

FEELING STUCK IN AUTOPILOT, OR TOTALLY OFF COURSE?

What if you could go back to key points in your life
and ask different questions of yourself and others
to change where you are today?

Speaker, author, and entrepreneur Laura Atchison had it all—a great career, a successful business, ambitious goals, and a loving family—when she realized she was off course. Instead of achieving the life she was meant to live, she had been stuck on autopilot, plodding through the life others wanted her to live. By failing to ask the right questions of herself and others, her life had taken the wrong direction. Explore Atchison's riveting and candid story to see the parallel struggles all women share—and the opportunities all women possess to learn and grow beyond their wildest dreams. Learn the right questions to ask in career, family, relationships, spiritual life, finances, and more.

Unlock the life you were meant to have.

Get back on course, and stay there.

Begin asking different questions starting today—as a Wise Woman.

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ISBN 978-1-61448-344-1



9 781614 483441 \$17.95

FOREWORD BY JAY CONRAD LEVINSON

WHAT WOULD A WISE WOMAN DO?

QUESTIONS TO ASK
ALONG THE WAY

LAURA STEWARD ATCHISON

WHAT WOULD A WISE WOMAN DO? LAURA STEWARD ATCHISON

WHAT WOULD A WISE WOMAN DO?

Advance Acclaim for
WHAT WOULD A
WISE WOMAN DO?

“Relationships, business, life purpose: it’s all here in this book. No matter what your age or your life stage, *What Would a Wise Woman Do* gives insights to support you on your journey.”
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“Laura helped to clear the sludge from my brain so that my vision became clear. She helped me to recognize that my skills are my own and that I can achieve whatever I set my mind to. She’s inspired me to move forward.”

–**Gini Murphy**, president of S.T.A.R. Pilates, Inc.

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A WISE
WOMAN
DO? QUESTIONS
TO ASK ALONG
THE WAY

LAURA STEWARD ATCHISON



NEW YORK

WHAT WOULD A WISE WOMAN DO? QUESTIONS TO ASK ALONG THE WAY

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ISBN 978-1-61448-344-1 paperback
ISBN 978-1-61448-345-8 eBook
Library of Congress Control Number: 2012947876

Morgan James Publishing
The Entrepreneurial Publisher
5 Penn Plaza, 23rd Floor
New York City, New York 10001
(212) 655-5470 office • (516) 908-4496 fax
www.MorganJamesPublishing.com

Author's Photo

J. Scott Kelly
Island Images

Cover Design by:

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www.r2cdesign.com

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DEDICATION

For my mom and dad, without whom I would never have learned that it is good to question, and for creating a safe place to do so. Dad, I am sure God will get a copy of this book to you in Heaven. I wish you were still here to celebrate with us. Mom, thank you for always believing in me. I owe you both more than I can ever express. I am who I am today because of your faith and encouragement.

For my husband, Jerome—who shows me, every day, that dreams are worth waiting for.

For God, who opened my heart to possibility.

Ten percent of all author royalties are donated to non-profits close to my heart including the Michael J. Fox Parkinson's Foundation.

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“All achievement, whether in the business, intellectual, or spiritual world, are the result of definitely directed thought...”

–James Allen

“He that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened for only by patience, practice and ceaseless importunity can a man enter the Door of the Temple of Knowledge.”

– James Allen, As a Man Thinketh

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FOREWORD

The question posed by the title of this book invites a lot of discussion. Laura does a better than superb job of exploring that discussion, and providing authentic dialogue and guidance along the way.

The key to knowing exactly what a wise woman would do is knowing the right questions to ask. Laura wants you to master the art of asking the right questions—even if you have not yet done so. She wants you to understand how asking the wrong questions might have kept you from what you are capable of becoming. She wants you to know that no matter where you are, it's not too late to start over in asking the right questions.

So do I.

Why? I fervently believe that in the fool's mind, there are many options, just as there are many disempowering questions.

In the wise woman's mind, there is only one option: to ask the right questions, that guide you to the right answers.

It's only by asking the right questions that a wise woman learns just what she should do.

This book exists to direct you to those right answers by learning to ask better questions. The most extraordinary thing about the right answers is that you already know them: God has given them to you.

Acting on those answers requires you to trust your instincts—something that the wise woman also has mastered.

That is why I ask you to trust your instincts and listen to what God has told you. Learn to ask the right questions, and trust that in doing so you have the right answers.

The answers are in the pages ahead. But mostly, they are in your mind now, awaiting the right questions!

Jay Conrad Levinson
Debary, Florida

Introduction

WHAT AM I ASKING MYSELF?

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

—**Marcel Proust**

I started first grade when I was six years old. Back then, the norm for children was to learn to read once they got to this important milestone. So naturally, I looked forward to my first day.

Unfortunately, it didn't go as I had planned. My mom loves to tell the story about how I left school, walked right out in the middle of the day, and came home. She asked why I was home so early, and I told her it was because they wouldn't teach me how to read.

At the time, I didn't understand why, but I later learned I had been put into the second group instead of the first group. All I wanted was to learn how to read! Since my parents were always reading to me, I knew there was this huge world out there accessible only through the vast universe of books, and I was more than ready to explore this larger world for myself. I had no patience; I was on fire to read!

On that first day of class, rather than figuring out a way to get myself into that other group that was being taught to read right then, my six-year-old self just walked away. I concluded that my teachers likely weren't

ever going to teach me to read, and as a result I felt angry and powerless. I didn't understand.

My mom, however, did understand—at least that there was something we weren't aware of yet—and as a result, she went to the teacher to talk about why I had walked out of school. Mom knew enough to get to the point and ask her directly why I wasn't going to be taught to read yet. The answer was simple, although not exactly full of merit: I was towards the end of the alphabet so I was in the second group. Due to my eagerness and my mom's persistence, the school agreed to switch me, and I started learning to read the next day.

This experience taught me a powerful lesson about asking questions. That is, Mom knew that by *asking questions, she could change the outcome*. She didn't tell the teachers *what to do*. She asked them *what could be done*. In the process, she showed me that asking the right questions can change the outcome, which in turn can change your life. This has become the lesson of my life, and the one I explore with you in this book.

To this day, Mom says she cannot afford to keep me in books, and she urges me to go to the library. I still use the library, plus Google and the Internet, and anyone I can find who is willing to answer my questions. I have been on a lifetime quest to find the right questions to improve my life—not only in regards to little things, like learning facts about the world—but also in the bigger issues life brings to me.

I am eager to meet anyone who can help me increase my wisdom, and I have made it my mission to formulate and ask the right questions. In that process, I've also made some mistakes, which have led me to greater clarity. In the end, I've found some key questions I'd like to pay forward to you to help you on your own journey.

As you read through the rest of this book, think about what is happening in your life as you explore my process for making choices. I will show you what I was thinking as I made these key choices, what the specific choices were, what happened next, and how I realized when I was asking myself and others the right questions. Then, I will show you how things changed for me.

Finally, I will let you in on the specific questions I initially asked, as well as the new questions I learned to ask along my path to becoming wiser. My hope is that you will gain insight into new ways to ask the right questions, so that you can avoid my pitfalls.

By showing you how to shift your thoughts and questions—even a little bit—you will see opportunities and choices you never dreamed were possible. Journey with me as we explore, *What Would a Wise Woman Do*, in:

Relationships

Business

Times of Personal Crisis

Money Matters

Self-perception

Searching for Faith

Planning Her Future

Before we begin, I'm going to let you in on some preliminary questions you can learn to ask which will help you get the most from this book. We'll explore them in more depth later, but reading over them now will help you as you proceed.

As you read, ask yourself,

- *What am I asking myself around "x"?*

If you can't answer, you are likely on autopilot—which we will discuss in Chapter 1—so stop what you are doing and start applying questions to what you are doing, seeing, and saying. Give yourself permission to ask different questions—or even just to ask questions of yourself and others about what is happening around, to, and within you.

Ask yourself, and others if you do not feel that you are able to see what is going on in your life objectively, *"Am I asking the best question(s) to move me forward and out of where I currently am? Do I know where I want to be?"* Asking others about what they see in our lives can trigger forward

movement because it is hard to see the picture when we are in the frame of our lives.

This book aims to help you ask questions along the way that guide you towards being fully engaged with your life—participating in your journey in an authentic way so that you can experience greater joy and fulfillment.

?????

QUESTIONS TO ASK ALONG THE WAY

In regards to overall questions, ask yourself,

- What am I asking myself around “x”?
- Am I asking the best question(s) to move me forward and out of where I currently am?
- Do I know where I want to be?

Chapter 1

HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS?

“You can’t solve a problem from the same level of consciousness that created the problem.”

—Albert Einstein

THE ALLURE AND DANGER OF AUTOPILOT

I don’t know about you, but throughout my life I have found myself on autopilot way too often. It just seems so much easier to get stuff done when things remain consistent.

While I’ve worked hard to become more conscious and aware about what I am doing and why, I still find it so much easier to slip back into autopilot. That is the lure of autopilot: you only slip into it when you already know the route you need to take to your destination.

The problem, however, is that autopilot doesn’t work very well because when you are in this state of cruise control, you are watching but not always thinking. Instead of being present to what you are doing and having conscious thought about your action and place, when you are in autopilot you are simply going through the motions unaware—somewhat like a machine.

When you introduce conscious thought (versus just watching your life happen around and to you), positive change begins to seep into your life. Why do productive changes happen when you are more present? Because when you start thinking in a more aware manner, you often find that what you are doing doesn't make sense or isn't taking you where you need to be anymore. Autopilot doesn't work effectively once you realize the direction you are going isn't the one you want to go in anymore.

Be warned though that when you embrace the conscious realization that your current direction is holding you captive and will never lead you to go where you are meant to be, you are setting the stage for positive and lifelong change.

The reality is that the feeling of ease that comes with being on autopilot is a lie in the long run. It is only a temporary delay of the inevitable pain of growth that will eventually occur. Yes, it is easier to go along with the status quo; but, as time goes by, your ride will become bumpy and, in many cases, you will arrive at your destination not only with extra baggage, but also with a one-hundred dollar baggage fee.

You may begin to realize you are not fulfilled, you are more unhappy than you are happy, you don't know what your purpose is, and you are not satisfied with your life and what you have. *How did I even get here?* might already be running through your mind.

HOW TO KNOW WHEN YOU ARE READY TO CHANGE

How do you know if you are near this point of change? Pay attention to your reactions. When you get closer to consciously engaging in a big change, you will notice a level of discomfort that wasn't there previously. Consider these examples:

- Have you noticed you seem more irritable lately when you get up to go to work, or perhaps when your colleague or boss responds negatively to your ideas? *This may be a sign that you are craving a change.*

- How about when you reach for that last piece of chocolate cake in the refrigerator instead of the leftover grilled chicken? What thoughts are going through your head? Are there any thoughts? Or are you just going for the quick emotional fix—the chocolate cake, my personal favorite—rather than making a choice that gets you to the healthy you? *If it's easy for you to grab the cake without thinking twice, you may not be at the conscious level wherein change is at your doorstep.*

In 2009 when I decided to sell my technology services company, the tipping point came about because I could no longer ignore a feeling in my gut. My autopilot had steered me into a norm of sleepless nights and a lack of heartfelt joy during my days. My temper grew shorter with each passing day.

At first, however, I avoided dealing with these pressing problems, because I knew facing them head on would require radical course corrections I was unwilling to make. Instead, my dissatisfaction with my business remained a giant pink elephant in the room.

For more than a year, friends and peers would point out the problems in my business and my seeming unwillingness to see what was so obvious to them. They would even question my sense of direction. They would ask, "What is going on with you? Where has your joy gone? You used to love this business. If you are unhappy, why don't you make a change? What do you want?" My autopilot would respond with anger that its course was being threatened.

I remember the day when the questions from both inside my head and outside sources became too loud for my autopilot to override. I realized I was angry at myself, not at the questions people were asking me. You see, I had allowed my auto-self to continue to chart a course without my consent.

I had learned to rely on my autopilot to make the necessary corrections to reach my destination, while not realizing that my course should have

been characterized by a conscious journey that held my full and constant engagement.

Another problem with autopilot is that it often self corrects without considering the desires of the captain or the detours that open new doors to opportunity along the original charted course. Rather than plotting my own course after feedback, questions from others, or new information that appeared, I had simply allowed autopilot to readjust me—veering me off course and away from the plans I had for myself and my business.

In reality, what I wanted had changed, but I didn't want to acknowledge that truth because I felt doing so would invalidate all of my accomplishments. It felt like I would be admitting failure if I were to radically change course or just simply accept I did not want the business anymore. (I will go into the entire lead-up to selling the company in Chapter 5.)

The ultimate result of the story I just briefly shared about selling my business is this: I love how aware I have become of how much being on autopilot limited my possibilities. I made a commitment to myself to get off autopilot and stay there.

I NOW THINK ABOUT
WHAT I WANT, RATHER
THAN MERELY ENGAGING
IN A PERVERSE AND
UNCONSCIOUS LOYALTY
TO THE MOMENTUM OF
MY AUTOPILOT.

As a result, rapid-fire questions form in my mind today about how things can change—how I can move and adjust my path in a more positive direction than one that is programmed into my autopilot. I now think about what I want, rather than merely engaging in a perverse and unconscious loyalty to the momentum

of my autopilot.

This doesn't mean I always have clarity or know I'm one-hundred percent on track. There are some lingering, "What have I been doing with my life?" moments. I am human after all, and we humans have doubts and fears and seem to enjoy a little bit of self-flagellation. But, as I've learned to challenge the autopilot more, those weaker moments have far less of an impact on my life and happiness.

HOW DO I GET OFF AUTOPILOT?

Steve Jobs was an incredible example of someone who knew the course he wanted to be on. He was determined to let go of everything that did not meet the end result he envisioned. It simply did not matter that the iPad, iPod, iTunes, or iPhone had never been created before. He was determined to avoid life's persistent autopilot and keep making innovative Apple products which no one had seen before. He wanted to wake up the world to what could be.

How can we learn from his example? To get off autopilot, it helps to understand how we manage information and stimuli. Our brains process millions of bits of data each and every moment we are alive. We discard a lot of information without ever having conscious recognition of what the information means. But the data that remains affects the choices we make throughout the day. Those remaining bits of data move into our conscious minds and do their work. They start as mere facts until we begin to process and assign context and meaning to them.

WORKING FROM THE "SPOCK POINT"

Before adding our emotions and creating context and meaning to the data, we may end up making choices that are merely "clinical." Essentially, we have no emotional involvement in the outcome at this point and are merely coming to conclusions based on the data available at the time.

If you follow *Star Trek* or even have heard of the TV show or movies and their main characters, you might call this the **Spock Point**. This is not a reference to his pointy ears!

For those of you who are not up on TV trivia, Spock comes from the planet Vulcan and is part of the bridge crew of an Earth starship called the Enterprise. His planet long ago suppressed all emotion, and therefore values logic and reason above all else. Emotion does not play any part in the choices Vulcan's make. Pure reasoning, logical deduction, and statistics determine the course of actions they take.

In the series, human emotion as demonstrated by Captain Kirk and the rest of the crew, when added to the data Spock gives, more often wins the

day for the crew—versus just the choices available when using only logic. Basically, the crew adds their gut instincts to the data provided by Spock to win the day.

WORKING FROM THE “EXPERIENCE POINT”

Once we gain awareness that more exists beyond just receiving data, we can begin to apply our past experiences, knowledge, learning, and emotions. It is from this point that we make better choices to direct our lives. I call this the **Experience Point**. The Experience Point adds feelings, emotions, and past experiences to facts. This creates a human element that then controls our actions and choices.

The addition of the human element is not bad. On the contrary, the human element can prevent us from harming ourselves or others by making us realize that just because the odds are in our favor for something to work doesn't mean it is the best thing to do. I have seen that making choices only from the Experience Point or the Spock Point can lead to a bumpier path and sometimes one that is a dead end.

“THE REALITY POINT”: TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

What if you could learn how to make choices from the Spock Point *and* the Experience Point? What if all the choices you made took into account not only the wisdom you have learned over the course of your life, but also a reanalysis of facts and new knowledge outside your experiences and wisdom—so that options and possibilities beyond what you originally envisioned are present?

This is the Reality Point—that ideal mode of daily thinking that occurs when you are looking at your choices with clarity and consciousness and choosing how to proceed with the best information available. (Chapter 2 will go over this concept in more detail.)

Let's look at an example of how this might work. I like to use the analogy of a basketball game because most people have seen a game or have watched some form of sporting event. When you are watching a basketball game, this is what you see from the Spock Point: a bunch of people in

different uniforms running back and forth on a hardwood floor towards raised round hoops with netting at their base.

You see the players using a round orange ball with black stripes and notice they are trying to get the ball into the hoops—and the ones who don't have the ball are trying to stop that from happening. You also notice they get points based on how far away from the hoop they are when they throw the ball and get it in the hoop.

From the Spock Point, you can see there are lots of other rules, but this is the basic idea. You also may be aware of the statistics or odds of getting the ball in the hoop and beating the other team.

From the Experience Point, you may have played basketball or know someone who has—so you begin to add emotion into the equation. Perhaps you have a favorite team who you root for and are willing to overlook mistakes or penalties its members experience.

In the Experience Point, you really only see one team on the court and you assume they are going to win. Or, maybe you have learned that one of the teams never wins against the other team, so you go in with the Spock Point fact that the team will not win this time either and then you ignore it hoping this time will be different.

From the Reality Point, you see all of those things but you decide to watch the game for what it is with no judgments because you know that in sporting events, anything is possible; in fact, sometimes the underdog wins in spite of long odds against them. You enjoy the game as it is played. Even though you have a favorite team, you can recognize a good game from both sides of the field of play.

Die-hard fans much prefer to stay in the Experience Point and cheer their team on to the victory they hope for. Gamblers like to dwell a bit longer in the Spock Point so they can understand the odds but will slip into the Experience Point quite often when they actually place their bets.

Watching a game from the Reality Point is much more fun for me because I actually see all that is happening on the field and can appreciate the skill it takes to do what the athletes do every day. I no longer have favorite teams, but I do have favorite players. They are favorites because

they demonstrate skills on and off the field, as well as grace, caring, and excellence.

How do you get to this level where you operate on a deeper plane in the decisions you make—where you are not merely reacting to what happens around you, but you are consciously choosing the best path for yourself? To fully optimize the choices you make, you need to take the first step: *begin questioning your questions and the answers you are getting.*

?????

QUESTIONS TO ASK ALONG THE WAY

In regards to where you are, ask yourself:

- Am I on autopilot?
- Am I responding from the Spock, Experience, or Reality Point?
- Am I ignoring signs I need to change direction?

WISE WOMAN NOTES

Chapter 2

HOW DO I QUESTION MY QUESTIONS?

*“Knowledge is learning something new every day.
Wisdom is letting go of something every day.”*
—Zen Proverb

AWARENESS MOMENTS, PAUSE MOMENTS, AND QUESTIONING MOMENTS

So how do you question your questions? How do you even know that you need to question them? The fact that you are reading this book tells me you are not moving forward in the way you would like, and you cannot figure out why. Awesome! You have already taken the first step: gaining awareness.

You have become aware *there has to be something more*. You aren't sure how to move to the next step in your progress, but at least now you realize there is a next step, and you know you are no longer willing to stay where you are now. *These are your awareness moments*.

After awareness, the second step is to pause. Sounds simple, doesn't it? But sitting in silence, or simply exercising patience, is not always second nature. Many of us are inclined to react—to do something or anything just to not be stagnant. Don't. I have found over and over again that taking action prematurely can be fatal to true progress. Instead of doing something,

just stop and take no action until you *know what to do that will move you forward*. *These are your pause moments*.

So how do you move forward? That is the third step. Rob Lowe, in his book, *Stories I Only Tell My Friends*, says, “All of us on a daily basis have the opportunity to move forward or backward or stay put. Today I know to move forward” (St. Martin's Press, 2011, p. 303).

How do you begin? This is what I call *the questioning moment*. Progress starts by learning to ask yourself these key questions:

- *What questions am I asking myself that got me to this place?*
- *Where did the questions come from?*
- *Do they still serve me?*
- *Are the answers I get moving the dial forward towards my goals, and does my questioning put me outside my comfort zone?*

I have lots of *awareness moments*, *pause moments*, and *questioning moments* each week and month. Having even more would be better, because I would then be making more conscious decisions; but sometimes I still react because there doesn't seem to be enough time to run through the options.

I am getting closer to being able to pause first before choosing; but it is okay that I'm not fully there yet. I've begun treasuring each and every one of the moments I do have, because they mean I have reached a new level of understanding about myself and what I am doing.

Awareness moments occur when I see what is really happening in a situation versus what I want/expect to have happen. *Pause moments* need to follow awareness moments and are my favorite because they give me time to breathe and think.

When I experience these, I get a sensation of time standing still. In this suspended, paused moment, I have all the time I need to determine a course of action based on my new awareness. *Questioning moments* often seem to happen simultaneously with *pause moments*—or at least so close to them that they seem simultaneous.

Questioning moments occur when I am faced with needing to run through as many possibilities as I can to narrow down my choices. Sometimes I involve other people in this portion of the process, while other times I might ask myself, *what would (insert a name here) do in this situation?* I always try to pick someone wiser than me when I run that scenario in my head. This is when the question, *What Would a Wise Woman Do?* comes in so wonderfully handy.

You may wonder how I came to this place of being so focused on asking the right questions, and reexamining the ones that got me where I am. A little background may help.

Years ago, I found myself faced with a choice I couldn't avoid making. I was approaching thirty. I had a successful career, my own home, money in the bank to do whatever I wanted with, an incredible mom and dad, and the thinnest body I had known in years. I also had just started dating a wonderful guy.

Sounds perfect, right? Perhaps, but I was about to be faced with a choice I hadn't seen coming: a different man I had dated off and on for a few years suddenly proposed to me. My initial thought was to ask, *why is he proposing to me now, when we aren't even dating?*

It took me a couple of days, but I finally said "yes," and we were married a few months later. The guy I had been dating had recently come off a long relationship so he understood when I told him what I had decided—yet another indication he was a wonderful guy. I should have paid more attention to those signs!

Within four months, the marriage was falling apart. During counseling, I began to realize our marriage was not going to work. We were in different places in our lives, and had different thoughts as to what being married was all about. (I will share more about this in Chapter 4.)

This process taught me that when confronted with the choice of whether or not to marry this man, I did not ask myself the right questions. I learned that instead of asking myself, "Do I want to marry him?" I really needed to ask myself, "*Why do I want to be married?*" Only after answering that question could I ask, "*Do I want to marry him?*"

Once I asked myself the new, critical question, a whole new world of options and answers other than *yes* or *no* presented themselves. I started to look at myself and quickly realized I had wanted to get married because I had not yet checked that box off the mental list I had created that would mean I had "succeeded." Having checked off the marriage box, the only one left would be the "kids" box. Society would then view me as a successful woman, and I would have left a legacy! Right? Not so...

KEY TO THE FUTURE ME

Going back to reassess and ask myself the one question I had previously missed made me rethink my entire life. When I got to the root of it—my desire to achieve something I felt would make me outwardly successful—I had the keys not only to a lot of my past choices, but to a future way of handling things with strength and clarity.

The answer I received brought into question every decision I had ever made. I thought I had known exactly what I wanted from life, and I had a plan for getting what I wanted from early childhood; but upon arriving at this crucial crossroad, I realized I had gone about achieving my dreams all wrong.

John Wooden said, "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts." I used to think I knew it all—that I was the only one with all the answers. I mean, really, who else could advise me better than myself?

I even had a plan for what I wanted to accomplish in my life—be an astronaut—and no one was going to stop me. I did not fully realize the effort involved in becoming one, but that was not going to stop me.

But this outcome of my decision to get married gave me pause. Asking myself why I wanted to get married, and getting the answer I did, made me realize I had a lot to learn about what was driving me and what I believed.

As I studied my past choices, I began to realize a lot of my ideas came from this image I had of a perfect life and a perfect family. What I thought was free will was really the combination of my emotions and beliefs driving me to make choices based on where I felt I *should* be.

WHAT CHOICES ARE
YOU MAKING BASED
UPON ASKING YOURSELF
OUTDATED QUESTIONS?

How does this apply to you?
*What choices are you making based
upon asking yourself outdated questions?*
*What new questions do you need to ask
to get you out of autopilot?*

WISE WOMAN NOTES

?????

QUESTIONS TO ASK ALONG THE WAY

In regards to questioning questions, ask yourself:

- What questions am I asking myself that got me to this place?
- Where did the questions come from?
- Do they still serve me?
- Are the answers I get moving the dial forward towards my goals, and does my questioning put me outside my comfort zone?