



Objects In Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear

By Sue Johnston

"Excuse me. Is this the road to Greatness? I can't see a sign. Is it far? How will I know when I get there? It's not on my map. It wasn't really my intention to go there. Should I turn back?"

As I speed through these unknown landscapes, I catch a reflection in the rear view mirror. Then I hear her voice, "Lighten up, girl. Just drive. Don't over-think this!"

Susanna is back and she's taken my place in the driver's seat.

Susanna's the reason I'm on this unfamiliar road hurtling towards an unexpected destination. She's wanted to do this trip with me forever, but I was always too busy, too broke, too timid, too tired, or too [*insert your favorite excuse here*] to listen to her promises of adventure in the land of greatness and power.

But Susanna doesn't buy excuses.

She's full of life and confidence. She feels no need to be trained and certified before taking on something new. She's fearless, though not reckless. She's creative and artistic. She can talk to anyone about anything. She feels her feelings. She sings out loud.

Susanna doesn't try to be perfect. She doesn't even try to be accomplished. She doesn't care what people think of her. She doesn't need to be popular – so, of course, she is.

Who is Susanna?

Part diva, part fairy princess and part wise woman, Susanna burst dramatically into my life when I was 47 years old, wrenching me from my familiar ways and saying, “No!” to my *status quo*. At the time, she scared me out of my wits, which made her arrival pretty inconvenient. Today, I welcome her and wonder, “What took you so long to show up?”

Susanna, as you may have quickly and correctly surmised, is my *alter ego*, my authentic self, my not-so-evil twin. She had been lurking in the margins of my life since birth, yet I never acknowledged her. To be truthful, I never saw her, even though she would show up, unbidden, to extricate me from whatever predicament I was in. Instead of recognizing Susanna and her power as the source of my rescue, I'd think, “Wow, that was lucky!”

Just what does it mean to be lucky? Being lucky, for me, was meeting Susanna before she gave up on me – and before I grew so dim-sighted that I wouldn't see her if she clobbered me with her magic wand. Being lucky was deciding that I wanted to be Susanna, and letting her train me to hear the voice that says, “Go!” instead of, “No!” Being lucky was when I discovered that the woman I see in the mirror is Susanna. Yikes! Who knew?

Eleanor Roosevelt, that's who. “I think that somehow, we learn who we really are and then live with the decision,” said the woman whose quotable quotes filled the pages of *The Reader's Digest* in my youth.

I read that phrase without noticing the word “decision.” Like Grandma and Mom, with whom this quote was shared and discussed, I thought it was about accepting one's lot in life. It wasn't until Susanna showed up that I saw that we can – and do – decide who we will really be. We make that choice, from moment to moment, although we may not know it. We are unaware of our most important decision ever – who we will be.



Presumably, each one of us has a Susanna character, or some variation of her, who can emerge and prod us to act from choice rather than from social pressure, habit or fear. Before we can give life and expression to this fantastic creature, the expression of our true great self, we have to locate and identify her.

“Hello. Yes. I'd like to report a missing person. It's my authentic self. She's been missing since around the time I started high school. No, I don't have a

recent picture. I think she might be wearing a tiara and waving a magic wand. I sometimes get a sense that she's nearby, but never see her."

It's pretty clear that the FBI and the Royal Canadian Mounties can't help us with this. Only we can find that place where our greater selves hang out. That place may be closer to home than we know.

Where our Great Selves Hide

Your version of Susanna can be found in that place where thinking and feeling overlap and morph into knowing. It's somewhere between your head and your gut. Could it be your heart?

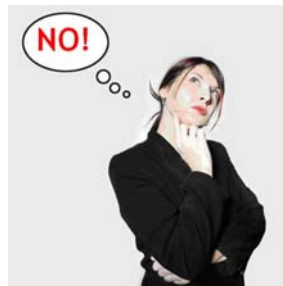
Just as the physical heart is an organ that pumps life into our bodies, the metaphorical heart pumps life into our lives. This is where our greater selves create our dreams.

I'm puzzled by how few of us are willing to go public with our dreams. We'll happily own the dream of winning the jackpot and retiring on a tropical island. We're uncomfortable sharing the dreams designed by our greater selves. What's wrong with admitting that you believe you're put on this Earth to make a difference: to touch people, one at a time or hundreds, to bring people happiness, knowledge or well-being, to make a mark on the world?

To live a life of meaning is a deeply human calling. Why do we keep that desire private?

Fear.

Pick a fear, any fear; it's probably in there somewhere: fear that we might not get it done, fear that we might do it wrong, fear that we might look foolish, be wrong, lose someone's approval, seem eccentric, be misunderstood, fall flat on our face. In other words, we might fail. Susanna says, "Failure is feedback." The voice that keeps us from sharing and living our heart's dream says, "Failure is failure, and it's bad."



The Voice that says, "No!"

Where does this negative voice come from? And how does the lone voice that says, "Go!" compete with a virtual choir of "No!" voices in which our own is the loudest? Susanna has been singing gorgeous solos all my life, and I have been one of the many voices that tried to drown her out. "Who am I to be great?" I asked, joining in the negative chorus that had trained me so well.

If, as a young person, I had a destination in mind for my life's journey, Greatness was definitely not it. I was on the road to Underachievement.

In my report cards, teachers usually wrote some version of, "Susan is an excellent student and a pleasure to have in class. However, [*insert your favorite teacher gripe here.*]" So I learned, as so many of us do, that one path to love and approval was to get good marks. I also learned that there was inevitably a "however" in the picture and overcoming it usually involved trying harder. Nobody ever tried as hard as I thought I was trying.

Trying harder didn't really pay off. Otherwise my most vivid memories of school would not involve "time outs" in the cloakroom, surrounded by thawing snowsuits and smelly rubber boots. In the 1950s, at least in St-Lambert, Québec, isolation was the usual punishment for sharing an unsolicited opinion in class. Worse yet, during one cloakroom chat about mending my ways, a teacher actually wept. Perhaps the smelly boots tipped her into the crying zone, but I suspect she understood that thwarting self-expression was inherently bad for children.

To my 10-year-old mind, my offence was extreme. After all, it made a teacher cry. More confident souls might have said, "Wow, what power. You made a teacher cry?" For me, that burst of emotion from an authority figure was more evidence that I was not living up to my potential or to the world's expectations of good behavior.

Here, too, was a paradox I could not resolve. On one hand, the world I knew wanted me to be outstanding. On the other hand, it didn't want me to stand out. Through the years that followed, in a contest between "Be outstanding" and "Don't stand out," blending in would usually win. My choice to conform would leave me frustrated and sad.



The Quest for Perfection

Meanwhile, my parents' only wish for me was to be happy. I worked hard to do that (or, at least, appear that way) while harboring suspicions that I might be spoiled. My friends' arguments with their parents over marks, homework and general behavior escalated as we moved through adolescence. By contrast, I got along great with my parents. Rather than conclude, as Susanna would, that I might be a good kid who was doing OK and lived in a fortunate home, I decided my parents' standards were too low. I decided I would have to set a higher standard. To be happy, I would have to be perfect. In other words, I had to be smart, beautiful and accomplished, which I translated as making the most of your talents and putting them in the service of others.

Beautiful was the hardest part. I didn't look like Jean Shrimpton and the girls on the pages of *Seventeen* and *Glamour*. I didn't understand (until I was working as a model) that nobody looks like those girls. Compounding this sad fact was a school uniform that scored 8.7 on the Hideous Scale. (To this day, I cannot stand wearing navy.) Is there, anywhere on the planet, a teenager who is satisfied with his or her appearance? Probably not. I decided it was a mercy to be merely plain, rather than flat-out ugly. With perfection (and, therefore, happiness) clearly out of the question, why should I bother being smart and accomplished?

Thus, at 17, I left home for university, a committed underachiever. In Psychology, I discovered I was "normal." In Sociology, I noticed I was "middle class." My marks dropped to "average," since all of us were bright kids. With my diagnosis as a normal, average, plain, middle class mortal, I could be extremely good at not standing out. In fact, sang the negative chorus all around me, I was perfect for the job. *

I Double-Dog Dare Ya!

About this time, Susanna started to take an interest in my welfare. She found ways to make me do brave things. She dared me to audition for the university chorus, though I couldn't read music. She knew it wouldn't matter. She occupied my body every time my folk duo sang in the campus coffee house, helping me express the emotion in a song in ways that made the audience stop talking and listen to the words.

Susanna helped me find jobs. "You think that looks interesting? OK, let's try it." She'd have scheduled an interview before I could say, "But I'm not really qualified." It was her amazing belief in my ability that found me, with very limited training, teaching in a modeling school, working as a TV reporter, editing magazines, and teaching sales skills to bankers.

Susanna enrolled me in classes as diverse as macramé and economics. "The more you learn," she said, "the more versatile you'll be and the more likely you'll be to succeed. Plus, you'll have more fun in life." And she was right.

Susanna practices Eleanor Roosevelt's advice to "Do one thing every day that scares you." She was there when I first tackled double black diamond ski trails so steep my legs were throbbing. Her rules were, "No whining," "Get up when you fall," and "Always carry a Mars bar." She raced sailboats with me on days so windy that the chorus of "No!" voices sang, "We'll all be killed!" She made me wear a life jacket. She's brave but not foolish. I fell overboard during a race, was quickly rescued, and we still crossed the line first.

* It's worth noting that, in the Canadian culture, the collective welfare of the group is at least as important as individual rights and often more so. The desire to blend in, barely conceivable in a land dedicated to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," is not unusual in a land founded on the less individualistic principles of "peace, order and good government."

In the corporate world, Susanna's type of courage can be startling, but it's needed there. Our better selves take the idea of the "management revolution" literally. They know that, across the land and around the world, people inside big business, big unions, big governments and even big armies can make this world a better place. They don't accept the cynical view that organizations are inherently greedy and there's nothing we can do about it. They work from within to help employers and clients recognize – and act on – their accountability to stakeholders. They don't say, "Those clowns just don't get it!" They help the clowns get it.

Though I didn't know it, Susanna often came with me to the office. On those days, I spoke more boldly about things I believe in, particularly honest communication. The sense that I was risking my PR job by speaking out was trivial, compared to the excitement of finding ways to show passion about work. Passion is the missing ingredient in most workplaces. I have had more than one boss tell me what makes me effective is my passion. The Susanna part of me is the source of that courage and my ability to use emotion to appeal that part of other people.

Susanna also made me wear red cowboy boots to the office. I mention that because this unorthodox footwear seemed to make the "corporate uniform" – the ubiquitous blue suit – feel less like my hideous high school getup. The Susanna part of us understands how to brighten up a bad situation – and not just through the use of colorful accessories.



Pining in Paradise

In that respect, Susanna worked overtime when my husband and I moved to Bermuda for his work. Though it is a lovely place, it was a bad situation. The combination of a small market and work permit regulations kept me unemployed or underemployed for nine years. It is easy for the head to accept that a country's immigration requirements are designed to protect the career aspirations of the local people. It is much harder for the heart. "You must understand that, if we can find a Bermudian who wants the job, we cannot get a permit for you." If I heard that once, I heard it a thousand times.

Susanna signed me up for art lessons and made me show my work in juried shows. She (or the Beaujolais) urged me to tell Bermuda's Alliance Française that, next year, rather than use a recording of *La Marseillaise* at their Bastille Day party, I would happily sing it for them. As a result of that bold move, I met some of my greatest friends on the island. It also led to a gig, every

July, singing the anthems for both the French and the Canadians. * Susanna talked me into singing lessons, when I was well over 40. "Are you insane?" I asked. Her response was, "Let's find out."

I had no way of knowing that, through singing, the Susanna part of me would take over my life. I showed my teacher the one piece of sheet music I had brought to Bermuda, *La Vie En Rose*. Overjoyed at having a student who could actually speak and understand the language of Edith Piaf, my teacher determined that I would perform a full solo concert of cabaret song within six months. "*Oui. Parfait!*" Susanna sang over the objections of *moi* and the "No!" chorus.

"What, exactly, is cabaret song?" I wondered. A Google later, I found a web site that said, "Sing in Italy this Summer!" The two-week Tuscany Project workshop, accommodation and airfare represented the entire contents of my bank account. "You have to do this," urged Susanna. "You have to do this," echoed my lovely husband. (Were they in cahoots?)

"I found them on the Internet. What if they're weird?" I asked.

"You won't care; you'll be in Italy and the food's included," Susanna replied. (It was at this point that I began to suspect that Susanna might be Italian.)

I went.

What if they're weird? Indeed. If anyone was weird, I was that person. Why was I hurtling along the rails of Europe to a workshop that would prepare me to perform as a cabaret singer? I was a quiet Canadian struggling to blend in, first in my own land and now in Bermuda. This was crazy. I was crazy. And why was I wearing this huge straw hat? Holy Diva, Batman! Who did I think I was, Diana Ross?

As those "No!" voices littered my mind with negative thoughts, it became clear that Susanna, author of this adventure, was not on the train with me. She was still in Florence, sipping espresso and painting little postcards. Apparently my courage was with her. I studied my Italian phrase book. "*Mi chiamo Susanna. Sono Canadese ma vivo in Bermuda, un'isola piccola nell'Oceano Atlantico. Sono qui perché sono pazzesca.*" *



* Overt patriotism is not a typical Canadian trait, and it has always been a kick to lead these expatriated Canucks in proudly and loudly singing O Canada, in both official languages. "They did what?" exclaim the quiet Canadians back home. Who'd have guessed, eh?

* "My name is Susan. I'm Canadian but I live in Bermuda, a very small island in the Atlantic Ocean. I am here because I'm nuts."

Mi Chiamo Susanna

As the minibus climbed the hilly trail from the station to the stunning *locanda* that would be our home for two weeks, the 20 workshop participants sized each other up. We compared musical experiences, discussed the songs we were preparing to perform, and speculated about the adventure we had just begun. All but me were from the US or Germany. I reached for the few words of German I knew. Unfortunately the only phrase I could remember was, "That's not my bag." I wondered if, in German, it was all about luggage or if, as in '60s hippie-speak, it might indicate that something was "not exactly my cup of tea." I hoped there was nothing prophetic in my recollection of that particular phrase.

To devote two weeks to singing and performing was joyful beyond belief. To do it in a place that felt like Heaven on Earth was an added bonus. Each morning, I strolled the gardens of the *locanda*, inhaling the aroma of the lavender and rosemary planted along the perimeter and watching the mist rise from the valley below and burn off in the Umbrian sun. Here, nobody cared what it said on my passport. Here, nobody cared about the color of my skin. Here, nobody seemed to judge a book by its cover. In this world, it is the heart that counts.



And then we would sing.

Now, part of the deal with cabaret song is that the singer makes the audience *feel* the story. It's not just about the words, which are often filled with irony. Nor is it the music, which often involves changes in key, tempo and volume. It is about becoming the character of the song. To be successful, according to our teachers, you need to do some "inner work."

Had I known we were going to tackle "inner work," I promise you, I would not have considered this project for one second. Yes, I was a bit of a mess, but I didn't want to know how messy, and I didn't want to make that untidy discovery in the company of strangers.

But I was there, and if looking inward would make me a better singer and help me survive this looming solo concert, I'd give it a shot. Or I would fake it.

We examined the content and context of every word of our songs and fixed them in our brains, hearts and bodies. The exercises using the body for emotional expression showed me that, despite years of dance training, I was oblivious to my body most of the time. How could that be?

We explored the voices that say "No!" and engaged them in dialogue and dance. I was shocked and terrified to discover that the loudest and most limiting

voice was my own. If I was feeling confined by my life, Bermuda was not to blame. I was the creator of my prison. To communicate through cabaret – to communicate authentically through any medium – I had to get out of my own way. I had to sing louder than the chorus of “No!” And I had to sing a different song.

The hardest part of the program, for me, was exploring our voices. I had arrived with a pretty voice. I liked its sound. I liked its reliability in an unreliable world. It was as if my voice was a metaphor for me and I didn’t want to change.

Voice exploration demanded that we produce sounds that were definitely not pretty. I didn’t get the point. I had no interest in going to the places in my voice that sounded harsh, or angry, or whiney, or powerful, or sad, or free, or confrontational, or coarse. I was afraid to go there. I didn’t want to acknowledge that I had such places in my being. Still clinging to my adolescent notion of perfection, I wouldn’t and didn’t go there. I would do it my way.

Terror on Terra Cotta

I lost my patience with my instructor in the middle of an exercise in which, like the Wicked Witch in Oz, we were screeching, “I’ll get you, my Pretty, and your little dog, too!” I imagined myself singing to the instructor, “I want to sing Pretty, whatever I do!”

And then I did it.

My confusion and anger had summoned Susanna and she had arrived. She let every emotion I had ever known come flying from the place where it had been bottled up. Instead of thinking about my feelings, she made me feel my feelings. Feel them in the heart and in the body and in the world. The box was opened. The curtain was drawn back. The real me was going to be exposed and it was not going to be Pretty.



And then Susanna simply occupied my body. She was “on” and she embodied all the things I had always been afraid to be – High Maintenance, Full Diva, Extravagant, Impulsive, Bitchy, Bold, Proud, Loud and Seriously Imperfect.

“By George, I think she’s got it,” proclaimed the instructor.

I abandoned the song I had planned to work on – Kurt Weill’s poignant *Youkali*, about a small, perfect island that exists only in the mind. Bermuda? Instead, I chose one from another book. Funny, sad, tuneful, and ironic, it was

perfect. It recognized how, for so many years, I had been trying to control my life instead of living it.

*Whenever there's a serious situation,
I run the other way without any hesitation,
Things get battered and beaten beyond expectation
And often get destroyed;
So my motto is:
Whenever possible,
Avoid! Avoid! Avoid!**

On our final day of the workshop, as we said our goodbyes, my mind flashed back to a day a friend and I had tealeaves read. Madame Zena's words had made no sense. "You will find your heart on *terra cotta*." Being a know-it-all 20-something, I thought, at the time, "Silly old doll, she means *terra firma*."

Two decades later, on the smooth terra cotta tiles of a hillside inn in Umbria, I knew I had, indeed, found my heart. I had recognized and embraced Susanna and would be changed forever. I was no longer trying to be beautiful, smart, and accomplished. I already was who I was. I was no longer striving to be perfect, a hopeless hope that no mortal will ever achieve. I was just going to be.

I returned to Bermuda as Susanna. Her lightness became mine. Immigration hassles, workplace challenges, and the endless demands of the nonprofit groups wouldn't bother me now. Susanna, the *diva bella*, would take it all in stride. I stopped looking for work. I started looking for life. I would prepare for re-entry into the great wide world. I would be my great self.

As Susanna, I enrolled in an MBA program, something I had wanted to do, for years, but couldn't justify. Now, through the magic of technology, I could do it from the middle of the ocean, with occasional three-week visits to Canada.

Pushing 50, I set off for the first residential session. "What if I'm the oldest person there?" I fretted. "What if this is hard? What if it's Mickey Mouse?"

"Excuse me? I thought you were Susanna," responded my greater self.

I arrived on campus exhausted and jet-lagged. I welcomed the welcome lecture, in which we were specifically told, "This is not about marks, this is about learning." I found the four other members of my work team. Three of them were lovely. The fourth, seconds after "Hello," said something that sounded like, "OK, here's the deal. We get A's. The "Marks Don't Matter" story is a lie. Nothing and nobody is going to hold me back." Wow! How Type A can you get? Even Susanna hadn't a clue how to deal with this man.

Next morning, we assembled to meet the instructors, find the library, learn the online tools and then - Surprise! - a special task before lunch. "I think this will be a fun way to learn your way around campus," said our cheerful program director.

* *Avoid*, Phillip Namanworth, Teshuvah Music Inc., 1990

“Oh no!” I whispered to my teammates. “A scavenger hunt.” As a corporate trainer, I’d inflicted this sort of team building exercise on participants, yet in my jet-lagged state, I failed to see the value. I smelt betrayal. I had not committed every cent I would ever earn in Bermuda to play camp games. I said this out loud. Or maybe Susanna said it.

To make a point about reading instructions carefully, dealing with ambiguity or some other worthy lesson, the game was structured to make it almost impossible for a team to succeed. This competitive group of achievers was chastened and cranky. But when Ms. Cheerful asked for feedback, there was silence. Susanna stood up. “I came here to learn about business. I didn’t travel half way around the world to play games.”



Though a few heads nodded, I was instantly branded as trouble. In an unfortunate burst of empathy, I read Mr. Get A’s thoughts and felt his fear. He saw me as the weak link. Anything I subsequently did to convince him otherwise provoked a sullen or sarcastic response. Here was the first person I had ever met that I absolutely could not get along with. He seemed to be the physical manifestation of all the creatures whose voices I had ever heard in the chorus of “No!”

Brave, wonderful Susanna vanished. Self-expression looked like a liability in this crowd and so did she. My desire to be perfect returned. I had to atone. I had to redeem myself. And I had to get all A’s. I absolutely would not be the weakest link.

I would occasionally catch a glimpse of Susanna, but she kept her distance. I became guarded, unconfident, depressed and confused. I was obsessed with performance. I had to excel. I’d spend way too many hours on every assignment and get top marks. Mr. Get A’s continued his bizarre battle. It felt cruel, wrong and personal.

Dealing with Mr. Get A’s was probably the most important lesson in the entire program. I owe him enormous gratitude. I finally had to accept the fact

that not everyone was going to love me – not even if I were striving to be perfect. This was beyond my control.

Dealing with that man led me to explore interpersonal communication and to pay close attention to my own. I was a professional communicator, yet my expertise was with words on paper. Suddenly, I was interested in how we deal with each other face-to-face and how that shows up in the workplace and in relationships.

On the assumption that he was lacking it, Mr. Get A's inspired me to study emotional intelligence. I discovered that I had much to learn about using and managing emotion. EI is now a cornerstone of my learning and my work.

A business coach who was visiting Bermuda suggested coaching was a growing field and I might be good at it. It seemed a nice fit with communication and emotional intelligence, so I began to train as a coach. Each of these activities involved more of that "inner work" I so disliked and feared. Susanna returned, asking the hardest question any of us will ever face, "What do you really want?"

"It depends on the day. It depends on the context. It depends on who is asking," I replied.

"That's your head talking. What does your gut say? What does your heart say?"

What does your heart say?

My heart says I want to be myself. I want to be great. I don't belong on the road to Blending In.

You don't belong on it either. Nobody does.

"Remember, always, that you not only have the right to be an individual, you have an obligation to be one," says Susanna, quoting Eleanor Roosevelt.

Each of us is already on a path to Greatness, and we are in the driver's seat. We don't need to follow anyone else because everyone's path is different. Maps and signs will not help us get to our own, individual greatness. We already know the way. Unfortunately, we are the ones who create the fog and put up the roadblocks. We lose ourselves when we tune the radio dial to the familiar chorus of "No!"



We will find our way when we relinquish the need to control our lives and, instead, simply live in them. When we lead with our heart, we will find we are no longer lost. Giving up control is never easy, but unless we do, the world

will never see that place where our Great Selves live. It will never receive the thing that only we can provide.

Does everyone have a character like Susanna lurking about, ready to show us our power? I think so. Like the imaginary friend some children create to play with, we can create our Great Self and interact with it.

Give that character a name you can call when you hear the “No!” chorus tuning up its limiting refrain. Give it a voice that can say, “Yes!” and “Go!” and “Why not?” and join it in a powerful duet. Give it permission to dream, and share its work making that dream real. Give it the steering wheel, for it knows the Road to Greatness and wants to take you there.

As you ride along, take a close look at this creature – and don’t be surprised to discover how much like your Great Self you already are.



As founder and Head Coach of [It's Understood Communication](#), Sue Johnston helps people communicate for results. Her belief in the transformational power of conversation puts the focus of her training and coaching on face-to-face communication. She works with leaders and emerging leaders to develop their skills as authentic, confident communicators. Sue has an MBA in communication management and professional certification from the International Association of Business Communicators and the International Association of Coaching. She is the author of *Talk To Me: Workplace Conversations That Work*.