

Title: Visualize This : Ex-model Kathy Freston used an off-beat way to break 1

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Publication: Prevention
Column / Dept.: Feature
Month: January
Year: 2004
Pages: 134-139, 160-16

It isn't easy feeling sorry for a model.

Kathy Freston used to be one, and you can tell. The 39-year-old author and meditation counselor is intensely beautiful: all long legs, gobs of hair, deep blue eyes that shine with warmth and intelligence, and a used-to-be-shy, nice-girl vibe. Yet for a woman who looks as though she could have George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Colin Farrell wrapped around her finger all at once, her choices in men were once baffling.

"They were just plain bad," Freston admits, "terrible, really. Not only did I date men who were completely wrong for me," she says, "but I also tended to go out with guys who somehow drained my energy. Some were just boring, a couple were alcoholic, and one was downright abusive. I kept wanting to see something that just wasn't there, and I would try desperately to make right what was wrong. I scrambled to fill my heart with the illusion of love."

It's a familiar story, really-almost a cliché: Girl meets boy. Girl gets boy. Girl gets slammed by her own fool choice but still wants boy. Turn on Jerry Springer, and you can catch it every day. But for Freston, it wasn't just about the boy. Her neediness was driving her life. She desperately wanted the Cinderella ending: to be transformed into a beautiful princess through someone else's love. By the time she recognized her own personal story line, she was losing friends, jobs, money, and nearly herself.

In the end, though, it was Freston who rode to her own rescue in an offbeat, even inspired, way: She started meditating.

"My work in meditation, both as a counselor and a practitioner, is rooted in the belief that we create our own reality, that healthy relationships can occur only when we are healthy inside," says Freston, who says that the more she meditated, the more positive, confident, and cognizant of her own self-destructive patterns she became. "Healthy," in Freston's own Al-Anon-meets-the-Dalai-Lama jargon, primarily means mentally relaxed, emotionally supple, strong. "We tend to give our energy to what we fear instead of what we hope for," she says. "When you meditate, you do the opposite, strengthening your focus even as you direct it on what's affirming, what's positive. And as a result, you become more positive, you become healthier-and you start to draw people who are healthful for you to you."

The Science of Monk Minds

Once considered strictly for hippies, meditation is offered in schools, hospitals, corporate offices, even prisons. It's to this decade what aerobics was to the '80s-the class you can't miss if you're truly interested in improving your health. It's even caught the eye of the medical establishment.

Of course, scientists have known for many years that meditation has a positive, short-term effect on the nervous system. In 1975, Herbert Benson, MD, who would go on to found the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard Medical School, published a slim volume called *The Relaxation Response*, in which he introduced the idea-revolutionary at the time-that meditation can reduce the effects of stress and improve physical health by slowing heart rate, breathing, and metabolic rate.

The book became a runaway bestseller and marked the beginning of the American medical establishment's serious interest in alternative therapies. But it wasn't until the technological leaps of the past decade made it possible, through powerful scans, to actually see how meditation affects the brain. Only then did meditation morph into what many docs now consider truly worthy of scientific inquiry.

Richard Davidson, PhD, has studied the brains of the most-dedicated meditators on the planet for 10 years now. Director of the W. M. Keck Laboratory for Functional Brain Imaging and Behavior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he had long studied the nature of positive emotion when, in 1992, he received a fax from Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, essentially volunteering the minds of his monks. In the Buddhist tradition, meditation aims to calm the mind-to defuse sources of negative emotion and to cultivate more healthful emotional states. Davidson wired the monks to measure their neural impulses and ultimately found that meditation did reduce stress and defuse negative emotion for them. It also apparently facilitated more rapid, spontaneous recovery from negative reactions-exactly what Freston herself promises in her new book, *Expect a Miracle: 7 Spiritual Steps to Finding the Right Relationship*.

"Meditate for just 20 minutes a day, every day," she says, "and you will create the space in your life you need to truly listen to your heart, to fulfill its strongest desires, and to transform your life. That's why I call my own form of spiritual practice transformational meditation, because it brings forth positive, healthful, and permanent changes in your outlook on life, which is you at your deepest, most fundamental level."

And indeed, Freston may be right. In a study published in the journal of *Psychosomatic Medicine* in 2002, brain scans of new meditators who were guided in meditation for 3 hours a week for 8 weeks showed significant increases in activity in a part of the brain associated with positive emotion. What's more, the heightened activity persisted for at least 4 months after the experiment when the study participants were scanned again. Meditation, it appears, literally changes the brains of those who practice it.

"When you show up daily for conscious contact with a higher power, what you're essentially doing is infusing your day/your personality/your world with the grace to trust in yourself and the universe," says Freston. "You can't think your way to that kind of optimism. You can only get to it through your heart-by closing your eyes, breathing deeply, and listening to the truth that resides there."

But Freston's twist on meditation takes it beyond listening. There's some talking too. In her version, while you've cocked an ear to your inner voice, you're also planting a "spiritual intention"-a vision of what you want out of life, love, the universe. It's not like a wish granted by a genie. And it's not for material things. ("I'd love a Viking six-burner or a trip to Bali.") "As you repeat an affirming mantra, such as 'I am still and centered. In my stillness, I am magnetic to miracles,' you're also visualizing what it is that you want in your life," she says. "For most people, it's love. To be seen, to be loved, and to rise to one's highest potential. To be who you are and to be loved wholly and completely and healthfully for it."

Escaping a B-list Life

As a model, Freston worked steadily, initially in Paris, doing a lot of catalogs, which is why her face may be familiar but not her name. In model world, this is not A-list work. It's a living, of course, but it's one in which rejection is implied, because if a model has landed coveted editorial or runway jobs, she doesn't do catalogs. Ever.

"I was 17 when I started, a nerdy girl from Atlanta with mall hair, zits, and an intense desire to please," says Freston. "And I just never felt like I fit in. The successful models were so cool. They would walk into a room and own it. I was less sure of myself and went through a lot of rejection-which, of course, made me feel even less confident. I remember photographers leaning in close, staring intently at my skin, and talking rapidly in French among themselves. Then they would send me home from the job-because of my pimples or maybe because I looked tired or insecure to them that day. It was a constant battle to keep up my self-esteem."

The local bibliothèque, of all places, supplied an escape hatch. Freston had become a model when most girls were going to college, so books were her teachers. "I read everything I could get my hands on about religion, philosophy, psychology, and alternative therapies," she says. "There was so much attention placed on how I looked, what my day rate was, and where I was booked next that I needed to go inward to find some validity-something that was going to make me feel okay when I was constantly feeling less than okay. I could have gone in the other direction, of course, gotten really angry and acted out-a lot of girls I know experimented with drugs and alcohol. But I didn't. I experimented with meditation; I learned about prayer."

But she also hooked up with men who tended to reflect how she felt about herself-lemons, nearly every one. It was one in particular who stung the most. "When I was in my mid-twenties, I met this guy," she recalls. "Something in me immediately connected with him, and it was powerful. At first, everything seemed great. He hotly pursued me, and he was successful, so that was very flattering to me. I fell head over heels in love with him. Then he started cheating."

Freston left him.

Then she took him back.

Then she discovered he was still cheating.

Then she left him.

Then she took him back.

Then she discovered he was still cheating.

Repeat seven times.

The pattern, while excruciating, became what Freston knew, accepted, and even expected of their relationship. It became her pattern. "Every time I came back, I got more and more attached to him and, at the same time, more and more degraded," she says.

"I felt so ashamed, because I knew I shouldn't be with him, but gradually I came to feel as though he was the only person who could make me happy ... if he would just change. So I began to police his world. I'd spy on him, check up on him. My world became all about him."

Freston began to look haggard. She lost modeling jobs. She lost money. She lost most of the people she then counted as friends. (They simply found it too painful, she says charitably, to watch her spiral out of control.) "I was pathetic," she says. "I hated looking at myself in the mirror."

When Freston did catch a glimpse of her reflection, she says, she didn't see her undeniable beauty. She saw desperation, and she believes that's what other people saw too. "We're all constantly communicating who we are through our physical being-through the vibrations our bodies exude," she says. "If you feel desperate and afraid, as I did, people sense that. They might not see a desperate person when you enter a room, but they sense something in you that they're not crazy about. It's your fear. It's palpable, and it's repellent."

"As Marianne Williamson says, 'A thought never leaves its source.'" Williamson, whom Freston quotes frequently, is the author of the New Age blockbuster *A Return to Love* and seven other books. It was Williamson's teachings and the steps advocated by Alcoholics and Codependents Anonymous to which Freston turned to get a grip. "I started putting together what I knew of spirituality and psychology," she explains, "because at their very best, I think that they ultimately get to the same thing."

What Freston got to was this: "I came to understand that I was always sort of looking for 'the one' and wondering why he wasn't showing up," she says. "It took 4 years with a boyfriend who was cheating on me for me to finally, finally realize that the common denominator in all my relationships was me. I was the one who was giving out my phone number."

In *Expect a Miracle*, Freston quotes Buddha: "We are what we think. With our thoughts, we make the world." "Once I understood that-really understood it-I began to purposefully think differently," she says. "And my life changed dramatically. It was pretty simple, really. Pretty miraculous, but pretty simple."

Meditating for the Perfect Blind Date

As it did with the Tibetan monks, meditation changed Freston's brain.

"Meditating transformed my energy from that of fear and desperation to quiet, hopeful confidence," she says. "It taught me how to be still, to be present in my life, and to attend to what I'm doing and how I'm feeling as opposed to what he's doing or how he's feeling. It gave me the strength, the focus, and the hopefulness I needed to break off my relationship for good."

As Freston tells it, she didn't hurl the random bookend or shriek obscenities: She simply left and stayed gone. She was finally that strong. "When you're constantly reacting to someone else, you're distracted," she says. "And that distraction keeps you weakened and away from the truth of who you are and what you're doing-and from your perfect relationship." Her own began a year later, on a blind date.

In the intervening months, Freston had morphed from model into meditation counselor. Her blind date was Tom Freston, chairman and CEO of MTV Networks. The two clicked immediately. "Tom's funny; he's lighthearted; he's full of love," says Freston. "He's as positive as my other relationships were negative-the yin to their yang. Yet I honestly think that if I'd met him several years earlier, he wouldn't have been interested in me nor would I have been able to see him. I was in a positive place

when I met Tom; I was projecting positive energy. So I attracted a wonderful, positive man."

And a guy who was positive about her. "Tom was the first man I was attracted to who thought good things of me, who didn't put me down. I can be talking to him and have this huge piece of spinach in my teeth, and he'll tell me I look so beautiful. He really won't see the spinach in my teeth. He views me through a filter of 'Kathy is great.'"

But make no mistake: While she got her happy ending-she and Tom married 5 years ago-Kathy Freston isn't living the fairy tale she'd always wanted. The little girl in the cinders saved herself long before the handsome prince came along. She believes that Tom thought, "Kathy is great" because Kathy thought so too.

As a meditation counselor, she has a long list of clients ranging from novice meditators to cancer patients, most of who come to her through referrals. She finds the work spiritually nourishing. "I am a wholly different person now," she says. "I feel I can rise to my highest potential, not just because of Tom, but because of me."

Contributing editor Megan Othersen Gorman lives in suburban Philadelphia.

A Cheat Sheet for New Meditators

Step 1: Be still

Find a quiet space that's both private and inspiring. It can be outside, in a church or temple-even a corner of your bedroom. Sit or lie down, close your eyes (to help you relax), and set a kitchen timer for 3 minutes, so there's no need to worry over when to end the meditation. As your comfort level rises, gradually increase the length of time you meditate to 20 minutes a day or, ideally, twice a day.

Step 2: Invite in the divine

Make your meditation space a sanctuary for spiritual practice by adding an element or two from your spiritual life-perhaps a candle, crystals, a cross, a Buddha, a picture of God as you understand him, even a tiny bunch of flowers-to remind you of why you're there. "When you create the space," says Kathy Freston, author of *Expect a Miracle*, "action will follow."

Step 3: Have a spiritual intention

Start by repeating an affirming mantra, one that's spiritual and meaningful to you. Use it to help empty your mind and to relax as fully as you can. Then visualize what it is that you want out of life-what you want your world to include and how you want it to feel. ("For me, it's always about having serenity and creativity," says Freston.) Then actually invoke the presence of the divine, thanking God or the universe for what you have-or simply for help in the meditation process.

Step 4: Pay attention to what comes up

In the stillness you create, you will notice thoughts or feelings-some of them negative, some of them not-that you may not have been aware of because you had been masking them with activity. Don't try to make them go away. They are what's truly in your heart.

Step 5: Surrender

In other words, accept that things don't always go according to your plan. Relax under the strain of your self-imposed rules and actions. Dispense with your frustration or any negative emotions you might feel. Trust that everything will be okay. And surrender to the idea that miracles are your highest potential.