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# FINDING THE DEEP RIVER WITHIN

A WOMAN'S GUIDE TO RECOVERING  
BALANCE & MEANING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

- Reclaim your life from the tyranny of your to-do list.
- Slow down and remember what really matters.

Bring more sanity, soul, and satisfaction  
to daily living.

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# Finding the Deep River Within

A Woman's Guide to  
Recovering Balance and Meaning  
in Everyday Life

Abby Seixas

 **JOSSEY-BASS**  
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## More Praise for *Finding the Deep River Within*

"This practical guide is full of tools and encouragement to help overworked, overcommitted women regain balance and spiritual contentment and would be a great project to tackle with a reading group or buddy.... A comforting and stimulating how-to, *Finding the Deep River Within* has powerful inner and outer implications."

—Body+Soul

"If you can wait at a red light without applying makeup or practicing Italian verbs with a CD, this book is not for you. For the rest of us, Seixas has a message: Slow down!"

—Brandeis University Magazine

"When things get crazy, and I need to let go, I often use the image of floating on my back, trusting the river, allowing it to take me where it will. Now I have a book to read while floating! Abby Seixas's beautifully written *Finding the Deep River Within* is a wise and fluid book—as clear as a mountain stream and as deep as the ocean."

—Elizabeth Lesser, cofounder, Omega Institute, and author, *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*

"Abby Seixas's work is a blessing. As a psychotherapist, teacher, speaker, and author, I know how much people need to hear what she has to say. *Finding the Deep River Within* belongs on the bookshelves of every therapist who works with women—not only to give to clients, but for their own self-care. I am already recommending it to clients and friends."

—Dr. Dorothy Firman, coauthor, *Daughters and Mothers, Making It Work*; *Chicken Soup for the Mother and Daughter Soul*, and the forthcoming *Chicken Soup for the Mother and Daughter Soul 2*

"This book is terrific. It reads like a letter from your best friend. It's smart and helpful without being pedantic. Seixas's stories inspire, and her six practices give down-to-earth tools for bringing

balance and joy into your daily life. You'll want to share *Finding the Deep River Within* with your sister, your mother, daughter, aunt, office mate, women friends... all the women in your life, and then, make sure you leave it around for the guys to read it too."

—Bob Kriegel, Ph.D., and Marilyn Harris Kriegel, MS, coauthors, *The C-Zone: Peak Performance Under Pressure*

"*Finding the Deep River Within* is one of those rare books in which you recognize yourself and what you need from the very first page. Blending wisdom with compassion, inspiration with practical tools, Seixas meets us where we are and gently guides us toward wholeness."

—Rachael Freed, author, *Women's Lives, Women's Legacies: Passing Your Beliefs and Blessings to Future Generations* and *The Women's Legacies Workbook for the Busy Woman*

"Everyone whose life is too busy and is seeking a deeper source of nourishment should read this book. Both beginners and experienced students of the inner life will savor its timeless and timely wisdom and find practical tools for transforming their lives from the inside out."

—Jeffrey Rossman, Ph.D., director, Behavioral Health, Canyon Ranch, Lenox, Massachusetts

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## Introduction

I slept well until I had children. Like many mothers, by the time I had put in six or eight years of interrupted or could-easily-be-interrupted sleep, the habit of waking at night was deeply engrained. Over the years, in my 3 A.M. sessions, I've tried any number of ways of dealing with being awake when I don't want to be, from counting backward as I breathe deeply to taking prescription sleep medication. Often during these wakeful times, my mind spins anxiously forward to everything I have to do in the coming day, how *much* is on The List, how *tired* I might feel if I can't get back to sleep, which will mean getting even further behind as I drag myself through the day . . . and so on. For obvious reasons, this train of thought doesn't soothe me back into a deep and restful sleep.

But occasionally, I have a very different experience in the middle of the night. I get out of bed. I go downstairs, wrap a blanket around me, and sit on the living room couch. Sometimes I light a candle, and sometimes I sit in the dark. Sometimes I meditate, but mostly I just sit there. As I surrender to being awake, heavy eyelids and all, something shifts inside me. I find I am no longer fighting myself, fighting the night. I relax and begin to notice how quiet it is. In the stillness, my body softens and I breathe more deeply. I feel as though I'm dropping down into myself, as if I am greeting an old, dear, trusted friend. Sometimes I think about my life, but more often I just feel gratitude for *having* a life, for being alive. Or I just sit there in an experience not easy to articulate. It feels as if I am finding myself again, coming home to myself. This sense of fullness or wholeness makes not-enough-sleep

seem a much smaller issue than it was an hour before. Often, I return to bed. Whether or not I go back to sleep, I am deeply renewed.

When I drop down into myself in those quiet hours of the night, it feels as though I have tapped into a deep river that runs strongly beneath the busyness of my daily life. When I allow myself to fully experience this deep river within, I connect not only with myself and what matters most to me but also with a powerful stream of silence, mystery, clarity, aliveness. . . . I seem to tap into a universal source, available to us all, of deeply nourishing spiritual qualities that can provide a healing balm for our out-of-balance lives. Although this kind of experience could happen at any time, day or night, it is not something that can simply be added to one's to-do list and squeezed in between finishing up at work and doing the grocery shopping. We experience this sort of connection only when we allow time for it, which is increasingly rare in our overscheduled lives. Yet we desperately need to *make* time for it, because the nourishment it gives is a crucial antidote to our frenzied lifestyle and to the culture that feeds our nonstop pace of life.

This book is about slowing down. It is a guide to reclaiming our lives from the tyranny of our to-do lists and bringing more of the deep inner resources we all possess into our everyday living. When we are feeling overwhelmed and out of control, it helps to know how to step away from busyness and get enough perspective to remember what our true priorities are. We have this sense of perspective within us. When the perpetual motion of trying to get things done makes us dizzy, it helps to know how to find stillness. We have this stillness within us. When we feel at the mercy of others' demands, it helps to know how to center ourselves and respond with clarity. We have this clarity within us. These are the kinds of resources that flow from the Deep River realm. This book is a guide for contacting the dimension of our being where these spiritual qualities live. It will explain what the Deep River is and why it is important—not only for ourselves but for all our relationships—and then offer practical tools for accessing this realm more regularly and opening to it more fully when it unexpectedly breaks through life's routines.

The program described in these pages draws from my more than twenty-five years of guiding women in my private psychotherapy practice, in individual coaching sessions, and in workshops for groups and organizations. Its principles are based on the Deep River groups I developed and have led for scores of women over the last decade. In this work, I have seen so many women who, due to their chronic busyness and the culture that feeds it, are cut off from essential aspects of themselves. They feel disconnected from their deeper feelings, their creative possibilities, spiritual sustenance, and the sense of depth and meaning that makes what they do with their time feel worthwhile. This disconnection from self tends to negatively influence relationships with partners, children, coworkers, friends, and other family members. Simply put, when we are out of touch with ourselves, we suffer, but our relationships also suffer. While many women intuitively recognize, as they race through the motions of life at breakneck speed and with little joy, that something is profoundly out of balance with how they are living, they often cannot accurately identify the cause of their dis-ease nor find effective remedies. Contact with the Deep River within is an antidote to this cut-off, fragmented experience of life. It opens our lives to greater meaning and contentment and our relationships to greater compassion and connection. And it gives a sense of spaciousness to the rhythms of life that our daily routine rarely affords.

Chapter One lays out the culturewide problem of “too much to do, too little time,” how it affects us as women, and how we attempt solutions that often compound the problem. Chapter Two suggests an alternative solution and introduces the realm of the Deep River, filling in what it looks like and feels like and why it is so important to nurture contact with it. This chapter also explains why slowing down, which we all sense to be necessary but have such a hard time doing, is key to finding your spiritual center and touching the Deep River.

Chapter Three introduces three preliminary doorways to the Deep River realm: recognizing the power of the culture, getting support, and keeping a journal. These three pave the way for the six central practices that follow. Chapters Four through Nine present the

Deep River practices, the essential tools for integrating the Deep River realm into your daily life. The first two, taking “time-in” and making boundaries, address the *outer* obstacles to slowing down, providing ways to pause and restructure daily life so that you can dip down into the Deep River. You’ll find practical ways to make better choices about your daily routine and how you spend your time. The next three practices, befriending feelings, taming self-expectations, and practicing presence, show you how to work with the *inner* obstacles to slowing down. You will learn how to get more comfortable with difficult emotions, lighten up on your expectations of yourself, and deal with the distracting inner chatter that can keep all of us from being truly present to the people we care about and the activities that make up our days. It’s essential to address both the outer dimension and the inner dimension in order to be able to slow down and find your balance day to day. Integrating these two dimensions, the final practice, doing something you love, guides you to express yourself in the world, or “at the surface,” in ways that arise out of and draw from the Deep River. When the inner and the outer are connected, we are tapped into the source of depth and meaning in our lives. The result is activity that is satisfying, renewing, and energizing rather than fragmenting and draining.

During my years of working with women who seek to connect with the Deep River, I’ve found that they need two other important types of tools: (1) tools to help them recognize what I call “blocking beliefs” and (2) exercises to help bring the concepts to life. Blocking beliefs are common mental and emotional assumptions we make that range from the seemingly benign (“I can’t have fun until everything’s checked off the list”) to the more clearly self-damaging (“If I don’t do it all perfectly, I’m a complete failure”). All of them block progress toward living a life of more balance, satisfaction, and depth. In each of the chapters on the Deep River practices, the “Blocking Beliefs” section will help you identify your own personal blocking beliefs, learn how to question or challenge them, and, if appropriate, replace them with more useful working assumptions.

The exercises, which can be done alone, with a friend, or in a group, are tools for initiating change in your day-to-day experience. They will give you insight and understanding about how the Deep River process works for you personally, as well as guide you toward *experiencing* the concepts so that you can make them your own. And sometimes the exercises are actually fun!

Finally, Chapter Ten broadens the lens through which the Deep River within is considered, taking it from the personal to the planetary, and discusses the implications of this work for our children, for our world, and for our future.

### **A Note About Reading This Book in a Group**

Over the past twelve years of working with groups, I have been continually impressed by what participants teach one another through sharing their experiences. Chapter Three will talk more about the importance of getting support as you redefine your rhythms and routine in order to live a more balanced life. For now, let me just say this: you will benefit from reading this book and doing the exercises by yourself, but you will benefit even more if you can find a buddy to read the book with or even just to check in with periodically about the progress you're making. You will benefit the most if you can organize a group of friends or introduce the concept of the Deep River into an existing women's group so that you can read the book and do the exercises together. Not only will you gain from the wisdom of the group, but the mutual support will give you needed strength to counter the rapid currents of our culture.

However you choose to engage in the process of contacting the Deep River, may it be of benefit—to you and to all whose lives you touch.

"My life had started to feel so stagnant,  
like it was atrophied. Everything shrunk down  
to the roles I played. I had loved doing them, . . .

I really had, but they were drying up,  
and they weren't really me. Do you understand?  
I felt there had to be some other life beneath the one I had,  
like an underground river or something,  
and that I would die if I didn't dig down to it."

—Sue Monk Kidd

"How we spend our days is, of course,  
how we spend our lives."

—Annie Dillard

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