

The Six Spiritual Laws of Distress

By Melinda Blau

It's God's way of slowing you down," intones Pamela, my spiritually attuned friend, as she ponders where to put the ice packs first: my throbbing wrist, aching ribs, reddened knee, the many angry cuts that dot the landscape of my body. Minutes earlier, weak and embarrassed, I limped through the door, understating my condition: "I got into a little accident."

Strangers had discovered me on the side of an unmarked road on a remote Caribbean island, sitting on the low brick wall my scooter and I had just crashed into. The scooter, which looked almost as bad as I did, lay next to me, its front wheel still spinning.

The irony was that I had gone to that island to slow down. I wasn't very good at it. By day seven I had read four books, logged miles of beach walking, snorkeled large expanses of the sea and pondered a new book idea. I was starting to feel better than I had in months and wanted to see more of the island, which was ostensibly why I rented a motor scooter.

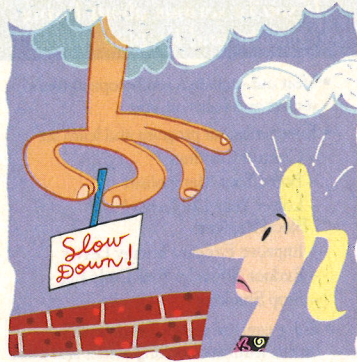
"You just *can't* sit still, can you?" Pamela asked. "You know, you're not a kid anymore." I wanted to strangle her.

Once stateside, though, the truth is all over me, like so many passport stamps marking my cosmic comings and goings. The bruises turn Technicolor, giving my body a retro, tie-dyed look. My left wrist is broken, and at 53 I have my first cast. My ribs probably are fractured too, but there isn't much the doctor can do except recommend rest.

Sentenced to indeterminate pain and three months in a cast, I am struck by a defining moment of existential awareness: *My body is breakable*. Everyone says I look young. I feel young. But my accident begs the question: Have I been in midlife denial? Did I have no business climbing aboard that scooter in the first place, as some of my more age-appropriate friends suggest? What am I trying to prove?

Fifty is older and supposedly wiser: time to stop, take stock. I, however, seem hell-bent on careening through the decade as if nothing has changed. Perhaps this bruised body is a bulletin from the universe, telling me I'm just as vulnerable as the woman next to me in the doctor's office who looks her age and takes twice as long to jot down her medical history.

I struggle to grasp such a sobering "lesson." On one side is my Higher Self, that part of me who is supposedly wiser with age. On the other is my Lower Self, the ego-driven, eternally young and spiritually challenged me who usually takes over. Instead of giving in to my body, rewarding it with the rest



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and self-reflection I need, my Lower Self gets busier and takes hostage of my mind. Together, in the wake of my accident, we contemplate (with apologies to Deepak Chopra) the Six Spiritual Laws of Distress:

1. Know thyself and disregard it. Ignore your vulnerabilities. A moment of reflection might have inhibited me as I blindly peeled out of the driveway, alone on a perilous vehicle. But I am obviously more willing to explore the remote island of North Caicos than my own interior landscape.

2. Never ask for help. I write articles saying how important offering and accepting support is. Yet now, when I'm forced to ask friends to drive me and sometimes to dress me, I feel humiliated. I'm out of practice, and what's more, I don't want to learn. I am like the saying on the bumper sticker: TAKE MY ADVICE; I CAN'T USE IT.

3. Ignore the indisputable lessons that the universe provides. I refuse to acknowledge that I, a mother of grown children, am—technically—no longer *young*. That scooter *did* malfunction. As I turned the corner and tried to downshift, the bike lurched forward. I lost control and slammed into a brick wall. It wasn't my "fault." Perhaps a more spiritually integrated person would look at the metaphors: turned the corner, downshifted, lost control, brick wall, all graphic symbols of one refusing to face her limitations. But not I. Information exists everywhere and is ours for the taking or, as I see it, there for the leaving.

4. Don't be grateful. Humbug! to all those well-wishers who say, "It could have been worse." Sure, I could have cracked my skull, scarred my face beyond recognition, even lost my life. I refuse to smell the flowers. My Lower Self stamps its feet, while my Higher Self looks on in disgust.

5. Attach. Gurus say we must separate ourselves from material concerns and not try to change things we can't control. I say detachment is for sissies. I can't help worrying what my hair looks like now that I can coil with only one arm. The vanity of youth dies hard. Many around me say, "Let go and let God." What happened to the days of holding on?

6. Never be satisfied with what is. Symbolically speaking, there's always a new island to explore. If I never slow down long enough to reflect on where I've been or to enjoy where I am, I'll never have to acknowledge that I'm vulnerable, human and not as young as I used to be. Today a brick wall. Tomorrow who knows what it will take to stop me? ♦

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