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Four Days That Changed Our Lives

By Tamara Jeffries

"This is going to change your life - I guarantee it," declares the woman calling me from the Possibility of Woman course. I have never heard anyone so enthusiastic about a workshop before, but this isn't just any gathering. This is the "course" - an international empowerment event started by motivational speaker Carol McCall. After four days, I am told, no woman walks away the same.

I can always use a little more personal power, but I am not sure my life needs changing. I have recently taken an exciting job as the health editor at ESSENCE. I have a cozy apartment, a cluster of supportive friends, a loving family and a steady relationship with a nice guy. On the other hand, my finances are limited, I am still without children-and my sweet relationship is going really, *really* slowly. Just beneath my skin, I have a nagging sense that a lot more is possible for me-that somehow, at age 36, I haven't quite lived up to my potential.

Unlike me, my younger sister couldn't be more eager for change. Six months ago Kerri, her husband and their two toddlers moved six hundred miles from Indianapolis to Syracuse, New York-only to have their duplex totaled in a fire a few months later. They were safe, but they took one look at the charred remains of their home and said, "Let's go." They then moved another six hundred miles south to Virginia to live temporarily with our parents. Then there's Kerri's job situation: After three years as a full-time mom, Kerri just started working outside her home. But jobs are scarce, and she and her husband, both college-educated, are stuck in just-above-minimum wage positions. So when I call to ask Kerri if she'll join me for a weekend course that can "change your life," she agrees.

My sister and I don't know exactly what to expect from the seminar, but as we pack for our four-day retreat, we're both game. The brochure promises that we'll discover "the catalytic power of listening to understand and to heal" and improve our "unbalanced, disjointed and unfulfilled lives." After packing a bathing suit, warm socks and plenty of water-and filling out pages of forms and disclaimers-we're on our way. What we don't know is that we're stepping into four days that will enlighten and surprise us-and transform our lives.

Why We Don't Listen

Kerri and I walk into an ordinary hotel conference room in Durham, North Carolina. The tables are arranged in a U shape, with 40 chairs squeezed along the perimeter, ready for the women, most of whom are perhaps feeling as nervous as Kerri and I are. Cheery workshop assistants bustle around. "Do you think we have enough Kleenex?" one asks another. I whisper to Kerri: "We're not going to cry on the first day, are we?" But even before the introductions are done, we're dabbing our eyes.

Facilitator Carol McCall appears. Draped in rich purple, she explains one of the main purposes of the course - learning to listen. She says our relationships with others and our ability to achieve our goals hinge on how well we communicate - and especially on how well we hear. "While others speak, we often listen to our own internal dialogue," she says. She explains that while others are talking, we tend to think, *I know exactly what she's about to say or When he has said his piece, I'm going to come back with this*. Then we reply to what we assume the person has said.

Carol says the same "internal dialogue" that interrupts us also informs our choices. The problem is, that voice doesn't always tell us the truth and can even "make things up." Carol believes that as children we each subconsciously make an "early life decision" - one of five myths a person creates about herself before age 5. For women, the myths are "I'm not good enough," "I'm worthless," "I'm not worthy," "I'm not enough" or "I'm not important." Then many of us make decisions for our entire lives based on the myth we've chosen for ourselves.

I realize that my myth is "I'm not important." I manifest the classic symptoms-a shrinking violet's disposition, a hard-to-hear voice and a tendency to dismiss my accomplishments. My sister later tells me that her myth is "I'm not good enough." She sees herself as both a bad girl and a perfectionist-one who is blind to her own gifts.

As Carol outlines these myths, something clicks for me. Suddenly, I can scroll through my life and see how often I've deferred to others and assumed someone else knew best. How I haven't sought to get my writing published because, after all,

who would care about what I have to say? I recall all the times I've felt invisible, unheard, misunderstood - at home, at work, in relationships.

We learn that our personal myths are deeply ingrained, but they can be altered. The first step is to recognize what they are, then to realize how these negative thoughts are undermining our efforts. Only then can we start to move beyond the myths and keep them from sabotaging our happiness and success. Again, the key is listening. "There's a way you want to be, a way you want to present yourself to others," Carol says. "That's your higher dialogue. When you stop listening to your [negative] internal dialogue, you can listen to and follow your excellence - and that changes your whole way of being."

But how do we tune in to that "higher dialogue?"

How do we replace our personal myths with new beliefs about ourselves? Over the next four days several of us will get one-on-one guidance from Carol when she calls us to The Angel Chair.

The Chair Up There

Each day during the course, Carol selects a woman from the group to sit in a big easy chair at the front of the room. The rest of us are instructed not to say a word; our job is to listen and when the session with that "angel" is over, to say what we have learned about ourselves from the woman's experience in the chair.

Each woman selected settles nervously into the chair, pulls her box of tissues close and draws in a deep breath. Carol aims a laser of questions right at the woman's most personal issue: "Tell me about this man you're seeing," she says, "and let's talk about the baby you're about to have." Or "Why are you so angry?" Or "Why haven't you done the thing you dream of doing?" Though Carol has had little or no individual contact with these women during the weekend, she seems to hit her target each time and, with probing questions, urges each woman to "go there" - to talk openly about her fears, hopes and concerns and uncover ideas and behaviors she has used to sabotage herself.

For me, just the thought of sitting in that chair is emotionally wrenching. The suspense alone nearly kills me: No one knows who will be the next "angel" until the moment the woman is chosen. Each hot-seat session goes on for what seems like hours, and I hold my breath and pray, for the woman in the chair as Carol carries her deep into the well of herself. I cry with women whose names I don't know - White women, grandmothers, people with whom I thought I had nothing in common. "Let it out, sister," I whisper as one woman sobs, another rebels and still another laughs and is set free in that chair.

And then it's Kerri's turn. On the afternoon of the third day Carol summons my sister to the front, and she and I exchange a wide-eyed look that says, "Yikes!" "Take notes for me," she whispers as she rises slowly and heads to the front. "I got your back," I promise. I am nervous for Kerri, but happy too: She might be able to finally work through what is blocking her career. But Carol's first question is not about my sister's job search; it's about Kerri's relationship with me.

In that chair my only sibling admits that she has always resented me. She says that over the years, she has found ways to play to my insecurities. This was her way of compensating for what she had made up about me - that I was the smarter sister, the together one, the one my parents liked best. Carol asks me to stand. "Tamara, what have you made up about Kerri?" she asks.

Feeling like a 5-year-old, I admit that I've always been jealous of her. "She was always the pretty one," I say through tears. "She was the funny one, the one my parents always liked better."

"See what happens when we make things up?" Carol says. She encourages Kerri to stop giving me advice - the method she has used to keep me insecure - and free me to make my own decisions. That, in turn, would allow me to work through some of my "not important" stuff. Not so bad, I think as I take my seat again. At least I didn't actually get called to sit in the chair.

When Carol turns her attention to Kerri's marriage, I am stunned by my sister's revelation. Kerri and her husband, Kenyatta, college sweethearts, are approaching their sixth anniversary and are among the most solid couples I know. But Carol gets my sister to admit that she is weary of her marriage. She is emotionally detached from her husband, unsure of their future together and nearly beyond caring. Though we'd talked intimately about her married life, Kerri had never admitted any of this to me. Looking at her now, I can see that she is telling the barest truth and that she is afraid of where that honesty will lead. Carol asks the women around the table to raise their hands if they have ever been sick of marriage - and everyone who has ever worn a wedding ring lifts her hand.

"See?" Carol says. "You're not the only one who has felt this way. Besides, you love his dirty drawers, don't you?" Kerri smiles and nods, wiping away tears. Carol insists that my sister needs to open her heart to her husband. Even if she has divorced him emotionally, Carol says, she can secretly remarry him. In the end Kerri promises to have a long talk with Kenya - and to take a long vacation alone to replenish herself.

When Carol is done with Kerri, each woman in the room says what she has learned from my sister. I may have escaped the chair, but I can't escape the truth: I discover that Kerri and I don't know each other so well after all. We have a lot of listening to do. After all 40 of us have spoken, we stand and give Kerri long, loud applause.

Will the Changes Last?

When we leave the course on Sunday afternoon, Kerri and I are emotionally drained but euphoric, amazed by what we've learned. On the road trip to our parents' home in Virginia, we talk about all that we realized about ourselves and each other - and whether we'll really be able to make changes that stick.

Twilight is falling as we pull up at our parents' house; Kerri's little ones come running, clamoring for hugs and kisses. As my sister and I look around at our parents and her husband and children, tears fill our eyes.

"What's wrong with y'all?" someone asks. Without answering, we put our arms around each other and let the tears fall. We have no words for the love and empathy we feel for each other and the hope we feel for ourselves. "This will last about three days," Kerri's husband jokes.

In about a week, the high does wear off. My sister takes a job as an administrative assistant and finds that she is bored and unappreciated. To make matters worse, what she thought would be a two-month stay with our parents is dragging into six months. Kerri is feeling stuck.

Meanwhile, my three-year relationship stagnates. I become more dissatisfied with my life, and depression settles in. I pick up the phone and call Carol McCall. Trying to be diplomatic, I ask her: Is this what that woman at the course meant when she said my life would change?

"It's called detox," Carol says matter-of-factly. Like physical toxins, poisonous behaviors must pass through your system in order to get out, she explains. After an intense honesty session such as the one at the course, one often feels worse before feeling better.

After the workshop, Carol says, women realize that their old habits don't work. "Then they convert to telling their truth," she says, "and that stirs up a hornet's nest." When a woman begins to be honest with herself, the lies she has told herself about the quality of her relationships, her interest in a chosen career or her hidden desires surface. Carol explains that although it may not be pretty, telling the truth ultimately brings you healing.

But what do you do while the hornets are swarming? "People are hard on themselves when they're in a funk," she says. "When a friend is in a funk, we get in there and work with her, support her, comfort her. We need to give ourselves the same compassion that we give others. Don't kick yourself when you're down." But no matter how difficult it becomes, she adds, you have to keep telling yourself the truth - and then you must slowly begin to act on that truth.

Telling herself the truth gives Kerri the nerve to tell her husband that she thinks they ought to separate. A fiery argument follows - which is exactly what they need to break the silence between them and admit to each other that neither of them really wants out. Little by little they start communicating again and working together toward their goals. They locate an apartment, he finds a new job and she lands a better-paying position as an administrator for a nonprofit educational organization.

As for me, I initiate some intimate conversations with my parents, listening to a side of them I have never noticed. My guy and I decide to make changes in our stagnant relationship by putting some distance between us. I need to spend time getting to know myself before I can commit to a relationship. I am asking for what I want, saying no to what I don't and paying attention to negative habits. And while life isn't perfect or even close, I have a stronger sense of myself and my desires. I guess you could say I'm seeing the possibilities of this woman.

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ARE YOU AT YOUR BEST ?

Carol McCall, international motivational speaker and founder of Possibility of Woman, says her workshop can help women move beyond their limitations and live with "magnificence." Here, she offers a peek into the guidance she gives:

-On making your thoughts more positive: McCall says if your gossipy friend or your hard-to-please parent feeds you nothing but negativity, you must find something else to listen to. "Hang out with people who support your work, and disassociate with anyone who doesn't support your desire to live up to your highest standards."

-On getting out of a funk: People often blame themselves for the hard times they face or try to ignore their blues. Instead, McCall says you should just accept what you're feeling. Doing so releases the depression's hold on you. Continue to work through what you feel, but tell yourself, "This is where I am - and I'm going to treat myself well through the process."

-On speaking the truth to others: "Tell the truth with compassion and love," McCall says. You don't have to curse anyone out or turn on the tears - just state the facts. "It's like telling someone, 'You're standing on my foot,' " she explains. Usually that statement is enough to make the person move, but if he or she doesn't, that's your cue to move away from that person.

-On being true to yourself: "Many people are miserable because they know that they're living a life that isn't truly theirs," McCall says. "I call it internal betrayal. They're not living up to their true values, their true excellence." That's why you shouldn't take a job or get into a relationship that doesn't feel right for you.

-On real generosity: "When you take care of yourself, you do so much for others," McCall says. "The reason people dishonor others is because they've dishonored themselves." The better you treat yourself, the more benevolent you'll feel toward those around you. -T.J.

RETREAT FOR CHANGE

Feeling a dip in your personal power? A women's-only empowerment retreat might be what you need to uncover your potential and find or remember-your true purpose. Consider these courses:

Possibility of Woman

Who: Carol McCall's World Institute Group of Companies.

What: Talks and workshops on the power of listening, finding balance, refocusing your life and uncovering authenticity.

Where: Cities around the country; also at Caribbean and other international sites.

When: Four-day retreats year-round. Cost: \$500

Contact: Listening profitsu.com or 888-728-9975 [or see below contact information]

African-American Women on Tour

Who: Founded by Maria Dowd; speakers have included Debbie Allen, Maya Angelou, Bertice Berry and Bev Smith.

What: More than 150 workshops on career and business, finances, family relations and health.

Where: Six cities across the United States; locations change each year.

When: Summer through early fall.

Cost: \$325 for the full three-day conference; day rates are available.

Contact: (858) 560-2770, (800) 5602298 or aawot.com.

Wonder Woman Weekend: Unleashing Your Power

Who: Iyanla Vanzant's empowerment organization, Inner Visions.

What: Two and a half days of sessions that teach thought control, conscious breathing, learning to say no, moving beyond trauma and self-imposed limitations.

Where: Inner Visions Spiritual Life Maintenance Center, Silver Spring, Maryland.

When: Twice annually, in summer and fall.

Cost: \$800, which includes some meals but does not include lodging.

Contact: (301) 608-8750 or inner-visionsworldwide.com.

The World Institute Group of Companies also offers co-educational listening courses, teen-oriented courses and courses for men. If you are interested in attending a World Institute Group of Companies Course, please contact Pasqualina Hamilton 888-728-9975 ext. 1

