

Life is the Classroom

By Nancy Vanderheide

A Presence permeated the room.

Lisa had been in a coma for three solid days. At 34, my sister's war with cancer was nearly over.

Suddenly, she spoke, clearly and with authority.

"Peter," she said, "Answer the door. He's coming in."

We froze in that strange borderland where hope and dread stop feeling like opposites and start feeling like the same thing. We heard no knock. No footsteps. Her husband leaned towards her and suddenly her voice cut through the room again, lucid, calm, and unmistakably present.

"Go," she urged. "Let him in."

I looked across the bed at our parents and exchanged a glance with my husband.

Before Peter could move, her face relaxed.

"Oh, never mind," she said gently. "He's walking up the hallway."

Seconds later, she sat straight up in the bed and lifted her arms toward the sky, greeting a beloved Friend. The air in the room shifted markedly, ushering in a profoundly numinous experience.

"You're here," she said. "I'm ready. Take me home."

And then she was gone. Awe suffused my entire being, even as I became aware of how thoroughly her essence had vacated her body.

My sister's passing was my first intimate experience with the presence of death, and my first fully conscious encounter with the divine. It was not frightening. It was not an ending.

It was unmistakably alive.

Something surged towards awareness in those precious moments and suddenly I knew: We are not separate from God. We never were.

And life is anything but random.

Life is organized through a vast web of interactions. It is a living, breathing tapestry that weaves our lives and our souls to one another, to Source and to something that persists when the body is released. Life is an intelligence that teaches us through love, arrival, and return, and reminds us that nothing meaningful in this life is ever lost, only transformed...

The Early Grades: What I Was Taught to Learn

When I began my career as a psychologist I adhered to the firmly sanctioned syllabus of the time.

Science was acceptable in psychology. Spirituality was not.

Working with altered states, imagery, and intuition was permissible, but only if you characterized it as purely psychological. We spoke of hypnotherapy as “the relaxation response,” and never as consonant with meditation or prayer. We didn’t speak of spirit or God. We certainly didn’t speak of transcendence.

So, I cloistered my relationship with Source and spoke the languages of psychodynamic and systems theories.

I showed up as my professional self, competent, grounded, credible. My internal, private self, deeply aware of another reality, was relegated to relative silence.

Looking back, I see those years as early schooling, providing necessary structure. As I worked my career path, I learned how to hold space, how to listen, how to regulate emotion, and help clients connect to meaning.

But I also became increasingly adept at hiding parts of myself in service of credibility and belonging. Essential as that was, I sacrificed authenticity in favor of compliance.

Compliance is not the royal road to wisdom. My sister’s death illuminated a hole in the syllabus.

She was a born-again Christian. Her language was Jesus. My language was different, but what happened in that room transcended theology. It was not symbolic. It was not imagined.

It was *witnessed*.

Ten years earlier my husband and I found ourselves deeply disheartened in a life that looked perfectly respectable from the outside.

We had returned from college just in time to rescue his family’s business when disabilities struck his parents. It was competitive, materialistic, and exhausting. We joined the Chamber of Commerce. We did what business owners have to do. I tried to convince myself that I enjoyed my role and was putting my talents to good use. But a spark within me was flickering out.

Fortunately, an article about the Esalen Institute in Big Sur caught our attention. A “Disneyland for grownups,” Esalen is a retreat center and birthplace of the human potential movement, offering workshops to those exploring human consciousness.

We decided to check it out.

Esalen was an alternate universe. Perched on verdant land undulating atop cliffs suspended above the ocean, it was a magical, welcoming garden, spacious, and deeply humane. The people we encountered sought to understand themselves and seek meaning in their lives.

I loved the hypnotherapy workshops, enabling us to access our internal resources for healing. One participant in an early group had a breakthrough that touched us all. Somersaulting down a grassy hill, intermittently laughing and crying, he shouted, “It doesn’t have to be the way you thought it had to be!”

My body absorbed the declaration as nourishment. What if life wasn’t meant to be simply endured? What if success didn’t require self-abandonment?

Esalen taught me that there are many classrooms in life, and that success begins with choosing those that help you become fully alive.

Learning Through Service

We returned to Esalen frequently, compelled by the rich rewards of personal development. Answering phones at a community crisis hotline came next, not for advancement but because serving brought us joy.

This engagement with mental health fueled an insatiable fascination with psychology, and I found myself taking undergrad classes through UCLA’s extension program, working my way through the full curriculum required for a degree in psychology.

My husband suggested that we expand our exploration into graduate school and from there we became licensed, first as MFT’s and then as Clinical Psychologists. My expansion continued as I earned a post-doctoral degree in relational psychoanalysis.

In a very gratifying way, life was shaping us not into experts, but into *containers*, teaching us to hold pain, uncertainty, and complexity without collapsing.

Life, in its quiet intelligence, was showing us the value of risking the comfortable known for the freedom of following our bliss, drawing us on towards authentic authority well before crisis would demand it of us.

If you’ve ever looked back and realized that the hardest seasons were preceded by eons of subtle preparation, you know what I mean. We are rarely thrown into the deep end without being taught how to swim. Sometimes the training looks mundane. Sometimes it looks like service.

Sometimes it looks like work that stretches your ability to stay present with pain that can't be fixed.

Our next classroom was the hardest of all.

Life's Own Graduate School Begins

In 2017, my husband was diagnosed with advanced esophageal cancer.

The doctors were direct. If he endured rigorous rounds of chemo, radiation and surgery, he had a three percent chance of survival.

Three percent.

These were odds we couldn't accept. Impelled by a neighbor's full recovery from multiple sclerosis, we followed in her footsteps to a healer in Brazil.

As soon as we arrived, the Casa's magic revealed itself in the psychically attuned travelers who surrounded us. Even before we encountered Juan de Dios, the healer, my husband Sietze began having mystical experiences and visions, as did the others in our small group. Although I was heartened, I felt somewhat envious of their psychic encounters until I received an oddly compelling dream of pre-celebrity Marilyn Monroe, the unglamorous Norma Jean Baker. The uncanny feel of the dream remained until that afternoon, when I encountered her visage gazing back at me from a prayer card. Nurse Sheila, the entity in charge of the Casa infirmary, bore a stunning resemblance to the woman in my dream. It gave me hope that the magic was also available to me.

This is how awakening works. Not as a lightning bolt, but as a tuning. When you begin to trust that anything is possible, the world responds with more. Symbols repeat. Images find you. And slowly, you realize you are not separate from the signal, you're part of it.

Life is constantly offering signs through dreams, coincidences, and sudden recognitions, but we're usually moving too fast to catch them. We dismiss the illogical, call it imagination and move on. But intuition is a muscle that strengthens when we pay attention.

When we returned home, tests proclaimed the cancer vanquished. There were no tumors. No markers. An endoscopy revealed smooth pink cells lining the esophagus in place of the angry ulcerations that had made each swallow torture.

It was a miracle.

We took full advantage of the time we had been given, seeking out new curricula in new classrooms.

Two years later, observing Thanksgiving at Esalen, his symptoms reappeared and I thought back to the words he had said when first diagnosed. "I just wish I had a little more time." We had been given that miracle of time.

Time to live.
Time to love.
Time to keep learning.

His final decline was mercifully fast and within the month I knew we were mere days away from his transition. I sent the hospice staff away and called a friend. We dimmed the lights, lit candles and lined the room with fresh flowers. Accompanied by soft music, we reached out to the spirit guides who had been our companions since Brazil.

As I ministered to his body throughout the night, I murmured the soothing trance patter we had practiced with each other since early in our new lives as therapists. The night passed in a quiet space untouched by time. I was applying cool water to his forehead as the first light of dawn unfurled.

Suddenly, his eyes flew open as he deliberately sought my full attention. "Are you okay?" I started to ask. "Oh - are you going now? Home?" His eyes held mine in a steady gaze. "Do you see the rainbow bridge?" He nodded as he raised a thin arm and, with surprising strength, brought my head towards his. My lips received his kiss and the words "I love you." And like the sun plunging abruptly behind a mountain at dusk, like my sister, drawn into the arms of Jesus, he was gone.

Once more, Truth flowed into the room and filled it. There is no death. There is only transition. We are one.

Life Is the Classroom

Life is a school and the evolution of our souls occurs in its playground of challenges. Rather than understanding it as signifying that something is wrong, I know that difficulty is inherent to life and plays a necessary, formative role. We must take the risk of responding open-heartedly to life's overtures or we cease to thrive.

The question is never *Why did this happen?* The real question is *What must I learn from this?*

I could no longer tolerate sequestering my truth outside my work. The cost was too high and I craved wholeness. With relief, I brought spirituality fully into my work as a lived practice.

Central to my philosophy is a simple truth: growth depends on a felt sense of safety. Not the kind of safety that insulates from discomfort, but the kind that allows the nervous system to relax its chronic hypervigilance. Successful self-regulation results in the emergence of a leader's presence as a field within which feeling held is experienced somatically, where affect can arise

without threat of overwhelm. The alignment of the leader's words, values and actions in a trustworthy internal coherence holds space for uncertainty without rushing to premature closure, modeling tolerance for ambiguity and not-knowing. Control relaxes into curiosity, defensiveness into creative thought. It is not about commanding attention, but about regulating the emotional space so that others can bring their full capacities forward, effort aligns naturally, complexity becomes workable, and shared aims feel reachable rather than imposed.

If life is the classroom, then leadership is what we practice when the lesson is difficult. We do not lead by having answers; we lead by how we meet uncertainty. That requires us to be present instead of reactive, open instead of certain, grounded instead of armored. And to that end, we bring into every area of life consistency, congruence, reliability, humility, and kindness.

Whatever you are facing now is not a detour from your development. It is the curriculum shaping your capacity to hold more—more complexity, more grit and more humanity, even as you learn to stay regulated, awake, and engaged. Progress is measured by your willingness to remain enrolled even when you don't understand the lessons.

Practices That Keep Me Enrolled

We have long known that insight alone is insufficient for change to occur. Healing must reach not only the mind, but also embodied emotional states, the world of unconscious dynamics and organizing patterns, and the intersubjective field of pure awareness where we can experience the spiritual interconnectedness of all things. Awareness must be sought, tended, stabilized, and embodied.

Regulating my nervous system is not optional. Without it, no amount of healing can take root. Through meditation, I learned to sit with my own mind without needing to control it. Through hypnotherapy, I learned how to speak gently to the unconscious. Yoga became a way to notice where I was holding or resisting life. Apprehending the vital role of energy's unhindered movement throughout the body, I became a Reiki Master.

Breathwork taught me how to interrupt old survival patterns in real time, to come back into my body when fear or grief tried to pull me away. For me, breathwork paired with meaningful music is perhaps the most powerful tool in the toolbox, as evocative music paired with profound lyrics excavates even the most deeply exiled feelings. The light of compassion can then transform and integrate them into a richer, more coherent sense of self. These practices are study habits that foster devotion to Presence, to staying awake.

After my husband passed, traditional holidays lost meaning and became markedly painful. The calendar felt empty and disorienting. It was then that I became more aware of the cadence of nature. The phases of the moon, eclipses, the solstices and equinoxes spoke to my soul, as did the ancient holidays that mark natural cycles of death and rebirth. I resonate deeply with the rhythms of nature that remained intact when my world collapsed. Aligning with them brings me joy and always reminds me that loss and renewal are not failures in living but expressions of it.

The Heart of Success

Success is the courage to stop abandoning yourself in order to belong. It is the willingness to bring all of who you are into the room—your intellect and your intuition, your competence and your vulnerability, your grief and your joy—without asking any part of yourself to stay behind.

My sister and husband both showed me that there is no separation. That what we call death is not an ending, but a homecoming. That there is nothing to hide from. That authenticity follows the refusal to conform.

Life does not want us to be perfect. It is not asking us to transcend our humanity. It is asking us to be present. To listen. To *learn*.

When we stop resisting the curriculum, our truest selves step to the front.

That, to me, is the heart of success.