


*Rachel Macy Stafford*

# SOUL SHIFT



*The WEARY HUMAN'S GUIDE to  
GETTING UNSTUCK & RECLAIMING  
Your PATH to JOY*

 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

# YOU ARE HERE

**W**elcome, weary human. I suspect you picked up this book because you are indeed weary—maybe even more than that. Perhaps you are downright fatigued by life. Perhaps you feel misdirected or a little lost, disoriented by the spinning world’s relentless demands, endless stream of information, and daily atrocities. Perhaps you long for something to change, a way to escape the pressure so you can simply breathe.

## **You are not alone . . . in how you feel.**

The world feels completely out of control right now, like we are all driving down a crowded highway, bumper to bumper, with construction on both sides; we feel anxious, not knowing how long the traffic will continue, worrying about when we’ll get to our destination, and wondering what we should do. As tempting as it sounds to wish for an escape, what we actually need is an *exploration*, one that returns us home to our authentic selves and the joy inside.

Taking the first step to reclaiming your path to joy is not easy, but the fact that you are here with me searching for it is enough to put you on the path to finding it.

## **You are not alone . . . in what you seek.**

You’ll be hearing these four words—“you are not alone”—throughout this journey. Yes, this is a *journey*. This is not just a book with pages to flip through and ponder and then eventually forget about. This is a guidebook for you to take with you on a continuous discovery process that will come to life through your introspection, self-compassion, and small, brave steps.

These pages you hold will become your map to joy, presence, purpose, and peace. With my hand in yours, we’ll explore eight vital practice areas in the Soul Shift journey:

Presence

True Self-Worth

Letting Go of Perfection

Being Kind to Yourself

Being Your Authentic Self

Self-Forgiveness

Looking After Yourself

Offering Your Gift to the World

If merely reading the names of these practice areas feels overwhelming, let me assure you, this exploration process is not a race, nor does it require you to commit to a fixed itinerary. The eight practice areas in the Soul Shift journey are designed to be explored at your own pace, as many times as you need, in whatever way feels most authentic to you. It is through this flexible, self-paced approach that you'll be able to uncover healing truths and create new, life-giving pathways to a life with limitless possibilities.

Before you begin your Soul Shift journey, it's important to emphasize something:

**You are here.**

You know the point at which a hiking, biking, or horseback-riding trail begins? It's called the trailhead. There, you can usually find a big map with an overview of the trails and bodies of water you may encounter along the way. On that map, there's a little arrow pointing to a dot that says "YOU ARE HERE."

Let's focus on that dot for a moment.

You are here, and that is significant.

I can only imagine what it took for you to get to this place: You had to carve out time from your daily schedule. You had to make a financial investment. You had to quiet the inner critic, reflect vulnerably on what you might need, and step out of your comfort zone. In other

words, you didn't get here by accident. You made both the choice and the commitment to show up in this moment.

**You are here, and that is brave.**

And this is me, celebrating your arrival and acknowledging the courage it takes to embrace a new journey. If you are anything like me, entering unfamiliar territory can be nerve-racking. You may be wondering: *Is this where I should be? Am I on time? Am I ready?*

Trust me when I say yes, you are at the right place . . . at the perfect time . . . and you've come in the ideal form—just as you are.

Thank you for being willing to traverse a new territory to be here in this moment. If anyone recognizes the significance of leaving one's comfort zone, it is me. I'm a fan of familiarity. I crave consistency. I like having a plan. Knowing what to expect brings me peace. But, as you will read in the pages ahead, opportunities to grow and become who we are meant to be don't typically happen when we cling to what is safe and routine. I'm quite certain I wouldn't be here, writing these words to you, if I'd stuck to familiar terrain. Now, don't get me wrong: it wasn't as if I willingly *chose* to venture out of my comfort zone. Three people were placed in my life to *usher* me out: my husband, Scott, and my two daughters, Natalie and Avery.

Looking back, I had some inclination of what I was getting into when, in 1996, I married a guy who thought nothing of last-minute, out-of-state job transfers in the spirit of "career development." By the time our daughters started school, we'd lived in Indiana, Ohio, Florida, and Alabama. Over and over, I faced the discomfort of establishing roots only to have them ripped up and replanted in new soil.

And if physical displacement didn't present enough challenges, it soon became evident that my daughters' temperaments would also force me into unfamiliar areas. Natalie, with her fierce independence, thirst for knowledge, and zest for adventure, created daily challenges. Avery, with her empathetic soul, big emotions, and snail-like pace, tested me in ways I'd never been tested before. My daughters' inherent natures were vastly different but equally threatening to my desire for predictability. Yet the more I tried to control the natural inclinations of my children, the more pain and discomfort I caused.

I'll never forget telling my sister, Rebecca, in 2010, about the realizations I was having and the changes I knew I needed to make. Rebecca knew I'd dreamed of being a writer since childhood, and I knew she would be a safe confidant.

"I've been writing down these raw and enlightening discoveries," I confided, "and it feels like something significant is happening."

"Rachel," my sister said, her voice low and certain. "You should start a blog! It's basically an online journal where writers share their thoughts and readers can comment, like a conversation. It's becoming hugely popular, and I know several people who could really use your words."

Within days, Rebecca sent me a step-by-step blogging book with a personal note about her belief in me. After extensive research and help from some tech-savvy friends, I started a blog called *Hands Free Mama*. The title encapsulated the pursuit I was on to let go of what *didn't* matter so I could grasp what *did* matter.

A few months into it, I received a speaking request from a woman in my community to talk about my Hands Free journey. My immediate thought was, *Uh . . . what part of "online blog" makes you think I'd want to share this information with a live audience?*

It was hard enough publishing my vulnerable reflections online. To say them out loud and see people's reactions? *No, thank you*. Not to mention I'm directionally challenged, and this woman lived outside the two-mile radius that I usually operated within. (Like I said, my comfort zone was quite small.)

But this person was certain her group needed to hear my story, and her belief echoed a persistent voice inside me that had been saying for a while now, *Just show up and trust that whatever is meant to happen after that will become clear*.

Armed with an old-school printed map and a cutting-edge GPS navigation system, I successfully made the short drive. I was immediately ushered to a room where I was expected to address a group of thirty women I'd never met. As I began to tell my story, my heart raced and my voice quivered, fueling uncertainty that I might not get through it. Scanning the room for feedback, I noticed

a woman nodding her head. Sensing she felt a connection to what I was saying gave me the courage to continue. And then, a few minutes later, she wiped away a tear—as if my story was her story and we were in this together.

From that experience, I embraced this freeing truth: **when we see each other's scars, we love each other more.**

When we show up as our most authentic self, we give permission for others to reveal *their* true selves. It is in those vulnerable moments of authentic connection that true belonging is felt.

This was the opposite of what I'd spent my life believing up to that point. I thought I had to hide my insecurities and vulnerabilities in order to be accepted. Yet, in this moment, I couldn't deny the thread of connection I felt with a complete stranger in our moment of shared vulnerability.

My dot to her dot, drawing me toward more authentic connection.

I began to wonder: *If I continue to take brave steps out of my comfort zone, what other dots in my life might connect? And what might the whole picture become if we, as human beings, were to choose to connect our dots bravely, boldly, flawed, and full of hope?*

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

As you prepare to embark on the Soul Shift journey, I'd like to offer a few helpful guidelines.

## **GUIDELINE 1: PERSONALIZE YOUR PATH**

You will find the imagery I provided for this journey is that of an idyllic, heart-shaped botanical garden. It is made up of eight distinct areas of exploration that overlap and are connected by stone pathways.

While in each area, you will practice the same small-step discovery process. I refer to these exercises as stepping-stones, and there are four. Their headings in each of the eight areas look like this:

**Stepping-Stone One** (a Place to Just Be)

**Stepping-Stone Two** (a Place to Become Aware)

**Stepping-Stone Three** (a Place to Prepare the Way)

**Stepping-Stone Four** (a Place to Step Out)

The goal of each practice area is to get to **A Peaceful Spot** (a Place to Let Things Sink In). In that area, you will find three relatable and encouraging stories in which you can immerse yourself and make “notes to ponder.”

You'll know you've reached the end of a practice area when you see the section marked “Assurance for Your Pocket.” This is a brief word of encouragement to carry with you as you proceed to the next area of exploration.

Although the imagery I envisioned for the Soul Shift journey is that of a garden, yours can be any peaceful place that you feel safe to meander, explore, contemplate, breathe, and grow.

You also may explore the eight areas in any order you wish. Just keep in mind that there is a natural progression from one practice to

the next. The tools and insights you gather will eventually form your own living map (located at the back of the book), which you'll use to reclaim the joy you were born to bring to the world.

## **GUIDELINE 2: REMEMBER YOU ARE NOT ALONE**

My teaching approach utilizes personal anecdotes, which include stories about my family, my work, my childhood, my faith. Yet, the essence of this transformative process is not in these personal details; it's in the commonalities we all share: emotion, struggle, growth, connection. While my story's details may look different from yours, the thread that connects us and the work that transforms us is the experience of being human.

## **GUIDELINE 3: EXPLORE WITH SELF-COMPASSION**

After sharing a Soul Shift concept from my own personal experience, I'll invite you to explore your own experiences through writing prompts, sketch noting (visual notetaking), and mind maps. When you encounter discomfort, tenderness, surprise, or challenge during these introspective exercises, please be kind and gentle with yourself. Underneath those uncomfortable feelings is information that will guide and enlighten you on your healing journey, so don't be afraid to feel them.

## **GUIDELINE 4: VISUALIZE YOUR JOURNEY**

And finally, as my story shows, visual illustrations can provide additional context to our feelings and enhance our words. You'll notice each new practice area begins with a title page containing a rock garden marker with a symbol that represents the practice. Use the spacious title page to jot down any insights and observations you make in that area of exploration. The discoveries you make in each section will eventually combine to become part of the bigger picture, your living map. Watch as your Soul Shift journey steadily comes alive, both on paper and in everyday life.



## ASSURANCE FOR YOUR POCKET

Beloved companion, it is now time to begin your Soul Shift journey. If you're still holding any doubts about the timing or your preparedness, please unclench your fists and release the weight of doubt using these traveling mercies:

Just because you didn't experience a close, loving relationship doesn't mean you can't cultivate one.

Just because you didn't hear people own their mistakes doesn't mean you can't accept your humanness.

Just because you were loved conditionally doesn't mean you have to keep proving your worth.

Just because you felt misunderstood in life doesn't mean your complexity is too much.

Just because you were denied your feelings doesn't mean it's too late to honor your needs.

Just because you made mistakes doesn't mean you are forever defined by them.

Just because you took an unauthentic path doesn't mean you must stay the course.

You can exit the crowded, high-speed highway and start to trust your internal navigation system. The fact that you are reading this sentence is proof that you've already taken the first steps. *You've already begun to shift.*

The daily responses of love and presence—no matter how seemingly imperfect or small—are creating a better way.

The damaging patterns you're overcoming—not perfectly, but wholeheartedly—are creating a meaningful life.

With awareness and compassion, it's possible to create hope and healing for the present *and* the past, for you *and* for those you love.

Just because transformation seems impossible from where you are right now doesn't mean your weary, brave steps won't turn into a joyous journey of reclamation, in time.

You are here.

I am here.

Together, there is hope.

My hand in yours,

*Rachel*

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**PRACTICE ONE**  
**PRESENCE**



## START HERE . . .

I'm starting with love. I'm starting with breath.  
I'm starting with stretching my body that carries me despite  
the aches.  
I'm starting with a hand over my heart.  
I'm starting with forgiveness.  
I'm starting with a clean slate.  
I'm starting with a cup of tea and a crisp new page.  
I'm starting with a tearful release.  
I'm starting with wind on my face and gratitude on my lips.  
I'm starting with my eyes up, not down.  
Today, life is calling me to take my own path—  
Go at my own pace,  
Stop when needed,  
Notice the signs, people, and sights meant for me.  
Today, life is calling me to show up—  
And I take this brave step by declaring . . .  
*Love is where I'm starting.*  
*May it also be where I am going.*  
*Love IS the way.*

Ever since I recovered *Google Island*, the book I wrote as a child, I've been making an intentional effort to connect with that younger version of me, the one I now call "my Dreamer Girl." This was the "me" who knew at a very early age that lovingly responding to myself and those around me brought me joy. Over the past few years, I've spent time remembering what my Dreamer Girl was like.

She couldn't walk by a stray cat without talking to it.

She marveled at the sounds she made with her violin and bow.

She loved the rush of the wind when she swung as high as she could go.

She freely ran through the sprinkler in her bathing suit, unhindered by her squarish body that held an abundance of freckles.

And most of all, my Dreamer Girl's joy was found in filling spiral notebooks with observations, stories, and dreams.

I can't pinpoint exactly when I decided these inclinations were not acceptable and therefore needed to be abandoned. I'm pretty sure it was during adolescence when I began assuming the roles that gained the world's approval—roles like the Planner, the Go-Getter, the Accommodator, the Helper, and the Overachiever—and when accolades took precedence over pleasure.

And those roles were just the beginning. In the twenty or so years that followed, I took on so many roles and expectations that it should have come as no surprise when it all became too heavy to bear.

But it did. I can still see myself at my breaking point—the teacher, the partner, the mother, the daughter, the sister, the volunteer, the completist, the juggler, the people-pleaser, the fixer, all simultaneously coming undone during a morning jog, my well-crafted roles unraveling so quickly I didn't even try to hold myself together.

Fueling my breakdown was a question I got a lot: "How do you do it all?" I'd always taken it as a compliment, but not on this particular day. At thirty-eight years old, I'd reached the very frayed end of myself, and that question loomed before me, forcing me to stop and face the answer I'd been running from.

I could "do it all" because I missed out on life—I missed out on the laughing, the playing, the creating, the connecting, the memory making . . . the living . . . the loving . . . and what I missed I cannot get back.

That truth was so gut-wrenching, I was forced to stop. I collapsed to my knees and I wept for all that I'd lost and the desolate place I was in.

It was then and there that I decided to tell the truth. Looking back now, I realize the significance of that response. For once, I did not push the pain and discomfort away. I allowed myself to feel it, to let truth enlighten me, which is why tears of despair turned into tears of relief.

I'd lost my connection with my Dreamer Girl, the tree climber, the notebook filler, the music maker, the seed planter—but she was not gone. Oh no, she was still with me, in here, hand over heart.

I just needed some time . . . space . . . and permission to reconnect with her.

***Dear Soul Shift Companion***, does that thought resonate with you? Because here's the reality: as we grow further and further away from childhood, the demands and stress of life increase. We forget we have the power to say yes to what delights our heart and soul, makes us feel alive, and brings us peace. But in order to live an authentic, joyful, and purposeful life, we must remember how to say yes to those very things!

We can do it through the Practice of Presence—an intentional choice to temporarily push away distractions and be fully present in the moments of our life.

Within hours of my emotional morning run, I made this choice for myself.

I was in the middle of making lunches. My younger daughter, Avery, who was almost four years old at the time, was on the sofa watching *The Lion King*. My computer was open, the phone was buzzing, and I was thinking about all the things I needed to do that day. In that moment, I looked up and noticed—really noticed—my child. A clear voice inside me said, “Go be with her. There is nothing more important right now.”

Without closing the bag of bread or looking at the clock, I placed the knife across the jar of peanut butter and went to hold my child.

What happened next was something no one had ever done in my whole life: my daughter brought my hand to her lips and gently kissed

the inside of my palm, as if offering a silent but powerful acknowledgment of my presence.

*This is remarkable*, I thought.

Tears filled my eyes.

I was so grateful I did not miss that moment and knew I didn't want to miss any more.

This strong desire to not miss my life is what sparked my Practice of Presence.

Of course, at the time, I did not know it would become my Practice of Presence . . . I called it "going hands free," a term that was inspired by that kiss-on-the-hand moment.

It might sound contradictory to the process, but being a planner, I needed a plan. Realistically, I knew I could not overhaul my life, give up technology, or abandon all my duties and responsibilities, but that initial response I made to heed the inner voice demonstrated it was possible and practical for me to dedicate small increments of time to just being present.

As an experienced teacher of students with behavioral issues and low self-esteem, I knew the impact of small, achievable steps in creating new, positive pathways. Change begins with a behavioral action, and when you change your behavior, your perspective starts to shift, too.

So, I started with ten-minute periods of time during which I set aside my phone, computer, and agenda to be fully present and open to connection.

It was impossible not to notice how one choice produced a ripple of positive outcomes. For example, after opening my pop-up chair at my older daughter's swim meet, I chose not to get out my work in an attempt to maximize the free time. Seeing my open lap and available attention, Avery asked if she could sit there. Holding her made me feel at peace and connected to her. When the meet was delayed, I did not fly off the handle because my plan was derailed. Instead, my daughters and I went and asked the coach how we could help, which he seemed to appreciate.

We got home later than expected that night, but I hadn't yelled or felt that internal pressure . . . which resulted in my falling asleep without



the pain of regret. With one choice to be fully present, a series of meaningful experiences were created, lasting far beyond a solitary moment.

As I continued to practice choosing connective presence over productivity, efficiency, distraction, and control, I realized that a feeling of peace consistently came along with that choice; it was as if I was receiving an internal message of encouragement from my soul that said, *This feels in line with how I want to live.*

Now, does this mean that from this point on life was rainbows and butterflies? Absolutely not. The damaging habits and beliefs I'd carried for decades were deeply ingrained, and life continued to deliver unexpected challenges. So, naturally, there were times when I didn't choose a loving, compassionate, or healthy response to conflicts or big feelings. But . . . I was practicing.

**And here was the difference:** when I encountered a painful external clue—a wounded expression, a troubling comment, an upsetting memory, an uneasy feeling—I did not push it away. The difference was . . . I acknowledged it. I allowed myself to *feel* my response to the discomfort without judgment, so it could be used as information to lead and enlighten me.

Because of this willingness to be present for it all—the remarkable moments and the mundane moments, the peaceful moments and the uncomfortable moments—I was able to move from the painful truth of **I am missing my life** to a new, healing truth:

