

“In short, plain-spoken meditations based on her experiences with suffering and the teachings and practice of yoga and Buddhism, Betsy Johnson offers a series of much-needed balms for those suffering from personal and societal wounds—which, in these times, is all of us. With its emphasis on breathing deeply and being still, this is a book to read slowly, mindfully, and with an openness to all life offers.”

—Michael N. McGregor, author of *Pure Act:
The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax*

A Hit of Hope

(for when it gets really bad)

Betsy Johnson



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She knew there were all kinds of things she could do to numb the pain, but she wanted to get better, not worse. In response, she wrote these meditations to bring a hit of hope and help others not only to survive, but to live light"—

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“In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering
at the moment it finds a meaning.”

Viktor Frankl

Contents

Introduction xi

Part One: The Way It Is

Trying to be perfect is a kind of hell 2

Most of us would rather have a root canal 4

Notice when your flaws are in play 6

Life will give you cliffs . . . and strawberries 8

Part Two: Like/As

This isn't a perfect metaphor 12

Like Don Quixote, know adventure awaits 14

Consider the boulder 16

What if you invited more weeds and wild into
your life? 18

Your chance to dance in dead leaves 20

Be as still as a wide-open prairie 22

Consider the acorn 24

Peace—like lasagna—doesn't just happen 26

If you have a mountain in your life, put on a sturdy pair
of shoes 28

Even creatures with wings sometimes scream as they
wheel in the bluest sky 30

A door asks you to live somewhere between 32

Part Three: Dead Ends

Don't give me the pat answer 36

The world wants you to hide what is weird 38

Can you quit trying to make a U-turn? 40

You can live on autopilot 42

Just don't let them drive the bus 44

Part Four: My (Tougher) Advice

Have a seat 48

Eyes on your own mat 50

Decide now to be a bad ass with a big heart 52

Begin again and fail better 54

Cherish your scars 56

Stoke your inner fire 58

Remember the wondrous space 60

Board by board, nail by nail 62

Dammit, this matters. Trust me. 66

Do not ruin the good with “what if” 68

There is no magic wand 70

Part Five: My (Gentler) Advice

You don't have to do another damn thing 74

Or you can let go of the things that weigh
you down 76

Encourage what is good 78

Perhaps, you could consider living the gentler verbs 80

A practice of endurance 82

And if something is big, give it time 84

And if you can't live with the uncertainty 86

Remember, pretty flowers come from shit 90

Encore yourself with joy, baby 92

In this new space, see what is 94

You deserve to be looked at with love and grace 96

Part Six: What You've Done/Are Doing/Will Do

What deserves your attention? 100

Can you tell when you are growing prickly? 102

And it might have been horrible, harrowing, but you
have survived 104

Maybe it is a good time to surrender 106

You are bigger than your thinks 108

You have already done so much 110

You have a light inside 112

This is not the end of your story 114

Introduction

This book began in a time when nearly everything in my life was out of my control. I had breast cancer, chemo, radiation, and a divorce I didn't want in the same year. But I believed there was one thing I *could* control: how I would walk through this crucible. I chose to live with hope.

I knew I needed to feed hope the right things, so I sat down one day to do a two-minute meditation I'd found online. Sitting still for that long was all my broken spirit could handle. I pushed play to start the video, and as I settled in, I was told to clear my thoughts. And breathe. About a minute in, the voice started telling me about the benefits of a particular tea. I opened my eyes to see the beautiful woman now holding a steaming cup. Peace with a price tag? Buying something was the last thing I needed at that moment, so I decided to write my own meditations, to use my own voice, which had been slowly silenced, to bring about my healing. Could my words help others? That part I wasn't sure about. Because I knew what I needed to write wasn't going to be "nice." It was going to be gritty. Salty. Real. I had no patience for easy answers at that point.

And sometimes, the swear word was the right word. The perfect way to capture the essence of what I was feeling.

What follows are those first meditations I wrote.

When I was in college, I felt called to go to seminary and become an ordained Presbyterian pastor. Upon arriving, I learned that I was good at asking questions. But I didn't have the faith to sit with the mystery of those questions. I got angry with God—who promised presence, but always felt absent. I imagined myself having to perform a funeral for a child. What could I say about God to parents in that moment? Baffled and disappointed, I quit seminary without being ordained. I went on to preach as a pulpit-supply pastor for about a decade at churches in Illinois that were too small to afford their own pastors. Those congregations didn't mind my questions.

When my then-husband, my children, and I moved back to my home state of Minnesota, I began to explore yoga and Buddhism.

I could actually feel yoga's positive effects flooding me that first time I practiced. I was hooked.

My interest in Buddhism began about a decade ago, when my ex-husband led a study-abroad trip to Japan. After beginning our trip in Tokyo, we traveled to a mountain village. While we were there, early one morning, I walked alone on a small path that snaked up a gentle mountain. At the top, I found an open-air temple. Inside stood three gods. A goddess who was naked on top, one knee softly bent, a half-smile on her lips. Next to her was a massive blob wearing a hat. It was an old tree stump tipped on its

side, and the roots reaching up and out made it look like a star. Lastly, a Buddha wearing a hat. A white band was tied under his chin. It felt right to bow, and when I straightened, I whispered, “Oh my.” Granite might be dead, but this Buddha looked alive. His eyes—which were nothing but slits in a stone face—took me in, missing nothing. I felt no judgment in them. Only awareness, pure and deep. With a walking stick in one hand and a bowl in the other, it looked as if he had paused here on top of this mountain to talk to the other two gods and catch his breath before continuing on his eternal journey.

Two hours later, we were on a train, rushing down the mountain, and my restless mind was tempted to offer all my adoration to the Buddha back there. As long as I was willing to climb a mountain, he was willing to stand before me, and his message couldn’t have been clearer: Be here.

What was so appealing is that I could *see* him. The God I was raised to believe in did not stand in a thousand places the way the Buddha did all over Japan.

With Buddhism, I didn’t have to wait for a God who might or might not show up. I didn’t have to deal with the wild and unpredictable Spirit. With Buddhism, I was in charge. I had all the control. Or at least I could have all the control, if I could only figure out how to settle my mind, get out of my negative *samskaras* (patterns), and move myself toward Enlightenment.

But as I went through my cancer treatment and divorce, it seldom worked when I told myself, “If only I could just let these excruciating feelings pass like storm clouds, then I

would be free.” I could barely breathe sometimes, let alone feel equanimity in my mind.

I failed again and again, and I felt so very alone.

Buddhism never presented me with Calvin’s exacting and ever-unpleased God, but it created a different kind of absence. There was no Presence there to be with me. As I sat on my meditation bench, or in the chemo chair, I was alone—in my life and in my heart.

The only way I could think to deal with the bewildering uncertainties of life and Life was to start writing these meditations. As I did so, I continued to swing between Buddhism and Christianity—a tension that I first wrestled with on that trip to Japan. After we’d left the mountain village and returned to our apartment in Tokyo, I sat in a chair and read *Orthodoxy* by G.K. Chesterton. He said that one of the most appealing things about Buddhism was its emphasis on immanence, on being here. He argued that Christianity is different. “Love desires personality; therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces, because they are living pieces.”

In Japan—and everywhere else—I wanted a god. Here. In the world. One I could climb a mountain to go visit, one I could touch, or snuggle up beside and be content. One who would let me come back to the world again and again until I got it right.

But the more I thought about it, the more I decided that a cold stone god on a mountain and reincarnation

weren't enough for me. Even back then (long before the quarantine), there were already times when life felt endless to me, when I reached a place of such internal aridity, that I was not sure if I could—or wanted to—go on. To have to live again and again suddenly felt like a trial, not a blessing.

That day in Tokyo, I knew something that I continue to forget more often than I'd like: I need a Who. A God who loves me. A God who loves *me*. One who broke the universe into pieces, living pieces—of which I am one among many. Because then I was not alone—I was surrounded by the presences of God. Because then I did not dare to hurt this world, for that would be hurting the divine. Because then I had to slow down and look more closely, since this is my only shot at this thing called life. I had to search in order that I might find—and therefore, I should celebrate the me who never stops seeking the divine in all the places and pieces I can find, who meets the dark with words as I claw at my space in an attempt to get at something bigger.

I offer you these hits of hope. May these words be a reminder to you that no matter how long and dark and hard the night, the Light *always* comes back.



Part One

The Way It Is

Trying to be perfect is a kind of hell

It's okay.

It's okay to be sad. To be angry. To be afraid. To be weary.

It's okay to leave the dishes.

It's okay to let the grass grow.

It's okay to fall down.

It's okay to screw up.

It's okay to say, "I don't know."

"I can't do this alone."

"I've done some bad shit."

"I've hurt the ones I love."

It's okay to cry.

To stare at the wall.

To do too much.

To do nothing at all.

It's okay to say, "Not today."

It's okay to say, "I'll try again tomorrow."

It's okay to feel awkward and strange, weird and broken.

What is not okay?

To let the voices inside have their way.

The ones that want to hurt your tender and bruised self.

You do not have to be perfect.

You cannot be perfect.

You are not perfect.

Trying to be perfect is a kind of hell. It will burn you
again and again.

What a blessing, what a relief it is to just be okay.

To be okay with your fears, your mistakes, and your scars.

To be okay for this breath in. And this breath out.

You are okay. You are okay. You are okay.

Most of us would rather have a root canal

Settle yourself.

Let your shoulders relax away from your ears.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Is your inner life working for you or against you?

Do you hide what is going on inside?

Or do you dare to share your inner life?

Your real, authentic, messy, and maybe terrified inner self?

The one who is longing to be seen and heard?

We take so much time, spend so much effort on our
outer shell.

Our outer shell has to be perfect.

It has to look perfect,

It has to smell perfect.

And most of all, it has to act perfect.

Or at least *act* as if everything is perfect.

When, in reality, the inner life might be howling.

Or crumbling.

When the inner life might be the last thing you have the
courage to face.

But the inner life will not go away on its own.

The inner life will not grow quiet on its own.

The inner life will not heal on its own.

You.

You have to sit.

You have to stay.

You have to breathe.

You have to face. What's. There.

That is scary as hell, isn't it?

Most of us would rather have a root canal.

Or do whatever we can think of to numb the pain.

But even when you are wounded, you can also be healing.

Have faith in the work you are doing.

Have faith in the inner work you are doing.

Do what you can to plant any positive seeds along your
rocky path.

Stay.

Breathe.

You do not have to stay dark inside.

You do not have to stay broken inside.

You are good.

You are worthy.

Sit.

Do the inner work.

Heal.

Consider the acorn

It is the tree's pilgrim.

When it is ready, or when a great wind or storm arises,
the acorn drops and makes its way toward new life.

The acorn might bounce into a tangle of thorns.

The acorn might drop into the mud.

The acorn might get crushed.

The acorn might get buried in the earth before the
snow flies.

Let's be honest: the acorn might have preferred to stay
atop the mighty tall oak.

But fall it must.

And then, the acorn must sit.

Wait.

More storms are sure to come and go.

Some nights, it will be so dark and cold.

Sit.

Wait.

An acorn must fall away from what it knows to move
toward life.

An acorn must sit.

Wait.

And all the while hold onto the life and energy at
its core.

In the quiet of the night, in the light of the day, the
acorn must wait until the time is right.

And then the acorn must let go of its protective shell.

Reaching out.

Grounding down.

Lifting up.

Finding the light.

Welcoming the rain.

New life takes time.

New life takes patience.

New life asks us to sit.

Wait.

Soften.

Marvel at the tiny green shoots that suddenly start
to grow.

Peace—like lasagna—doesn't just happen

Hey.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Center yourself.

Here.

Now.

It's tempting.

To buy into the cookie-cutter life.

That it has to be this way and only this way.

That it has to be absolutely perfect.

That it has to be just like everyone else's life, otherwise,
you are a big fat failure.

You know what?

The cookie-cutter life is bullshit.

The idea that there is only one way to live and be happy?

The idea that we can get our lives to match what other
people's lives are like?

Again, I call bullshit.

And you know what, I doubt their lives are as perfect as
we think they are.

But oh, it can be hard to let go of that kind of life,
especially around the holidays, or especially
regarding the idea of one true love to save us from
everything life has to offer.

Yes, that can happen, and yes, it can be wonderful.

But listen very carefully to me.

The cookie-cutter life, the perfect life is not the only way
to be happy.

Having it or not having it does not make you a success or
a failure.

You are you.

You are living your life.

You are awesome and weird, real and strange.

You are you.

Live *your* life.

Not the life that someone else is trying to sell you.

Live your life.

Find your people, your purpose.

Find your way to live, love, shine, fall, and get the fuck
back up again.

You are you.

And isn't that fucking awesome?

Remember the wondrous space

When it hurts, hold on to your center.

When it's hard, hold on to your center.

When you are caught up in things you can't control, hold on to your center.

When you find yourself returning to a pattern that doesn't serve you, return to your center.

When you want to give up, return to your center.

When you don't know where to find the strength to go on, return to your center.

When it's too much, return to your center.

When there's not enough money, help, food, support, kindness, attention, whatever, return to your center.

When it sucks, return to your center.

Maybe cry.

Maybe scream.

Maybe sit with the desolation and hopelessness.

But then remember your center.

Remember that wondrous space inside of you.

The one that is filled with more strength than you can imagine.

The one that surprises you with all of the ways it helps
you to survive.

Remember the wondrous space.

Return to your center.

Hold on to your center.

And breathe.

In. Out.

In. And out.

May you be free from fear.

May you be safe from harm.

May the light inside shine.

Board by board, nail by nail

It isn't surprising.

We don't have to wait days or even weeks for something anymore.

We can one-click and get it the very next day.

We don't have to plant the seeds, water the seeds, weed the garden, and wait for food to be in season.

We can drive to the grocery store and have strawberries whenever we want.

We don't have to cut down the logs, fit them one on top of one another, and build an entire cabin with our bare hands.

We watch tv shows where an entire house is torn apart and rebuilt in a week.

But when our lives get torn apart—by whatever it is—it takes time to rebuild.

And it takes even more time if we want to rebuild things right.

First, we have to do the work to tear away our outer shells.

We have to be bare. So we can see all of the damage.

Oh, isn't it tempting just to slap some nice new outer shell on as quickly as possible?

But the rot, the things eating us from the inside out, all of that is still there.

And if we just cover it up, it will grow, spread, making things weaker and more vulnerable to life's storms.

Okay, fine. The damage is there. Let's hack away at the rotten parts, right?

But that can cause more damage and harm.

So, can we look at what is, can we see the parts that need our attention, can we get to work with intention and finesse, and piece by piece, remove the damaged parts?

And let's not blame the damaged parts. They are already broken.

We simply say, "This needs to be replaced, to bring steadiness, wholeness."

And speaking of whole, if we work to remove the damage, there will be holes.

We might want to shove them full of whatever junk is at hand.

But can we take the time to find the best materials?

Can we rebuild with care?

And rebuilding with care means it is going to take time.

It is going to take skill.

It is going to take the support of friends and family.

It means showing up at the work site every single day—rain or shine—and doing the work.

Board by board.

In this new space, see what is

Sit.

Settle.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Everything goes.

This breath.

This moment.

This life.

Everything goes.

Sit with this fact.

Be with this season when it comes, and when it demands
that everything goes.

Sit.

Still.

When you are asked to let go, when you have been
stripped down to the bone, if you have to, take some
time to feel defeated.

To surrender to the sorrow and pain.

Sit.

Breathe.

Inhale.

Exhale.

When you have been stripped down to the bone, can you
see that there is actually some spaciousness in that?

Then, can you hold onto that spaciousness, staying
curious, light, soft?

When the season of letting go comes, be alive at your
core.

When the season of letting go comes, resist clinging to
what should be.

Do not wallow in what has been.

Do not let yourself grow rotten with misery.

In this new space, see what is.

Let things happen.

In such a season, may you find quiet.

In such a season, may you find clarity.

In such a reckoning, may you surrender and ground.

A new season is on its way.

You deserve to be looked at with love and grace

Dear one, you are beautiful.

Hush.

Do not argue.

Do not gather all of your usual evidence to try and prove
to me how and why that is not the case.

Dear one, you are beautiful.

If you are among those who hear that message often
and from a multitude of voices, I am so very happy
for you.

If you are among those who have not heard that message
in a very long time, my heart holds you.

You. Are. Beautiful.

You are a most miraculous work.

You need to know that.

And if you are among those who do know that, praise be.

If you are among those who have forgotten that, here is a
voice, reaching through the wilderness to tell you—
you are beautiful. Miraculous.

Rare as a bird's nest made out of horse hair.

Dear one, you deserve to be looked at with love and grace.

You deserve to know you matter. You are worthy. You are
enough.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Breathe.

Center.

Dear one, never forget it. You. Are. Beautiful.

You are bigger than your thinks

You've probably done some shit.

I have too.

And, oh, how all the bad things you've done, all the ways
you've fallen short, can weigh a person down.

It can be tempting to pull away, tempting to crawl into
a dark hole, because you don't want to be a bother.
Because who would want to listen or be with you,
because who could understand, because who could
ever love a person like you again?

Is that what your voices say?

We've all done some shit.

When that weighs on us, we need to remember, it's what
makes us human.

When that weighs on us, we need to be honest about
what we've done, but then we need to turn toward
and repair instead of turn away and isolate.

Everything you've done is a chance for growth.

You deserve love.

Turn toward.

You deserve to be heard.

Reach out.

You deserve peace.

Be gentle with yourself.

You are bigger than your thinks.

Let me repeat that—you are bigger than your thinks.

You are more than what you've done.

You are moving the obstacles from the past out of the
way, so you can step freely and easily into the future.