

## CHAPTER 1



# When Life Puts the Squeeze On You

## *Rediscovering Yourself*

When he was six years old, the story begins, a little boy saw a picture in a book about the jungle that showed a boa constrictor swallowing a creature.

The little boy was fascinated by this picture and it fired his imagination. He pondered what he had seen in the book and eventually took out his colored pencils and made his own initial drawing of a boa constrictor. He was incredibly proud of his drawing and called it his Drawing Number One—as if it were a symbol of his life, somehow representing the whole of his existence.

When the six-year-old showed his drawing to the grownups in his life, instead of seeing a boa constrictor digesting an elephant, they thought it was a drawing of a hat. Whenever he showed it to adults, he received the same response. The youngster concluded that none of the grownups had any imagination at all!

The narrator depicts grownups as devoid of imagination.

This is his way of saying that if you want to get along in the adult world, you have to conform to the way adults do things. You can't "waste your time" on such qualities as a sense of wonder. You'd better not expend mental energy on feelings of awe. You don't have room in your life for mystery, just those issues the adult world takes seriously—or what the author refers to as "matters of consequence."

No, don't dare "draw" life your own way! Learn the "right way to draw" by doing things the way everybody else does them.

When you began life's journey, you were wide-open to your world and the experiences it offers. You had a fertile imagination. All you lacked were the practical skills with which to explore and to express yourself. Such self-discovery, ongoing throughout life, is what fuels the ability to sustain romance and passion in an adult relationship.

The boa constrictor is carefully chosen by the author to illustrate what more likely happened to you during your formative years. Instead of opening you up to more and more of yourself, growing up very probably had the opposite effect.

Perhaps you enjoy boa constrictors—I'm quite sure they are charming in their own way. For most of us though, boa constrictors conjure up a definite image. If you are at all like the average person, during the journey from childhood to adulthood much of the vitality was squeezed out of you. Instead of developing as a whole person, with your imagination fully alive, you learned to curtail your excitement. Rather than following your own unique bent, you learned from the adults in your life, who cycle these behaviors from generation to generation, that only some aspects of your personality were acceptable, only some of your interests to be applauded, while other elements were to be discouraged.

Those parts of you that were frowned upon eventually atrophied. Whereas you started out open to the whole of yourself—indeed, open to the fullness not only of your own humanity, but of the universe itself—you gradually shut down to those parts of yourself that didn't receive validation. As your vision narrowed, your ability to experience a world of wonder diminished—and with it your capacity for the romance and passion that make for a wonderful life.

Drawing represents the little boy's attempts to express himself. His early drawings are revealing because his ability to connect with a partner when he grows up will depend in large measure on his childhood experiences. By age six, the first and only drawings he makes are of boa constrictors. In other words, he already perceives himself in a restricted way. Adult society has quickly narrowed him, so that even at this tender age he can no longer access much of his imagination, creativity, vitality. This will limit his ability to connect with others, especially a partner, in a fulfilling manner later in life. A relationship of any kind, whether a friendship, a family member, or a romance, is only magical to the degree that the two individuals experience themselves as magical. But this is less and less how the little boy feels.

Though there may be passionate interludes, chances are you don't live your whole life passionately. For instance, you may enjoy fleeting moments of romance, but your everyday life is no longer permeated with romance. Sadly, many experience romance only on television, in movies, and through novels. You go on an adventure for a week or two, but life itself isn't a thrilling adventure. You experience creative moments, but you don't create your own magical reality each and every day from your internal richness. Flashes of insight occur

to you, but you don't live insightfully. Instead you become a practical person. You conform, which requires that you compromise yourself. You fit in with the expectations of family, peers, and the broader society to which you belong.

When life begins to constrict you, you don't necessarily give up completely right away though. There's often still some spark left in you, revealed by the six-year-old's next effort. Not totally disheartened by the response of the adults to his first masterpiece, the little boy attempted another drawing, this time drawing the inside of the boa constrictor to help the grownups in his life get a clear picture of what it was he had drawn. Having lost their own native insight, grownups have to have everything explained to them. Ah, we are so rational, so down-to-earth!

The little boy called this second piece of artwork Drawing Number Two, for it too is a symbol of his whole life. The first drawing pictured the external constrictions society placed upon him as he grew. This second drawing is the flip-side of the coin, representing the internal constrictions the young boy now began placing upon himself. Adult rejection of his fledgling attempts to express himself resulted in self-rejection.

Sadly, recalls the little boy now grown, the grownups advised him "to lay aside my drawings of boa constrictors, whether from the inside or the outside, and devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic, and grammar." Everyone knows that at the end of the day you must make money. You can't make a living by "drawing!" Society requires you to become a bottom-line person.

The "good life" in the modern world is built on practicality, not on wonder, imagination, mystery, passion. Society focuses on economic development, which requires the development

of skills for the work place, not the development of your inner person.

In school, perhaps you were equipped to earn a future living, but were you taught how to live? Were you invited to come fully alive, awake to every aspect of your being? If you attended the usual learning institutions, more likely your own rhythms as a child were ignored. At a time when you were excited about yourself and discovering your world, you were forced to sit at a desk and get down to “the task at hand.”

The image of the boa constrictor says that as children grow up, they become alienated from their truest self. In growing up, the pilot learned to bury his uniqueness in order to fulfill the expectations of his parents, his teachers, and society. He learned to shut down his inner world and to conform. His story was squeezed to fit into their story. This is why all he could draw were boa constrictors. Even his artwork was crying out that society was crushing him!

The consequence of constricting children’s imaginations is evident in the dull drudgery many of us tramp through year after year in our home life, places of work, and retirement. Fulfillment should come from feeling a deep connection between yourself and the people and activities that make up your life. However, in the kaleidoscope of the daily rush, fulfilling connection is too often absent—or at best happens in passing.

When your contact with others is largely superficial, it stunts your ability to commune deeply with another person. Attempts at togetherness frequently feel contrived instead of spontaneous, strained instead of natural. Though at times you talk incessantly, you fail to say anything meaningful. Your real self hides behind a facade of niceties, a feigned enjoyment of

each other, an affected interest in the activities through which you search for togetherness.

In short, adult life for many of us consists of a routine that fails to engage our souls.

When your identity is shaped for you by the demands and rush of society, sometimes the only trace of the sense of wonder and connection with which you entered the world is a gnawing feeling that somewhere along the way, you lost touch with what it's all about.

All of this is symbolized by what adults see in the narrator's two drawings of the boa constrictor. Everyone to whom he shows the drawings sees a hat. Though written in 1943, the book is set in 1937. In the world of that day, you were rarely seen outdoors in public without a hat. A hat was a symbol of conformity to the conventions of the community. It represents the fine, upstanding, fully-constricted citizen.

If you are in a romantic relationship, and you and your partner have lost your passion for each other—if one or the other of you rarely has time for the relationship and would rather be doing something else—you might ask whether it's because your deepest self is constricted. How much of your real self ever developed to be available to engage a partner? Individuals who are only half alive are neither truly fascinating themselves nor very interested in anyone else. Little wonder they have difficulty sustaining a meaningful connection.

The story of the little prince is an antidote to your alienation—an alienation from yourself initially, and thence from your partner. The book invites you to recapture the wide openness you once knew in childhood—asks you to discover anew the wonder and awe, the sense of mystery, the passion and romance that feed authentic connection.

How do you recapture your original view of life as a smorgasbord of opportunity to be seized with your whole being?

Says the narrator, reminiscing about the nature book that so enthused him at the tender age of six, he spent a lot of time “pondering” the drawings of the jungle. It was his pondering that led to his desire to draw. Deep awareness like this—being truly present, awake, alert, instead of having a mind filled with endless dull, nonsensical chatter—will fire within you a yearning to express how you truly feel within yourself.

Children instinctively ponder. Watch a baby study a person’s face sometime. The baby isn’t afraid to look—to really look, with an intensity that would unnerve many adults. Look at an adult with a steady gaze for even a few moments and the person is likely to turn away or say defensively, “What?” or “Don’t stare!” Yet behavior that’s often uncomfortable for adults feels perfectly normal to youngsters. It’s from pondering that their sense of wonder springs—and the deep connection such wonder facilitates.

How sad it is that our ability to ponder gets crushed. Though as adults our bodies entwine in what we call “making love,” it’s usually in the dark or with our eyes closed. We darren’t look at each other in our most intimate of moments—at least, not for long. We hold the greatest wonder of all in each other’s arms, yet we fail to ponder this best of life’s gifts. How much love can we have for someone we don’t even listen to much of the time, let alone ever really see?

The ability to ponder comes naturally to children because they have a great ability to be present. Instead of dwelling on past regrets or obsessing about what tomorrow might bring, the child savors the moment. Until, that is, we soak them in sound bites and hassle them to “hurry up.”

Children should be encouraged to ponder in the way they naturally do. This way, they will stay in touch with their feeling self. They will live their whole life in the present—a rarity among humans, whose thoughts are frequently elsewhere when they talk to each other, look at each other, or touch.

Not just in romantic situations but in so much of life, we appear to be with our partner, our children, our friends, but we aren't really "here."

Savoring the moment is the key to deep connection. When you touch, you really touch—deep beneath the skin, right to the heart. When you converse, you say what you actually mean, and you focus until you truly understand each other, even though you may disagree and have to tolerate the fact you disagree. And when you look, you see all the way into the soul. You feel the connection, and you don't let it go.

Especially in our romantic relationships, many of us are merely going through the motions. Whether in the perfunctory way we caress each other in order to get to the "main act," or in the evasive chitchat we engage in over a romantic dinner, we're like the adults aboard express trains that race past a railway switchman the little prince will meet after he arrives on Earth. Back and forth the brightly lit trains rush, and the little prince asks, "Were they not satisfied where they were?"

"No one is ever satisfied where he is," says the switchman.

No matter what your outward circumstances, you can never be satisfied until you recognize that satisfaction comes from being true to yourself. No change of partner, switch of location, or alteration of lifestyle can fulfill you. Wherever you go, whoever you are with, whatever you are doing, you take yourself with you. If your real self is in hiding, or you are betraying yourself, all of this goes with you into your next endeavor.



You can't experience authentic connection with another unless you're willing to connect with your deepest self. If what you do on the surface of your life doesn't mirror your essence—if you're dishonest about your real desires, not revealing them to your partner, family, or friends, not taking action on them lest you rock the boat—you'll forever feel dissatisfied. Dissatisfied with yourself, you'll be unable to connect with anyone in a fulfilling way. Until your inner world and your outer world align, meaningful connection between you and those who matter to you will always be sporadic, if it happens at all.

As a third express races by, the little prince will ask, "Are they pursuing the first travelers?"

The switchman explains that they aren't pursuing anything. Instead, they are asleep, or at least yawning. He adds, "Only the children are flattening their noses against the windowpanes."

Finding yourself means waking up and beginning to pay attention to what you're doing. You start to notice what really interests you—what's of consequence to you.

Waking up from the psychological slumber of the adult world entails sifting the deep currents of the heart and separating them from the surface chop of emotions. Few of us seem willing to probe our thoughts and feelings deeply enough to make such a separation. Life for many of us is an emotional seesaw. Hardly aware of our real self at all, we display little solid self as we are first swayed in one direction, then in the opposite direction.

You may need to catch the express if you've lingered too long in a relationship that's never going to be fulfilling, a career that doesn't fire your imagination, or a location that

doesn't nourish your soul. But if you decide to change your situation, you need to do so with your nose flattened against life's windows, so you make your decisions consciously and not yawning with boredom at the thought of what you're choosing.

Neither does an awake person make decisions merely in reaction to a distasteful situation. If you are alert, keen, excited about your life, rather than stumbling blindly from one meaningless situation to another, you'll make changes that spring from being true to yourself.

The importance of being acutely aware of the moment is a concept at the core of most of the world's great spiritual paths. For many centuries Judaism was largely silent about an afterlife, stressing the importance of living fully now. Jesus, who was a Jew, invited people to experience "life abundant"—a quality of life characterized by being truly awake, fully alert. Similarly, Zen points to being fully present in whatever you do. The Zen key to life is to engage life completely. To do this requires awareness, which flows from spending time pondering.

Ask yourself, do you take time to ponder the faces in your life? Do you allow yourself to feel a sense of wonder in the presence of a rose—a real one, or a human being who is the "rose" in your life? And do you ponder your own life? For instance, in each moment of your day, do you allow yourself to be aware of how much real connection you are experiencing? Or do you find yourself "connected" only in a pseudo manner, as you alternately need someone intensely for a while, then push them away either by locking horns with them or distancing them with the "silent treatment?" In all of such behavior, you skim across the surface of life instead of exploring its juicy core.

When the adults failed utterly to respond with imagination to Drawing Number Two and pointed the little boy instead to practical matters, he at last became disheartened. Remember, Drawing Number One is a boa constrictor seen from the outside, whereas Drawing Number Two is the boa constrictor seen from the inside. The view of the boa constrictor from the inside teaches us that not only is a sense of wonder at the world around us discouraged, but to explore the terrain of our inner world is out of bounds too.

It's possible you don't know how to get in touch with what's going on inside you—with how constricted your inner life is from all the weighty things you've been forced to digest. Society certainly won't encourage you to do this. If you ever got in touch with what's happening inside you, you might begin to change, which would be a threat to a whole world of constricted adults. You might become passionate, connected, deeply involved in all aspects of your life. Many of the adults in your life could never tolerate this! Consequently, society presses you to compromise yourself by conforming. And so the little-boy-now-grown relates, "That is why, at the age of six, I gave up what might have been a magnificent career as a painter."

Instead, our narrator learned to fly airplanes. Of course, for such a career the practical subjects to which he turned his attention in school proved valuable—particularly geography. These things are always good to know. The problem with this kind of knowledge is that it doesn't facilitate connection to what you're doing or to the person you're with. So when you make these subjects the be-all-and-end-all of your life, you can end up leading a highly productive life but missing out on the one thing that makes everything else meaningful—knowing and living

from your essence, which is the key to meaningful connection with your activities, the world around you, and other people, especially a partner. You spend your days either running from connection, unaccustomed to it as you are, or yearning for it but not taking the steps that might enable you to find it.

The lack of connection you experience is depicted by the narrator's choice of a career as a pilot of a single-engine plane. For him to engage in such a career required him to be alone a great deal. He must also be a precise, technical, mechanical type of person—especially if he's going to fix his own airplane, as he'll in due course need to do. The point of the symbol of the pilot flying alone is that he spends his days literally over people's heads, in a world of his own, devoid of real connection.

The isolation of flying solo is symbolic of what the little boy's life has become now that he's an adult. He explains, "So I lived my life alone, without anyone that I could really talk to."

What a devastating description of so many modern lives! Despite our highways and skyways and electronic networks, heart-to-heart connection is the linchpin of few lives. Many of us are lonely even when we have people all around us.

Perhaps, like countless couples, you lie in bed at night side-by-side with your partner, desperately lonely. If your bodies touch, even in your union you experience not connection but isolation, your thoughts on someone other than the person you're with, miles away in fantasy. Or you're so needy of your partner that you can never experience this person for who they really are, only for what you need them to be.

You might manage to escape your loneliness for a time. You can bury it beneath a busy schedule, paper it over with a slew of social activities, crowd it out with surface friendships,

mask it in emotional household entanglements. But eventually you lose someone dear to you, your career collapses, a friendship which has succored you ends, or you have to give up a nest that has furnished a certain security. Perhaps only now do you become acutely aware that you are alone, utterly and irrevocably alone.

Instead of waiting until your life is largely spent to discover how terribly disconnected you really are, if you would allow your loneliness to dawn fully in the present, you'd recognize that the lonely existence you've been leading is no way to live. You'd realize the importance of real connection to everyone and everything that forms your life. You'd let go of unfruitful relationships and pointless activities, seeking instead only relationships that nourish your soul and activities that are rewarding.

Though you hide behind pseudo-togetherness and fake busyness, in your heart you know you yearn for genuine connection. You long for someone you can really talk to, someone with whom you can truly commune, and something to do that sets your heart aflame.

The little-boy-become-adult doesn't have much respect for the way adults settle for such a truncated life. During the course of his life, he has spent a lot of time among adults, often having an opportunity to observe them closely. As a result, he doesn't have a very high opinion of them. Having seen the way many adults settle for such a shallow existence, he doesn't care to be like them. Instead, he makes a point of seeking out those rare individuals who promise something more meaningful.

Unfortunately, many who at first seem enlightened also turn out to be shallow, having only a pseudo-depth that isn't

actually life-changing. Recounts the pilot, “Whenever I met one of them who seemed to me at all clear-sighted, I tried the experiment of showing him my Drawing Number One, which I have always kept.” He wanted to find out whether this was a person with true understanding. The result was always the same—the grownup thought the boa constrictor was a hat.

Whenever someone described the pilot’s drawing as a hat, he changed the topic of conversation. Instead of talking about the things that were truly meaningful to him, he would bring himself down to the person’s level, talking to him “about bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties.” Whereupon the individual was “greatly pleased to have met such a sensible man.”

Many who appear to be enlightened—who may be psychologically attuned, environmentally aware, or have an air of spirituality—are usually no more able to make real contact than the average adult. They buy into a pop psychology or a pseudo spirituality that sounds good but doesn’t result in emotional maturity or true intellectual curiosity. The moment you begin to go deep, such people become either disinterested or restless. Accustomed to discussing niceties, anything that brings them into a real awareness of their inner self proves unsafe. Anything that evokes intense feelings—feelings of introspection represented by boa constrictors, of mystery pictured by jungles, of wonder symbolized by stars—makes them uncomfortable.

We live in a world of corseted, compromised people. Such individuals are afraid to plumb the depths. They are fearful of being out of their league. Their boa constrictor upbringing has done its job well. Many people are so out of touch with themselves that it’s impossible for them to connect with a partner—or with anyone on a close basis.

The rediscovery of your own center is the antidote to your

alienation. This rediscovery of your deepest self is what the story of the little prince is all about.

First you must face how you run from yourself—recognize how you use activities, social status, relationships in which you fail to be true to yourself, and material possessions to cover up your inner void, the emptiness of your soul. If you stop to ponder your life, you already have an inkling where the lack of connection lies. You sense the ways in which you sell yourself out—how you compromise yourself and settle for mediocrity. In due course, the little prince will explain how to bring what you already sense to the forefront of your awareness so you can act on it.

Second, you need to realize there's no reason to run from yourself. Though you may feel alienated, in truth your center is part of a universal life that's bursting with love and joy. At the heart of reality is an ecstasy that has birthed the galaxies. This is what Jesus of Nazareth was pointing to when he said, "The kingdom of heaven is within you." There's a play on words in the Greek, where "within" also means "among." The journey toward connection leads inward—and when you truly journey within, with deep self-understanding, you discover what a huge difference it makes to live your life with authentic connection. Finally having someone with whom you can really talk changes everything.

Though you may be little aware of it, there is within you an ability to connect that can transcend all alienation. By tapping into this original self, which was crushed in growing up, you end your estrangement and again find yourself embarked on "a magnificent career as a painter." In order to truly grow up, you must rediscover a part of yourself that got buried in those years when you were supposedly "growing up." You allow

yourself to awaken to the part of you that's spontaneous, feeling, excited, and genuine.

I'm talking about learning to be true to yourself. Children know how to do this because they are real, and it's back to your real self that you are called by the little prince. Fulfillment is a soul thing. It expands as you become increasingly true to your essence in all aspects of your life.

"Life is either a grand adventure," said Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf, "or it is nothing at all." It's by finding again your most authentic self, beneath the false self that's been layered onto you, that you can experience life as a grand adventure—and experience the connection you crave with the people who matter to you, especially a partner for whom life is also a passionate experience.

The journey begins when you have the courage to face up to the fact you've been defined by a boa constrictor and understand how tightly it has held you in its grip.