



Regina V. Cates
Author. Advisor. Activist.

Introduction to

Lead With Your Heart

By **Regina V. Cates**

My name is Regina, and I am creating an incredible life filled with love, compassion, and purpose. But I was not always the joyful, confident, and responsible person I am today.

On my forty-third birthday, I remember sitting on the couch with my dogs huddled around me, rapidly going through a box of tissues and about to open a second. The tears did not stop. I sobbed because it was my birthday and life sucked. I felt helpless and hopeless; I wanted someone to heal me, someone to complete me. Without someone to rescue me and cheer me on, I did not imagine much chance for contentment.

Longing to have a good, lifelong relationship with a partner, I grew up believing I would meet the person of my dreams, enjoy a deep, rewarding, lasting relationship, and somehow magically live happily ever after. After a particularly difficult breakup—my sixth in a series of not-good relationships—it became crystal clear I did not know how to be a strong half of a healthy relationship. The bottom line was this: I did not love myself, so I did not know how to love others.

It seemed my life was a failure.

For so many years, I went along with the idea of success as defined by my peers and society, which meant having attained wealth, position, and honors. In order to be a success, I got a good education. Then I landed a series of respectable jobs with great benefits and, at some of them, a big corner office. Although I did not dislike my jobs, I was not content. My days were jam-packed with work, leaving little time for anything else. My overcrowded schedule cost me relationships with my partner, friends, pets, and myself. I had no time to really enjoy life. I was too busy being a success.

Where I lived, what I drove, what I wore, what I owned, and what I did determined my worth. I had a great house with a big mortgage, stylish furniture, and a well-landscaped yard, and yet I was unable to afford to have my dog's teeth cleaned. My car was beautiful, but I could not pay for its regular maintenance. The fancy wardrobe I thought was necessary for my successful image caused me to not keep up with, much less pay off, mounting debt.

With all of my success came large debt from living beyond my means. My home was crammed with

stuff, and yet my heart was empty. Filled with fear and worry, I could not imagine how I was going to pay off all the bills, even with my good job. After almost drowning in debt, I realized that “keeping up with the Joneses” was a shallow and irresponsible endeavor.

From an early age, I felt as if I were molded into a purchasing machine. Product ads promised to make me contented, beautiful, or sexy, and I spent much of my life surrounding myself with things, since I was conditioned to believe my house, my car, and my job defined me. I thought things would make me happy. So, I got used to whipping out the credit card without caring about how I was going to pay when the bill arrived. Nor did I stop to question if chasing after things was actually the way to joy or peace of mind.

During a visit to the veterinarian, I learned one of my dogs had a heart problem because of poor dental health. The news hit me like a ton of bricks. How could I love my pets and not take care of their health needs? Without proper care, they would not have the quality of life I wanted for them. Saying I loved them without responsibly demonstrating care for their health showed me my priorities were not straight.

What was the purpose of having a luxury car if I could not afford to keep it in proper working order? When had my car changed from being a mode of transportation to a status symbol? How important was my wardrobe, furniture, or manicured lawn if each time I got dressed, sat on my sofa, or spent time outdoors I felt stress in the pit of my stomach? Who was I trying to impress? Even if others were impressed by my materialistic focus, I was frustrated, anxious, and exhausted by such a superficial and unrealistic standard.

When I took time to honestly think about why I was spending without awareness or concern, it allowed me to step out of ego-motivated consumerism. As long as I continued to live above my means, I was going to be stuck with that horrible feeling. Buying more stuff would not validate me or get people to like me for who I really was.

Then I lost my job, and it all came crashing down. My excellent education and successful employment record did not help me find another position quickly, and it was almost two years before I was employed again.

I had not foreseen this and was totally unprepared. I sold my home to live off the equity and moved in with my parents. I let go of the beautiful garden I loved. My success seemed to quickly turn to failure.

And there was my health. . . . I'd stopped making regular exercise a priority around my twenty-fifth birthday, and for more than twenty-two years I'd smoked cigarettes. As a rock 'n' roll drummer, the advice I'd received to protect my hearing went in one ear and out the other. I burned the candle at both ends and went for days with only a few hours of sleep each night. As a weekend landscape designer, I loaded, hauled, and installed objects much too heavy for my strength and size. On my days off, I sunbathed without protection, often resulting in some bad burns. Fast-food restaurants were my personal chef for far too long. Water did not place on my list of top ten beverages. And sugar was a Federal Drug Administration vital food group. As you might imagine from all this, getting regular health and dental checkups was not a top priority. The only thing I was consistently protective of was my eyesight, because without regular eye exams and glasses I would not have been allowed to drive legally.

Then, at about forty-two, my life plan did a one-eighty. Not once had it occurred to me that there might come a day when I would become physically impaired. Sure, I thought about getting lung cancer, to the point where I was obsessed and lived in terror of it. I got sick all the time, smelled bad, and had a constant cough. But it hadn't occurred to me that any greater physical challenge might lie ahead. Why would it? I was born a natural athlete, excelling at every sport I attempted. Working in the yard, moving heavy loads of soil, plants, and stone, was a challenging pleasure. Eventually all the years of lifting too many heavy objects without supporting my lower back or asking for help caught up with me.

Unaware that my back was unstable and teetering on the brink of disaster, I sneezed. That one sneeze resulted in a lower back disc herniation, and the pain went from uncomfortable to excruciating over the next few days. Fortunately, I worked for a neurosurgeon at the time, so I got a quick referral and was rushed into surgery.

Two weeks after the surgery, I was able to walk around a short block in my neighborhood. It took

four weeks for me to drive and six weeks to return to work. More than three years later, I finally woke up and accepted the truth: my body was not going to ever be the same.

The most substantial shock I received in life was looking in the mirror and not recognizing the person looking back. Two back-to-back surgeries on my spine left me with permanent nerve damage, muscle atrophy, and a limp. It became easy to ignore the inner, aware voice that told me to keep exercising, eat right, and stretch. Instead, I ate without awareness, sat around feeling sorry for myself, and waited for a miracle.

I gained more than fifty pounds in what seemed like the blink of an eye, but it was actually not overnight. As I became emotionally detached from being responsible for my body, time got lost within my unconscious excuses.

At forty-three years old, on that couch, rehashing all that was wrong with my life, I felt destined to be miserable and lonely. I was fully caught up in the largest pity party I had ever hosted when something extraordinary happened. Originating from deep within my soul, the words *Do you enjoy feeling this way?* passed through my consciousness. "Of course not!" I screamed out loud to no one. My heart responded, *Who do you think is actually responsible for creating the joyful and fulfilling life you want?*

In the instant it took for "I am" to roll off my lips, the idea that someone outside me had the power to fix my life or heal the holes within my heart vanished. I became empowered by the truth. Creating the life I wanted was completely an inside job. If I am my own worst enemy, how can I be my own best friend? I was the only one capable of developing the self-love, intimacy, self-acceptance, peace, and joy for which I longed.

I could no longer blame other people for my life. Yes, growing up had been hard. At school and in church I was bullied and oppressed, causing me to be angry, blaming, and unhappy. Feelings of unworthiness, confusion, and rejection resulted in an unhealthy and deeply wounded sense of self (ego). My suffering and immature side was not interested in being accountable for *my* actions or emotions.

That day I began accepting the reality that my life remained difficult and unsatisfying because I still saw myself, other people, and the world around me through the eyes of a damaged and emotionally immature child. Allowing hurt to speak for me, to behave for me, to think for me, I was being driven by inappropriate impulses.

A thoughtless and reactive approach did not allow me to create a happy, peaceful, and rewarding life. Only ugliness came from self-centeredness.

Through self-assessment, I realized that living insensitively is being out of control. If I am not emotionally in charge of and present with my behavior, I undesirably and recklessly react rather than take the thoughtful actions necessary to create the productive life I say I want.

It took time, heartache, frustration, and disappointment to learn that when I practiced reactionary and self-justifying behavior, I usually received the same in return. Unfavorable action carries baggage in the form of damaging consequences. The returning result may not happen right away, yet the energy expended is guaranteed to be returned.

There is truth to the saying “Payback is hell.” The difference between constructive and destructive behavior is freedom from the suffering of reprisal that results from irresponsible actions.

What a revelation! What a wonderful birthday gift!

Now on September 4th each year, I celebrate the day I was born. When the gathering is over and friends and family leave, I retreat to a quiet place. Spending a few moments alone, I pay tribute to my forty-third birthday, the day I began ending my suffering by looking within to find the biggest fan, most loving life partner, and best friend I will ever have. That is the “birth-day” I began to live—the day I chose my heart’s path.

Learning to lead with my heart—that often hard-to-describe yet fully understood part of me where the positive guiding principles of a conscious life, such as responsibility, cooperation, and peacefulness originate—has transformed my life. No, it hasn’t always been easy or smooth. I’ve made lots of mistakes. But along the way I’ve

learned to love myself and found a loving partner. I learned to respect myself and stopped smoking and lost those extra fifty pounds. I learned to put self-centeredness, blame, judgment, and feeling like a victim behind me. I learned to create a life of deep meaning by leading with the respectful, compassionate, and sensitive part of me.

Assuming responsibility for my life has filled me with self-love, joy, and satisfaction. Now, instead of crying on the couch with my dogs, I celebrate life. And I want you to celebrate life by learning to lead with your heart, too.

In the following pages I’ll share stories, some funny and embarrassing, some sad and poignant, but all of them hopefully inspiring. These are the lessons I learned, the questions I asked, the mistakes I made, the limitations I overcame, and the realizations I had that moved me from living egoistically and irresponsibly to putting my accountable heart out front.

Following your heart’s path is an adventure of creating a life of deep meaning. My greatest desire is that this will serve as an indispensable guidebook to help you along the way. That is why at the end of each chapter, I offer some meditations and exercises to help spark your personal reflections.

If you have a journal, write down your answers there. If you don’t own a journal, jot down your responses here in the spaces and margins. However you prefer, thinking about these questions for yourself and applying them to your own life as I applied them to mine will go a long way in helping you lead with your heart.

While I do not know your personality, beliefs, likes, and dislikes, I do know you and I are more alike than different. Please consider this book the testimonial of a good friend. Regardless of what pain and disappointment you have experienced, you can have self-acceptance and self-worth. You can love yourself and be loved by others. You can live in peace with your family, neighbors, co-workers, and the folks you meet each day.

So if you’re ready, let’s begin the journey.

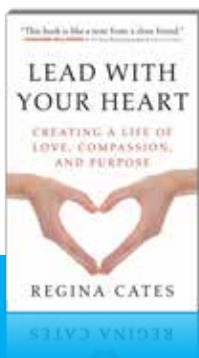
Regina

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Regina V. Cates
Author. Advisor. Activist.

"A fantastic book!
I highly recommend it
to everyone."

- Donna Ryan



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What noted thought leaders and celebrities think of Regina and *Lead with Your Heart* -

"This book is like a note from a close friend, reporting on her spiritual journey from lovelessness to love. By walking you through her experiences, she casts light on your own. And not just her life but yours too begins to change."

- **Marianne Williamson**, #1 *New York Times* Best Selling Author of *A Return to Love*

"Regina Cates is a beautiful human being who teaches us by sharing her own life-changing experiences. Her message is loud and clear, 'Trust your heart, it will never lead you astray.'"

- **don Miguel Ruiz, MD**, #1 *New York Times* Best Selling Author of *The Four Agreements*

"Regina Cates has done a huge service by lighting the path for us to reconnect with our heart. Cates has made the journey herself, and each chapter resounds with her painful, all-too-human experience. Easy to read, yet filled with wisdom that will penetrate your heart, this book puts the power back in your hands. It's a must-have."

- **Marci Shimoff**, #1 *New York Times* Best Selling Author of *Happy for No Reason and Love for No Reason*

"If I were asked to share one life lesson, it would be to lead with your heart—exactly as Regina Cates teaches us in her beautiful book, *Lead with Your Heart*. Cates gives us the keys to creating a joyful life: Find your connection with heart and reclaim the wonder of who you really are. What a magnificent mix of inspiration, wisdom, and humility this book is!"

- **Tavis Smiley**, PBS broadcaster, author and philanthropist

"Regina Cates has given us a tremendous gift by sharing her heart on these pages. So much of what we are fed in life leads us on a path away from what makes our hearts sing. *Lead with Your Heart* is different. This book is for everyone who is attempting to make meaning of his/her life, for everyone who is looking for a guide on how to live the best life he/she can live within his/her given circumstances, for everyone who is desiring self-acceptance, joy and peace while fully experiencing this crazy world we live in. I can personally attest to how leading with my heart is helping me become a more centered, joyful, truthful and fully alive person, accepting - and even embracing - my personal journey. It doesn't matter if you don't 'do' the new age stuff, have a million self-help books, or spirituality isn't your forte. Get this book anyway."

- **Sharmila Devar**, actress

"In *Lead with Your Heart*, Cates provides factual evidence that the heart is a wise spiritual organ that beats in rhythm to being true to oneself in a most noble way: living a heart centered life."

- **Michael Bernard Beckwith**, founder of Agape Spiritual Center and author of *Life Visioning, A Transformative Process for Activating Your Unique Gifts and Highest Potential*

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