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excerpt from LIFELINES

Let's say that suddenly the breath is knocked out of you by shocking news. Let's say your heart is broken by loss, by unexpected change, by rejection, by remorse. Let's say you have to make a terrible decision or face your greatest fears. Or maybe to make a choice you wish you didn't have to make. Let's say you are consumed with doubt or regret, with envy or hesitation. Let's say you are trapped in a reality such as prison or a brutal marriage or in your own negative thoughts. What is the simplest way to calm the mind when it is scattered in every direction, when it is dancing a Boss Nova of fear and dismay in your head?

Meditation.

You don't need anything but a few minutes of time. You don't need equipment, although having a meditation pillow is helpful, but a chair, a rug, or space under a tree will do. You don't need silence, although it helps to settle the mind more quickly. You don't need classes or long instructions, although they are available for strengthening your practice. And you don't need a special place, a room or building, or a group. You carry meditation with you.

My first experience of meditation was Transcendental Meditation. In 1972, when my friend enthusiastically announced that he had started to meditate, I was skeptical. After all, I was eighteen and suspicious of anything organized. "We can't stay friends if you don't learn how to meditate," he told me. He wouldn't let up until I finally gave in for the sake of our friendship. What could it hurt? Harry taught me to sit up, but I didn't need a special pose or even to sit cross-legged on the floor. (This was a huge relief to me.) I agreed to give meditation a trial run.

I had no idea that my life would change, radically and suddenly. I hadn't realized that I felt stifled by discontentment: my job after I graduated from high school bored me, my relationship with my boyfriend was unfulfilling. Max wouldn't commit, wouldn't help with the bills yet basically lived with me. I had no idea how to be in a relationship. I wanted love but had little idea how to walk another's shoes; I was too busy trying to stay upright in my own platforms.

I meditated dutifully for twenty minutes twice a day, during my lunch break and after dinner. At work, I sat in the storage area, drowning out the sounds in the store behind me by intoning a mantra in my head. At night, I meditated by sitting in a stuffed armchair in my tiny apartment.

Where was Max? It seems as though he came and went, sometimes staying with me for three or four days in a row, then vanishing. I had learned TM while he was at the ski resort and I continued to practice when he came back.

At first, I didn't think anything was happening. The twenty minutes made me feel energized. And clear-headed. A strange sense of discomfort grew, like wearing clothes that had grown too tight. The contrast between the inner states of peaceful awareness and the outer condition of my life pulled tauter and tauter until it snapped.

I remember dressing up to go out to a party. I remember walking the darkened streets and thinking, "I will meet someone tonight." I remember walking into the room and our eyes meeting and knowing, a tingling through my body, that here was my future.

Billy took me away from anything familiar. He had been accepted at St. John's College in Santa Fe and I demanded that he take me with him. I was ready to leave the job and the boyfriend. Meditation had shaken something awake in me. An awareness that I had to move along, take a leap of faith, try on a new life. Search for something more than what I had settled for.

Within a month we were on the road.