

*Book Review of Dancing With Elephants: Mindfulness Training For Those Living With Dementia, Chronic Illness or an Aging Brain* (2017), Jarem Sawatsky, Winnipeg: Red Canoe Press

This is a mind-blowing book! It is written by a man whom my wife and I knew when a child, because of intersecting with his parents (our contemporaries) when they lived in Vancouver, later in Winnipeg and Hamilton. Sadly, Jarem's father is never mentioned except with reference to his parents' marriage being "crushed piece by piece" (p. 91). And his mom, who lived the "earthquake" of Huntington's with denial her only skill, is mentioned numerous times as a kind of foil for what Jarem commits to become other, determined rather to learn to "dance with elephants". We knew his brother too, who is also only mentioned for "getting the hell out" of his mother's home while a teenager at the onslaught of their mom's dealing with Huntington's disease.

I also knew of Jarem's establishing himself as a noted advocate for peacemaking, justice doing, and in particular his embrace and promotion of Restorative Justice (all in which I have a keen interest). His university teaching, his books and other writings, are brilliant and wise. Two of his books are offered for free if one signs up for his [mailing list](#). Highly recommended!

Jarem begins by telling us of course that he knows nothing about dancing or elephants. "And yet, this is a training manual and love letter for elephant dancers like yourself (p. 7)." "Elephants" of course are universally the human condition confronting our "big, unacknowledged fears" (p. v7). We learn immediately of Jarem's lifelong awareness of Huntington's disease "lurking somewhere in the corner (p. 8)." This is an incurable brain disease that "is a kind of combination of Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, and Schizophrenia (p. 7)."

We learn right away of his family reality: both the possibility of inherited Huntington's disease, but also of his dear wife, who insisted on including "in sickness and health" in their vows. They had identical twin girls, now teenagers, knowing the 50/50 chance of the potential possibility of his passing on the disease. With his diagnosis of the disease, that possibility became reality.

We are informed of a list of symptoms of the encroaching disease.

While a student in Hull, England, Jarem began in earnest his study and commitment to healing justice, which has endured. He signals to us that he does not want to pass on anger, fear or violence to his family. "So I have been experimenting on myself to find a healing way to face disease (p. 14)."

At 41, he retired from his university professor job. He gave away hundreds of books he had accumulated, saving only "the handful I thought might be helpful for me in learning the art of dancing with elephants (pp. 14 & 15)." Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh – known as "Thay" by his students of whom Jarem was one – has pride of place in books he has kept. Jarem writes: "Thay is an author of more than one hundred books. I find his writing and speaking deeply valuable. It is inspiring but also very concrete and practical. (p. 15)." While Jarem and his family were at Plum Village, France, where Hanh lives, they learned the five mindfulness trainings that make up the five parts of the book. As well, as key authors cited for each part are

mentioned. Jarem points to the surfeit of books that teach financial and career success. But billions need tips for facing disease, dementia, and aging. Jarem works at “the kind of healing that awakens the heart to love. I call this dancing with elephants because dancing is a playful way of engaging that which we fear most (p. 17).”

Part I is “Reverence for Life”. There is a beautiful poem by Jarem about first embracing things, including the hard things, and the need to “Let it rain down on me”, a reprised line throughout. Next, there is “Replacing Fear with Love”. One tool Jarem mentions for transforming fear into joyful dancing is the “Corpse Prayer”. He writes, “If in the end all is dust, then now is the time to enjoy, to play, to love. The fruits of this kind of freedom are countless (p. 31).” Then follows “Letting Go”. Jarem dispenses a very wise observation: “It is only when we lose something or have it taken from us, that we realize we feel entitled to it (p. 35).” Wow! His again lovely poem, “Letting Go”, ends with “On the other side of entitlement lies more joy than sorrow / How do I get to the other side? (p. 37)” Next comes “Celebrating Everything”. The author tells us then of the “Movers & Shakers” (Huntington’s is known as the dancing disease) party thrown at the time of his “retirement”.

We continue in Part II with “True Happiness”. We read: “*From our perspective, no matter what diagnosis you come with or what’s wrong with you, there is more right with you than wrong with you – no matter what is ‘wrong with you’.*” This from Jon Kabat-Zinn who has helped thousands at his “Stress Reduction Clinic”. He also founded “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)”, an eight-week program used in hospitals around the world. The key to living healthily, according to Kabat-Zinn, is to “reclaim the present moment (p. 47).” Jarem comments: “This is one of the great gifts of mindfulness. You can use the very thing you fear as a tool to replace fear with love. I know he was offering me powerful medicine (p. 48).” We also learn from Kabat-Zinn: “When all is said and done, all that mindfulness is, is a radical act of love (p. 49).” And love changes everything!

One may request “A More Healing Way: Conversations on Disease”, that includes the author’s interview with Kabat-Zinn. Sign up for Jarem’s Readers Group [here](#) to receive it.

Part II is entitled “True Happiness”. We encounter “Live Beauty Awake” as the first chapter. Jarem lets us know of having been asked by her husband to preach at a dear friend’s funeral. Drawing on singer Steve Bell’s “[Let Beauty Awake](#)”, we are given four lessons from his friend’s life: The Art of Beholding the Sacred; The Art of Dynamic Loving; The Art of Gardening Creation Blessed; Let Beauty Awake from Death.

The next is “Embracing Dustness”. Jarem treats us to a simple poem by that title, which last line is: *The lovers of truth embrace  
the way of the dust* (p. 68)

For Jarem, “The dust is an image of resilience that transcends power and powerlessness (p. 69).” Further, “My experience is that embracing dust can teach us a lot about dancing with elephants and about true happiness (p. 68).” Wow and wow!

The next two chapters discuss mindfulness walking and their new puppy, Kobi. In reflection on love, Jarem writes poignantly:

Love is weird in that way. It is not like money, which decreases as you use it. Nor is it like anger, which pushes others away as you use it. Love grows into more love (p. 78).

In Chapter 11 on an “Ocean of Gratitude”, we read:

To be thrilled, grateful, wonder-filled and curious about life and living. These are ways of being that are accessible to me (p. 82).

We learn about Dr. Patch Adams who at 18 years “dove into an ocean of gratitude and has never found the shore (p. 84).”

There was a famous movie about Dr. Adams starring Robin Williams. Dr. Adams says that “My spiritual path is loving people (p. 86).”

In response, Jarem poses a couple of questions, then reflects further:

What if the answer to most of our problems is to make others radiant? When we are not well, so many medical professionals tell us to focus on ourselves. But what if the key to our own happiness is to care for others?

From Patch, I want to learn the joy of living, the gift of living in gratitude, and the deep transformations that arise when we care and love those around us. This book outlines some of my own social experiments in loving, but Patch dared me to go further, bolder, and freer (pp. 86 & 87).

In Part III on “True Love” we first read about “Responding to a Disease with a Circle”. In this chapter, in one paragraph, we learn of the sadness of Jarem’s birth family. I knew his dad off and on during this phase. Even at this remove, I ache for the entire situation in which Jarem passed into his late and post-teen years. From the age of 18, there were 16 years ahead of the fog of Huntington’s earthquake trauma until her death. No one can imagine this – outside of direct experience.

Jarem wonders:

Which ways of living, what kinds of mindfulness training might equip us to live in a way that does not dump all the trauma of previous generations onto the heads of my girls? For me, loving those around me requires that I pursue that question with everything I can give (p. 93).

He discusses the power of circle peacemaking, highlighting [Living Justice Press](#) that is dedicated to publishing examples of such, and Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) that do exactly as the name indicates, around released sex offenders considered high risk in the community. (I’ve had the privilege of serving on the [CoSA Canada](#) Board the past two years.) Jarem highlights the qualities of a circle of six around his family who offer nurture, support, a collective “bullshitometer”, and even guidance for the family.

Jarem treats us to some of the gems he has already learned about “living life with wisdom (p. 97)”. In hearing from a social worker from the Huntington Society of Canada, they learned how uniquely gifted they felt from their church group of friends who offer so much. Jarem wishes that kind of circle on us all. Without a loving community around us, we slowly die.

In the chapter on “Dying and Mourning with Love”, Jarem asks: “How do we unlock the keys to dying well? (p. 102)” He answers with a reflection on his mother-in-law, who died September 22, 2016.

In the next chapter on “Loving Our Ancestors”, we are introduced to the small Ojibway community on the shores of Lake Winnipeg: [Hollow Water](#). A film about that community highlighted tremendous healing of generations in relation to the violence of sexual abuse. The community members looked back seven generations to help heal and impact healthy living seven generations into the future.

Jarem also highlights the video [Touching the Earth](#), as part of Plum Village, the community in France founded by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hahn. Jarem as well describes some of his work in this regard.

The author also mentions generational blessing as a longstanding unexplored area for most.

The following chapter, “Playing With Children”, highlights the deep joy of children in one’s life. It also touches on decisions about having children with prospects of passing on a debilitating disease to them.

Jarem also discusses Lucy Kalanithi, co-author of the bestselling book, *When Breath Becomes Air*, under the title “Being Disarmed by Joy”.

He quotes her saying that “holding joy and pain at the same time is a task for a lot of people. It is a task for all of us, really, at one point or another in our lives (p. 120).”

He cites her again reciting the final words in the book, addressed to his daughter, Elizabeth Acadia:

“When you come to one of the many moments in life when you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man’s days with sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more, but rests, satisfied, in this time, right now, that is an enormous thing (pp. 121 & 122).”

The chapter ends with a partial quote from Thich Nhat Hahn’s prayer, “Please call me by my true names”. In it is the wish to “see that my joy and pain are one (p. 124).” Jarem wishes that prayer for all elephant dancers.

Part IV: “Loving Speech and Deep Listening” begins with a chapter about Jarem’s refusal to do battle with his own disease. He writes: “But something in me knew that metaphors of war would

not help my journey of healing (p. 128).” For him, the language of war does not yield to the path of love. He supplies eight reasons for this. At the end of the fifth reason, he writes: “Battling my disease is not for me. I put my hope in embracing dustness (p. 132).”

In a chapter entitled “Breathing Anger”, Jarem shares practices he has been experimenting with for letting go of the toxins of anger.

In discussing noted peacemaking activist/practitioner/author Jean Paul Lederach, Jarem draws lessons for Lederach’s call to what he dubs the ingestion of “vitamin awe” (p. 160).” Lederach writes:

Cultivating awe is a form of mindfulness. Awe is there and present in almost everything around us every day, but we so rarely touch it (p. 161).

Lederach’s wife, Wendy, has battled Parkinson’s for several years. In her emails to Jarem, her signature line is, “When you stumble, just make it part of the dance (p. 162).”

In Part V on “Nourishment and Healing”, the first chapter is on “Embracing Weakness”, which for Jarem is developing a one-track mind and tunnel vision. He divulges four secrets to this that are gems.

There is a whole chapter on “Falling Mindfully”, in relation to his own frequent physical falling, but also a play on words for “falling in[to] love”.

In the chapter “Valuing Your Life”, Jarem shares a profound poem he wrote about embracing dust, entitled “On This Sacred Earth (or Going Home)” – pp. 178 – 180.

In “Eating like a Buddha”, Jarem reflects on “eating” as a metaphor for a life of “reverence, happiness, love, and nourishment (p. 184).”

In “Developing a Family Health Plan”, Jarem indicates:

I want to enjoy my life. So I need to address these issues from my present perspective. To me, it is freeing. When fear is not present, there is space and freedom to explore and to live. We can waste energy wishing we were living someone else’s life, but the life I have is the only one I can live. I don’t want to waste it. Nor do I want to harm those around me. I still have living, loving, and laughing yet to do (pp. 191 & 192).

In “Mandela Gardening”, Jarem discusses Richard Stengel’s [\*Mandela’s Way: Fifteen Lessons on Life, Love and Courage\*](#). We read:

In the midst of death, life! Out of neglect, beauty. Out of misery, happiness. Out of disregard for life, love. Out of the attempt to crush the spirit, healing and nourishment. Maybe this is why I kept the book. It shares hard-learned skills of living beauty awake even in the most difficult of settings. Mandela’s gardening was not the hobby of a retired person. Rather, it was a powerful, mindfulness training ground for one who would become a beacon of love,

courage, and renewal. “You must find your own garden.” These are the words Mandela speaks to Stengel. These powerful words have never left me (p. 195).

Jarem now sees his writing “as a kind of Mandela Gardening” (p. 196).”, and he challenges fellow elephant dancers to find theirs too.

The author next deals with “Practicing Self-Compassion with Toni Bernhard”. He mentions three of her books, and a list of all her books even in different translations, is [here](#). The author explains:

One day in Paris, Toni Bernhard got sick with what appeared to be an acute viral infection. She has never recovered. The many specialists she’s consulted agree that she is sick but aren’t sure what’s wrong. The consensus is that the flu-like virus compromised her immune system in some way. For 22 years before she got sick, Toni was a law professor at the University of California, Davis. For six of those years, she was the law school’s Dean of Students. For the past 15 years she has been mostly confined to her bed. The whole lifetime of my daughters, Toni has been sick (p. 199).

In speaking with her, Jarem writes:

This is a striking statement. People with chronic illness must face layers and layers of problems—financial, relational, medical, social. But amid all these waves of problems, learning self-compassion is the hardest! And learning self-compassion is possible! “All of my books include chapters on self-compassion because to me it is the most important thing you can cultivate in life, whether you are sick or not,” she said (p. 201).

In “Last Words”, Jarem says that “One of the secrets to thriving at the art of elephant dancing is to structure each day so that you practice the steps (p. 207).” He concludes the book with:

If I am able, I will try to keep writing and sharing about a more healing way of facing life, disease, and death. But at some point, I will lose my words. It is my hope that my last word is love (p. 209).

There is at the book’s end a “Free Jarem Sawatsky Starter Library”, for which one can sign up [here](#). There is also an “Acknowledgements” page that includes information about his [Blog](#), followed now by thousands. And there is a page about other resources by the author.

I began the review by stating: This is a mind-blowing book!

I now again add: Wow! Thank you Jarem!