

# *The Enchanted Life*

by Sharon Blackie

## Readers' guide



*'I believe that enchantment is an attitude of mind which can be cultivated, a way of approaching the world which anyone can learn to adopt: the enchanted life is possible for everybody. In this book I'll share with you my own experiences, and the experiences of several men and women from around the world, as they demonstrate how we can bring enchantment into every aspect of our daily lives. Because enchantment, by my definition, has nothing to do with fantasy, or escapism, or magical thinking: it is founded on a vivid sense of belongingness to a rich and many-layered world; a profound and whole-hearted participation in the adventure of life. The enchanted life presented here is one which is intuitive, which embraces wonder, and fully engages the creative imagination – but it is also deeply embodied, ecological, grounded in place and community. It flourishes on work that has heart and meaning; it respects the instinctive knowledge and playfulness of children. It understands the myths we live by;*

*thrives on poetry, song and dance. It loves the folkloric, the handcrafted, the practice of traditional skills. It respects wild things, recognises the wisdom of the crow, seeks out the medicine of plants. It rummages and roots on the wild edges, but comes home to an enchanted home and garden. It is engaged with the small, the local, the ethical; enchanted living is slow living.*

*'Ultimately, to live an enchanted life is to pick up the pieces of our bruised and battered psyches, and to offer them the nourishment they long for. It is to be challenged, to be awakened, to be gripped and shaken to the core by the extraordinary which lies at the heart of the ordinary. Above all, to live an enchanted life is to fall in love with the world all over again. This is an active choice, a leap of faith which is necessary not just for our own sakes, but for the sake of the wide, wild Earth in whose being and becoming we are so profoundly and beautifully entangled.'*

*from The Enchanted Life, Introduction*

*In The Enchanted Life, Sharon Blackie speaks to those who feel an emptiness at the heart of modern life – who long for a more authentic and connected lifestyle. An inspiring book for the intelligent, creative self-development arena with insight, wisdom, interviews, case studies and exercises.*

To see a video of the author talking about the inspiration for *The Enchanted Life*, please visit the book page on [www.sharonblackie.net](http://www.sharonblackie.net).

## Questions and topics for discussion

Throughout *The Enchanted Life*, Sharon Blackie offers up questions and exercises for each chapter, which can be worked through either individually or in groups. This guide offers brief content summaries and suggested discussion points for each chapter of the book.

### **Why enchantment, and why now?**

#### Chapter 1: An enchanted life

In this introductory chapter, Sharon introduces the idea of enchantment, illustrating it with a version of the two different ways of approaching a walk in the woods.

- Have you ever approached a walk like the first woman – returning from it feeling that you haven't actually been present?
- How can you bring more of the second woman's approach to being in the world into your own daily life?

#### Chapter 2: The unendurable everyday

In this chapter Sharon discusses disenchantment of everyday life, and contrasts it with her own perspective on what might constitute an enchanted life.

- In what specific ways do you feel that your own life, as it is today, takes place against a backdrop of disenchantment?
- Can you trace the process of disenchantment in your own life, from childhood to adulthood?
- In what ways, if any, do you feel a sense of alienation from, or lack of a sense of belonging to, the world and the people around you?

### **What is enchantment?**

#### Chapter 3: To inhabit the living world

In this chapter Sharon offers a brief introduction to some of the key components of what she considers to be a state of enchantment, all of which are explored in specific and practical contexts in the remainder of the book. These components include *participation mystique* (living in a

participatory way, with a profound sense of connection to the natural world rather than a sense of separation from it), a sense of wonder and awe, a focus on embodied experience, and the exercise of creativity and imagination.

- Have you had an experience which might fall into the category of a 'peak experience'? What was the nature of the experience, and what words would you use to describe it?
- Are there other times when you feel or have felt especially at one with the world?
- What examples of *participation mystique* do you see in your own life? Are there objects or places which hold significance for you beyond their physical form? How did they come to acquire that significance?
- Do you feel fully present in the world – living in a way that is in full awareness of the information that comes through all your senses, and in full awareness of your body and its responses to the world and your experience in it?
- What blocks you from living a more creative life?

#### Chapter 4: The Wonderment

In this chapter, Sharon discusses the ways in which our sense of wonder and awe becomes eroded as we move from childhood into young adulthood, and offers up suggestions for moving from the jadedness of so much contemporary adulthood to a new awareness of the world's mystery.

- Did you have a strong sense of wonder as a child, and did some of it fade? If so, why? And what might your experience of everyday life feel like now if it had not?
- List the things which have made you gasp with wonder or awe. How can you introduce more experiences like that into your life?
- How can you cultivate an attitude to the world and to your own daily life which is founded on an awareness of wonder and mystery?

#### Chapter 5: At home in our skin

- In this chapter, Sharon discusses the ways in which we become disconnected from the wisdom of our bodies and our senses.
- Do you feel at home in your skin? If you don't, do you remember a time when you did?
- Whilst understanding that all such discussions are founded on broad generalisations and that

there are always exceptions, do you think the ability to feel at home in your skin differs in men and women?

- What does it mean to you, to ‘tune into the wisdom of your body’? How can you bring the practice of ‘bodyfulness’ into your life?

## Chapter 6: The mythic imagination

In this chapter, Sharon focuses on the importance of cultivating the mythic imagination – an awareness of the importance of story, and an ability to tune into the mythic patterns which underlie our lives.

- Is there a particular myth, legend or fairy tale that you loved as a child? If so, what makes it so memorable? The plot, or a character, or an especially beautiful image? Did you see yourself in the story?
- Have you ever had what Carl Jung called a ‘big dream’ – a dream which was particularly significant to you, or which carried a ‘message’ which seemed especially relevant to your life at the time? Where do you think those dreams come from?
- Which are the cultural myths you see operating in the world around you, and in your own life?
- Can you think of any old myths and fairy tales which offer up more ecologically aware, community-focused values to live by?

## The magic of the everyday

### Chapter 7: Coming home to ourselves

In this chapter, Sharon writes about the ‘enchanted home’: one which in some sense blends into and reflects back the place it occupies, the landscape where it is situated. A dwelling which is eco-friendly, using natural materials for construction (where appropriate), furnishings, and decorating. It is a home where the artisanal, the handmade, rather than the mass-produced, is valued; one which is not crammed full of ‘stuff’, but in which every item is carefully chosen, loved, valued.

- What objects – things that you have found yourself, rather than those which have been inherited or passed down from your family – speak to you of home? What is it about them which makes them special?
- Discuss one of the houses you’ve lived in. How would you describe, in just a sentence, what

happened to you in that house? What parts of yourself did you leave behind in it? What did it teach you?

- In what ways does your home, warts and all, reflect core aspects of the person you imagine yourself to be?
- How can you make your home reflect core aspects of the person you would like to become? What objects, artwork, symbols can you bring to it which will remind you of this? How can you declutter, and clear away the things which have become obsolete or unnecessary – which you've maybe outgrown?
- If you could have a hut or shed as a sanctuary, what kind of place would it be? Or if you already have such a thing, what makes it a sanctuary? What deep longings would/does it satisfy in you? What part of your soul would be/is nourished by it?
- If you have a garden, or a patch of land, can you allow part of it to grow wild? Or plant a few medicinal or culinary herbs or wildflowers, instead of geraniums, in a plant pot on your balcony?

## Chapter 8: An ear to the ground

In this chapter, Sharon writes about the importance of place in our lives – and about ways of finding a sense of belonging to the place you're in right now, whether or not you think you'll be there forever.

- If you were a landscape or an element of the landscape, what would it be, and why?
- Discuss one of the landscapes/ places you've lived in. What are its qualities, physical and archetypal? What aspects of that place did you relate to, and which did you not relate to? How have you been shaped by it? What was the lesson of that place, for you?
- Is there a particular kind of landscape you long for? Is it real or imagined? Why do you resonate so deeply with it?
- Does the idea of a 'place of resurrection' resonate with you, and if so, do you know where yours is?
- How would you characterise the *spiritus loci* of the place you live in today? What is its unique personality?
- How can you develop your local awareness, and support your local community?

## Chapter 9: Kinship and otherness

In this chapter, Sharon writes about her belief that a critical part of connecting to and feeling a sense of belonging to the world around us involves understanding and forming relationships with the nonhuman others who share our places with us, celebrating our kinship with them whilst acknowledging the magic of our otherness. This includes both flora and fauna.

- If you had a 'dæmon', like Lara in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* books, what animal would it be, and why? Which qualities or characteristics of the animal appeal to you?
- If you were this animal, how would you see the world differently? How would it feel to be in its body?
- Do the same exercise for a plant or tree.

## Chapter 10: Hands on the clay of life

In this chapter, Sharon focuses on the ongoing revival of popular interest in the preservation and practice of traditional arts and crafts, the surge in traditional fairs and festivals, and the increasing coverage of artisanal skills and products in bestselling magazines. This is not simply about preserving old ways of doing and making for the sake of it; rather, it is about appreciating the individual, the handmade, and the carefully crafted, whatever the specific methodology for achieving it. This trend also reflects a growing interest in slow living, and in local traditions and materials as an antidote to the anonymity of globalisation and all that is mass-produced.

- What traditional crafts do you especially resonate with? Do you employ any traditional crafts in your own life?
- Are there traditional crafts and practices which have disappeared or are disappearing from your world, and that you would like to see return? Why? What do they mean to you?
- Think about the ways in which you might be caught in the cultural trap of wanting too much. Do you really need a bigger house, or a new car, or a clutter of clothes and other possessions? Do you really want to think of yourself as on a 'housing ladder' or a 'career ladder'? Why not just step off?
- Do you live within your means? If not, how can you do so?

## Chapter 11: Life as if it mattered

In this chapter, Sharon writes about the importance of ritual and ceremony in the world, and about the need to find a sense of our 'soul's calling' in this life.

Taking up the ideas in this chapter about how we might discover our personal calling, think about the following questions:

- What were your earliest loves and obsessions? Do any of them contain the seeds of a calling? Some things may be very obvious – as a child, for example, you might always have been inventing stories, which might give you a hint that your calling has something to do with writing, or storytelling – but some may be subtler.
- Is there a particular story, or archetypal image or character, which strongly draws you?
- What really nourishes you and makes you feel whole?
- What do you love? What makes you get out of bed in the morning, even when times are hard? What would sustain you if you were to come home and find everything gone? What are the constants, the things that are truly essential to you, the things that reflect your values and help you to grow? How can you find more ways to honour those things that are essential?
- What is the great thing for which you would sacrifice your life?
- Conversely, what can't you tolerate?
- Who are the people you most admire? What are the qualities you admire them for?
- Who are your 'tribe', or who do you wish were your tribe?

Think about the kinds of ritual you might like to bring into your life:

- Ceremonies which celebrate seasonal cycles and festivals.
- Ceremonies and initiatory experiences which celebrate life passages: birth, death, the onset of menstruation, coming of age . . .
- Rituals and ceremonies carried out in times of need or illness.
- Rituals for transformation: pilgrimage or vision quests, for example.
- Public rituals to express solidarity or shared beliefs.
- What can you do each morning to greet or mark the gift of a new day?
- What can you do each day to orient yourself to your surroundings and the world you live in?

## Chapter 12: Manifesto for an enchanted life

In this final chapter, Sharon offers up the following manifesto for living an enchanted life:

1. Everything around you is alive: believe it. Tell stories to stones, sing to trees, start conversations with birds. Build relationships. You'll never be lonely again.
2. To be fully in your body is to be fully alive. Get out of your head and into the world.
3. Look for the wonder wherever you go. Be all your life, as American poet Mary Oliver suggested, 'a bride married to amazement'.
4. Embrace mystery – don't be afraid of what you don't know.
5. Cultivate your mythic imagination: the inner and outer landscape of myth.
6. Know your place. Learn to belong, because wherever you go, there you are. There's nowhere else real to be.
7. Cleave to the local and the ethical. Cultivate community spirit, and autonomy.
8. Slow down.
9. Create. Buy handmade. Live folklorically.
10. Don't have a career: have a life. Find your calling – but above all, find your meaning in the community of the world.
11. Foster meaningful ritual; make each day a ceremony, or make a ceremony in each day.
12. Cherish otherness, in all its forms; confront in yourself, and explore, the forms of otherness which make you uncomfortable or afraid.
13. Treasure change: it's the stuff from which lives are forged. Stop looking for the eternal and immutable, and enter into the daily dance with the transitory.