

KEVIN J COTTAM

# Aha

## *Mother's Pearls*

12TH PEARL: LEARNING



**27 insightful personal stories of Aha Moments to help you perform at your best and lead a rich life**

“*Mother’s Pearls* is an enlightening read. It was a great opportunity to reflect on my own experiences and see Aha moments that I may have overlooked. Each new chapter brought to mind a simple life moment that needed to be reflected upon, helping to remind me to take each moment to heart. We may not always know an Aha moment at the time we’re in it, but patience is the key until the true meaning is revealed.”

—*Lana Bertsch, President, Birchwood Productions Inc.*

“With his insightful book Kevin Cottam presents 27 experiences that have the reader questioning her/his our life’s journey, looking for the kernel of wisdom in each visitation. The cross-cultural sweep alone makes for an interesting read. *Mother’s Pearls* is a treasure chest full of gems.”

—*J.Lafrentz, Engineer*

“Each pearl shimmers with wisdom, creativity, and everyday practicality, while inviting me to recognize and maximize the pearls in my life.”

—*Pauline O’Reilly, Teacher*

“The stories are so simple yet, they all have such powerful messages that really make you think about our conscious choices in every day life...”

—*Ira Kita, Montessori Teacher*

“To read a series of stories (the pearls), written from the heart, that shower you with truth and questions is but a unique and powerful experience. It is a guidebook and a support tool that can be picked up again and again, with some pearls read and re-read depending on your need or mood at that time. The Pearl’s are an insight to life, being both biographically educational and some more formally educational. It is a gift that sits by my bed, alongside the Dalai Lama’s Art of Happiness.”

—*Ailbhe Troubetzkoi, Communications Consultant*

‘We all have ‘Aha’ moments, times when the blur of our lives comes into clear focus, when the angles of the walls seem to bend, or the earth seems to shift under our feet with the new and powerful recognition of who we are and what our time on this planet is about.

In ‘*Mother’s Pearl*’, the author has selected 27 of such moments that have altered the course of his life.

Moving, honest and from the heart, ‘*Mother’s Pearls*’ is a true treasure – a beautiful necklace with its stones of wisdom, bright and timeless to treasure.’

—*Vivienne Vermes, Author*

# Aha

## *Mother's Pearl*



Kevin J Cottam



Singapore, Singapore

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# Dedication



To my mother, Lily, for everything.

My dear friends Bojan and Robin, who believed in me throughout the challenges of writing this book.

My friend Nikos, who unfortunately didn't live long enough to write his own book.

My Guru, who has taught and assisted my awakening to *Aha* moments.

All my friends, family, and unknown people, who all live inside these stories and have created the space for awareness to happen.

*“Be the change you want to see in the world.”*

MAHATMA GANDHI



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# Introduction



*Live your pearls now, and use them to powerfully transform your life.*

For a number of years, I lived in Europe and would routinely return to Canada each summer to visit my mother. Even at the advanced age of eighty-eight, she took great care to dress stylishly at all hours of the day, including breakfast. One hot summer morning, she appeared at the kitchen table wearing a double strand of pearls. My niece Launa exclaimed, “Oh Gran, you always look so good with your pearls!” We all smiled and laughed at this lovely moment, but for me it represented a profound realization. *Aha*, I thought, “‘Mother’s Pearls,’ what a great name for my book.”

That simple *Aha* moment triggered my desire to write this book. *Mother’s Pearls* is a collection of twenty-seven short autobiographical chapters of *Aha* moments of realization. These moments in life often appear like a flash of light coming out of nowhere, from a voice or an image I may have seen, a sentence or phrase I may have heard, or voice deep from within. They can sometimes also appear completely contrary to what is happening at the time. They are a mystery really. Or are they? They may appear during a truly challenging and negative experience, which is just a face, or a “façade,” if you like, as the beautiful pearl is sitting there behind the curtain waiting for us to discover it.

These moments are offered as gifts of messages, lessons, or knowledge. They are freely given to us and yet we often let them pass by, not acting upon them and letting them return into the ether. In *Mother’s Pearls*, I invite you to discover your own pearls and what they mean and can do for you. It is here you can discover your truth, explore your journey, and fully celebrate your essence.

Through the art of storytelling, I have chosen to explore my *Aha*

moments, my pearls. Storytelling is definitely not a new concept; it has existed since the beginning of time. As human beings, we discover our lives, our inner light, our worth, and more through the stories we hear and in turn relate to each other. All of this can lead to the development of our greatest human potential.

In telling my own stories, I have chosen pearls and oysters as metaphors for my journey. The pearls are the *Aha* moments of wisdom that have appeared to me throughout my life. The oysters are the locations where the pearls have occurred—they hold the pearls. I've had the rare opportunity and privilege to live in many different places and among numerous cultures, each of which has offered moments of revelation, learning, and inspiration—providing the pearls that, strung together, have so lovingly helped guide my way.

For me, discovering the bigger picture behind the story is what life is about. I hope you will also find the wisdom of each story by getting inside, behind, and on top of it. In turn, this new awareness will assist you to make more powerful decisions in your life. With these pearls, you will begin to see and experience how your life can transform with more self-confidence and self-worth.

Accepting and honouring my past, realizing what is present, and actively moving toward the future is a valuable truth. *Mother's Pearls* reflects some of the lessons on my journey that have led me to find the truth, my truth, and my reality. Through these pearls, I am now discovering how to perform more vibrantly and authentically from my heart. My hope is that, through this book, you can also find this awareness, comfort, and knowledge in your pearls.

Life today often feels comparable to a hurricane. When you are in the storm, it is extremely challenging to be objective. But if you simply stop for a minute, listen to the *Aha* moments, reflect on their teachings, and move toward the calm, interior eye of the storm (or simply step outside of it), you will begin to see the picture of your life in a much bigger way.

Take the time to really receive the *Aha* moments. Their gifts are there

for you to move forward in your life with elegance and strength.

Imagine a closed tap. The water is being held back so tightly it cannot get through. Now when you open the tap, you allow the water to flow through. Allow yourself the fluidity and flexibility so you can loosen your grip on life a bit. Then, the messages or *Aha* moments will come, flowing through to you at the exact moment when you are ready to receive the pearls. Loosen up so you can hear, see, and feel the pearls that come with the *Aha* moments, which can appear at anytime in your life without any warnings at all. Be like a pirate and discover the treasure; but go farther to discover the treasure beneath the treasure.

As I have mentioned, my mother and her pearls gave me the title and metaphor for this book. Her love gave me the freedom to explore. My mother and my father gave me life, and I thank them for this. And now, I have also come to realize in a more profound way the meaning behind the saying, "We choose our parents and the life we come into." I am grateful and honoured to consider my own role in my creation.

I also want to thank all the people from around the world, from different cultural and professional backgrounds, who contributed to the creation of this book. They offered important perspectives and insights. Thanks specifically to Pauline O'Reilly, a fellow seeker in life, John LeFrenz, Jenny Tarrant, Kate, Lana, Sandy, Danny S., and Peter M. for providing valuable feedback.

*Honour the Pearls that you are.  
Honour the Oysters you have had.  
Honour what you have created along the way.  
Honour you and just be.  
Be aware of that Aha moment as  
You never know when it will appear.*

Kevin J Cottam





12<sup>TH</sup> PEARL

Pearl • Learning



Oyster • New York City, USA

*“The  
unexamined life is  
not worth living.”*

SOCRATES



**I**t was 1979. Hell's Kitchen, midtown Manhattan. I had come to New York City to study contemporary dance at The Ailey School and to teach figure skating at Sky Rink, which was a beautiful ice rink on the sixteenth floor of a venerable building on the corner of 33rd Street and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, an unusual location for a skating rink that, to this day, amuses me. This move to New York City was quite a jump, a leap of faith, for a guy who grew up in a very British, quiet, and quaint neighbourhood of south Oak Bay in Victoria, a city often known as the destination for the "newly wed and nearly dead." Little did I know what was in store for me in the Big Apple.

In my first three months in New York City, I moved four times to various apartments and neighbourhoods. This was an excruciating learning experience in itself because I had to move my suitcases, a futon, and a chair each time in a taxi. I finally settled into an apartment in a dilapidated five-storey walk-up building with my boyfriend.

My introduction to the tenement was to kick in the front door to enter the building, then proceed to walk up to the fourth floor on the smelly, dirty stairs with peeling or torn away linoleum and past the graffiti-covered walls. The door to my apartment had a doorknob hole in it so any passer-by could sneak a peak inside. After opening the door, I heard a rustling sound all around me. What was that? I turned on the lights and I had my first view of the lovely cucarachas scampering away into the walls. I thought, How could anyone be lonely in New York with these creatures?

This was to be my living space for six months, and Hell's Kitchen was certainly an appropriate name for my new neighbourhood. I looked around at the long railroad-style apartment, with room after room connected by a hall. It was dirty and noisy. I went to the toilet and I heard water running above me. I looked up. To my surprise, there was a major hole in the ceiling exposing the pipes from the toilet in the apartment

above. I felt tears come to my eyes. What have I come to in my life? What penance am I paying for? Was all this change and learning worth it?

During conversations with my boyfriend, he asked why I had chosen New York. The first answer that came out of my mouth was the opportunity to learn, an "O2L", as I call it.

He was surprised and impressed with my statement and said, "Most people come to the city to use it and abuse it." Primarily, I hungered for dance knowledge, but I also wanted to acquire life experience. And this was the right place to do this at this time in my life, when I was on an insatiable quest for learning.

Every moment of the day I was going into sensory overload with new learning; my eyes were wide open, my sixth sense was stimulated, and I learned to move like crazy. At times I thought I would explode from all the new experiences.

One day I gathered the courage to ask my boyfriend why there was no lock on the front door to the apartment building. He said, "They often put a lock on it, but it's busted within a day or so." The people who would break in were drug addicts. Apparently, I lived on the heroine users' corner and they would go up to the roof and shoot up. I thought, Safe neighbourhood!

These were also the days of my starving artist routine. To earn a living, I taught figure skating at Sky Rink. Now that was an adventure to be on a skating rink that was located on the sixteenth floor! Most of my clients were adult women who liked to ice dance. When I began working there, I was told that I would have to be at the rink twice a week for a dance session called "taxi dancing." I did not understand what this meant at first, but then learned that I was to partner the ladies around the rink for a couple minutes, doing waltzes, foxtrots, and other dances, and being paid per "taxi ride." Hmm, I thought, now what am I?

It was kind of like being a hired guy and sometimes felt like I was



prostituting myself. When I was first introduced to this activity I was appalled at what I had reduced myself to. But I was learning! At that time I got, a whopping seventy-five cents a dance. I was exhausted by the end my forty-five minute taxi session because it was as if the ladies clung to me for dear life.

Taxi dancing goes like this. Before the session would begin, women would run to my sign-up board and write their names next to all the dances they wanted with me. My board was always full, thanks to my personality, youthful good looks, and unique dance ability and agility. Every male partner had his own signature of ladies. Sometimes women feuded over those who signed up for more dances than they should with their favourite partner. Observing these skirmishes remains a fond recollection of my time at Sky Rink.

Every day I was learning. It was like the words in the song “New York, New York”—“the city that never sleeps.” It never sleeps. Sometimes, I would sit in a restaurant and listen to old actors talking about the good ol’ days; listen to waiters who are wanna-be actors trying to “make it or bust”; talk to the occasional street person; attend many different dance classes with the best teachers around; watch incredible dance and theatre performances; and I even could compare the rice puddings from different diners around the city.

I also learned to be economical by ordering hot water and a slice of lemon in restaurants so I didn’t have to pay for a tea or by going to Canal Street and find the best bargains in clothes—all so I could afford to take another dance class.

My determination to learn not just contemporary dance technique, but also life, truly led me to experience much, much more. The essential part of learning, I realized, is to open ourselves to it, no matter how old we are—surrender to our O2L, getting under it with passion and support the experience(s) fully. The quest for knowledge, bettering ourselves,

and moving toward excellence is why we are here in this body form.

My mother thought my move to New York was ill-advised at best, and in actuality, crazy. The Big Apple proved to be one of my most risky shifts in my life journey, but in reflection, I would do it all over again for that excitement of such hard work, adventure, and knowledge.

NYC was an O2L just as every day of our lives is an O2L. We can choose to see the positive or we can choose to see the negative. To learn, one creates an upward spiral of energy flow, leading toward growth. The opposite leads a downward spiral toward victimization and self-pity. I experienced both of these situations in New York. The city is totally in your face, all the time, and the only way to escape it is to leave the city or go home and lock the many locks on door and breathe a sigh of relief.

When I looked around me, I observed that our challenge in life, if we should accept the challenge, is to keep seeing the bright side of learning, even when all hopes are seemingly lost, or the force of nature is moving against us. Here is where faith comes in. Here is where the rubber hits the road. Dig in and move with the flow. Be conscious of the fact that we are in a learning state all the time, even when we don't think we are. We are always learning, just sometimes not absorbing it totally.

The city never lets up. It is invigorating, exciting, and energizing but exhausting at the same time. I realized a great learning experience one morning. I was tired. My body was physically exhausted from dancing six hours per day, plus teaching. My legs felt as if they were screaming. I stood in my apartment before my door, staring at the hole and the four locks, and thought there must be a better way to learn. I opened the door and as I walked down the stairs, I felt my tired body become tense as I prepared for the madness of the street.

At that moment, I decided this incredible learning period had come to an end. I remembered my father telling me that life is in chapters. Yes, this chapter of learning was over. I must move onto another place

of learning. We need to realize and accept this from the heart when it is time to move on.

I moved to Paris a few months later for another O2L.



# DISCOVERY

*Have you ever thought of situations and decisions in your life as an opportunity to learn, or O2L? ~ What would this do for your motivation and inspiration if you saw them as an O2L? ~ What if you saw even most experiences in life as an O2L? ~ Reflect upon some of the learning moments in your life that stand out for you. How have these added to your performance in life?*

## EPILOGUE

To my mother and the mother within us all.

*I thank my mother for her biggest pearl of all, truth.  
Whether it was her intention or not,  
I accept this as her greatest gift and  
lesson for me in her life.  
It has taken me five decades to realize this and  
many of us will come to it  
at our own pace and time in life.  
Others may not,  
but here is your chance, now.  
Through sharing this with you  
my wish  
is that it won't take as long for you as it did me.  
But again, life plays tricks on us and  
when the student is ready  
the teacher will appear.  
Stand on guard,  
be alert, and  
keep that door open,  
your senses piqued, and  
be ready to move when awareness strikes,  
as it may be a fleeting moment.  
Grasp it,  
run with it,  
dance with joy, and  
forever be grateful that  
this is the bigger picture of life.  
The reason you are here,  
is to seek the truth,  
through your own stories.*

With all my love and respect, I welcome you to your Mother's Pearls.



NOTES: