

## Emily's Affirmations: A Valentine's Day Gift to Yourself

by Emily Rose Barr

The invitation from a friend was simple: take a picture each day of something that brings you joy. The intention was harder: bring a little light into a year of profound tumult and isolation. In the summer of 2020, I, like many was starting to feel the unraveling of time—my calendar no longer punctuated by social gatherings and grocery shopping, casual exchanges and well-worn routines. The unscheduled hours I'd previously longed for were being delivered in bundles and heaps and had begun to feel alarming and disorienting. Absent of the markers I habitually relied on, Wednesday could now be Monday, Thursday was Blursday, and weekends were as strangely solitary as the rest of the week.

Of course there were perks - getting outside more was a welcome prescription, and the stillness that surrounded me offered an opportunity to silence mental chatter and amplify the senses. But there was also a restlessness that yearned for a return to the pre-pandemic normal. I'd learned many ways to approach ambiguity and find resolve in uncertainty, but none seemed sufficient to respond to the collapse of the familiar life I'd taken for granted. Except for one.

Like a cool rain on an August day, the invitation to take a daily, joyful picture was perfectly timed. It required only a steady hand and a willingness to tune in. It would be months before the implications of this seemingly ordinary assignment would fully dawn on me. Its daily rhythm was a reassurance; and the simple activity was salve to the spirit. I discovered joy lurking in the nooks and crannies of everyday scenes.

A sandwich pictured with goldfish crackers was an ode to the kindness of a friend; the image of a pinecone, a reminder of nature's mysterious depths. A snap of a day's outfit was a nudge to keep going, a pair of shoes, a tribute to how far I'd come.

Unable to limit myself to the requisite one photo a day, I would revel in taking three, four, five, or six, each enthusiastically received by their commissioner whose delight radiated through our every exchange. After sharing dozens of garden shots, and a sprinkling of other miscellaneous moments frozen in time - a sleeping dog, a smiling baby, a chalkboard scroll, a board game - the assignments I'd come to savor became more specific: take a snapshot of your bare feet in the grass; of your shadow; of your hands on your heart. Take a picture of yourself holding a favorite mug. The mystery of their conception only drew me in further, my artistic eye free to wander from the constraints of intention and outcome.

My creative spirit burst at the seams as I experimented with color, composition, and perspective. My outer world was a magical realm, where I had intimate exchanges with

caterpillars, ladybugs, and praying mantises, while my inner world was becoming more spacious and at ease.

A few weeks prior to my daily adventures in photography, I began to receive quiet flashes of insight. They came in the form of soothing messages heard deep in my heart, that I transcribed into my journal. These spontaneous affirmations saw me through my most difficult days. "There will always be a sun," read one. "Go slow and know," read another. Some carried a world of meaning in half a dozen words. Others were a little longer, but whether concise or more expansive -- the words of each one seemed to arise from the soul's wordless knowing.

As they nestled their way into my daily routine, the affirmations became an avenue to self-reflection and a potent protection against the gradual erosion of my outer world. I was both their messenger and recipient, each one packed with the wisdom I needed in the moment. Sometimes I would write several a day, tending to moments of sadness and fear, anxiety and overwhelm. They would whisper to me gently during meditation, or greet me before I rolled out of bed in the morning. They would be inextricable from a nature encounter or woven into the voice of a friend. If I tried to harness them, I'd be met only with the echoes of messages past, unable to tap into their wisdom on demand. But they would always return, calling me back to myself, meeting my darkness with the promise of dawn.

The serendipitous overlap of these pursuits soon resulted in their pairing: each of the affirmations I'd written came to be accompanied by one of the photos I'd taken. This, I discovered, had been my friend's intention ever since the day my assignments had gotten more specific.

I came alive as each new pairing spilled into my inbox. A vision that had emerged from a space of fear and longing was becoming a source of tremendous light. My purpose was being traced with the delicacy of a paintbrush, my creativity blossoming with each new turn. Over time, I felt called to reconstruct the original visualizations, a pursuit that filled my waking hours. Crafting color schemes and uniting design elements was like learning a new language that you wish you'd always spoken. It was, and continues to be, a labor of love and an honoring of my innermost self in ways that I couldn't have imagined.

The combining of these inner messages with images -- first with my photographs, and then with my graphic designs, was a natural unfolding that neither words nor timelines can fully explain. If I told you that Emily's Affirmations was born of an email that graced my inbox on the eve of last September's arrival, that would be true. Were I to tell you that a spontaneous phone call and chance encounter years before were responsible for its evolution, that would also be true. What if told you that this pairing emerged from a series of unwelcome interruptions and hard compromises? True. Tough breaks? True. An experiment in vulnerability? True. A pandemic, a creative nudge, a mentor, a friend, a way with words, an attunement to wonder, a breaking point, a meeting of hope and expectation? All true.

Like all things sacred, there are a number of conditions that came together that fostered the emergence of Emily's Affirmations. Trying to relay its story, my story, in a linear fashion would be in many ways futile, as words cannot be ascribed to experiences that transcend our limited understanding, built on order and problem-solving and answer-seeking. Perhaps in that regard, I've let you down. If you were looking for a

concrete history, an answer to the who, how, where, and when of it, I'm afraid I don't have one. But I believe that the innumerable decisions, unlikely encounters, roadblocks, saving graces, passing exchanges, unknowns, and serendipities that led to this communion of comforting words and creativity bursting at the seams are the answer. Maybe we're just not asking the right question.

I cannot help but think how easily you could have been reading different words right now, perhaps not even my own; how easily the merging of my creative spirit with my desire to reach the hearts of those in need, a juncture I'd long neglected, could have otherwise unfolded; how easily I could have kept the messages that lined the pages of my journal confined to an audience of one.

But I didn't. And the words that are meeting you are these ones, not others. And being invited to hold space for the wounds that we all carry is no longer an aspiration but a vocation. I like to imagine that in sharing these affirmations, there are those who don't know they need them, but one day they will, and our paths will cross at just the right time. And that for some of you reading, that time is now, and we are intertwined by a mystery that is all the more beautiful left unsolved.

The affirmations are both a part of me and bigger than me. My inner smile grows at the thought of their unraveling, weaving their way into the days of those I may not know, but whose stories I'm certain bear resemblance to my own.

Take a leisurely wander through Emily's soul-crafted offerings, and if you're inspired to share an affirmation of your own with her, you can do so here here.