

# The True Livelihood Series



Reflections from...

Denise Bissonnette



Denise Bissonnette is an internationally renowned writer, trainer and keynote speaker. For over two decades, she has inspired people and organizations throughout North America to look beyond traditional concepts of career development and to craft livelihoods rooted in the individual "genius" of each person. Her work is a rich tapestry of her talents as a poet, writer, storyteller, teacher and career developer.

## Paths to Potentiality: Ten Habits of Heart and Mind

I am so excited to be sharing this article with you as it has been an adventure in the making, as well as a labor of love. Make no mistake – I do not lightly frame my ideas in such heady, ambitious terms, nor am I nonchalant in the choice of those terms. It may interest you to know that I never set out in ambitious pursuit of a framework purporting to point us in the direction of our longed -for potentiality. The truth is that this title and its accompanying framework found *me*, in a most unexpected and roundabout way. Allow me to share a little of the process that ultimately led to the evolution of this framework before venturing into the ten paths themselves.

I am forever ruminating, developing, and writing on a variety of topics that, when I am lucky, evolve into articles for this newsletter, new keynote presentations, or additions to my workshops. As I read a book, skim a blog, listen to a Ted Talk, or attend a workshop, I take notes on any available paper surface – a journal, a napkin, a flyer, a concert program, or in the margins of whatever I happen to be reading. Then, every week or so, I gather my sundry scribbled notes in hunt of an inspired idea, a sparkling revelation, or even a tiny thought worth revisiting. Upon entering them into my computer, I cut and paste these vagabond ramblings, allowing them to take up residence in pre-existing files categorized by theme. Many are deleted before I have even finished transcribing them; others are expounded upon enough to inspire the creation of a new file, while others are dropped into *multiple* files for future perusal and pondering. Once a file has reached 20 pages or more, I give it the "upshot treatment", deciding if the content gathered is substantive enough to be shaped into an article or a talk. Some make the cut; others are sitting in the "forgotten but not forsaken" annals of my computer files. As random and haphazard as it may

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seem, this is the process that works for me.

Sooooo ... in the last few months something caught my attention. While hot on the trail of my newest topic "Cultivating Resilience", I noticed that as I made entries into this file, I frequently dropped the same notes in four other files, namely "A Leadership Perspective", "Living the Creative Life", "A Mindset for Growth", and "In Pursuit of Possibility". Because these five files with seemingly distinctive and divergent themes had such an uncanny number of identical entries throughout the last year, I purposely set off in pursuit of what they might have in common. To my astonishment, what I discovered was that, while each maintained their own flavor and tone, they all shared the same "upshot". These five seemingly distinct and divergent subjects were inextricably linked by ten common factors falling into three categories: dimensions of thought, postures towards life, and stances regarding the self, which I later named "Habits of Heart and Mind".

Who'd a thunk it? The same set of dynamics that allows us to muster the strength and resilience to survive the storms of life are not different than the dynamics that empower us to find our voice and respond to the call of leadership? Who would have suspected that the perspective that allows us to perceive possibility is not different from that which enables us to take risks and lead a life bent on growth rather than stagnation? Lo and behold, how about these same characteristics intersecting perfectly with those leading to living life as "high art"?

In search of terminology that is both descriptive and inclusive of these five themes, I chose the term "Potentiality". In a nutshell, I believe that there are particular ways of thinking and relating to the world that are most apt to enhance our personal and collective effectiveness. Through the "Ten Habits of Heart and Mind" presented below I believe we increase our potential for continual growth, for embracing the unknown and cultivating resilience, for creativity problem-solving and living life as art, for expressing our unique and authentic form of leadership, and finally, for pursuing with wholeheartedness the great expanse of our possibilities in life and in work.

Clearly, I am not a researcher, a social psychologist, or an academic. I have no empirical data to support this treatise - no charts, graphs, or stats to lend it an air of authority or imbue it with a sense of hard-won assurance. Rather, from one earnest pilgrim who attempts to live a wholehearted and vibrant life to another, I offer this as a humble but earnest invitation to examine and explore common dimensions of thought and feeling that affect our everyday experience of the world. I do not expect that any of these ten dimensions will be new to my readers, as many of them have been explored and discussed by a wide host of writers, myself included. What I do want to introduce here, however, is the idea of recognizing

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them as a *totality*, grasping the implications of these attitudes in light of the five themes discussed above, and in the light of our Potentiality as a whole.

I purposely chose the term “Habits of Heart and Mind” because I think our ordinary ways of thinking and relating to the world do become ingrained and, in the same way we have eating and sleeping habits, we have habits of mind and of heart. Like all habits, however, once we become aware of them, we can choose to continue, stop, alter or create a new habit in line with our aspirations. To a great extent, I believe that these are *choices we make* rather than “fixed aspects” of our personalities, or attitudes we inherited for which we have been hard-wired. I think of these habits more like software than hardware in that they can be revisited, refreshed, updated, or downloaded at any time. I also believe that these ten factors can be measured, taught, learned and improved.

Most importantly, I hope to trigger questions, catalyze discussion, and encourage fierce examination of how we as human service providers, educators, and counselors can work to invoke and inspire these ways of thinking and relating with the individuals we serve. As you read through the ten habits, please consider the enormous implications these attitudes have on the challenges the people we serve commonly face: A welfare recipient’s ability to attain self-sufficiency and overcome learned helplessness; A student’s capacity to stick with and achieve educational goals; A person’s ability to face and overcome a crisis, a loss, or any major life transition; A job seeker’s stance toward the world of work, their part in the process, and the possibilities awaiting them; or, How a veteran, an ex-offender, a recently arrived immigrant, or a newly-disabled person views their choices, their power, and their opportunities as they enter a new chapter of their lives. In my mind, the benefit that would come from cultivating any of these habits of heart and mind would far exceed any other gift we have to offer people who are in transition. Far from “giving a person a fish for the day”, these are the habits of consciousness that could empower people to feed themselves for a lifetime.

In order to present them in the clearest and most thorough fashion, I have identified the key attributes and qualities, the actions and practices, and the attitudes and beliefs each of these habits engender, as well as the opposing qualities for each. You will notice that I have given them my own spin, utilizing language that my readers will recognize from past articles of this newsletter written on these various themes. I invite you, dear reader, to consider where you find yourself along the spectrum of these ten dimensions. Which do you feel totally at home with, which present the greatest challenge to your current way of thinking and relating to the world, and which would you like to cultivate to a greater degree?

In the spirit of the accompanying poem, *The Exquisite Risk*, may these habits of

consciousness help to make of our hearts “a ship, made for high seas... a wild bird, drawn to untamed skies.”

## Ten Habits of Heart and Mind

### **1. Adopting a growth rather than a fixed mindset, embracing the unknown rather than avoiding change.**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Insatiable curiosity, Appetite for adventure, Thirst for learning, Adaptability, Sense of healthy vulnerability.

*Actions/Practices:* Remains open, curious and teachable rather than needing to be right and/or in control; Seeks new experiences, takes risks, always looking to expand horizons; Identifies more as a learner than an expert; Regards oneself as “unfinished” in all areas of personal and professional growth; Accepts change and befriends the unknown; Interprets fear as “excitement without breath”; On an unrelenting quest for excellence.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* All of life is about change and ‘being in transition’ means we’re still alive and breathing. We are either engaged in the adventure of growth and change, or in the process of stagnation and complacency. Life itself is the great unknown. The journey between what we are now and who we will become is where the heart of our real adventure lies. Around every bend in life lie fresh opportunities and new beginnings. What challenges us is what grows us.

*“The aim of life is not to get rid of the butterflies in your stomach,  
but to get them to fly in formation.”  
– Outward Bound*

*Opposing Qualities:* Fearfulness, Insecurity, Avoidance of change, Lethargy, Stuck in a rut.

### **2. Responding to the world from the inside out rather than from the outside in.**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Self-Efficacy, Self-empowerment, Responsibility, Capability, Confidence.

*Actions/Practices:* Puts more stock in who one *is* than what one has or does; Defines oneself by the values, tenets and qualities they wish to express in the world; Bases sense of security on principles that hold true regardless of outside events; Keeps energy and attention focused in areas of one’s own influence and personal power; Takes proactive stance in responding to circumstances, honing in

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on the desired outcome of a situation; Exercises a strong sense of personal power to handle whatever the world dishes up; Sticks to an internal locus of control.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* Through the power of interpretation, we choose our perspective in any given situation. Our experience has more to do with what is happening *in* and *through* us, than what is happening *to* us. Mindset can make the difference between giving up and moving on, between identifying as a survivor or as a victim. Free will and choice matter more than fate and determinism.

*"The way you are toward your life is the way that your life will be toward you. Any time we perceive the problem as 'out there', that perception is the problem!"*  
- Golda Meir

*Opposing Qualities:* Fatalism, Powerlessness, Helplessness, Surrendering to the whims of a chaotic world, Incapacity to respond to challenges, Need for validation.

### **3. Being true to one's gifts, purpose, and dreams; following one's heart rather than going with the crowd.**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Authenticity, Purposefulness, Loyalty to talents; Awareness of gifts; Desires of the heart.

*Actions/Practices:* Makes constructive use of solitude and reflection; Takes one's own needs, desires and passions seriously; Expresses a calm confidence with a balanced view of one's strengths and weaknesses rather than downplaying or overplaying accomplishments; Sets one's own standards for success and joy rather than competing with and comparing oneself to others; Acts on the sincere desires of one's heart; Shows up fully, willing to risk the vulnerability of individuality.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* Everyone has a purpose and something unique and singular to offer the world. We are not here to simply witness creation, but to abet it. Opt to live the examined life. Follow your bliss. What is in your heart cannot be measured by standard tests and evaluations. We are here to express our gifts, not to impress others. Be true to your own dreams rather than wait for your dreams to be true to you.

*"The finest gift we have to offer this world is the gift of ourselves."*  
- Denise Bissonnette

*Opposing Qualities:* Comparing oneself to others, Self-judgment by other's standards, Denial of purpose, desire, and dreams, Selling out to mediocrity for the sake of security.

**4. Using one's imagination for the forces of hope rather than fear; seeing abundance rather than scarcity.**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Realistic optimism; Hopefulness; Gratitude, Healthy expectation of good, Faithfulness, Joy.

*Actions/Practices:* Directs attention to what is going right, what can be counted on, what to be grateful for, and what is possible in the future; Seeks beauty; Counts blessings rather than burdens; Anticipates, affirms, and celebrates the abundance and bounty of the everyday world; Lives in the present; Harnesses the imagination for forces of good.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* How and where we direct our attention is all-important. Optimism is true moral courage. Things can change for the better. Nothing is "too good to be true". We need not take the limits of our own imaginations for the limits of the world. Each day is a gift to be relished, tomorrow is not promised. We are blessed in more ways than we can ever fully imagine. Hope takes work, and we are designed for hope. Opportunity is everywhere for those with the eyes to perceive it, and possibility often lies in places we would least expect. Take heed of Thomas Edison's advice: "When you have exhausted all possibilities, remember this: You haven't."

*"Two men in prison looked through bars; one saw mud, the other stars."  
- Frederick Langbridge*

*Opposing Qualities:* Cynicism, Scepticism, Pessimism, Self-preoccupation, Sense of entitlement, Scarcity consciousness, Despairing, Doubt.

**5. Approaching obstacles as opportunities – treating failure as "feedback".**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Resilience, Openness to Experience, Humility, Flexibility.

*Actions/Practices:* Doesn't take rejection personally; Looks for the lesson in everything; Intentionally avoids seeing challenges as insurmountable, always asking for best possible interpretation of situation; Manages one's expectations and focuses more on effort than results; Persists rather than surrenders in the face of challenges.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* This is a lessons-based world and challenges are a natural part of life. There is a difference between meeting defeat, and being defeated. Mistakes are an important of the learning process. Nothing is more resilient than the human spirit. The difference between a roadblock and a stepping stone is a matter of perspective. Believe in "post traumatic growth", allowing a setback to cause us to see things in a new, fresh light. If you are going to fail, fail forward or fail up.

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*"Success does not tempt that man, this is how he grows,  
by being defeated, decisively, by constantly greater things."*

- Rainer Marie Rilke

*Opposing Qualities:* Inflexibility, Defeatist attitude, Ego-Centered, Fatalistic, Easily discouraged, Self-doubt, Need for validation.

### **6. Keeping a level head and able to respond rationally rather than reacting compulsively and emotionally.**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Level-headedness, Reasonableness, Ability to problem-solve, Emotional intelligence.

*Actions/Practices:* Stays calm under pressure; Practices mindfulness; Purposely makes choices based on long term ramifications rather than immediate gratification; Is driven more by significance than success; Exercises impulse control; Has a solid sense of solid ground from which to make choices rather than acting indecisively or abdicating their choices.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* It's important to be with and learn from the whole spectrum of emotions rather than ignoring them or being overwhelmed by them. 'Minding the mind' is critical rather than letting it operate like a runaway train. It is human to react, but it is even *more* human to respond appropriately and rationally once one has their wits about them. Tunnel vision gets us nowhere. Keep your eye on the ball and don't get distracted from the goal.

*"It is in our daily choices that we sit with the Gods and design ourselves."*

- Dorothy Gilman

*Opposing Qualities:* Irrationality, Emotional immaturity, Compulsiveness, Inability to make decisions.

### **7. Treating life as the ultimate art form, valuing the role of creativity and inspiration in shaping one's destiny.**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Creativity, Self-Expression, Inspiration, Inquisitiveness, Insatiable curiosity, Resourcefulness, Big picture perspective.

*Actions/Practices:* Takes a creative approach to problem-solving; Looks for possibilities everywhere; Observes everything; Is an avid people-watcher and trend-spotter; Able to connect dots others do not see; Asks big questions and considers the broader context; Surrounds oneself by what is inspiring; Remains open and receptive to gifts of the muse; Maintains balance between confidence and humility, taking initiative and being receptive, being spontaneous and having

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focused concentration; Appreciates the benefits of sustained effort over the long term, knowing that a relationship, a career, or a legacy, like a painting or a manuscript, cannot be forced.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* The world is not yet finished. Possibility abounds. The questions we ask are fateful. Asking “why” is important, but asking “Why not”, is even more so. The world needs dreamers. Creativity is our birthright, and artistic expression is the province of every human being. We are unlimited and unbounded in the infinite ways in which we can choose to create, express, and communicate with the world around us. Creativity and imagination can lead to sudden connections and new insights. Every aspect of life is a “work in progress” and we need to be open to the on-going process of revision, editing and refining.

*“The secret to discovery is not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”*  
- Marcel Proust

*Opposing Qualities:* Rigid thinking, Dogmatism, Accepting the world at face value, Uninspired, Operating from a fixed reality.

### **8. Accepting one’s part in the whole, seeing the best in everyone, and embracing interdependence.**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Generosity of spirit; Interdependence; Connectedness to others, Empathy, Compassion, Kindness, Willingness to ask for and offer help.

*Actions/Practices:* Looks for the best in others; Gives people the benefit of the doubt, takes communication seriously; Seeks out new opportunities to connect with others; Makes a habit of asking for and/or offering help when needed; Maintains good relationships with family members and friends and others who are important; Cares more about being kind than being right; Works to break down barriers between people and create a more expansive sense of “we”.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* By our mere presence in the world, we are an inextricable part of web of life and the impact of our actions and inactions matters to the whole. We each must be responsible for our own ripple effect. We are either part of the problem or part of the solution. Through compassion and kindness we have the power to uphold the dignity, well-being, and integrity of every person around us. We are here to sow seeds of affirmation and encouragement for one another – taking turns championing the gifts we each have to offer. Whatever affects one person in the circle, affects everyone indirectly. It’s important to recognize those who have helped us, and pay it forward. Our willingness to offer and ask for help is crucial to community, and can change the world.

*“There are no passengers on Planet Earth, there is only crew.”*  
- Buckminster Fuller

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*Opposing Qualities:* Lone-wolf mentality, Exclusion, Competitiveness, Defensiveness, Small-mindedness, Greediness.

### **9. Keeping to an action-orientation – focusing on the next right step.**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Determination, Decisiveness, Accountability, Initiative, Persistence, Energy, Vitality.

*Actions/Practices:* Develops a realistic plan and moves towards goals in a decisive manner; Focuses on small daily accomplishments, deciding in each moment what the “next right step” might be; Focuses on one’s efforts and intentions, knowing that persistence will pay off in the long run; Makes and keeps to daily commitments, not avoiding accountability; Attempts to keep one’s plan gentle enough to be doable, but ambitious enough to be inspiring; Celebrates small achievements along the way.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* Life is full of fresh starts and new beginnings and that it’s never too late to become what you wish to be. Nothing is more empowering than the power that lies in taking a single step in the direction of the life we long to be living. Daily effort is the path to mastery. Change only happens by changing ourselves, one action or choice at a time. Our behavior is the only true measure of our values and intentions - everything else is wishful thinking. We may falter along the way, but everyday gives us a new opportunity to start again.

*“Gardens are not made by singing ‘oh how beautiful’ while sitting in the shade.”  
– Rudyard Kipling*

*Opposing Qualities:* Hesitance, Lethargy, Indolence, Laziness, Surrender, Helplessness.

### **10. Remaining mindful that “our life is our message”, living each day by design rather than by default.**

*Attributes/Qualities:* Self-Discipline, Mindfulness, Self-Care, Integrity, Character, Leadership.

*Actions/Practices:* Takes care of oneself; Plays the role of guardian to one’s mind, body and spirit; Maintains awareness of one’s own needs, thoughts and feelings; Sets personal and professional boundaries; Intentionally engages in activities that replenish and renew the spirit, inspire and enliven the mind, and keep the body healthy and moving; Is careful to walk the talk, and practice what one preaches; Is careful to not indulge in negative self-talk or slip into false self-glorification.

*Attitudes/Beliefs:* We can’t give what we ain’t got; If we want to inspire others, we have to live an inspired life. Our life is our message, by design or by default. We

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must be impeccable with our word, deeds, and promises. The values we espouse must shine through our daily choices, actions and relationships. Character is at the core of who we are and having integrity means that who we are and what we do are in sync. No one is exempt from the privilege and responsibility of leadership as all of us are ambassadors for something. You cannot separate the message from the messenger – we always lead by example.

*"We must be the change you wish to see in the world."*

– Mahatma Gandhi

*Opposing Qualities:* Mindlessness, Duplicity, Lack of integrity, Self-Deceit, Betrayal of one's sense of truth, Self-deception.

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POETIC REFLECTION 

## The Exquisite Risk

Written by Denise Bissonnette

Sometimes my heart is a vagabond  
in search of a place to lay its sleepy head.  
Once rested, it is difficult to awaken from slumber.  
But that is to miss the point of having a beating heart.  
The heart is a ship, made for high seas...  
The heart is a wild bird, drawn to untamed skies.

My heart loves the safe valley floor.  
It paints the picket fence white,  
whistling while it works,  
loving in all ways safe and comfortable.

But the true homeland of the heart is in the horizon.  
Gazing out at the long, twisted road  
falling from eye's view.  
Learning to love in new ways,  
ways radical, forgiving, less careful, more true.  
Less anxious to worship those it adores;  
More willing to wash the feet of those it does not yet understand.

The heart forever yearns to speak in a new tongue,  
to move in ways it thought impossible.  
It will settle on burning at a low flicker,  
the small flame shining behind the window at twilight ...  
But oh, to be a blazing star of fire glowing in the deeper night –  
That is its proper place.

The poet asks, "Are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?"

The heart whispers, "Keep me safe and I will sing you  
sweet familiar songs that lull you to sleep ...  
But take the exquisite risk  
of allowing me to ache from the use of unused muscles,  
perhaps to even break, again and again,  
and you will hear songs falling from the throat of the very world,  
the birds, the stones, the stars, and all that you dare to love.  
Be warned: these songs are not lullabies;  
They are clarion calls to a life you have only imagined."

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## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

After reading through the descriptions of the ten habits, give yourself a rating on a scale of one to ten (1 being low, 10 being high) in terms of where you find your current thinking and relating to the world along these ten dimensions. Consider the implications of each of these habits for your potentiality in the following areas:

- Your resilience in the face of challenges in life and work;
- Your capacity to embody a leadership perspective;
- Your inclination to live life as a creative art;
- Your ability to adapt to change and willingness to grow; and,
- Your proclivity to live in pursuit of possibility for the future.

### **Paths to Potentiality: Ten Habits of Heart and Mind**

1. \_\_\_ Adopting a growth rather than a fixed mindset, embracing the unknown rather than avoiding change.
2. \_\_\_ Responding to the world from the inside out rather than from the outside in.
3. \_\_\_ Being true to one's gifts, purpose, and dreams; following one's heart rather than going with the crowd.
4. \_\_\_ Using one's imagination for the forces of hope rather than fear; seeing abundance rather than scarcity.
5. \_\_\_ Approaching obstacles as opportunities – treating failure as “feedback”.
6. \_\_\_ Keeping a level head and able to respond rationally rather than reacting compulsively and emotionally.
7. \_\_\_ Treating life as the ultimate art form, valuing the role of creativity and inspiration in shaping one's destiny.
8. \_\_\_ Accepting one's part in the whole, seeing the best in everyone, and embracing interdependence.
9. \_\_\_ Keeping to an action-orientation – focusing on the next right step.
10. \_\_\_ Remaining mindful that “our life is our message”, living each day by design rather than by default.