

The background of the book cover is a close-up photograph of a dense, green, needle-like plant, possibly a juniper or cedar, with many small, pointed leaves. The plant is filling the entire frame, creating a textured, natural background. The title and author's name are overlaid on this background in white text within semi-transparent green rectangular boxes.

GET LIFE

A Personal Philosophy and Practice

Lloyd Fell

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www.biosong.org

BIOSONG is the term I coined more than 30 years ago when I wrote *Stress The Musical* and performed it with artist-friend, Graham Sharpe. At the time I worked in biological science and wrote songs as a hobby. The term suggests to me: ‘Life Sings and we can all sing along.’

Much of what I have written since that time has been ‘published’ under the BIOSONG label, mostly online, but also in several printed books, which can be accessed from the website.

This book is available as a free download at the website above.

Lloyd Fell – Faulconbridge, NSW, Australia

November, 2019

Thank you again to all my teachers, including Mark Mitchell whose help in distilling my past work into this much shorter book was invaluable.

GET LIFE *

A Personal Philosophy and Practice

** To **GET**, in this case, means to feel that you are learning to do something.*

First Edition

‘May you not disrespect the mystery through
brittle words or false belonging.’

John O’Donohue *

* A line from *For Absence*

From *Benedictus - A Book of Blessings* (Bantam Press).

This book is a super-simplified summary of my way of thinking about my own life experience today. As we get older, some of us need to speak about what we think is important in life and some of us worry about the sustainability of life generally.

Utilising the science of life (biology) was my 'bread and butter' for many years. Then, with a sprinkling of spirit, it became my entire feast; my research on stress morphed into research about love at the interface between science and spirituality.

Your life is different from mine. That individuality, with autonomy, is a biological necessity. The other essential requirement for life is connectedness.

I fear we are losing our ***feeling function*** and our ***connectedness*** in this highly individualised and rationalistic society. This can become an existential crisis – ***it gets harder to find meaning*** – and so there is discontent, suffering and desperation.

But it doesn't need to be like that.

I've had my own existential crises and stress. In this book I'll try to explain why I think I GET LIFE much better today.



Perhaps I was born to be a dreamer and to live in a cloud. But it happened that ***reality*** and ***love*** joined forces to enable me to GET LIFE in a practical way. My life can be bad, but mostly it's good. ***(?!)***¹ I love it. It's like singing a great new song that I haven't quite learned yet, with lots of enjoyable flow and a few bum notes here and there.

Doing research on animal stress, I was trying to find causes and their effects so I could improve how things work. But understanding what happens in one's life requires much more than knowing how it works; we want to know what it means. I needed to learn new approaches to the biology of cognition.²

I also came to realise that what I actually know, although important to me, is next to nothing in the larger scheme of things. My life is a tiny part of

something far bigger than I can comprehend. The idea of a vast and powerful **Unknown** fills me with awe.

Gradually, I adopted the Unknown as an ever-present, accompanying influence in my life. I came to believe it could guide me in learning about **love**, which I felt would be important. My faith that this is what actually happens has grown stronger as the years go by.

What I think and do may be insignificant in the larger scheme of things, but it is very significant for my own wellbeing. ***I take responsibility for making my life work well.*** All those things I can't control I try to leave in the province of the Unknown.³

Evolution has made humans more vulnerable and more co-dependent, so I know I don't get life on my own. This biological imperative to connect with other people, while being oneself, is what I call **love**.⁴ I think love is gifted to us all, yet in my experience it can seem to be a feast or a famine.

I learned that mind and body are not separate, so everything I do involves them both; they function as a single unit, even though at any moment I notice only certain parts (a racing mind or anxious gut, perhaps). People say my thoughts mostly run the show. In more

recent science my emotions have also been given their due, but the separate influence of my *feelings* is still underestimated or glossed over. When we try to put our feelings into words they have already become thoughts and something important has been lost. What is lost is crucial if I am to work out the *meaning* of anything in my life.⁵ Without feelings nothing really matters (except in a mechanical kind of way).

I think the evidence is very clear (though perhaps not widely appreciated) that *feelings* occupy a special space *in between* emotions and thoughts where they generate one's *sense of meaning*. It's not the semantic meaning that you get from verbal logic, but it is the main motivating force for what I do. I think this is why music and imagery (including that used in commercial advertising), by targeting these feelings, affects us more deeply than we notice.

In my experience of searching for meaning I've found it to be *sensuous-intuitive* before it becomes verbal-intellectual. In my books I've called this the *feeling of meaning*. I think it is shaped by the *values* that I've acquired over time and by my relationship with the Unknown, as well as by thoughts and emotions. It's

an awareness of what is important in my life and a sense that I **need** to play my part. I'm trying to look at my **reality** (which I don't always like) **in a loving** (*i.e.* honest) **way**.

I know there is a personal **story** for my life and it holds the thread of meaning that I could not do without. I think there is also a deeper **human story** that we all share which shapes us at a subconscious level.

My feeling of meaning is not necessarily correct, but I rely on it anyway. **(?!)** If I forget about the Unknown it's more likely to be lacking because my view of things will probably be too narrow and mundane.

I think the Unknown is at least as important as the known, in the same way that the silent spaces between the notes are as vital as the tones themselves for making music.

Overview

There are three modes of doing I use to GET ***LIFE***. I call them GET ***MEANING***, GET ***SELF*** and GET ***LOVE***. There are also two very real limitations that became apparent from my experience. The first is that ***living is actually simpler than I make it out to be***. My thoughts complicate it. Yet I have to give some thought to what I do. ***(?!)*** The second is: ***inevitably, I do everything imperfectly***, but that is perfectly okay and is never a good reason for not doing something. ***(?!)***

There's a background melody in my mind, asking: ***What will I do next?*** ⁶ There's an insistent drum beat behind that which is my ***will***. So I will, I want, I desire, I seek, I strive and I search – for what? What is the object of my seeking?

It could be ***pleasure*** – in fact it is. I enjoy pleasure – it makes me feel good; to such an extent that I usually want more of it. When Sigmund Freud first uncovered some of the mysteries of the subconscious mind he emphasised this.

It could be **power** – in fact it is. Not really power over other people, but the ability to be myself and achieve my goals, whilst also fitting comfortably into my world. The ideas of Alfred Adler, a contemporary of Freud's, helped my learning about this.

And it could be **meaning**. Viktor Frankl, the 'third school' of Viennese psychology, has been my best guide in this respect. He prioritised the 'will to meaning' as the primary driving force for human life. One can get pleasure or get power – be very rich or famous – yet remain lost because something is missing. An aspect of Frankl's thinking that goes beyond psychology to the spiritual is that there is an ultimate meaning, mostly beyond my reach, that could be a subliminal guide for what I do.

Beyond the feeling of meaning there is a deeper yearning still, which tells me that I have a **soul**. My recognition of soul grew stronger as my life advanced; it was vague and in the background when I was young. I associate this yearning – and the soul – with the idea of **love**. I have often felt loved by people whom I love, but what got me through the most difficult times and gives me confidence (whenever I acknowledge it) is

the love I feel when I say I ***love the Unknown***. I imagine that what we call love must come from the Unknown in the first place for us to use it in our lives.

For me, the biggest thing about recognising my soul is that I take it to be the part of me (sometimes the only part of me) ***that tells me I am loved, without fail, no matter what happens***. This is vitally important to me.

It also helps me to appreciate that I'm a precious part of the whole living world. While that feels good, it also reminds me that to be ***alive*** is to experience ***stress*** and that can be difficult. I learned that the quality of the connections I make, including my experience of ***love***, is the key to coping with stress.



1. GET MEANING

If I have no feeling of meaning at all, I don't have a way to decide for myself: 'what's next?' ***I have to find some meaning*** even when my circumstances seem to hide it from my view. In my darkest times, this can be difficult and it takes time. I think: surely I'm here to do something. If the 'what's next' is clear, but beyond my own capability, I have to ask for help.

When there is no shortage of thoughts and emotions, some will dominate and prevent me from getting into a ***peaceful present moment***. All I'm aware of is a dominant thought (I must do this because someone did that) or emotion (I'm angry, dejected or needy). These are about the past and the future and they remove me from the present. It may take a while to tune out some of the superficial chatter and tune in to ***a reality that warrants my respect and love*** (even if I don't like some of it). I may need to use rituals in the form of meditation or prayer. What's important about finding a peaceful present moment is that it's the only way I know to make ***conscious contact with something larger, outside of myself*** (for me, the Unknown).

This is what I believe protects me (though not completely) against hidden pitfalls in my feeling of meaning. Seeing a ‘bigger picture’ often alerts me to my *ego-driven self-will*, reminding me of the other people in my life who are affected by what I do.

My feeling of meaning is subject to the limitations I mentioned, being simple and imperfect. It gets easier to find it with practice (I pick up the tune). It might just be to keep doing what I’m doing. But as reality changes, I have to change. The important thing about this meaning is that it feels like I am being *real* and being *honest* – not pretending or scheming. I’m trying to *accept and embrace reality* – the good, the challenging and the uncertain.

The feeling of meaning is often uncertain and the mysterious yearning is always there in the background. I’ve come to accept the fact that certainty about anything is an illusion and I’ve become more comfortable with the inevitable uncertainty as my faith in the Unknown has grown stronger.

I am aware of two different modes of *perception* that my divided brain provides for me to use as I see fit.⁷ Emphasising my left brain I can divide my world into

separate parts and figure out how things work. This is good for all kinds of manipulation, but it has the downside of a rather narrow perspective and a self-satisfied hubris: if it all adds up, it must be right.

Knowing how things work, however, is NOT the same as understanding their meaning. Emphasising my right brain I get a sense of the whole, including beauty through the arts and music, an openness to learning new things, and an awareness of the **context**, which I must have to discern any **meaning**.

For a long time I didn't fully appreciate how personal this meaning is – that each of us has to make our own meaning. We can share meanings to a certain extent (when our feeling function works well), but it is a biological impossibility to simply transfer one person's meaning to somebody else. This cognitive **autonomy** is just as essential to life as the **connectedness** between us that activates everything we do. (?!)

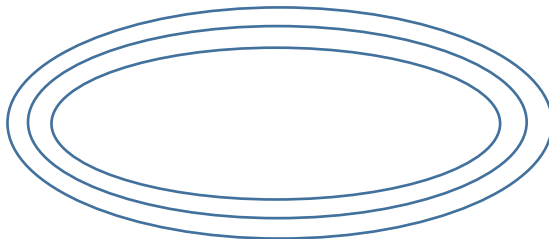
The emotions and behaviours that promote loving relationships, empathy and kindness, emanate mainly from the right side of my brain. Therefore I try not to get stuck in the **manipulation** side of the brain and

try to maximise my enjoyment of the *appreciation* side. It's not too difficult to do this, because I can choose where I put my *attention*.

Like other researchers, I've come to understand that it is increasing left-brain dominance in modern society that predisposes to the short-sighted, rather desperate, decision-making culture that produces our arbitrary bureaucracy, very gross inequality and irredeemable environmental damage. I try not to support this unfortunate trend towards expediency ahead of wisdom (or, in many cases, ahead of commonsense).

To counteract the *stress* that is caused by left-brain modern living I need to *trust in my own meaning*, especially with regard to *love*.

I regard meaning as precious and I marvel at the fact that one can experience it at all. Sometimes it is the very silence and nothingness that speaks loudest about the mystery and joy of meaning.



2. GET SELF

I've tried the introspective search for authenticity, but it seemed to be a bottomless pit. I think you are who you are even though you don't know what that is. Perhaps the best indicator is the kind of relationships you have with other people. If these are kind and loving, you are a kind and loving person. If they are mean-spirited . . .

My feeling of meaning suggests what is most important for me to be doing, but this will be challenged. In a society with so much uncertainty and such desperate craving for bogus certainty or fantasy, I have to practice saying NO (or, I'll think about that) instead of an automatic yes. I call this personal *integrity*. Trying to please other people unnecessarily is a trap I still fall into too easily.

As well as a reasonable doubt about what others are doing, I need to question my own motives. In a culture that revolves around the idea of self, selfish behaviour is rampant and often unheeded; I need to notice it when it's my own. I believe that any suffering I have in life is due to a *false pride* that stems from

my ***ego-driven self-will***. This is the opposite of love, being a flagrant disregard for the larger scheme of things: in other words, for the context in which I live.

I'm quite circumspect about showing my emotions. I think I'm actually being myself when I'm wearing a benign mask, which I think is appropriate in many circumstances. I try not to waste time on anger or reproach, try to smile, even when I'm a little upset, and generally be civil. I call this ***dignity*** because it's a way of trusting my own meaning – albeit imperfectly.

Integrity and dignity require ***self-discipline***, which I most certainly have to practice. In my feeling of meaning there will be things I DON'T want to do. I find it essential to do at least one of those things every day. Enjoying a bit of voluntary discomfort (doing something ethical even when it's not convenient, apologising when necessary no matter how you feel, or 'busting your gut' for something worthwhile) is an old Stoic principle and is always rewarding. Self-discipline strengthens my regard for myself.

Friends are what I need most to GET SELF. I was told that the easiest way to get a friend is to start by being a friend. Ideally, these are relationships in which

judging does not play a large part, there is no quid-pro-quo, and time enhances rather than weakens the connection. It's not like romantic love, but it is *love* all the same. To cope with *stress* I have an absolute need for loving friends.

The triangle tool ⁸

I use this to represent three different ways I may be operating. On one side of the triangle is written: *those bad people*. This is my focus on what others are doing (or have done or might do) that seems to be causing problems for me. It can be helpful to speak with a friend about this, up to a point. On another side of the triangle is written: *poor me*, which is my focus on the bad effects this situation is having on my life and my wellbeing. My friends don't really enjoy hearing about this, anyway.

The third side of the triangle is what connects me with life's melody once again. It says: *what will I do next?* Acting on this and talking to friends about it is always the best thing I can do. I know from unfortunate experience that expecting others to change or feeling sorry for myself will always make my life worse.

What to accept and what to change?

In my favourite prayer I ask for the *serenity* to accept the things I cannot change, *courage* to change the things I can, and *wisdom* to know the difference.⁹

It actually takes a lot of *courage* to see what's to be done, to believe that I can do it, and to begin. Here I am seeking *power*, the power to *see lovingly what I am doing that needs to be changed*. This is the hardest part of the whole operation because that power doesn't seem to be on tap where you might expect to find it – in self-will. (?!). In my experience it is sourced from outside through a sense that *I myself am loved*.

Like most people, I find many ways to demean myself – even hate myself – when I think about my life and who I am. Adler studied this inferiority complex (and its subconscious desire for superiority) and made some helpful suggestions.¹⁰ It is, of course, NOT the way to get power – in fact it is the biggest obstacle. When I am feeling bad about myself, the only way forward is to summon the *courage to change* my own present state and my feelings.

Attitude

For me to be able (often, but not always) to escape this trap of negativity, I had to back off the idea that my life is driven by ***past causes*** (essentially a victim mentality) and see it instead as mostly determined by ***the goals that I myself set***. Where ***aetiology*** (cause-and-effect) once framed my thinking, ***teleology*** (the pull of the future) now prevails.¹¹

This doesn't mean I never think about the past. I try to learn from past mistakes and I enjoy the nostalgia of past pleasures. But the past is NOT within my power to change. Nor is this present moment. It is ***reality*** and I can either love it or hate it. To look forward I will need to ***trust*** (*i.e.* have faith) in the Unknown. This is where I do my best to simply think of the Unknown with love, which seems to help.

I think this is the life-force that enables me to say: what's next? ***I am drawn towards the goals I set; the way I think about the future describes where I am right now***. This is an ***attitude***. It's easier to set goals when I have pre-arranged commitments (family obligations or set tasks) and it can be difficult when

there is nothing I ‘must’ do. Internally-generated goals arise from a feeling of meaning.

What kind of goals do I choose? In theory: *to practice love and be of service*. And to brush my teeth, walk into town, write another chapter . . . As explained in my previous books, the biological imperative is to find a balance between *autonomy* and *connectedness*. I want to feel self-reliant, but also feel comfortable within my relationships and my community. Seeing myself as one tiny part that is *NOT the centre of the universe* is essential here.

Separation of tasks

We all have things we have to do and I need to know *which tasks are mine* and which actions or concerns belong to someone else – and are therefore not directly any of my business. I often find this hard to do; the attraction to live other people’s lives is strong because I think I can see how they could do it better. The more often I practice a deliberate detachment, the easier it becomes to feel comfortable with that.

My life is inevitably most entangled with the lives of the people I am closest to and live with, but this

‘within-family drama’ needs to be tempered where possible with outside activities and other friendships if I am to contribute in the most helpful way.

Community

In fact I think my community is the making of myself. The increase over recent decades in individualism, narcissism and being yourself, ahead of fitting into and serving your community, actually suited my style because I’ve always felt that I preferred to be a loner. But the reality is that it is only through connectedness and a feeling of belonging to something outside of myself that I have a good life.

The person I am is largely the result of every close relationship I’ve had, with every friend or colleague whom I’ve trusted – all my clumsy attempts at being honest and being real in that context.



3. GET LOVE

This is so fundamental it's easy to forget to do it. I think of love as a verb – it exists in the doing of it (imperfect though the doing may be). As another famous prayer suggests: you have to give it away to receive it.¹² The beauty of that is the more you give away the more you seem to have in your own life.

Loving is *unconditional regard*. I can love things, other people, my activities and myself. The most important of these is to love *another person*, and people in general, because they are my fellow-travellers in life. I can *only* do that properly when I have sufficient *love for myself* to at least be able to give; AND I can *only* do that when I know somehow that *I am loved*. (!) Shortcomings in my ability to GET SELF *in a loving way* are the obstacles – as I know only too well.

Loving is *seeing something as it really is* – not what I would like it to be or might imagine it could be. A wise person wrote that it is only with the heart that one sees clearly.¹³ I can misconstrue my relationships with things and activities when I'm not honest (for

example, thinking alcohol was my friend when it was causing me harm).

To love someone I must try to see exactly who he or she really is and also want that person to continue to be that, no matter what happens. Its inbuilt expectation is that I, also, can be exactly who I am. The ***paradoxical beauty of love*** is that it can optimise both connectedness and autonomy – enable all the joy of togetherness without sacrificing the freedom and power of being oneself. Ideally, it facilitates ***both*** being and belonging. (?!)

But, inevitably, our lives fall short of the ideal. Difficult relationships (at work or anywhere) are a major form of ***stress***. The latest science about this is invaluable because it shows that humans evolved a new coping mechanism for dealing with psychological stress.¹⁴ We often fail to make use of this, however; we fall back on outdated animal responses.

I habitually used the more primitive fight-or-flight response to stress; not an actual ‘punch-up’ or running for my life, but bogging down in argument or trying to avoid the issue altogether. Now I try to invoke a previously unrecognised part of my autonomic

nervous system – the ***ventral vagus*** – which calms and strengthens everything (heart rate, breathing, even facial expression) as soon as I connect in a loving way with another human being. I found, from science and experience, that high quality connecting (***love***) is the way to make stress work for me and not against me.¹⁵

I've always appreciated the benefits that come from a certain amount of stress. But fear of it is debilitating, so the answer is to strengthen both autonomy and connectedness. A confident and deliberate ***increase in my connectedness*** is what relieves the harmful aspects of stress. This includes engaging with the source of the stress, but I probably need to start with a hug and a chat with a friend.

There are other things I can do too. Mindfulness practices tap into the ***ventral vagus*** system so they enhance my ability to GET LOVE. Being aware of my ***breathing*** engages my autonomic nervous system, even more so when it is combined with ***movement*** (e.g. Yoga, Tai Chi) and more so again when this is ***communal***. A particular hormone that promotes calmness and close bonding, ***oxytocin***, flows most freely when one is ***singing*** in a group.

Thinking too much exacerbates stress. When I make unnecessary *judgments* I bestow my shortcomings and attributes onto other people, especially when they do things I don't like. I imagine how nice it would be if they were doing something differently. This is living in my fantasy, not in my reality.

I have done that to my detriment so I recognise the need to *see what is real and look at it with love*. I'm not saying there is anything wrong with fantasy, but if I mistake it for reality, my life does not go well.

In fact I think it's very beneficial to indulge in flights of fancy – to allow my imagination to run free – to dream. *(?!)* Many things are only known to us in our imagination.



THE SOURCE OF MY MEANING

Even knowing so little, I believe I am a worthy part of a greater whole. Whatever meaning I generate, it must be linked to a bigger meaning, even if that is but dimly known to me. That's how important it is to have something larger than myself in my mind and life.

I know I could not exist without ***connectedness***, firstly to other people and ultimately to the entire medium in which I exist. This connectedness is what I call ***spirit***. My feeling of meaning arises in a sensuous-intuitive way – there is always some mystery about it – but when it is coupled with my soul's knowledge that ***I am loved***, it is the force that enables me to GET LIFE. It is indeed the spirit of life.

Contained in this, like an essence, is a desire to ***make a contribution*** to the lives of other people – to be of service. It may be for my work or a cause I believe in, for my family or a group I belong to, my local community, a charity, or a stranger I pass in the street – all I can ever hope to do is ***be of service***. Often, one can make a contribution in such a way that nobody ever knows who did it.

I think the motivation to *practice love* is the fundamental reason for my existence. That is why the most heartfelt gratitude I feel is for the gift of discovering my *soul* and *knowing I am loved*.

Two thousand years ago, *love* was described as: patience, kindness, generosity, humility, courtesy, unselfishness, good temper, guilelessness and sincerity.¹⁶ Each of these is a quality of connectedness. As such they will guide human lives forever, I imagine.

So I think of them as *ideals*, which I suppose is what inspires the dreamer in me. But I don't have to live in a cloud. I try, in my own messy way, to get MEANING, get SELF and get LOVE.

‘May you become the gracious and passionate
subject of your own life.’

‘May your longing inhabit its dreams within the
Great Belonging.’

John O’Donohue *

* Lines from *For Absence*
From *Benedictus - A Book of Blessings* (Bantam Press).

ENDNOTES

¹ (?!) is my symbol for a paradox. Life is full of contradictions.

² I became frustrated with the limitations of the scientific method in my research on stress in animals, until I learned about the shift from the stimulus-response paradigm towards a more holistic biology in the 1980's (see, for example, *Autopoiesis and Cognition - The Realisation of the Living* by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela). I had some personal contact with Maturana (and his 'biology of love') over several years. So my research on stress eventually came to include research on the biology of love.

³ Its magnitude and lack of limitation reassure me and I trust that my awareness of something so much bigger than I am might counteract my ego-driven self-will to some extent. This concept of the unknown does not need to distinguish between a secular faith and a religious faith.

⁴ I wrote books about this: *Mind and Love - The Human Experience* (2010) and *Dancing with the Unknown - Feelings and Everyday Mind and Soul* (2017) which are available at www.biosong.org.

⁵ See *Dancing with the Unknown - Feelings and Everyday Mind and Soul*. Other books also refer to an apparent loss of feeling function and associated lack of meaning in our society today. Over several decades the fabric of society has been weakened by a decline in connectedness, the growth of individualism and narcissism and attitudes that put the needs of self ahead of the needs of a community. A new book, *The Second Mountain - The Quest for a Moral Life*, by David Brooks is one good account of this. In the classic Parsifal story, *The Fisher King*, Robert Johnson describes the loss of our 'feeling function' as 'the most common and painful wound' in our society 'and the most dangerous because it goes unrecognised.'

⁶ I use the words 'do' and 'doing' but this is not necessarily a physical action. Contemplation is doing, as are speaking, writing and reading – even waiting for the right time to act, when that is a valid option.

⁷ This is explained by Iain McGilchrist in *The Master and his Emissary - The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* as well as in my other books.

⁸ I first read about this in *The Courage to be Happy* by Ichiro Kishimi and Fumitake Koga, but I assume it is widely used.

⁹ This well-known *Serenity Prayer* is the opening passage of a longer prayer written by U.S. theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr.

¹⁰ For the way I have interpreted Adler's thinking in this section I am indebted to two books by Ichiro Kishimi and Fumitake Koga: *The Courage to Be Disliked* and *The Courage to be Happy*.

¹¹ The philosophy of causation generally includes the future as one of the causal agents (ever since Aristotle).

¹² Here I am thinking of the well-known *Prayer of St Francis*.

¹³ In *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the fox explains: 'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.'

¹⁴ This is explained by Stephen Porges in *The Polyvagal Theory - Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation* as well as in my other books. It was Porges, whose research on stress I always followed closely, who brought to light the scientific connection between our physiological coping mechanisms and our experience of love.

¹⁵ For further explanation of this see *Dancing with the Unknown - Feelings and Everyday Mind and Soul*. This is how my research on stress over many years eventually became research on love!

¹⁶ Here I am referring to a sermon by the Scottish evangelist, Henry Drummond, published as *The Greatest Thing in the World*, and based on the Apostle Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 1:13 4-6.