

On Being Human: Why Are We Here? Lori A. Leyden, PhD

I believe that every human being has an innate desire for happiness and does not want to suffer. I believe that each of us has the same potential to develop inner peace and thereby achieve happiness and joy.

— The Dalai Lama

The essence of what most of the great spiritual and religious traditions teach us is that “God is love.” Many teachings refer to God as well as “the kingdom of heaven” as lying within us. So what if life was a Divine invention designed to give us all the opportunity to fulfill our true potential as loving beings by connecting to the Divine within? And what if, by connecting to the Divine within, we could experience the “kingdom of heaven” which is lasting peace and happiness? This would be Magical Living in its highest form.

Let’s take it a step further. If our soul purpose is all about love, consider that there are at least two dimensions to learning lessons of love. The first dimension gives us all a reason to experience a sense of oneness that comes from sharing the same soul purpose — learning to love ourselves and each other. Now consider the second dimension. That in addition to a shared purpose, we each have our own unique contributions to make and lessons to be learned in pursuit of unconditional love and happiness. That uniqueness means that no one else can fulfill our soul purpose in just the same way that we can. If we can embrace the concept that all our experiences are designed to teach us how to give and receive love and that our soul purpose unites us as well as honors our uniqueness, then suddenly the events and circumstances of our lives begin to make sense.

I believe that as part of the Divine invention of life, we all come into the world with at least three factors affecting our true potential to live a Magical life. They are genetics, environment and forces related to our soul purpose. Science tells us that certainly genetics and environment play key roles in our mental and physical development. I also think that our soul purpose is a driving force that propels us through even the most difficult genetic and environmental challenges. If we are all born with a soul purpose and the drive and resources to achieve it, then why is life such a struggle for so many of us? If life is all about love, then why is it so hard to get it, to keep it and even to give it? How do we get so far off track and what keeps us off track? While we may not be able to fully explain all the complexities of our purpose for living and how we get off track, the human experience of stress can provide us with some important insights.

Dysfunctional Families

Perhaps we are all born lost – lost to our innate capacity to love unconditionally. And just like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, we journey through life looking for love outside of ourselves until we finally realize that we had the capacity to “go home,” that is, to love, all along. Or perhaps our capacity to love unconditionally needs to be nurtured and guided and reinforced.

Scenes from Ozzie and Harriet, words on Hallmark Cards and images from Norman Rockwell tell us that unconditional love exists right from the start of our lives in our own families. Yet, our own experience tells us something different. Even theorists tell us that 85 to 97 percent of us come from dysfunctional families. My definition of a dysfunctional family is any family environment that isn’t based on the practice of unconditional love. Let’s face it, being unconditionally loving is a tough task especially if you don’t learn it right from the beginning in your own home environment. And there are lots of things that get in the way. Our parents learned parenting skills from their parents, and they from theirs. Unless we stop to consider the

impact of coping skills, personality traits, culture, addictions, illnesses, trauma, religious messages, and socio-economic conditions, we simply continue the traditions, programming and modeling we experienced in our own homes. I have traveled a great deal, met a lot of people and worked with hundreds of clients and I have yet to meet anyone in the three percent, supposedly “non-dysfunctional,” category!

Here is my scenario for how stress and dysfunction keep us off track.

Right from the womb

Our life experiences begin right in the womb. Studies tell us that as early as six months in the womb we are conscious and able to learn. At this stage we respond to the environment inside our mother’s body including what she eats and drinks, her activity level, even her emotional state. We can even learn to respond to our external environment including reacting to our father’s voice, certain kinds of music, heat and cold. All of these factors have an impact on us. Some even suggest that the birth experience itself may be a source of emotional trauma for us.

Tension in the crib

Now consider the infant stage. At this point in our development we are considered to be egocentric. We only experience the world as it relates to us and to getting our needs met. That is, we are primarily aware of only our own basic nurturing needs — to be fed and held, to be kept dry and warm, and to be loved. In fact, so powerful is our need to be nurtured that without it, we can develop Failure to Thrive Syndrome, which often leads to infant death. To a lesser extent, if our needs are not met consistently and/or if there is tension of any kind in our environment, we tend to absorb these conditions as “something is wrong.” Since we are unable to rationalize that the “something” that is wrong is in our environment, developmental experts tell us that we internalize that “we” are the something that is wrong.

Toddler tension

So now we are in the toddler stage and our ability to think and feel is more sophisticated. Picture little Mikey at the age of two or three. He’s exploring the wonders of life in the back yard on a warm, sunny day while his mom tends to the vegetable patch on the other side of the yard. Unbeknownst to mom he has managed to secure her favorite silver spoon and is using it to dig a hole to China right in the middle of the flower garden. That geranium pot sure looks like it will make a great helmet so he dumps out the plant and puts the pot on his head. There are even new foods to explore in the worms and dirt he has uncovered. Dad arrives home from work just as Mikey is delighting in all of his child senses and backyard games. After a long day at the office and too much traffic, Dad’s first reaction is to grab mom’s spoon and yell: “Mikey, what are you doing with mommy’s best silverware!?! You’re ruining my flowers! Don’t eat that – it’s dirty! You’re a bad boy!”

Needless to say Mikey’s reverie is sharply interrupted. He’s just going along, having fun being himself, when *wham* all of a sudden, something bad happens, and his happiness is abruptly taken away. He has no way of understanding that his father was having a bad day and may have over reacted. What Mikey is capable of understanding is that feeling happy can have bad consequences. He has experienced the early stages of what’s called *happiness anxiety*. Happiness anxiety is a form of free-floating anxiety. It’s that feeling of foreboding, “waiting for the other shoe to drop,” “knowing” that something bad is going to happen even when there is seemingly no reason to feel this way. That’s because, just like Mikey, our life experiences

reinforce the notion that something always seems to happen to cut our sense of happiness short.

You might begin to imagine and even remember the kind of tension that happiness anxiety creates in your own life. In fact, many of us develop not necessarily healthy, but certainly resourceful, ways of “protecting” ourselves or avoiding this feeling. From an early age we make certain decisions about how we will relate to happiness. Some of us simply live with the sense of anxiety that arises in us when we feel happy. Of course, this puts a damper on our ability to truly experience happiness on any deep level. For the most part, it leaves us numb to the experience of happiness. At my worst moments I was so filled with free-floating anxiety that even the most exciting and joyful events in my life left me numb. If someone asked me whether or not I was happy, the only response I could think of was, “I’m not sure. Do you think I’m happy?”

Others of us find this tension so disturbing that rather than wait for something bad to happen, we sabotage ourselves by looking for or creating events that will interfere with our happiness. One of my clients’ biggest dreams was to take a trip to England. For many years, she read all about its history, famous sites and famous people. She carefully imagined and planned each detail of the trip. Her dream was about to come true when her husband, having scrimped and saved, surprised her with tickets and hotel reservations for the whole family. From the moment they arrived however, she would not allow herself to enjoy the experience. Her husband drove too fast, the kids bickered, the weather was too hot, the weather was too cold, she brought the wrong clothes, she looked too fat, they should have stayed here and not there, it was the wrong time of year, etc. She could have chosen to see things through the eyes of gratitude but her desire to escape happiness anxiety was too great.

And then there is the most tragic defense mechanism against happiness anxiety. Some of us actually choose to believe, however subconsciously, that the best way to keep ourselves safe from this tension is never to be happy at all. Don’t we all know someone like this? They have everything they ever dreamed of — the relationship, the children, the car, the home, the social status, the career, the material wealth — and still they look for what is wrong instead of what is right because they are too afraid of having happiness taken away from them.

Childhood Programming

Of course, our environmental influences increase as we grow and develop. Once we reach the age of five, experts tell us, our brains have already accumulated the equivalent of over 20,000 hours of parental tapes or programs. These programs include beliefs about every aspect of our lives from what to think and feel, and how to behave, to what’s right and what’s wrong — who to marry, what jobs are acceptable, how to handle finances, education, health and relationships, how to communicate and express feelings, and so on.

Our families also have a tremendous influence on the way we handle stress. We tend to model what we saw acted out at home. If members of our family resorted to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol or drug abuse, gambling, eating disorders, emotional and/or physical abuse, even excessive control, withdrawal, or anger, we tend to repeat these same escape patterns. Considering that 85 to 97 percent of us came from families with some amount of dysfunction, our coping skills were sure to be affected in some way.

Besides parental tapes, there are many other factors influencing our internal programming. We absorb social, cultural and ethnic messages, as well as messages from our religious training, our teachers, our peers, and the media. As we grow older, these messages, combined with our life experiences, shape our view of ourselves, in other words, our self-esteem. Because of the tension they create in us, negative messages we receive about ourselves often have a much more powerful impact than positive messages. So for example, if our parents told us that we were stupid or lazy or too sensitive, if they criticized or even showed disappointment in our appearance, our athletic skills or our creative talents, these messages often carry more weight in our minds no matter how much positive feedback we receive later in life. These kinds of messages tell us that we are only worthy of love when we do something our parents approve of. If these early messages were reinforced in our experiences outside the home they are even more difficult to overcome.

Learning to love ourselves unconditionally is essential to our growth, our well-being and our *Magical Living* potential. We all yearn for the safety and comfort of unconditional love. If our families are unable to provide unconditional love and acceptance it is particularly hard for us to develop the capacity to love ourselves in this way. We tend to take on certain roles or coping skills in an attempt to get the love and approval we long for. Some of us become people pleasers, perfectionists, or high-achievers, while others become rebels or comics or dare devils, while still others might choose to try to be invisible. Ultimately, we operate on our programming. We become outer-directed — looking for external validation to fill the hole inside where we cannot love ourselves.

Worthiness/Deservability – Core Issues

When we combine our infant experience of “something is wrong with me,” with childhood experiences of not feeling loved unconditionally, it is only natural for us to subconsciously and even consciously make the connection that, “because there is something wrong with me, I am not worthy or deserving of unconditional love.”

When we feel unworthy or undeserving of love we lose our sense of being safe in the world. Circumstances, and even life itself, can feel very unsafe and threatening. So we rely on our coping skills and develop defense mechanisms to numb us from the pain of feeling unsafe and threatened in the world. Unhealthy defense mechanisms can range from addictions to alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, shopping, work, or busy-ness, to shutting down, withdrawing, isolating, becoming overly aggressive or controlling, or developing obsessive/compulsive tendencies. These defense mechanisms wreak havoc on our mind-body-spirit connection. They increase our stress, create more struggle and prevent us from experiencing *Magical Living*.

The Stress of Adulthood — Living on Autopilot

So based on a combination of programming, coping skills, defense mechanisms and our experiences with unconditional love we develop our own unique perception of the world as well as a unique set of automatic responses to cope with what happens to us in our world. Our programs determine what we tell ourselves about ourselves and our ability to cope with what happens to us in our lives. If we don't feel confident about our ability to handle a situation, then we feel threatened and unsafe. These feelings trigger a physiological reaction in the body called the stress response, or the fight or flight response. If this response is triggered often enough, the body begins to wear down and we become susceptible to illness and disease.

(See *The Stress Management Handbook* for a more detailed description of the physiological effects of stress.)

In an effort to feel safe and to cope with what life presents us we go on autopilot. We learn to numb ourselves to our own needs and feelings. With programming and coping skills in place we never stop to consider whether what we are doing with our lives and how we are responding to our lives really fits with our own beliefs, values, dreams and goals. Of course, we are not really aware of our own beliefs, values, dreams and goals because they are layered deep beneath all that programming.

In many respects, autopilot is the static that smothers our innate guidance system — our inner voice — and diverts us from our soul purpose. Often, our autopilot mode covers the fear that we are trapped, that in fact, this is all that life has to offer and there really are no options, no way out. In order to avoid this great fear, we cling to autopilot as if it were safer than being inner-directed, fulfilling our own true desires and experiencing peace and happiness. Unfortunately, while autopilot might keep us on a certain track, that track is usually far from the road to *Magical Living*.

Conference Room – The Journey to Magical Living

The following example is a metaphor I use with my clients to help them understand how our programming, defense mechanisms and autopilot keep us off track.

Consider that the journey of life is similar to being invited to a workshop on how to find peace, happiness and your life purpose. We arrive at the building where the workshop is to take place and take the elevator to the seventh floor. Once the elevator door opens we find ourselves at the head of a very long corridor. At the end of the corridor is a conference room clearly marked: Peace/Happiness/Life Purpose Workshop. Seeing the corridor before you, you know that all you have to do to find the elusive answers to peace, happiness and your life purpose is to walk straight ahead and find a seat in that conference room. But then you notice that there are lots of doors on either side of the corridor and you become curious as to what these rooms are all about. So you look at the signs on the doors and you find that there is the martyr room and the self-pity room, the rooms for judgment, arrogance, depression, anxiety, rage, addictions, and a seemingly endless array of dysfunctional characteristics.

“Hey, I don’t have time for this,” you tell yourself, “I have to get to my workshop.” But you begin to see that there are obstacles along the corridor that make it difficult for you to proceed in a straight path toward the conference room. At times there are so many people in the corridor that you want to escape into a side room so you won’t feel so claustrophobic. Back in the corridor again, you find yourself being assaulted by really strong winds, as if a tornado were ripping through the hall so you use one of the side rooms to protect yourself. Just when you’re feeling safe enough to get back out into the corridor, you peek out and see snakes and spiders slithering their way toward you and your fear propels you into yet another side room. It seems like a long time passes before you can calm down and then you remember that you need to be getting to the workshop, so you open the door and seeing that the coast is clear, you head toward the conference room. Just before you get there though, you feel overcome with weariness, so much so that even though you are so close to your goal you just must rest a bit before going any further, and so you drag yourself into another side room.

Of course, the obstacles in the corridor represent the obstacles we encounter in life — bad choices, unfortunate circumstances, anything that makes us feel unsafe or threatened. The side rooms represent our unhealthy coping skills and defense mechanisms that get triggered by feeling unsafe or threatened. We can stay in a particular side room all our lives or run from room to room, never getting back into the corridor long enough to attend the workshop.

Cosmic Wake-Up Calls

So with all the obstacles that life can present, how do we ever get back into the corridor? Cosmic wake-up calls get us back out into the corridor and headed in the right direction. Consider if you will, that there is a cosmic system of wake-up calls that offers us many opportunities to question our beliefs, attitudes, actions and choices, and in so doing, to disengage our autopilot devices and get back on track. Most of us remain on automatic pilot until we get a wake-up call. In other words, we stay on autopilot until something happens to make us question our programs and behaviors. For many of us, wake-up calls generally come in the form of a life crisis like the death of a loved one, breakup of a relationship, loss of a job, an accident, or a serious illness.

These kinds of events can trigger us to begin questioning the choices we have made and the paths we have followed. They bring us face to face with the questions: “why am I here,” and “what is the meaning and purpose of my life.” And even if we don’t wake-up and get on track after the first alarm, the universe continues to offer these wake-up calls until we recognize the problem and solve it.

Did you ever have one of those alarm clocks that ring a series of alarms until you finally wake-up enough to turn it off? Our cosmic wake-up calls work the same way. Often it takes more than one wake-up call to convince us to change, so the universe accommodates us by continuing to sound alarms. The alarms can all sound alike or sound a bit different. Jobs and relationships offer good examples of alarms that sound the same. I went through seven jobs, several career moves and two advanced degrees before I did the soul-searching necessary to find my life’s work. Some of us do the same thing in relationships. We end up dating or marrying a series of partners with the same unhealthy traits. They might be emotionally unavailable, “control freaks,” substance abusers, cheaters, overly jealous, or any number of other traits that interfere with having a healthy relationship. Wake-up calls like these can help us become aware of our patterns so we can make conscious choices that allow us to break the unhealthy cycle we have fallen into.

Wake-up calls don’t always sound or look alike. Susan experienced a series of seemingly unrelated life crises before realizing that her life was off track. After being on autopilot and numb to her needs and feelings for 32 years she found herself out of a job, breaking up with her boyfriend of 7 years, looking for a place to live and experiencing back problems. Any one of these issues offered the opportunity for self-reflection and change but it took all of them in combination to get Susan to become “teachable.” That is, to commit to making healthy changes in her life.

Believe it or not, wake-up calls can even come in the form of positive experiences, like a spiritual awakening or a transcendent moment. Clare had battled severe depression for most of her life until she was able to experience Divine love in a meditation. For the first time in her life she felt a “knowing” that God loved her. Often driven by suicidal feelings, she was finally able to

commit to her future and her depression lifted. Marguerite experienced a transcendent moment while paragliding for the first time in New Zealand. During her 30-minute flight, accompanied at times by a hawk and wandering animals on a mountainside next to a luscious valley, she felt a sense of freedom and connectedness she had never known before. As she landed she knew that part of her soul purpose was to guide others to experience transcendent moments in nature.

Wake-up Calls: Divine Gifts and Miracles

It is easy to see how wake-up calls that come in the form of spiritual awakenings or transcendent moments might be Divine gifts or even miracles. The gifts and miracles from other, more traumatic, wake-up calls however, can be more difficult to recognize. But time after time following a crisis, even a life-threatening one, people tell me that they see the gifts and miracles in what has happened to them. Early on or even years later they can see the opportunity their personal crisis gave them to change their lives.

A number of people made critical lifestyle changes to improve their health and the quality of their lives like giving up addictions and eating better foods. Others gave up unhealthy romantic relationships and found love with partners who are able to be happy, loving and intimate. Still others, like me, took the opportunity to examine every part of their lives and make a combination of changes ranging from relationships, jobs, and investing in personal and spiritual growth, to adding healthy nutrition, exercise, play and meditation to their lives. Some people simply got in touch with a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives as well as a sense of gratitude for what they already had — a loving family and friends, a good job, a nice place to live, their health, their surroundings. Sort of like George Bailey in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* or Scrooge in the story *A Christmas Carol*, only George and Scrooge could actually see their wake-up calls in the forms of an angel and several spirits.

Synchronicities

The renowned Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung was the first to coin the term *synchronicity*. In its extreme interpretation it means that there are no coincidences or random occurrences. Everything happens for a reason. Synchronicity means “meaningful coincidence.” So every synchronicity can be viewed as a wake-up call however minor or major. Believing in synchronicities and wake-up calls gives us further evidence that the universe supports us with everything we need when we need it, even though we may not be aware that we need it. Like when you are just thinking of someone and they call you on the telephone or you unexpectedly run into them someplace. Or when you have been thinking of applying for a job at a certain company and someone tells you that there is a job opening there.

I see synchronicities in my life all the time. I was meditating several years ago about what the next step in my work might be. After listening to my inner voice I connected with my desire to help other psychotherapists incorporate spirituality into their treatment strategies. Within days I was offered the opportunity to write a regular column for a professional journal for psychotherapists and present a workshop at a professional conference – both on the role of spirituality in psychotherapy. If this isn't synchronicity in action, then what are the odds that my thoughts manifested into opportunities within days even though I had not shared those thoughts with anyone?

Getting Back On Track

If our programming is so ingrained and longstanding, how do we overcome it? The first step in getting back on track is to recognize that our programming is all about learning. Most importantly, what we learn can be unlearned. In fact, we can choose what we think as well as how we perceive what happens to us in our lives. If we can choose what we think and perceive, then we can choose the way we feel and behave.

The second step in getting back on track is to recognize our wake-up calls and more importantly to do something about them. Often, just hearing our wake-up calls and seeing the gifts, miracles and synchronicities they offer aren't enough to lead to lasting change. We need guideposts, even a structure to keep us on track. The *Magical Living* program can provide you with a course of action to help you recognize your wake-up calls and perhaps avert the need for future alarms. It can also help you find your own unique track to Magical living. It's up to you to provide the commitment — the commitment to stop living on autopilot, to honor your mind-body-spirit connection and to start listening to your inner voice, that part of you that is uniquely you and connected to the Divine.

As we learn to honor the sacred in every day life and the divinity that is inherent in each of us then nurturing ourselves comes from a much deeper, inspired place inside of us. When we can rely on a strong sense of self-love and compassion, when we have a sense of meaning and purpose, when we experience the safety that comes from listening to our inner voice and feeling connected to others and the Divine, we can begin to believe in our ability to cope with just about anything life has to offer. With this as a foundation, we can open to more gratitude, joy and wonder in the present moment and live happier, healthier — more Magical — lives in the process.

On Being Human Review

Consider writing down your reflections and beliefs regarding the circumstances of your life and how they might relate to each of the sections outlined in the course. They are listed below as a reminder.

▪ Dysfunctional Family	
▪ Womb	
▪ Crib	
▪ Toddler	
▪ Childhood Programming	
▪ Worthiness/ Deservability	

▪ Autopilot	
▪ Wake-Up Calls	
▪ Gifts and Miracles	
▪ Synchronicities	
▪ Getting Back on Track	

Notes

*If you enjoyed this course, you may be interested my **Mind-Body-Spirit-MAGIC Inventory** -
an in-depth and comprehensive tool for initiating change and healing.
Please visit www.Magical-Living.com for more information and tools
to help you create magic in your life.*