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INTRODUCTION

Writing this book has changed my life. I've gulped down knowledge with an unrivalled thirst and made willing changes to my life in the name of finding a deeper connection and hopefully to write a book that will be meaningful to you. Yet I had no idea of the impact it would have on me. I had no clue that so much would change in such a short space of time. I'm confident it'll have a similar effect on you. All I'm asking is that you have an open mind and then just sit back and enjoy learning from a host of wise minds I'm going to introduce you to.

I'm at a pivotal point in life where I feel that the lurking fog, which crept in like a November morning in my early thirties, is lifting. This book has marked the start of a process of shedding I didn't even know I needed, with old layers of life peeling away, falling off in great swaths to reveal new perspectives and a much welcomed lightness. Are you up for it? Do you want to dig deeper with me? Let me put some lexical oomph behind this life pivot and explain what we are about to do.

By now we all have a rough idea of how to look after our bodies and minds. We know that eating a balanced diet, doing a bit of exercise and remembering that cigarettes look cool in

films but suck for our lungs will help our bodies out. We know that having decent relationships with others, doing things we love and refraining from bingeing social media will give us a healthier mind. But what about the other bit? The ... what-do-you-wanna-call-it bit? The soul? Spirit? Awareness? Energy? I don't mind what you call it as I'm not sure what name to pin on it myself, but I know it's there. I personally believe – wait, sod it, I want to be pretty definite about this – I KNOW that I am not just a body and a mind. There is some other inexplicable part of me which I think gets forgotten about far too regularly; the part of me that feels a deep instant connection with certain strangers I've met over the years; the part of me that is pure intuition and knows the answer even though I'm tempted to google the question; the part of me that felt and saw a celestial rainbow of colours during childbirth; the part of me that has felt pure bliss when tripping out looking at the sky; the part of me that could burst into a million tiny pieces when hearing a song that just gets me. How am I looking after that part of me? We'll get to that later as we romp through this complex, deep and hopefully nurturing journey together.

As well as nurturing that part of ourselves that gets massively overshadowed by our bodies and minds, I want to explore the concept of everything else outside of us too – again, call it what you like: God, a higher power, the universe – and how we connect and perhaps even communicate with it. Not to complicate matters too much early on but this exterior energy, or higher power, is recognised by many spiritual leaders as something that is within us, not outside of us as we may believe; but, again, we'll get to all of this later down the line.

Reconnecting with Life

I believe that we need to look at this part of ourselves and find new ways to expand our thinking now more than ever before. En masse we've never been in more trouble and we know it. We can't always pinpoint why but the jittery feeling of discontentment is never far away. There probably hasn't been a time in history when we have been so stressed, anxious, depressed, confused and at times disheartened. We are more technologically advanced than ever before, can video-call someone on the other side of the planet, order shoes that arrive on the same day, send satellites into space to aid/support us navigate our route to work and have modern medicine to help us in physical crises, yet we're usually dissatisfied and feel we are lacking. We have more than any other generation, yet that feeling of lacking is growing by the minute. I think all of these uncomfortable feelings are rooted in our total subliminal disconnect. It's something I've talked about at length to my dear friend Sarah Wilson (activist, writer and all-round amazing egg). We are all in 'disconnect'. We know we are abusing our planet, we know we aren't always genuinely connecting with other humans heart to heart, we know we are driven more by fear and less by love and are floundering around wondering why we feel so off-centre. We cannot fix this feeling with a new workout, by changing our diets or with mindfulness alone. Something much bigger, more expansive and more powerful is needed. Connection.

Connection isn't calling up your mate once a week to check in (lovely as that is). True connection is remembering we are all one – not just as individual humans (which we seemingly forget on a daily basis with our road rage, divisive attitudes and war), but also with nature. There is no separation or distinction. That might not ring true to you immediately but it is something I'm

going to explore in this book as we work out how to nurture our souls and get back to total connection.

The Hugeness of Life

The title of this book, *Bigger Than Us*, is supposed to be relieving, evoking an en masse collective ‘phew’ that maybe there is something larger at play. This is not to diminish the human experience, my life or yours, it’s simply a way of thinking that allows us to take the heat out of the small annoyances and problems in life so we can remember how huge all of this is. If we remember that we are on a ball spinning in space, and the ONLY ball we know of with life on it – with our own sun and moon and other planets beautifully dancing with synchronicity and precision nearby, all held in place due to energy that we can’t see – then maybe it won’t matter so much that we messed up at work or said something stupid we regret. Looking at energy allows us to get out of our heads and marvel at the magic that is constantly unfolding all around us. Life is bloody HUGE.

My head is already bursting with thoughts and questions, but hey, that’s the mind just trying to steal the limelight again.

More Magic

I would have been petrified to write a book like this five years ago. I would have typed trepidatiously while second-guessing what every cynical person out there might say. I have always felt inferior to cynical people. I’ve labelled them ‘cool’, ‘edgy’ perhaps even more ‘intellectual’ than me but, honestly, at this point in my life I’m so over that. I love exploring spirituality and what else lies within us and outside of us. The magic, the connection, the inexplicable. I LOVE IT! I’m an out-and-out spiritual junkie

and there is no stopping me. So, in short, if you are extremely cynical about this sort of thing, that's cool, welcome along. My job with this book is not to convince you otherwise; it's to hopefully give you some other options and tools that might help you find more meaning, magic and purpose in life.

We often think purpose comes from having power or opportunity but that's not the sort of purpose I'm talking about. I'm talking about purpose and meaning from within. An inner knowing that propels you towards a deeper experience of life. This book is about getting under the itchy clothes of life. Getting beneath the thoughts, rumination and constant noise of the modern world. It's connecting the dots and making sense of the nonsensical. This process throughout the book is not going to be wishy-washy or surface. This book isn't exclusively about burning incense and partaking in gong baths while wearing smocks (although they may feature if there is reason to); it's about getting curious and cultivating the willingness to see life in its full-coloured, bold, ever-changing beauty. I heard a term coined recently that made sense of the commodification of spirituality in recent years: 'spirituality lite', nodding to the vast interest in spiritual rituals without the deeper exploration or openness underpinning them. For example (and please remember I'm not judging anyone here as I'm on this learning curve with you all), many out there may partake in yoga waiting for a six-pack to emerge without experiencing the deep connection from the breath work and mental stillness of the practice. Many will burn sage in their homes hoping that negative energy will magically disappear from their lives without any willingness to look at why they might be attracting negative energy into their lives in the first place. For us to go on this journey together, you will not need to purchase a rose quartz toilet seat or go anywhere near a wind chime. You need nothing more than an open mind and a little curiosity.

The Speed of Life

I'm also deeply fascinated with finding out if it is entirely possible to live a DAILY spiritual life in the velocity of the modern world. I know that minutes after coming out of a meditative state I can shoot to pure rage that my next-day delivery hasn't turned up. The irony! One minute purely IN the moment, the next using time as a weapon against myself. If I'm honest, my spiritual awareness is mostly only rearing its head in those moments I actively carve out time for it. But what about the messy bits of modern life: a bulging inbox, kids screaming and demanding to watch YouTube even when you've said no, a traffic jam and you're half an hour late for work, a friend accusing you of neglect. How can we tap into spirituality in those moments? I'm at a juncture in life where I know that following a spiritual path makes me feel good and now it's time to really commit to it. Spirituality is often seen as an add-on, the extra bit on the side, but more recently I've started to see that it IS life. It's not the side dish to the main course of life. It is the WHOLE meal – starter, main and dessert – the rest is merely seasoning.

I want more peace, a deeper connection, a trust in life, faith instead of worry, more meaningful moments, acceptance in the messy bits, even MEANING in the messy bits. I know the only way for me to do this is to take an even deeper dive into theories, methodologies and practices that have been around way, WAY longer than the internet and modern science.

Making the Ordinary Extraordinary

This isn't a new way of thinking for me, thanks to dear Lin Cotton. The mothership and I have talked about spirituality more than any other subject over my lifetime. Mum is on

a constant mission for meaning and mostly magic. She often wants the magical answer or explanation to help soothe worry and fear rather than a statistic or something purely practical. I've watched her zoom in on orbs in photographs to find minuscule, hidden images that may inspire or guide her. She has found many blurry outlines of her late dog Wilf trapped in floating orbs caught on camera in a snapshot moment, which may sound very out of the box to you but, again, if these moments bring peace and connection to the individual, why question it or judge? She always actively encouraged me to look outside of everyday thinking to find the extraordinary and I'm eternally grateful for that. At a young age, I was inadvertently introduced by Mum, to meditation even though I had no clue what it was. She had a cassette (for anyone under twenty-five reading this, you can indeed have sympathy for my generation having to rely on cassettes and their often-tangled tape) which she would often pop on for us both to listen to. We would lie on the '80s dusty-pink floral sofa and zone out while listening to an audio experience that to this day is still crystal clear in my mind. The narrator, using hushed tones, would usher you through a wooden door at the end of a long mosaic-tiled corridor and there you would find yourself in a house with many rooms. Each room we were guided into held a different colour from the last. The first room was red with many red objects within, which you could pick up and examine. The next room was yellow in hue and contained many sunshine-coloured objects of interest. I adored letting my mind wander through this imaginary house and eventually on to a shoreline on a beach umbrellaed with stars. I can so vividly remember the images my imagination threw up in those childhood moments, perhaps more vividly than the real-life occurrences that I experienced. What I didn't realise was that this imagined house was emulating the chakras and their colours and purpose. As an

eight-year-old I merely found it a relaxing and super-fun experience but really it was a beautiful, gentle introduction to how we can relax our minds into a meditative state. This experience also subliminally taught me to look outside the box. To reach for the seemingly impossible, to seek the magic and to make the ordinary extraordinary.

Pinner Daze

I grew up in a suburban town on the outskirts of London in a mock Tudor semi-detached house with a hard-working mum who held down four different jobs and a dad who honed his craft as a sign writer for his whole working life (bar a brief stint as a milkman before I was born). Nothing out of the ordinary there. A classic '80s/'90s suburban childhood full of school-packed lunches, chats on house phones and the odd camping holiday thrown into the mix. Yet Mum was always up for the extraordinary, often desperately seeking it out. On Pinner High Street above a small shop that sold crystals and wind chimes there was a therapy room. I just had to call my mum to reacquaint myself with the name of this shop as the decades have made the memory fade to sepia tones and she tells me, with absolute clarity, the shop was called Dreamcatcher, which is no surprise to any of us. You could get many treatments, from reiki to energy healing and past life regression, all while, below the treatment-room window, the good people of Pinner bought their weekly shop in the giant Tesco over the road. My first experience of Pinner's very own spiritual portal was around the age of sixteen. Mum had been before and said I might have fun booking in for a past life regression session. After making my way past an Everest-sized pile of crystals in Dreamcatcher's shop entrance, I ducked under the stalactites of wind chimes hanging from every inch

of the ceiling, to make my way upstairs to the treatment room. A middle-aged lady with coiled tangerine hair asked me to lie down and close my eyes. I can't recall exactly what happened next but I imagine that, while I had my eyes closed, she waved her hands around, over and above my body, never touching me but giving off that buzz of energy that is often experienced with reiki. Now hold on to your hats as I tell you the part you'll either be fascinated by or laugh your head off at. The first past life she recalled for me was from a period in the early 1900s where I had a twin brother who was my partner in crime as a trapeze artist. We would swing together in synchronised beauty high above a cheering crowd. On one occasion I lost my grip and my dear twin's hands slipped through my fingers like a wet bar of soap and he fell to his death. Tragic, I know, and maybe far-fetched but I loved the process nonetheless and, even if I came away not 100 per cent wedded to the story itself, it massively piqued my interest in past life regression. It could also be tenuously linked to my omnipresent need to make sure everyone in my life is OK and safe at all times, who knows?

I more recently spoke to the incredible Rhonda Byrne, author of *The Secret*, and she talked passionately about how we never die as our 'energy' (insert here 'spirit/soul' or whatever you are comfortable with) can never die. You don't have to believe in reincarnation to be on board with this one as none of us truly know where our energy goes once the physical part of us dies. Could it embody another physical form or just weave into our complex universe in inexplicable ways?

Mum (gosh, this is such a Lin-heavy section, she's going to love it) also used to open my eyes to alternative possibilities on our evening walks. Eager to break the mundanity of suburban routine, instead of settling for *Coronation Street* after our Linda McCartney sausages, we would stomp around the mean blocks

of Ruislip at dusk. These chats would veer off into the deep expanses of life's unimaginable possibilities as Mum reached for the stars above the mock Tudor maze. On one occasion Mum stopped in her tracks and looked around. I mimicked her stance and looked for what had caught Mum's eye.

'Do you feel it?' she whispered. I stopped and looked into the distance with a little more focus and ... I did, I did feel a shift in something. This is where things get a little weird again but, you know me, I love weird. The air seemed thicker, time seemed to have stopped. We both marvelled at this secluded moment, just me, Mum and this strange shift in energy we were both feeling and possibly even seeing. Everything looked a little more hazy than normal, a little purple even. Team cynical will of course say there must have been a nearby bonfire or a heavy mist en route but it didn't feel like that. Team cynical, I love you just as much as those who are nodding their heads right now having experienced something similar. We can of course continue to look exclusively for the scientific explanation for everything, but maybe there is a little room for intrigue, magic and the totally weird that is left unexplained too. We felt something inexplicable on our nightly walk that summer's evening. An invisible movement and an all-encompassing shift of sorts. The delicious juxtaposition of the extraordinary in the setting of the totally ordinary.

Something Bigger

My unusual experiences as a kid and teen are not limited to these two isolated moments. These often inexplicable or deeply connecting moments are woven through my life like a silver thread, reminding me of the beauty, strangeness and hugeness of life. I'm yet to make sense of all of these moments so hope to

learn as much as I can during this process. Maybe you'll have had similar experiences that I'll be able to help you make sense of too, or maybe all of this is new to you, in which case, **HOW BLOODY EXCITING!** I'm buzzed for you and what you're about to read and hopefully experience too.

Do not fret, this book is not going to be exclusively my trippy experiences from the Pinner High Street days; spirituality of course goes way beyond a few freaky experiences and a local crystal shop. We have so much to cover and so much to learn. I'm the most eager student, notepad in hand, eyes wide, ready to go. **I feel very lucky to have gained insights and teachings from a plethora of experienced, wise and incredibly smart individuals from varying backgrounds with differing expertise, who can guide us through theories and practices to help us connect with life, ourselves and others.** They will share their knowledge and impart advice on how we can look after our energy/soul/spirit, which will subsequently help us remember that we are connected to everyone and everything. I hope this book will also act as a reminder that spirituality is for everyone no matter where you are from, what you've got going on, or what you currently believe or don't believe.

Even though I've been borderline obsessed by this stuff for most of my life, I still have so much to learn and so much to unpick. I have a kaftan full of questions and my excitement is of seismic proportions, so shall we crack on?

Are you ready to see past the human body and mind so we can have a poke around in the other bit? Are you ready to experience something bigger than us?

PART 1

LOVE

Is there anything bigger than love? It's all-encompassing and the catalyst to life itself but when we can't see it, life can feel barren, brittle and unforgiving. Love is safety, comfort, reassurance, motivation, community-building, miracle-making. It is omnipresent and everywhere, so why at times does it seem to vanish completely?

When we are lonely, depressed or full of rage, we are blind to love's power and mass. It seemingly dissipates before our very eyes at the mere whiff of negative distraction. Life's distractions can be so big that we forget it is our lifeboat whenever we need it – we just have to remember that it's not always exclusively an exterior source of love that can carry us through life, it is also always within.

We often think of love as a rather one-dimensional proposal. It's all red roses and romantic dinners backed by a sunset. We forget that love is the driving force behind each unfurling flower and pulsing through every jolt of hysterical laughter. We usually only recognise the romantic or family aspect of love but it has so many other sides.

It's so powerful that when we refuse to see it, we create a vicious friction that separates, causes suffering and sparks war. In those moments where we are blind to the love that is around us and within us, we lose our connection. Self-floathing or judgement upon others blocks us from the abundance of life.

Self-love is a term that's been thrown around a lot in the last couple of decades but have we really noted the powerful nature of simply loving oneself? I think not, as we're living in one of the most divisive eras – a

time in which we use social media to compare ourselves to others and use labels to exclude and discriminate against others. We've lost sight of the love we need for ourselves and others.

My relationship with love has changed over the years. At times I merely viewed it as something to get drunk on. I would crave kisses and human touch and the thrill of feeling my heart flip upside down with lust. An intoxicating, heart-thumping love was all I desired and the only kind of love I recognised outside of the grounded, long-lasting love for my family. Self-love was not in my orbit for a long time. I assumed I would like myself more if I was loved by another, maybe even lots of others. As my TV audience increased, I expected to find more acceptance of the bits of me I didn't like. Maybe if others loved my insatiable enthusiasm that I felt out of control of, I would like it more too? Maybe if my characterful nose and bulbous eyes were applauded, I would find it easier to look in the mirror without judgement? I learned that lesson the hard way and have only really started to understand the power of self-love and acceptance recently.

*How we get to that place is another story. My own rollercoaster of self-examination has been one of severe self-loathing at times and I'm so desperate to settle into a calmer plateau of self-acceptance. I assume that once I get there my relationships will be better, my love for the planet will be more respectful and my understanding of love in all its many guises will be cemented. **I believe love is where it's at when it comes to living a spiritual life of connection and meaning.** It's often the answer to so many of our problems but so often we forget it's for us, due to feelings of unworthiness, and can't perceive it in others as we only see our differences. To help us peel back the red shiny wrapper of love so we can feel it more, see it more clearly and understand its potency I am going to explore several different subjects with some incredible people I've met over the years, to help us on our merry way. Here's to love and a deeper, more meaningful life.*

SHAMANS

Love is complicated but essential for connection to that something that is bigger than us. We often feel confused by love and so devoid of it, and maybe we can attribute some of that lacking to the modern world. We value success, an accumulation of ‘stuff’, and power, over the abundance of love that we have access to whenever we want. It’s long been the work of shamans to help others tune in to that love globally and internally, with historic practices and treatments. I have been fascinated with the mysticism that surrounds shamans for as long as I can remember. So often we are coerced into believing there is only one option in life. We are exposed to limited choices when it comes to health, happiness and connection. The confines lie in the hands of the government, media outlets and monster brands. We are subconsciously imbibing messaging and rules without even recognising that our beliefs are changing by the minute. Looking to the esoteric theories and ideas that might not dwell in the mainstream has been essential for my wellbeing, ongoing recovery from mental illness and connection to the hugeness of life. There simply is no better place to start than with shamans and their beautiful look at love and life.

Where Did It All Begin?

Shamanism is said to have originated in Siberia yet, once commonly recognised, it became apparent that it was conducted the world over in many cultures. The practices involved have been used and cultivated for thousands of years in India, by Native Americans and in South America, with cave art depicting shamanic rituals dating back as far as 30,000 years ago, yet there is also evidence of shamanism being widely used throughout Asia, Tibet, Hungary, Sweden, Central Europe and Africa, to name but a few. The exact origins and dates are unknown but it's certainly been a spiritual path for many which at times indigenous tribes have had to fight for, as throughout history those who have not understood its power and importance have either dismissed its validity or taken from it without acknowledging its origins. Many individuals still practise shamanism today to help people connect with nature, spirits, community and themselves. But what is it? How do they carry out this ancient work and what does it look like?

Calm and Connected

The work of a shaman may differ in practice but most would align with the idea that their work is to act as a healer. Using a plethora of skills, honed over many years, the shaman employs rituals, psychic ability, acupuncture, energy work, sound bowls, herbs, tinctures and reflexology, among other esoteric practices, to heal physical, emotional and mental pain, problems and trauma. The time spent with a shaman will differ depending on their particular teachings and perhaps even where they are based geographically. Their work is in conjunction with that something 'bigger': it's tied tightly to the power of the land

and nature and has always to work in harmony with it. The shaman's work is also a direct communication with all that is usually unseen by the human eye: spirit, energy and psychic ability. It's a powerful concoction of ceremony and healing on a physical level interwoven with a deep understanding of the hugeness of life.

I've met a couple of UK-based shamans over the years and have been helped massively with examining my own resistance to accepting love. It might be helpful to meet one in this book for a deeper understanding, so keep reading to get a glimpse into the world of Wendy Mandy. I first heard of Wendy via Russell Brand's brilliant podcast, *Under The Skin*. I was curious and fascinated listening in on their conversation and felt a sense of peace immediately wash over me. Whenever I listen to wise people talk, I feel calm and connected as the little worries and insecurities I carry daily dissipate. They cannot stand the heat of wisdom and truth. All the rubbish and modern-day debris just falls away. Coincidentally, or perhaps fatefully, shortly after hearing Russell's podcast episode a great friend of mine, breathwork coach Rebecca Dennis, suggested I have a session with her friend who was a shaman. And guess who that friend was? ... *The Wendy Mandy*.

Wendy doesn't have a website and minimal results come up when you google her, which made me even more intrigued. It's all word-of-mouth stuff, which is wonderfully old school, yet it's almost impossible to get an appointment with her as she is booked up for months in advance. In a completely jammy move, I managed to get an appointment after Rebecca and Russell put in a good word, so expectantly awaited my session with Wendy a month down the line. Wendy has spent most of her life working and living with tribes around the world – the Kogi of Colombia, the Samburu of northern Kenya and the Yawanawa of Brazil to

name a few. Wendy is currently writing a book about all of the amazing people she has worked with, learned from and taught over the years, which I cannot wait to read.

Energy and Power

Wendy's practice room is rammed with beautiful books on every subject from natural medicine to astrology. There is a treatment bed next to a cabinet of well-loved rattles and sound bowls, with a painted ceiling above depicting flying creatures in red and blue. It's a hypnotic space that keeps your attention and intrigue, with eyes darting from one curiosity to the next. I lay on the bed with a towel over my bare legs, feeling slightly insecure as I always have freezing feet, which at the end of the bed actually look tinged with purple. I could have painted my toenails too but, hey, there are bigger fish to fry today.

Sat by my aforementioned violet hooves, Wendy instantly gets to work rubbing life into them – the most heavenly moment of my day so far. I LOVE having my feet rubbed. I turn into a sort of stoned, purring cat with slurred words and squinty eyes. My body relaxes entirely as Wendy asks me some questions and I rattle off my list of worries and past regrets that I carry around with me daily in a cumbersome and perhaps unnecessary backpack. Wendy is small but also huge. Her tiny frame is almost unable to carry the size of her energy and power. It spills out into the room and makes me feel safe; my own torrent of insecurities wrapped up in her knowledge and total understanding of life. Phew, what a relief. If only momentarily, I feel a weight lift.

After the most heavenly foot rub that seems endless but simultaneously way too quick for my liking, Wendy steps up to my side and places two fingers on my pulse points. I am

familiar with this technique as my dear friend Gerad Kite, who also practises five element acupuncture, initiates treatment by checking the energy in the pulse points too. From my understanding, this is where the acupuncturist feels for blocks in the body. Still woozy from the foot-caressing, I am startled when seconds later an acupuncture needle is plunged into my ribs and twisted, releasing the most powerful whoosh that feels like a firework going off internally, sparks fizzing out to all corners of my body. My eyes widen to saucers. This happens maybe five more times on differing points over my body – my shoulders, my feet (YOWTCH!) and the hollow between my shin bone and calf muscle. Discombobulated and desperately trying to catch up with the constant stimulation of needle to skin, I feel like cracking up with laughter, or maybe crying, perhaps both.

All the while Wendy is pressing me on the past troubles I've mentioned to her during the blissful foot rub. She is constantly excavating, trying to work out the root cause, the pain point, the twisted knot that needs untying.

Next, rattles. I close my eyes as Wendy shakes a large, cacophonous rattle all over my body. My ears follow the sound and at times it's overwhelming. The noise fills up my whole body, making my solar plexus tingle. I'm told to imagine myself at a specific age that relates to the start of some self-limiting beliefs, and as the rattle works over my body I'm to imagine that image dissipating entirely. There is such relief when the noise stops that I exhale deeply, yet not completely as instantly some celestial gongs reverberate in place of the crashing rattle. The sound bowl responsible for this beautiful noise is placed on my tummy so I can feel the sound vibrations in my bones. My tummy is such a delicate spot. I'm sure many of you feel that way too. It's my squishy bit, where my babies grew, that I try to cover in large pants and high-waisted jeans. I don't like being