



An Interview with

ANITA MOORJANI

by Margaret Cahill

What if This is Heaven?

Anita Moorjani talks about the need for passionate living in the face of life's challenges, the lessons we can learn from illness, and living from a place of love rather than fear

MARGARET CAHILL: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to ask you some questions about your new book, *What if This is Heaven?* As someone who was treated for lymphoma three years ago I am particularly interested in your view that your cancer was caused by your low self-esteem – something that you only realised after your NDE (Near-Death Experience). Can you tell us a bit more about that connection?

ANITA MOORJANI: Although I did not realize it at the time, the fact that I didn't love myself was actually draining me of energy. Not loving myself means I was putting everyone else first. It mattered to me what everyone else thought of me, so instead of doing things that made *me* feel good, I was more concerned about doing things that made *others* feel good. Yes, it's great to be generous towards others, but we don't realize that in actuality, we are like batteries.

When we don't learn the importance of loving and valuing ourselves, we end up needing the approval of others to recharge our batteries, otherwise we feel unworthy. In other words, when we don't learn how to charge our own batteries, we rely on others to charge our batteries for us.

So in order to get their approval (to get them to recharge our batteries), we are constantly dancing to the expectations of others. A question to ask is: When we are giving generously, are we giving because we want their approval? Or are we giving because we are filled with love, and there's so much love inside us that it's brimming over and everyone else is a natural recipient of it? The healthier way to give love is the latter, I think. I used to be the former, and when people did not approve I would constantly worry and wonder what I had to do to win their approval.

I always felt that there was something wrong with me when I didn't get someone's approval, so I would bend myself all out of shape trying to win their approval. And by doing that, I was draining my batteries even more! I didn't realize that my batteries were becoming so drained that my body started to get sick constantly...until it developed cancer.

Today, research indicates that when we are happier, our bodies reflect it. As a result we are healthier. For example, when we are in love, or following our passion, or have a reason to live, or if we are surrounded by people who love us, we are much healthier, and live longer. However, our healthcare industries have yet to use this information when it comes to treating illnesses. They still rely on drugs and surgery instead of using this information to promote people's wellbeing. I truly believe that if people knew how to recharge their own batteries, we would see far, far less illnesses. I don't believe that the cure for cancer lies in drugs alone.

MC: Your heartbreaking account of being bullied at school (which you say contributed hugely to your low self-esteem) reminded me that bullying has become even more sophisticated now as bullies resort to social media and texting to pick on their victims. What do you suggest is the best way to handle this, both as an adult and for a concerned parent?

AM: Bullying really saddens me because if you are a victim of bullying, it changes who you feel yourself to be. I'm not sure people realize how much bullying affects a child's self-esteem and wellbeing. For example, I have no doubt that the bullying I endured at school affected the way I carried myself through life, making me the person I became—one who eventually got cancer. If I had a different type of personality—say if I had externalized it instead of internalized it—it might have made me a violent person. So instead of cancer, I may have ended up in prison or maybe even with mental issues.

Sadly, nowadays bullying is even harder to control because as you've astutely pointed out, we have a new, more sophisticated form of bullying, which is cyber bullying. And equally sadly, a lot of people who were bullies as kids, continue to be bullies as adults and they do their bullying in the relative safety of cyberspace, hiding behind an online identity. I feel sad for the future generation because there are no programs to teach them cyber etiquette and I hear stories of young kids taking their own lives as a result of cyber bullying.

If it were up to me, I would change the education system so as to foster a more collaborative culture that is more focused on inclusiveness, rather than a competitive atmosphere that is more focused on exclusiveness. This competitive and exclusive culture, in my opinion, is what feeds bullying and brings out the worst in our children! Our education system is more focused on getting kids to pass exams, as opposed to becoming joyful, productive, helpful people who go out into the world. I would insist on topics like "Cyber Etiquette" being part of the curriculum so kids would learn the truth of the power of their words when they post them to other kids who are vulnerable. I would also make "Social Awareness" a compulsory part of the curriculum where kids are encouraged to open their eyes and hearts to everyone who is different from themselves, whether that difference is in the form of socio-economic levels, race, physical abilities, and so on. But most importantly, I'd discourage competition, and reward collaboration. I can think of many, many more things that can be implemented, including more spiritual awareness. I could go on and on, but I think these are the kinds of things that would help reduce the growth of a "bullying culture" for future generations.

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MC: You stress the importance of self-love in creating a happier and healthier life. What would be the first thing someone suffering from low self-esteem—and possibly depression—could do to help lift their spirits?

AM: A very simple exercise I ask people to do is to make a gratitude journal. In it, I ask them to write 5 things they are grateful for each and every day. And every day they have to write 5 different things. No matter how bad they perceive their life to be, they have to find 5 positive things about it, whether it's something as simple as having a roof over their head and food to eat, or a pet who loves them unconditionally.

Another exercise is to ask people to write 5 positive traits about themselves every day, and no matter how hard it is to find 5 traits, not to give up until they can. Those traits could be related to their personality, or even physical traits, or how they handled something that day. It doesn't matter.

The point is to push yourself until you find 5. Most people find it hard to find positive things to say about themselves, so I start them off with finding positive things about their life. What I've found is that: "loving yourself" and "loving your life" go hand in hand. It's hard to have one without the other, so it's fine to find things about your life that you love.

When we do either of these exercises, it starts to shift our perspective into one of gratitude. In essence, what happens is that our awareness shifts from a dire situation to a state of optimism. We start to realize that our situation isn't as bad as we thought. When I use the "flashlight" analogy to illustrate only seeing what our flashlight is focused on, this is what I mean. I like to help people focus their flashlight on something other than the negative.

What I would never do is to tell them that they need to get rid of their negative feelings, or that their feelings are irrational! That dishonours where they are and doesn't allow them an authentic experience. It's much more empowering when they climb out of those feelings themselves by shifting their own focus and seeing for themselves that they, and their lives, are not as bad as they thought!

“I kept reminding myself that I have to live my own truth according to what I had learned during my NDE.”

MC: It must have been very hard to fit back into everyday life after the beautiful experience of your NDE. How did you cope with people who wanted to fit you back into the place they had allocated for you before? I ask this because change is difficult and close ones can often find it threatening.

AM: That was the most difficult thing I had to do. Once I returned to this life, I had to live in the physical again and try to fit back into it! Today, I'm grateful that I did live on, but in the early days there were times when I wondered why I came back! It was lonely, that's for sure. And having been someone who hated criticism and longed to fit in with others my whole life, it was really difficult to strike out on my own by creating my own path and allowing myself to become my own person. But I kept reminding myself that I have to live my own truth according to what I had learned during my NDE. I knew that I didn't ever want to go back to being the person I used to be before I had cancer, because I already knew what my destiny would be if I did. The person I used to be, who did everything to fit in and be what everyone else wanted of her, gave and gave of herself until she got drained and...got cancer. I didn't want to go down that road again, so I knew that I had no choice but to believe in what I had learned and become my own person. I held on to what I learned about the importance of being authentic, and allowing what is truly mine to unfold before me instead of living a life that meets everyone else's expectations of me. And now, I'm so glad I held on because sure enough, it's paid off. I've truly created a life that is free from dogma, doctrine, and buying into other people's expectations!

MC: *What if This is Heaven?* reads as though you are constantly plugged into a force that tops you up and sustains you. Can you tell us a bit more about this source of strength? And do you ever get 'down' now?

AM: I believe we are all connected to this source of strength, or force, but we don't realize it. We always have access to it and are never separate from it. But we are taught to believe that we are separate, and that "God" is separate from us, and we have to work at being more spiritual by following certain dogma or doctrines to access this force. When I was in the other realm, I realized that the force that tops us up with energy is always there, it was always with

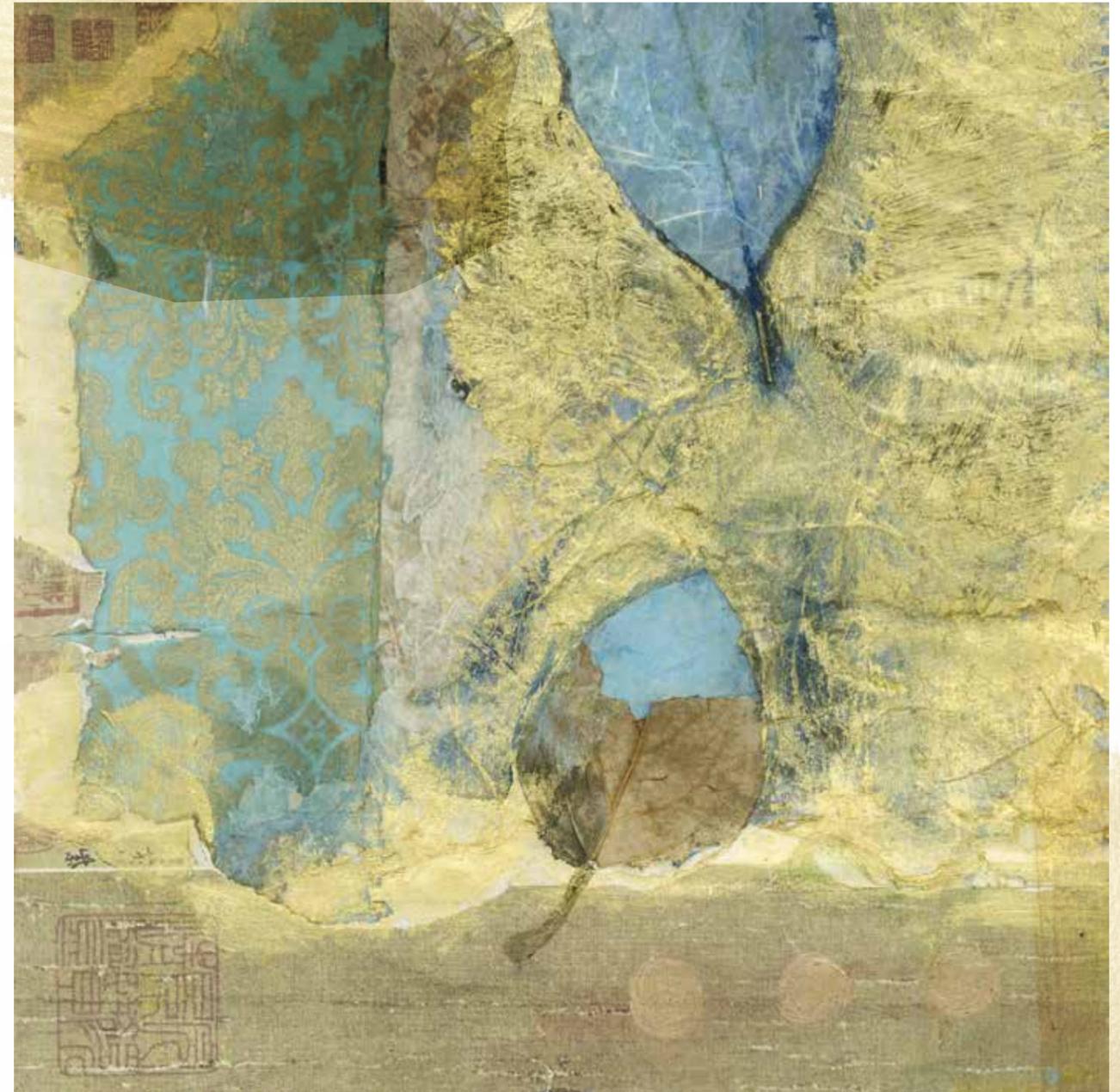
me, and it's constantly flowing into me. But I had denied it. I had forgotten it because I was conditioned to ignore it and instead, to focus on the outside world—our 3-dimensional physical world. We get conditioned to focus outside ourselves for all our answers and we give our power to external teachers, leaders, religions, and so on. True spirituality is within us and will never leave us. It's always available for us to tap into. When people ask me how to access it, I invite them to stop seeking. Stop searching for answers. Stop researching, stop obsessing. Just stop! When all the external noise stops, we will be able to hear the internal signs and messages. It happens when we are about to fall asleep, or when we are walking in nature, or just sitting and daydreaming. But we fill every moment of every day with noise, playing with our mobile devices, searching for answers to every question—even the most profound ones—on the internet. There's no room for us to recognize the connection to our own source of strength... which is always within us.

I still do get "down" from time to time, especially when I hear about things that are happening in our world. Whenever that happens, I tune out the world, tune into my internal force of energy, and start to feel that no matter what, everything is going to be fine. And then I remember that even death is beautiful, and not a bad thing at all!

MC: You are passionate about living and making decisions from a place of love rather than fear, which I find so inspiring, but cancer seems to generate a very special kind of fear which is very hard to overcome. What suggestions can you offer people who are facing an uncertain future and aggressive treatment for this disease?

AM: I would suggest that, as far as your health allows it, to focus on things you love doing and not to focus on the cancer. Stop focusing on health and healing, and focus on what brings you joy. Spend time with people you love, and do things that you are passionate about. Stop obsessing over the illness, and researching it on the internet, and stop trying to get rid of it! Instead, live as fully as your health allows you to.

I would say to people who are facing an illness, "If your illness were to heal right now, what would you do to celebrate?" And whatever your answer is, I'd say "Go and do that!" Another question I'd ask them is "What brings you joy? What are you passionate about? Go and pursue those things! Who do you love? Go spend time with them!" The thing is, most of us don't live from that place even when we are healthy. We often don't know how to value our lives, or celebrate our lives, until we have an illness. We put off doing all the things that we actually came



here to do. Instead, we spend most of our time at jobs we don't enjoy just to earn a living. Illness can sometimes be a gift that reminds us to value our lives and to focus on what we love; to dream bigger. I like to remind people not to "waste" that reminder on obsessing about the illness itself, and instead, to create a whole lot of reasons for why life is a gift and why you'd like to be alive!

MC: Your conversation with a stranger at the airport about suicide in chapter 7 is so touching; the guilt felt by the people left behind is a lacerating pain that doesn't seem to have a remedy. What did you learn about suicide during your

NDE that would bring comfort to someone dealing with this?

AM: I learned that even those who took their own lives love the ones they left behind unconditionally; I learned that it's no one's fault, and there's nothing that anyone could have done or said to have kept them here because no one goes before their time. Also, there are a lot of elements that lead up to a person taking her or his own life. It's never just one reason, or one argument, or one day of not saying "I love you". It's about how they interpret their lives and the filters through which they view the world. It's their whole psychological makeup that makes them have these suicidal thoughts.

I also learned that no matter the conditions

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when someone crosses over—even suicide—they still have a beautiful and peaceful afterlife. They will not be punished for what they have done. They are fine, and they want the ones they left behind to know this and to be fine, too.

I learned that we are continually surrounded by people in the other realm who love us and who continually help us on our life path. We can communicate with these loved ones. It’s never too late to resolve any feelings of guilt we may have. Just think of them, and then speak with them, either aloud or in your own mind. They know your heart, and they know what you are feeling. Speak with them as though they are there. They are there. They can hear you. They want nothing more than for you to be happy. They are helping you.

Also, don’t feel guilty if you have lost a loved one and then find love again. They want you to be happy, and chances are they are helping you and guiding you to someone else!

MC: How has your NDE affected the way you live your life on a day-to-day basis? What do you do differently?

AM: I don’t worry as much as I used to about what other people think of me. I’m less paranoid about “getting things right”, or trying to please everyone. I’m much more confident of my own values, and much more committed to sticking to them, even if it means displeasing some people.

I know the “old” me wouldn’t be able to handle the life I live today because I won’t tailor my beliefs to please people or risk criticism.

I also think of myself and my needs a lot more now than I used to; and if someone says that I’m selfish, I realize that it’s about them and not me.

MC: You mention several times that you feel your cancer was caused by you forgetting your own divinity and becoming subjugated to outside influences. How do you reconcile that with someone who has finally found happiness, is living a deeply fulfilled life, then is suddenly struck down with cancer?

AM: First of all, we never really know what is actually going on within someone else. We simply can’t judge them one way or the other. We can’t judge them either positively or negatively. Our task is simply to love them unconditionally and to help them on their journey.

Secondly, someone’s cancer might be for the benefit of that person, or even for the benefit of other people. We simply have no way of knowing.

In my case, I often tell people that cancer was the best thing that ever happened to me. Far from taking my life, it actually gave me life! None of what I am now experiencing would have happened had I not had cancer; no NDE, no book, no radio show, no meeting all the wonderful people I have met along the way. None of it. In a very real way, cancer saved my life. I know that sounds ironic and possibly contradictory, but it’s true.

So once again, my message is to live life to your fullest capacity and enjoy everything it has to offer. Love yourself and all others. If cancer is the result, then know that it, too, is just part of your experience and embrace it. It may actually be saving your life!

MC: You worked in international business before you were ill, and write about your struggles to break through the ‘glass ceiling’ which women often face. Did your experience in the other realm give you any advice you could pass on to women facing a similar situation?

AM: One of the things I’ve noticed is that women who try to make it in a “man’s” environment try to become more like men. This is not a criticism because I tried to do that, too. We don’t know any other way of doing it. If we wanted to climb to any position of significance, our mentors in the work place—at least historically—were all men.

Men, after all, were the ones who created that work place in the first place, so it stands to reason that they would be the ones we would turn to. We really had no female role models to emulate. Thank goodness that’s changing because in many ways, the work place is way out of kilter!

Anyway, what I learned in the other realm is that our gender is what it is for a reason, so we need to honour it. Regardless of what gender we are, we are not inadequate nor are we in any way “less than” the opposite gender. For a woman, this means to embrace our female authenticity and not feel the need to become more like a “man” to succeed.

It means realizing that the traits we normally associate with women, such as sensitivity and empathy, are not weaknesses, but strengths. To deny them means creating an imbalanced environment.

Once we realize this and embrace this, we can start to display these traits with more confidence even in the workplace. Motherhood, and the responsibilities that go with this role, is also something that women don’t need to apologize for in the work place. It’s a natural part of life and evolution and needs to be seen that way and valued.

In other words, we don’t need to be more like “men” to succeed in the world. And we don’t need to “fight” against men for recognition either, because we need to realize that we don’t need their approval for us to be who we are. As women, we just need to recognize the value that our feminine traits have, and bring these traits with confidence and strength into whatever environment we choose.

MC: And finally... you write with great passion about the need to be yourself rather than attempt to be positive in the face of difficulty when you really don’t feel like it. I found this to be especially true when I was being treated for lymphoma. Can you describe the best way for someone to be true to their own feelings of fear and negativity without being sucked down into a permanently negative thought pattern?

AM: One of the things I ask people to do, no matter how fearful or negative they are feeling about a situation or diagnosis, is to hold on to optimism. Optimism is very different from positivity. There’s no “pressure” to optimism, whereas there’s a certain amount of pressure attached to feeling a need to be positive. We feel we are failing somehow for being negative, and end up bottling up our feelings which leads to an inauthentic experience.

Optimism, on the other hand, gives us hope that things will not always be this way, while at the same time, it allows us to authentically feel our current emotions fully, with no pressure to be or do anything else. Optimism gives people hope and helps them to have a vision for the future, which helps them to climb out of the hole of fear and depression.

This why I get so upset when doctors give people a terminal prognosis and say something like, “You’ve got xx number of months to live”. This is the worst thing you can do to someone. It takes away their hope!

In essence, you’ve taken away their will to live! I don’t think ANYONE has the right to do that! And we often see this become a self-fulfilling prophecy while the doctor feels that they have predicted it correctly!

No one has the right to do that, because no one knows when you are really going to die! I’m living proof of that! 🙌

When I was born into this world
The only things I knew were to love,
laugh, and shine my light brightly.

Then as I grew,
people told me to stop laughing.
“Take life seriously,” they said,
“If you want to get ahead in this world.”
So I stopped laughing.

People told me,
“Be careful who you love
If you don’t want your heart broken.”
So I stopped loving.

They said,
“Don’t shine your light so bright
As it draws too much attention onto you.”
So I stopped shining
And became small
And withered
And died

Only to learn upon death
That all that matters in life
Is to love, laugh,
and shine our light brightly!

ANITA MOORJANI



MEET THE AUTHORS

ANITA MOORJANI is the New York Times best-selling author of *Dying to Be Me*, an account of her battle with cancer that culminated in a near-death experience that completely changed her perspective on life. Now completely cancer-free, Anita travels the globe, giving talks and workshops as well as speaking at conferences and special events to share the profound insights she gained while in the other realm.

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MARGARET CAHILL is the author of *Under Cover of Darkness: How I Blogged My Way through Mantle Cell Lymphoma* and publishes books through her company *The Wessex Astrologer* and its MBS imprint *Flying Horse Books*. During 2013 she underwent six months of intensive chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant for the treatment of Mantle Cell Lymphoma. She is now in remission and has returned to full time work. She still writes her blogs.

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