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Vitality and Youthfulness

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique.

—MARTHA GRAHAM

Many years ago, while flying home from teaching a two-week seminar in Chicago, it suddenly dawned on me that each time a student or client of mine improved, she or he radiated *vitality*. Their faces relaxed and their skin color became more vibrant. Their eyes brightened. Their voices became more enthusiastic and melodious. They stood taller and with greater ease. They exuded a sense of peacefulness and quiet attentiveness. They moved with greater grace, energy, flexibility, and confidence. When I am able to observe them over several hours or days, as is often the case in my longer seminars, I notice their thinking becomes clearer and their ability to express themselves sharper. They laugh more and become lighter in spirit. They exhibit radiant beauty that comes from a place deep within them and is reflected in every part of their demeanor.

At the time of this realization, I had been working with a great variety of people, men and women from all walks of life, all ages and conditions. I saw people like the sixty-year-old executive

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recovering from a stroke, the thirty-year-old mother recovering from a difficult childbirth, and the forty-year-old sales representative wanting to improve his golf game. I even worked with students from the university who were in perfect health but were searching for ways to improve their academic performance and creative capacities. Many were referred to me by a friend or spouse who had benefited from this work; their lives had been going fine, but the workshops opened up new possibilities for them. There were also world-class musicians, dancers, and athletes searching for ways to improve their performance. In addition, I had been doing a great deal with infants and children with developmental problems, which had informed me so much about what we adults need in order to thrive. Over the years, I have helped thousands of people move beyond their present limitations, whether those limitations were intellectual, emotional, physical, or even the result of genetics.

No matter who they were or why they came, all who opened their minds to this work had one thing in common—they radiated *vitality*.

RECLAIM YOUR VITALITY

Whether you have experienced vitality for brief or extended periods of time, it is not something you easily forget. You might remember falling in love and feeling filled with energy, light on your feet, and hopeful about the future. Or perhaps you remember getting your dream job and then bursting with creative new ideas. If you play tennis or golf, or some other sport, you may have had the experience, many times over, of exceeding your personal best and feeling flooded with energy, ready to perform at higher and higher levels. You might recall the deep vitality you felt while making love passionately, or the thrill and empowerment you experienced when you found a new way to increase your income or make a career change. Vitality is something we all know, regardless of our activities and interests. If nothing else, we have all

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experienced vitality in our childhoods, during the period of our steepest learning curves when our brains were constantly generating new information, forming new patterns, and creating new possibilities in our lives.

For a moment, think about your life in the first hours following your birth. Reflect on how much you have grown and evolved to be where you are today. In those early hours in your mother's arms, you responded to touch, sound, light, movement, and the comfort or discomfort of your body, but you had yet to develop anything resembling voluntary action. You could initiate very little, except perhaps to follow a movement with your eyes, suckle, or cry. For many months, even years, your growth seemed to take care of itself. While you were dependent on others to provide emotional, physical, and mental support, the curve of your development was extraordinarily steep, like a race up a mountain path.

During this time, you were bursting at the seams with energy, curiosity, and spontaneous creativity—and with it came the fire of vitality that made so much of your experience exhilarating. The vitality you experienced in those early years was directly connected to the fact that behind the scenes your brain was growing new connections and patterns at the staggering rate of 1.8 million connections per second. Each new set of patterns provided you with new possibilities for movement, feeling, thought, and action. Nearly every day, you developed new capacities and discovered new things. Life was exhilarating. What happened between then and now to diminish this vitality?

Very simply, when we get to a certain level of development, most of us begin to coast. We stop providing our brains with what they need in order to continue to grow and create new possibilities for us. Our brains either slow way down or stop forming new connections altogether; as a result, we begin repeating the same patterns over and over again. Eventually, with no significant change, our lives become habitual, and we begin to deteriorate in the ways we think, move, and feel.

As adults, we find ways of thinking and doing that work for us,

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ways that are usually productive, efficient, and practical. Then we repeat those patterns again and again. After all, we can't reinvent the wheel every time we get up in the morning or drive to work or do routine tasks our jobs require. We'd never get through the day without having efficient routines and habits we can rely on. The downside is that we can become like automatons running the same old circuits day after day.

But part of our true nature is to go beyond persistent habit and routine. Our brains thrive when creating new information, and this is what we require to feel alive and enthusiastic—vitaly engaged in our lives. When we don't provide our brains with what they need in order to create and thrive, we begin to feel lethargic and inflexible. We get aches and pains, and we become less and less responsive to people and events around us. The more this occurs, the more new information seems like a distraction or even a threat to us. We become physically and mentally dull, increasingly unreceptive to anything that seems new or different.

Is it possible to reignite our vitality at will, regardless of our age, physical symptoms, or station in life? The answer is *yes!* You can have the high levels of vitality you long for, and you can recreate it throughout your life. Our brains have an innate capacity to keep discovering and inventing new ways of acting and thinking. They are most vibrant and alive when called upon to differentiate, that is, to recognize finer and finer distinctions and make increasingly finer choices, to form new patterns and reach higher levels of complexity, skill, comfort, strength, and heightened levels of performance in everything we do.

In this book, you'll learn about the Nine Essentials your brain needs to thrive. You will have the opportunity to experience simple, subtle body movements and mental exercises that satisfy those needs and thus awaken your vitality. You'll also discover why and how these methods work, based on research and my experience over the past thirty years. And you'll find that the practical applications of these methods are so intuitive that you'll find it easy to integrate them into all areas of your everyday life.

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Over and over again, I see people come to life who have felt dead and torpid, trapped by restricting circumstances, sometimes for many years. I have seen people who have suffered the energy-blunting experience of chronic pain, experienced the disappointment of a stunted life based on rigid and limiting beliefs, or deadened by a life of routine, reawaken their brains and regain the vitality that makes life worth living. They often describe their experience with phrases such as: “I feel twenty years younger!” or “I feel like a kid again!” or “I have never felt better in my life!” or “I didn’t know this was possible” or “Now I know I can follow my dream.” They discover their capacity to enjoy greater freedom, flexibility, and strength, with enormous bursts of energy and joy.

EXERCISE 1 TRANSFORMATION THROUGH
WHAT YOU DON’T YET KNOW

Most of us have experienced the feeling that “I’ve tried everything and nothing works.” This usually comes while struggling with a difficult situation and settling on the belief, at least for the moment, that what you wanted to happen is impossible. What often proves to be true is not that you had really *tried everything*, but that you had believed in your own limitations; that is, you’d believed in the limited knowledge you had at that moment. New solutions and new possibilities await us in what we don’t yet know, or in what hasn’t yet evolved.

Think of a time when you felt stuck and then, with new knowledge, created a solution that changed everything for the better. This might have been in a relationship challenge, a work-related problem, your sexuality, your health, or in a recreational activity. Let this be your reminder that there is always something beyond what you presently know; you need not limit yourself to your present knowledge. Dare to believe in what may seem impossible.

There’s a wonderful exchange between Alice and the White Queen in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*. When Alice

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complains that she can't believe impossible things, the Queen replies: "I daresay you haven't had much practice . . . When I was your age I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

**EXERCISE 2 THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER
OF KNOWLEDGE**

Take a few moments and create a list of at least one time when you were sure something was impossible for you to have or accomplish and that later on, with new knowledge, became possible. Then continue adding to this list every day. It can be from any aspect of your life: physical, emotional, mental, relationship, faith, work, financial, or recreational activity. It can be a recent experience, or something you experienced a long time ago. Practice this skill until you become an expert in knowing that with additional knowledge, you can move beyond what you believe to be impossible.

TRANSFORMATION FOR A BETTER LIFE

Over the years, I have experienced the joy of working with thousands of people—teachers, accountants, homemakers, truck drivers, lawyers, grandmothers, professors, secretaries, and others. Many faces come to mind as examples of the transformational process people experience as they move beyond what they once perceived as personal limitations, ultimately achieving capacities they had only dreamed were possible. Madison's story is particularly powerful. On the surface, her situation shows how pain—be it physical or mental—can compromise our lives, making it difficult, or impossible, to do even that which we love. It was pain that motivated her to seek help, but it doesn't have to be. Madison's story speaks to anyone wanting to enjoy greater vitality and joy.

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WHEN MADISON WALKED into a crowded room, people sat up and took notice, captivated by her exceptional air of self-confidence and professionalism. At forty-two, she appeared ten years younger—slender, brunette, five-foot-nine, and smartly dressed. A successful businesswoman, she was president of her own consulting firm, coaching executives in key organizations. Happily married to a San Francisco attorney, her life seemed ideal.

I first met Madison when she enrolled in my workshop at the Anat Baniel Method Center in San Rafael, California. I started out this workshop by having the participants form a large circle, then asking them to introduce themselves and say what they wished to accomplish in the class. The circle that day consisted of several professional people, including a musician from a symphony orchestra, a couple of schoolteachers, a psychotherapist, and a surgeon. There were housewives, retired men and women, and a college girl who was studying biology. All had their own reasons for coming to the workshop, ranging from the retired doctor recovering from depression to the young father grappling with panic attacks.

Madison told us that she was feeling like she was “dying by inches,” but because she was so good at hiding what was going on with her, few people knew she was in constant pain. As she described her experience, I was amazed that she had even showed up for the workshop. The worst thing for her was that the pain she experienced was eating up her energy. This was something that nearly everyone in the workshop could understand, since most people have experienced how pain can sap their energy and compromise their lives. Madison was a person who once had all the energy in the world; she had never dreamed her life would ever be any different. Over the previous seven years, she had built a successful consulting business, mostly on her own, but now she had to turn it over to her assistants to run, and she was afraid that

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things would go downhill without her direction. These necessary changes were breaking her heart, but she had no other options. She'd turned most of her attention to her recovery, searching for a way to regain the energy and well-being she had always enjoyed in the past.

I asked Madison to tell me how this had come about, seeking clues to the link between her physical conditions and the loss of energy and vitality she described.

She paused and took a deep breath before going on. Two years before, while driving home in the fog, a driver in front of her swerved to miss a road hazard and lost control of his car. Madison slammed on her brakes and managed to avoid colliding with the other car, but a split second later a delivery truck slammed into her car. Though she was badly shaken, she thought she was going to be fine, but the police ordered an ambulance and she was raced to the hospital for observation. The doctor found no broken bones or signs of other injuries, so she was released that same night and told she would be okay. All she needed was a little bed rest.

Okay turned out to be anything but. She woke up the next morning with excruciating neck and back pain. Further medical examination showed she was suffering from a classic whiplash injury, so her doctor sent her to a physical therapist. For a while, she got some relief from the stiffness, but her debilitating pain continued. She dreaded the idea of going back to work. She didn't have energy for anything. She had to force herself to even get out of bed.

When further medical tests proved inconclusive, Madison began looking for other sources of help. She tried yoga, massage, and acupuncture—all of which brought some relief, but always the energy-sapping pain returned. She found a gifted Pilates instructor who was successful in reducing the pain to a greater degree, but Madison continued to feel very constricted in her movements and limited by the pain. She felt old at forty-two. After a few sessions, her Pilates teacher told her about the work I was doing, and she signed up for the workshop.

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One of the class participants, the retired doctor in the class, remarked how he'd noticed that while she stood tall and seemed flexible enough, she moved like she was walking on eggshells.

I nodded in agreement. This had been my first clue that Madison was in pain and fearful of moving. Meanwhile, her personable ways successfully masked her suffering from most people around her.

When I asked how long she'd been experiencing this pain and restriction, she looked at me with an agonized expression and answered that it felt like "ten grueling lifetimes!" Tears welled up in her eyes as she shared how she hoped this class would be helpful, since she felt it was her last hope.

I explained that to heal and become fully alive again she needed to find new ways to move, feel, and think, and the class would definitely provide this. Her brain needed to create new patterns that excluded the pain and limitations that she was presently experiencing. There was not a doubt in my mind that her brain could do that. I knew that the movements and other exercises I'd be guiding her through in the workshop would give her brain the information it needed to find new solutions.

Madison was worried. She explained that anything at all challenging was scary for her. She needed my assurance, which I was able to give her, that if any of the exercises I gave the class caused her any discomfort, she could just do them in her imagination. I explained that as a source of new information for our brains, imagination is often as effective and powerful as any movement exercises we perform with our bodies.

I start most of my workshops by having people lie on their backs on the floor and notice how the different parts of their bodies feel. Nothing could be simpler. But as they do this, I ask them to pay attention not just to their bodies, but also to what they are thinking and feeling emotionally. Then I have them do a very easy sequence of movements and have them pay close attention to what they are sensing in their back, rib cage, neck, shoulders, and even their eyes. They instantly begin feeling more flexible, moving in

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ways they hadn't been able to move for years. I ask them to stand and describe what they are feeling. Most say they feel taller and lighter on their feet. Many report that they are breathing fuller and easier. These changes, after only a few easy movements and some awareness instruction, produce outcomes that transform lifelong beliefs and experiences.

During the workshop with Madison, I carefully watched as she did the exercises and was not surprised that she did fine with them. In fact, she did better than fine. She did all the movements attentively and gently, gradually becoming bolder, less tentative, less fearful, and far more at ease than I had imagined she would be. As we took a break, I noticed her talking excitedly with the woman next to her. Madison was sitting cross-legged on her mat, gesturing animatedly with her arms, even throwing back her head now and then to laugh. Her excitement was attracting everyone's attention.

I could barely contain my curiosity. As I walked over in her direction, she turned and looked up at me, her face radiating with sheer delight. She was already using her neck more freely. With great enthusiasm, she told me, "I can hardly believe it. My whole body feels so much better!"

The three days of class passed quickly, and as Madison was leaving she stopped to thank me. She asked if it would be possible to do some individual follow-up sessions with me. Part of her reason for this was that she wanted to stay in touch with me in case her pain returned. But there was more to it than that. "Anat," she said, "these days with you in the workshop have opened up something that feels very new in my life, and I want to learn more about it. Do you know what it is? It feels like my brain is doing something I don't think it's ever done before. It's a miracle."

I assured her that the miracle was more science than magic. It has much to do with liberating ourselves from ways of moving and acting that have become so routine and "natural" for us that we don't even think about them anymore.

Madison came in regularly for her private work with me over

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the next month or two. When she came for her third session, she looked more youthful and energetic than I'd ever seen her. I told her how beautiful she looked—for she truly did—and that I was certain she was moving into her life in new and exciting ways. She laughed, nodding enthusiastically. She described how she felt “like my wild, expressive self again.”

Thankfully, you don't have to experience an accident or injury to have this kind of outcome. Vitality can be awakened through my program in spite of pain from a serious injury, a chronic condition, overwork, stress, or what we often associate with “normal” aging. What Madison experienced is not an isolated or an unusual case, with or without a presenting complaint such as an injury, illness, or trauma. We have only to provide our brains with new information and new possibilities to experience renewed vitality. As our brains form new patterns, we experience a new sense of aliveness and energy, excitement, and enjoyment.

LET YOUR MIND THRIVE

In this book, you will discover that we can powerfully and quickly revitalize not only our bodies, but our mental and emotional capacities as well. Kirsten, a concert pianist and piano teacher, first came to me with a shoulder pain that she described as “maybe just a symptom of how burned out I'm feeling.” As I questioned her further, I began to suspect that in addition to feeling burned out, Kirsten was seeking something important that she believed was missing from her life; as it turned out, I was right.

Her shoulder pain was gone after two private sessions. However, she signed up for weekly classes and began coming to all my longer seminars. One day, she asked if she could sign up for my professional training program, which would require a long-term commitment. I asked her why she wanted to do this, since she already had a very exciting and successful career in teaching and performing music.

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She surprised me by explaining that she wanted to learn how to think better. Kirsten had been brought up in a family in which girls not only weren't expected to be smart, but were also taught not to speak out or aspire toward any kind of personal achievement. She had challenged those principles enough to become a successful teacher and musician, but she still struggled with the belief that she was not very intelligent. Because of that belief, she was inhibited in developing her intellectual skills. The ways she had learned to think about herself in her family of origin had become a barrier, but her work with me over the past months had begun removing that barrier. She had experienced profound changes in her ability to think and began feeling more confident in these abilities. She knew there was more, and she was eager to go even further and engage more fully in the intellectual and mental aspects of her life. Once she realized it was possible for her to feel and be intelligent, there was no stopping her.

In the weeks and months ahead, Kirsten began forming, trusting, and expressing her own unique understanding of life. As she continued with this process, she became more and more bold and authentic in her intellectual expression; her thinking became clearer and more creative. She often told me how empowered she felt and how much she loved the vibrancy and energy of her new intellectual life.

Today, she continues to perform and teach, bringing all that she has learned as a practitioner of my method to every aspect of her life. You'll probably not be surprised to learn that she is particularly skillful at helping her students realize greater mental and creative capabilities, and bringing these to every aspect of their lives.

THE NINE ESSENTIALS FOR VITALITY

The *Nine Essentials for Vitality* form the core of my method. Each of the Nine Essentials describes one of the brain's requirements for waking up and doing its job well—that is, creating new connections

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and avoiding rigidity and limitation. With the Nine Essentials, the brain resumes growing and changing at an incredibly fast rate, and it does so at any age and regardless of how or why it stalled, be it through illness or trauma like Madison experienced, by conditioning such as Kirsten experienced in her youth, or by the sheer inertia of routines and habits that have lulled our brains into a haze. Once awakened, our brains resume growth and change in a way that is very similar to what we experienced as children.

Until quite recently, it was believed that after we have grown to adulthood, our brains no longer grow very much, if at all. In fact, it was believed that past the late teens or early twenties there is a diminishing ability, or even no ability, to create new connections between various areas of the brain. We know that our brain cells start dying at a rapid rate as we approach middle age. But science has now shown that *neurogenesis*, that is, the production of new brain cells, not only occurs naturally, but can also be enhanced at any age. The adult brain retains impressive powers of neuroplasticity—the ability to change its structure and function in response to experience. For example, even with moderate athletic activity, or regular daily exercise, new brain cells start branching out, sprouting new neurons and establishing new connections with other groups of brain cells. In recent research by neuroscientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone, at the Harvard Medical School, it was shown that in learning new skills, both thinking and moving our bodies in new ways could alter the function as well as the structure of our gray matter.

My own observations with thousands of my students repeatedly confirm what these scientists report. Beyond that, it is clear to me that as our brains form new patterns, we experience a renewed sense of aliveness, energy, discovery, excitement, and enjoyment.

The Nine Essentials will help you tap into your brain's resources and open up a whole new world of possibilities. You can literally become more intelligent. You can learn to move your body better, with greater flexibility and ease. You can discover how to give and receive love more successfully. And you can enjoy

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greater health, vitality, sensuality, flexibility, strength, and creativity throughout the full span of your life.

1. MOVEMENT WITH ATTENTION. Our brains are organized through movement. This includes movements we already know and do and movements we have yet to learn. The more habitual our everyday movements, the less we are able to satisfy the brain's need for growth. As we introduce new patterns of movement, combined with attention, our brains begin making thousands, millions, and even billions of new connections. These changes quickly translate into thinking that is clearer, movement that is easier, pain that is reduced or eliminated, and action that is more successful. As a result, new activities that we may not have even dreamed were possible become possible.

2. THE LEARNING SWITCH. Learning occurs in the brain. However, for the brain to do its job, the “learning switch” needs to be turned on. During childhood, the learning switch is turned on a lot. As we grow and take on the responsibilities of adulthood, we tend to develop habitual patterns, a set way of doing things, rigidity and resistance to change. Our learning switch turns off and learning slows way down. We can learn to turn the learning switch back on, regardless of age. When we do, everything in our lives becomes an opportunity, and miracles seem to pop up everywhere; our lives are filled with movement, new ideas, vivid memory, sensuality, and pleasure.

3. SUBTLETY. Your brain thrives on subtlety, on gentler, less-forceful, more-refined input. Conventional wisdom teaches that no pain, no gain is the way to improve or get what we want. What we discover with this Essential is that subtlety generates seemingly miraculous new possibilities that will change how you speak to your loved ones, how you present an idea, how you cook and taste, how you move, and how you remain vital. Subtlety will reveal to

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you what turns your brain on and what makes it check out, instilling your life with new excitement, zest for life, creativity, and fun.

4. VARIATION. A life filled with possibility must include the miraculous. By trying out different ways of moving, thinking, feeling, and acting, you will become more resilient and healthy. By introducing variation into the way you move, you can end back pain. By introducing it into the way you think, you will discover new ideas and solutions that wouldn't otherwise have been possible. By introducing it into the way you feel, you awaken your senses and open doors to new worlds of sensuality and playfulness.

5. SLOW. Slow gets the brain's attention and gives it time to distinguish and perceive small changes and form new connections. Fast, you can only do what you already know. To be aware and to create new patterns, you need to *feel*, and that requires slowing down. With slow, you will feel so much more, and with greater vibrancy and richness. You will immediately notice differences and have the opportunity to create new ways of moving, listening, communicating, smelling and tasting, and making love. In the words of Mae West, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing slowly."

6. ENTHUSIASM. Enthusiasm is an amplifier by which you can turn up the volume, boosting the energy of everything you do, think, or feel. We often think of enthusiasm as caused by an external event. However, it can be generated from within, becoming an intentional action for transforming virtually anything in our lives. Enthusiasm can take the seemingly small, dull, boring, or unimportant and turn it into something new and magnificent. Learn to strengthen the muscle of your enthusiasm, letting the tiny become great, and you will reclaim your energy and passion.

7. FLEXIBLE GOALS. Goal setting is important for getting what we want from life. However, how we go about achieving our goals

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can become a real impediment, creating resistance to change, *shutting us down, and even resulting in failure*. Loss of vitality, being stuck, or aging can often be traced to the way we approach our goals. By learning to hold goals loosely, you give your brain opportunities for discovering new ways to fulfill your fondest dreams. You will accomplish more, with less suffering, and open up to new possibilities. Vitality and health are fostered by adopting a free, flexible, playful attitude toward goals, embracing mistakes, and making room for miracles.

8. IMAGINATION AND DREAMS. Imagining and dreaming can transform your life. Dreams are like night vision, guiding you to create that which has never been, thus drawing you toward a yet to be discovered future. While your capacity for having a dream may become dull and jaded due to trauma, disappointment, or aging, this book will guide you in ways that will enable you to reclaim and revive this rich and vital resource any time you choose. Dreams are not “optional” if you are to fulfill your destiny.

9. AWARENESS. Awareness—knowing, and knowing that you know—is the opposite of automaticity and compulsion. Awareness means that you are in the here and now, living in the present. Awareness is a skill that we need to grow and evolve throughout life if we are to enjoy freedom and true choice. With awareness, we can have a brighter, more-cheerful, joyful, and alert life.

I encourage you to begin experimenting with the Essentials as you read and learn about them. You may work with them in the order they appear in the book, or select the ones that appeal to you most first, or the ones that you feel are most missing in your life. When you start working with the Nine Essentials, you will immediately begin experiencing the vitality that is unleashed with growth and change. The speed with which this happens may surprise you. New brain patterns and greater vitality can be established instantly, and with them you will begin to enjoy renewed energy and

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stamina, and a sense of well-being you may not have experienced since childhood.

In the chapters to come, we'll be exploring each of the Nine Essentials in greater depth. You will learn why these essentials work, and you'll find exercises and suggestions for experiencing the power of these essentials for yourself. Some are body-movement exercises; some exercises are mental, emotional, and conceptual, not visible to the naked eye but nevertheless very real. But all address your brain, providing valuable information to help you form new patterns and new changes in your life. You may at first wonder how these small and frequently very subtle exercises and concepts can possibly make such meaningful differences—but they do.

You will find yourself getting up in the morning with much more energy and the usual stiffness gone. Aches and pains you've been experiencing will be lessened. You will discover yourself getting along better with family members or difficult coworkers. You will find yourself much lighter on your feet when you walk, and walking will become really pleasurable. You will find your stamina and sensuality heightened. Your memory will be better. Thinking and problem solving will become easier, and you will more often experience the thrill of creativity and heightened intelligence. If you are active in a sport such as tennis, golf, running, or working out at the gym, you will notice yourself performing better and with greater ease and fewer injuries. Most important, you will experience yourself moving more and more fully into your life.

One

Movement with Attention—Wake Up to Life

Nothing happens until something moves.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Think of your life as constant movement—millions of small and large movements. Think even beyond the familiar movements associated with your bones and muscles. My teacher, Moshe Feldenkrais—a physicist and judo master who developed a revolutionary mind-body method to help people transcend their limitations—often told his students, “Movement is life; without movement life is unthinkable.” Through movement, you make sounds, organized in your brain as language, that communicate to others ideas and emotions you are experiencing. Through movement, sometimes when you are alone, sometimes with others, you carry out all the activities associated with your job, profession, family, recreation, and creative expressions.

Through advanced brain research, we know that our simplest thoughts and feelings involve movement within and among billions of brain cells. Whether it’s remembering that you need to pick up your dry cleaning on the way home, or feeling a surge of excitement because it’s Friday, or being inspired by music you’re

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hearing on the radio—all these involve movement. Even your daydreams and your dreams at night involve movement. The cumulative result of all this movement is who you are and what distinguishes you from me. What we begin to see as we delve into what movement means in our lives is that the quality of our movements is a manifestation of the quality of the workings of our brains and will ultimately determine the quality and vitality of our lives.

WHERE MOVEMENT IS ORGANIZED

What gives the continuous movement of our lives the particular form it takes? What organizes the ways you throw back the covers from your bed and swing your legs out to the floor as you begin each new day? What is it that organizes how you put the bread in the toaster as you are getting your breakfast? What organizes how you mutter a foggy “good morning” to your family members? What organizes your patience or impatience as you thread your way through stop-and-go commuter traffic, or how you enunciate your words or use certain facial expressions as you greet people at work? What is it that gives you the power to invent, form attitudes, and develop ideas? And what is it that orchestrates the emotional experiences you are having throughout the day?

The answer, of course, is your brain, those two to three pounds of gray matter embodied within your skull. Within your brain are billions of brain cells. Each and every one of those cells has the potential for making between five thousand and twenty thousand connections with other cells, all poised to receive and send information to and from all the various parts of your entire system. This is as close to an infinite number of possible brain connections as one can imagine. It is here in your brain that information gathered from your movements is organized, somehow making sense of the myriad messages received—and in a continuous feedback loop that also tells you how to conduct every movement you make.

Movement is the language of your brain, and your brain is the great organizer of that movement, managing trillions of connections associated with every single action, large or small. The manner in which all of this takes place will determine how you experience your life, whether you feel numbed and deadened or excited and energetic at the end of the day.

Imagine for a moment the wasted energy you'd expend if your brain organized your every step in a way that required twice the energy that would be required if your movements were better organized. Or imagine that in the process of doing its organizational tasks your brain surrounded your every thought and feeling with a million contradictions that required you to ponder, and perhaps worry over, every little thing. Life would indeed become exhausting. You'd feel drained all the time.

What we'll discover in this chapter is that the quality of organization that our brains provide us is directly related to the quality of the information we provide it. And one of the most important ways to improve the quality of the information we provide it is through *bringing attention to our movements*.

Most, if not all, experts in the health-related fields agree that movement, or what more often is referred to as exercise, is central to our health and continued well-being. We are encouraged to exercise both our bodies and our minds. Yet it is important to note that movement alone, done automatically, without attention, does not provide the brain with any new information. On the contrary, such movement will tend to groove already existing brain patterns more deeply. Over time, that leads to loss of strength and flexibility in both body and mind. We then think that we are losing our vitality due to age, life circumstances, or simply back luck. But not so. The moment we bring *attention* to our movement, any movement, research shows that the brain resumes growing new connections and creating new pathways and possibilities for us. And that is when we feel most vital.

Much of what I've learned about vitality and the brain's organizational capacities has come from working with young children

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born with neurological anomalies, and from adults who have suffered injuries or diseases that continue to cause them pain or a loss of normal function and vitality. Through the work I have done over the past thirty years, I've seen how profoundly important the quality of the organization of movement is—for our bodies, our thoughts, our emotions, and our feelings. Through movement with attention, we gain the ability to assist our brains in seeking the most successful way to manage all movement in our lives.

EXERCISE 1 THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF MOVEMENT WITH ATTENTION

With this simple, short exercise, you can experience firsthand the power of combining attention with movement to transform your performance and your whole sense of yourself. You can then do it in your yoga practice, sports, and everyday movements.

1. Sit at the edge of a chair with your feet comfortably flat on the floor and with about a foot of space between them.

2. Lift your right arm out in front of you, with your elbow straight but not stiff. Lift it to shoulder level and put it down two times. As you move, pay attention to how it feels. Put your arm down and stop.



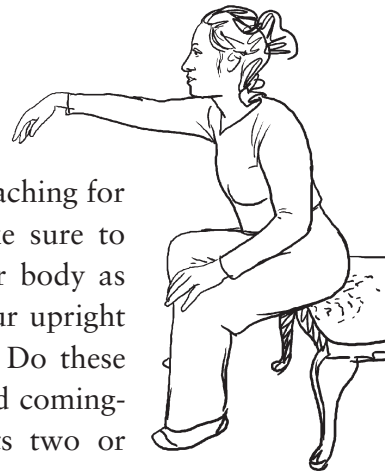
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3. Now do the same movement twice with your left arm, lifting it to shoulder level, with elbow straight, paying attention to how it feels. Then lower your arm and stop.



4. Select the arm of your dominant hand and do the rest of this exercise with that arm. If you are right-handed, do the exercise with that arm; if left-handed, use that arm.

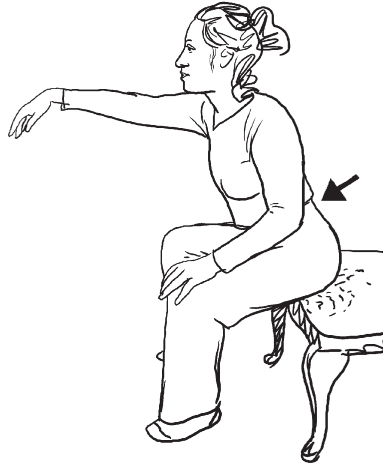
5. Lift your dominant arm in front of you to shoulder level, with your elbow straight but not stiff. Keep the arm up and begin moving forward with this arm as if you were reaching for something a foot or so away. Make sure to also move forward with your upper body as you do this. Then come back to your upright sitting position. Do these reaching-out and coming-back movements two or three times.



6. Stop, and come back to your neutral sitting position. Put your arm down and rest for a moment. Feel how you are sitting and how you are breathing.

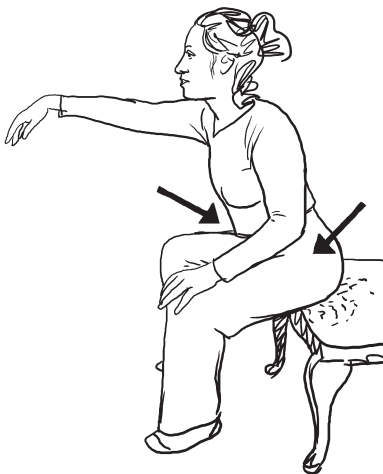
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7. Again, lift your dominant arm in front of you to shoulder level and reach out as you did above. Do this two or three times. But this time do something a little differently. As you reach forward and come back to your neutral sitting position, pay close attention to your lower back. Can you feel any movement there? If yes, is your lower back arching and rounding as you reach forward with your arm and come back?

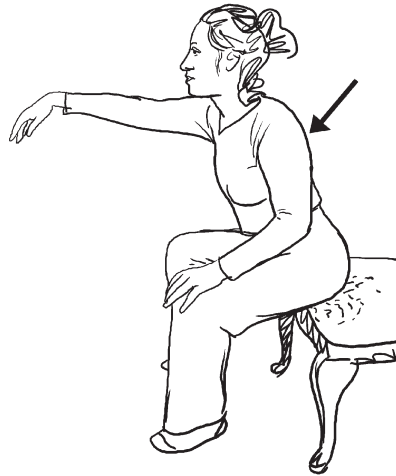


8. Stop, come back to neutral, put your arm down, and pay attention to how your shoulders feel. Does the right one feel the same as the left? If not, how do they feel different?

9. Lift your dominant arm again and continue doing the same movement as you've been doing, two or three times. But this time pay attention to your belly. For example, are you pulling in your belly when you reach forward or are you relaxing it, or perhaps pushing it out? Then pay attention to your pelvis. Do you feel movement in your pelvis as you reach with your arm and come back? If the answer is yes, are you rolling it forward when you reach out and rolling back when you come back to neutral? Stop, put your arm down, and feel how you are sitting. Do you have the impression that one arm is longer than the other? Lighter than the other? More energetic and vital?

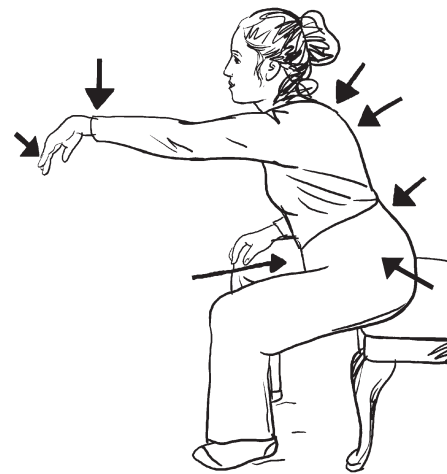


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10. One more time, lift your dominant arm and do the same reaching-forward and coming back as before. This time pay attention to your ribs in your back, on the side of the arm you are lifting. Do you feel any movement in your ribs? Simply note in your mind any movement you are feeling.

11. Now, with your arm still raised and extended, reaching forward and coming back two or three times, do the following: Let your attention move, sort of like a flashlight searching in the darkness, starting with your pelvis, moving to your lower back, then to your belly, then to your chest, then to your shoulder, then to your wrist, and finally the tips of your fingers.



12. Stop, put your arm down, come back to neutral, and take a few seconds to notice the sensations in your body. How does your dominant arm, the arm you moved, feel? Compare it to the other arm. Do you feel any differences between the two? Feel the whole side of your body on the side you just moved—including everything from your face down to your feet. Compare these sensations to the ones on the side you didn't move and see if the two feel any different.

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13. Now simply lift your dominant arm in front of you and put it down a few times. Does it feel any different than it did at the beginning of this exercise? It may feel lighter, longer, maybe larger, and perhaps you can lift it higher, with greater ease. You might feel a sense of having more energy in that arm. Now lift your other arm just one time and note whether it feels any different than your dominant arm. Does it feel heavier or clumsier? Does it seem to have less vitality?

You lift your arms many times a day, even as you are walking around and doing your usual activities. However, these arm movements do not bring about any noticeable change. In this exercise, however, which you took five minutes or so to do, you most likely are already feeling some clear changes. This is a demonstration of how the power of *movement with attention* can transform us instantly.

THE DANCE BETWEEN MOVEMENT,
ORGANIZATION, AND VITALITY

Have you ever noticed that young children move nonstop when they are awake? What is all that movement about? Movement coupled with attention to the sensations, feelings, and outcomes that result serves as a rich source of new information to the brain. With every movement the child makes, new connections are taking place within their brains, forming the seemingly infinite patterns that they will use to express their lives—how they will speak, stand, run, and write, what they will think and believe and feel. Through their brains' capacities for taking in new information and organizing complex patterns, children develop their own unique capacities and ways of perceiving the world.

The relationship between movement, growth, and vitality is never so purely demonstrated as in our childhood years, when so much movement, brain activity, and formation of patterns within

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the brain takes place. In those first years of our lives, when we are developing so many skills and abilities, we not only move a lot, but also feel our movements vividly. This time of our lives epitomizes everything we associate with vitality—full of energy, highly flexible in body and mind, experiencing each moment as new. We are curious, optimistic, joyful, creative, inventive, and unstoppable.

At the heart of it all is movement with attention—not just movement of our muscles and bones, but also the movement that is our thinking, feeling, and emotions. By moving with attention, you will be able to resume that process of intense growth, invention, and change that we observe in children.

Every day, through the people I work with, I see the connection between movement and vitality. By paying attention to their movements—arms, legs, torsos, eyes, how they breathe and think and feel—weariness turns to vibrancy, curiosity, and interest; rigid shoulders are suddenly freed; and locked-up emotions are liberated.

Some years ago, I worked with a woman by the name of Miriam. She was in her midfifties and had gone through an extremely difficult divorce a couple years before. The divorce rekindled profound pain and trauma from an extremely difficult childhood, compounding the grief and pain she was experiencing. A single mother, she found a job as an office manager and was able to create a stable financial base for her child and herself. However, she was profoundly unhappy. Hurt and disillusioned by all that life had dished out to her, she gave up on ever having another relationship, and, being depressed and shut down, she confined her life to a very limited and predictable social life, belief system, and routine.

As shut down as she appeared to be, she nevertheless attended one of my classes. She seemed to be doing okay with the movement exercises of the class and was very attentive throughout. After the class, she came to me with a big smile on her face. She explained that she wanted to thank me because she was feeling an important change in her life already.

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Miriam explained that she did not understand exactly what had occurred, but as the class was progressing, she began feeling more flexible and comfortable in her body. But that was not all. “Something shifted inside me,” she said. She felt as if a big weight had been lifted from her shoulders. For the first time in years, she actually felt hopeful and that her life could be different. After attending a few more classes, Miriam continued to experience changes. She moved more easily, took up swimming, and began socializing more. She was so enthusiastic about what she’d experienced that she asked me to teach in her town, which was about an hour and a half from where I lived. She was eager to have her friends experience what she was experiencing. She assured me that she knew people who would attend and would benefit greatly from taking classes with me. Because of time limitations, I had to decline, but Miriam kept asking, and one day I had an idea. I suggested that she take a training program so that she would be able to teach classes to her friends. She took me up on my offer and signed up for my next training seminar.

What followed as a result of her participating in the training was most amazing for me to watch. When she walked, she walked taller, no longer scrunched up and slightly stoop-shouldered. She walked with strong, flowing movements that exuded increased confidence. Much more than her body had begun to change; her depression and bitterness had dissolved. As she opened up emotionally, her popularity grew and she developed close friendships in the class. Her quick laughter brought a sense of levity to those around her. Her feelings, she explained, were now much more about joy and gratitude for what she did have—a beautiful daughter, health, relative security about her financial situation, and all the richness that was evolving in her life. No longer was she limited by her painful past.

Every day in the workshop, she would pay close attention and observe her own movements—her thoughts and emotions as well as her body movements—and share with us the spontaneous transformations she was experiencing. The changes in her think-

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ing, ideas, and belief system were so intense for her that for the first two weeks of the training she could hardly sleep. Time and again she exclaimed how she was feeling a freedom within herself that she had never felt before. After completing her training, she announced to her friends that she was opening her first class. A good number of people signed up.

Because of her personal experience in the training workshop she'd taken, Miriam made sure that all her students paid close attention to each movement they were doing. However, she made sure they were paying attention to more than just the movement of their bodies. Through sharing stories of her own transformation, she guided them to pay attention to what was going on in their minds, particularly to changes occurring in their emotions, their thinking, and their belief systems.

Miriam loved what she was doing, and her greatest thrill was seeing her students waking up to their lives. Her students' enthusiasm encouraged her to put more and more time into her teaching. Soon she was doing it full-time. After fifty-plus years, her life had become her own.

EXERCISE 2 GET SMART—MOVE AS YOU THINK

Since ancient times, people have associated movement with concentrated mental activity. Jews rock back and forth as they study the Torah. Socrates walked with his students as they debated complex ideas. In recent years, scientists have been able to show that movement greatly enhances the brain's ability to organize and create new connections and patterns.

As you are reading this book, sit very still, do not move, and read a few paragraphs. Then, as you continue reading, begin to gently rock back and forth or side to side. From time to time, for a few seconds, pay attention to your movements, feel the sensations in your body as you move. Does your movement with attention make it easier for you to take in what you are reading? Over the

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next few days, bring some movement with attention into whatever you do that requires thinking. For example, when you are trying to find a solution to a problem at work, composing a letter that is not coming out quite right, or looking for a way to ask a family member, or your boss, for a favor, at some point get up and take a walk. If walking is not an option, go where you have some privacy and do some dance steps for a few minutes. Infuse your movement with attention. Feel the sensation at the bottom of your feet, in your chest as you are breathing, and continue looking for solutions. Notice if during or after these movements with attention your thinking flows better, gets clearer, or is more creative, and whether new ideas and solutions begin to surface.

WHAT KIND OF MOVEMENT GOVERNS YOUR LIFE?

You may be thinking, “Okay, I move. There is plenty of movement in my life. I get up in the morning, do all the normal things that people do during the day. I even exercise regularly at the gym. And yet I still feel sluggish. True, I feel better for a while after working out but it doesn’t last, and I don’t have the vitality I once had, and certainly don’t have the vitality I’d like to have today. How come?”

The first part of the answer is that life is always about movement. We all move, and do so constantly. If we didn’t, we’d be dead. But is all movement alike? Clearly, it is not. There are two primary forms of movement in our lives: (1) automatic movement, and (2) movement with attention. In a very real way, vitality is a choice between these two life paths—*automatic movement* or *movement with attention*. There are many routines in our lives—from how we get up each morning to how we perform our responsibilities at work to how we swing a golf club or perform other athletic activities. These routines can be done automatically or

with attention. Movement alone does not trigger vitality; movement with attention does.

First, let's look at routine or habitual movement that is done automatically. You can be involved in a very active form of exercise and movement, such as walking on a treadmill at the gym, or pumping iron, or spinning the pedals on a stationary bike for hours every week. You most likely will feel better afterward, at least for a period of time, thanks to the production of *endorphins* in your brain and to an increase in the activity both of your muscles and brain, but you may still notice little or no increase in vitality. You may feel slightly more flexible, but not significantly so, and you may even experience stiffness. Your thinking is pretty much the same; nothing new here. You are not more creative. Your relationships stay the same. Aches and pains persist, and so do your everyday thought patterns.

These activities, while stimulating the production of *feel-good* hormones such as endorphins, and providing cardiovascular and musculoskeletal benefits, are not making a sufficient difference by way of producing the kinds of connections in your brain that lead to new possibilities in your life. You can be exercising like mad—but be doing what you are doing in a way that your brain barely notices. What is missing is attention, that is, paying attention to your movements, how your body feels, any feelings of comfort or discomfort as well as pleasure that you are experiencing. Pay attention to how fast or slow you are moving, how you are breathing as you move, what you are thinking or feeling.

In a recent Vitality and Sensuality workshop, I became aware of David, a handsome man in his early thirties with a well-developed physique. He not only exercised regularly, he was also a professional fitness trainer. When I began leading the group through some simple movements, David became increasingly annoyed. He raced through every movement easily and automatically, as if to say, “These exercises are so simple they’re a waste of my time.”

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As the group got familiar with the movements, I instructed them to pay very close attention to their movements as they were doing them. “Don’t let yourself be seduced by their simplicity,” I told them. I watched David’s expression slowly change as his movements slowed down and he brought more attention to what he was doing. I was delighted to see that the more attention he brought to his movements, the more animated and interested he became. Then, as I finished the last day’s session, he trotted up to me with a curious but spirited look in his eyes. He wanted to have a private session with me.

The following week, when he showed up at the center for his first session, I sat him down and asked what he would like from the session. He seemed shy, almost embarrassed, as he began telling me what had happened for him in the workshop. He told me that for first time in his life he felt really good about himself. He hardly knew how to talk about it except to say that he had noticed how, when he paid attention to his movements in the workshop, he began to get intrigued. There were so many feelings he’d never experienced before. He enjoyed what he was feeling. He found real pleasure in the movements themselves. Before this, he had only focused on how movements, such as working out at the gym, led to having bigger muscles and a stronger body. Now, not only were his workouts more pleasurable, he was also able to do them better than before and get better results. Paying attention to the experience of moving in the here and now, focusing his attention only on the present, was something new for him.

He’d gone home feeling energetic and that everything he did was so much easier and more enjoyable than ever before. That evening, he’d been able to connect with his girlfriend in a new way. He found spending time with her, just sharing the experiences of their day, more interesting, even more exciting, than before. Life definitely had a brighter glow for him.

The next day, he was able to do his usual fitness regime much better and more easily. He felt a breakthrough in at least one area

in which he'd been limited before. He understood that it had something to do with the attention he brought to whatever he was doing, but he didn't understand why this was having such a dramatic effect on other areas of his life. He wanted to continue the process, whatever it was.

David would take one lesson, disappear for two or three weeks, and then return for another lesson. He learned to pay attention so closely that he was able to benefit from the outcome of one lesson, bring it into his daily life and his work with others, and put it into practice for a long time before he felt a need for more input from me. The central thing he was getting was how to bring his full attention to his life—to every aspect of his life, as it turned out.

For years, David explained, he had been operating on automatic pilot. He'd gotten into fitness training and the martial arts soon after high school, and these practices had become the center of his life. He developed a careful regimen that varied little from day to day. He found comfort and security in developing regular routines around these disciplines, routines by which he lived his whole life. The only trouble, he confessed, was that his life had become dull to him, and apparently to other people who were important to him, noticeably his girlfriend. He couldn't shake off his lifelong feelings of being emotionally stunted, and his movements, as nice as they looked to others, were hard for him to do. He was also experiencing aches and pains he'd never had before. All of that had now changed for him. He'd even overheard his girlfriend telling one of her friends that it was like living with a brand-new person, one who was alive and vibrant, more open and affectionate than he'd ever been. She told her friend she was falling in love all over again.

While David was unusual in his determination to change, his experience overall is not that remarkable. When we operate on automatic pilot for too long, falling into routines and habits in the ways we move, think, and even feel, we not only feel less vital, we also begin to develop real aches and pains, stuck thinking, and a

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certain flatness, or dullness, in our emotional and sensual lives. And, of course, we know that routines such as *repetitive exercise* can become a major source of job-related and athletic injuries.

When prolonged over many years, routine living becomes a rut. To the people around us—as well as to ourselves—we become predictable and lackluster. By sheer inertia, we may find ourselves resisting any suggestions that might change how we think, feel, or do things. We resist even our own desires to pull ourselves out of our rut. We all tend to do this, in either small or large ways. It's just human. But it does lead to the inertia in which we can lose ourselves in repetition and sameness. Living too much out of habit and routine blinds us to new experiences, which our brains crave and which, in truth, can be found in every moment of our lives. Blinded by habit and routine, we are often left with the impression that there is nothing new, nothing to get excited about, nothing to say, do, or feel that hasn't been said, done, or felt a million times before. In short, we cease to find anything that would trigger new growth and new connections in our brains.

We all know how, after years of maintaining certain routines, movements that are done over and over again in the same way become restricted, no longer evolving. This inevitably leads to joint pain and muscular soreness. Much of the time in my work with adults, people come to me because they are in pain or because they cannot comfortably do things they once did easily and for pleasure. This can include everything from carpal tunnel syndrome, for people who spend long hours keyboarding or doing other repetitive movements with their hands and arms, to certain arthritic conditions and to back, shoulder, and neck pain. Along with these conditions, they may have a generalized feeling that it is difficult to initiate movement, and there is no longer pleasure in moving. Not surprisingly, pain and physical discomfort affect our emotional and intellectual lives, limiting our responsiveness to the world around us. All such restrictions result in a loss of vitality.

The good news is that we do not need to be trapped by routine

and its painful or otherwise limiting side effects. When we bring our attention to our movements—body, mind, and emotions—our brains are able to use the new information that movement with attention provides to transform the unwanted condition. With attention, better-organized movements are introduced and discomfort disappears and we experience well-being and vitality.

EXERCISE 3 THE MOVEMENT OF YOUR EMOTIONS

You are probably familiar with the popular expression “I was moved” when commenting on emotional experiences. What’s expressed in this common saying is our innate awareness of emotion as movement. (Think “E-motion,” that is, “energy in motion.”) Just as bringing attention to the movement of our bodies brings about change and increased vitality, so too bringing attention to our emotions can bring about greater freedom, increasing our energy and our sense of well-being where our emotional life is concerned. To appreciate this, choose a situation in your life in which you experience strong emotions. For example, maybe there’s a scene in a favorite movie that has always moved you in a certain way, or a TV program whose stories or characters move you, or certain political topics that get you riled up. Or perhaps you experience strong emotions associated with your communication with your child, another family member, or a coworker. Next time you are in one of these situations, pay close attention to your emotions as you experience them and observe how they begin to change. For example, you might feel angry at someone in your life, but then, as you pay close attention, your feelings slowly transform into compassion, even love. As you get more skillful at paying attention to the movement of your emotions, you will notice how *good* feelings tend to get richer and fuller, spreading throughout your whole being. You will also notice how *bad* feelings tend to tone down,

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with new emotions emerging. To bring vitality into your emotional life, simply pay attention, from time to time throughout the day, to the movements of your emotions.

THE POWER OF ATTENTION

In recent years, there has been an explosion of research showing how brain activity radically changes when we bring attention to even a routine movement. This phenomenon has been known and practiced in many spiritual traditions for centuries. In his book *The Power of Now*, on Buddhist practices in modern life, Eckhart Tolle writes that the more consciousness, or attention, we direct toward our movements, the higher the “vibrational frequency becomes, much like a light that grows brighter as you turn up the dimmer switch and so increase the flow of electricity.”

What Tolle states intuitively can now be stated scientifically as well. Each time we combine attention with movement, millions and millions of brain cells are activated. Imagine for a moment that you have the capacity to look inside your head and see the trillions of brain cells, each one like a tiny lightbulb that becomes brighter when active. At rest, all the cells emit a nice, faint glow, with those controlling your muscles and other organs of your body glowing a little bit brighter than the rest. Now you begin moving, perhaps just your right arm. Suddenly, a cluster of cells begins glowing brighter and brighter. When you stop moving, the lights dim back down.

Now you move your arm as before. Approximately the same cluster of brain cells lights up. Then you add a new element: *attention*. No longer running on automatic pilot, you are now aware and awake, experiencing your movements with your five senses and your mind. You turn this attention to how it feels to move your arm, as well as how fast, slow, or far you extend it. With attention, the brain’s organizational functions are spurred into action. Now you see brand-new clusters of cells lighting up, in many

different areas of your brain. You might even imagine, at this point, something like an artfully choreographed fireworks display, as clusters of brain cells begin communicating with one another, exchanging information and reorganizing the patterns of the clusters so that they will signal more refined movements of your arm.

As improbable as it might seem, this metaphorical play of energy and lights offers a pretty accurate mental image of what happens in our brains as we move and bring attention to our movements. The more we combine attention with movement, the greater the number of brain cells that *light up*, joining to form new patterns to create new possibilities for our lives, be it a new action, a new idea, a different feeling or emotion, or new knowledge.

As we've seen in David's story, when a person continues to follow the path of movement with attention, every area of his life begins to change. Life becomes more interesting and exciting again. He finds greater pleasure in physical activities; his sensuality is awakened; his emotional life becomes more vibrant; and even his belief systems open up to new ideas. The one overriding benefit, however, is increased vitality, which is apparent to those around him the moment he walks into a room. How could one not notice someone with billions of brain cells lit up!

EXERCISE 4 ATTENTIVE HAND

Next time you touch your partner or begin caressing her or him, pay close attention to the movement of your own hand. Notice how this movement feels across your palm and fingers as your hand moves over the contours of your partner's body. Take in the sensations of your joined energy as your hand moves. Notice the changing qualities of your touch as your sensations begin to transform for you and your partner; that is, be aware of how, as both of your sensations are awakened, you become more attentive to each other and your experience of each other deepens in the moment.

THE SEDUCTIVENESS OF ROUTINE AND HABIT

While our brains are truly miraculous in their ability to process information, and invent and organize complex movement, they are also excellent at creating set “templates” or “programs” that allow us to do routine activities very well. In fact, our brains are so good at creating programs and templates that we can go through virtually any of our everyday activities on automatic pilot and lose all awareness of where we are or what we are doing. I’ve certainly had this experience while working out at the gym. After a difficult day, I admit, it can be a relief to just go on automatic pilot and tune out the world in this way. Many of my students have explained that they plug themselves into their iPods so they can listen to music or recorded books, or even watch TV, as they are working out at their local gym or health club. No doubt about it, tuning out helps to pass the time as we give our bodies the exercise they need to stay fit. The main function of our brains at this time is to provide the set patterns—templates and programs—to follow existing routines.

These habits and routines have enormous value. We couldn’t live without them. They provide us with ways to do things reliably, efficiently, and safely. Think of how impossible life would become if we had to learn anew every activity in our lives, from getting out of bed in the morning to walking down the street!

We have spent many years learning all the things that we do today so we can do them effectively and without too much conscious thought. We used repetition in a conscious and deliberate way to master a new skill in our profession, or in an athletic activity, or in any of a million other activities. But the one ingredient we bring to repetition as we learn to master a new skill is our attention—attention to how we are constructing each sentence if you’re a writer, or how you are swinging the racquet if you’re

playing tennis, or how you are modulating your voice if you're a singer.

Once we've developed our skills sufficiently, we may maintain a routine activity with that skill. However, unless we also remind ourselves, again and again, to bring our attention to the movements—intellectual, emotional, and physical—that are involved in that activity, we begin stagnating. We will bring less and less energy and awareness to what we are doing. Our brain's organizational activities will then diminish and our vitality will erode, giving way to weariness and boredom. We become less and less aware of the world around us, content just to stick with our routines, going down pretty much the same track day after day, producing exactly the opposite of what we are seeking—vitality.

We easily slip into robotic periods of activity in daily routines, particularly with those household tasks and everyday jobs that we perform as a matter of course. Whether at home, at work, or at play, our set ways of doing things can become so routine that one day begins to feel pretty much like another. With the same old movements, and no attention brought to those movements, no new information is fed to our brains; thus, few new patterns are created. The patterns that once organized our movements so well begin to degrade. As one student put it, *after a while it's like nobody's home*.

Some people call this state of being “burnout time.” We've all been there at one time in our lives. One of the first things we then hear from friends, and even our therapists and doctors, is “A change of scene will do you wonders.” We consider taking a trip to Europe, or leaving for a weekend at some romantic getaway. Or maybe we should change jobs or change friends or move to a new town where nobody knows us. Any of these changes can be fun and exciting, but too often we change our surroundings and yet bring along the same old routines and habitual ways of acting and responding that got us into a rut in the first place. We need to constantly remind ourselves that vitality comes about by bringing attention to our movements.

BREAK OUT OF ROUTINE

We need to notice, and focus our attention, on *what* we are doing, *how* we are moving our bodies, *how* we are thinking, and *what* we are feeling. The moment we bring attention to any movement, brain activity increases and new connections are made and strengthened, specifically the brain's organizational abilities.

Our brains crave new information—and a lot of it. When routine becomes the predominant way of being in our lives, and our brains don't get their needs met, even our moods change; stress increases, and soon we feel drained at the end of the day. The longer we live our routine automatically, the more resistant we become to any change in the routine. We all know the frustration we experience when our most habitual routines are interrupted. When the unexpected intrudes—be it anything from finding there's no coffee in the morning to being told we're being downsized at our job—we can become quite upset. We don't know where to turn. We may feel lost, frightened, or even depressed.

The less we are bound to routine, the broader our experience tends to be, and when our routines are interrupted, or life challenges intrude, we have more resources to draw from. We are confident that beyond our routines are infinite possibilities just waiting to be discovered.

The good news is that you can bring this kind of attention into your life this very moment and once again see the world anew, with all kinds of new possibilities. You needn't go anywhere, buy anything, rearrange your furniture, change your hairstyle, or seek new friends. The secret is right there—in your head.

MOVE INTO LIFE

I recently heard a ninety-seven-year-old woman interviewed on the radio. With a strong, resonant, highly expressive voice, she was

telling about a book she was writing and which she looked forward to having published next year. She also spoke of the many lectures she had given over the past few years, and how she had integrated into her book what she had learned from other women during Q & A sessions after her talks. In her work, she was exploring what it meant to live a full and vital life. Obviously, she was walking her talk. Here was a woman of advanced years who was a living example of what it meant to have an active, creative, energetic, and personally gratifying life.

She was scheduled, in two months, to fly to China, where she would be delivering a lecture and speaking with other women at an international women's conference. She appeared to be a person whose mind was alive with new ideas, new observations about life, and new insights about herself. At ninety-seven, she was still fully engaged in life, excited, articulate, and fun. She spoke of how much she had learned from other women in her lectures and interviews for the book, and how every day was filled with new ideas.

When asked what she thought the secret of her vitality and longevity might be, she said she could not answer that for certain. She talked a little about watching her diet, but only insofar as she ate fresh, good-quality food, and occasionally a cookie or two. Over the years, she had learned techniques for managing stress, including meditation, cognitive therapy, and movement to manage stress. "Movement" was key—movement of her body, her mind, and her ideas, movement with attention, leaving room for change and growth in the way she thought and felt. She realized that just as she could have a stuck pattern in her body, she could also have a stuck thought or emotion that no longer moved, was always the same. She actively sought new ideas through reading books, seeing movies, listening to music, going to museums, and listening to people who challenged her own beliefs and feelings, and—most important—she made sure she paid attention to her own thoughts and emotions. Listening with attention to music that was new to her introduced new feelings to her brain. Listening with attention to new ideas and beliefs moved her brain to create new ideas of

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her own. The result was greater flexibility in her mental and emotional capacities—greater ability to be *present, in the now*, constantly creating new possibilities that kept life open and vital.

Louis Armstrong, the great jazzman, used to sing a blues song that went “It ain’t what you do, it’s the way how you do it, that’s what gets results!” The concept he expressed here reminds us that if we organize the notes of a piece of music one way, we get chaos and want to cover our ears; organize the same notes another way and we get an exquisite, moving, wildly exciting experience that makes us happy to be alive. Remember, all life is movement; thus, we can think of our brains as the great composers of the notes, the daily actions, the thoughts, and the feelings that comprise our lives.

Our brains are in charge of all the movement in our lives. How those movements are organized, poorly organized, or disorganized, as the case may be, will have an enormous impact on our lives. When the organization is working well, we feel fully alive, free of pain, creative, moving in ways that are fluid and easy. Most of the complaints associated with loss of vitality—stiffness, pain, lack of energy, mental lethargy, loss of interest, or diminished excitement about our lives—can be traced to *poor organization* in the movements in our brains.

All of us develop ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that include some level of disorganization. This may come about because we grew up in a difficult environment, or because we suffered physical trauma, or because of a serious illness, or because we have experienced the stresses of life, or simply because we didn’t know there was a way for us to do it better. Whatever the circumstance, movement with attention will change how our brains put it all together. Our human destiny, if we’re to be vital and alive and healthy, is to keep creating those opportunities for change and growth by choosing, over and over again, to bring movement and attention to all that we do.

EXERCISE 5 MOVEMENT WITH ATTENTION

WHAT'S YOUR VITALITY QUOTIENT?

On a scale of 1 to 5, rate yourself on each of the following statements, with 5 being always, 3 being occasionally, 1 being never.

1. I jump at opportunities to move, whether it's taking the dog for a walk or taking the stairs instead of the elevator.
2. I have a regular exercise program and participate in it several days a week.
3. From time to time during the day, I pay attention to how I am performing daily actions, whether it's pouring my coffee into a mug or sitting in my favorite chair.
4. I take mini breaks throughout the day to check in with myself and bring my attention to any discomfort I might be feeling in my body.
5. When I feel anger, irritation, or impatience with another person, I pay close attention to the emergence and movement of these feelings.
6. Whenever I encounter mentally challenging situations, I take movement breaks to improve my thinking.
7. Throughout the week, I pay attention to any habits or routines I've established and look for new ways of doing them.

Score Yourself

24–35 points = high

15–23 points = medium

1–14 points = low

Go through the seven statements above and choose the ones on which you scored the lowest. Take some time to think about ways to improve your scores in those areas. The statements themselves will guide you.

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The Learning Switch— Bring in the New

*For the things we have to learn before we can do them,
we learn by doing them.*

—ARISTOTLE

Healthy young children at play are the very essence of vitality. We see in their faces, their wide-eyed wonder, their seemingly boundless energy, and their sheer joy and excitement with each moment something that we adults have either lost or fear we might lose. Through working with thousands of people, from all age groups, over thirty years, I've found that the child's vitality is the product of a very specific state of being. Moreover, I have helped my many clients initiate this state of being through a process I call *turning on the learning switch*. One thing is very clear—the boundless vitality of children is not just a nostalgic notion but is a particular way of being in the world, one that we can all bring into our lives on a consistent and reliable basis.

By now it should be clear to you that the loss of vitality is not something that happens only because of the passage of time. Yet many people experience some loss of vitality beginning quite early in life, even as early as their teens. What is it that so often reduces our vitality as we grow up, take on new responsibilities, and settle

into a routine? This loss is related to the fact that along the way we learn the disciplines of everything from toilet training to getting a college education. We develop means for dealing with emotional and physical demands. As time goes by, we learn a trade or we go off to college to learn a profession. Mixed together with all these things are the beliefs we adopt around politics, religion, life values, and simply getting along with other people. All of this is fine and well. But there's a hurdle that gets created along the way, one that we need to soar over if we are to enjoy lives lavished with vitality. Once again, we find the answers by looking at how our brains work.

The human brain is geared for efficiency, for getting its work done as simply, directly, reliably, and quickly as possible. When we are introduced to any new activity—crawling or walking, for a child, or learning a new language or a new dance step for an adult, for example—new synapses are created at a rapid rate and in large numbers, and we become vibrant. Yet, over a period of time, as we refine that activity, our brains start choosing the most efficient pathways for doing it and let go of millions of extra synapses that are not required for performing that activity efficiently through a process that brain researchers call “pruning.”

In 1949, a researcher by the name of Donald Hebb proposed that it is through gaining experience in an activity that this pruning occurs. His theory can be stated as “cells that fire together, wire together”; that is, cells that constantly work together will, over time, join in persistent patterns. This phenomenon, in which the plasticity of the brain coupled with repeated experience actually reduces the number of connections in the brain, has been named *Hebbian plasticity*. Some researchers refer to these patterns as “grooves” guiding the flow of information. While forming these efficient patterns in everything in our lives—from learning to walk, run, read, write, do math, and relate to others all the way up to developing efficiency in jobs, professions, and recreational activities—is not just normal but necessary, there's another side to all this that we can't ignore. As these grooves form, they tend to protect their own

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integrity by rejecting neurons that might alter those patterns. Essentially, the grooves resist new learning.

Our brains create order out of what otherwise would seem like utter chaos. As they take in stimuli and organize them into useful patterns—that is, information—we develop an inner vision, or model, of what our world is about. When these patterns are successful enough, our brain then imposes that model, or vision, on the external environment and on our experience. The brain takes in stimulation from the world around us and within us, and organizes it according to knowledge it already has. Everything we have learned, and that we hold in our brains, comes into play to “make sense of” the world. While it may seem that a ball is really round or a box really square, that one thing is *good* and another is *bad*, that certain situations are threatening and others safe, it is our brain that has learned to interpret them as such. What we hold in our brains may even determine the possibilities we see or fail to see for our lives.

The story is often told that when Magellan and his crew landed in the Pacific islands, the natives asked how they had gotten there. When the sailors pointed to their large ships on the horizon, the natives could not see them. Though there was nothing wrong with the natives’ eyesight, the large ships were invisible to them. Their brains simply lacked the information to make sense of what they saw—or didn’t see—out there. They lacked the brain patterns the Europeans obviously had to impose the meaning of “ship” on the visual stimuli they saw out there bobbing around on the ocean waves.

As often as not, this capacity of our brains to impose order and meaning on the world works well for us. We see an obstacle in the road in front of us. Our brains immediately respond: “Danger, slow down!” Instantly, we start drawing upon knowledge already stored in our brains; we slow down, and from the information organized in our brains we safely dodge the obstacle and go safely on our way. When we see a glass of water, we reach for it in a way that is already known to us, recognizing what’s inside the glass

and the purpose of its contents. When our child suddenly cries, we know to stop what we are doing and attend to him or her.

Our brains also impose themselves on human relationships, often with less than perfect results. How many times have you found yourself interpreting another person's behavior in a way that turned out to be wrong? For example, when she was growing up and anyone in her family got sick, Harriet's family showered the sick person with close and constant attention. Jed's family took care of the sick person by giving them as much peace and quiet as possible. Their way of caring was to stay in the background most of the time while being attentive to anything he or she asked for. So the first time Harriet got sick after they married, Jed did what he'd learned to do—leave her alone and wait for her to ask him for things. She was crushed, believing Jed didn't love her anymore. This is a clear example of how our brains impose preexisting patterns on the world, and we each do it all the time.

When we only rely on what we already know—or what we believe we know—we create the same experiences for ourselves over and over again, no matter what comes our way. We all need to create some degree of predictability or we'd never be able to accomplish anything; however, if we become too rigid in our efforts to create this predictability, we are sure to inhibit our vitality. You have probably had the experience of being with somebody in a new place who is constantly saying, "Oh, this is just like at home," or "Doesn't this music remind you of that TV program we saw yesterday?" This tendency to equate every new experience to something we already know deadens our vitality in everything from greeting our partners in the morning to making love with them at night.

It may be true that you are in a place that reminds you of home. And it might be true that the music is like the music you heard on the TV program. And maybe your morning greetings and love-making are predictable morning and night. But that needn't be so. These are simple examples of imposing on the moment at hand that which you have experienced and learned in the past. Over

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time, this easily becomes a habit, and the more habitual it becomes, the less you will tend to create something new. Unless we give our brains the opportunity to perceive new stimuli and create new information, pretty soon every moment of our lives will start looking like every previous one. Our lives will soon be wrung dry of any sense of vitality. The state of mind at work in a situation like this is the direct opposite of the state of mind we observe in the healthy child and the vital adult for whom each moment brings something new.

One of the first signs that our brains are rigidly using the same, existing patterns, imposing the old on the new, over and over again, is boredom. When we stop rigidly imposing what we already know on the world, something very different begins to happen. Just as with healthy children, our brains begin working with the stimulation entering the brain to create new information and new possibilities. This is a pivotal point, and it is here that we discover an important secret that opens doors to achieving lifelong vitality—*turning on the learning switch*, one of our Nine Essentials.

EXERCISE 1 BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

Much of the time, we try to make sense of our life experience by comparing the present with the past. Our brains are made this way, and interpreting the present based on the past serves us well much of the time. For example, if you step off the curb and see a speeding truck bearing down on you, you instantly interpret this as dangerous and run for safety. While interpreting the present through the lens of past experience is normal and healthy, trying to fit our current experience into the mold we are familiar with shuts off our learning switch. If the present only echoes the past, our brains go on automatic, as if asleep; we stop creating anything new, life becomes humdrum, and we ourselves grow quite boring.

The tendency to interpret the present from the past shows up in

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subtle ways. How often have you thought, or heard yourself say of a new experience, “This is like . . .,” or “This reminds me of . . .,” or “Doesn’t she look just like . . .,” or “All men (or women) are alike,” or “Here we go again!” This might occur while visiting a new place, having dinner with friends, trying to resolve an issue with your boss or coworker, or even while making love with your partner. When you think or speak in these ways, you make the present be just like the past. Your actions will tend to be habitual and predictable. You shut down your learning switch and lose the burst of energy that comes with discovery, creativity, and invention.

When you have the experience of sameness, try to identify anything that is different for you. This might be a small detail, such as how your body feels or how you are moving. Perhaps you will notice an expression on your lover’s face that you have never noticed before, or a reaction to your touch that you haven’t perceived before that will lead you to be more creative in your lovemaking. Or maybe at work you’ll hear something new in your boss’s communication that will motivate you to work with that person in a whole new way. You will be amazed how the discovery of that one different thing will frequently lead you to experience the present situation as unique. You bring yourself into the present, your brain wakes up and starts creating new patterns, and you become more vital.

THE SWITCH

I will never forget the first time I became aware of the learning switch. It was more than thirty years ago, and I was working with a new client. Katie was a professional caterer. Her business partner, who had attended one of my classes, had strongly encouraged Katie to see me. Katie had been finding it harder and harder to do her job. Even though she had no critical complaint, she fatigued faster, found it difficult to be on her feet for many hours, and at

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the end of her work day felt achy and lacked interest in doing anything. She was too tired and complained that her body felt leaden.

When Katie walked into my office for the first time, I observed that she moved in a somewhat rigid manner. As I looked into her eyes, and watched her face, I had the impression of a thin veil between the two of us that was somehow preventing her from connecting with me in any significant way. You have probably had that experience when talking with a friend and you suddenly realized they were barely participating in the conversation. You might have even found yourself wanting to say, "Hello? Is anybody home in there?" That is how it was with Katie. As she explained why she came to see me, she was friendly and polite, but I noted that her responses to my questions were flat, lacking vibrancy. She was there and not there. I was connecting with her, but she was not connecting with me.

When I am working with individual clients like Katie, I use movement exercises like those in the book, except that I'm guiding their movements with my hands. As I first touched her body, it felt like a block. I realized that Katie had been doing her job, using her body like a reliable machine for nearly twenty years, performing many of the same tasks in the ways she had learned long ago. As I was touching her body and moving it gently, leading her through some new configurations of movement, it was as if she were melting under my hands. Her back, arms, and legs became light and increasingly flexible, moving more fluidly and harmoniously. Katie was paying close attention to what she was experiencing as I did my work. Ten or fifteen minutes into that first session, her face started to change. It became far more expressive, and there was more vitality in her responses. I was a very young teacher at the time, and I was both puzzled and intrigued by what was happening. The more I worked with her, the more she lost the dull, glazed-over look she first had in her eyes and the more I felt that we were connecting.

Several days later, as I welcomed her into my office for her second session, she actually greeted me with enthusiasm, and I no-

ticed that her face was more animated than in our first session. My impression of there being a thin veil separating us was nearly gone. Katie told me that she already felt some changes while at work. It took longer before she felt fatigued, and her body did not ache as much at the end of the day. She even went to the movies one evening with her husband.

During this second session, I immediately noticed that she was participating in a new way. She asked lots of questions, was interested in what I was doing with her, and from time to time told me what she was feeling as I was working with her. At the end of the session, while saying good-bye, I noticed that the veil between us was completely gone. As I walked home that evening, the image of Katie's newly animated and expressive face popped into my mind. I realized at this moment that through my touch, and through Katie's movements and her close attention to those movements and her feelings, it was as if she had turned on an imaginary switch in her brain—the learning switch. I began to understand that we come to life when we turn on the learning switch.

I then thought of the biblical quote about mouths that do not speak, eyes that don't see, and ears that don't hear. With each new session, Katie was becoming more alive. Her responses told me that *her brain was eagerly turning the stimuli I presented in our sessions into new information* that led to rapid changes and improvements. Katie also turned on her learning switch at work. Her brain was at the ready to form new patterns that left her with more energy at the end of the day. Her ears were hearing, her eyes were seeing, her body was feeling, and her mind was thinking. Where once she had been stuck and expressionless, she now became responsive and expressive.

By her third and subsequent sessions, she was arriving poised to learn. Any impression of a veil separating us had vanished. What I saw instead was a nearly palpable sense of positive expectation. I remember telling a friend that it almost didn't matter what I did when Katie's learning switch was on. I could sneeze and her brain would somehow convert it into information that would

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be valuable for her. Once her learning switch was turned on, her vitality radically improved. Not only was she more vibrant and expressive, but she reported that she was much more innovative at her job, was sleeping better, moving more flexibly, and enjoying life more than ever before.

For the first time, it struck me that when a client's learning switch was turned off, no amount of my work with her would produce much benefit. When it was turned on, change occurred as if by some miracle, and with it came a very high level of vitality.

More and more I noticed the same phenomenon with my other students, both in private sessions and workshops. Whether they were six months old or eighty, it was always the same. As soon as the learning switch turned on, the impression of the veil dissolved. Their faces not only became lively and expressive, but their presence also shifted from a passive state into a state of anticipation, curiosity, inquiry, and discovery. They were meeting each moment as fresh and new, and they hungrily took in new stimuli and began creating new possibilities for themselves. Like turning on a switch that fills a dark room with light, turning on the learning switch fills our lives with vitality.

EXERCISE 2 BEGINNER'S MIND—TURNING ON YOUR LEARNING SWITCH

You are probably familiar with the term “beginner's mind,” which has come into the popular lexicon from Buddhist teachings. It simply means voluntarily suspending anything we think we know. You might think of it as having the kind of vibrant and open mind we had as young children, always with the learning switch turned on.

Select a situation or area in your life in which you feel stuck and into which you want to bring more vitality. This might be in a relationship at home or at work, a financial situation, your exercise routine, communications with your children, an education or career change, or perhaps something as big as taking a new look at

your life values and beliefs. Choose an issue that is real, in which the outcome is important to you.

Switch to beginner's mind. Take the position that the issue in which you feel stuck is new to you and you don't have any prior knowledge of it. Is this too big of a jump, since you do have some knowledge regarding this issue? How about that you agree that you don't presently know how to handle this situation as well as you'd like and that some new knowledge could be useful? What we learn from beginner's mind is that we usually get stuck because we try to solve our problems by applying the same beliefs and behaviors that created the problem in the first place.

Take a moment or two and focus your attention very lightly on whatever issue you have chosen to work on. Suspend all effort to solve anything about that issue. In fact, take the position that any knowledge you presently have about it is either incomplete or getting in the way of a resolution. Be in beginner's mind, letting it be okay to *not know*.

As you step into beginner's mind, shift your focus to something you have recently experienced but which is unrelated to your issue. It could be as mundane as a bit of conversation you've overheard in a restaurant, a scene from a movie, a song on the radio, a story a friend shared, or the grace you felt when working out at the gym. See if anything in these situations inspires new ideas regarding your issue.

With beginner's mind, solutions often come from unexpected places and circumstances. The learning switch is turned on, and the brain is free to create unexpected new connections and new solutions.

Over the next few days, continue to repeat this exercise two or three times a day, again focusing on your issue. Each time, bring in new associations that seem unrelated to that issue, creating the opportunity for the unexpected to occur.

You can bring beginner's mind not just to what you know you don't know, or where you feel stuck, but also to what you think you already know very well. In fact, bringing beginner's mind to

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those areas in which you are most experienced can be tremendously fruitful, vitalizing that area of expertise and your whole life with increased energy and creativity.

TURN ON THE LEARNING SWITCH

In the early stages of my career, the learning switch of my students seemed to turn on serendipitously. I did not know what turned it on or what turned it off. But I soon learned that there were things I could do to make this process intentional. What's more, it was relatively easy for people to learn how to turn on the learning switch for themselves; and when they did, their whole lives changed. They moved into life in a new way, with great enthusiasm and pleasure. With the learning switch turned on, we fill every moment with life, rather than living by habits, routines, and sameness.

When I reflect on the quality of life people experience when the learning switch is on, I recall that wonderful and popular picture of Albert Einstein, in his seventies at the time, wheeling playfully around the Princeton campus on his bicycle, a huge grin on his face as he weaves around students and various obstacles. There's a quote attributed to him during this time that I dearly love: "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving." To keep moving into life—and to keep the flame of vitality always burning—it is important to learn how to turn the learning switch on and keep it on.

In recent years, there has been much talk, and many books written, about the importance of lifelong learning and what author-psychiatrist Daniel G. Amen calls "Brain Workouts" in keeping our brains young and healthy through mental exercise. In his book *Making a Good Brain Great*, Dr. Amen cites more than three decades of work by neuroscientist Marian Diamond, of the University of California at Berkeley, showing how certain conditions keep our brains healthy well beyond our retirement years. Dr. Diamond has stated, "We now know that with proper stimula-

tion and an enriched environment, the human brain can continue to develop at any age.”

Learning plays an important part in Dr. Amen’s prescription for keeping our brains active. He suggests taking classes about something you find new and interesting, improving skills you already know, breaking routines in your life, making love in new ways, trying a new sport, learning new cooking recipes, going to concerts to hear music that is new to you, joining a personal development group, learning new words, making a new friend, and visiting new places. In addition to Dr. Amen’s work in this area, there are numerous books and workshops prescribing “brain calisthenics,” including doing crossword puzzles, taking ballroom dancing, learning to play Ping-Pong, and avoiding foods and drugs that are toxic for your brain.

The success of such programs provides evidence that the human brain loves new challenges and new learning, and will continue to stay healthy as long as you feed it what it needs. All of this new thinking around keeping the brain young is indeed invaluable.

Yet, the extent to which such activities will enhance new growth in our brains will depend on how fully our learning switch is turned on as we participate in them.

Whether being exposed to new situations will increase our vitality will depend on how we approach new stimuli, be it a brain puzzle, a new job, a new relationship, a new yoga pose, or a trip to exotic lands. To make use of this fact, you need to know the three types of learning, what they have to do with vitality, and how we can apply it in our own lives.

WHAT KIND OF LEARNER ARE YOU?

Some years ago, the concept of learning styles became popular among educators. They showed how there are visual learners, who learn primarily through seeing and processing imagery; auditory

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learners, who learn primarily through listening; and kinesthetic learners, who learn primarily through movement, doing, and touching. None of us are purely one style of learner or another; however, if you know your preferred style, you can use it to facilitate your own learning.

I have realized in my work that we not only have these different ways of taking in and processing information—visually, auditorily, or kinesthetically—but that there are also three broad approaches to learning that affect how our brains organize information and the quality and degree to which they will grow and change. These are *academic learning*, *skill acquisition*, and *organic learning*.

First you know and then you learn.

—MOSHE FELDENKRAIS

Academic learning is about acquiring new information. A simple example of this would be learning the dates of historical events. With academic learning in its simplest form, we are learning something that already exists as a *known* or *accepted fact*, with the intention of continuing to hold this knowledge for the future. The academic may even function as a gatekeeper, maintaining standards so that valuable knowledge is not lost or corrupted. Recognize, of course, that as we advance in academic learning, the process may be much more than this, resulting in the creation of new knowledge and deepening our understanding of a particular subject. But for our use here, think of academic learning in its simplest form, of learning information by rote.

Skill acquisition is learning a new skill or activity. Examples of this include learning to swing a golf club, or to ski, or to play tennis, learning a new language, or learning how to operate a new software program at work. Initially, skill acquisition is very different from academic learning. We are learning to do something that we couldn't do before, so we ourselves are involved and are changing. We thus have to pay some attention to ourselves and how this new thing we're learning is affecting us. We've got to make it

somewhat personal. For example, we may begin by learning the basic principles and movements of skiing. We need to learn how to execute the moves and, because we are trying them for the first time, we have to notice what our bodies are doing and overcome any trepidations we might have. We are personally involved. But we can learn a skill in such a way that it is as if we are learning something outside ourselves. Our own abilities, inclinations, handicaps, fears, or physical capacities are hardly taken into account during the learning process. If the activity is learned without consideration for the uniqueness of our own bodies, hearts, and minds, the activity can later actually reduce our vitality. For example, I have helped musicians who later in life developed musculoskeletal problems as a result of early teaching that failed to address the whole person. If we get full engagement (making certain the learning switch is turned on) in the early stages of learning a new skill, we learn faster and become more accomplished in that skill, and our brains are stimulated in ways that lead to personal transformation, with all its attendant benefits for maintaining and boosting vitality.

Organic learning is any learning that brings about personal change, and this cannot occur until the learning switch is turned on. Whenever we have participated in organic learning, we know that it has changed us in meaningful ways. We feel and act different. Something new is going on not only outside us, but also inside us. To learn organically, we need to approach each moment as unique and new. It is personal in the sense that in the process of learning, something new is revealed to us about ourselves and the world around us, involving our thoughts, our beliefs, and the way we move and feel. Our brains do something qualitatively different from what we normally do. Instead of imposing sameness on the experience, our brains switch on and create something new.

The experience of vitality associated with organic learning comes, in part, from being intimately connected with the moment. This results from bringing ourselves into the equation, expecting it to be different from anything that has gone before. You have

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a willingness to be vulnerable, that is, to allow yourself to be changed by new experience.

Many years ago, I worked with a famous orchestral conductor for the Boston Symphony Orchestra who not surprisingly turned out to be a most amazing organic learner. I was teaching at the Boston Symphony's Tanglewood Music Festival at the time that this maestro was giving a concert. He was referred to me because he'd been having trouble with his right shoulder, which was naturally of considerable concern to him. When he came to me, he was very curious about what I was doing. It was very new to him. I answered his questions, and as I began working with him, he quickly moved into total engagement with the process.

He reported after the session that his right arm and shoulder felt lighter and moved more fluidly and easily than ever before. He was confident he would be fine for that night's concert. That evening, I was in the back of the auditorium to listen to the music. The conductor came out, bowed to the audience, took his position before the orchestra, and tapped his baton on the podium to alert the orchestra that he was ready to begin. And then, to my horror, he began to conduct with his left arm only! His right arm hung limply at his side.

"Oh my God," I whispered to my friend standing next to me. "He is not moving his right arm!" I was afraid I had injured him in our session.

I waited, praying that he would begin using his right arm, the one I'd worked on. But he continued with his left, the orchestra nevertheless performing beautifully. Then, finally, he brought his right arm up and began using both arms. I heaved a sigh of relief. Both his arms moved with extraordinary grace and expressiveness. In that moment, the energy in the Shed suddenly shifted. The orchestra as well as the audience came alive. The change was palpable, literally sending ecstatic waves up my spine. The audience's excitement seemed to be similar to mine as the performance continued.

After the concert, I was walking back to my room when a car drove up beside me and the window rolled down. It was the conductor. He asked if I'd like a ride, and I accepted. As we drove to my place, I asked him how his right shoulder felt, and he said it was fine. It was feeling much better. I then explained that I'd been watching him conducting and had been concerned that he was having trouble with his right shoulder.

"Oh, not at all," he explained. "I became curious. I experimented to see if I could move my left arm with the same fluidity and ease I experienced with my right arm after my session with you."

"It looked like you were successful," I said.

"Yes. It certainly felt good to me," the conductor said.

Here was a man, one of the most esteemed orchestral conductors in the world, still seeking to learn and improve. He took the first opportunity to experiment with a new experience he had had and apply it to himself and his actions—and do this in front of a full orchestra and a huge audience. His learning switch was certainly on. His curiosity, his eagerness to learn, his willingness to take a risk, and his complete engagement in the process were all characteristics of the organic learner.

When we are engaged in this way, we often find that everything we encounter in our environment relates back to whatever we are working on, or trying to learn. A simple example of this is a story a friend told me about learning to ski. On and off the hill, she had experiences that related to what she was learning about balance and coordinating her physical responses as she was sliding down the hill on her skis. One day, while returning home from work on a bus, she noticed two boys skateboarding in a park. One older boy was very skillful, while a younger one was obviously just beginning to learn. Watching the contrast between the two boys, she saw something in the more skillful boy's movements that revealed how she could correct a movement she had been trying to master in her skiing. In that instant, she said, everything changed for her. She felt different in her body, and she could not wait for

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the weekend when she'd go skiing again so she could start practicing what she'd just witnessed.

One of the most colorful examples of how our brains work when our learning switch is on and we are engaged in organic learning is found in the story of Archimedes (ca. 287–212 BC), who is often credited with inventing geometry.

It is told that Archimedes was assigned the task of determining if a golden crown placed in his possession was truly made of gold or if it was a counterfeit. But he had to determine this without changing or damaging the very elaborately shaped crown. For several days, he puzzled over how this could be done. One day, he decided to take a bath. We can imagine him lowering himself into his bath and noticing that his body felt somewhat lighter, buoyed up by the water. He observed how some of the water displaced by his body flowed over the edge of the tub.

Suddenly, he had the solution to his problem—igniting an insight that we still use today in calculating the weight and density of an object. He realized that if he took a bar of gold that weighed exactly the same as the golden crown, both the crown and the bar should displace exactly the same amount of water. If the volume of water displaced by the crown was different from the volume displaced by the gold, it meant the crown was not pure gold. (For example, the density of gold is nearly twice that of lead.) The story goes that Archimedes was so excited by this discovery that he leaped from his bath and went running through the streets naked, shouting the news of his discovery.

This story shows the level of total involvement and the resulting high level of vitality we have when the learning switch is turned on and we engage in organic learning. We can imagine how Archimedes' brain became very active, perhaps with a virtual explosion of new activity. Remember in the previous chapter the image of each brain cell being a light? At the moment of his discovery, Archimedes' brain must have been ablaze.

The good news for us is that we don't have to be a genius mathematician like Archimedes or a famous orchestral conductor to ex-

perience this state of being. In fact, we have all experienced it in our childhoods and in other times in our lives. Perhaps it was with a sudden notion about a gift for a special person or a breakthrough moment at work. What we know about the brain and organic learning is that it is accompanied by increased activity and an outward movement to seek and create new information. It changes the way we experience our lives. Note in the story about Archimedes that the discovery that lit up his brain came about when he was involved in an activity that appeared to have little or no relationship to the problem he was attempting to solve. Archimedes had his insight about calculating weight and mass while getting into a tub to bathe! What made the big difference was his level of engagement, set into motion by the learning switch being turned on.

EXERCISE 3 EXPERIENCE NEW FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

What you'll experience in this exercise is that change comes about, whether it is reducing pain or improving our movements, not by forcing our bodies, but by "talking" to our brains. Improving how we move is a learning process. Remember, our brains tell our bodies how to move. If we're to change how we move, we have to provide our brains with new information. Without new information, our brains will just keep telling us the same old thing—and if that old information is resulting in pain or other limitation, we definitely want to change it. And that's what turning on the learning switch is all about.

PREPARATION

Do this exercise in a place and at a time of day when you will be without interruptions for approximately ten minutes. Alternately, have a friend join you, with one of you reading the instructions

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while the other follows them. Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothing and work with a straight-backed chair that allows you to have both feet comfortably on the floor. Work in your stocking feet so that you have good contact between your feet and the floor. Make sure you do all the movements easily, always within your comfort range—you don't want to strain your neck. The drawings will help guide you along.

THE EXERCISE

1. Sit on the edge of the chair with both feet flat on the floor and a comfortable distance apart. Approximately the width of your pelvis is ideal. Rest your hands, fingers down, on the tops of your thighs. Call this your neutral position. Turn your head to look to the right. Do so easily, always within your comfort range, without forcing anything, straining nothing. Take note of how far you turn your head. You might want to spot a visual reference point you can use to measure changes as you go along. Now turn your head to the left and find a similar reference point.



Note: In the rest of this lesson, I am only giving you instructions for the right side. But when you have finished the right side, you can simply do the left side by reversing right and left.

2. While still sitting on the edge of the chair, place your right hand a few inches behind you on the seat of the chair and lean back on it so it's bearing some of your weight. Turn your head to the right and then turn your head back to look straight ahead of you. Make sure you move easily within your comfortable range of motion and note how far to the right you see. Repeat this movement two or three times. Then come back to the middle, placing both your hands back on your thighs, stop, and rest for a moment.



3. Again, sit on the edge of your chair and place your right hand behind you and lean on it as before. Now lift your left arm, bend your elbow, and rest your chin on the back of your hand. Gently turn your head and your arm together, as one unit, to the right and then come back to center. As you turn, make sure that your chin is in contact with the back of your left hand all the time. Do this

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movement three or four times. Stop, come back to your neutral position, and rest for a moment. Notice if there are any changes in the way you are sitting or feeling.

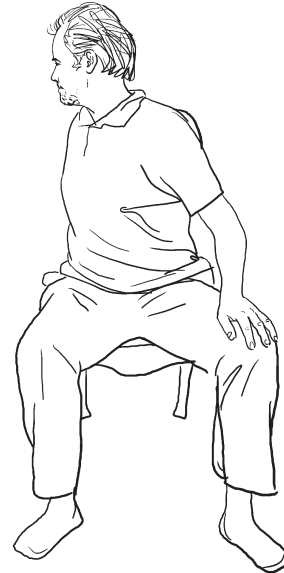


4. Using the same position as above, with your chin on the back of your left hand, turn to the right as far as is comfortable for you and hold that position. Now gently move only your eyes to the right and to the left. Repeat the movement three or four times, then stop and rest in your neutral position.

5. In the same position as step 4, turn as far as you can to the right comfortably and stay there. Now lift your left buttock off the chair an inch or so and put it back down three or four times. Feel how your ribs move on your left side, coming closer together and then moving farther apart as you lift and lower your left buttock. Stop, come back to neutral, and notice if you are sitting differently on your right buttock compared to the left.



6. Once again, lean on your right hand behind you and turn your head to the right. Notice if your neck moves more easily and whether you see farther than before.



7. Now go back to your neutral position, with both hands palm down on the tops of your thighs. Gently turn your head to the right, then to the left, and notice whether you turn your head more easily to the right than to the left. You have just experienced the power of turning on your learning switch.

You may do this exercise on the other side; however, before you do, for at least an hour or so, let yourself experience the differences between your right side and your left side as you move and go about your life.

TURNOFFS AND TURN-ONS

You might be asking, “If we come into life with our learning switch turned on, and organic learning is our natural state, what turns the switch off?” It would certainly seem logical, especially since our vitality depends so much on it, that we would do everything in our power to keep it turned on. But the human experience is more complicated than that. While our brains contain all the functions needed to create high levels of vitality, they also possess the potential for reducing our vitality, even to the point that we feel like emotionless robots.

As highly evolved as we might like to think we humans are, the old reptilian part of our brains still influences much of our behavior. It is this part of the brain that triggers the so-called fight-or-flight response. Researchers now tell us that whenever we are confronted with a perceived threat, our old reptilian brain sends out signals to the rest of our brain, and thus out to our body, that cause us to want to do one of two things: fight or run. And if we can’t do either of those, we freeze; we essentially “play possum” until the danger passes. This is a survival tactic. Whether we fight, flee, or freeze, what eludes us at that moment is the ability to explore and discover alternate ways to resolve the challenge. Out of those three possible responses, we most often choose the freeze mode and inhibit, or repress, our impulse to fight or flee.

In Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he made a case for the fact that repression—a shutting down of sensory input, as well as erotic and aggressive feelings—is an inevitable offshoot of civilization’s demands on us. To put it in the terms of this chapter, we get very good at freezing, which means that we turn off the learning switch. After all, if you’re angry at your boss or a coworker, it’s not usually acceptable to start a fight. And if you run, the chances are you won’t have a job the next day. Similarly, if your fight-or-flight response is triggered by a family member, you may fight, you may even run, but most of us have learned

there are serious consequences if we go too far with either of these; freezing is the most socially acceptable thing to do.

The cost of freezing is very high. Our vitality disappears. Not only do our feelings begin to numb, but we also start tuning out our responses to other stimuli. Our response is often “Okay, I’ll just shut up, do what I’m told to do, and nothing more” or we are simply too fearful to explore, discover, and invent. This is anything but an organic-learning state.

Generally, our struggles with the fight-flight-freeze experience is labeled “stress.” Anyone who has ever had this kind of experience—and who hasn’t?—knows how uncomfortable it is. Our pelvis, back, shoulder, and fist muscles may go into a state of chronic tension; we may have elevated heart and breathing rates; we may develop digestive problems; some people may feel light-headed, depressed, and distracted. As stress builds, such symptoms become increasingly uncomfortable, even unbearably painful, leading to disease. At this point, we may be labeled as needing to take time off from work or home responsibilities; we sign up for stress-management classes, or we medicate ourselves to take away the pain.

There are times when a vacation, a massage, a class in stress management, or even medication can be a godsend. Given the pressures of life, we shouldn’t pass judgment on any of these. However, we should not turn a blind eye to the price we pay in terms of lost vitality for indulging only in these ways of handling stress. Groundbreaking research by Fulbright scholar Angela Patmore, described in her book *The Truth About Stress*, suggests that how we handle stress in our lives can either empower us or tranquilize us. In an interview in *Ode* magazine (May 2007), Patmore explains that by calming people down as a form of stress management, you “reduce their coping skills, making people more cowardly and unwilling to take up new challenges, through which they can grow in life.”

If handled well, Patmore asserts, we expand our repertoire of skills and information; we meet life’s difficulties with the confidence

of knowing we have the inner resources to do so successfully. Best-selling author-educator Ronald Gross, a leading expert on lifelong learning, points out that our brains thrive on challenge and flow. Gross explains that we need to find that optimal state of embracing our challenges, of finding that place where our brains are stretched, but we can do it, if we give it our all. The result, Gross says, “is ‘flow’—that wonderful state where time seems to pass swiftly, and we are exhilarated by the sense of accomplishment.” This is an example of how turning on the learning switch and gaining the vitality we long to have is really a choice.

Let’s be reminded here of the profound link between brain activity, the creation of new possibilities and experiences, and our level of vitality. If we want to be vital, we need to bring increasing attention to organic learning, realizing that anything we do—be it in the realm of academic learning, skill acquisition, or self-exploration—can be approached in this way, that is, with the learning switch on. The good news is that turning on the learning switch is a skill we can develop.

EXERCISE 4 WHAT TURNS OFF YOUR LEARNING SWITCH

It is useful to discover how and where you tend to turn off the learning switch. With this knowledge, you can turn the switch back on, or avoid turning it off in the first place. Some of the common turnoffs I have observed with myself, my students, and my clients over the years are feeling rushed; assuming there is only one way of doing something; trying to learn by rote or by a set formula; believing yourself to be inadequate, perhaps because you had been told you were stupid or inept in some area; blaming—either oneself or others; personal defensiveness; and any areas of past trauma, neglect, or abuse that undermine self-trust or the ability to take in new information. What are some of your learning-switch turnoffs? Identify an area in your life you want to bring

more vitality to. It could be your social life, your physical fitness, your professional life, even your health. Ask yourself if you have been doing any learning in that area lately. Most likely, the answer will be no. Try to identify any beliefs, or past experiences, that have turned off your learning switch. Fear, blame, shame, someone else's negative opinion, and past failures are very common learning-switch turnoffs. The good news is that your brain is always at the ready to turn on the learning switch. All you have to do, once you have identified where you want to turn the switch back on, is to choose to resume learning through classes, reading, your own exploration and experimentation, or any other means.

THE ABCS OF TURNING ON YOUR LEARNING SWITCH

We've all experienced what it's like to have the learning switch turned on and to be immersed in organic learning. Perhaps you can remember it from childhood, when each day brought a seemingly endless flow of new experiences and your brain was busy creating new information that would become an integral part of your life. You may also recall times when you were excitedly engaged in learning something new that was very near and dear to your heart; this strong sense of emotional involvement in the learning is indicative of the learning switch being turned on. Maybe you've noticed that during our discussions of the learning switch and organic learning, your memories of those past experiences were awakened and you were able to feel the excitement and high levels of vitality you enjoyed during those times.

Simply reading about organic learning and the learning switch, and having your own memories of these experiences stirred up, can help you start turning on your learning switch. Beyond that, you can develop skills to turn it on at will. Once you have developed the ability to turn on the learning switch at will, you have gained a skill for restoring and maintaining vitality throughout

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your life. Remember, living with the learning switch turned on is a way of being, one that provides you with all the benefits of living with vitality.

As you begin the process of learning how to turn on your learning switch voluntarily, keep in mind that just as in learning to ride a bicycle, communicate well with your spouse, ski, or develop any other skill, daily practice strengthens your abilities. In the beginning, plan to spend five to ten minutes each day to do the following steps, alone or with others:

FIVE STEPS TO TURNING ON THE
LEARNING SWITCH TO EXPERIENCE A
VITAL AND EXCITING NEW LIFE

1. KNOW THAT IT IS POSSIBLE FOR YOU TO TURN ON THE LEARNING SWITCH YOURSELF. Begin with the understanding that *it can be done*; you can turn on the learning switch and make organic learning, with all its attendant gains in vitality, a part of your everyday life. If doubts arise, remember the lessons of the true pioneers of history who were surrounded by naysayers, yet who prevailed. Roger Bannister, the man who, in 1954, broke the four-minute mile, was surrounded by scientists “proving” the human body was not capable of breaking the four-minute mile. Bannister not only did it, but since that time hundreds of other runners have done the same; in fact, there are now high school runners who better Bannister’s record. Turning on the learning switch is nowhere near that kind of challenge the four-minute mile was, since organic learning is a natural part of life. Still, knowing with total assurance that you can make organic learning a part of your everyday life is an important first step in your success.

2. CREATE AN IMAGINARY PLACE IN YOUR MIND WHERE THE LEARNING SWITCH GETS TURNED ON AND ORGANIC LEARN-

ING OCCURS. Think of your mind as having many rooms. Most of these rooms are occupied with your habitual stream of thoughts and feelings. These rooms are sometimes filled to overflowing with things to do, things to remember, ideas and beliefs that repeat themselves, and feelings we have about people and activities in our lives. Then imagine there is one room in which the lights turn on any time you step into it. Once you are in that room, you immediately become curious. You discover the new in the daily and mundane. You experience yourself and the people around you in new ways, and your mind fills up with new ideas. First, create this illuminated room vividly in your mind, so that you will be able to quickly get a mental picture of it, and feel yourself in it, any time you wish. Furnish your imaginary room. Decide on the colors of the walls, the texture of the floor, and the objects you want to have in this room. Don't forget windows if you'd like to have a view—even the view outside can be important. Once this imaginary room is well established in your mind, choose a situation from your everyday life that you can bring into this space. You might also want to bring your image of this room into your mind when you want to discover the new and bring change and improvement to an ongoing situation or activity. Imagine yourself in this room when you are talking with another person, doing a yoga exercise, playing golf, participating in a business meeting, or even standing in line at the supermarket. As you become increasingly familiar with how it feels to have your learning switch on, recalling your image of this room will instantly transport you into the organic-learning frame of mind.

3. BECOME INTENTIONAL. Choose an area in your life that is important to you personally and that you can feel safe exploring with your learning switch turned on. This might have to do with looking at the quality of your interactions with your child, the way you write memos at work, your beliefs about having money, how you do a daily walk or run, or any of a seemingly infinite number of issues that arise in our lives. Begin by setting the intention that

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you want to have the learning switch on as you visit the subject you have chosen. Do this with the intention that you are not going to try to accomplish a specific outcome, such as communicating more peacefully with your child, walking faster or farther, writing more concise memos, or whatever is applicable. Be aware that this intention is different from a goal. Intention is an action, something you do right now. Just have the intention that you will notice and experience the new; you will expect the unexpected, and discover what you haven't seen or noticed before, or something you couldn't have dreamed possible. You might notice your habitual "stories" trying to jump in, such as thinking that what you are doing is ridiculous or getting caught up in an argument you never resolved with your child, or with your own interpretations of something that has happened in the past. When stories such as these arise, say to yourself, "Thank you for sharing." Observe yourself noting the old stories, then letting them go and finally recreating your intent, untainted by your own or anyone else's stories, interpretations, or analyses. If you feel yourself applying old patterns of thoughts and feelings, just note that you are doing that and allow them to pass through your mind.

I'm reminded of a story that was told to me many years ago by my teacher about D'Arcy Thompson, a famous British biologist. As a young student, D'Arcy's life was changed when his professor sat him down in a room in front of a desk that held only a tortoise shell. D'Arcy was told to look at this shell to see what he might discover. A bit confused but willing to comply, he sat for hours looking at the shell and seeing only a shell. One day passed, then two. Nothing happened. He was ready to give up and go home. Then, on the eighth day, he saw what no one had ever seen before. He suddenly had an insight that the growth and form of all living things complied with physical laws and mechanics, adding a whole new dimension to the study of evolution. Nobel laureate Peter Medawar called D'Arcy's book *On Growth and Form* "the finest work of literature in all the annals of science. . . ." D'Arcy's work is a prime example of organic learning, which was triggered

when he focused his intentionality on the discovery of the new and unexpected.

We learn from his experience that regardless of the object or issue we are focusing on, we discover the new not by *trying* to learn, and not through our efforts to make sense of our discoveries, but by allowing our brains to do their work, without limiting how they will use this new information. Einstein spoke of something he called “recombinant play,” which simply meant that one allowed information to mix all together like in a wonderful stew where flavors mingle, find their own connections, and produce something one could never have predicted.

Drop all inclinations to judge right or wrong, good or bad; let go of any attachments you might have with a desire to *do something* about what you are taking in. Just hold your intention with curiosity, interest, and nonjudgment. This might be difficult at first, but the more you practice this process, even for a few minutes a day, the more you will begin to see changes in yourself, letting go of routines and habits and ultimately experiencing not only more and greater vitality, but a life that gets increasingly more thrilling as time passes.

If you are bringing this process to a relationship with a family member, a coworker, or a friend, hold the intention that you will be seeking new information out of which will come a fresh new way of relating to that person. Soon you will begin to feel a subtle shift. The first signs of this will be a quiet excitement—indeed, a new sense of vitality.

You might also bring this process with you during a walk in nature. As you notice the wildflowers, perhaps their color will seem brighter, their scent stronger, their very existence more miraculous than ever before. You might notice shapes that you have never seen before. The air might seem more fragrant, and its movement on your skin more pleasurable. The first signs of a transformation occurring in a relationship will be that you feel excited by perceiving something new that you had not previously noticed about the other person. You may feel you are discovering a

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whole new side of him or her, one you never guessed was possible and at the same time you might discover new sides to you. All of these are signs of the learning switch turning on and your stepping into the light of organic learning.

4. GET CURIOUS ABOUT YOURSELF. No matter what you are doing, whether consciously learning a new skill, recreational activity, academic subject, or anything else, make it *personal* by paying attention to how what you are learning is affecting you emotionally, physically, intellectually, or even spiritually. Let's say you are learning ballroom dancing. Notice how it is affecting the way your body feels: Maybe you feel more flexible, more expansive, lighter, and more sensual. If you are learning a new language, see if you can find a pen pal for whom that language is their native tongue. Nowadays, many movie DVDs allow you to select different languages, either dubbed or in subtitles; select a favorite movie of yours, one for which you have felt some emotional involvement, and watch it in that language. When you read a book or watch a movie or a TV show, ask yourself why you are attracted to certain characters. What is it in you that is stimulated by that person? Maybe a character on a TV show impresses you because of her leadership skills; acknowledge this to yourself, and ask how you might bring your experience of that character into your everyday life. Or maybe you read a novel in which a character changed something about herself that improved her relationship with her spouse. Get curious and try doing something like that in your own relationship. Know that everything you are thinking, feeling, and seeing in these moments when your learning switch is turned on is in the service of you. They are your discoveries, and only need to be meaningful and important to you.

5. RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN GROWING LEADERSHIP. Pay particular attention to the ways you are taking an increasingly greater leadership role in how you experience your life. Turning on the

learning switch and unleashing the vitality that comes with it does not happen by itself. It is a choice that we make. Children are exceptionally vital and energetic because they are intensely immersed in organic learning all the time. However, for them the process is spontaneous by virtue of their youth and innocence. When we, as adults, take the kind of leadership role I'm describing, choosing our own process of learning, we are empowered; we have endless resources of energy, and we are inspired.

As you notice yourself gaining the skill of turning on your learning switch and doing so by choice, you may also feel a sense of lightness, freedom, and greater power, and a new appreciation for who you are and what you bring. Your newfound skill of turning on your learning switch will be like opening a new door and crossing into a brand-new territory—a transformative experience that will light up millions of new cells in your brain, and fill you with newfound vitality.

EXERCISE 5 TURNING ON THE LEARNING SWITCH

WHAT'S YOUR VITALITY QUOTIENT?

On a scale of 1 to 5, rate yourself on each of the following statements, with 5 being always, 3 being occasionally, 1 being never.

1. Whether at home or at work, I easily make any task interesting or pleasurable.
2. I often find myself interested in new ideas about myself or how things work—when watching TV or a movie, engaging in a conversation, surfing the Internet, or reading.
3. I discover new things when visiting familiar places, whether it's my own hometown or another country I've previously visited.

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4. When exercising, I experiment with and frequently find ways to improve how I do my routines.
5. I enjoy exploring and discovering new ways of communicating with those around me.
6. I welcome opinions different from mine because I find it interesting and enjoyable to expand my knowledge and beliefs.
7. In my sexual relationship, I am interested in finding new ways to mutually share deeper connection and intimacy.

Score Yourself

24–35 points = high

15–23 points = medium

1–14 points = low

Go through the seven statements above and choose the ones on which you scored the lowest. Take some time to think about ways to improve your scores in those areas. The statements themselves will guide you.