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BOOK

I am sitting on the edge of my bed, crying and holding my bear, Frankie. He's a chubby white bear with big black eyes, and he is looking adoringly up at me like he usually does when I hug him.

The reason I am crying was because I am supposed to be writing a book, and I can't do it. That book is about how to talk with strangers. Right now, I am too depressed to talk to anyone in the whole world. I feel like a farce, a fake. If people knew what a loser I am, they would never read my book. I am not qualified to write it.

"Margaret?" says Frank Lloyd Bear.

I look down at him and sniffle. "Yeah?"

"I love you, and I think you should write a different book," he says.

"What's that, Frankie?"

"You should write a book about how to talk to Bears. You're completely qualified for that, you know." He nods his head somberly to emphasize his point.

"You mean...write about you?" I look down at his furry face, a face that I've loved and talked to for decades.

"Yup! Me!"

"Oh, Frankie, you are such a wise, amazing Bear." We hug each other tightly as my tears continue to flow.

KIDS

Many of us had Bears when we were young. We hugged them, cried with them, and told them our deepest secrets. We took them everywhere, dragging them around by their ears, heads, arms, or legs:

"Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn't."
(A.A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*)

But like Christopher Robin, eventually we outgrew our Bears. We went off to high school or college, and they remained, mute, on the bed in our childhood bedroom. We

forgot about the emotion and love we had invested in them, and they became inanimate objects.

We invested our love and affection in people instead, and sometimes those people let us down and broke our hearts.

Now when we cried, we cried alone.

There is another way. If only we could stop bumping for a moment, we might think of it.

WRITING

"OK, Margaret, that's enough of the serious stuff," says Frankie. "Write some more about me."

"For cryin' out loud, Frankie, are you writing this book, or am I?"

"We're writing it together," says Frankie.

"You may be an expert in talking to Bears, but I am an expert in talking to Margarets. And it takes both of us to have a conversation."

"I am suspecting an ulterior motive here. Do you want me to write only about talking to Bears, or is there something else?"

"I want you to write about living with Bears, and loving Bears, and why Humans should include Bears in their lives," he says. "Start by telling them how I came into your life."

BEFORE

When I was young, I had dozens of stuffed animals. In addition to Bears, there were the usual dogs and cats and lambs -- but also unusual ones, like an owl, a squirrel, a unicorn, a pig. Every single one of them had a name, and I wrote elaborate lists and genealogies, documenting how they were related.

My mother tried to keep the numbers down, but my older brothers and sisters, and especially my father, kept giving them to me for every birthday and Christmas. Once I'd adopted a new critter and given him or her a name and a gender, there was no way to remove that one from my collection without feeling like I was an evil parent, rejecting my offspring.

When I went away to college, I stored an entire footlocker of stuffed animals at my parents' house.

"But you didn't call them that," Frankie interjects.

"You're right, Frankie. The ones that weren't Bears, I called Teddy Animals, because I found the term 'stuffed animal' offensive."

"So what happened to all those Teddy Animals?" asks Frankie.

"Most of them got donated to thrift stores, after I got out of college. A few are in storage -- my two original Bears, Theodore and Lee, and Hopsi the Squirrel."

"I've never met them," says my Bear.

"They got quiet. They never talk," I admit. The truth was they still had names, and they were associated with childhood memories, but they no longer had personalities.

"That's terrible." Frankie hangs his head and looks sad.

ARRIVAL

By the time I was in my late 20's, I'd completely given up on Bears as companions. I had a cuddly husband and a delightfully furry long-haired cat, and the two of them served as my live Teddy Animals. The three of us snuggled on the couch or in bed together, just like I'd snuggled my stuffed coterie as a child.

But one day, depression descended on me like a black cloud. It was horrible. I couldn't function, I could only cry and be angry and feel like I had no reason for living.

The cat tried sitting on me and purring, but I pushed her away. The husband tried similar methods, with the same results.

One day, an unexpected box arrived in the mail addressed to me.

"That was me!" cries Frankie. "I was in that box!"

When I opened the box, I found a snow-white Bear with big black eyes looking up at me. He had a brown nose and a slightly shy smile, and his paws were open as if requesting a hug.

There was a note inside, from the Bear.

"Admission time," says Frankie. "I had help writing that note."

"I know," I say. "You haven't written me any notes since then."

"That's because I found that I could talk to you directly. Besides, I'm not very good at holding a pen. I have terrible pawwriting."

The note said that this Bear was on his way to the North Pole, but he got lost, and he needed a home. Could I provide a home for him?

HUGGING

Frank Lloyd Bear and I bonded from the first moment I saw him, before he even came out of the box. What an adorable face! He was just what I needed.

Frankie was quiet at first. When I took him out of the box, I found him to be the most huggable Bear I had ever encountered in my life. We just sort of melted together.

I walked around the house, carrying him. Sometimes I hugged him to my chest. Sometimes I carried him on the side, the way you might carry a furry baby on your hip. I set him down on the desk next to my computer, and he sat and watched me intently.

So intently that it was distracting. All I could do was pick him up and hug him again. I planted kisses on the top of his head, between his big ears. I kissed his nose. I

rubbed his chin and his tummy. I caressed his furry cheek.

"Hey, do all those things now!" says Frankie.

"Mmmmm. Okay." I pick him up and cuddle him. His fur is no longer snow-white, it's a dingy gray, and his nose is threadbare, shiny with pink patches where the brown fur is gone. He's not as plump as he used to be, and he has a hole in his side, under his right arm.

When I set him down on the bed and rub his tummy, he laughs with glee, his paws going back and forth in a blur.

I bury my face in his fur and give him a big kiss.

"You make me so happy!" he says.

"You make me happy, too, my Bear."

"We're good for each other."

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"That we are."

As if to prove it, he says, "OK, Margaret, now go write some more."

LOVING

At the time, I didn't know why that Bear was able to break through my depression when no one and nothing else could. There was something special about the look on his face, the way he held himself, the way he felt when I hugged him.

"I love you," says Frankie.

"I love you, too," I scratch his nose.

"Unconditionally," says Frankie. "That's why I hug you so much."

Bears live in the moment. They don't sit around thinking, like people do. They wait patiently, silently, waiting for a chance to hug someone. When that chance comes, they put all their love into the hug.

It is a moment when they are very much alive and very much needed.

When the hug ends, the Bear sits back down on the bed and hibernates. He doesn't anticipate or worry about the next hug, and he doesn't relive the previous one. He doesn't fantasize about hugging a perfect person.

The Bear simply is.

Right now, Frankie is sitting across from me, smiling. He seems blissfully happy. He can sit like that for hours or days or weeks. Like Winnie-the-Pooh, there might be another way, if he could think of it. Or there might not. But because he is a Bear, he can just live in the moment and not worry about another way.

When I pick him up and hug him, there is another way. It lasts as long as the hug does.

I pick him up and hug him.

"Thanks!" he says. "You are a Very Special Friend to Bears. You know just what Bears need."

"And this Bear knows just what I need."

"Lovin'," says Frankie. "Everybody needs that. That's why everybody should have a Bear."

SPEAKING

Frankie is one of the most talkative Bears I have ever met. He has a very distinctive voice, a low timbre that carries a hint of a smile, even when he's saying something very serious.

When Frankie first began to talk, it was a bit of a surprise. He'd been in the house with us for a while, and he'd demonstrated what a fantastic hugger he was, but he didn't say anything out loud.

Then, one day, my husband and I had a disagreement. I don't remember the specifics, but it turned into an argument, and then a fight, and afterwards, we were both hurt, angry, and sullen.

At the time, there was no way I was going to hug my husband, who'd just pissed me off. I picked up Frankie and gave him a hug to make myself feel better.

Suddenly, the Bear talked.

"Barry..." he said.

My husband turned and looked at me, his eyebrows raised in surprise. I was holding the Bear to my chest, facing away from me and towards Barry. The quiet, low-pitched words were coming from my lips, but the voice didn't sound like my voice.

"I think that Margaret is feeling badly about what she said to you. She wants to apologize, and she wants you to forgive her," the Bear said.

Barry's eyes searched my face, and he realized that the Bear was saying something that would have been very hard for me to say.

"Tell Margaret that I accept her apology, and that I am sorry for what I said" Barry answered, and he came over and hugged me, squishing the Bear between us.

From that time on, Frankie was never afraid to speak up. The Bear was a complete mind reader -- he knew exactly what it was that I was thinking and needed to say to Barry, but was too afraid or angry to say. When Barry couldn't get through to me, Frankie could step in and say things for him, too.

"He's so enlightened," I said to Barry. "He's like a Buddha Bear."

Frankie has never spoken a harsh or harmful word to anyone. His words are always gentle and loving. He does have a sense of humor, but he is kind. He's occasionally self-deprecating or teasing, but he doesn't make jokes at anyone else's expense.

In short, he practices what is known as "right speech." Right speech is one of the elements of the Eightfold Path of Buddhism. It means being truthful, saying the right thing at the right time, and abstaining from idle chatter. Right speech is summed up like this: One

should speak only words by which one would not harm others.

"Margaret," interrupts Frankie, "you are saying some very nice things about me. Thank you."

"They're all true, my Bear."

"Yes, but it feels especially good to see you writing them down for everyone to see."

Frankie's ability to practice Right Speech is completely natural. He has never been able to speak any other way. It's part of his Buddha Bear nature.

When Barry and I are alone, Frankie speaks up a lot. He often says, "Can I have a hug?" Sometimes, he says, "Margaret, Barry needs a hug." Other times, it's the inverse: "Baaarry, Margaret needs to talk to you." But he gets shy when there are other people around.

"Why is that, Frankie?" I ask him. We are alone.

"Well," he drawls, slowly, "I don't want to embarrass you. I am afraid that other people will laugh at you for talking with me."

"But if we publish this book together, the whole world will know that you and I talk. Don't you think they'll laugh at us then?"

"Some of them will," says Frankie. "But if they make it all the way through the book, they'll understand. And if you and I help even one person to be happier, then it will be worth having thousands of people make fun of us."

"How can you and I make someone happier, Frankie?"

"We can tell them that they are unique, and lovable, and that they deserve to have a Bear in their lives who understands their deepest needs, a Bear like me. And we can tell them

that it's OK to talk to Bears and tell your secrets to a Bear, even if you are a grown-up. *Especially* if you are a grown-up!"

Frankie bounces around happily for a little while, thinking, and then says, "We can tell them that they might have a book inside them that needs to be written, and they just need a Bear to write it with."

LISTENING

“Margaret, I don’t talk *all* the time,” says Frankie. “Sometimes, I listen.”

I look into his radiant, upturned face. He doesn’t say anything more, just waits patiently to hear what I have to say. I’m reminded of this elegant description of “the man who knew the art of listening.”

“Without his saying a word, the speaker felt that (he) took in every word, quietly, expectantly, that he missed nothing. He did not await anything with impatience and gave neither praise nor blame – he only listened...towards the end of the story, he listened with doubled attention, completely absorbed, his eyes closed.” (Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*)

Frankie is “the Bear who knows the art of listening.” I’ve always been able to tell him how I’m feeling, what I’m thinking, what I want to do with my life. He takes it in silently, beaming back at me with that childlike, caring smile.

I can say anything to Frankie, even secrets, even shame, and he will still love me.

“You know the art of listening, too,” he says.

He falls quiet, looking at me lovingly, intently. Waiting.

“I don’t have anything to tell you right now,” I say to him, feeling awkward.

Still, he remains silent, looking at me. Finally, he says, “I just wanted you to know what you look like. You know, when you’re listening.”

We sit together in silence, listening to the world around us and smiling.

SIZE

Frankie's small, furry body has always contained more personality than many a full-sized being.

"Hey, you didn't say I was small, did you?" Frankie complains.

"I know, Frankie. You want me to say that you are a Big Bear, don't you?"

He nods vigorously.

"OK, you are a Big Bear, Frankie." He hugs me with all of his warm softness. He's about 10 inches tall, but also about 10 inches wide. Compared to other Bears, he is nice and big, easy to hug.

Frankie made it clear from the very beginning that he did not consider himself to be a small bear. His stature was not measured in inches. He was proud of himself and his place in the world, and only

a Big Bear could do the things that he could do.

"I am a really good hugger," says Frankie.
"And I know just what to say to make people feel better."

"That's true."

"Scuppers is a Little Bear," he continues. "He doesn't mind if you call him a Little Bear."

Scuppers is another Bear who lives in our household. He is, indeed, a lot smaller than Frankie. He is also known for making mischief in ways that only a Little Bear can do.

Scuppers is not much interested in hugging people. He'd rather play practical jokes and do things that make people laugh. He's about six inches tall, with jointed arms and legs, and he wears a jaunty nautical sweater. Sometimes, he takes off his sweater and sunbathes in the nude. He's been known to

dive headfirst into a canister full of jelly beans, and he once was photographed riding on the back of a Dungeness crab.

The comparison between Frankie, the Big Bear, and Scuppers, the Little Bear, reminds me of conversation with my father. He was telling me about an acquaintance, a friend of a friend whose health was failing. "She's *very* old," said my Dad, who was 86 at the time.

I pointed out that the woman in question was a year younger than Dad.

"Oh, but she's an *old* 85, and I am a *young* 86!"

"You see," says Frankie, "what's important is not how other people see you, but how you see yourself. That's why I am a Big Bear. That's why your Dad is a Young Human."

Frankie is quiet for a moment, and I know what's coming.

"How do you see yourself, Margaret?"

It's hard to answer him. Because he is my Bear, I know I have to be completely truthful. There is no other way to be with a Bear.

"I am feeling like a Very Small Human today, Frankie."

"You think that you are not good for anything, don't you?" As always, he cuts right to the truth of the matter.

I start a litany of all the things that are wrong with me. I get angry with people. I am very bad at relationships. I am a lousy writer. Nothing I do in my life is worthwhile.

"I don't believe any of those things," says Frankie. "I am your Bear, and I know you better than you know yourself. For instance, you and I are writing this book together, so you must be a good writer."

The problem, I see, is one of Right Speech. If Frankie practices Right Speech all the time, then I feel compelled to practice it with him. How can I argue with him? How can I be angry with him?

I stare at my furry friend in silent frustration.

"Aww, let me hug you," he says, and he does.

NEEDS

One of the early things I learned about my Bear was that he eats Air, and a lot of it. Frankie is a connoisseur of Air.

"Some kinds of Air are yummier than others," he tells me.

"Which ones do you like best?" I ask him.

"I like Flower Air, and Rainy Day Air, and Fresh-Baked Bread Air... and Jelly Bean Air, and Lemon Pudding Air. There's a lot of nice Air in this world."

He comes over and puts his nose over my coffee cup.

"Coffee Air! Yum!"

"Are there some yucky ones, too?" I ask.

"Not right now," he says, reveling in the Air above my coffee cup.

I know he doesn't like farts and diesel exhaust, but who wants to think about those things when there's a good cup of coffee at hand?

"Sometimes, when there are bad smells around, you bury your nose against my chest," I remind him.

"But I don't need an excuse to do that. See?" he says, snuggling against me and burying his nose against my chest.

Frankie says something into my chest that comes out like this, "Mphthmm mhph thmphm mmr."

"What did you say?" I ask him.

He looks up at me. "Tell them about the Cookie Air."

"OK, I'm getting to that, my Bear."

I was on an extended long-distance bicycle ride in northern Ohio when I got word that my mother was dying. I rushed to her bedside in South Carolina, arriving just seven hours before she took her last breath. I held her hand until the end.

Once she was gone, I fell apart. I had never experienced such grief. The pain was so severe, I was wracked with sobs. With the emotional pain came a physical pain, as if I was being torn apart from the inside by all the crying.

Frankie wasn't with me at the time. He was back in Ohio; my husband's sister had been Bear-sitting while we were on our bike trip. Young but wise, Julie knew just what to do.

She made a double batch of chocolate-chip cookies, wrapped them carefully in plastic wrap, and packed them in the bottom of a large, sturdy cardboard box. Then she put

Frankie on top of the cookies and shipped the box to me.

"Omigosh, what a memory," says Frankie.

When he arrived, and I took him out of the box, he was completely full of Chocolate-Chip Cookie Air. He gave off the most heavenly aroma, that of fresh-baked homemade cookies.

During those difficult times, Frankie was a nonstop hugging machine. He hugged me and Barry and anyone else in the house who needed his furry paws. And with every single hug came a burst of yummy Chocolate-Chip Cookie Air, infused with Teddy Bear Love.

"Margaret, are you missing your Mom right now?" Frankie asks.

"Yes, I am, Frankie." It's been almost twenty years since she passed away.

"I thought so," he says. "How about a hug? I don't smell like cookies right now, but let's pretend that I do."

TRUST

"Turn around, Frankie, so I can see your tail."

"OK, but you know the rule," he says.

"I'm not going to touch it, silly Bear. I'm just going to write about it."

He turns around and moons me, displaying the cutest tail I have ever seen on a Bear. It's round and small, placed so that it's just barely visible when he sits.

The most important thing about Frankie's tail is his pride of ownership in it.

"That's right," he says. "My tail is very special, and I get to decide who can touch it and who can't."

Like Frankie, we all have parts of ourselves that we want to keep special. Frankie knows that I respect him, and that I would never do

anything to harm him. The fact that I keep my hands away from his precious tail is one of the ways I show him that respect.

It's a reminder of the respect we owe everyone in our lives. When Frankie reminds me not to mess with his tail, he's reminding me to be respectful of everyone I come in contact with.

"I am?" says Frankie. "Wow, I didn't know that. I can't even *see* my tail."

He tries to turn around and see it, but his stuffing gets in the way, and he just looks contorted and silly. It's a move he's showed me hundreds of times, always with the same result. Like a dog chasing his tail, Frankie never gets to see his.

This might explain why he doesn't want anyone to touch it. How do you protect a part of yourself that you can't see?

"I know how," he says. "You have to trust the people around you. If you surround yourself with the right kind of people, then it's OK to be vulnerable."

"I guess you trust me, then?" I ask him.

"Absolutely," says Frankie. He cuddles next to my side. "Touching my tail is like touching my heart. I trust you with my heart."

FLIGHT

"I wish we could include a video in our book," says Frankie. "Then everybody could see that I really do fly."

Flying is one of Frankie's amazing abilities. When he is across the room and wants to hug someone on the other side, he flies. Usually he needs some help for takeoff and landing.

"Oh, Barry..." he says.

Barry looks up from across the way. I am holding Frankie in front of me, and he's trembling excitedly.

Barry holds out his arms, and Frankie flies across to him and gives him a big hug. Then he turns around and looks back at me, expectantly.

I nod and hold out my arms, and he flies back and gives me another hug. He could do this all day.

"Flying and hugging go together," says Frankie. "I wish people could fly around and give each other hugs like I do."

We humans don't need to fly. We have many other means of travel at our disposal. We can simply walk across the room or drive across town to reach our loved ones.

"The reason you walk or drive is the same reason I fly," says Frankie. "To give people the lovin' they need."

JOY

Frankie has spent a lot of time traveling with us on the road. When he first came to live with us, we drove a little Honda Civic named Peepcar. Frankie sometimes rode shotgun, in the space between the two front bucket seats. Sometimes, he rode in the passenger's lap, waving at people we passed along the way. But his favorite place to ride was in the driver's lap.

He did not ride quietly there.

"Please, please, pleeeeeeease?" he would plead.

"Not now, Frankie, there's too much traffic," I'd say.

A few minutes later, he'd start again. "Can I now? Please?"

"Oh, OK, go ahead," I would capitulate.

Then he'd dive at the steering wheel with his nose and blow the horn.

Beeeeeeep!

It made him laugh, and it made me and Barry laugh, too. How could something so simple as blowing the horn bring so much pure joy?

"Uh-oh," says Frankie. "I know what you're going to write about now."

One day, Frankie asked if he could blow the horn, and something strange happened.

When he put his nose against the steering wheel, the horn made noise as expected, but as he held the button down, it started to get quiet. It was as if it ran out of air, and the sound dwindled down to nothing.

Frankie sat back and looked at me in puzzlement. "What happened?"

When I pressed the horn button, the car was silent. No noise came out.

"I'm sorry," said Frankie, contritely. "I didn't know I could use it all up!"

We assured him that it was not his fault, but the horn didn't work after that.

We continued to drive the car for years without a horn. And from then on, we let Frankie blow the silent horn as much as he wanted. It wasn't as much fun as the loud horn, but he still got a kick out of it.

Then, one day, we were sitting in our car in a parking lot and had just said goodbye to some friends. Frankie jumped up to blow the broken horn at them, but when he did, something strange happened.

"It worked!" says Frankie. "It went BEEEEEEEEEP!"

After years of not working, the horn suddenly decided to start working again. Our friends, who were standing directly in front of the hood, jumped several feet at the unexpected loud noise, then glared at us. They couldn't figure out why Barry and I were laughing so hard and hugging each other in the front seat of the car.

They couldn't see the white Bear squished between us, laughing at the private joke the three of us shared.

BEING

I often go away from Frankie, for a few minutes or hours, or months. When I come back, he is exactly as I left him.

He might be sitting on a shelf, looking across the room at me.

He might be laying on his back on the bed.

He might be sitting on my pillow.

But unless someone else has been picking him up and hugging him, he is right where I left him.

"What do you do when I'm not around, Frankie?" I ask him.

"Oh, you know. The usual." He's being a little coy, trying to hook my attention.

I take the bait. "What's the usual?"

"I be," he says.

"How do you be, Frankie?"

"Well, it depends on how I started. Whether I am sitting or lying down."

"So if you are sitting, you lie down, and if you are lying down, you sit?"

"No, no, no," he corrects me. "If I am lying down, I lie down. And if I am sitting, I sit. And if I am eating air, I eat air. I do what I am doing."

What Frankie is describing to me is Mindfulness.

"That's a big word for what I do," he says. "Be is shorter."

Frankie sits quietly for a couple of minutes as I type and think and stare at the ceiling and scratch my ear.

Then he says, "OK, I showed you. Were you paying attention?"

"Paying attention to what?" I ask. I have already forgotten what we were talking about, I am so busy thinking about what I am writing and what I am going to fix for dinner.

"I was showing you what I do when you are not around," he says.

"You weren't doing anything," I say. "What was there to pay attention to?"

"I was doing something very important," he says. "I was Being."

"I was being, too," I say.

"Yes," he says patiently, "but you were not Being in the moment. You were being in your head, thinking about other places and other times. If you want to understand your Bear, you have to just Be."

I close the laptop and look at my Bear. I suspect this is the real reason he wants to be

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called a Big Bear instead of a little bear. He has great wisdom to impart to me.

"Now you try it," he says. "Be."

SNOW

Even more than car horns or Chocolate-Chip Cookie Air, Frankie loves snow.

"It's a polar bear thing," he explains.

He was on his way to the North Pole when he got lost and landed in North Carolina. We never asked him where he started or how he ended up in North Carolina.

Snow is always a special delicacy for our Bear. Every flurry sends him into ecstasy. A patch of snow seen through the car window when we cross a mountain pass is bliss. Even the sight of a snow-capped mountain from hundreds of miles away makes him come alive.

"Snow! Snow! Snow!" he calls out, to make sure we don't miss the precious sight.

Snow brings out Frankie's secret superpower. It's what gives him his energy, what makes him come alive.

"Do you wish you lived at the North Pole, Frankie?"

"No, why?" he says, puzzled.

"Then you would have snow all the time," I point out. "You'd be a very powerful polar bear."

"But I wouldn't have you," he says.

"True, I don't think I could live at the North Pole."

"You know what I think about those Teddy Animals in storage?" Frankie asks me.

"The ones we talked about earlier? The quiet ones?"

"Yeah, them. I think maybe they need some snow to wake them up and make them talk," he says.

I consider this briefly.

"But they are not Polar Bears. Two of them are Brown Bears, and one of them is a Squirrel," I remind him.

"It doesn't have to be *my* snow, it has to be *their* snow," he says.

"What's their snow?"

"You know, that special something in the world that wakes them up, makes them come alive," he explains patiently.

Everybody has their own snow. It could be anything -- snowflakes, rainbows, spring flowers. It might be smiling babies or playful dogs. Some people come alive at the thought of race cars or rare filet mignon.

What Frankie refers to as snow, we know by other names. "Happy thoughts" is one.

"You just think lovely wonderful thoughts," Peter explained, "and they lift you up in the air." (James M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*)

Some people have more than one kind of snow. They get excited about lots of things.

"Margaret, what's your snow? What brings out your secret superpower?" Frankie asks me.

"Bears."

CHANGE

"I wonder what I would look like with brown fur," says Frankie.

"Then you wouldn't be a polar bear," I respond.

"And an earring in my nose," he continues.
"No, wait, if it's in my nose, it can't be an earring, can it?"

I'm sure his line of thought is leading somewhere, but I can't figure out where.

"If I wanted a tattoo, I'd have to shave. I'm too furry," he says, more to himself than to me.

"Why do you want to change the way you look, Frankie?"

"I'm just letting myself think about it. I'm not planning to do anything right now."

"Do you want me to change something about the way I look?" I ask him.

"I just want you to think about it."

Every once in a while, when the subject comes up, I think about tattoos. I have never been able to think of an image important enough to be permanently shown on my body, and I tell Frankie so.

"Good," he says.

"Why are you saying, 'good'? I thought you were trying to convince me to think about a tattoo."

"Exactly. I wanted you to *think* about a tattoo. You tried one on in your head. Then you decided not to get one. You thought about changing your mind."

I think about dying my hair or getting a piercing, and decide not to. Frankie decides against the nose ring. It's a nice thought

exercise. After taking some deliberate time to think about possible changes, we decide that we are satisfied with the way we are.

I return to my reading on the computer.

"OK, *now* I'm changing my mind," Frankie says, pointing at the screen with his paw.

The article he's pointing to is a journal written by the brother of a friend, someone I've never met. Jim was describing what it feels like to have cancer:

"...there's part of me, call him Big Jim, and he's coldly logical, and a planner, and he's worked out all the contingencies, and makes sure that everything that needs to happen does in fact happen...

"Then there's Little Jim, who wonders why people keep sticking needles in him, and why he feels sick,

and has to go to the hospital every day. And then in the radiation oncology waiting room, there's a six month baby there, bald, with a big scar running across the back of her head, and that seems terribly unfair, and across the room there's a three-year old, and it's his first day, and the nurse is talking to him and his mother, and then the person before me in the radiation room is old and frail and lying on a stretcher with three EMTs attending, and that seems harsh, to be in the hospital AND getting radiation treatments.

"And then Little Jim walks outside, and the sun is shining, and the little sparrows and chickadees are building nests in the awnings over the sidewalks, so he stops to observe, and he sees one on the ground with a huge wad of twigs in its mouth, and it takes off but can only get a foot off

the ground before coming back down, and it tries a few more times before releasing its load and just picking up one twig. And then Big Jim says that they shouldn't really let birds nest in a patient waiting area, since that's going to get messy with bird droppings, and Little Jim tells him to shut up and not ruin the moment, and life is good."

"I like sunshine and birds, and I think life is good," says Frankie, thoughtfully.

"Does this have something to do with tattoos and piercings?"

"No, that was just the warmup." He declares, dramatically, "I want to be Little Frankie."

It's a shock. As long as we've been together, he's been fighting the word "little." It does not apply to him, and he tells everyone so. He is a Big Bear.

As I'm staring at him, trying to comprehend the enormity of this change, he says, "It's OK to change your mind, Margaret. Even about important stuff."

Until he ran across Jim's writing, Frankie had never considered that "little" could be applied to him in a good way. Now that he had new information, he changed his mind.

But I am not a Bear. How can I change my mind without breaking promises or disappointing people?

"You also made promises to yourself," says Frankie. "You promised to be the best person you can be."

"Right, and if I break those promises, I won't be the best person I can be, Frankie," I say.

"Those promises were made by the person you were then. You are a different person now. You have to let yourself think about who you are now, and whether those are still

the right promises based on what you know
now."

"In other words, I might need to change my
mind to Be the best person I can now?"

"Yup. When you get watered, you have to let
yourself grow. I'm growing from Big to
Little."

FRIEND

One year, Barry and I celebrated Christmas alone, without any other family. It was just the two of us, on our boat, with Frankie.

My father always collects lots of presents for us during the year. That year, he mailed us a large box of gifts, and I started fussing as soon as I saw it. “We live on a *boat*, darn it! Where does he think we’re going to put all this stuff?”

I hauled the box onto the boat and opened it. Inside, I found a whole bunch of small gift-wrapped parcels. We waited until Christmas day, and then we took our time opening them, a few at a time. The most memorable one wasn’t revealed until evening.

It was a lightweight, lumpy package, about 6 inches high. Inside, I found another white teddy bear, with big black eyes and a bigger,

fuzzier nose than Frankie's. The Bear's arms were open wide, just waiting for a hug.

I set the Bear aside, saying, "We don't have room on this boat for any more Bears!"

Frankie watched me from across the boat. He was sitting with a wrapping-paper hat on his head, inhaling egg-nog air. He didn't say anything, but I thought I saw him shake his head in dismay.

PRECIOUS

The new white bear sat quietly for a few days. She was nearby when I talked with my father on the phone, and she overheard me say to him, “Thank you for the Christmas gifts, Dad, but I don’t have room for any more teddy bears!”

He replied, sounding hurt, “But that one was just so cute! It called out your name, and I couldn’t resist. It’s just a little bitty thing.”

All of a sudden, I heard something different in his words. It was as if he was saying, “When I was shopping, this cute little Bear made me think of you and how much I love you. If you reject the bear, you are rejecting my love.”

“Oh,” I quickly backpedaled. “I didn’t know it was like that. I’m sure I can make room for one more Bear.”

When I got off the phone, about ten minutes later, I turned and picked up the small white bear. She didn't hug me like Frankie. She nestled between my cheek and my shoulder.

Then I heard a voice in my ear, and I knew it was hers.

“Hi. I'm Precious. And so are *you*.”

I catch my breath in surprise, and she adds, “And so is Frankie.”

TWO-FER

Precious has a completely different personality from either Frank Lloyd Bear or the mischievous Scuppers. She's gentle, shy, and unassuming. Her voice is high-pitched, but soft. She's very feminine.

She is a quiet, caring fountain of love for all beings.

Usually, she and Frankie hang out together. She fits right between his paws, her head snuggled under his chin. I often pick them up and hug them together.

"It's a two-fer," says Frankie. "You get twice as much love from us at the same time."

EMERGENCY

When Barry and I travel separately, one of us takes Precious and one of us takes Frankie.

I was visiting my Dad in Florida with Precious when I received a shocking text message from my dear friend, Philip, in California.

“A terrible thing has happened. My son has died.”

I immediately called and spoke with him. He was in shock, surrounded by well-meaning family and friends. “How can I support you?” I asked, 3000 miles away.

“Just keep sending me your love,” he replied.

I was frustrated, because I knew etiquette demanded silly things. I had been on the receiving end of sympathy cards, “in lieu of” charitable donations, houseplants, and floral

arrangements. But none of those could touch the pain. Nothing could replace the young man I met briefly. I knew he had loved his father a great deal.

My eye fell on Precious, and I knew exactly what to do. Immediately, I started baking cookies.

A few hours later, I took the box containing fragrant fresh-baked cookies and Precious to the post office. The woman behind the counter asked the standard question: “Anything fragile, liquid, perishable, or potentially hazardous in this box?”

At that point, I melted into tears and admitted I was shipping my very own teddy bear to a friend who’d lost his son. The postal employee listened with compassion, and then she said, “Thank you so much.”

She went on to tell me about a friend who had lost first his daughter, and then his

father, to suicide. “I didn’t know what to do to support him,” said the postal employee. “Now I know. When I get off work, I’m going to get a Bear to send him.”

“If it’s not your own Bear, you should be sure to charge it up with lots of hugs before sending it,” I recommended. “Here, I’ll get you started!”

I leaned across the counter and gave her a hug, which caused quite a stir in the line of people behind me.

NETWORK

“You could have sent me on that mission, you know,” says Frankie.

“But you were with Barry,” I reminded him. “And you couldn’t both go.”

“Sometimes, I do my work remotely,” announces Frankie. He is climbing into my lap again.

“I have a special hug for you, Margaret,” he says.

“Special? Special how?” I ask, intrigued.

“It’s from someone who loves you very much.”

“Well, you love me very much. You even told me that you love me unconditionally.”

“I do,” he says, “but somebody else does, too. And that person just sent you a hug through the T.B.N.”

Frankie wraps his paws around me and hugs me for quite a long time.

"Wow! That was pretty special." Now I'm curious. "What's this T.B.N.?"

"Teddy Bear Network," says Frankie. "That one was from Precious."

"So all those hugs I gave you after Philip's son died...?"

"I sent 'em to Precious!" he says, proudly.

"And she delivered them to Philip." Now I understand. When Precious arrived in California, she became a special node in the T.B.N., providing comfort and solace to Philip for several years, and conveying his affection for me to Frankie.

Then Philip passed away, too. Precious came back to live with me and Frankie. There's a tiny hint of sadness about her now, because

she misses her big, tall California Person. He was quite a teddy bear, himself.

Despite the sadness, Precious is still gentle, feminine, and completely full of love and compassion for all beings. And she is still a node in the Teddy Bear Network, which is connected to Philip, and to all who have passed before us.

NAPS

“That’s some heavy stuff,” says Frankie.
“How are you doing with the writing?”

I give a deep sigh and look into my empty coffee cup. Frankie may still be enjoying the coffee air, but I need a refill. And maybe a nap.

I haven’t said anything out loud about the nap, but Frankie knows what’s best. He lures me over to the couch for a snuggle, which turns into a little snooze.

I am awed by his napping abilities. He is a master-napper. Poof! He’s asleep. Poof! He’s wide awake again, and ready to Be.

He gently corrects me. “Even when I’m napping, I Be. But when I wake up, I can Be and hug and talk, all at the same time.”

TRAVEL

Frankie has traveled more than most Bears. He's sailed on small boats on the Atlantic and the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico. He knows all the good anchorages in Puget Sound. He's also driven to all four corners of North America, including British Columbia, San Diego, Key West, and Newfoundland.

He tells me he's at home wherever he is.

"Well, except maybe stuffed into a suitcase," he admits. I know he'd rather do the flying himself, but once in a while, he has to endure the indignity of riding inside my bag.

Once he gets out of the bag and samples the new air, though, he's thoroughly at home, wherever we have landed.

His complacency is completely at odds with my cat, who nearly went insane in a strange motel room. She didn't want space, she wanted security. She was always happier

sleeping in the van, a familiar, though tiny place.

“What do you prefer, Margaret?” asks Frankie.

“I love adventures,” I admit, “but if I have to sleep in a strange place...”

“...you want your Bear!” He finishes my sentence triumphantly.

He is confident of his place in my world, no matter where in the world that is.

Right now, we’re staying at a friend’s house in Bellingham, Washington, and he’s curled up on the couch with a new friend, Pola. As in “Pola Bear.” She looks like a miniature version of him, the same face, the same posture, but about half his size. Her tag declares her to be a Gund Snuffles, so they are distantly related.

Pola rarely travels, which explains why she looks younger, but is a full eight years older than Frankie.

“Traveling gives me and you character,” says Frankie. It’s a graceful way to explain his shabbiness and my crows’ feet.

Last week, he was with me in California, at another friend’s house, where he spent his time looking out the window at deer and wild turkeys. Before that, we were staying in the cozy basement guest-room of relatives in Ohio. Everywhere I go, he goes.

“Where’s your favorite place, Frankie?” I ask him.

His round black eyes look surprised at the question. “Right here, Margaret.”

I should have known the answer.

PHOTOS

Yesterday, I went out for a walk along the waterfront with a new friend. Afterwards, we sat in a top-floor café in an old brick building. The sun poured in the windows, and she glowed inside and out. I pulled out my phone to take a picture, and she panicked.

“Oh, no! I hate having my picture taken! I always look terrible.” She turned off her internal glow, although the sun was still shining.

I tried taking the photo anyway, but when I showed it to her, she made me delete it.

This is in contrast to Frankie’s reaction to photos. He’s the ultimate furry ham.

“Me! Me! Me! I want to be in the picture!”

Every time I take out the camera, he is eager to be included. It's not narcissism; it's something more subtle.

We sit down to talk about it.

"I am who I am," he says.

"What's that got to do with cameras?" I ask.

"Everything, and nothing," he says, maddeningly.

I wait in silence for him to explain. The only sound is the hum of the refrigerator. He hums along as he collects his thoughts.

"When you say, 'Let's take a picture,' you see something good, or at least interesting, in the present moment," he begins.

"...and you are good and interesting?" I ask, hopefully.

“No, that’s not it at all. I just am.” He tries another approach. “The camera’s only a tool. It captures what is.”

“You’re saying the lens does not judge?”

“Right! The camera loves me unconditionally. It loves you unconditionally, too. When we live in the present moment, we’re always good enough to be in the photo.”

FEAR

Lately, I've been struggling with something called "anxiety disorder." Frankie tries to comfort me with his wisdom.

"Everything always turns out OK. There's nothing to be afraid of," he says. "Remember that time you left me under the bed in the hotel?"

I remember it well. We'd packed everything in our room, locked it, and carried our luggage down a couple of flights of steps to the car. We returned the key and got in the car, ready to drive back to Seattle from San Francisco. A half-block away, I noticed that Frankie wasn't riding shotgun between the seats. "OH NO!" I shrieked.

Barry slammed on the brakes, thinking I was referring to something in the chaotic San Francisco traffic. "We have to go back for

Frankie!” I continued, my voice several octaves higher than usual.

We drove around the block, and I went back inside the hotel and explained my dilemma.

“I left something valuable in my room.” The clerk’s eyebrows were raised in surprise as I added, “My teddy bear.”

He hadn’t even had time to put the key away; it was sitting where I’d left it on the counter. I pounded up the stairs to our room and unlocked the door, breathless.

Frankie was tangled in the white bedspread, halfway under the bed, fast asleep.

He hadn’t even noticed that we had left.

I scooped him up and hugged him tightly. “It was terrible! I was afraid I’d lost you forever!” I told him.

“Well, you didn’t,” he replied, nonplussed.
“I’m right here. And so are you.”

I could never convey to Frankie the anxiety and panic of that day. Twenty years later, I say, “I can’t believe you didn’t even notice that we left without you! That could have changed the course of history!”

Frankie gives a little chuckle. Then he reminds me, “I’m right here. And so are you.”

FORT

Anxiety disorder is a funny thing. It's not that I'm afraid of something particular, like a cockroach or an upcoming public speaking engagement. My body just spontaneously goes into flight response and sends all kinds of scared, weird hormones to my brain.

My heart starts pounding, and I get light-headed and shaky. I have learned to deal with it by crawling into bed with Frankie.

For the first time in my life, I pull the covers all the way up over my head.

In the filtered light of the coverlet, I can see Frankie beaming at me. He calms me down, and we take a nap.

One day, Barry came looking for me in the house and couldn't find me. I wasn't under the covers with Frankie, so he checked the closet. You never know where you'll find someone with anxiety disorder.

To his surprise, Frankie and I were on the floor next to the bed, a space less than two feet wide.

“Are you OK?” asked Barry.

“We’re fine,” Frankie and I answered in unison.

“What are you doing?” Barry lingered, curious.

“It’s a blanket fort,” I explained. “We’re very happy here, and we’ll come out when we’re ready.”

Sure enough, when we heard dinner was on the table, we crawled out of our blanket fort. It was the most successful treatment I’d found for anxiety.

From that time on, I told people I had “Blanket Fort Disorder” instead of anxiety. It sounds like so much fun, my friends want to come over and join me and Frankie in there.

“Are you sure you want to put that in the book, Margaret?” asks Frankie.

“Why not?”

“It could get awfully crowded in there. We can’t just invite everybody in the world into our blanket fort.”

I stare at him incredulously. He gazes back at me, then shakes himself and says, more to himself than to me, “What am I thinking? Of course we can invite everybody in the world into our blanket fort! They might have to bring more blankets, though.”

“And more Bears?” I ask.

“Ha! That’s the best part!”

AGING

In his early years, Frankie used to go into the washing machine. It was a nerve-wracking process for both of us. What if there wasn't enough air, or his fur fell out?

I would sit in front of the washing machine, nervously wringing my hands and reassuring him through the glass. To others, I looked like the crazy lady talking to the washing machine in the Laundromat.

When he came out, much whiter than he'd gone in, I'd dry him in the sunshine. I always wondered what was inside my furry friend, and why he seemed to be losing weight.

Eventually, he became so worn that I was afraid to put him into the washing machine, for fear he'd fall apart completely. I hugged him more and more gingerly.

Frankie's aging process was a lot like a human's. His skin sagged and his fur went from snow-white to dingy gray.

I still see him the way he was when he was young, fat, and squishy, but he's shy about meeting new people.

"I didn't want them to think of me as a shabby old Bear," he says. "I want them to take me seriously," he continues, in his wisest Stuffed Buddha voice.

"Seriously? You want to be taken seriously?"
I am aghast.

"Seriously Fun," he clarifies.

MIRACLE

One day, I arrange a big surprise. Frankie is going to Suzi's Bear Spa, in Santa Clara, California.

Suzi is a dear friend who calls herself a "dollmaker." I call her a sculptor. She creates fanciful creatures and expressive miniature humans out of three-dimensional mixed media.

She picks us up in San Jose, and Frankie rides on my lap in the front seat. His gaze takes in the soft hills around Silicon Valley, that unique color my friends call "Teddy Bear Brown."

When we arrive at Suzi's house, we sit down and start talking about life, relationships, plans, dreams, and family. I am so comfortable, I can talk about anything with Suzi, and so can Frankie.

She puts Frankie in her lap and opens up the seam under his arm. She pulls on his stuffing as we talk, and eventually it all comes out in a single blob.

It's not blob-shaped, though. Frankie's insides are shaped exactly like Frankie's outsides. They're a little lumpier and smaller, without the eyes and nose, but I know without a doubt that's my Bear.

A rush of emotion overwhelms me. I can't believe I am seeing Frankie's outsides and insides separated. He is so real to me, I didn't know this was possible. If you did it to a human...well, that would be messy and they'd never go back together again.

Without the stuffing, Frankie's outsides -- his fur and his features -- maintain some of their shape, but he looks older and more fragile than ever.

After showing him to me, Suzi puts his outsides into a mesh bag and takes him out to the garage, where the washing machine is.

I worry that he will drown without Air. I worry that I can't talk to him while he's in the washer. But it's only half of him, the outside half. His insides are safe and sound, right in front of me.

After the wash cycle, Suzi puts the outsides into the dryer.

"Are you sure it's OK?" I ask, anxiously. I am terrified that he'll shrink, or disintegrate, or that his fur will curl. She reassures me, smiling at my mother-hen nervousness. She takes me out to the garden to pick fresh kale and tomatoes. Then she sits me down at the kitchen table and distracts me with lunch from the kale and tomatoes.

When Frankie's outsides come back from the dryer, they are bright white and fluffy.

Suzi carefully re-inserts his insides, then begins adding additional stuffing. When she's satisfied, she uses a ladder stitch to sew up the hole under his arm. Then she holds him out to me.

I burst into tears. He is *beautiful*. He's big and white and fluffy, just like he was 21 years earlier. At first, I just stare at him. Then he starts bouncing up and down, full of youthful energy.

“Whee! Whee! Whee!” He flies up to the ceiling and back into my hands.

It's a miracle. Frank Lloyd Bear has been reincarnated in front of my eyes. He stops flying and bursts into a fit of giggles.

“Reincarnated AGAIN?” he says, laughing uncontrollably. “Dang. I was feeling so enlightened! I was sure I was going to reach Nirvana this time.”

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“There’s a Buddhist book title that describes your life,” I tell him.

“What’s that,” he asks, curiously.

“*After the Ecstasy, the Laundry.*”

REINCARNATION

Frankie's body looks and feels very different after his reincarnation, but his personality is very much the same. He seems to be the same Bear he always was.

Yet there's a powerful stillness to him that makes me more aware of my thinking and doing and running around. When I see him, I want to stop and just Be.

"I think you're becoming wiser," I tell him.

"I think you are," he tells me.

I stick my tongue out at him, just to prove that I am not becoming wiser.

"I haven't changed, really," he says. "I'm still who I was yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, and tomorrow. Even though I'm different."

I'm scratching my head, trying to understand the puzzle that is Bear wisdom.

“Time is an illusion, like a river. It's made of moments, the way a river is made of droplets. Bears live outside Time,” he explains.

“You mean you can live forever?”

“I could, but I don't want to,” he says. “Not without you.”

TRUTH

When I was younger, I didn't love myself at all. I considered myself completely unlovable, a waste of humanity.

“Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I'm going out and eat worms.”

Along came Frank Lloyd Bear. He liked me. He loved me. He was always there for me. He was my enlightened Buddha Bear.

But the hard truth is, Frankie is not alive at all. He's a Gund Snuffles™ Bear, Platinum Edition. How can something so simple enhance my life so much?

I've always had an incredibly powerful imagination. I spent years of my life tuned into what I called “The Fantasy Channel,” where I overlaid better people and situations on top of the life I was living. Nobody knew; it was all in my head.

One day, I told my friend Carlos about living tuned into the Fantasy Channel all the time. Carlos is a very wise, thoughtful man who happens to be Suzi's partner.

"I don't think that's very good for you, hmm?" was his comment.

Under his patient gaze, I squirmed. He was right, but I hated to admit it.

I took some time to think about it, and I decided that I agreed with Carlos. I needed to live in the present, to be satisfied with real memories and achievable dreams instead of crazed fantasies of being a completely different person. I took a deep breath, and -- click! -- I switched off the Fantasy Channel in my head.

Changing the way I thought was a painful process.

I cried with Frankie a lot for the next few months. He talked to me and encouraged me, just as he always has.

Something was different, though. With the Fantasy Channel silent, I began to recognize that Frank Lloyd Bear *was* me. I had given him the best parts of me, to hold until I was ready. He held my wisdom, my unconditional love, my vulnerability, my joy and contentment. He knew who I really was inside: A happy, loving little girl.

That little girl has often been afraid to come out and play, which is why Frankie is so alive. Frankie lives, acts, and speaks for her.

With that realization, Frank Lloyd Bear and I became equals. He no longer carries the wisdom and vulnerability for both of us. Now we share it, along with the joy.

I can see he's just a stuffed bear, and he can see I'm just a squishy human.

Both of us live in the present moment.

Both of us embrace our Big and Little selves.

Both of us love unconditionally.

Both of us like blowing car horns, snow, and breathing cookie-scented air.

Both of us are willing to embrace change.

Both of us are perfectly imperfect.

Both of us can write a good book.

And both of us are delighted to Be in this world, together.