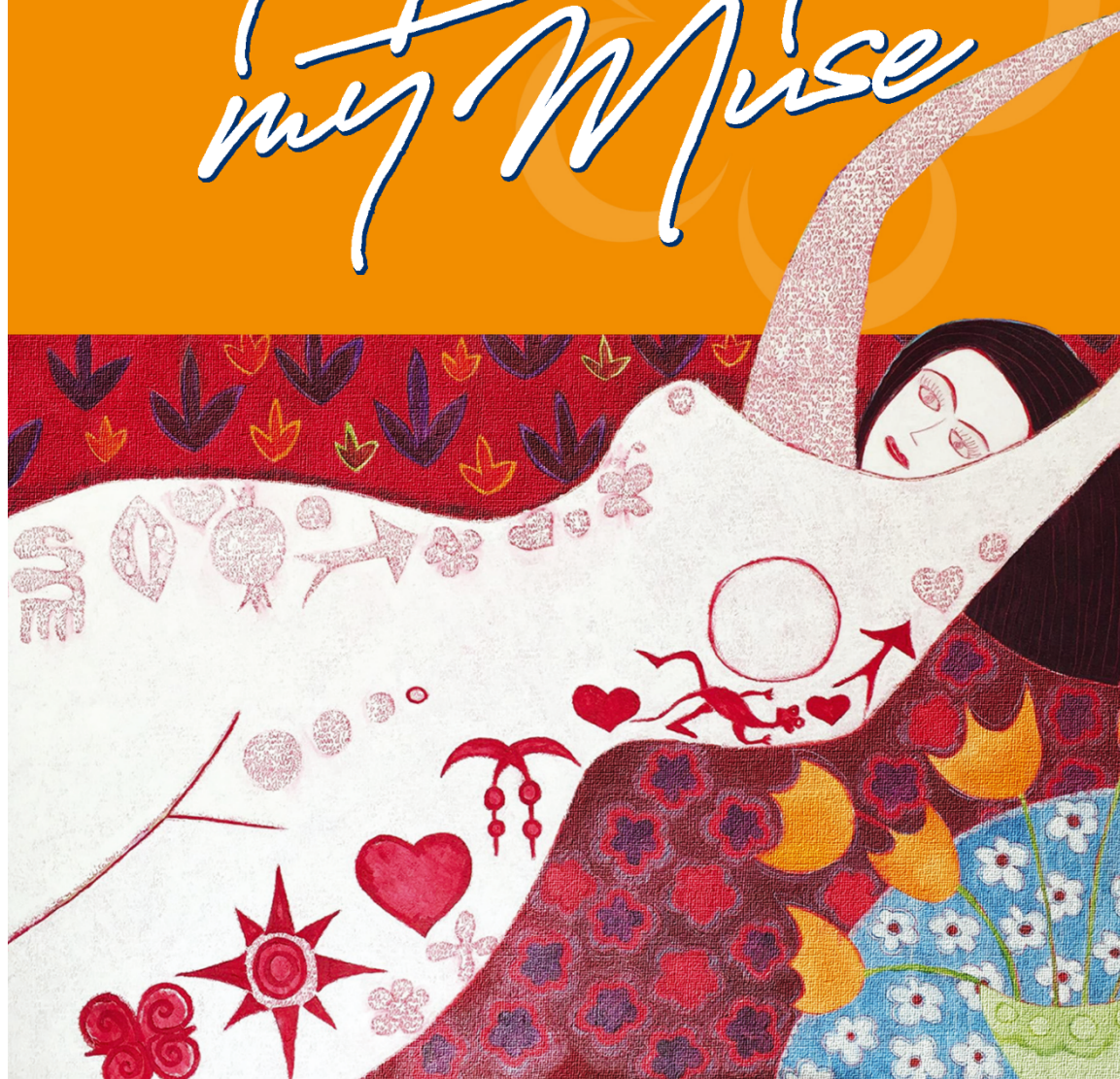


LEDA VAN DER POST, PhD

# my Body my Muse



**HEALING YOUR BODY IMAGE  
THROUGH CREATIVITY**

# My Body, My Muse

Healing Your Body Image through Creativity

Leda van der Post, PhD

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Cover design by Megan Barber Designs.

Cover painting: *Her Courage is Written on Her Body* by Leda van der Post.

Author photo courtesy of Sandy Coffey.

## Praise for *My Body, My Muse*

*"My Body, My Muse is a truly valuable tool written by an exceptional human being, born through her own life experience and a deeper understanding of her physical body. I truly believe there was no one more qualified to write it and I find myself resonating with her truth which is embedded into the pages. A book for those who wish to delve deeply into a simple, creative yet poignant way to uncover the messages hidden within their bodies and a creative ingenious way of working with the mind. She draws you along and each exercise seems to exist for itself until the end where it all comes together in a magical way that brings insight and much needed healing.*

*I have fortunately had the pleasure of attending one of Leda's workshops in person and I have found it to be inspiring in that I have continued to do some of the exercises with great results long after and healing in terms of both understanding my body and calming my mind. I truly believe this is one of those precious little gems you may want to keep close at hand."*

~ Tanja Pau, Owner, AnandaMaya Yoga and Massage,  
A Journey of Healing through Movement and Touch

*"What a refreshing experience it was to work through this book! Never was I told what to do to fix me; never was I told that I needed to do this and that, otherwise I won't get unstuck, or have a better body image, or... whatever it was I wanted to influence.*

*Instead, I was asked to play—without initially being too serious—and to consider why certain things work for me and others don't. The cherry on top was that I was encouraged just to be me, to feel and value my emotions, and to constructively work with them and use them to my advantage.*

*There was no pressure to achieve by other people's measures—my reality was my own; through the exercises you explore and find some hidden treasures and strengths you might never have thought you possessed. Thank you for allowing me to participate in the process!"*

*~Lynette Barnard, PhD*

*"Finally a book on body image that guides me to play and explore with my right brain!*

*Like most women, I have done a lot of work on learning to love my body. This book gives me deeper access to understanding my body relationship by taking me out of thinking or fixing and into playing, feeling, and exploring in a non-linear way.*

*The exercises are so accessible - easy to apply on my own with a journal and some pens... I can only imagine what emerges when a woman has a guide like Leda to walk with her through the process.*

*There is no need to be an artist or even to identify as creative. Trust the process in this book and you will be amazed at what emerges!"*

*~ Megan Jo Wilson, Founder, No More Playing Small for Women*

*For every woman who is tired of spending  
time, money and effort on trying to “fix” her body,  
and is ready to find a less painful, more playful way  
to transform and heal her relationship with her body.*

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# Introduction

*“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them.”*  
~ Albert Einstein

You have just gotten the invitation you have always wished for. And, you are going to turn it down!

As far back as you can remember you have had this image of yourself, on a carefree holiday at a luxurious beach resort. You’ve imagined the indulgence of long days in the sun, with nothing to do but relax, and romantic evenings with no kids around. Now, your partner has found the perfect spot and wants to take you away for this special holiday you have desired for so long. Ten days of blissful time out, with just the two of you.

After years of a comfortable marriage, two almost grown up children who can truly manage without you for a week or two, and a successful career that has given you the financial stability to make this dream a reality, you would have thought you would jump at the chance.

Instead, you can’t face it.

You find yourself making all sorts of lame excuses for not going. You have too much going on at work right now. You can’t let things slip by going away just as work is getting back to normal after the global pandemic. The children need your support at this time. Your

mother isn't all that well and you don't want to leave her alone.

But the real reason is that all you can think about is how you would have to spend time at the pool or on the beach, exposed to the world in your swimming costume. With your hair scraped back and no makeup on. Every day for more than a week. You would be tempted by all the exotic food and delicious cocktails. Then, in the evenings, you would be alone with your man, and while you know he loves you, he can't love all that flab that you usually manage to hide with the lights turned off!

You have spent so much time, energy and money on trying to "fix" your body, and to feel good about yourself. Yet, here you are, still battling with it.

Some days you look in the mirror and you are horrified. Where did those wrinkles come from? You consciously avoid the full-length mirror in your bedroom when you're naked. You do not want to have to face your fat rolls and cellulite!

If you could wave a magic wand... your legs would be at least three inches longer, your breasts would be perky again (that is, if they ever were), your tummy would be non-existent, and best of all you would be able to eat whatever you liked without putting on an ounce!

You would be ordering a whole new range of resort wear online because it would all fit perfectly, and you would be encouraging your husband to book the vacation for at least three weeks, not just the ten days he was planning.

Is this you? Or some version of this? Are you continually uncomfortable with your body? Perhaps you find yourself not doing the things you love to do because you don't like the way you look? Or you worry that people will judge you for your appearance?

You have tried so many diets, exercise plans, weight loss or lifestyle change programmes. You might even have tried therapy to address your body image issues. But nothing seems to work. Maybe for a short while, but then you slip back and are still unhappy with

your body and how you feel about it.

You don't want to go on like this.

It's time to stop letting your body image rule your life. You have tried all these different things, and yet you still feel stuck with the same old problem. You don't know what to do, but you know that you **MUST** do something to shift your relationship with your body, so that it doesn't get in the way of what is truly important to you anymore.

The good news is that there is a way to change your perspective about your body image which will make it easier to transform the way you feel. You will be able to use the time, energy and money you have been spending on worrying about your body on the things that really matter to you.

Imagine waking up and not dreading looking at yourself in the mirror; no longer standing in front of a packed wardrobe with absolutely nothing to wear. Instead you put on clothes that make you feel gorgeous; eat a breakfast of favourite food that will give you energy for the day; go out confidently into the world without comparing yourself unfavourably to other women. In short, you are happy and comfortable in your own body. You know it's not perfect, but it's yours, and you love that woman you see in the mirror.

This might sound impossible from where you are right now, but if you follow the process set out in this book, you will find that this is not just a dream, but something that you can do for yourself. *Heal your body image through creative expression* and change the way you live your life.

So why would following a *creative process* be able to heal your body image?

Creativity is all about approaching an old idea from a new angle. As Einstein said, "*We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking that created them.*"

What I've come to understand over years of dealing with this problem myself, is that the source of how we feel about our bodies,

is not actually our BODY. Rather, our body image problems are a result of our emotions.

Truly creative process is HOLISTIC, and occurs when you fully embrace the connections between mind, body, and soul. This allows you to more readily access your emotions and start looking at your body from a new perspective that includes your emotions. In this way, you can develop a new relationship with your body.

This creative perspective leads to deeper, long-lasting change and healing.

The process set out in this book helps you to develop your own creative ability. Even if you don't believe you are a very creative person right now, you CAN learn to be more creative. Then, once you have better access to your own creativity, you are more likely to be able to see your body and its problems from a different angle and find new ways to deal with these issues. Especially when it comes to being uncomfortable with your body or judging yourself in comparison to society's expectations.

As you rediscover your innate creativity, you will connect to your emotions, and clarify what's truly important to you. You will find yourself being more open to exploring new ideas, and looking at yourself and your body in a new way.

Playing with creative ideas in a way that encourages you to explore and experiment, without being attached to getting a perfect result, reminds you that things don't have to be PERFECT to be of VALUE.

The *Mindful Creativity* process that forms the main content of this book is specifically designed to promote such a creative or change mindset. I have used this process often to help me out of unfavourable situations, and it forms the basis of my *Healing Body Image through CREATIVITY* coaching and workshops.

## The Process

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During the first few months of 2020's global pandemic, a colleague, Janice, with whom I had previously had little interaction, asked me what my secret was.

*How, she wanted to know, had I managed to go from almost dying to recovering and being upbeat at a time when many around us were struggling with and depressed by the circumstances of the global pandemic?*

Let me give you some background.

Just over a month before South Africa (where I live) went into strict Covid-19 lockdown, I had been rushed to the emergency room at 11pm on a Monday night, suffering from extreme stomach pain.

I won't go into all the gory details. Enough to say that the young ER doctor had done some tests, then told me he was going to call the surgeon on duty. I just lay there, not fully aware of the decisions being made for me. Based on the excessively high white blood cell count in my test results, and the level of my pain, the surgeon decided to operate. I vaguely remember waking up in the early hours of Tuesday morning, very groggy, but without the acute level of pain I had been experiencing earlier.

I had suffered from bowel necrosis, a condition in which a blockage in the intestine causes a lack of blood flow leading to potentially fatal infection. Thanks to my surgeon's decision to operate, my life had been saved.

There were times, though, especially in those first few days spent in the intensive care unit, when I thought it would have been better if I had died. I was very weak and in a lot of pain as a result of the operation to remove the dead portion of my intestine. This, after recovering from cancer two years earlier, was almost more than I could take. I felt quite despairing, and wasn't sure that I was up to another long healing process. My body had already been through so much, I was not sure if I could face the emotional and physical issues I knew awaited me.

I had suffered from poor body image for most of my life, and the

physical issues I was now facing raised the old insecurities that I thought I had mastered. I now had an angry scar running from my tummy button all the way down, muscle around that scar that had to regenerate, and a compromised digestive system. This had created a large, bloated stomach—the very thing that I had always felt the most self-conscious about, and worked hard to get rid of!

Fast forward to three months later, May 2020, in the middle of Covid-19 lockdown.

I was by no means fully recovered. I was starting to eat more normally, and was gradually building up my physical strength. The lockdown restrictions limited movement and the opportunities for exercise, but I had been walking kilometres around and around in my house and small garden, followed by my ever-faithful dogs. It would take time, but my body was going to heal.

Mentally too, I was in a very different place from the early days after my visit to the emergency room. I no longer wished I had died, but was actively working and developing new ideas.

Thanks to Covid-19, online teaching was no longer a new approach to work to come sometime in the future, but had become an urgent necessity. So, while paying due attention to my physical healing, I was busily running online classes for my university students, painting in my studio, and about to start up online versions of my coaching and creative process workshops. I found that I was excited about tackling this brand new way of working in the online space.

Janice's question prompted me to think about what I had done to move from despair, and days quite literally wishing I had died, to being excited about new opportunities.

That's when I decided to write this book.

I attribute my recovery and ability to re-energise to my creative mindset. A mindset that is open and receptive, grateful for my many blessings, and able to create positive change.

I had used my creative process successfully in the past to help

people who were feeling stuck in different ways. Then, after my emergency surgery, I had used the process to heal my own body image issues, through connecting to my creativity and resetting my creative mindset.

*Finding confidence in my changed body had been crucial to regaining confidence in every other aspect of my life.*

I felt that a book explaining how to use my process could be particularly useful as we move out of the Covid-19 lockdown, with many people having experienced crises of all kinds, emotional and physical. Healing body image leads to feeling confident in our bodies. Body confidence helps us to be confident in all other areas of our lives.

It is more important now, than ever before, for us to find ways to be confident in our own bodies, so that we can move forward positively in a world that is already different in many ways. Women, especially, will benefit from transforming their relationships to their bodies, and opening up their creative abilities.

If you could find a way to spend less time, energy and money on trying to “fix” your body, and have those resources available for what you believe is truly important, would you do it? Of course you would!

The aim of this book is to enable you to use the creative process I have developed from my experience in business, education and coaching. It is a process that can help you transform from a place where you are struggling with how you feel about your body and how you look, to instead being able to look at your body from a new perspective, and transform your relationship with it. This leads to deep, long-lasting change and healing.

My *Mindful Creativity* process has evolved over the years as I have grappled with my own situation. I have been *stuck* many times in my life, in a range of different, difficult circumstances. Circumstances which could have been overwhelming or kept me despondent. Yet here I am, embarking on new creative projects with a sense

of excitement.

Apart from body image issues stemming from childhood, the recent emergency surgery and the Covid-19 global pandemic, I have managed to get through moving to a new country three times with no pre-arranged job, divorce, completing a PhD, and cancer. And those are just the BIG things that I have had to navigate.

I believe the reason that I have managed to get myself unstuck and start thriving each time I found myself in a challenging situation, has been because of my creative practice. It has been developed through facing problems, big and small, and finding solutions to move my life forward in a positive way.

As I have learnt more about my own creative process, read books and done courses containing other people's ideas about creativity, I have refined my process. However, the essentials have remained the same.

Some of the key elements of my process originated in the work of eminent thinkers and authors in the creative, education, psychology and spiritual fields. Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* helped me in my late twenties to develop my painting. Parker J. Palmer's *The Hidden Wholeness* and other works formed the basis of my approach for my PhD. I read Caroline Myss's *Anatomy of the Spirit* when my father was diagnosed with cancer, thereby developing a strong belief in the connection between mental and physical wellbeing. Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul* gave me an appreciation of the beauty and compassion available in our everyday lives.

Everything I have learnt along the way has become integrated into my 9-step *Mindful Creativity* process.

## What I Know About Creativity

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I believe we are all creative. Some people are probably innately more creative than others. But at the same time, if you want to be creative, or develop your creative ability, it *can* be done.

Think of young children. Give them coloured crayons and paper,



and they don't stop to think about whether or not they can; they just draw. Then what happens? Some are better at drawing than others, and are praised for their efforts. They are then viewed as being more artistic or creative. However, because a drawing is a good likeness of a person, it does not mean the child is more *creative*. It simply means that he has more natural talent for drawing, composition or colour; that is, for visual art. Proficiency at art is not the only domain for creativity. Creativity can be expressed in a myriad of different ways. But as we grow up, we tend to forget this.

I am a creative artist, working in the field of technology and software development. This is not actually the paradox it seems, as the world of computing has a very creative side to it. My varied skillset allows me insights that I might not have if I was only the creative, or only the businesswoman, or only the computer scientist. I am grateful for this combination of skills and experiences, which has allowed me to develop a process that can help to unlock *your* creative potential to solve your problems, whether you think you have creative ability or not.

The value of creative process in everyday life and healing is recognised by some of today's most prominent wellbeing and spiritual leaders.

Brené Brown, renowned author and speaker says: *"I'm not very creative' doesn't work. There's no such thing as creative people and non-creative people. There are only people who use their creativity and people who don't. Unused creativity doesn't just disappear. It lives within us until it's expressed, neglected to death, or suffocated by resentment and fear."*

I know this from personal experience. I see it in small ways. If I am not working on a creative project, be it painting, writing, or developing a new programme, I can be really bitchy to live with! And neglect of my creative expression comes out in big ways too. When I suppress my creative ideas, I make myself ill. You see, if we don't put our creativity to use FOR us, it doesn't disappear. Our creativity

will be working unconsciously anyway. But because we aren't directing it, it often comes out in a negative way, "creating" negativity and problems in our lives.

Caroline Myss, a medical intuitive and expert in the fields of human consciousness, energy medicine and health, expresses a similar idea in a different way.

*"Many people take the very limited view that creativity refers only to the arts, science and other noble pursuits. Creative expression is not only alive in our major projects, but also present in the normal course of everyday life—how we organize our work space or our home, how we prepare our meals, or even how we structure our time."*

She goes on to say that it can take courage to bring creative ideas to fruition, and that we often give up in the face of external pressure. But, she believes that *"Creativity is an essential life force."* By integrating creativity into our everyday lives as a practice, she believes we can redefine and recreate ourselves, leading to deep healing.

Gabor Maté is a physician who, as an addiction expert, has written extensively on how emotional trauma leads to disease. He believes that there are two basic values that we need to honour in order to heal, one being creativity.

He writes: *"The gods, we are taught, created humankind in their own image. Everyone has an urge to create. Its expression may flow through many channels; through writing, art or music, through the inventiveness of work or in any number of ways unique to all of us, whether it be cooking, gardening or the art of social discourse. The point is to honour the urge. To do so is healing for ourselves and for others; not to do so deadens our bodies and our spirits. When I did not write, I suffocated in silence."*

The practice of creativity in everyday living can impact your quality of life, health and confidence.

## Healing Your Body Image Through Creativity

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The *Mindful Creativity* process allows you to focus on using *creative process to achieve a specific purpose* without actually worrying about or concentrating on your own creative ability. Although this may sound counterintuitive, it works.

The *specific purpose* that is the focus of this book is for you to start developing your own creativity, and then using it to find new ways to look at, and live with, your body.

This helps you in unexpected ways.

By tapping into your innate creativity in a playful, yet focused way, you begin to understand your unique creative gifts, and to value your own creative ability. Accessing your creativity helps you to reconnect with what is truly important to you. You can then shift your focus from what you see as being “wrong” with your body and approach your body from a new perspective.

The end result is the ability to accept your body as it is, and make more helpful and creative decisions about where to spend your time, energy and money.

It doesn’t mean you stop paying attention to your looks and health. Rather, you are able to approach how you look and feel in a way that is closer to your values and what you desire from your life.

*My Body, My Muse* presents my unique 9-step *Mindful Creativity* process, providing clear guidelines for each step and illustrating the concepts with experiences and stories from participants of my coaching and workshops.

You don’t have to be a creative person to successfully use the *Mindful Creativity* process. The process can be used by ANYONE, whether you think you are creative or not. Choose your focus—the specific issues relating to your poor body image—then use the process to inspire, to innovate, to create clarity, to rekindle a lost spark, or simply to start accessing your inner creative self.

The activities in each step will enable you to tap into your values

and your innate creativity in a playful, yet focused way, to start transforming your relationship to your body image. The steps are designed to lead to a new awareness of, and confidence in, your own ability to improve your circumstances and make a positive change in your life.

*Are you ready to be inspired?*

This is an invitation you won't want to turn down

**Are you tired of spending TOO MUCH time,  
energy and money on trying to “fix” your body?**

**This book will show you it's possible to:**

**Feel comfortable and safe in the skin you are in right now.**

**Let go of “what will they think about my body?”**

**Eat the foods you truly love without feeling guilty.**

**Learn how to appreciate your body as a source  
of inspiration and wisdom.**

You can transform the way you feel about your body without changing a thing and this book will lead you step-by-step through a creative process that is designed to help you look at the issues you have about your body image in a new way. The end result is deeper, long-lasting change and healing.

Whether you consider yourself a “creative” or not, this book is for you if you are exhausted by diets, exercise plans, and weight loss programmes, and have decided it is time to stop letting your poor body image rule your life!

Discover THE creative approach that will change the way you live in your body.

*“Finally a book on body image that guides me to play and explore with my right brain! There is no need to be an artist or even to identify as creative. Trust the process in this book and you will be amazed at what emerges!”*

Megan Jo Wilson, Founder, No More Playing Small for Women



Dr Leda van der Post is an author, painter and life coach who has had her own lifelong journey of coming to terms with her body. She intuitively used her creativity to get to a place where she is now comfortable in herself, and respectful of how her body has helped her to overcome both physical and emotional pain.

Leda analysed how her creativity had helped her to understand her issues, and developed her 9-step *Mindful Creativity* process. She has successfully used the process to help others see their bodies from a new perspective, get unstuck and heal their own body image issues.

