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A FAMILY THAT MEDITATES TOGETHER STAYS TOGETHER

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The Allman (assumed name) family was a fairly typical American family with two working parents, three energetic and individualistic children, a comfortable lifestyle that included occasional attendance at a Unitarian church; a somewhat 'hands off' father; and a mother/ wife who felt overworked and underappreciated, as she managed the family's daily routine, dealing with issues from sibling rivalry, sniffles, and snacks for school lunches. Yet the family maintained a unifying closeness and commitment that held them together during rough times. It wasn't until the kids were grown and gone and the mom became ill, however, that the family discovered both hidden weaknesses and hidden strengths that would tear down previously unrecognized barriers and bring the family closer than they had ever imagined possible. Key to that discovery was the unlikely (in their lives) element of meditation.

Meditation became the catalyst for change in various members of the Allman family, spanning three generations. It provided a link to the past to heal old wounds, a bridge across a chasm of misunderstanding and a spiritual spark that reintroduced family members to their true natures. The family found sacred places and spaces to meet once again after years of separation brought about by the marriages and moves of the now-adult children. But this time, the coming together was marked by a profound healing on both emotional and spiritual levels.

Growing up on a farm in Minnesota in the 1930's, Roberta Allman had always been drawn to nature. She spent a lot of time alone and felt somewhat 'different' from her peers, perhaps because of her status as an adopted child. She quickly learned that her creative and curious nature was not approving to her mother, so Roberta subdued her energetic tendencies and came to model the critical and somewhat distant behavior of her mother. She later raised her own children with love and a healthy dose of discipline, all the while harboring an unstated resentment that Tom, her husband, was not taking as active a role in parenting as she would have liked. Little did she realize that Tom, feeling 'he could never please her,' had resigned himself to taking a back seat in parenting out of frustration and feelings of inadequacy.

Meanwhile, the second generation Allmans were experiencing their own growing pains. All three children took advantage of the traditional process of teenage rebellion to explore their own uniqueness. Laura, the oldest and the only daughter, was the first to break away from the family's Unitarian religion in search of a more structured spiritual environment. Tom's influence, it seems, though minimal at home, was stronger in deciding the family's faith. Tom liked the idea of the family having a home church, and being a sociologist with an appreciation of individual differences and personal choice, , enjoyed the open environment offered in the Unitarian religion.

During her teen years, Laura began to gravitate toward the opposite pole. She tried out the more indoctrinated and formal Catholic Church, going so far as to date Catholic boys and eventually

taking Catholic religious instruction. She eventually realized that Catholicism was not for her, coming to feel it was 'too dogmatic and structured.'. Laura changed her spiritual direction again as a young adult in the early 70s, when she discovered meditation.

Matthew, the older of Laura's two younger brothers, introduced Laura to the concept of inner reflection and guidance when he brought home from college an audiotape by Ram Dass. "I hung on every word," Laura recalls. "It was like I'd found something I'd been seeking for a long time." Laura began to read books on New Age and spiritual topics and soon decided that she needed to meet and interact with others who shared her new ideas. She entered an ashram and spent eight years practicing kundalini yoga postures and breathing exercises. Laura met and married her first husband while in the ashram. Their son spent his early childhood among white-turbaned yogis and devotees. Laura eventually left the ashram, finding the isolation too confining. Her spiritual life again floundered for several years as she reeled emotionally from the loss of companionship and community spirit that had played such an important part in her life.

During these eight years, the Allman family seemed to drift apart, both from one another and from their individual spiritual selves. Roberta had hated Laura's involvement in the ashram, feeling threatened by Laura's commitment to this culture and lifestyle that she could not understand. Meanwhile, Matthew, who in college had practiced Transcendental Meditation on a regular basis, now practiced it only irregularly, along with a sporadic practice of yoga. Donald, the youngest brother, following in Matthew's footsteps, continued to be a fan of Ram Dass. But he did not find himself drawn to any special spiritual practice.

With the kids gone, Roberta and Tom began to drift apart. And yet as couples from their generation often did, they simply accepted a less than perfect relationship. Things began to change quickly, however, two years ago when Roberta became ill. Upon nearing seventy, she began to notice an unusual weakness and dizziness when she walked. Having had polio as a child, doctors first ruled out post-polio complications, and concluded that they could find no physical reason for Roberta's deteriorating health after doing CAT scans and a host of blood tests and x-rays. An aberrant virus or psychological origins were their final guesses, and neither sat well with Roberta as her weakness continued to progress.

Concerned over her mom's health, Laura invited Roberta and Tom to visit her in Washington State, where Laura now lived with her second husband and their children. Matthew and his wife were also coming from the East coast for a visit and Laura thought it would be helpful for her mom to feel the support of the family. Laura was worried that Roberta, who had always been so active, was giving up hope of ever living a normal life again. Laura also wanted to try to help Roberta, using hands-on healing techniques that combined Therapeutic Touch and shamanic healing practices she had learned while at the ashram. First, though, Laura knew that she would have to convince Roberta to let her use these techniques on her. Roberta was skeptical, but she was also desperate and she was moved by Laura's conviction. "Laura's faith in the process rubbed off on me," she said.

On a crisp fall day in 1994, Matthew, Laura, Tom and Roberta, along with Laura's husband and Matthew's wife, drove to a secluded spot on Laura's farm near Spokane, Washington. They spread out blankets on bales of hay and to the light of a dazzling moon they meditated together for the first time to the sounds of *Shaman's Dreams* by Anugama. Laura told Roberta, "Mom, think of something that is really important to you. What would you be doing if you were not sick?"

Roberta closed her eyes and allowed the music to drift her off into a pleasant, meditative state. In her hand Roberta held a stone with lichen on it. She had gotten the stone on a beach in New Hampshire, near Matthew's house, when she had last been there. Roberta had always loved lichens; their color and smell reminded her of her childhood on the farm. As she let her mind

wander, Roberta began to imagine a mental picture of her stone, along with a toadstool and a green partridgeberry plant.

These images together represented in her mind nature itself. Roberta realized how important nature was to her, what a big part it had played in her life, and how much she missed it while living these last twenty years in a suburban Ohio neighborhood. Despite her well-cultivated garden and her flowers, Roberta still missed the true closeness to nature that came from being fully surrounded by it as she was right now.

Allowing the music to take her deeper yet into herself, Roberta felt other images overtake her. Soon these images were growing larger and larger, and she found herself in her mind's eye dancing around her lichen stone in a filmy gossamer dress, itself the color of lichens. Her arms were outstretched and she was dancing on her toes, twirling around and alternately reaching down to touch the lichen stone. Then Roberta found herself at the top of an evergreen tree, where she could see all around, and she was filled with a sense of expansiveness and freedom. She began to imagine herself flying over land she had never visited before, seeing rocks, tan colored earth and green tree-lined ridges. As she passed over the top of one ridge, Roberta saw before her a huge image of an Indian, recognizing it as the image on a pin that she had received as a child. She had loved Indians and had felt as a child that when she grew up she would teach in an Indian school.

"That was the most powerful experience I've ever had," Roberta said. She felt that the partridgeberry plant, tenaciously growing out the side of mountain and claiming its precious space among the rocky terrain, represented her own indomitable spirit. "I realized that day," she said, "just how much of myself I'd given up. I realized that who I had been then I still am, what was important to me then – being in nature, and acknowledging my true spirit – is still important to me today."

This experience opened up a new source of understanding and inner guidance that Roberta had never known existed. Both Roberta and Laura knew that Roberta must continue when she got back home to Ohio to practice the processes she had started. "You must find someone to work with you back home," Laura told Roberta as she said goodbye at the end of the visit.

Roberta was doubtful about finding someone else she could feel comfortable enough with to continue this deeply personal process. But as synchronicity would have it, she came to find help in an unlikely place.

I was giving a writing workshop at a local arts center when I first met Roberta and Tom. They were at the workshop to get help with a writing project that involved creating a story out of some old letters that they had saved from their early marriage. I didn't normally do it, but that day I included some brochures about my other work in with my handout materials. Roberta responded immediately when she read the brochure about my psycho-spiritual therapy. "I knew there was another reason for me being here," she said.

We began to work together and found that Roberta still felt resentment at Tom for 'not taking full responsibility' as a parent when the kids were growing up, even though going through the old letters was bringing a new perspective to their relationship. "The letters reminded us of what it was like in the beginning of our marriage, of the strength of the love we had for one another," Roberta recalled. Nonetheless, the old issues were still getting in the way.

I felt that Roberta's emotions might be playing a role in her physical illness, so one of the first things I did was to use a hypnotic finger technique to elicit 'yes' and 'no' answers from her subconscious mind without interference from her logical mind. Roberta's subconscious agreed with her doctors that there was no physical cause for her health problems. But there were emotional as well as spiritual causes. With this information, I pressed Roberta's subconscious for

more information and discovered that using color therapy might be a good healing tool for her. Going through the various choices of colors, Roberta's subconscious indicated that blue (a color often associated with the spiritual realm) would be the best color for her to use, and that she should visualize this color washing over her and through her body during her meditations. I worked with Roberta to help her to learn to meditate in several different ways, using the meditative state as both a state of realignment and healing and also as an avenue for requesting and receiving guidance. During many of our sessions I also used a hands-on healing technique to realign her energy field and readjust her pranic (life force) energy. During this process, I noted that whenever I adjusted the energy center associated with her true self and core emotions, it indicated that a blockage was present. So I asked Roberta if it was possible that she was not in touch with her true self.

Roberta immediately burst into tears. "I haven't been in touch with my true self since I was a little girl," she said. "I feel like two people, the one inside me that I squashed and the one outside that they [her parents and teachers] wanted me to be." Roberta realized that she had become more like her own mother than she had ever intended. As she began to experience and integrate her old emotions, her physical health began to improve. "It's like I'm sorting out years of misunderstandings," she said one day.

Daily meditations played a major part in Roberta's therapy. Because of her difficulty walking and muscle weakness, she had begun to be afraid to take her daily walks. Instead, she visualized herself walking in a strong and confident stride while repeating the following affirmation, "I am walking firmly and easily." Within a month, she began to feel stronger and was soon able to get back to into her walking routine. Recognizing now her attraction to nature, Roberta adjusted her schedule to allow more time for taking long walks in the park. As soon as she grew strong enough, she began to walk alone so she could spend as much time as she wanted, stopping to look at a leaf or a stone.

Roberta's insights prompted her to open up more with the family, dredging up many buried issues for reexamination. There were lots of long distance phone calls as she discussed her meditations and their insights with her family. Roberta realized that she had contributed to her own unhappiness during the early years of her marriage by not speaking up about her frustrations, and instead had slowly closed herself off emotionally from both her husband and her children. Along with the letter project, these insights finally healed the breach between Roberta and Tom.

"The real turning point came," Tom said, when Roberta told him one day, "It wasn't you. It was me. I wasn't happy with me so I couldn't be happy with anyone else." Years of repressed resentment flowed out of Tom and he, too, finally felt the miracle of change. "Now I know what real married life should be like," he said.

I asked him if he thought it was Roberta's involvement with meditation that had allowed the change to take place.

"What else?" he said.

Laura and Matthew, too, have benefited from Roberta's experience with meditation and self-transformation. "I see it as having helped to bring the family back together again," said Matthew. "It's as if Mom began a new life that we all can share. I can talk to her now about things I never could before." Matthew also applauds his mother's courage and openness to change, especially at her age. "She's inspired me to go out on a limb more," he said.

Matthew did go out on a limb himself in 1992 when he accepted the offer of a healing session from his sister Laura. "I felt layers of old emotional stuff breaking up and leaving my body," he said. The power of the experience forged a new bond between them. "For the first time since childhood, I felt as if I had a big sister to look up to and to give me guidance," Mathew said.

Since the Allman's spiritual journey began, other members of the family have joined them. Jacob, Laura's teenage son and third generation Allman, attends a spiritual retreat several times a year where he will often meet up with his uncle Matthew. Donald, Tom and Roberta's other son, also slowly became more interested in the family's favorite topic of conversation. The family bonds became so strong, and the possibility of regular family meditations so appealing, that Roberta and Tom decided in 1998 to move to Washington to be near Laura and her family. Matthew and his wife also moved across the country from New Hampshire, to join the growing family group. Three generations are now all living in close proximity – and meditating together – in a unique tradition of family bonding.

Matthew sees this permanent family reunion as a continuation of the family's growth process. "It's like when I was younger," he said. "But now some of the roles are reversed, and we kids are able to provide guidance to our parents. Meditation has brought our family back together as a team."

Three easy ways to meditate

Most of us could use a way to relax and reduce the stress caused by our busy lives. Many have turned to meditation, an age-old technique that is not only an excellent way to reduce stress, but is also known to be one of the surest and best ways to gain spiritual enlightenment. In meditation one can begin to make a connection with the spiritual realm, meeting angels, guides or spiritual helpers, receiving insights and inspirations, gaining help with problems and guidance for spiritual growth. No wonder meditation is becoming an ever more popular way to relax.

What is meditation? How does one go about getting into a meditative 'state?' Are there techniques to master and rules to follow? While many people do learn to meditate by following a technique such as the popular TM method or the Relaxation Response, the truth is that anyone can begin meditating any time without formal training.

Meditation, simply put, is a quiet mind. Most people can learn to meditate by themselves. There is really no 'right' or 'wrong' way to meditate. All you need is a feeling of relaxation and a sense of inner awareness. I have taught students to meditate for over twenty years, using the simple methods of attuning to their breathing and being aware of the location of awareness or consciousness. Inner peace, resulting from a state of mental and emotional poise, are often achieved when you go inside.

To gain access to your inner self, you must first remove your attention from the outer world. Attuning to your breathing will accomplish this goal quite easily and well. Start by getting into a comfortable position. If you tend to fall asleep when you lie down, you might consider sitting up instead. Close your eyes and relax. Put all of your attention on your breathing, noticing how it feels for the air to come in, your lungs to expand, your diaphragm to recoil. Allow your attention to follow each breath until you are just too relaxed to remember to do so any longer. Then let your mind wander; let all thoughts of the day pass out of your mind. Know that anything important will be there later. You will continue to have thoughts drifting by, but don't stop and examine them, just let them go. If you forget and begin to dwell on a thought that floats by, gently remind yourself to let it go and return your attention to your breathing until your mind begins to drift off again. Sooner or later, as you allow thoughts to float by unattended, you will discover moments of 'emptiness' between thoughts. It is during these moments of profound inner stillness that our bodies and minds realign and balance themselves.

Open focus meditation

The process described above leads to an open focus meditation, where the idea is to turn down the volume of your logical mind, to quiet its chatter by simply not attuning to it. In an open focus meditation you diffuse your attention so that it does not become engaged with any one thing. You focus on breathing until you still your mind; then you release that focus as well.

One focus meditation:

There is another way to meditate and quiet your mind that uses the exact opposite approach to the one mentioned above. Some people find it easier to meditate by not trying to 'let go.' Indeed, if you tell yourself you must let go, you probably won't be able to do it. If you have an active left brain, you may find it easier to use the one focus method.

This method allows you to quiet your mind and turn down the volume of your thoughts by 'boring' your logical mind with a repeated experience. You might use a word or phrase, which would be called a mantra. Repeating your mantra could involve saying to yourself the word, 'relax' over and over for a period of ten to twenty minutes. Or you could maintain the breathing awareness throughout your meditation and use the breath itself as your focal point, which I find more relaxing. Your main goal is to concentrate your awareness, to pin-point it. Then the thoughts that are continually passing through your head cannot take hold, because your attention is already engaged.

Open focus meditation with reflection

Whether you use an open focus or a one focus meditation, at some point in your meditations, your mind will begin to bring up information or insights from your subconscious. Your subconscious learns to take advantage of the 'down time' of your logical mind to slip into your awareness information that it feels is important. You can learn to use this natural reflective process to get answers to questions, solutions to problems, and insights about your life's direction. As you move from the breathing awareness into an open focus meditation, gently mull over in your mind a question or a problem, just wondering about it in a detached and relaxed manner. Then let the thought go, allowing it to move quietly into the background, as you continue to relax in an open focus meditative state. Every once in a while, gently remind yourself that you are seeking an answer to your question and mull over it again momentarily. Then let it go again, repeating this process throughout the meditation. By gently holding the question or problem in your mind, you are pointing your subconscious in a specific direction as it begins to bubble up insights.

Using these methods you can make meditation a valuable and pleasant part of your life. You can gain relaxation and a sense of inner balance as you learn more about yourself and receive guidance for your life. Let meditation take you to the source of your best advice and healing - your own inner mind.

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