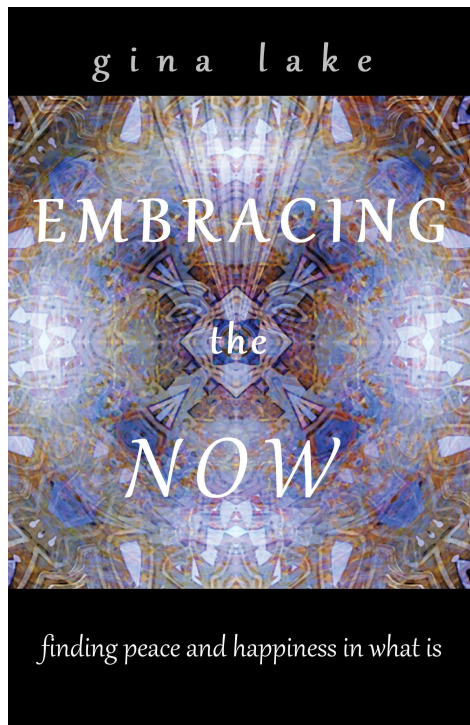


From
Embracing the Now:
Finding Peace and Happiness in What Is

Gina Lake

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CONTENTS

PART 1 Discovering Who You Are

Awareness Is Who You Are
Becoming Aware of Awareness
Aliveness
Noticing as a Doorway into the Now
Acceptance
Just Being
Awareness Meditation
Who Creates Your Reality?
Two Kinds of Desires
Following Your Heart
Aligning with Essence

PART 2 The Ego

Seeing Through the “I” Thought
The Ego Is a Troublemaker
Taking a Break from the Story of Me
The Ego Is Irrational
Life Is Springing out of the Now
How the Egoic Mind Takes You out of the Now
Wanting to Know the Future
Fear: The Ego’s Most Powerful Tool
Doubt: The Ego’s Most Insidious Tool
The Ego’s Favorite Weapon
How Judgments Undermine Relationships
The Ego Is Confused

PART 3 Breaking Free of Conditioning

Seeing the Truth about Desires
Feelings Are Not What You Think They Are
What to Do with Feelings
Feelings Point to Conditioning that Needs Healing
How to Heal Conditioning
Disengaging from the Ego’s Voice
Accepting Death and Loss

Surrender
Living without Mirrors
Living Without Referring to Beliefs
A Lifestyle for Awakening

PART 4 Secrets to Happiness

Happiness Is Here Right Now
All You Have Is Now
Good Enough
The Hidden Blessing in Limitation
Loving What Is
Embracing the Moment
There's Always Something to Love
Love What You Do
Do What You Love
Do What Essence Loves

PART 5 Trusting Life

Trusting God
Who You Are Is Goodness
Taking the Leap of Faith
The Importance of Experiencing Essence
What Is Trustworthy About Life
Seeing Life as It Is

PART 6 Making the Most of the Moment

Make the Most of Life
I'd Rather Be Fishing
Do What's in Front of You
Finding Pleasure
Waiting
What Keep You from Being Happy?
How Do You Create Stress?
Events Don't Change Experience
What Story Are You Relating To?
Unnecessary Thoughts
Noticing the Impact of Your Thoughts

INTRODUCTION

This book is a collection of essays that came out of my one-on-one work with others for the most part. As I worked with people around emotional and spiritual issues, I found the need to address certain questions common to spiritual seekers and those in the process of awakening to their true nature. Because the book is made up of essays, it is organized in parts rather than chapters. As a result, it lends itself to contemplation of one essay at a time and doesn't need to be read in any particular order, although it has an intentional order.

Introducing some terms might be helpful, in case this is the first book of mine you've encountered. The terms I've used in this book and my others are very similar to those that Eckhart Tolle, bestselling author and spiritual teacher, has used in his books, *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth*. In those books, he introduced the term *the Now* to refer to the present moment. He also introduced the term *egoic mind*, which is the aspect of the mind that serves the ego, or the false self. *The ego* is the sense of being a *me* and all the ideas, beliefs, and other conditioning entailed in the sense of existing as an individual. The ego is called the false self because the ego isn't who we really are, although it seems like it is who we are.

The egoic mind, which is a reflection of the ego and its conditioning, is the chatterbox mind, which produces a nearly constant flow of commentary about life based on our conditioning. We experience it as "the voice in the head," as Eckhart Tolle calls it. For simplicity, I sometimes refer to the egoic mind as *the mind*. However, the egoic mind is distinct from *the functional mind*, which is the aspect of the mind that we use to read, calculate, analyze, design, follow instructions, and so forth. We need the functional mind, but we don't actually need the egoic mind to function. The egoic mind is the aspect of the mind that talks to us, while the functional mind is a tool we pick up and use when we need it.

In writing about the ego, I have somewhat positioned it as the enemy, as a device to help people detach from it. When people are identified with the ego, they are, in a sense, in love with the egoic mind, and I'm hoping to help them

fall out of love with it, because the ego and the thoughts and feelings it produces are the source of human suffering. Of course, even the ego belongs to the Oneness, and the ego serves exactly the function the Oneness intended.

The ego isn't actually an entity. Rather, it is the *sense* of being a separate individual, which is innate to us. We feel like individuals, although we are actually manifestations, or expressions, of One Being. This is the Oneness that mystics throughout time have realized as being behind all life and which the term *nondual*, which means "not two," refers to. While cloaked in a human body, we have lost awareness of our true nature, and we are meant to rediscover the truth. That discovery is what the spiritual path is all about and what spiritual practices are meant to reveal.

The sense of being a separate individual is accomplished through the mind. We are programmed to *think* of ourselves as separate and as having distinct characteristics and labels: "I'm a man," "I'm smart," "I'm a mother," "I'm forty-seven." Anything that comes after "I am," defines us, and we take those definitions as who we are. And yet when you examine those assumptions, you see that they are just ideas. There is no *you* behind the thoughts about you. This *you* that you think you are is made up of thoughts! What a revelation that is!

Then who are you? That is the perennial question. Trying to answer it results in the discovery that we are not a *thing*, but more of a being, an experience of existing. If we strip away all labels and ideas, we are left with just *I am*, just existence. We are that which is existing right here and now and aware of that existence. Spiritual teachers often call the true self *Awareness* because the experience of the true self is that it is aware. Beyond that, who or what we really are can't be defined. It has qualities that can be felt, such as peace, acceptance, love, compassion, gratitude, kindness, patience, wisdom, and strength, although those words don't come close to defining the mystery of our true nature.

Who we really are is indescribable because it is beyond anything the mind can grasp. But to speak about who we really are, we have to give it a name. It has been given many names: the Source, Spirit, Oneness, Beingness, Consciousness, God, Awareness, the Divine, the Absolute, Presence, Stillness, Emptiness, the Now, Essence, the Self, the higher self, the essential self, and the true self, to name just a few. I usually refer to it as Essence, the Oneness, the Self, or Awareness. Those words mean basically the same thing. I generally

use *Essence* to refer to the aspect of the Oneness that expresses itself and lives through each of us. Words and definitions aren't important. You know Essence when you experience it, just as you know the ego when you experience it. Essence and the ego feel very different and are very distinct.

Awakening is another term that may need some definition. Humanity as a whole is awakening out of the egoic state of consciousness into awareness of its true nature. Many of you are taking that step. Awakening refers to the shift from identification with the ego, or false self, to the recognition of yourself as the spiritual being that you are. This shift happens whenever we are simply in the moment without all of our thoughts. So awakeness is possible in any moment. Awakening, however, generally implies a more permanent shift to living from a place of non-identification with the ego and alignment with our true nature.

THREE ESSAYS

Happiness Is Here Right Now

Many people would define a successful life as a happy one, so we go about trying to be happy in many ways. Some people try to attain happiness through accomplishments and material things, while others use spiritual means. The problem is that happiness isn't something to attain or achieve, but something to notice. If you are busy trying to achieve happiness, you are probably overlooking it. The ego tries to get happiness from doing, having, or being someone, while the spiritual ego tries to get it from transcending all of that. For the ego, spiritual freedom, or enlightenment, is just one more thing to be achieved.

Wanting happiness and freedom from the suffering of the ego are worthwhile desires. The problem is that wanting anything implies you don't already have it. You *believe* you aren't free when you already are. You *believe* you need to do something to be happy, and you don't. That truth is very hard for the ego to grasp. The ego doesn't notice the happiness that is already present in the moment because that happiness doesn't look like the ego imagines or wants it to look.

When true happiness shows up, the ego is bored with it: It's too plain, too ordinary, and it doesn't leave us feeling special or above the fray. It doesn't take away our problems, which is the ego's idea of happiness. The ego wants no more difficulties: no more sickness, no more need for money, no more work, no more bad feelings, only unending pleasure and bliss. Such perfection is the ego's idea of a successful life. However, the happiness the ego dreams of will never be attained by anyone. The ego denies the reality of this dimension, where challenges are necessary to evolution and where blissful states and pleasures come and go.

The happiness that underlies all of life is happiness that comes from just existing. Happiness is actually a quality of our true nature, of Essence, which loves challenges because Essence loves the growth that comes from them. It embraces all of life, not only the pleasurable and fun moments, but also the more difficult ones.

Then who is life difficult for? The only thing that experiences life as difficult is the ego, which is made up of ideas about ourselves and ideas the conditioned self has about life. These ideas are all that interfere with true happiness. Ideas—just thoughts—keep us from experiencing life and the happiness that Essence is experiencing as it is living through us.

In any moment, you can experience true happiness if you just notice that true happiness is here right now. True happiness is much more subtle than the giddy high we feel when we finally get what we want, which never lasts for long. The ego wants happiness to feel like a high that never goes away, which is also why many people want enlightenment. They imagine enlightenment will be a state of unending bliss, which it isn't. In short, the ego wants every moment to be thrilling. But life will never feel that way. No one has ever had the experience of unending excitement or bliss in this dimension, and no one ever will.

True happiness—the happiness that *is* available and ongoing in this dimension—is a quiet contentment with life and an openness and availability to life. True happiness is steady and constant, although it seems to come and go as our attention shifts. Usually our thoughts take us away from the happy peacefulness of the moment because the ego doesn't appreciate peace and prefers drama and feelings.

If we stay in the Now long enough, we experience Essence rejoicing in life, relishing the experience of being alive in this ever-changing and mysterious moment. That contentment and love of life is true happiness. It doesn't have the excitement or glamour of a spiritual experience or winning the lottery. But unlike those thrilling experiences, true happiness doesn't come and go.

When we are aware of everything that is arising in the moment, not just our thoughts, we see that life is unfolding perfectly, regardless of the ego's attempts to manipulate it. The ego tries to intervene in every moment, as if it's responsible for shaping life. But the ego isn't that powerful. The ego's interventions take us away from life and bring us into its mental world, where it creates an imaginary life full of dreams, hopes, and fantasies—the life it wants.

The life the ego wants will never come to pass, however. What the ego wants is unrealistic and often not connected to the flow of life, out of which reality is born. Life doesn't follow the ego's desires. Life has its own momentum and reason, which is mysterious and can't be known ahead of time. The ego doesn't like not knowing and not being in control, so it pretends that it can be the creator of life, and through the mind it is. But the mental world the ego creates doesn't affect life except by taking us away from it.

The ego's mental world is an illusion that will never become real. The ego really believes in its illusions, though. It believes its dreams and fantasies may come true if it thinks the right thoughts and does the right things. The ego doesn't recognize that something else is at work, giving birth to life. When we are in touch with what's actually creating life instead of the ego's ideas about life, we stand a chance of being really happy, not because of anything that happens, but just because we exist in this miraculously ever-shifting moment in time and because what we are loves life.

The Now is complete and fulfilling just as it is. Nothing needs to be added to it. The Now can't be made any better because the Now is already as good as it gets. The ego will tell you otherwise and promise you its version of happiness, but the ego's promises are empty. Will you chase after the ego's dreams, or are you willing to see that happiness—true, unshakable happiness—is already here and that what's here is enough?

The Ego Is Irrational

The ego is irrational. Its strategies to change reality don't affect it, but only make us unhappy. Once we see how irrational the ego is and how ineffective its strategies are, we can begin to free ourselves from it and from the suffering it causes. The ego pretends to know how to make us happy, but its strategies produce the opposite and, in fact, obscure true happiness.

One of the ego's favorite strategies for trying to change reality is judging. When we don't like something (i.e., when we are identified with the ego, which rejects the way things are), we judge whatever we don't like. Judging provides reasons for not liking something: It's too this or too that. Or, it's not enough of this or that. Judgments make the ego's discontentment with everything seem reasonable. They provide reasons that justify our complaints and the anger generated by those complaints.

Anger stems from assuming that the ego's perspective is correct and that the ego's desires should be met. What assumes that, of course, is the ego; we don't have to. That assumption is a highly irrational one. Life doesn't revolve around the ego's desires. And infinite perspectives are possible, and every ego has its own. So why should our ego's perspective be the correct one?

The ego's perspective is colored by its values. It wants security, superiority, fame, power, money, safety, comfort, and pleasure above other values, such as love, peace, and unity. As a result, the ego sees the world from the standpoint of how well the world is providing what it wants. The moment is good or bad, depending on whether what is happening makes the ego feel good, safe, powerful, beautiful, comfortable, rich, popular, happy, or whatever else it wants.

When the moment doesn't provide these things, the ego feels cheated and angry. It judges and complains, building a case for its anger so that it feels justified in feeling angry and, perhaps, in taking some destructive action. If the ego's anger took place in a vacuum, it would be obvious how pointless and impotent that anger is. But anger is meant for others to see, because the ego

uses anger to try to get its way in the world. The ego tries to manipulate others with anger, and it's often successful, but only at a great cost.

The ego doesn't care about the cost of indulging in anger: a diminishment of love, harmony, and happiness. It cares more about getting what it wants. It wants what it wants more than it wants love or even happiness, because ultimately its choices don't lead to happiness. The ego would rather have its perspective than be happy. When it does succeed in getting what it wants, it gets little out of having that. The victory is a hollow one.

The hollowness of the ego's successes doesn't stop it from continuing to apply its favorite formula to life, which is: Reject something, judge it, complain about it, and get angry or sad about it. The ego actually enjoys feeling angry and sad. When we are identified with it, we enjoy these feelings on some level and often unconsciously choose to stay in them for a while rather than move beyond them. When we choose anger or sadness over happiness often enough, anger and sadness become natural and familiar, like old friends, and those feelings become automatic whenever life doesn't go our way. Fortunately, we can learn to respond differently when things don't go our way, and with a little practice, anger and sadness will no longer be automatic and unconscious.

Anger is an attempt to manipulate life, which is particularly irrational when what we are angry about is something that happened in the past. Being angry at something we think will happen in the future is equally irrational, since the future is just an idea. Being angry at something in the past or future is irrational because being angry doesn't change anything; it only makes us and others unhappy. Being angry at something that is presently happening isn't rational either because anger doesn't help us cope with the present either. Anger simply isn't functional.

When we feel angry, we are actually angry because of a perception we have. We are saying something to ourselves that is making us angry. The story we are telling ourselves is making us angry. If we don't want to feel angry, then we have to stop telling ourselves and others that story. The solution doesn't lie in changing anything outside ourselves, but inside ourselves.

Sadness is a stance of defeat or victimization in relation to life, which also brings only unhappiness and, like anger, has no power to change reality.

Sadness, like anger, is also often an attempt to manipulate life and others. We hope that others will come to our rescue and give us what we want if we are really sad about it. Sadness can also be an unconscious attempt to manipulate God into giving us what we want. We throw a tantrum over life in hopes that Daddy/Mommy will finally give us what we want. We make ourselves sad by disagreeing with the way life is showing up, and we hope that life will show mercy on us.

Both of these strategies, anger and sadness, are ineffective ways of dealing with life. They don't change whatever we don't like, and they are harmful to us and our relationships. These feelings are the result of the ego's irrational perspective, which assumes incorrectly that life should conform to its wishes and that it can make life do that, or that it should be able to. The ego believes it is the center of the universe, which is an immature and inaccurate perspective. Spiritual maturity is seeing the truth about life. The ego is immature, irrational, self-centered, and shortsighted, but the good news is that we are not the ego! More good news is that spiritual maturity doesn't depend on our ego changing, but on simply recognizing the truth about it.

When you catch yourself complaining or judging, that means you are identified with the ego's perspective. When you realize that and stop complaining or judging, you will stop suffering. However, stopping in the midst of complaining and judging isn't always easy because the ego loves to complain and judge. But the less we indulge in that negative pleasure, the weaker the ego becomes. Instead of complaining or judging, give your attention to something else: something of beauty, something you love or are grateful for, something you're experiencing through your senses, or your breath. Give your attention to anything but your negative thoughts.

If you find yourself angry or sad, ask yourself what you just said to yourself that made you feel that way. Seeing that you created those feelings by believing your thoughts empowers you to move beyond those feelings. Our feelings are the outcome of believing negative thoughts. Although there may be some truth to such thoughts, which is why we believe them, they are a story we are telling ourselves that leaves out much of the truth. When we feel bad, those feelings mean we have bought into the ego's story about ourselves, our life, or others,

and the ego's story is a negative, small, shortsighted, and ignorant one. What story would Essence tell? Essence sees the big picture and the truest perspective. It always has an uplifting story to tell. If you are going to tell a story at all, find Essence's story. Better yet, just be in the moment without any story to distract you.

Fear: The Ego's Most Powerful Tool

Fear is powerful. It can make us behave badly and make us do things we don't want to do. It makes war and all types of conflict seem justified. We are willing to fight and wage war because we are afraid we won't get or keep what we want, and we are afraid of what that will mean. When we feel our survival is at stake, fear is behind that, and that fear is the basis of all wars and other atrocities. Most people will do anything to survive. The questions we need to ask about our fears are: "Is what I'm afraid of real? Is my survival really at stake? Do I know that for sure?" The answers to those questions are rarely yes.

Fears aren't real because they are ideas about a future possibility. How real can those ideas be? The future exists only as an idea. Where did that idea come from? This is such an essential question. Fears always come from the ego, because that's what thinks about the future, and how reliable a source is the ego?

We need to examine not only how real and true a fear is, but also how functional fear in general is. Do our fears keep us safe or protect us from what we are afraid of? They seem to motivate us to take care of our basic survival needs. For example, we are afraid of being homeless and starving, so we work to earn money to survive. However, if we needed fear to help us survive, then as soon as we had enough money to survive, wouldn't we stop working? So much more than fear is behind our motivation to work and do the things we do. We don't need fear to motivate us to live. We are naturally motivated to live: to work, play, create, rest, explore, grow, learn, have fun, and so on. Essence motivates us to live life. Fear is simply the ego's contribution to life, a contribution we need to examine.

The ego generates fears and tries to get us to do something about them. We believe our fears because we are programmed to believe them. We believe that

if we don't do something about our fears, they might come true. Fear is how the ego stays in power because fear gets our attention. It keeps us tied to the egoic mind because the mind promises a solution to the fear. If the ego doesn't have a plan for avoiding what it says we should be afraid of, then it gives us a plan for coping with it: eat, watch TV, drink, do drugs, go shopping. We assume that fear is constructive by motivating us to take care of ourselves, but fear is behind our addictions and self-destructive actions, and it's behind depression and other mental illnesses as well.

The truth is that fear isn't constructive. It drives us to do things we don't really need to do and therefore wastes our time. Moreover, fear often keeps us from following our Heart, which is the safest thing we could do. In truth, safety is a false concern, since life has a way of bringing us exactly what we need, regardless of whether or not we recognize that or like what it brings.

We can trust life. Fear is the ego's experience because it doesn't trust life. But the perception that life is untrustworthy is false. Fears are a figment of the ego's imagination. They are generated and upheld entirely by the ego. The ego makes up fears, and because these fears are passed on from person to person and from generation to generation, they seem credible. Since everyone is afraid of the same things, our fears seem worthy of our attention. As a result, questioning them seems unnatural. Fears are so basic to life, the ego's life, that is. The majority of people are identified with the ego most of the time and, as a result, identified with the ego's perceptions and fears.

Fears keep us out of the Now and in the grip of the ego, which then tries to structure and plan our life for us. Meanwhile, Essence continues to move us and attempts to structure our life according to its intentions. We get to choose what will structure our life. Our lives are shaped by both the ego and Essence. Essence works its plan into the life we are creating by following our ego. The situation changes dramatically when we wake up out of the ego because the ego becomes less dominant and Essence becomes more prominent.

Fear scares us into paying attention to the egoic mind. It takes us out of the Now by sounding an alarm, which brings our attention back to our thoughts. A fearful thought is more powerful than other thoughts because of the sense of alarm connected with it. Other thoughts tempt us to go back into the egoic mind, but fearful thoughts scare us into going back to it. The fact that fearful

thoughts can produce uncomfortable physical sensations makes them all the more convincing.

If we need to do something to take care of ourselves, like eat better, buy health insurance, or get a job, Essence will inspire us to do that, or it may bring people into our lives who inspire us or help us do that. When Essence uses others as mouthpieces to inspire us, they do it without fear. Those who try to get us to do things by judging or scaring us are acting out of their egos, not Essence.

Essence moves us naturally and joyfully to take care of ourselves, and the only thing that can interfere with that natural movement is our conditioning. The ego is responsible for fears about ill health and also for the conditioning that causes us to do things that are detrimental to our health. Our conditioning is what most stands in the way of being willing to work, rest, eat right, and take care of ourselves in other ways. The ego, rather than keeping us safe, as it promises, actually keeps us from our innate wisdom, which knows exactly how to live life safely, healthfully, and joyfully.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Lake is a spiritual teacher and the author of numerous books about awakening to one's true nature, including *From Stress to Stillness*, *Trusting Life*, *Embracing the Now*, *Radical Happiness*, *Living in the Now*, *Return to Essence*, *Choice and Will*, *Ten Teachings for One World*, *Loving in the Moment*, *Anatomy of Desire*, and *Getting Free*. She is also a gifted intuitive with a master's degree in counseling psychology and over twenty years experience supporting people in their spiritual growth. Her website offers information about her books, courses, and spiritual mentoring as well as free ebooks, book excerpts, a monthly newsletter, a blog, and audio and video recordings:

<http://www.radicalhappiness.com>

Books by Gina Lake

Available in paperback, ebook, and audiobook formats.

From Stress to Stillness: Tools for Inner Peace. Most stress is created by how we think about things. *From Stress to Stillness* will help you to examine what you're thinking and change your relationship to your thoughts so that they no longer result in stress. Drawing from the wisdom traditions, psychology, New Thought, and the author's own experience as a spiritual teacher and counselor, *From Stress to Stillness* offers many practices and suggestions that will lead to greater peace and equanimity, even in a busy and stress-filled world.

Trusting Life: Overcoming the Fear and Beliefs That Block Peace and Happiness. Fear and distrust keep us from living the life we were meant to live, and they are the greatest hurdles to seeing the truth about life—that it is good, abundant, supportive, and potentially joyous. *Trusting Life* is a deep exploration into the mystery of who we are, why we suffer, why we don't trust life, and how to become more trusting. It offers evidence that life is trustworthy and tools for overcoming the fear and beliefs that keep us from falling in love with life.

Loving in the Moment: Moving from Ego to Essence in Relationships. Having a truly meaningful relationship requires choosing love over your conditioning, that is, your ideas, fantasies, desires, images, and beliefs. *Loving in the Moment* describes how to move beyond conditioning, judgment, anger, romantic illusions, and differences to the experience of love and Oneness with another. It explains how to drop into the core of your Being, where Oneness and love exist, and be with others from there.

Embracing the Now: Finding Peace and Happiness in What Is. The Now—this moment—is the true source of happiness and peace and the key to living a fulfilled and meaningful life. *Embracing the Now* is a collection of essays that can serve as daily reminders of the deepest truths. Full of clear insight and wisdom, it explains how the mind keeps us from being in the moment, how to move into the Now and stay there, and what living from the Now is like. It also explains how to overcome stumbling blocks to being in the Now, such as fears, doubts, misunderstandings, judgments, distrust of life, desires, and other conditioned ideas that are behind human suffering.

Radical Happiness: A Guide to Awakening provides the keys to experiencing the happiness that is ever-present and not dependent on circumstances. This happiness doesn't come from getting what you want, but from wanting what is here now. It comes from realizing that who you think you are is not who you

really are. This is a radical perspective! *Radical Happiness* describes the nature of the egoic state of consciousness and how it interferes with happiness, what awakening and enlightenment are, and how to live in the world after awakening.

Living in the Now: How to Live as the Spiritual Being That You Are. The 99 essays in *Living in the Now* will help you realize your true nature and live as that. They answer many questions raised by the spiritual search and offer wisdom on subjects such as fear, anger, happiness, aging, boredom, desire, patience, faith, forgiveness, acceptance, love, commitment, hope, purpose, meaning, meditation, being present, emotions, trusting life, trusting your Heart, and many other deep subjects. These essays will help you become more conscious, present, happy, loving, grateful, at peace, and fulfilled. Each essay stands on its own and can be used for daily contemplation.

Anatomy of Desire: How to Be Happy Even When You Don't Get What You Want will help you discriminate between your Heart's desires and the ego's and to relate to the ego's desires in a way that reduces suffering and increases joy. By pointing out the myths about desire that keep us tied to our ego's desires and the suffering they cause, *Anatomy of Desire* will help you be happy regardless of your desires and whether you are attaining them. So it is also about spiritual freedom, or liberation, which comes from following the Heart, our deepest desires, instead of the ego's desires. It is about becoming a lover of life rather than a desirer.

Return to Essence: How to Be in the Flow and Fulfill Your Life's Purpose describes how to get into the flow and stay there and how to live life from there. Being in the flow and not being in the flow are two very different states. One is dominated by the ego-driven mind, which is the cause of suffering, while the other is the domain of Essence, the Divine within each of us. You are meant to live in the flow. The flow is the experience of Essence—your true self—as it lives life through you and fulfills its purpose for this life.

Getting Free: How to Move Beyond Conditioning and Be Happy. Freedom from your conditioning is possible, but the mind is a formidable opponent to freedom. To be free requires a new way of thinking or, rather, not thinking. To a large extent, healing our conditioning involves changing our relationship to our mind and discovering who we really are. *Getting Free* will help you do that. It will also help you reprogram your mind; clear negative thoughts and self-images; use meditation, prayer, forgiveness, and gratitude; work with spiritual forces to assist healing and clear negativity; and heal entrenched issues from the past.

Ten Teachings for One World: Wisdom from Mother Mary is a message from Mother Mary to her beloved children on earth. The teachings are intended to bring us into closer contact with the peace and love that is our divine nature, which has the ability to transform our hearts and our world. Mother Mary's gentle wisdom will inspire and assist you in awakening to the magnificent being that you are.

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What About Now? Reminders for Being in the Moment. The secret to happiness is moving out of the mind and learning to delight in each moment. In *What About Now*, you will find over 150 quotes from Gina Lake's books—*Radical Happiness*, *Embracing the Now*, *Loving in the Moment*, *Living in the Now*, and others—which will inspire and enable you to be more present. These empowering quotes will wake you up out of your ordinary consciousness and help you live with more love, contentment, gratitude, and awe.

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