

The light that sits beside the darkness

The summer is at its closing and a friend has lured me onto a Scottish adventure before welcoming the fall. We travel from Ghent to Glasgow with the train and marvel at the landscape that is getting more and more divinely curved and transforms into all sorts of green as we cleave the kilometers, or should we say miles.

I am very lucky to be hosted by some of the Scottish friends of my friend. Helen McGinn is there to pick us up from a small train station called Bearsden around Glasgow. She is a mother of three and a yoga teacher for carers and people with disabilities, and a great nature enthusiast. The following days we conquer a munro in the trail of sturdy sheep and follow our host chasing small rivers in gorgeous surroundings, for centuries unruled by men.

We share things about our lives and i feel intrigued by this 47 year old Scottish fury who seems never out of spirit or energy, although her own path in life has been just as hilly as the mesmerizing landscape around us.

On the third morning of our Scottish bliss we sit down by the fireplace in the cottage we can call home for a few days, and i ask her some things about her life and work.

I'm curious to hear about the course your path has taken. You started out as a bank manager and now you run your own organisation 'Yogability' in which you offer yoga for disabled people and their carers.

HMG: "Well, you know, a lot of us fall into jobs when they are young. Being a bank manager is not something I explicitly chose. The opportunity arose and I turned out to be good at the managing part of it. I got promoted and found myself being fast tracked. Not only did the bank pay for me to do my masters degree, i also had interesting working hours, and i had good earnings." She lifts her shoulders with a smile. "I enjoyed my job, i had no particular worries about it.

While i was studying for my master's degree, i got pregnant. It was a pregnancy by choice, it went very well, it was a textbook pregnancy and a textbook birthing. Everything about it was a joy. After six months i went back to the job and my master's degree and everything was fine. About a year later i got pregnant again, with twins this time and that was a very different story. I put on a lot of weight, moving about was difficult. I had a condition which is quite common in twin pregnancies, it caused me a lot of pain and made it difficult to sleep. In the morning i would roll out of my bed on pillows and crawl to the door." She smiles and thinks for a second. "I coped fine with things but i do think there was a sort of accumulation taking place: the work, the studying, the toddler and the twinpregnancy.

At the time we lived at Glasgow University because my husband was a scientist there and also worked there as a warden. It was also the place where i studied so that was all very nice and practical. The only thing was that i had to walk up a very steep hill every morning, there was simply no other way to get there. It's funny how simple things can push you over the edge. In the last part of my pregnancy it all got to be too much and i decided to take some time off from getting my degree. The twins ended up being born five weeks early. The last weeks i had to be monitored every day. Every day i had to climb up another massive steep hill!" She laughs.

“The birth was a totally different experience from the first time, this time it took place in an operating theatre with about 25 people in the room and with quite some stress involved. But it ended up going well. After a week i went home, i now had three babies.

The children were lovely but nevertheless, going back after six months was a very different experience than the first time. I did look forward to going back but you don't view your work in quite the same way after you have given birth. My boss was very supportive to making it work but i noticed a lack of support from others who had been through it themselves. There were small actions that made things difficult. Under normal circumstances you cope with things like this quite well, but there are times in your life when you are vulnerable and there are people who like to hone in on vulnerability to use it to their advantage. I could see it happening and i wasn't prepared to put up with it. At least, that is how it appeared at that time.”

The path comes to you when you are ready

“It took me another year to fully realize i couldn't continue. At some point i was in a meeting of managers and experienced a sort of deja-vu. The things that passed over the table were things that had been coming back in the past five years without evolving. I suddenly realized that no change was happening. It struck me that the work i was doing wasn't really making a difference to anybody's life in my team. I thought: there has got to be more to life than this. At that point being mother seemed more valuable to me then doing the work that i was doing as a bank manager. My boss said: 'We are not used to you being so quiet.' I replied: 'This conversation has happened before and in fact: i'd like to hand my notice in.'” She smiles. When something is broken like that, it can't be fixed. It was time to go. My husband agreed with my choice. I left the banking world. I did finish my dissertation for my master's degree, then i rolled into a period of doing many different things and many different jobs.

The yoga thing was not a path i chose. I think the path comes to you when you are ready. A while after i quit my job as a bank manager, things changed for us financially pretty drastically for a little while. I was doing all sorts of jobs to make ends meet, i could never have thought at that point that yoga would become my job later.

I first started doing yoga about twelve years ago, my eldest was six. I needed something in my life. I wasn't particularly healthy, i had been before but in this stage we were rather in a survival mode so then taking care of yourself is usually not high on the list. Looking for personal growth in your life is something that can usually only happen when you're secure in the basics. I was struggling with things.

As you get older, there is a slow death of the girl you were as you transform into a woman. It's not a bad thing but it is a transition. Looking back, i think i had to become sloth like to a point for things to start changing. I did take care of the children, took them to school, helped them with their hobbies, and i tried to find ways to make money from home. Buy that was it in that phase. A dear friendship broke up in that time and i was devastated about it. I felt such a loss. I remember my husband saying that it was meant to happen, that something new would come on my path.

A couple of weeks later someone i knew wanted to try yoga and invited me to come. She never went as it turned out, i went by myself and oh my god..." She brings her hands to her face and her eyes start to smile. "In yoga we speak about the movement from the gross to the subtle. You start of with the gross in a physical way and slowly you start to hone in on the subtle. It starts of big and then the subtle energetic body changes. Not that the changes are smaller after that but you start to notice things more. It's a bit like this: your house is an absolute disgrace and you clean it. After you have cleaned out the rubbish you start to notice the dust, so you remove all the dust. Then you start to notice the chips in the paint so you start to repaint the walls. And as you peer down into the corners, you realize some repairs are needed and you start repairing things. In that way you could say, there is a movement from the big to the small.

Already the gross part of it, the first yoga-sessions, changed my life. I was an insomniac, had chronic lower back pain and no core strength. The first yoga-session took all my pain away until about an hour after, this was huge to me. And that night i slept. It was like magic. I went back the next weeks and that was difficult. It was quite something to actually get it into my schedule to pursue the yoga classes, not only to get there and come back but also to recover from it the first weeks. I wasn't used to that sort of activity, my body was tired after it in the beginning. On top of that i had the household and the jobs i was doing to make ends meet. At some point i skipped a lesson or two and everything came back immediately: the insomnia, the lower back pain, the feeling of things closing in on you. I realized i had no choice but to go to yoga. Sometimes i resented it but i kept on going.

At some point i started going more than once a week and practicing at home a little bit. What yoga does is that it brings you a deep awareness of your body. I realized my body was a treasure i had to look after. I started to go on long walks again like i used to when i was younger. In the walks i went into deep thinking. I didn't realize at the time that this is all part of yoga. Through working with your body, you open up your mind. I had revelations about love and kindness, and about peace and joy. It all came to me and i felt gifted, in a way that i felt i had been given a major gift in my life. I was much kinder to everybody than i had been before. Friends started to enter in my life and stayed. The reason why people left before is that i discarded people. If i felt wronged, i just left, i would walk away rather than feel hurt. As you can see, yoga changed quite a lot." She smiles. "So that was the journey from being a bank manager to starting yoga. After that there were years down the line from becoming a teacher."

Purity

What was it that brought you to being a yoga teacher for carers and people with disability?

HMG: "About four years ago a friend of mine, Debbie, wanted to do teacher training and talked to me about it. I didn't feel i was ready. I wanted to do it but i felt insecure about my abilities to teach and apart from that, it was quite an expensive training. A couple of things happened that make me decide to do it.

There was a moment in a yoga studio where there was a bit of unkindness towards one of the yogi's. Debbie and i spoke about it. I realized that it would have been an opportunity to really help this person. If there would have been kindness in supporting her, it could have changed her life. We felt teachers should work with kindness.

There was another incident where i was given the advice not to do the teacher training because possibly i was too heavy and not good enough at yoga. Luckily i don't internalize things like that

but it did made me think i absolutely needed to do the training so that as a teacher i would never tell somebody they shouldn't do the training because of their size or their ability, because that was completely missing the point of yoga.

I wanted to teach and share this point of yoga: it is for everybody and it's about moving, not about ability at all. In fact, the more difficult it is to touch your toes, the more work you are doing. If you can touch you toes, fantastic, you are halfway there, but it's all about the work that you do there, along the way.

So, i ended up doing the teacher training. I also did special needs yoga because Debbie and i decided we wanted to do special needs yoga and help carers. My friend Debbie's son has special needs, cognitively wise he is fine, very bright, but physically he is in a wheelchair, he can't talk or walk or move well. He has a talker though, he can communicate fine. Debbie had a specialized yoga teacher to come in and do yoga with him, it was very beneficial for him. For herself as a carer she also found such a benefit in yoga for example because of the strength you build: core strength, arm strength... If you are lifting and pulling constantly, you need to be strong. She saw that a lot of carers were broken, not just mentally but physically. Yoga brings strength to your body and your mind.

We talked about it a lot and i decided i would do the special needs yoga training with her. I wasn't sure if it was something for me in the beginning, i had no experience with it what so ever. During the training something came to me while i was watching the children being taught. There was a real purity there, in those children. As parents we put our own ideas onto the kids all the time, we transfer things, we expect them to behave, to act in a certain way... With kids with special needs, you find that the parents want their children to be happy, that they can move, that they can speak. The children don't have the weight of expectations of their parents and as a result they are free. That struck me during the training. In a way they are under strain but in a way they are absolutely free. It was so beautiful to see. There was beauty in it, there was freedom in it, there were benefits in it. People don't like to talk about having benefits with special needs but actually i think we all have special needs of our own. Some you can see, some you can't." A log of wood falls down in the fireplace. We look at it for a moment.

"We started Yogability and it grew. Today we have a lot of clients. We provide free yoga to special needs people and their carers. We do outreach work that helps pay for the free yoga. Apart from yogability i also work with NHS groups, doctors and nurses, and patient groups. These things i'm paid for. It's wonderful. It works." She smiles.

The system of working through charity is something that we don't know so well in Belgium. So you have set up a system to make it work financially. You bring yoga to people who might not of thought of it or have the money for it and you get your earnings elsewhere?

HMG: "That's right. We came up with that because yoga is expensive. Teachers should of course be paid for their work, they bring a major health benefit to a person. Teachers also do a lot of training, which is costly for them. At the moment i'm about to follow an extra training in Yin Yoga for example. The whole thing will probably cost about a 1000 pounds. It's something i want to do, we are constantly learning, taking on new training and reading, honing in so we can learn and help. However because of that it's all quite exclusive and that is just not fair. If you are a carer the chances are more often or not that you are on a very minimal income because you can't work, you are a full time carer. There is not a lot of money coming from the state. You may

be lucky to have a partner that is working but even then there won't be a lot of money because of for example all the special gear that you need. A pram for a mainstream child will cost about 100 pounds, for a child with special needs, it easily costs 1000 pounds. The markup on equipment is huge, transport is an issue and so on.

What we also realized was that there are a lot of people that appear as though they can afford things might not be able to in practise. It's all judgement. Somebody could live poorly but have a nice car or nice clothes. Somebody else could be wearing clothes from a second hand shop but could very well be much better off financially. A lot of people have issues about money and want to appear okay. What we decided was we didn't want people to have to prove anything about their income. It's written in the constitution of the charity that the yoga is free for carers and people with special needs and paying for everybody else.

The others pay on a donation basis. We work with overcoming barriers to entry. If somebody can pay 2 pounds, that's fine, others pay 10. What we find is that we get an average of 5 pounds and we can work with that. A average price in a mainstream yoga studio would be about 12 pounds a class.

The charity was never about earning money, it was about managing it so we could pay our bills. Debbie and i have for years paid ourselves 70 pounds a week, that has not changed. It's very basic as you can imagine but the charity is not about money for us. It could easily become financially successful but neither of us is ready to make a change to the basic idea of it at the moment. Yogability has grown a lot, we have more teachers in, we have lot's of volunteers, it has become a wonderful community.

What i have done to gather the rest of my income is taken on my own yoga classes. That is also working very well. I always take on clients saying: let's start with six weeks, then take a week of and see if you miss it. Everybody continues. Which is amazing.

I also do yoga therapy, that is a training i haven't yet finished because it went on during a difficult time in my life. What i do is bring yoga teaching to private clients. It works very well. That's the commercial side of it that balances of the other side."

Kindness

You have lost your husband almost two years ago. At some point you told me that the way you were able to cope with that would have been totally different if you didn't have yoga in your life.

HMG: "Yes, that is true. You know, yoga doesn't take away pain or heartache, or grief or loss, but it allowed me to accept that change was inevitable. That the pain i was feeling was a part of being alive. And that there was still beauty in the world, i had my children, i was very healthy..." She thinks for a few seconds. "Yoga teacher training and all the yoga i have done in the last years has been about understanding death. A lot of yoga is about preparing ourselves for death. This may sound weird but what i mean is this: if you understand that life is fleeting and everything is always changing, then you can absolutely live in the moment and find the joy in things." She sighs. "There is no joy in grief but to be able to understand that the emotions that you feel mean that you are alive, to have that awareness, is a yoga-thing. I don't know what i would have done with myself if i hadn't had the yoga. I know how to breathe, how to become still, how to become balanced in the yoga postures. Yoga allows you peace even if it's just for a short time. It permeates your life even in such a time of grief.

I couldn't teach for quite some time, I didn't have the energy for it. For a while the yoga that I did was all about me, about taking from yoga rather than giving form to it. I learned a lot in that time about the eight limbs of yoga. There is the physical posture, the meditation, the concentration, there is quite a lot of different things to it. Two of the main parts are called the yama's and niyama's, they are not so much commandments but rather observances of life.

There's a lot in there about non violence and loving kindness, about how you should conduct yourself. When you get enough advice like that, that has been passed on through generations of yogi's, you find there's a comfort in it during a time of crisis. I'm not religious but I can understand that people find in their religion something to hold on to in a crisis. This for me wasn't so much something to hold on to, it was something to actually do. By living by these principles and honing in on them, it meant that the day was better to sit in for everybody. It was better for you to sit in your grief, for your children you are working through grief with, and for the people who surround you who want to help.

It's very difficult for other people actually because they want to do something. But there is nothing anybody can do for you during a time like that. I mean, they can do practical stuff which is fantastic but that's about it. For the rest, they can only stand by and watch you get through it. But what yoga did for me was show that I could get through it. I think that was also important for the people around me. If it was only for that, yoga was worth it." She smiles.

You also said something about kindness. You said something like: if every child would be brought up in kindness, we would have a different world.

HMG: "I really believe that. When yoga came into my life and it started to have its profound effect physically and mentally, I changed. I think I was a kind person before but it's hard to judge. If you don't have awareness, you think you conduct yourself in a loving, kind way. As human beings we can delude ourselves into believing anything, anything we do seems justified in our heads because that's what we do to survive.

What I found with yoga is you actually take the kindness into your heart. It becomes you, so you actually don't need to know what other people think because all you have is loving kindness. You still have pain and anger and fear, it's not about suppressing real emotions but it's about not acting on them. It's about absolutely sitting in them, realizing they are going to pass. With children for instance, if you do yoga and it has permeated your life, the kindness that you show them, the understanding, the patience, that is pretty huge. The patience and loving kindness I have felt in my family, particularly the five years before my husband died, made the whole environment. My children are very kind, I don't know if it's because of me or not, whether it is part of their personalities or because of the fact that my husband was kind. All I know is: the room was filled with kindness when we were in it.

Before I did yoga I felt lost a lot of the time. I could even be sitting in a room with my family and feel lonely. Still at times I feel like that, or I feel a bit adrift, but there is something that comes in your heart when you do yoga. A calmness of your soul, of your inner you. An understanding between you and your soul: this is good, you are on the right path, you are doing the right thing. You can relax in what is deep inside of you.

In yoga there is talk about Brahman, Atman, the inner god, the god that comes from inside of you. It no longer struggles against you. You probably know the inner voice that says to you: 'oh, what are you doing, why are you doing that? Stop.' It's a voice we often don't listen to. That's the voice that I mean, that spark, that part of your soul, your inner being. When you do listen to

it, suddenly you don't have to play out scenarios anymore, scenarios that bring pain and suffering to you and that you have created. Scenarios that haven't happened but you have made them happen, you have manifested them whether they actually physically happened or not. All those things stop. You stop planting seeds for terrible scenarios and start planting seeds of kindness for massive trees to grow out of it.

Can you imagine if we all did that and this would be the environment our children grew up in? That would be so different for them because we pass on all our insecurities on them, our fears and worries. We all do it. If we are very lucky, we reach a point where we are aware of this and we are different and our children then become different. So yes, i think we would have a different world if everybody did yoga."

Gifts

What's quite intriguing is that you are an insomniac. Could i say despite the yoga?

HMG: 'I had some periods of insomnia when i was younger and when i had children, and yes, after my husband died quite a lot. I have had a lot of time to think in the night about insomnia and about not sleeping." She smiles. "I think what i realized is that a lot of the pain and suffering, and joys and good things, we choose to have. You have to be careful when you speak about these things. You don't want people to think that you mean that they chose to have pain and suffering in their lives or that that they have chosen to have bad things happen to them. Of course not. But when it comes to how we treat ourselves, we are making choices. It is that simple. If we have pain that isn't something we were born with, that can be remedied and we don't remedy it because we don't move, we are choosing to hold on to our pain. If we are angry with somebody and we are still angry five years later, we are getting a benefit from that pain, we have decided we want to carry it, it comforts us, it makes us feel better. Like a child with a blanky. We make choices and we are comforted by them. So me not sleeping after my husband died, possibly was a choice.

What i found when i slept was i had terrible nightmares. Really vivid terrible nightmares. I was taken to another world. I think i realized that the dreamworld actually was another world. It can affect you as much as your day-to-day world. If you wake up not remembering your dreams, it could be worse actually. You wonder: 'why do i feel like this?' Some days you wake up and you are in pain, or you feel numb, or sometimes you feel joyful. The dreams I had were huge and i couldn't cope with them. I decided i'd rather not sleep, i didn't want to go to that world.

I think because of how I operate day to day, because of how i move and breathe, my body adjusted. I can survive on low sleep. I go on massive walks, i'm joyful, i'm happy with my family. There is nothing that i haven't been able to do.

I've done some reading on insomnia. A lot of people who have it are in physical pain, that is not the case for me. Or they suffer from the mental chatter, i don't have that. I'm calm during the night, i rest during the night and i think. My thoughts are lovely thoughts most of the time. If i have dark thoughts, i breathe through them. I do have dark thoughts and i sometimes get carried away with them but i don't build scenarios. I think a lot of the pain comes from building scenarios. What if, what if. I have taught myself not to do that.

In some ways obviously i would like to have the hours of sleep. Having a deep sleep is wonderful and great for the body and mind. Deep down i think i might know why i'm choosing not to sleep but maybe i'm not ready yet to change it. Maybe the insomnia i have now is different from the

one caused by grief. Or maybe it is grief, off a different kind. I have not examined it fully, i'm not ready to delve that deep. But i take responsibility for it.

There are a lot of things i have neglected the last two years, things that seem ridiculous and small to me, certain practical things, i try not to worry about them. Of course sometimes I have to deal with them: bills need to be paid, things need to be sorted, but i try not to worry about them.

My choices are to everyday find beauty, happiness, joy. It doesn't mean i'm always happy or joyful but i do choose to find it in every day. The smell of the woodsmoke right now, how wonderful is that?" She smiles.

You said at some point that you become more aware as you become older. I read somewhere that the age between 42 and 49 is the age of authentication, you become the truest version of yourself.

HMG: "I think you do become more aware as you grow older. You know this idea of moving from the gross to the subtle we spoke of? I think as women our body, our physical appearance, changes. We can fight against it or we can accept it and be wise about it." She smiles. "We can be thankful that we have a body that works and is healthy. I think the physical side of it is obvious. How can we not be aware of your body by this age? As you age, changes happen and you cannot help but see them. That awareness will kick in even if you don't do any kind of spiritual work or work that allows you to grow.

But also the awareness grows on a more subtle level, we are aware of our thoughts. We start to see patterns in ourselves, we start to think: 'wait a minute, why am i doing this? Why have i been doing this all my life? Why is this still happening?' I have seen it in people. Also in people who don't do yoga. Awareness creeps in by itself. A spark of: wait a minute, this has happened before and before and maybe i would like it not to happen anymore. I do think it's a natural progression for everybody, but maybe some people suppress it. If you decide to follow it, great, if you don't, that's your responsibility then.

I think it's great to reach that part of your life." She laughs and I join in.

Is there something else you want to share?

HMG: "As I get older, there are connections that are instant. It's not about the time you have known somebody but about the connection that you make in that moment. Sitting down and talking like this, with somebody that you didn't know before as we are doing right now, is just wonderful. There is no discomfort in it. What a pleasure that is in life. And it happens more and more. Connections appear and we engage in them but we don't grab them. If somebody wants to leave you bless their journey and let them go. People go but you keep the doors and windows open for love and connection to be possible.

I was at a conference in Dublin some time ago and shared a wonderful evening with a group of people. We exchanged thoughts and shared experiences. After a day we all left and i didn't even know the surname of most of them. You can have deep connections without needing to hold on to them."

Connections can be deep but light?

HMG: "Yes." She looks at the fire for a moment. "When we talk about lightness, it doesn't mean we should avoid darkness. Every positive trait will have a negative side to it. If somebody is

vivacious and outgoing, you might find it to be irritating the next moment. You can't have the joy of that vivaciousness without the other side of it, it's that simple. The darkness has to come with the light. The light is sitting by the darkness side by side.

I have thought a lot about that in the last two years. The darkness can be overwhelming, I can get carried away with it. Not for long because I'm lucky to have techniques and tools at my disposal. I have learned that you can walk side by side with it. It shouldn't go away actually, we need to have the dark side. We need to be able to embrace it. Sometimes it seems heavy but it doesn't have to be. Funnily enough darkness can be light. The darkness sitting by your side allows you to see the light. The way you see colors in nature, the forest, the grass. It's just wonderful.

A lot of people get pulled down in the darkness. I have stood on the precipice of the dark hole when I was fifteen and then again when I was in my twenties and at some point in my thirties. Not often but I have stood on the precipice of the dark hole and looked down into it. I decided I did not want to fall into it. I'm not saying that it's an easy choice to make. Some people get sucked into it and can't help it. Sometimes there is mental illness, I'm not undermining it. It's not always a choice, but it was for me. The darkness still surrounded me but I wasn't going into it, I didn't allow myself to go down there. You don't have to get carried away. You don't have to allow it to take the form of a big monster and pick you up to take you into its pit."

That reminds me of something you said: you used to be afraid of spiders but not anymore.
She laughs.

HMG: "The spider thing! I was terrified of spiders. I would scream if one came near me, even if somebody had a bit of fluff and pretended it was a spider, I would freak out and jump in the sofa, I would actually be struck with fear. When I had children I tried very hard to not be afraid because I didn't want to pass it on to them, but when you strive and strain for something, it doesn't work. The kids have got the fear as well.

When Brian died, the fear went. A lot of fears went actually. When the worst thing in your life happens, small fears like spiders disappear. It was like that with a lot of things but the thing with the spiders struck me. I now pick them up and put them outside. In fact, they are beautiful little creatures who do no harm. Apart from something happening to my children, I don't think there is anything I couldn't face, because I have faced it. And what a gift that is.

My husband dying was an awful terrible thing to happen but there are gifts in there. If I would have a choice, I would have my husband here and take the gifts back gladly. But that's not how it happened and I am grateful for the gifts.

You choose to take a good path and live your life. If you were lucky and you had a wonderful person in your life like I did, then you know that's what they would want for you as well. So there is absolutely no guilt or remorse about leading my beautiful life today."

In the morning of our returning to Belgium, we are so fortunate as to be given a lift by somebody of the group of nature enthusiasts where Helen is part of. He is a GP at the local health center where Helen also teaches yoga classes. I ask him about it. While he steers the car through the Monday morning traffic on the outskirts of Glasgow, he admits he has picked up yoga himself over the last year thanks to Helen's enthusiasm. So have his fellow practitioners and all the nurses and most of the rest of the staff. There is even talk of other practices starting to offer yoga classes to patients and staff.

In the train i study the landscape sliding by, it slowly transforms back from the Scottish wildness and sense of escape, into the limbo of my everyday and routine. The miles and miles, or should i say kilometers, of green and moist have brought their imprint on my body and thoughts. As have some of the things we have talked about in this week, just before the fall kicks in. I pick up some of the joys of kindness as i hand out smiles to people passing by on the train and get some in return. I feel thankful to be going back to my beautiful life filled with work and household, and with a lot of searching and exploring, on my own path of life.