isolation and disconnection? Even powerful "negatives" have much value and information. My anger tells me there is injustice, my jealousy tells me desires aren't being met, and hatred tells me I have prejudices that deserve attention.

Taking this analogy into the kitchen, I can cook up any number of things with these ingredients. First of all, I could starve myself to death by not partaking of my favorite foods of love, peace, joy, and beauty. I could also similarly injure myself feeding on past hurts, pains, and miseries. The point of course is to have good food in good measure for body, mind, spirit, and soul.

Next I took my imagination to the clothes and linen closets to see who's shirt I wear, what makes up my bed, and from what cloth my have clothes been cut. It might seem a silly example but Ralph Waldo Emerson said we are speaking our characters constantly whether we wish to or not. Similarly I wear my internal state in the clothes I wear, on my face, and in my body language. And when I open my mouth or take any action my character and personality speak as well, and often in colorful broad strokes and great detail.

Fortunately my story has changed. My frozen clenched fist heart of stone could finally rest, relax, melt, and open to become a helping hand to reach out with kindness and compassion. I then discovered that not only was my sorrow and sadness frozen, but along with it much of my joy and enthusiasm. Now I have ready access to a wide range of emotions and experiences that were shut off to me for decades. The problems of life I had been running away from in fact held the keys to healing, and a full and meaningful life.

Through my studies of twelve step practices, eastern philosophy, and western psychology I found the fear, pain, and suffering I had been avoiding, as well as the desires I had been chasing after held the key to the recovery of my True Self, and thus true happiness. I had to turn my thinking and behavior upside down and backwards. I discovered a visual representation of this, for if you write ME on glass then turn it upside down and backwards it reads WE. This is the WE of Higher Power, mother, father, and child that had been torn apart, yet can come home to be one, to be WE again.

It bears mentioning here just how revolutionary this is. It often takes a tremendous amount of courage to muster the willingness to embrace and follow this path. The usual tack of running from pain, suffering, and discomfort, or running to distraction and entertainment is forsaken. Instead we begin removing the bandages we have wrapped around our wounds, and digging into them to get to the sources of the misery and show them unconditional love. The days, weeks, months, and years of hard work and pain payoff in huge benefits, as not only our thinking and feeling, but our lives and world are turned around as well.

I found I wasn't making this journey alone. In the meetings, at the retreats, conventions, step studies, and all the other functions I found others with similar stories. If I couldn't recognize or speak my story and truth, before long someone else did it for me. I hear my fears, rejections, abandonments and abuses told by others I can relate to. This is the path we most fear to take, to the places that scare us, but it is the most important one of all. Although I only see the retreat folks twice a year, I feel we have a deep and sacred bond. We have been through a lot together, so these folks are also some of my best angels.

What's the bottom line? What's the point? I used to be on autopilot playing out all the old, sad, sick, dysfunctional tapes playing in my head. I may have looked like a normal person and been fairly happy, but on the inside I was hurting and felt alone. Like Michael Jackson, Robin Williams, and Prince I was highly functional on the outside, but dying a slow and painful death on the inside. Yet because of my desire for a better life of real meaning, passion, and purpose I did the hard work and cleaned the wounds to find help, healing, and happiness.

As Robert Frost said; "I took the road less traveled, and that has made all the difference." And most importantly of all as Toby Mac sings; Love broke through. Like the Grinch my heart grew three times, so that now I can feel the pain and suffering, as well as the joy and elation of life. Now I'm not afraid to look for where I'm stuck or shutting down, also where I can open up my heart and mind and get into the flow of God's divine grace to realize it in my life and the world.

In the end it has given me great peace to realize that not only is life on a spectrum from well being, sanity, and happiness on one end, and sickness, abuse, and insanity on the other end, but I am (and we are) the same. I am

an angel of honesty, help, and loving kindness, as well as a devil of dysfunction, dishonesty, and hate. I can recognize my set point and plight, and with God and others help, pull myself back to life and sanity from the pit of despair. There is hope for me, and you.

When I am having a particularly bad day or moment I like to think of how when surfers get "wiped out" on a big wave and they are tumbling in the surf not knowing which way is up they grab a hold of the leash attached to their wrist and surfboard and pull themselves up to the surface, and to air, light, and life. It's like the Rumi poem that asks "Why should I stay at the bottom of the well when there is a strong rope in my hand?"

A friend tells how he is "a recovering looker downer," and a poignant image of low self esteem. It reminds me that the first and important step is to lift up my face and look to my Higher Power and the breath, light, and life that God is for me. I like to say that if I fix my life on God, then God will fix my life. It starts simple, by simply looking up and fixing my eyes on God, and all the goodness, grace, and blessings I always have at my disposal to utilize and enjoy. I am God's eyes and ears, hands and feet, and most importantly God's mind and heart in this world, so I need to use them in an uplifted way to truly honor all that I have been given.

Honestly I feel I was one of the lucky ones, as it seems I didn't know how bad it was until I had good measure of healing at hand. Many millions, perhaps billions weren't so lucky. The stories of neglect and abuse I have heard have been horrendous. I know that you have suffering stories too, as everyone has been hurt, wounded, and in pain. But what are you going to do with that pain and suffering? Will you let it harden your heart until it becomes a clenched stone fist like mine was, or find and use the tools you need to really feel compassion, beauty, loving kindness, and joy?

I hope you have found some hope and inspiration here, for that is my intention and purpose. Some of the concepts presented here are so helpful to me they deserve whole chapters or books to fully explore, but I hope it is a chapter in *your* life. No doubt I will continue in this endeavor to turn my thinking and behavior upside down to realize my wonder child, loving inner parent and adult, and loving Higher Power, and my True self, but will you? Will you begin, and then persevere, carry on, and do the hard work to realize your real life and True self? I pray you will, because "it works if you work it, and you're worth it!"

Personally, I've have to do this, for my family, friends, community, for all those who suffer, and for all mankind and life. It's on and I'm all in! If this is what recovery is all about, bring it on, I want all I can get! I used to ask myself, what are you waiting for, an engraved invitation? So I wrote out a full page called "Invitation to Your Life" I use for inspiration. I hope you get to read it sometime (look for it on the CowboyDharma.com website under personal passions), as it is perhaps the most inspired and inspiring thing I have ever done or will do. This is *your* invitation to the full and complete, LARGE and loving life you were intended for, and deserve.

Lastly I would like to leave you with a question I often ask people; how would you finish the sentence "Life is..." For me the answer is that life is what *you* make it. Life can be sick or well, and heaven or hell, depending on how we choose to live it one day, hour, minute, and moment at a time. I am choosing Higher Power, True Self, and true love as best as I can, and as often as I can. I am going to keep pulling on that leash, that rope of recovery, and pull myself to light and life. I hope and pray you will too. Thanks for listening, Brother Lars :)

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