

*your
great
— life!*

**A SOULFUL AND
STRATEGIC GUIDE TO
DESIGNING A LIFE YOU LOVE**

GEMMA STONE

live a life you love
add love to the world

GREAT LIFE CREED

LIVE BY THE GUIDANCE OF YOUR TRUE SELF.

When your life reflects the essence of who you are, you move in the direction of living a life you love.

YOU ARE MULTIDIMENSIONAL.

You are not just the bright and beautiful parts; you are also the dark and difficult parts. Knowing and loving all your bits creates space for living an authentic and aligned life.

LOVE MATTERS.

Design your life on a foundation of love. Choose love over fear, repeatedly. Life is too short not to love freely, fully and deeply. Our world needs your love.

NOURISH YOUR SOUL.

Listen to the desires, longings, and cravings of your soul. Fill your life with things, people, and opportunities that nourish your soul.

AUTHENTICITY IS ATTRACTIVE.

Knowing your true self and expressing it in the world will attract people and opportunities to support you in designing a life you love.

YOU HAVE WHAT YOU NEED WITHIN YOU.

Life design is not dependent on time, money, energy, age, approval, accolades, education, or anything else outside of yourself. You have everything you need to begin the life design process today.

DO YOUR INNER WORK.

Doing your inner work allows your outer world to evolve. Your mental maps will define and design the terrain of your life. Make sure they are accurate.

RESPECT YOUR INDIVIDUALITY.

People are like snowflakes – beautiful because of the diversity in the details. Celebrate your unique self and the distinctive life you will live.

COMMUNITY IS ESSENTIAL.

Find where you belong. Your tribe is waiting for you. You are not alone.

DO WHAT DEEPLY MATTERS.

Find the people and places that help you expand. Reflect frequently on this question: what matters deeply to me? Build your life around your core values.

YOU HAVE PERMISSION TO CHANGE YOUR MIND.

Who you are now is different from who you were then. What works for you today may not work for you tomorrow. You are free to change.

LIVE BY YOUR SACRED YES AND HONORING NO.

Be generous, but don't sacrifice yourself. Know your boundaries and honor them. Know your limits and transcend them. Serve others, support others, but don't live for others.

MAKE THE CALL.

In each moment you have a choice. Will you choose the life you love, or something else? Be conscious, courageous, and intentional. You are the designer of your life.

LET IT BE EASY.

But, it won't always be easy. Opt out of drama and trust yourself to navigate the difficult moments.

THE TIME IS NOW.

It's never too late. No matter how long you've been in the relationship, career, location, or mindset, it is never too late. We all arrive on this planet with possibility, potential and a desire to live a life we love. You haven't missed your chance. Now is the time.

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A MAP OF THE SACRED ADVENTURE

PART ONE – PREPARE

In part one, we will cover what you need to know in order to build a solid foundation for your life design adventure. We explore love, fear, true self, constructed self, ego, soul, life design values, and how to navigate this book. I know soul can be a confusing term. In chapter three, we're going to clarify what it means and why it matters for life design. By the end of this section, I hope you'll know that designing a life you love is worthwhile and do-able.

PART TWO – DESIGN

In part two, you'll warm up your creative muscles and expand your cognitive processes as you create the blueprints for living a life you love. This is where we dive deep into the life design process. We'll reflect on what you want in your life and what you need to release in order to make it happen.

PART THREE – LIVE

In part three, we will move your life design from creative concept into rocking reality. Here you'll craft your annual soul plan, establish rituals and commit to plans. We will connect with love and logic to strategically design your life.

PART ONE

PREPARE

It's better to look ahead and prepare, than to look back and regret. —Jackie Joyner-Kersey

CHAPTER ONE

A LOVE LETTER, TO YOU

The frankest and freest and privatest product of the human mind and heart is a love letter. —Mark Twain

I know you have a secret dream, a longing, an aching. Something pulls at you, something brighter, bolder, more precious, more real, much more ... you.

That something is the life you love. I call it your great life. Great lives are not super lives; they are truthful lives. Great lives are not without tears and heartbreak, uncertainty and confusion. They are not lived for approval, applause, or accolades.

Great lives are born when you listen to the call of your soul. They are built from truth, integrity, courage, self-awareness, and vulnerability.

Your great life may involve a huge change – a move, a relationship transition, an adventure, a creative dream. Or, maybe it just needs a few small tweaks. Living your great life may mean your old world needs to die so your new world can be born. It may also mean having a difficult conversation, forgiving yourself, or becoming liberated from an old fear. Your great life may ask you to love yourself so completely and unconditionally that your heart breaks open. That wouldn't be such a terrible thing, would it?

When you hear your soul calling, you may be tempted to glance over your shoulder to see how your friends, family, culture, and society feel about the path you're being called to. They may be worried or confused; be gentle with them.

Life design isn't always easy or effortless – though sometimes it can be. You may have hesitations, doubts and uncertainties, or you may step into your great life with bold enthusiasm. No matter what, every step you take in the direction of a fuller, truer life brings you closer to what deeply matters.

Be prepared. Your ego will almost certainly protest your new life. You may hear the fears of your constructed self say, *who do you think you are?* You can respond lovingly with, *I'm my true self.* Suddenly, it's time to let the old habits and patterns of your constructed self crumble away.

When you choose to live the great life your soul is calling for, you may notice some fears rising.

What if ...

... I make a public declaration and I fall short?

... My friends and family don't understand?

... I don't like waiting in the unknown?

... I outgrow the people in my life?

... I make the wrong choice?

... I succeed?

... I fail?

... I transform my life in such a revolutionary way that the people I love no longer recognize me?

... I make the move, hand in my resignation, open my heart, take the leap – and instantly regret it?

... I spend heaps of time, energy, money, and effort chasing the dream that calls to me, only to end up back where I started?

... I start living my fuller, truer new life but long for my comfortable, familiar old routine?

I wish I could promise you these fears will never see the light of day. I wish I could guarantee you will be safe from discomfort. I wish I could support you by saying *every step of the journey will be easy*. I wish I could assure you that your loved ones will support and understand you. I wish I could comfort you with the knowledge your choices won't hurt anyone. I wish I could claim with absolute certainty that you will experience success with every decision you make and every action you take.

I really wish.

However, life design is subject to the realness of life. At least one of your fears may come true. But, it is just as likely the reality won't be as shattering as you expect. As you embark upon living a life you love, please remember, fear has a tendency to inflate itself. It likes to puff up into a sharp and prickly ball to scare you into staying stuck. Even if your fears do materialize exactly as you imagine, it won't necessarily mean you'll regret designing a life you love.

The whispers of your soul are meaningful and trustworthy. You are much more likely to regret ignoring them than to be sorry for heeding their call. As you follow your own advice, you will see the truth of your soul and the truth of your life. Trust it.

Please remember, there will be struggles in life no matter which path you choose. People will tell you what is right and what is wrong regardless of whether or not you live life on your own terms. There will always be dissenters, critics, and walls erected by the status

quo. These things are unavoidable, so you might as well choose to live a life you love.

As you pursue the truth of your life, you will bond your heart and soul to like-minded people. Your love of authenticity and living a meaningful, fulfilling life will tether you to others who are doing the same. You will feel kinship, connection, and belonging.

Living a great life begins with a choice and continues with a belief: *I choose my soul's calling over all others. I am capable. I can handle whatever life puts in front of me.*

Do not mistake a designed life for a self-indulgent life. Living a life you love is a gratifying by-product of repeatedly choosing to live with consciousness, courage, and community. It's what happens when you choose to listen to your soul and do what is necessary to make it the truth of your life.

My dear Life Designer, at the end of your life you will look back and know you picked the sacred adventure – you designed your life the way you wanted it to be. You lived truly and fully. When you reached the fork in the road, you picked the path that allowed you to feel proud of who you are and how you spent your time on earth.

When you reach the moment where you face the ultimate decision – the predictable, familiar, untrue choice versus the unpredictable, unknown, truthful choice – you may experience a nervous edge, a stomach full of butterflies, sweaty palms, a mind filled with uncertainty. Take the first step and know you are not alone. There are many others walking right beside you.

A CAUTION

Life design isn't for everyone. Many people are completely satisfied with the status quo and automatic living. If your comfort zone is ... comfortable and you have no desire to expand it, I lovingly suggest you close this book now.

The questions, reflections, and processes that follow may make you uncomfortable. You might feel challenged and you may question everything you thought you knew about yourself, your life, and the world.

I want to be sure you are entering into this process fully aware of the risks, because there are risks. Of course, life design also offers tremendous rewards, but those rewards are not for everyone.

Whether or not you continue past this point, I wish you a great life.

You're still here. Wonderful!

Life design is an adventure that requires preparation. Without adequate preparation, it's easy to be unpleasantly surprised or unnecessarily challenged by the experience. The next few chapters are all about preparation. As you read through them you may notice a sense of urgency building within you, like you're ready to design your life immediately. I can relate.

When I was 25, I decided I wanted to hike the West Coast Trail – a beautiful and challenging 47-mile rainforest hike. I had never done a multi-day hiking trip before, but I felt the urgency to do it, so I signed up anyway. I read a few blog posts, climbed a few hills, bought a backpack, and found myself at the trailhead a few weeks later. I was unprepared. It was the hardest, most painful, most exhausting thing I have ever done (which is saying a lot, considering I birthed both my babies at home, alone). My hiking adventure didn't have to be that way. With a little patience and preparation it could have been the empowering and exhilarating experience I had anticipated.

I encourage you, as you move through the next few chapters, to allow your excitement to build, while being patient about the preparation process. It's the best way to ensure you get the most from your life design experience.

USING THIS BOOK

You found me – and I found you – for a reason. I trust life brought us together for a purpose. I feel like I know you, even if I don't know you. I know you have a story. I know you've had moments of suffering. I'm guessing, at times, you scramble to feel happy and deep down inside you have a dream, even if you don't yet know what it is or how it looks. I know there have been moments in your life when you've been told who you should be and what you should do. I know, at times, you feel the burden of expectations pressing down on you. I know you crave truth, meaning and purpose. I know you want the freedom to follow your heart's desire and I know you want to live a life that makes you feel excited and energized.

LIFE DESIGN IS FOR EVERYONE

I am amazed at the range of people who show up to life design. New moms struggling with an identity crisis, young artists searching for an inner muse, burnt-out executives, spiritual masters seeking more soul, enthusiastic entrepreneurs, and folks on the brink of retirement.

Life designers are also people who are madly in love with their spouse, surfing the single life, exploring alternative lifestyles, and rebuilding after a devastating divorce.

Life designers have been uncomfortably broke, comfy in middle class, or living the million-dollar life.

Everyone wants to live a life they love.

INTENTION

My intention is to support you to find your truth and give you some tools to help you design a life you love. This book includes theory, woven with philosophy, intertwined with story, and topped with process. When you explore a life design process in this book, I encourage you to make it your own, and mold it so it fits the shape of your life.

You may find life design takes over your days – in a really good way. Perhaps you'll keep a journal beside your bed to track 2 am insights, you may excitedly pull over the car to scribble down new inspiration, or even share a revelation with your barista. Researching and planning your great life will fuel your excitement for living. Taking a risk will feel less risky and more empowering.

Beware, this is not *Ten Steps to Living a Life You Love*, because my way is not your way. There are countless people in the world, especially the self-help world, shouting about what you 'should' be doing. This book is not intended to be a 'should-ing' list. Just because something works for someone else doesn't mean it will work for you. And, just because it works for you today doesn't mean it will work for you tomorrow. Adjust as necessary.

GUIDEBOOK

Jane Austen says, "*we have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be.*" I agree. Your Great Life is intended to be a guidebook as you adventure into yourself and the truth of your life. I've been on a few wild, outer world adventures and the most important thing I packed was my *Lonely Planet* guidebook. These books contain treasures of wisdom from people who travelled before me; they've helped me out of a few jams and made each adventure much more enjoyable.

The interesting thing about a guidebook is that, at some point, you won't need it anymore. Now, when I explore the world, I leave my guidebooks at home. A good guidebook will help you to build your confidence, trust yourself, and know you can find your own way. I hope this book helps you to deepen your confidence in life design, trust your true self, and understand that you have everything you need within you to create the life you love.

Make this book yours. It's your guidebook, vision board, art journal, sounding board and

trusted friend. Add color, draw in the margins, fold the pages, highlight passages, sketch symbols, tape quotes, circle words. Claim it and make your mark – it is yours.

EVOLUTION OF LIFE DESIGN

This book emerged in layers and pieces, words and thoughts, processes and questions. It was disjointed and disorganized. I was inconsistent with my writing practice and often withdrew from the work for months at a time. You may experience a similar process as you design a life you love. You may be laser focused and swift in your implementation or it may happen slowly and sporadically. There's no right way, but what I know for sure is that the life you love, loves you right back. Just like this book was waiting for me to write it, the life you love is waiting for you to live it.

In this book you will find perspectives, processes, and stories to help you design a life you love. I'll share pieces of my life design story and share the stories of other life designers. I don't ask you to agree with our experiences, but simply to reflect on your own. As I speak the truth of my life, it may help you to see the truth of yours and to know that you are not alone. There is so much to know and so much truth to discover. The direction my feet take and what speaks to my heart may not be right for you. I share my spark of truth to guide you through the dark, but not to tell you what to see.

Life design is a process and it is a tool. Processes are only helpful when you engage with them, and tools are only helpful if you use them. You will have to engage with the processes in order to benefit from them. Learning how to engage in processes and how to use tools can take time. You'll need to practice and be patient. If you commit to the processes and embrace the tools, you will find yourself designing a life you love.

This book contains plenty of questions for which there are no right answers. This is not an intelligence test or an aptitude exam. It's not a psychological assessment and I won't tell you how your personality traits make you perfect for a certain kind of life. There are many personality tests out there that will explain what motivates you, illuminate what attracts you, and draw attention to what depletes you. While helpful in some ways, psychological tests are limiting. They give you very little insight into the truth of who you are and what deeply matters to you. Only you can know that. This book was written to help you connect to the most important person in your life – your true self.

Life design is a creative, conscious, collaborative experience. I'll offer up ideas, thoughts, reflections and questions, and ask you to filter them through your own truth and wisdom. It's one part art, one part science, and wholly about soul. It's a deep dive into the fullness of who you are and the life you want to live.

AUTHENTICITY

Writing and researching this book allowed me to experience corners of my soul that were previously inaccessible. Becoming aware of the truth – we alone are responsible for our lives – was essential to my salvation. While this book is intended to add liberation and love to your life, it is not about transcending the human experience; it's about being in it – soulfully embodied, fully alive, and profoundly real.

I've read a ridiculous number of self-help books and eventually, I became suspicious of transformation conversations that bypassed the messiness of human experience. I made a commitment to myself to write as authentically as possible. After making that commitment, I found myself writing stories I didn't want to write, but needed to share in order to keep it real. I now understand that by sharing the messy stories of life, we come to know we are not alone.

Here's what I know for sure: when you live your great life, you automatically liberate others to do the same. When you shine your light, you add to the collective light in the world. When your life is guided by your soul, you tip our world in the direction of love. And, our world desperately needs your special brand of love.

QUALITY QUESTIONS

This book is focused on helping you develop self-awareness to know what works for you (and what doesn't) when it comes to designing a life you love. Self-awareness is born from quality questions and conscious reflection. Throughout this book, you'll find life design processes based on quality questions that are intended to spark conscious reflection.

Questions that are based in fear build stories that can imprison us, but questions that are based in love give us the freedom to truly live. Fear-based questions typically perpetuate suffering.

How can I get my partner to meet my needs? How can I get people to like me? How can I make it through the day? How can I find security? How can I avoid rejection? How can I do all that is expected of me?

The more we seek answers to fear-based questions, the less secure we feel. I will offer you questions and I encourage you to examine your questions as you move into the design of your life.

Do your questions empower you to grow more fully into your true self, or do they keep you stuck and cause suffering? Are your questions based in love or fear? Are you asking what your soul wants you to ask, or are you recycling questions from your parents, partners, teachers, or coaches? Do the answers to your questions cause you to open up

and expand or to close down and contract?

The questions we ask ourselves define the lives we live. *What life do you want to live? And, what questions will allow you to live it?* Ask these questions once and they will redirect your day. Ask these questions every day and they will redirect your life. Every question you answer is a gift to yourself. Be generous.

CONSCIOUS REFLECTION

In addition to quality questions, I will offer sentence stems to guide you into soulful self-reflection. Stream of consciousness writing is one of my favorite processes for connecting more deeply with myself and uncovering the nuggets of wisdom my true self wants me to know.

Sometimes truth is buried deep in our psyche. Sometimes truth is just below the surface and we must simply blow off the dust. Either way, stream of consciousness writing is an excellent way to find buried treasure. You will unearth knowing that will feel both surprising and familiar.

When using stream of consciousness writing as a tool for self-awareness, it's helpful to trust the answer that emerges first and write, write, write. Replicate your answers if needed. Ramble. Be uncensored. Heart-felt. Anything goes – big picture, specificity, single words, run-on sentences, eyes open, eyes closed. No analysis – we all know it creates paralysis. The impulsive response is usually the one that is most truthful. And, life designers are truth-seekers.

MAKE IT REAL

This book is not just about answering questions and reflecting on your life. It's also about making the ideal real. You will design of your life by engaging in thoughtful action and by having courageous conversations. A little deeper into the book, you will find life design processes that are more directive, with an actionable flavor. Reflection gets you started on the design process and action transforms your design into reality.

I'm guessing you've already attended motivational workshops, set goals, attempted meditation, committed to a gratitude practice, and tried to live mindfully, so this isn't a "let's focus on your breathing, be present and practice gratitude," kind of book. This also isn't about adopting a "just push through it," little-engine-that-could mentality. This isn't syrupy positive thinking. We will venture into your psyche so you can emerge carrying the truth of your soul and the courage to live a life you love.

Though there is a general sequence to life design, you are free to adventure through the

pieces that are most attractive to you. Stay curious. Stay inspired. Take a nibble and move on to the next one or devour the whole section in one large bite.

The life design processes are an important part of the adventure. Using these questions and strategies, you will deepen self-awareness and strengthen the skills you need to shift into living a life you love.

Let me be crystal clear -- life design is work. You will have to do the work. It takes practice and patience. You must actively unfold the life you love. Your true self will show you the path. It's up to you to walk it.

LIFE DESIGN PROCESS: TUNE IN

I feel light and alive when I ...

I feel heavy and burdened when I ...

When I love my life I tend to feel ...

If I were giving myself advice about living a life I love, I'd say ...

CREATE SPACE

Be sure to carve out time and space to move into life design in a way that feels right to you. You can tackle it sequentially or you can jump about. You can start with the easiest element or leap into the most challenging one. You choose.

You may block off a weekend to power through or you may find yourself returning to it month after month. You might choose to adventure solo, with a partner, or join one of the book clubs that are popping up all over the world. If you're partnering up for this adventure, remember to share your experiences and reflections with your travel buddy; tremendous clarity comes from being seen and heard by another human. If you're going at it solo, your traveling companions will be Truth and Courage.

However you choose to design your life, please make it sacred and meaningful. This is how I create sacred space for my life design time.

I greet the morning two hours before my kids wake up, and I head downstairs. I pull out my meditation pillow, light a beeswax candle, sip some green juice, and sniff my essential oils. I play with a few different meditation practices, go outside for a quick walk, and take a few deep breaths of fresh air. I head back inside to write and reflect on how I am living my life. A couple hours later, I hear the pitter-patter of small feet and my sacred life design time is complete.

You should know my life wasn't always green juice and beeswax candles. There was a time when I was working four jobs and sharing a basement suite in order to make ends meet. During that time, creating space for myself meant listening to a soulful song while sitting on the bus commuting between jobs and scratching out a few reflections in my journal. There are times when life is nuts. I totally get it. This is why I don't want to give you a to-do list for creating sacred space. Only you know what works for you, given who you are and what is happening in your life right now. Regardless of how you choose to move through the material in this book, it's paramount to set your intention.

INTENTION

Before you begin a life design session, reflect on how you want to feel and your intention for the time. Do you want it to be playful and energizing? Soulful and gracious? Liberating and loving? Clarifying and comforting? You choose. Once you've decided how you want to feel, it's time to set an intention.

Your intention is a way to focus your attention. It will guide you gently as you move through this book. It can also be helpful to state your intention as a question. Notice what it feels like to say, *as I read this book I intend to be loving to myself and listen to my*

soul. It is positive, but closed, and it kinda feels like a 'should.'

Now, notice how it feels to say, *as I read this book, I intend to ask, how can I be more loving to myself and listen to my soul?* It feels open, curious, expansive, and encouraging.

Form your intentions around your deepest longing. Write it down as a reminder while you move through the life design process. Once you've decided how you want to feel and you have set an intention to support it, self-compassion is the last foundational element to establish.

Going through this book, reflecting on your life, reading the stories of others, and engaging with the processes could be really easy. And, it could be really hard. It might make you breathe deeply with peace or breathe deeply with exasperation. You might feel sad, frustrated, empowered, or encouraged. There might be moments when you want to quit and moments when it seems like a breeze. Whatever comes up, let it come up – it's part of the adventure. Whatever happens, remember to hold yourself in love.

LIFE DESIGN PROCESS: CREATING SPACE & SETTING INTENTION

I'm going to create space to design my life by ...

My intention while moving through this book is ...

CHAPTER TWO

THE POWER OF STORY

Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart bigger. —Ben Okri

Throughout this book, I will share many stories. You will read stories from my life and stories from other life designers.

When I share stories of myself, I have tried to remember the facts of the past as accurately as possible, but the insights came after I had lived through the crisis. During my awakening moment in the bathtub, which I will share with you later, I was a highly medicated, sugar-addicted, slightly drunken mess. I broke open in that moment, but truth, love and wisdom didn't fill in the cracks until much later.

Many other life designers have generously supported this book by sharing their stories. Some identifying information may be altered to protect the storyteller's confidentiality; however, the themes, life lessons, and aha moments have all been left intact. These stories are vulnerable, sometimes raw, and always require courage to share. Opening up the deepest and richest parts of life can be daunting, but each and every one of them did it, for you, for me, for our world. They are amazing human beings. People who are living their great lives and want to help you live yours, too. These people have blessed my life; may they also bless yours.

While the stories are intended to illuminate and inspire, there is a catch. Don't do what they did. Not necessarily. Your great life is your great life. No one else can live it the way you will live it and no one can tell you which path to take. This is your journey, but there are many people walking beside you. These stories are meant to serve as guiding lights and they can help you to find your way, but they do not tell you where to go or what to see. No two people are the same. No two lives are totally alike. Every life design is its own work of art. This is your life, design it the way you want it to be.

As I share my story and the stories of other life designers, you may end up thinking, *this stuff is easy for them*. While that may be true for some life designers, it certainly wasn't for me. In fact, I wrote this book because until several years ago, my life was really bad and I was a hot mess. Debt was climbing, weight was piling on, and every year I needed a higher dose of antidepressants just to stay on top of the symptoms. Happiness was a long way off and living a life I loved seemed impossible. I know what it's like to feel drained and overwhelmed every day. Feeling unworthy, fearful, and not good enough was my comfort zone. Slipping into self-sabotage and self-sacrifice was all too familiar to me. I redesigned my life because I was barely surviving.

MY STORY

I was born a sensitive soul with an early start on darkness and trauma. The pain of my life caused me to disconnect from my true self by the age of five. I quickly developed a people-pleasing, self-sacrificing, good-girl persona. My trauma taught me that speaking the truth and taking care of myself causes a chaotic crash of abandonment, instability,

and disconnection.

Most of my life I was an adept chameleon, altering myself to suit my surroundings and the expectations of others. As a young adult, my past started to catch up to me and I self-medicated with wine, shopping, and ice cream. In addition, I used a handful of prescription medications to keep the depression, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and panic attacks at bay. I also kept my life overflowing with commitments; I would do anything I could to distract myself from the darkness.

Of course, at the time, I wasn't conscious of any of this. The story I told to justify my life was so elaborate, I couldn't see through the complex web of lies. As the good little over-achiever, I started winning awards and acquiring titles – captain of the sports teams, president of the jazz band, most 'inspirational' awards, and the Canadian Ambassador for my college. As life continued, I exchanged titles for roles, waking up at five in the morning to run off to one job, finishing my shift and starting my second job, finishing my shift and starting my third job. And, if a few available moments slipped free, I had a fourth on-call job to fill in the gaps. I was avoiding the pain of my life by zipping through it. Perhaps if I kept running, the pain couldn't catch me?

The whispers of my true self were so repressed that I didn't hear them until I turned 25. On my birthday, I decided to celebrate with a decadent bubble bath. I drove around town and collected everything I needed in order to honor my special day – fresh roses, a bottle of champagne, a box of Godiva chocolates, bubble bath, and luxury candles. When I returned home, I displayed the roses, drizzled the bubble bath, popped the champagne, and poured myself a glass. I laid back to enjoy my gift to myself and I felt totally ... empty. I looked at my bathroom sink and saw bottles and bottles of prescription medications lined up in a row.

Up until my birthday, I had seen dozens of therapists and read hundreds of books. I had tried EMDR, DBT, CBT, EFT, ACT, and a whole bunch of other therapies that involve a mouthful of initials. I saw therapists who asked me to tell them how events made me feel, ones who gave me worksheets, another who gave me stacks of books, and even one who gave me strawberry marshmallows. I cried, imagined waterfalls, challenged my thoughts, punched pillows, and drew pictures.

In a desperate attempt to heal myself, I dove into university and graduate school to study psychology. Eventually, I became a registered psychologist. As a student of psychology, I devoted myself to mastering the therapeutic techniques that had once been used with me. I hoped that by gathering degrees and certificates, I might find a way out of my suffering and help others find their way out, too.

Prior to my 25th birthday I had numbed, distracted and medicated myself so completely

that I was \$100,000 in debt, 100 pounds overweight, and I had no idea who I was. I knew who others wanted me to be and I dutifully showed up as that. Until I didn't.

My birthday bubble bath was my awakening moment. I realized my life was built on a foundation of fear and I needed to tear it down. I wasn't living my life. The part of me that had been showing up wasn't my true self, it was all false – and I knew that if I had the courage to climb the mountain of truth, I would find my real life. All I had to do was keep climbing. And surviving.

Once I woke up to my reality, it took years of soul-searching and healing to arrive at a place of authenticity. Thankfully, along the way, I was able to find wise mentors – people who inspired me to ask better questions, seek more truthful answers, and who held me accountable when I wavered. Some mentors I hired and some graciously donated their time. In all cases, I will be forever grateful for the impact they have had on my life.

With the loving and patient guidance of my mentors, I found my health and my life. In the past I had used my mind to avoid looking into my heart and healing my soul. I knew I needed to trade mind therapy for heart therapy, and I knew I had get to know my true self. Using various therapeutic approaches and my soul's guidance, I slowly began to heal the wounds of my past.

My first healing steps found me in an over-spiritualized, superficial space. I traded my addiction to Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey for self-help books. I was so determined to heal myself, I committed to reading a book a week for 10 years. I practiced my affirmations, listened to spiritual audiobooks as I slept, and looked up every ailment in Louise Hay's book, *You Can Heal Your Life*. I became a spiritualized version of my false self. Even though it wasn't soulful, it was a step in the right direction. I was too afraid to enter the dark, so I became addicted to the light.

By ignoring the darkness, it stayed in me, buried and festering. True healing came in when I had the courage to edge into the darkness. In one particularly intense group session I cried – hard. I stood in a circle of 40 people and surrendered. I dropped my ego, let the tears flow and choked on my sobs. I had contained the pain for so long that my body had forgotten how to breathe. It was my first public experience of intense vulnerability.

I know I'm not alone in this kind of suffering. I know we all struggle at times. Some rare folks have an entirely peaceful and trauma-free childhood. The majority of us experience a few physical, emotional, mental, sexual, or spiritual dust-ups. It's beyond the scope of this book to support you in healing the past, but it is important. When revisiting the past, it's helpful to seek allies who can create a safe and sacred place for healing. If past traumas are preventing you from living a life you love, please reach out for professional support.

Once I healed the past, I focused my energy and attention on loving the present and envisioning a future that felt light and free. The life design processes, questions and content were born from designing a life I love and helping thousands of others do the same.

YOUR LOVE STORY

Life design is about how to live and be in the world. It's about authoring the story of the life you love. The pen is in your hand, your life is a love story, and you are the main character. What story will you write? Structure your story according to what you cherish most. What is that? Love, beauty, adventure, connection, commitment, impact?

Will the story of your life be epic or meandering? Will it be a story of blazing glory or subtle surrender? Your life is your masterpiece; let the light of your soul shine through.

YOUR PAST STORY

Clarify how you got here. We all have a story. The story of our past shows us where we've been, but it does not define where we are going. In every moment we are making a decision to design a life we love – or not.

When I was younger, I loved skiing. My mom would pack us up early every weekend morning and drive us to the hill. The slopes would open at 8 am and we'd be carving tracks until the lights went out. There's something sacred about being the first on the hill, floating through fresh powder. I would often look behind me, admiring how my skis sliced through the snow, analyzing my turns and noticing how I could improve. Then I would look forward, where the rest of the hill was open. I could go anywhere I wanted to go. The tracks behind me were beautiful and I was free to choose my next turn. There are many things I appreciate about my snow-loving days, but one lesson rises to the top: our tracks show us where we've been, but they do not determine where we are going.

The story of your life is powerful. Everyone has a story and every story is layered. Parts of your life have already been written, and while you can't change the facts, you can change your perception. How do you perceive your past? And, what perception would bring you more freedom in the present? The facts of the past are the facts, but your story of what they mean can change everything. If you're not interested in changing your perception of the past, focusing on writing a future you love.

YOUR FUTURE STORY

Living a life you love means honoring all of who you are. We all have the ability to design

our lives to match our desires. Sometimes we get off course and end up with a life that feels draining. We feel hobbled and paralyzed, unable to detect the call of the life we love. So, we resort to what is comfy and familiar – our to-do lists, unhealthy coping mechanisms, busyness, old habits, and self-help books.

We all arrive on this planet with possibility and potential and a desire to live a great life. With all the demands we face and all the balls we juggle, our vision can veer off-course and even end up in the ditch.

The true you – the vibrant, alive, dynamic, creative, expressive parts of you – can be uncovered. Even if your constructed self feels broken or damaged, your true self is whole and complete. You have everything you need to design a life you love. Your confusion, your clarity, your light, your dark, your knowing, your questioning, your deviance, and your divine are all pathways on the sacred adventure of designing a life you love.

Showing up and brilliantly living your own unique part will complete the whole. When you fall in love with your life, you add to the love story of the cosmos. If we are to survive as a species, the collective story of our world must be a story of love. We need your love story in order to be complete.

My mother believed strongly in the power of gratitude. Every time my sister and I received a gift, she would immediately have us write a thank-you letter to the giver. Over the years, I began to find the act of writing letters inherently gratifying. When I traveled, I would write letters home. While commuting on the bus, I would write to my pen pal. When I was lonely, I would write letters to my friends. Once I became a psychologist, I began writing birthday cards and occasional letters to my clients. I rarely heard back from the clients I wrote to, yet I continued to write because I knew in my heart it mattered. One year, I received a phone call from a client who was struggling with depression. She had received my letter and read it every day for the entire year. “Your letter saved my life,” she said. My mother taught us something that mattered to her – gratitude. I maintained my commitment to add to the love in the world by writing letters. Honoring our unique parts can save someone’s life.

I’ve heard stories of how a stranger’s smile helped a stressed-out mom to avoid yelling at her kids, how witnessing a courageous conversation with one person inspired a courageous conversation in another, how receiving a warm cup of coffee and an hour of conversation gave a homeless man the will to turn his life around, and how one kind adult in a troubled adolescent’s life helped her to avoid trading sex for money.

How you choose to live your great life matters. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

LIFE DESIGN PROCESS: YOUR STORY

What do you really love about your life and why?

I want the story of my life to be ...

When I look at the past, the lesson that I keep trying to learn is ...

CHAPTER THREE

HELLO SOUL, GOODBYE EGO

All of us have a deep reservoir of mystical experience that sustains the part of what some call the soul. The soul yearns to be nourished, and if the reservoir begins to run low, we feel ourselves becoming dull, empty, brittle, and arid. If it sinks lower, we enter into states of angst, despair, and depression. —Rabbi David Cooper

The meaning of psychology is ‘the science of the soul.’ The Greek word for soul is psyche, or what gives our life meaning beyond our physical body. The soul is also known as the true self. Throughout this book I will refer to the true self as a guide to designing your life that allows for authentic expression, a feeling of being fully alive, and living a meaningful life. Conversely, building your life from the constructed self leads to a life that feels fake, empty, and full of suffering. The constructed self is also known as the ego.

TRUE SELF

At its most foundational level, *Your Great Life* is about living from your true self over your constructed self. When we are born, we are fully connected to our true selves. As we live, we develop a constructed self in order to learn how to function in our world. Your true self doesn’t change over time; you just become more skilled at tuning into it. Your soul is steady and your ability to see it, feel it, hear it, and know it will evolve through the life design process.

When you are living from your true self, you will recognize it by the qualities you experience in your life. Your true self feels secure, accepted, unconditionally loved, peaceful, and certain. When the world is chaotically swirling around you, your true self will remain stable and you will have a calm sense of knowing. The true self is connected to what deeply matters – it remains connected to meaning, purpose, and being of service. It is self-reliant, evolutionary, and creative. Living from your true self will build your life upon the solid foundation of truth and love.

CONSTRUCTED SELF

The constructed self emerges from a desire to get love, as in *maybe if I’m nice enough, smart enough, funny enough, obedient enough, rich enough, or pretty enough, they’ll love me*. It is built to protect us from feeling weak, inadequate, overwhelmed, or vulnerable. When we are young, we astutely observe and meet the demands and expectations of others in order to be accepted, safe, and loved. The greater and more extensive the expectations, the thicker the mask of our constructed self becomes. Sometimes we mask our true self so effectively that even we can’t find it anymore.

The constructed self is often overwhelmed by stress, crisis, scarcity, agitation, drama, doubt, fear, and insecurity. When you are swept away by outside influences, feeling lost, panicked, or confused, you know your constructed self is running the show. The constructed self will build a life from fear and insecurity.

For most people, the constructed self is largely unconscious and we don’t even know it’s there. When challenged to examine the constructed self, many people deny its existence; the constructed self can be tricky like that. The constructed self helps us to

avoid repressed emotion and distracts us from unacknowledged pain. It dodges the light with compulsive storytelling, dramatic distractions, chronic cuteness, assuming intellectual superiority, thwarting with defensive retaliations, and stalling with insatiable busyness.

As we navigate through early life, developing a constructed self is a necessity. We develop a constructed self in order to understand our relationship to others, explore our place in the world, and experiment with the work we want to do. We all have a constructed self. The problem lies not in having a constructed self, but in mistaking the constructed self for the true self. We struggle and suffer when we identify with the constructed self over the true self. The constructed self stifles consciousness and authentic expression – and both are necessary in order to live a life you love. When we believe we are our constructed selves, we operate under a trance of mistaken identity. We lose our presence, live our lives on autopilot, and abandon what matters.

TRUE SELF VERSUS CONSTRUCTED SELF

I have noticed that when a client is living from their true self, they are more likely to experience peace, fulfillment, and energy. When they are living from their constructed self, they are more likely to experience turmoil, emptiness, and lethargy. I frequently see my clients' symptoms emerging in resistance to the life the constructed self has built. Depression, anxiety, procrastination, self-sabotage, and fear have many sources, but often they emerge from a suffering soul.

When our soul is suffering, we feel empty and we try to fill the gaping hole with anything we can find: ice cream, vodka, sex, Prada, Prozac, workaholism. We are seduced by anything that feeds us, yet we continue to starve.

When we feed our soul, we are satiated. We feel whole and complete. When we are in service of our soul, we feel energy and enthusiasm. Of course, energy can also come from a triple espresso or a rush of adrenaline. The key is to notice what provides sustained energy over time. Notice your feelings, level of satisfaction, and sense of meaning. If you are doing something that is not right for you, over time, you will feel your energy drain, unwanted symptoms will emerge, and your soul will retreat.

People often say, "I'm being true to myself," which is a very good thing. But, to which self are you being true? The constructed self can dig you deeper into suffering. The true self will guide you into a life you love. As you explore this book, you will become increasingly aware of the voice of the true self and the voice of the constructed self.

Freeing your life from the constructed self can seem daunting. We are scared to feel the pain underneath the coping strategy, we fear we might lose love, and we doubt our capacity to navigate the change. Removing the constructed self can feel vulnerable and shaky. It

means dismantling defense mechanisms, redefining lifelong roles, and challenging ancient beliefs.

Returning to the true self requires self-discovery, not self-improvement. We are not trying to fix our constructed self or destroy our ego. Instead, we are focused on remembering our true self and identifying with our soul.

The work you do throughout this book will ripple into your life. You will separate ego from soul. What is unreal from what is real. And you will separate fear from love.

LIFE DESIGN PROCESS: CONSTRUCTED SELF IDENTIFICATION

My constructed self is most likely to show up as ...

I can recognize my constructed self by ...

When I'm living according to my constructed self, I feel ...

WHAT IS SOUL?

Every soul is unique. The soul is the meeting place of spirit and body. It's both earthly and transcendent. It's the eternal essence of who we are. I've encountered many people on the healing path who skip over the soul and go straight to the spirit. When we skip the soul, our bodies and minds protest. We must come back down to earth and embody the soul if we are going to live a life we love.

Your connection to the Divine – God, Jesus, Shiva, Shakti, Creator, Allah, Gaea, Buddha, Mother Nature, Angels, Universe – is your spirit, whereas the soul is the observer in each of us. When we interact with the world, we receive light waves and sound waves. When we observe these waves, we change them. These waves become electrical impulses that the brain converts into images. Then, our consciousness observes those images and makes meaning from them. Our soul allows us to observe the world with individuality. Without the soul we would all experience the world in exactly the same way.

Our soul reports its satisfaction or dissatisfaction through our bodies, our emotions, and meaningful dreams. It is always guiding us to healing and wholeness. When we are disconnected from our soul, we tend to live in more anguish. We are more susceptible to unconscious living and we desperately scramble to regain the love we think we have lost. We slap Band-Aids onto wounds that can never heal without the wisdom of the soul. When you reconnect to the fire of the soul, the Band-Aids go up in smoke, the wounds are cauterized, and true healing begins.

Your soul will design a life based on what is nourishing and meaningful. It will design a life that is connected to the core of who you are and that reflects your values and sense of purpose. The soul designs your life based on personal truth and authenticity. The soul is fluid, flexible, and moves through life with ease. It sees the perfection in imperfection.

WHAT IS EGO?

The ego is another name for the constructed self. If you are not living with soulful presence, you will find yourself trapped in the prison of ego. A life designed by the ego is stressful, draining, and often leads to depression and anxiety.

Your ego will try to design your life based on what you *should* be doing, what it thinks a good person would do, or the parts of yourself it doesn't like and wants to fix. It will design a life based on outside expectations or in pursuit of approval and popularity. The ego is rigid, it will expect you to be perfect, and it will hassle you to achieve every goal you set for yourself. The ego typically seeks comfort and security. On the other hand, ego may rebel against social norms just for the sake of rebelling.

Helping the ego to step out of the way is essential. If we allow our egos to lead, we are vulnerable to unhappy, unhealthy, unfulfilled years. If we live this way for too long, a part of us dies. Though our bodies will continue walking through life, we will feel as though we are not truly alive.

When I first began moving into life design, my soul expressed a longing to have a bigger impact. I was terrified of public speaking at the time. I resisted it for a few years and then slowly, I let my soul take the lead. At one of my early speaking gigs at a wellness festival, I was asked to share what I knew about living from love over fear. When I was slated to get on stage, there were two people in the audience. Two people! Needless to say, fear kicked in something fierce. I was tempted to beeline out of there and spend the afternoon playing with my kids at the park.

My ego was especially nasty that day, taunting me with refrains of *you're not good enough. People don't want to hear what you have to say. And you should never, ever, ever take another speaking gig. Remember that woman who criticized you last year? She was totally right!* I was a paralyzed.

I tapped into my soul. It reminded me, *it doesn't matter how many people are there; speaking lights you up, and you might make a difference in one person's life. It's totally worth the risk of looking like a goof. Failure is progress, so even if it seems like you've failed, you're still moving in the direction of living a soulful life.* Deep breath. I invited the two people to sit with me at the front so we could have an intimate chat. Then something magical happened – others migrated over. By the end of the talk, I was smiling at dozens of people.

When you step in the direction your soul wants you to take, it might not work out as planned. But, when you step into your fear, you make space for magic and miracles. And whether magic and miracles happen or not, the greatest gift of all is the voice of your soul becoming a little stronger and a little louder.

LOVE OVER FEAR

This book was born from thousands of hours spent researching, a decade of personal journeying, and from helping thousands of clients to design their lives. The most important lesson I have learned in my life is to choose love over fear. Again and again. Love will be your primary motivating force when designing your life. Love. Not duty, obligations, expectations, fame, fortune, fear, guilt, shame, or blame. Love.

Pace Smith, a pathfinding coach, has the statement, *can love be found even here?* inked across her wrist. It is a reminder that love can be found in the darkest moments and in the most fearful situations. Pace could have tattooed the statement, *love is available*

even here, on her wrist, but she knew she would be more likely to brush it off as a clichéd platitude. Phrasing it as a question instead of a statement encourages her to reflect with curiosity in her mind and sincerity in her heart. It's a powerful question. When faced with a difficult situation, ask yourself, *can love be found even here?*

The rules of love and fear are tangled in a hundred billion brain cells, amongst complicated electrical currents, and within a complex blend of hormones and neurotransmitters. Love emanates from the brain, but its reach extends further. Love and fear influence all human thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

The world is full of people who struggle with living from fear instead of love. I was one of them and I have worked with many more. Living a life we love depends upon resolving the struggle between love and fear as quickly as possible. Whether we live in a state of love or a state of fear changes everything – love and fear make us who we are and create who we become.

Children who do not understand gravity fall while climbing and get hurt. Similarly, people who do not understand the principles of love spend their lives suffering. Dreams are abandoned, unhappiness becomes chronic, passions are neglected, anxiety soars, and depression settles in.

Noelle struggled with the fear of judgment. Her fear prevented her from speaking up in conversations and following her dream of being a writer. She would often set a goal for herself and quit before she was able to achieve it. At the life design retreat, Noelle processed and released the fear of judgment and stepped into being more loving and less fearful. When she returned back to her life, she noticed people began coming up to her and starting conversations. “Before letting go of this fear,” says Noelle, “I would put off a vibe that kept people away because I was so afraid of being judged.” In working through the fear, Noelle became more approachable, felt more connected to others, began writing the book she always wanted to write, spoke her truth in conversation, and has maintained her commitment to her soul plan. “Fear is a liar,” says Noelle. “If you can move through it, it’s awesome on the other side.”

Choosing love over fear means living your life according to what you want to embrace, rather than what you are trying to avoid.

It means you focus on the good, practice gratitude, and trust life. Love will guide you to take the high road, while fear will drive you to control and manipulate. Love will ask you

to be thoughtfully vulnerable and courageously compassionate. Fear will lock you up, prepare you to fight, or prompt you to run away.

Make no mistake, you will have fear in your life. After all, you're human. We are wired for fear. Our brains are hyper-alert to the world's dangers for good reason. I categorize fear into clean fear and messy fear. Clean fears are pure fears, which help us to stay safe, avoid tigers, buckle up, and look both ways when we cross the street. Clean fears are natural. They are wired into our nervous system, like the fear of falling or the fear of loud noises. These biological fears help us to survive and avoid danger.

Messy fears interrupt life design, and they include the fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of intimacy, fear of not being good enough, fear of vulnerability, fear of success. Messy fears drain our mojo, weaken our prana, exhaust our nervous system, and jumble our mind.

We stumble when we allow ourselves to be controlled by messy fears. We procrastinate, self-sacrifice, self-sabotage, get defensive, play the victim, close our hearts, and over time, we lose track of the life we want to live.

Love is the force that can heal all things – including your life. The journey from fear into love is the art of discovering your own heart and designing your life from a place of love instead of fear. Within these pages, you'll find my favorite strategies for going within, choosing love over fear, uncovering the truth of your life, bringing it back to the surface, and living it in the real world.

LIFE DESIGN PROCESS: GROUNDING INTO LOVE

Think about a challenging situation in your life.

Can love be found even here?

The messy fears that are interfering with the life I love are ...

If I was living my life from love over fear, I would ...

WHY LIFE DESIGN?

Why is life design worth it? Without life design, suffering engulfs us, confusion sucks time, inauthenticity feels gross, and unaligned decisions are costly. When you connect to your true self you can live more efficiently and effectively. You make better decisions, have healthier relationships, and are less likely to be derailed by mental health challenges. You will trust your choices, channel your energy, generate confidence, and build momentum. Living in a state of flow is a natural byproduct of designing a life you love.

Why must you answer the call to awaken your soul? Because, once you awaken, your soul will never let you go back to sleep. You will know that your time is precious, and you will no longer be content to sacrifice your time and energy on that which does not deeply matter.

Why must you answer the questions your soul asks? Because, you will see through the illusions your ego has created, you will discover how to unlock the chains that bind you, and you will have the courage to put yourself in the way of change.

Why must you remember the truth of your soul? Because, you will be liberated from superficial expectations, repetitive talk, limiting beliefs, and false labels. You will be guided into the adventure of knowing who you are now and who you are called to become. You will understand that knowing and trusting your soul is as necessary to life as breath and blood.

LIFE DESIGN PROCESS: LIFE DESIGN REFLECTION

My relationship with my ego is ...

My relationship with my soul is ...

In what ways are you living a life you love?

In what ways are you not living a life you love?

What would it take for you to be utterly devoted to living a life you love?