

An abstract painting on a dark background, featuring a central, elongated, multi-colored shape (yellow, orange, red, brown) surrounded by blue and green brushstrokes. The background is filled with numerous small, white, star-like specks, suggesting a starry sky or a constellation. The overall style is expressive and textured, with visible brushwork.

A Constellation of Connections:
Contemplative Relationships

Study Guide

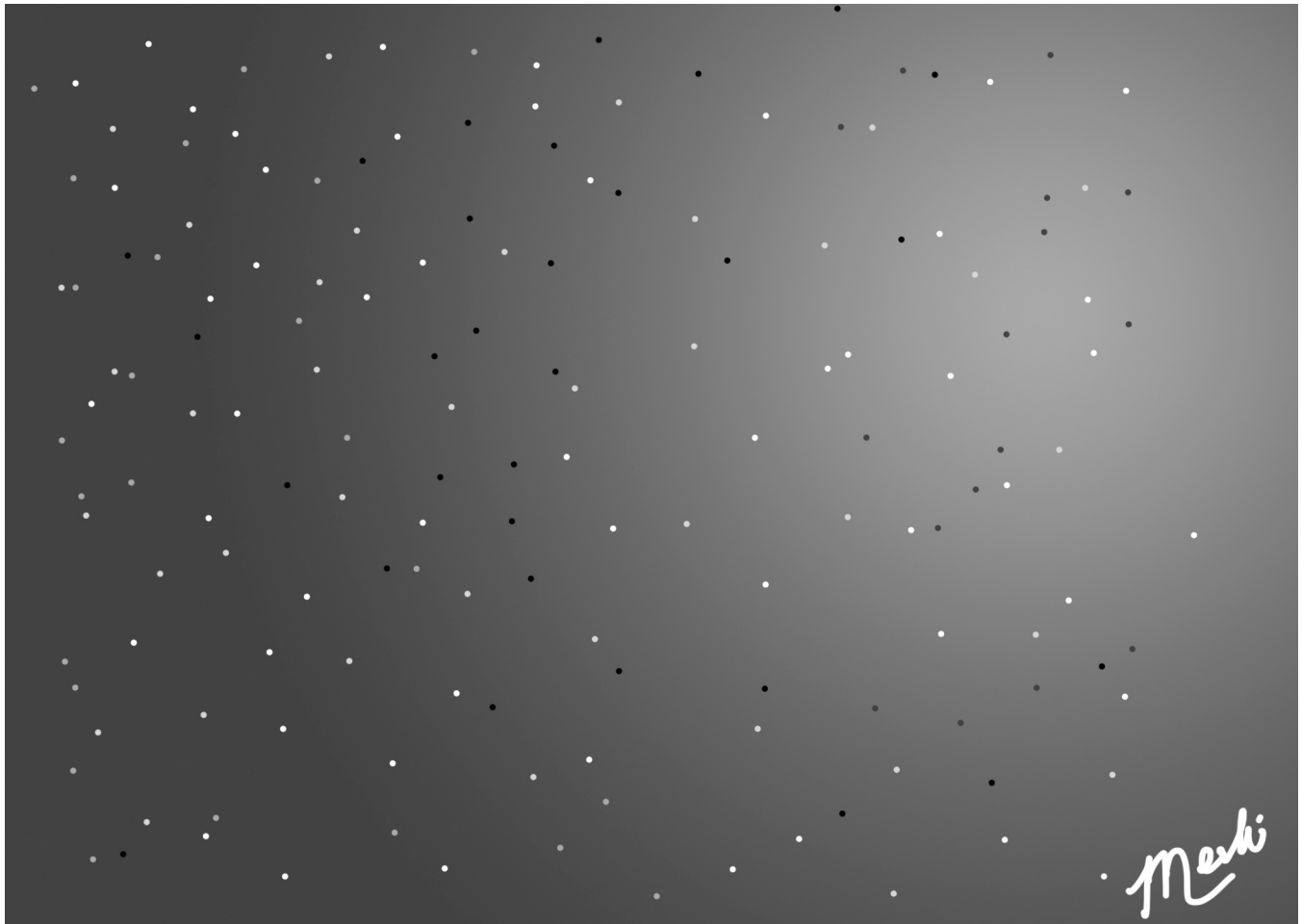
Vanessa F. Hurst, MS

"I haven't failed, I can tell you 10,000 ways not to be in relationship." Instead of judging our relationships in terms of success or failure, what happens when we view relationships as opportunities to experience our challenges, learn our lessons, and meet our life purpose? By reframing the way we perceive relationships, we create more mindful, contemplative connections with our self, others, the sacred, and all of creation.

Author, Vanessa F. Hurst, ms, uses the metaphor of the night sky to explore how silence, compassion, and communion contribute to living in relationship. By developing a greater awareness of these three elements, we mindfully create and sustain a constellation of contemplative relationships. The elements:

- Through the night sky's inky darkness develop a practice of silence to increase awareness of the present moment, focus on relationship connections, and navigate around distractions.
- Through the stars, the sparks of compassion present within each person, sentient being, and part of creation, practice self compassion and strengthen relationships by sharing compassion and receiving it from others.
- Through the connectors of our constellation, the deepest form of communication, communion, experiencing a full body, multi-sensory way of communicating. Engage others physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.

Through silence, compassion, and communion, connect to others in with greater awareness and mindfulness. Life becomes a dynamic, evolving constellation of contemplative relationships.



Chapter 1

A Constellation of Connections

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing by deepening it. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Reflect upon your key relationships. Name those that seem most important.

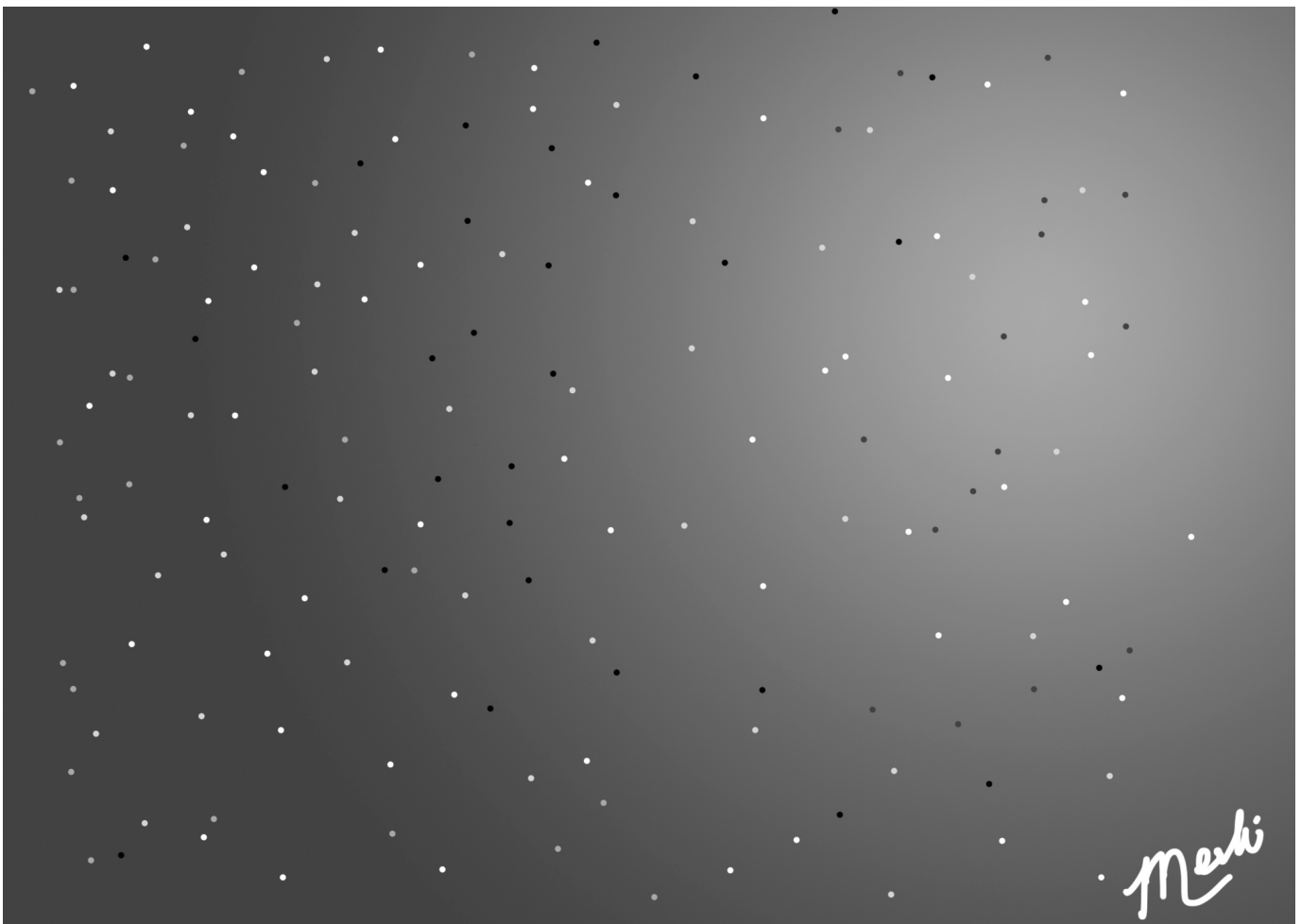
On a sheet of paper, begin to create your constellation of connections. First, place yourself on the sheet as the North Star. Then begin to place on the sheet other stars that represent your key relationships. Connect the stars to you. If they are connected to one another, draw those lines as well. You may choose to return to this sheet several times in the upcoming days to add additional stars/compassion sparks. (Use the image on the first page.)

Chapter 2

Connecting Contemplatively

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Don't deepen your inhale/exhale. Just notice.

Reflect upon your relationship with self. Create a constellation of connections that focuses solely on aspects of self. These aspects may be personality traits, roles that you assume, emotions, thought patterns, or those parts of you that you view as relevant. Name your aspects that are authentic and those that cast illusion. It is important to identify both the true self as well as any masks. Create this microcosm of connection. (Keep both your created constellation from the previous chapter and this one together.)



Chapter 3

Our Divine Spark, The Hub of Our Connections

Creating a Constellation of Connections: The midnight sky represents the deep serenity and peace of the silence of our quiet mind. Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Don't shift your inhale/exhale. Just notice.

Spend some time in conversation with your divine spark. Answer these questions:



- What illusions surface about recent interactions? _____

- Are you identifying with a negative certain emotion? If so, name it (them). _____

- How are you authentic? _____

- What attributes or traits do you have that bring you closer to awareness? _____

- How are illusions preventing you from being in a contemplative relationship? (Think about a recent interaction that triggered a reaction in you.) _____

- What parts of your authentic self encourage contemplative relationship? (Think about a recent interaction in which a reaction was circumvented and you responded instead.) _____

- How are you aware of your feelings, judgments, and beliefs and how they create a contemplative relationship? _____

Additional Comments: _____

Chapter 4 Relationships: Engaged, Dynamic, Flexible

Creating a Constellation of Connections: RI² is a contemplative practice that connects our body, mind, spirit, and heart in order to respond compassionately to something in our life.

- First, we reflect with our heart. We identify what we feel without making any judgment about those feelings. We observe what is happening in our life and in our relationships that might relate to what we are feeling.
- Second, we introspect using our logical mind. Again, with- out judgment, we attempt to understand what is truly amiss.
- Third, we integrate our understanding in ways that shift our fear-filled reactions to compassionate responses.



More often than not, we change our thinking or behavior because we see that we were thinking and acting out of preconceptions about our self or others, rather than from knowledge and understanding. This process, practiced regularly, transforms us. We become more true to our self and more compassionate of others.

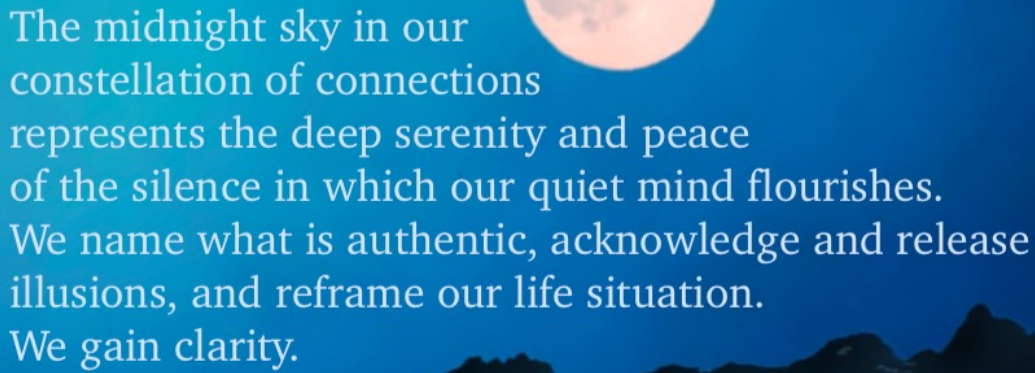
Use the following questions to reflect, introspect, and integrate transformation into your own life. Enter into a reflective place, where you notice the many potential answers that reside in your quiet mind. Then engage your introspection. How do these responses fit with the reality of who you are? Which ones are authentic and which ones challenge your illusions? Next, integrate what you have learned by embracing what is real and true and letting go of the unreal and the untruthful. Let go of the illusion.

Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Just notice.

Using RI², reflect upon a relationship in which you and the other are in sync. Reflect upon your connection without attachment, judgment, or defensiveness. Notice what makes the relation- ship "easier." How does it feel to you? Describe the relationship using all of your senses.

Move into introspection. How did you reach this place of ease and wide-openness with the other? How do you communicate with the other? What patterns exist in the relationship that lend themselves to communion? Finally, use the knowledge gained in the first two steps to shift a relationship that is not as easy. Integrate your patterns for at least seven days. Tweak if necessary.

What happens? _____



The midnight sky in our constellation of connections represents the deep serenity and peace of the silence in which our quiet mind flourishes. We name what is authentic, acknowledge and release illusions, and reframe our life situation. We gain clarity.

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Chapter 5

Silence: The Inky Night Sky

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Don't shift your inhale/exhale. Rest in the silence of your quiet mind. Notice with all of your senses how it feels.

Now reflect upon and respond to the following:

- How do you best create silence? _____

- How do you best enter silence? _____

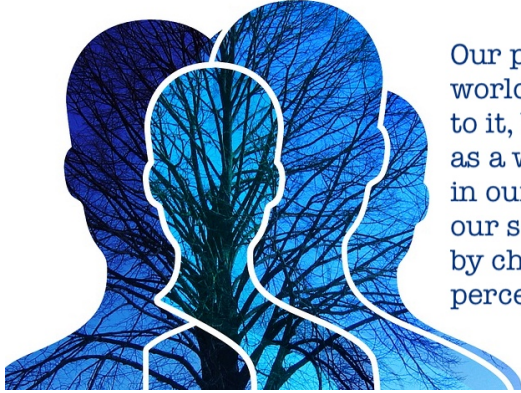
- How do you best nurture silence? _____

Reenter the silence with the answers. Name your distractions. _____

- How do these distractions help you create and sustain illusions? _____

- Name some of those illusions. _____

What contemplative practices help you identify distractions and release the illusions? _____



Our perception of the world and how we relate to it, both individually and as a whole, are grounded in our relationship with our self. We gain our truth by challenging our perceptions.

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Chapter 6 The Quiet Mind

Creating a Constellation of

Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breath. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Just notice. Become aware of your internal monologue. Listen to it for approximately five minutes.)

- Write down your impressions of the monologue. Consider using a narrative, outline, bullet points, or some other way to help you gain clarity of what you heard. _____

- Reflect upon what you have written: _____

- Choose two or three of your thoughts to focus on: _____

- Name the judgments and assumptions that lie at the roots of each thought: _____

- Name your beliefs that are the basis for your thoughts. For example, if you are thinking about a conversation, what do you believe about the interactions? What do you believe is the basis of both you and your partner's words? _____

- Ask yourself what is an illusion and what is authentic. Are you making assumptions that are not true and based upon your triggers? If so, name them. _____

- Name your personal reality.—how do you see the world? Is it true and accurate or based on illusion? _____

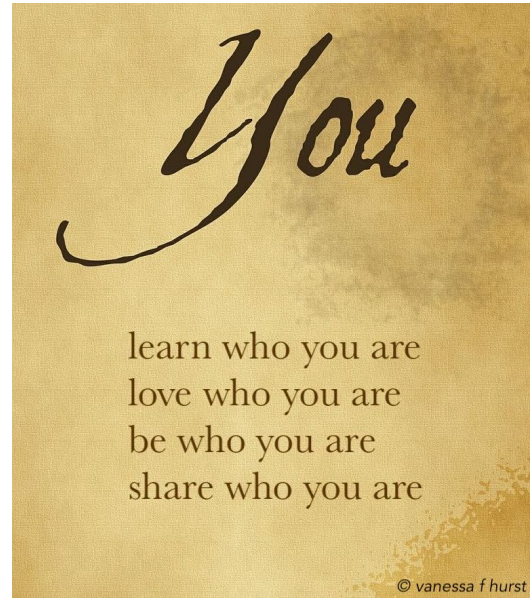
- What parts of your reality are accurate? How does illusion form your reality? _____

- Find ways to rescript those illusions that prevent you from living authentically. _____

Chapter 7
 Start at the Beginning

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Just notice. Become aware of who you are at the center of your being. Spend time in reflection as you discern what is an illusion and what is your authentic self.

Name those parts that represent who you truly are.



Identify the illusions that separate you from your authentic self. _____

What encourages you to enter more deeply into relationship? What illusions create barriers? _____

How did illusion damage the connection you had with your relationship partner? _____

Reflect upon a relationship. How did your authenticity and your illusions help form your connection? _____

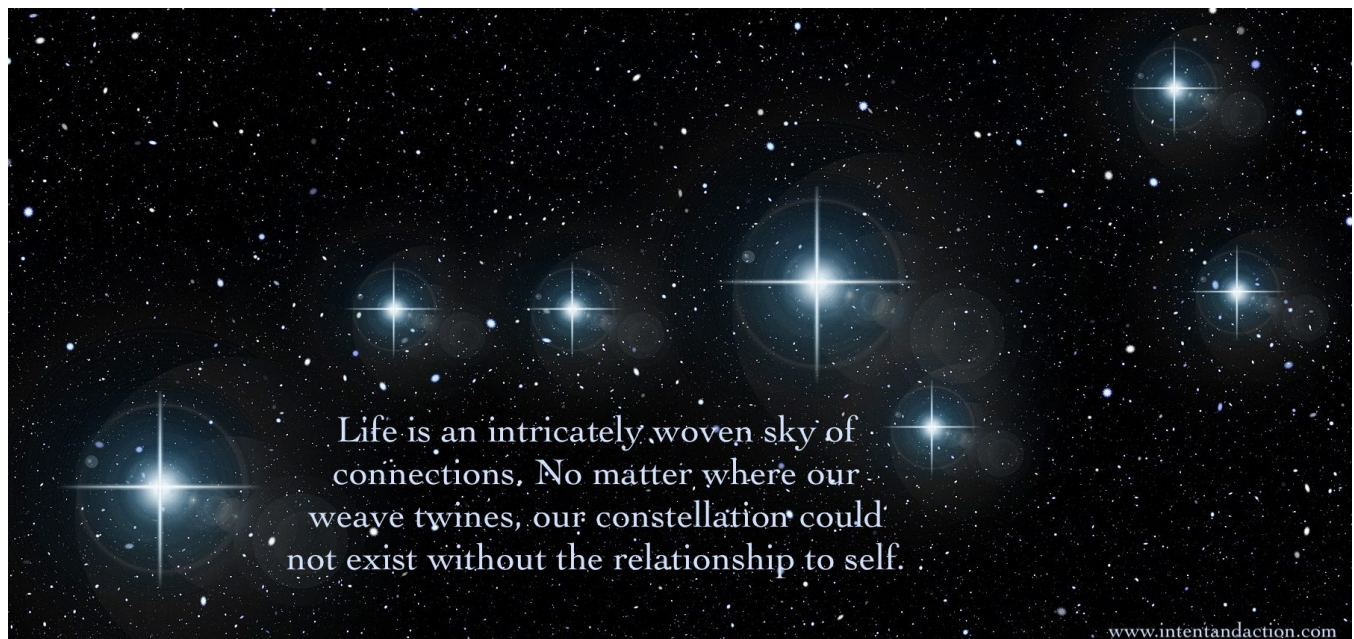
Chapter 8
Compassion Is...Our Divine Spark

Creating a Constellation of Connections:

Before beginning your day, practice this visualization: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Don't shift your inhale/exhale. Just notice. As you focus on your breath, it will naturally even and become balanced. Become aware of who you are at the center of your being. Envision that the air around you is filled with compassion... a pale rose color...breathe in compassion...see it flow throughout your body

filling you up...compassion flows from your physical body in a bubble that surrounds you...this is a permeable bubble... you choose what goes out...you choose what comes in...now envision that your bubble brushes up against others as you share compassion...receive compassion from others. Envision that the air around you is filled with compassion. . . a pale rose color . . . Breathe in compassion . . . See it flow throughout your body, filling you up . . . Compassion flows from your physical body in a bubble that surrounds you . . . This is a permeable bubble . . . You choose what goes out . . . You choose what comes in . . . Now envision that your bubble brushes up against others as you share compassion . . . Receive compassion from others. Be aware of the bubble throughout your day. Allow it to become a part of your compassion sharing.

At the end of your day, reflect upon your interactions. Did this visualization shift how you responded and reacted to others and to situations in your world? If so, how? _____



Chapter 9 The Heart of Compassion

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Just notice. Individually focus on each of the three aspects of the heart using the following questions.

Spirit of the Heart: unspoken intent, desire to be in relationship

- Reflect upon a relationship. Using the 4nons (nonattachment, nonjudgment, nondefensiveness, nonviolence), describe how you react and respond to the other. _____

- What are your expectations of your partner and the relationship? How do these expectations impact your intent? _____

- Do you need to change your intent? If so, restate it. _____

Will of the Heart: awareness of our responses and reactions

- Return to the same relationship. Reflect upon several interactions with your partner that profoundly impacted the relationship. _____

- How did you react and respond in those situations? _____

- How did your intent manifest through your actions? _____

- How can your awareness empower you to live au-thentically through your intent? _____

Feeling of the Heart: connecting our intent to action with aware-ness

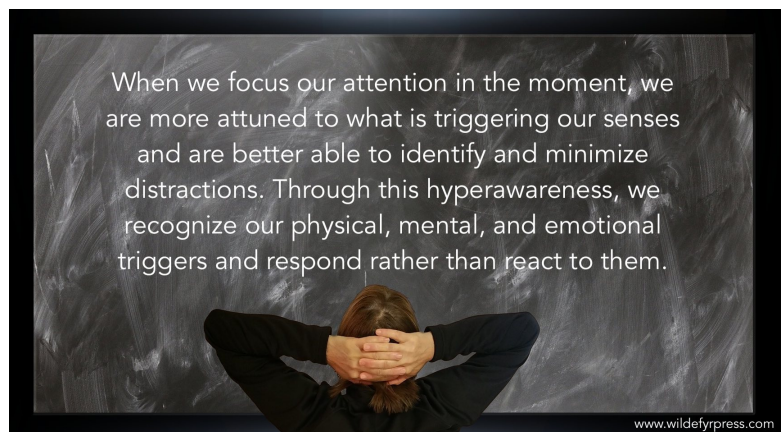
- Continue to use the same relationship during reflection. Either reset or reaffirm your intent to be in this relationship. _____

- Through courage and curious daring, create new ways of response that are in alignment with your intent.

- How does the implementation of this plan bring about relational transformation? _____

Chapter 10
The Guiding Presence of Relationship

Creating a Constellation of Connections:
Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Through your breath, enter the ground of your being. See the beautiful garden that you have planted and nurtured.



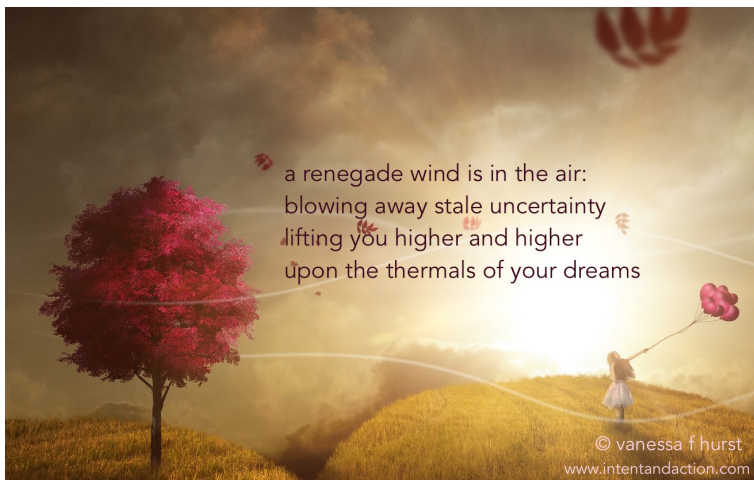
Name those parts of your self that are not authentic—the parts of you that are wounded and prevent you from being your true self. _____

After naming and being with those “imperfections,” call upon the wisdom of your self-compassion. Soothe the suffering. This soothing is the bedrock of our self-compassion. Ask yourself what is the most loving, compassionate response to me? The answer may be through verbal affirmation, exercise, or some other self-directed kindness. Whatever the answer, the goal is to alleviate your suffering. _____

As self-compassion fills your being, visualize the well spilling over and touching others. How does your compassion deepen your relationship with self? _____

How does self-compassion invite you into greater authenticity? How does self-compassion increase your ability to share compassion with others? _____

In what ways has the intimacy in your relationships with others deepened through compassionate action?



Chapter 11 The Radical Transformer

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Through your breath, enter the ground of your being. Visualize the garden you have sown, nurtured, and harvested in your self.

- What parts of the garden are authentic? _____

- What is growing your illusions? _____

- Reflect upon a particular relationship. _____

- How do you authentically share with the other? _____

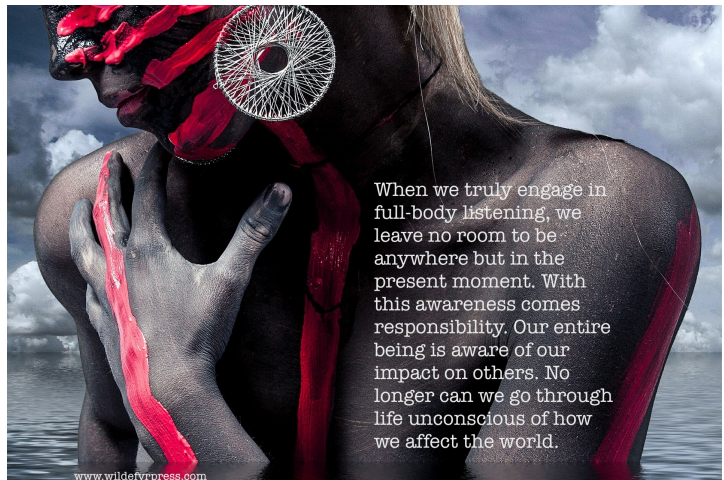
- In what ways are you humble? _____

- Where have you been courageous? _____

- How could engaging your humility, courage, and authenticity strengthen this relationship?

Chapter 12
 Full-Body Communication

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Through your breath, enter the ground of your being. With awareness engage your full-body listening as a way of entering into communion. Before beginning a conversation take a moment of self reflection. Close your eyes. Take a couple of breaths. Allow yourself to enter into the present moment. Be aware of your distractions. Name them and release them. Engage in full-body listening by through the following:



- Take a couple of breaths while listening to and feeling the rhythm of your breath. How is the cadence of your breath affecting your ability to connect fully and intentionally? _____

- Take a couple of breaths and notice any physical sensations. Is there tension in your body? Tingling? What do you feel? How are the sensations affecting your ability to connect fully and intentionally? _____

- Take a couple of breaths and deeply inhale the world around you. What do you smell? How is this sensation affecting your ability to connect fully and intentionally? _____

- Take a couple of breaths and notice what your mouth tastes like. How is this sensation affecting your ability to connect fully and intentionally? _____

- Now, intentionally affirm your desire to release any distractions. Take another couple of breaths. Fully enter into a conversation or a personal reflection. _____

- How was your awareness different? How did you respond? _____

Chapter 13
 A Contemplative Spirit

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Through your breath, enter the ground of your being. Enter into the awareness. Reflect upon how each attribute of self enhances your abilities to create and maintain communion.



A contemplative life is not experienced in a vacuum or as a solitary being. A contemplative life occurs in relationship. Our spirit is reflected in each of our relationships with our self, others, the sacred, and all of creation.

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Awareness: When your attention is in the moment, how do you respond? How are you able to prevent reactions?

Authenticity: How do your illusions prevent you from responding authentically? _____

Truth: How does the truth at the core of your being help identify and release illusions? _____

Courage: Name the fears that prevent you from speaking with honesty and integrity. Call upon your courage to fashion a compassionate response to your self. _____

Humility: Notice how your judgments and arrogance drive your interactions. How might you identify barriers to connecting to an other with your humble heart? _____

Clarity: What fears, arrogance, or other illusions cloud the way that you perceive? _____

How can your awareness increase your clarity? _____

Enthusiasm: Reflect upon the barriers that prevent you from enthusiastically engaging another. How might compassion to self and to others boost your enthusiastic spirit? _____

Open-Mindedness: What judgments, assumptions, and other illusions close your welcoming heart?

How might you use the first six traits to open your self? _____

Practice integrating one of these traits into your interactions. What shifts? _____

Chapter 14
Communion At the Core

Creating a Constellation of

Connections: Sit quietly.

Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Through your breath, enter the ground of your being. Connect with your core

relationship—the one with your self. Enter a state of hyperawareness. Engage in full-body listening using all your accessible senses. Describe your relationship using all of your senses:



What does it look like? _____

What do you hear? _____

What are you feeling? _____

What do you taste? _____

What do you smell? _____

Being an objective observer and using the 4nons (nonattachment, nonjudgment, nondefensiveness, and nonviolence), notice your thoughts and emotions. Using the information gathered, answer the following questions:

- How are you connected to your authentic being? _____

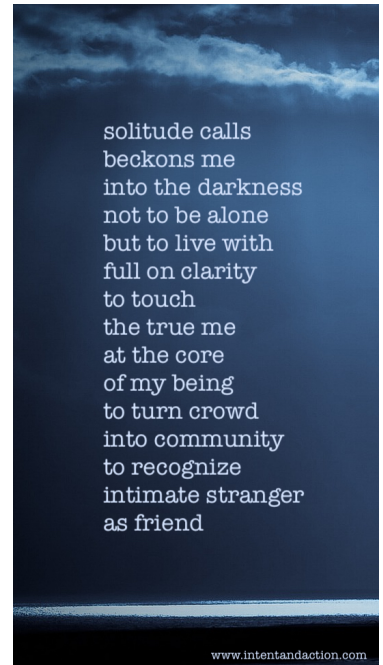
- What parts of your self are false or part of the illusion? _____

- Choose one illusion and through the process of RI² (reflection, introspection, and integration) and in communion, create a plan to release the illusion and rest more firmly in your authentic self.

Chapter 15 An Internal Conversation of Connectivity

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Through the inhale and exhale, visualize entering into the ground of your being. (Unless we have filters, we become inundated with information. Filters enable us to sift through the plethora of information and discern what is helpful and what is distracting. Filters are unique to each of us. Some work better for us than others. Filters have one thing in common: they activate through our awareness.


Focusing on your breath activates the filter through which information comes. With each breath be aware of how a conversation, a behavior, or any stimulus in the world around you washes over you. Use full-body listening.



Engage in the RI² process of reflection, introspection, and integration. Name the triggers of reaction. Filter those triggers that would cause reactions in you. _____

Using RI², name ways of moving from reaction to response. Integrate a new way of response. _____

Chapter 16 Reaching Common Ground



we are two boats
adrift in the same sea.
let's lay planks.
build bridges.
join a fleet of caring.
become a community
of compassion.

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Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Through your breath, enter the ground of your being.

Recall a time you entered common ground in a relationship and gained understanding. Reflect upon how the seven Gifts of the Spirit (knowledge, understanding, wisdom, courage, right judgment, reverence, and wonder and awe).

How did they help you gain common ground? _____

How did they help you remain in communion? _____

Identify how you used each of the seven gifts to and gain understanding. _____

What "right judgment" did you discover? _____

How did it enable you to revere the other? _____

Reflect upon a time that you were unable to rest in common ground and reach understanding. _____

Which of the seven gifts (there may be more than one) prevented you from deepening your connection?

How might you have made better use of the seven gifts to come to a right judgment in ways that deeply respected the other? _____

Who am I? That is a question answered
in each thought, word, and action.



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Chapter 17 From Intentio to Actio

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Through your breath, enter the ground of your being. Using intentio to actio, set your intent for the day.

Intentio: Ask yourself what you desire for the day. Spend a few moments focusing on your breath. Use these moments to form your intent through your words and/or thoughts. Next, visualize your intent entering your being through your breath. _____

Meditatio: Turn your awareness to the Sacred. How is it inviting you to manifest your intent? What distractions are barring your intent? Bookmark these distractions. With awareness, intend to navigate around them.

Oratio: Return to your intent. Does it need to be rescript- ed or refined as a result of meditatio? (What distractions did you discover that may prevent you from aligning your intent with your action?) Restate your intent, knowing you may need to restate and tweak it throughout the day. _____

Contemplatio: Find a place just to be. Focus on your breathing. Listen to the whispers, your intuition, as they well up from your being. Again, you may need to tweak your intent or be called to act upon it.

Actio: Throughout the day, whenever you are aware, align your intent with your action. When you need to use the three steps to refocus, do so. The initial four steps are part of your action.



Chapter 18

Dynamic Constellation

Creating a Constellation of Connections: Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Do not try to shift your breathing. Allow it to naturally flow in and out. Through your breath, enter the ground of your being. Choose a relationship to use for this exercise. Reflect upon the relationship. Answer the following questions using full-body listening and hyperawareness. Notice how your body is responding. Explore

its reactions with all of your senses to obtain a greater understanding. Attend to your thoughts and judgments. With hyperawareness, what do you notice? Is there something spiritual, mental, emotional, or physical that either resonates with you or brings you dissonance? Listen with your body, mind, spirit, and heart as you discern:

- How do I want to be in this relationship? _____

- What do I need from my partner? _____

- How do I receive what I want and need? _____

- How do I perceive that the other wants to be in relationship with me? _____

- How able am I to provide what that person needs? _____



Vanessa F. Hurst is a life coach through intuitive connection, author, and compassion consultant. As a life coach, she forms a bridge from her intuition to her client's to understand their current challenges, identify life lessons, and live with soul purpose. Vanessa develops and facilitates results-driven resources for identifying compassion competencies, stakeholder/community building, and organizational culture strengthening. Vanessa brings 24 years of experience intuitively guiding clients in becoming their best — personally and organizationally.

Vanessa is the author of three books published by Wildefyr Press. She nationally presents programs featuring compassion, mindfulness, contemplative living, and intuitive awareness. She is the innovator-facilitator of both the Compassion Conversation© and Compassion's Circle©. Contact Vanessa for programs, keynotes, consultations, and individual sessions. More information available at www.intentandaction.com.

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