

love thyself

FIRST + ALWAYS

*Methods for Living More Freely
as Your Authentic Self*

MICHELLE A. CAWLEY

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LTFA Resources

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Guided Meditations

Area 1: Self-Study – Explore Your Worlds

Area 2: Forgiveness – Forgive Yourself and Others

Area 6: Compassion – Cloud

Area 7: Energy – Grounding Energy

Area 10: Alignment – Chakra Balancing

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Introduction

Growing up, I never felt like I fit in. I spent my 20s and 30s playing by the rules and molding myself to everyone else's needs but my own. I traveled down the 'successful life path' of getting married, buying a house, and starting a family — until...

In December 2012, I was diagnosed with low ovarian reserve and encouraged to try timed intercourse and injections to boost my fertility. We had been trying to start a family for over a year and a half with no success.

Around the same time, an acquaintance who I had openly shared my story with suggested that I take a 'Jill class.' She was referring to the owner of Blue Lotus, a well-respected yoga studio in downtown Raleigh. Unfortunately, it would be a while before I would have the opportunity to practice there.

In the meantime, we experienced three failed rounds of infertility treatments and were told to consider IVF. That's when I hit pause. The idea of injecting myself with more drugs to basically force my body to do what it should do naturally didn't land

well with me. The cost of infertility treatments or adoption were way beyond our reach without an incredible amount of sacrifice, which we weren't willing to make.

After months of considering all of our options, I eventually chose to move forward childfree — the absolute hardest decision of my life. During those initial fateful months of having to live with my choice, I experienced what felt like at the time an insurmountable amount of grief, anger, and heartache. I became a shell of myself — my inner light dimmed to barely an ember — and my heart was completely shattered by the heavy reality right in front of me. I wanted so badly to escape my life. I wanted to run away from the pain. But I didn't.

In February 2014, I finally made it to a Jill class. The yoga philosophy she sprinkled throughout class opened my eyes and heart to a different approach for overcoming life's curveballs. One month later, I attended a yoga retreat in the North Carolina mountains with Jill and Carrington, another highly respected yoga teacher. I had only taken a class with each of them, but they had moved me in such a way that I trusted them with the very emotionally raw state I was in.

I very clearly remember Carrington encouraging us during that Friday evening practice to “lay down your burdens,” to “release what is no longer serving you,” and to “let go.” Those words were exactly what I needed to hear. I wept on my mat that night and off and on throughout the weekend. It was during this retreat that I first heard of the eight-limbed path of yoga, which piqued my interest. When I said goodbye to Jill and Carrington on Sunday, I felt better. Unbeknownst to me, I had started my very long journey towards healing my wounded body, mind, and heart.

In January 2015, we moved to Durham, NC. I continued to practice at the Blue whenever possible and eventually found another studio closer to my house where I started to practice regularly. Fast forward to July 2016, when I completed my first weekend of yoga teacher training. Over the next seven months and beyond, I examined my thoughts and feelings, my behaviors and patterns, and my values and beliefs, which shaped how I wanted to show up in the world. I fed my insatiable

curiosity by reading books by well-known authors like Brené Brown, Donna Farhi, Julia Cameron, and Jen Sincero; I listened to podcasts about Buddhism; and I started to reclaim a greater sense of self defined by my heartfelt desires. I earned my certification in January 2017 and started teaching that March.

Around this time I had two realizations: 1) my darkest days guided me towards the healing practice of yoga, and 2) my decision to go childfree was my way of throwing the rule book out the window and finally choosing how I wanted to live my life — no one else's.

Craving more information and deeper work, I completed my first of many 300-hour training modules that summer with Blue Lotus. I also separated from my now ex-husband that fall, and I said yes to just about every teaching opportunity offered, including 6 am classes. (Oof!)

I loved teaching so much that I shifted my focus. I started freelancing in July 2018 to free up my schedule, which meant I gave up a cushy salary, moved out of my fancy downtown apartment and into a house with roommates, and worked five different jobs to keep a roof over my head.

Over the next two years, I started to live into this idea of being me. I made it a point to notice and continue doing what felt good in my body. I aligned my daily life with the people, places, and activities I love so dearly. I challenged myself by going on my first backpacking trip – solo – in the backcountry of Virginia. I took more solo adventures that gave me the courage to be me and to follow my passions. I fell in love again for the first time in over 15 years. It's been quite the ride thus far, and I'm curious to see what the Universe has in store for me next.

The practice of yoga has taught me so much about myself and the human experience. It helped me tap into my true voice. It challenged me to be ok with the uncomfortable. It kept me curious. It brought me home to my authentic self. It helped me accept my past, and embrace the unknown with my arms and heart wide

open. It helped me heal and feel like I finally belonged to myself first.

Looking back now, it was all worth it. I've grown so much as a teacher and as a human being. Without these experiences, I wouldn't be where I am today — helping people like you live more freely as their most authentic self.

As I write this, it's now August 2020. Now more than ever we need to learn how to love ourselves wholeheartedly so that we can accept one another for who we are — individually and as a collective.

I believe Self-Love is a learned practice. One we're not taught from a young age. Instead, we're fed expectations, labels, and agreements that start to restrict us into a box that limits both self and social relationships. It's not until we discover we've abandoned ourselves that we decide we want to fall head over heels in love with us for possibly the first time ever. That's where *Love Thyself, First + Always* comes in.

LTFA invites you to dig deep into the dark crevices we try to ignore, examine what is there, evaluate what you want to keep for yourself and what you need to release, and consciously choose how you move forward from a heart-centered place.

LTFA is a book and workbook in one. It blends the 10 areas of Self-Love with yoga philosophy and powerful questions, all designed to help you become the self-loving machine you deserve.

The purpose of LTFA is to:

- Remind you of the renewable light within you, your inner compass, your true essence.
- Cultivate a life-long practice of self-awareness, acceptance, and forgiveness.
- Shift your perception of self towards living more confidently and unapologetically *you* as only you can.

- Align your thoughts, actions, and spoken words with your highest Self.
- Encourage you to embrace the dark and light within you, within all of us.
- Foster a strong sense of self that is resilient to life's curveballs.
- Design and implement strategies for creating the life you most desire.

Let's begin, shall we?



About the Author

A born-and-raised Ohioan with a desire to rebel against the status quo, Michelle made the extremely difficult decision to live childfree after infertility. She used yoga and meditation's therapeutic practices to transform her life into the vision she craved — to feel lighter, to feel more adventurous, and to feel free to be her authentic Self. She graduated high school with an extra tassel because of her passion for storytelling. Michelle resumed her love of writing when she felt called. With a BFA in dance performance from East Carolina University, an MBA from the University of Phoenix, and over 15 years in the advertising and marketing industry, Michelle brings a wealth of diverse knowledge and life experiences to her work. She currently resides in North Carolina and spends her free time exploring the U.S. in her Airstream Basecamp with her cat Carmey.

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