



LIVING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Living from the Inside Out

Your life matters. You are not here by accident.
You are not a mistake. You are on the right planet.
You are not here for the kids, the career, and the mortgage.

You are here to make the journey of your life

via the kids, the career, the mortgage.
The journey matters more than the destination.

For the past nineteen years, I have been witness to the intimate stories of other people's lives. Collectively their lives encompass every possible human drama and the emotions they evoke.

They come seeking ways to enhance physical, mental, emotional and spiritual healing; to find peace and establish what is truly meaningful for them. They come because the events in their lives have caused them to stop in their tracks and ponder the questions:

Who am I?
What am I doing on the planet?
Am I living the life I came here to live?
If not, why not?
And what am I going to do about it?

These are powerful questions that for some, arise in childhood or their teen years and for others, are precipitated by the unexpected events in their lives.

The turbulence I experienced throughout my early life made of me a good companion to journey with others likewise confronted by the unexpected events of their lives.

The following tit bits from my early life serve to demonstrate its challenges. I had grown up with a complex and wonderful brother who told me, before we were ten years old, that he had to take his own life by the time he was thirty. As he entered his teen years depression descended upon Brenden and our entire household. From being very small for my age I had a growth spurt that resulted in the bones in my legs growing wrongly. I entered hospital at thirteen to undergo a dozen major surgeries to rearrange my legs, barely emerging until I was sixteen years old. The long hospitalisations ended my education and precipitated me into a world of adults. I had just emerged from hospital, callipers, plasters and endless physiotherapy when I was raped by a man I considered a friend. An enthusiastic exploration of illegal drugs followed.

The multiple surgeries had left me with arthritis in both knees and I became increasingly interested in the contribution we make to our own health. I ate a



vegetarian diet, studied naturopathy and undertook several rigorous fasts. All the while, Brenden struggled with depression and we all suffered the agonies of feeling the helplessness of our inability to help someone we loved. He and I often discussed the 'meaning of life' as we both contemplated the suffering in the world and our powerlessness in the face of it.

Brenden finally succeeded in taking his own life (in Kathmandu) after several unsuccessful attempts. A few months later, my husband and I moved to America with our two small children to undertake a yoga and meditation teacher-training course. Four weeks after we arrived in California my husband returned to Australia as our marriage collapsed. Not long after that, I was diagnosed with leukaemia and my very first reaction was relief!

Life had been a struggle up until then and I felt the pain of Brenden's loss keenly. He had been the central pivot in the life of our family and now he was gone. The pain of his existence was only matched by the pain of his absence.

No longer existing held considerable appeal for me, however the feeling only lasted moments before I was assailed by the certainty that I hadn't *lived* yet. I was not at peace with myself, with my history or with the people who loved me. I knew that living was not about accomplishments and possessions. The perfected façade of 'coping with everything' I diligently maintained began to crumble and reveal a more vulnerable self, hiding in the recesses of tattered self-esteem.

These experiences pushed me to explore parts of myself I would otherwise never have willingly ventured into. The path to peace led right through the heart of anguish. In telling some of my story I know that we find common ground because our stories are all woven from a common thread. The events of our lives may differ but the paths are similar.

My encounter with life-threatening illness, contemplation and expectation of death and the honest exploration of my inner life gave birth to a peace that I had never expected to encounter. Through long meditation in a cave that St Francis had infused with his presence I finally *knew* that peace was not dependent on whether I stayed in a body or not. My *preference* was to live but I wasn't *addicted* to having to live in order to know peace. Peace is always possible when our sense of self is anchored within ~ in our consciousness ~ rather than attaching it to the outer trappings of a lifetime or even to our physical body. I realised that I am not my body, I have a body.

Life is full of uncertainties. It presents us with the unexpected, the unasked for and, sometimes, the unthinkable. We struggle to understand and accept these events, to find meaning in them. They can cause us to find the heroic within ourselves and in so doing we find self-understanding, acceptance, resolution, humour, courage, wisdom and more.

Since opening its doors in 1999 the Petrea King Quest for Life Centre has welcomed to its residential programs more than two thousand people from around Australia and beyond. People come to the Centre's programs seeking a listening heart and to learn practical skills in living well in the midst of the challenging events of their lives.



Together we recognise that we can't always change what happens to us, but we can most surely change the way we *respond* to what happens to us.

It is not always easy to find people who understand the distress of loss, grief, anxiety, despair, tragedy or serious illness. Many people find the unexpected events in their life precipitate feelings of helplessness, fears of the future, uncertainty and powerlessness. These events often lead people to the deeper questions about life's meaning and purpose.

In addition to training in their area of expertise, the staff at the Quest for Life Centre have all been confronted by illness, trauma, loss or grief in their own lives. People who have faced their own suffering are often the best companions for those new to their situation. The level to which we are willing to explore our own anguish or suffering is the level to which we will be comfortable around other people exploring theirs.

How do we live with uncertainty? What can we do to help ourselves? How can we manage fear, panic, depression, anger, anxiety, sorrow and despair? How do we heal our relationships? How do we make the right decisions? How can we find enough meaning to stay alive (for those contemplating suicide)? How can we die leaving our children still in need of us – after all, no one can love them like we can? Is it possible to let go the hurts in our lives? How shall we find peace?

These questions are both sacred and monumental. Sacred because they're a call to 'consciousness' or 'being'; a call that requires more of us than we've been using up until now. Monumental because they provide the opportunity to shift our awareness profoundly and dramatically.

These ancient questions, uttered throughout history by all those who suffer or contemplate its meaning, bring us to attention and provide us with an opportunity to explore the nature of who we are.

It is in the midst of the upsetting events of our lives - the diagnosis of life-threatening illness, the death of a loved-one (that can be a pet), an unexpected loss or disappointment - that these fundamental questions often surface. We're often caught unawares by them and can be perplexed that, in the midst of *this* trauma, we're also facing any unresolved issues or questions from the past.

For some people, these questions about their own existence have been glimpsed, pondered and then receded into the background of their lives. If there have been no easy answers, or disappointment with what was found, then many people bury themselves in their area of competence – mothering, working, sport – at the expense of creating a healthier balance in their life. Other people feel the presence of these questions as an unsettling undercurrent throughout their life.

If we're to make a positive contribution within our community and manage the journey of our own lives effectively, we need two essentials ~ well perhaps three. Firstly, we need to develop our resilience and flexibility. Secondly, we need to be grounded in an inner stability that is unwavering – this leads us to a life based in a conscious



awareness, lived from the inside out. And thirdly, it's simply not worth coming to the planet unless you cultivate a persistent sense of humour.

People are seeking a new framework to live by. For many people it is no longer tolerable to deny their emotional and spiritual aspects. Actively seeking to bring all aspects of ourselves into balance is the greatest gift we can give ourselves and others in our sphere of influence - and thus peace grows. We need faith, humour, love, idiosyncrasy, resilience, flexibility, belief and will if we're to survive any serious challenge in life.

Your life matters. You are not here by mistake, by chance. You are here to make a contribution that can only be made by you. Your value does not lie in what you do but who you are. *You* are the gift. We are here to release all that is false or limiting about our selves and to grow and blossom into all that we truly are.

You are not your body; you have a body. It is your responsibility to nourish it, rest it, exercise it and 'fluff it up'. You are not your mind; you have a mind. It is your responsibility to bring it to rest so that you can hear the voice of your intuition, your consciousness and to keep your mind in good company. You are not your emotions; you have emotions. It is your responsibility to learn how to witness your feelings or express them in ways that wound neither yourself or others. You are consciousness, soul, spirit, energy, life. Anchoring your sense of self in your consciousness is the path to living from the inside out.

An excerpt from Petrea's forthcoming book, *Your Life Matters ~ Practical Spirituality in Times of Change* to be published in early 2004.