

A View From the Loft, a publication of the Loft Literary Center January - February 2008 Issue

Climbing the Mountain

BY DARA SYRKIN

Julie Rappaport enrolled in ten Loft classes and a couple of workshops in the spring of 2004. She spent entire days at Open Book, absorbing and pondering; writing and eating with her classmates and instructors. Her goal: to write a book with her ex-husband and their daughter about surviving divorce with the family intact.

As Julie and her former husband, Lee Liberman, were in the process of divorcing, they sought help from a therapist for their daughter, Tasha. The therapist, impressed with the family's solidity and attitudes toward each other, suggested Julie and Lee write a book. The seed was planted.

The book, however, is about much more than the process of divorcing. It's about the journey of self-discovery, self-determination, and self-worth. It's about how powerful love can be—in all its forms.

All of the family's voices are heard in their book, *Relational Shifts: A Family Doesn't Have to End Just Because a Marriage Does*. Julie and Lee illuminate their perspectives on their lives as reflected in their marriage and divorce. Tasha adds her voice to the divorce process and subsequent life changes. The book is heart-wrenchingly honest as it takes readers through the soul-searching thoughts and reflections of the family's intertwined journey.

Honesty is a direct path to vulnerability. "The more transparent I am, the less people can use to hurt me," says Julie. "At the same time, it's scary to have anybody know this much about us."

Julie and Lee tackled the fear because of their larger goal. The back of *Relational Shifts* states: "If we are able to save any marriages through our book, then we are very blessed. But if we are able to save any families through our stories, then we have succeeded."

Vulnerability also leads to healing. Julie and Lee have presented evenings of discussion based on their family's book. Because the two have been so open, other people feel they can share their stories. "This creates a resonance and leads to healing for everyone involved," says Julie.

Resonance has been created in a business sense, too. "What I learned at the Loft," says Julie, "was how to establish a platform. When I have the

book, how will I develop the Web site? Will I want to teach classes based on the book? Can I make a movie out of the book? I had no idea how long it would take to write the book, however!" (Julie finished her self-designed degree at the U and produced three films while writing the book with her family.)



Julie has accomplished all the offshoots of the platform. She is running four businesses based on *Relational Shifts* as well as her film production company, Smokin' Yogi Films. "Learning how to be a business owner is like learning how to write. 'Who is my audience? My employees, banker, investors or educators? How do I get my message across to each?' " she ponders.

Getting the message across was a long, bumpy road. Julie describes *Relational Shifts* as "my six-fingered child. I can see all the mistakes now. If I were to do it all over again, I might leave out some of the stories. But maybe not. As we're working on the audio book, we're doing some editing after we shake our heads and moan and groan a bit. Overall, I feel pretty good about it.

"Life is all practice," Julie says. "We have to practice being in the moment. We practice being a good friend. We practice knowing our limits and recognizing the times we are disconnected. We have to practice unwinding the messages we've been fed all our lives. We have to practice facing our fears. Sure, fear can save a life—the fight-or-flight reflex—but we have to face our fears if we want to evolve. We keep practicing even if we fail; and we will fail. Our history stays with us until we have compassion for ourselves—instead of shame."

The learning process, practice, is all-important to Julie. In her own words, she strives to become a wanderer, mystic, and healer. "When Tasha had her Bat Mitzvah, we used Buddhist tenets as well as the Torah. All of my studies have led me to the idea of oneness. We are all energy. Whether you call it chi, prana, or n'shema, it's all the energizing force of life. And so many religious ideas and terms are shared. For instance, the head light in the menorah is the shamas; the person who keeps the religious artifacts intact at the synagogue is also the shamas. And yoga supports my spiritual beliefs, too. Yoga supports the union of mind, body, and spirit. The more you know yourself, you have no choice but to become more spiritual."

One day, Julie finished a part of the Shema, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God! The LORD is One!", with "The Lord is Oneness." "The word just came to me. That prayer has meaning for me again," says Julie. One is an exclusive term, where oneness is all-inclusive. I believe we are all one aspect of the oneness.

"We all carry God within us. We are gardens and have every seed we need inside us. Everyone has the potential for good and evil. Everyone has the potential for their spark of godliness to shine."

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Julie is learning important lessons in her forties about her potential and place in the world. She is acknowledging her intelligence and fortitude. She is rewriting "scripts" with family members. "We all have spiritual contracts with each other. Some people in our lives kick us in the butt; some are here for support; others help us grow. Knowing that, I've been able to turn anger and bitterness into gratitude," she says. "I gained so much strength from personal struggles in my family. Without it, I wouldn't be tough enough to allow myself to be vulnerable. I'm grateful for that."

Feeling she's earned them, she quips, "And I love having some gray hair."

Always, Julie is a seeker. *Relational Shifts* illuminates the search for her self through a second marriage and widowhood; through tales of interactions with family—some supportive, some harrowing—and friends during and after the divorce. But when a friend gave Julie a poster that included the phrase "Promise to marry yourself first and never leave" a chord was struck. Julie made that commitment and created a ritual to mark the commitment. She says in the book that marrying herself "meant that I would care for myself and love myself the way I wished someone else would love me." To that end, while studying in India for a couple of months, Julie climbed a Himalayan mountain that holds a glacier which feeds the Ganges. On that mountain, Julie married the idea of never sacrificing her integrity; never being bound by another person's definition of herself. She married the idea of sharing her story, her knowledge and her passion for lovingly speaking the truth. And she is willing and able to climb the next mountain and the next.

Julie Rappaport is currently sending out a contest call for submissions: Send either written (any format under 800 words) and/or video stories (under eight minutes) for an upcoming collection. The collection will be produced in book format and as a feature-length compilation of uplifting and encouraging stories, stories that start in the muckiest of life's challenges and turn into *Memento for the Garden*. The compilation will include a specific chapter titled "Hot Chocolate for Divorced Families." Why "hot chocolate"? Hot Chocolate is not only soothing and brings back warm memories, it is also stimulating and invigorating on top of nourishing (all those antioxidants!).

The top two winners in each category will have their pieces read or screened at the Loft's Third Thursday Series, February 21st, 2008. The program will also include a reading from Julie's family's book and a screening of her upcoming web series, *Abnormally Normal*, a demo-pilot loosely based on their book. The winner of each category will be awarded a cash prize of \$200. All selected pieces published in either the book or the video will share in their profits, after expenses. A percentage will be donated to the Loft student scholarship fund. Deadline: 02/01/08. For details, go to www.smokinyogi.com/contests.

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