Who Would I Be, What Would I Do, If I Trusted Myself . . .

In her warm and inimitable way, M.J. Ryan guides us to look at our lives from a different perspective. To imagine what they would be like if we practiced an attitude of self-trust, if we received the gifts trusting ourselves might give us.

In an age of constant media messages and so-called expert advice telling us to be richer, thinner, smarter, and faster, we’re all dogged with worry and self-doubt. Bestselling author M.J. Ryan believes we’ve become so dependent on “experts” to tell us how to live our lives that we listen to everyone except ourselves.

In Trusting Yourself, Ryan identifies the answers to feeling swept away by life: We already have what it takes to cope. We can learn how to tap into the wisdom inside us by cultivating self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-reliance.

Learn how to quiet the critics—inside and out—and trust yourself instead. If you accept that we learn through trial and error, if you believe that we each have unique strengths and that not one of us has to have them all, if you realize that labels only get in the way, then your self-trust will grow, your worries will shrink, and you’ll find happiness and success with a lot less effort.

This is a life coach in a book that readers can turn to again and again when stress or worry takes over to find more peaceful, saner lives every day.

“Cultivating genuine self-trust is at the heart of living and loving fully. M.J. Ryan gives us the confidence to take the necessary steps.”

—TARA BRACH, author of Radical Acceptance
Everywhere I turn, I hear people are overwhelmed. Married or single, with kids or not, working or not, people are struggling to keep their heads above the water of their lives. We’re overwhelmed by our to-do lists, we’re overwhelmed by all the information coming at us, we’re overwhelmed by how fast everything is moving and how fast we must run to keep up. We try to simplify, we try to get more organized, we try not to sweat the small stuff, we try to meditate or do yoga, but nothing seems to help very much.

There are good reasons for feeling this way—daily life is more demanding and less spacious than it once was. We are flooded with information and choices. We are all doing too much and have fewer options than we might like.
When I ask people about feeling overwhelmed, the words I most often hear are “inadequate” and “helpless.” That’s because when we have trouble keeping up, we’re sure it is our fault. Thinking this way only adds to our sense of overwhelm because on top of all that we have to do, we are now carrying the belief that there is something about us that makes us unable to cope.

I’ve been contemplating this problem for a while now, and the more I look at it, the more it seems to me that the reason we can’t seem to get a handle on things is that we haven’t gotten to the heart of the problem: that on top of all we have to deal with, we fundamentally don’t trust ourselves.

We don’t trust in our capacity to deal with life as it comes at us, so we are in a perpetual state of fear and worry. Or we try to control life through perfectionism and freak out when we (or others) make a mistake. We take on too much because we don’t trust our judgment of what we should be doing, or we don’t trust that we will be acceptable to others if we say no. We don’t trust ourselves to make the right choices, so we spend tremendous energy deciding and then second-guess ourselves after the fact. We consult friend after friend and expert after expert. Or surf the Net endlessly, looking for more information. We don’t trust our parenting instincts (I just read an article in Child saying that never have parents done so much right and felt so anxious about making mistakes), so in our self-doubt we overwhelm our children with too much, which overwhelms us managing and paying for it all. We don’t trust our feelings, so we stay as busy as possible to avoid them.
We seem to have lost the sense of ourselves as reliable sources of the wisdom we need to navigate through our lives. Instead, we see only our problems. Each and every one of us can catalog in detail the whats and whys of the ways we are screwed-up, flawed, broken. “I have low self-esteem, so I can’t say no.” “I’m a procrastinator . . . an introvert . . . a control freak.” Of course we don’t trust ourselves—why should we when all we recognize about ourselves is what’s wrong with us?

It’s no wonder we feel this way. We are flooded every day with messages about what’s wrong with us—what kind of disorder, syndrome, or problem we have. And what we should be doing or buying to fix ourselves. Our teeth aren’t white enough, we aren’t good enough parents, we’re eating too much, we have ADHD. There are precious few messages out there that we are fine just the way we are (that’s why so many people are attracted to Buddhism these days, I believe: because this is one of its main messages) or that we have what we need to deal with life. No wonder we feel overwhelmed—all the messages we hear reinforce that we can’t manage as we are.

For instance:

• Several years ago, Ann Landers was asked what question she was most frequently asked. “What’s wrong with me?” she replied.

• From birth, we’re now examined for any deviation from what some expert considers “normal.” Fully one-third of schoolchildren are now on some kind of prescribed drug for a disorder.
• My local newspaper’s “Lifestyle” section is ten pages. Recently I counted how many pages were taken up with advice columns—half, excluding ads. Two general advice columns, plus one each on sex, money, parenting, manners, relationships, and romance.

• A recent Psychology Today article examined the explosion of self-help advice on TV, radio, Web sites, books, and magazines, detailing how there is now even niche advice—for gays, for African Americans, for twenty-somethings, for intellectuals, for right-wingers. Here’s how they put it: “People are keen to outsource a wide array of their needs, from personal finance to parenting.”

• Apparently we’ve even lost the capacity to dress ourselves and decorate our homes, so we have What Not to Wear, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, Trading Spaces, and While You Were Out, to name just the most successful shows in this genre, so that the whole country can laugh at our poor taste.

There is nothing wrong in and of itself with needing help. But much of the advice we’re bombarded with reinforces the message that we are screwed-up and that the answer to our problem lies in following this particular expert’s idea of what’s right. Rather than being helped to understand how we best function, how to find the solutions that work best for us, we have become a people who look to others to define who we should be, how we should feel, and how we should live. This has led to an increased incapacity to deal with life.
You Are a One-of-a-Kind Miracle

*I am larger and better than I thought. I did not know I held so much goodness.*

—Walt Whitman

The other day, I was driving down a country road in upstate New York when a giant billboard for a car dealership caught my eye. It had a picture of a smiling infant with the legend “You Were Born . . . Preapproved.” Tears sprang to my eyes. How would the world be different if I, if you, could claim this basic trust as our birthright? How much pain would we have avoided, how much feeling odd and different, how much loneliness and fear? How less overwhelmed and more joyful would we be? How much more successful?

As I work with clients, as I hear from readers, as I go about my day as a mother, a friend, a partner, I am constantly in awe at the unique magnificence of each and every one of the human beings who cross my path, what incredible resources of mind, body, and spirit each of us possesses. And I feel great sadness at how unaware so many of us are about the riches we hold or how to use them to be happy and contribute our gifts to the world. It is to begin to address this terrible blindness that I’m writing this book.

You and I were preapproved at birth. Each and every one of us is a miracle of creation. Your particular mind/body/spirit has never been replicated in the more than seventy billion human beings who have lived on this planet. From the possible combination of genes of your parents, three hundred thousand billion different humans could have been created. But you were. Your
brain is the most sophisticated structure ever created, with “thirteen billion nerve cells, more than three times as many cells as there are people on the planet,” as Og Mandino writes in The Greatest Miracle in the World. And science is just beginning to understand that our minds are not located solely in our brains; other cells in our bodies seem to have intelligence as well.

Through these genetic resources and our personal histories, each and every one of us has precious unique attributes to draw upon, sterling qualities that we were born with or have developed, as well as a lifetime of experience that is our treasure store of personal wisdom. No matter how much we’ve been wounded, how defeated or unworthy we’ve been made to feel, those inner resources lie in wait, ready to be used on our behalf at any moment in our lives. But we have to believe that they are there and know how to open the treasure chest. In other words, we need to trust ourselves.

Self-trust is a virtue, like patience, that has been all but lost in the externally focused society that has increasingly evolved over the past fifty years or so. It is a combination of three emotional and spiritual qualities: self-awareness, the accurate assessment of who we are and what we care about; self-acceptance, the embracing of who we are in all our complexity; and self-reliance, the ability to use what we know about ourselves to get the results we want in our lives without constant worry about the approval or disapproval of others.

That’s what you’ll learn in this book—the attitudes and behaviors that support self-awareness, self-acceptance,
and self-reliance, as well as the benefits you’ll reap by committing to the process of trusting yourself.

Genuine self-trust, in the words of psychologists Carol D. Ryff and Burton Singer, “is not narcissistic self-love or superficial self-esteem, but a deep form of self-regard built on awareness of one’s positive and negative attributes…” In other words, it’s not thinking, I’m great. It’s about coming to understand how I am great, where I want that greatness to manifest, and how to use that greatness when I encounter the big and little difficulties of life. If we know these things, we can move through life like a regal schooner rather than a tippy canoe. For the more we come to understand our unique capacities and how to use them, the less overwhelmed we will be no matter the circumstances.

Self-trust is not the same as self-confidence. “Confidence is more cerebral,” writes Jack Gibb in Trust, “more calculated, and based more on expectations than trust is. Trust can be and often is instinctive.…” It is something very much like love.”

Self-trust has always been an important quality of heart and mind, but it is even more crucial in these fast-paced, challenging times. Here’s how James C. Collins and Jerry I. Poras put it in Built to Last: “With the demise of the myth of job security, the accelerating pace of change, and the increasing ambiguity and complexity of our world, people who depend on external structures to provide continuity and stability run the very real risk of having their moorings ripped away. The only truly reliable source of stability is a strong inner core and the willingness to change and adapt everything except that core.”
According to Webster’s, the first meaning of trust is “Assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something.” When we trust ourselves, we’re in touch with that inner core Collins and Poras are talking about. We have self-possession—an ease under stress that reflects a command of our powers. Consequently we know we can handle what life throws at us—we can complete the assignment, juggle our schedules, organize our desks, handle the difficulty with our boss.

When we trust ourselves, we can better navigate the waters of challenging emotional times—when we feel lost or grieving, angry, or afraid—believing somewhere in our hearts and souls that we will make it, even if we’re not sure how or when. We’re safe in our own care. We treat ourselves well, kindly, as a loving mother would nurture her beloved child. We learn from our mistakes instead of beating ourselves up about them, because we understand that life is about learning and therefore seeing errors as valuable information about how to go forward. We don’t consider ourselves bad when we screw up, just not yet as skillful as we would like to be.

Precisely because we accept ourselves exactly as we are, we are more able to change. Shame and guilt loosen their grip. We may be in difficult or challenging circumstances, but rather than getting mired in them, we see ourselves like the lotus flower. The lotus’s roots are deep in mud, yet its flower is one of the most beautiful in the entire world. Each and every one of us is like that lotus—precious and whole, despite the mud of our lives.

The ideal of self-trust has been around for centuries—it was Shakespeare who said, “This above all: To
thine own self be true.” And it was the belief in themselves that the founding fathers of the United States relied on when declaring independence from England.

One hundred and sixty-two years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote his famous essay “Self-Reliance,” a treatise on the crucial importance of self-trust. Here’s a bit of it: “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. . . . Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. . . . I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions. . . . My life is for myself and not for a spectacle. . . . Insist on yourself; never imitate. . . . Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.”

Inspiring words, but somewhere along the way from then to now, we’ve lost our sense of their importance. So much so that when I proposed self-trust as the topic for this book, some people questioned whether it was a concept that readers would even understand! We have been so indoctrinated into looking outside ourselves for the answers and to consider ourselves unreliable that we have very limited notions of what it means to approach life from this perspective. As author Jaya Sarada writes, “You can observe how deeply conditioned the self is to seek the stamp of approval from outside sources. From an early age we are told we are good or bad according to the judgments of others, so life begins a cycle of imitation.”
Given the training we’ve had in listening to everyone but ourselves and believing we are broken and bad, how do we begin? We start by understanding that the capacity to trust ourselves is not a fixed state we either have or don’t, like straight hair or violet eyes. Rather it is a quality of heart and mind we can cultivate. Like a muscle, it grows or shrinks with practice. Trusting ourselves will wax and wane depending on life’s challenges. For each of us, particular things will shake our sense of self-trust, but each time we realize we’ve lost faith in ourselves, we can incorporate what we learn and grow our capacity to trust ourselves more.

To begin to cultivate greater trust of ourselves, we must turn inward and look at ourselves without fearing what we will discover, without minimizing our gifts—oh, that old thing—or beating ourselves up for our learned self-destructive patterns. The good news is that we can begin right where we are, as we are. It doesn’t matter how much the world has told you you’re wrong, stupid, screwed-up. You don’t need to bring anything except all of who you are, because every scrap can be used on behalf of what you want in your life and who you want to become.

The Promise of Trusting Ourselves

_To know what you prefer instead of humbly saying “Amen” to what the world tells you that you ought to prefer, is to have kept your soul alive._

—Robert Louis Stevenson

Unlike the other virtues I have written about—kindness, gratitude, generosity, patience—self-trust is not something I went in conscious search of. Rather, like the rest
of us, I was focused on my flaws and looking to be cured of what was wrong with me—my worrying, my fear of the future, my inability to be alone with my feelings. Therapy helped a lot—now I understood why I had the problems I did—but I still suffered from and with these issues.

Then I met a wise woman named Dawna Markova. She uses what she calls an asset-focused approach to life, which is about looking at what is right and strengthening that, rather than focusing on what’s wrong. I have studied and worked with her for almost fifteen years now, and this approach is now virtually part of my DNA. I use it for myself, with family and friends, and with the executives with whom I am privileged to be a thinking partner. This book is my understanding of her approach as it applies to adult happiness and well-being, and many of the concepts and practices originated with her.

Looking back on what has happened to me over the past fifteen years, I see that I’ve really been on a journey of coming to more and more deeply trust myself. And with such trust, I am more peaceful, more joyful, more worry free. I’m more comfortable being with myself and by myself. I’m living more in alignment with what deeply matters to me, more able to make decisions for myself. I’m much less overwhelmed by life. And when it all does get to be too much, I know what I need to do to get back on track. It’s also easier for me to accept others for who they are and not condemn their choices, values, or attitudes.

Trusting ourselves offers many other rewards. The one that’s been most freeing for me is that I can stop trying to control life and instead place my faith in my capacity to respond to it.
What an immense relief! Rather than fretting over everything, we’re able to move through life with confidence that we can handle whatever comes at us. Life is exciting rather than threatening because we know what we want to say yes to and do it often. We also know we have worthwhile gifts to offer others. So we reach out in delight to give what is ours to give, do what is ours to do.

Trusting ourselves also helps when we go through difficult inner times. We learn we can survive—depression, sorrow, a sense of meaninglessness—and we learn what helped us make it, so when hard times come again, we’re better prepared. We aren’t afraid to stop moving and just be with ourselves because we know ourselves to be a source of wisdom. Our feelings are no longer so threatening to us, and we are able to serve as guides and mentors to others who suffer.

I believe that the same rewards can happen for you when you make this inner shift. You’ll know you trust yourself when you feel less tense and more positive, when you feel lightness in your daily circumstances, when you feel more accepting of yourself and others, when life is less drudgery and more joy filled. But don’t take my word for it—try a few of the attitudes and practices in this book and see for yourself. It’s your capacity to trust yourself that interests me, not your trusting me.

If there is a through line in my life, both personally and as a writer, it is to identify and develop those qualities that help us grow individually and collectively in wisdom and love. That’s ultimately why I’m so interested in self-trust. “Wisdom,” Buddhist monk Khandro Rinpoche says, “is innate in us; it is not something that
can be bought, heard, or received from the outside.” In other words, we must look within to find it. It can’t come from anyone but us. Without self-trust, we can never become wise because we will continue to look outside ourselves for the answer. As for love, it is only when we are grounded in our own beingness, comfortable with who and what we are, that we can enter into a truly loving encounter with another human being. Otherwise we are using the other person to meet our needs for security or approval rather than entering fully into the soul-growing encounter that a real loving relationship promises.

Ultimately, the greatest rewards of trusting ourselves are to be found at the soul level, the place where we are called to discover and express the wholeness of who we are for the benefit of all. “A self is made, not given,” says author Barbara Myerhoff. “It is a creative and active process of attending a life that must be heard, shaped, seen, said aloud into the world, finally enacted, and woven into the lives of others.” We can’t do that if we are looking outside ourselves for the answers. As that wise man Carl Jung once said, “He who looks outside dreams. He who looks inside wakes.”

This book is an invitation to look inside in a new way and awaken. Not to detail what is wrong, but to come to deeply treasure what is right. And to use what you discover to make your way more happily in life and to offer the gifts that only you can provide. For the more you trust yourselves, the more you will know just what your place in the grand design of life is and what your matchless contribution might be.