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## INTRODUCTION

In 1982 I had a minor back injury that morphed into generalized inflammation and soon into quite debilitating chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia. Because every prior experience I had with illness resolved quickly, I assumed this would too. That was over twenty-seven years ago, and it hasn't resolved yet.

I don't have a very heroic illness. My story lacks the drama (for which I am grateful) of a battle with cancer, the ravaging deterioration of Lou Gehrig's disease, or the sensationalism of a major organ transplant. Because it has gone on for so long and is so continuous, dealing with it is my own private concern. At this point, I'm sure it is quite boring news to those who know me, but because this illness provides the parameters in which my life takes shape, it is of enormous consequence to me. Every day it affects my decisions about how to spend my time, how much energy I have to talk to people, how much physical motion I am capable of, or what I can contribute. It greatly influences the way I look at the world and my place in it.

In the first year of my illness I attended a conference on women's spirituality. Of all the seminars offered, I chose "Living

## *The Unchosen Path*

with Pain and Illness,” thinking that there would not be many attendees and therefore it would be nice and intimate. I was surprised to find that the room was packed to overflowing.

To look around the room, no one would ever suspect that it held such a gathering of maladies. As each woman shared her story, I was astonished at the prevalence and variety of the physical challenges they were facing. Besides the frustration and anguish of pain and illness, what was most palpable was the courage, compassion, and insight these women shared. They were consciously using their experiences to deepen their understanding of spiritual teachings and to search for deeper truths. I was inspired and determined to do the same.

Several years later I woke up in the middle of the night with a startling dream. In it, I saw a book I was supposed to write. It was titled, *Illness as Teacher*. In the dream I could see every word on every page in luminous detail. When I woke up, I was so excited I could hardly contain myself. I spent about twenty minutes reviewing it in my mind and then fell back to sleep, certain that all I had to do in the morning was start writing it down. But, alas, when I woke up all I could remember was the title!

I knew the book’s purpose was to address the specific issues that concern people with chronic, rather than life-threatening, illnesses. Though there are many parallels between the two, the emphasis in chronic illness is on counteracting its long-term erosive and pervasive effects, rather than on the fight for life or preparation for death. Though the dream clearly suggested I write the book, what with several jobs and a small child I didn’t have the energy for such an undertaking, so the dream faded away.

Fast forward eighteen years and I was having a very bad day. I was as ill and depressed as I’d ever been, I wasn’t able to work, the limitations on my life seemed enormous, and my always healthy partner was off enjoying himself traveling. I lay belly-down on the grass in my backyard and sobbed my heart out.

## *Introduction*

After a while I heard the words, “Remember that book? Write it!” Over the years I have learned to listen to the clearly imperative directives of my intuition, and I trusted that this was exactly what I needed to do.

This time, I picked a different title: *The Unchosen Path*. I did not want to reinforce the concept of “illness as teacher” because of the subtle attachment to “teacher” it might promote. Everything in life is our teacher. Illness is not something any one of us would intentionally choose, nor would we wish it on anyone else. But when it becomes an irrefutable fact of our lives, the choice then lies in the ways we deal with it.

Usually when I think of the word “path,” I see a clearly delineated, easily traversable, smooth, inviting path. But the actuality is that, in nature, paths are not straight and clear. They twist and turn, become impossibly steep, are blocked by numerous obstacles, diverge into a confusing array of possibilities, bend back on themselves, and sometimes go in circles. A path that appears to be traversable might suddenly end at a ravine. The path of chronic illness is no different.

It is human nature to want the path smooth and easy. But it is in the ravines, the switchbacks, the dense woods, or the icy slopes that we're privileged to witness the awesome mystery, power, and complexity of life. Returning from the difficult places where we have met our biggest challenges, we find ourselves different, enlarged, carved deeper.



Everyone seeks to be happy. But when we physically feel lousy, our external sources for happiness are not so easily accessible. Sometimes the suffering of illness lies not so much in its accompanying physical sensations, but in the personal sense of diminishment and the social isolation and separation it brings. As the body contracts, life contracts as well. Nothing is left

## *The Unchosen Path*

unchanged—our relationship to ourselves, our families, and our social world. Because of this, illness causes us to reprioritize our lives, separating the nonessential from the essential. Basic questions of life's purpose and meaning take on new poignancy as we question the very value of our time here.

Illness can be a gentle nudge or a jolting wake-up call that motivates us to reexamine our lives and lifestyles. Because illness exposes our imbalances and weaknesses, it acts as a psychological magnifier that may uncover unacknowledged but deep-rooted feelings that our previously busy lives may have effectively masked. Some of these feelings may appear to be caused by the illness, but really they were there all along. Because they can no longer be denied, they can finally be attended to and healed.

Whether we accept the challenge to heal willingly or go down the path kicking and screaming, illness takes us on a descent to our depths. The path to the underworld is opened. It may not be a path we have consciously chosen, but it is the one on which we find ourselves. Here we have the opportunity to mine the gems that can only be found in the deep and dark places.

So many spiritual paths have certain austerities or sacrifices that are prescribed. Why do they do this? Maybe to cause us to wrestle with the will of the ego—to develop a spiritual muscle that will be a worthy adversary for the ego's tenacity. A chronic illness can serve this same function. It motivates us to explore the edge between personal responsibility and divine will. It demands sacrifice. The ego's wishes are impersonally ignored by the dysfunctions of the body. Illness insists that we let go of innumerable desires and gives us the opportunity to develop the generosity of heart that can become our salvation.

Just as we in the West have developed material technology, for centuries meditation masters have applied themselves to a technology of the mind, exploring the full range of the human experience, and learning to tune in to capabilities that bring not

## *Introduction*

only extraordinary perceptual abilities, but access to a joyful and natural state that transcends suffering. We know by the example of many saints and spiritual masters that they are not immune to the afflictions of the body. But they also show us that there can be joy and divine realization despite the body.

The open, enlightened mind is cultivated by withdrawing from the distractions of worldly life and retreating. In some ways, an illness provides the perfect opportunity for such spiritual training: removal from ordinary society, solitude, quiet, turning inward, self-examination. If we're lucky enough to be able to take time off from the demands of the outer world, we can use this time to learn to free ourselves from the personal patterns that contribute to much of our suffering. As our perceptions shift and our worldview opens, how we relate to our bodies and their illnesses also shifts. As we discover that our essential wholeness exists independent of the body and mind, we see that eventually all paths converge.

The road to spiritual mastery is similar to the road to healing—both present switchbacks and alternating stretches of difficulty and ease, both require us to question our conditioned limitations, both ask us to stretch and grow. How we struggle with illness often reflects our spiritual struggle. When we ask, Why can't I permanently sustain those precious moments of clarity, bliss, or health? we must remember that just as illness requires infinite patience, so does spiritual progress. As one of my teachers said, "The true spiritual path is arduous and demanding, involving one insult after another."

Illness does not necessarily teach us anything. It can be viewed as a mere annoyance or a great tragedy. But it can also be a great teacher and provider of endless opportunities to understand the nature of reality and to develop compassion for ourselves and all others. Through unexpected discoveries I have

## *The Unchosen Path*

found that the path of illness, though arduous, can be a rich and honorable one.



This is not a book about why you got sick or how to find health. It's about finding meaning, purpose, and opportunity in your current experience, no matter what path you find yourself on. As we attempt to discover effective ways to navigate our journey, the purpose of the path we are on reveals itself step by step.

Since I was so familiar with my own experience of chronic illness, I wanted to hear more about the experiences of others. I interviewed people with a variety of illnesses to find out what they had learned, where they had gotten stuck, how they had healed, how their spirituality had grown, and what makes their lives worth living. I was also looking for guidance on how to handle some of my own issues—how to deal with envy, disappointment, and fear.

The interviews were enormously rewarding for me—each person I interviewed was touchingly honest, human, courageous, and wise. Seeing how their experiences of illness helped forge the incredible people they had become enabled me to better appreciate the value of my own health challenges. Conversely, people who suffer year in and year out don't often get to talk candidly about the truth of their experiences, and they all were grateful for the opportunity to speak and be heard. I knew I wanted to share parts of their stories in this book. Though only their initials are used in the citations, a short description of each contributing interviewee is included in the appendix. I've also included liberal samplings from writers who have inspired me, caused me to examine my views, or reminded me to momentarily soften my heart and open to grace. The remainder of the entries have been taken from my own journals throughout the years.

## *Introduction*

Years after having started this project, I sometimes imagine gathering all the people I've interviewed into a circle, joined by our common experience, joined by our quest for the healing of our souls, and I imagine that the power of love spirals through our circle and touches and transforms each one of us. Then I imagine that feeling extending to all people in the world, remembering that the fact of our impermanence and our wish to be happy unites us all. The sense of separation that illness magnifies can be assuaged when we remember that our experience is so universally shared. It is my hope that, through reading these reflections, you will feel similarly touched.

### *Suggestions for Reading This Book*

*The Unchosen Path* is not meant to be read sequentially or cover to cover. You might find it most useful to flip to a subject that has your interest right now and let yourself reflect on one or several entries. I chose this format because sometimes it's difficult to concentrate when you don't feel well and you want to quickly access something that might touch, soothe, or inspire you.

Many ideas are repeated—what you can relate to may change from day to day. If you are new to the path of illness, you might first want to check out the chapter called “Why Me?” If you're having an emotionally challenging day, you could browse through “Difficult Emotions.” If you're ready to try a self-care technique, look in “Working with Ourselves.” Regardless of what approach you take, I hope you find some things that are useful on your own path.

*The Unchosen Path* does not offer any medical advice or discuss working with the health care system, which belong more to the outer journey of illness. I encourage you to continue to pursue the best medical care available to you.

