



Imagine a world where, instead of rooting around for what to wear in the morning, one starts the day by dressing from the inside out; picking aromatherapy oils to blend and massage into the body according to one's mood, emotional needs or what's in store for the day.

This two-minute self-nurturing ritual is one of the life tools invented by Karen Downes, founder of The Flourish Initiative, who lives by the mantra that doing inner work leads to effective outer action. The London-based consultant, author, activist and social entrepreneur, through her programme 'Leading With Grace and Resilience,' explores rebalancing yin and yang virtues through observing nature's ways. Nature, she says, represents "the most exquisite example of nurturance, nourishment, grace and resilience, and being in flow with the cycles and seasons of life." In a burnout world operating on anxiety, her holistic approach to building resilience has resonated with individuals and corporate leaders open to embracing the principles of "conscious leadership," "soulful" business practices and "wellbeing in the workplace." Even Number 10 Downing Street, under Cameron, booked a session.

Australian-born Downes, who has been pioneering new frontiers of the mind, body and soul since the 1980s, brings rich life and work experience to the table. As co-founder of In Essence, her first business venture which grew into a multi-million dollar aromatherapy business, Downes in her early career pioneered the aromatherapy industry in Australia from a cottage industry into mainstream business and healthcare. With the support of her business partner sister Judith, Downes introduced aromatherapy into drug rehabilitation clinics and hospital palliative care units, training nurses in the application of essential oils for healing and recovery.

The siblings sold their business in 1999 and in 2002 Downes moved to England. There, paradoxically, she switched from a very female world to a very masculine world, from working with oils of a healing nature to working with executives from the oil and gas industry. "Two years ago, what came to me after fifteen years working with women, then fifteen years with men, was that both sexes are needed in today's world," explains Downes who is Head of Training and Development for the international NGO, Rising Women Rising World and co-founder of the FEMMEQ Summit held in Berlin in June. "My work now is about helping people and business leaders achieve a deeper sense of wellbeing in themselves and with their employees to find meaning in their life and purpose in their business," she adds. "Today we have complexities and challenges we've not had to face before, and at the same time we have greater human capacities available to resolve these issues. I see corporate environments that deplete and diminish the people working in them, leaders who crush and dominate their employees. This has to change."

Tree of Life

Wellbeing pioneer Karen Downes looks to Mother Nature for lessons in leading with grace and resilience.

Interview by **KATYA FOREMAN**

Photography by **WAI LIN TSE**

Unlike the Facebook army of Cheshire Cat-grinning 'friends', for Wellbeing the biggest message has nothing to do with the pursuit of happiness. "I'm more interested in people flourishing than I am people being happy because happy is superficial," she says. "Unfortunately there is so much material and media about happiness and happiness is not a constant state, it's a moment-by-moment experience." That's why I love the word flourishing, I might not be happy moment-by-moment but I'm flourishing when I am grateful, when I'm contributing, when I feel that life has purpose and meaning."

This includes, she insists, learning to flourish in the downtimes. "It's a bit like going through what I call a winter of the soul, being able to let go and move on. A lot of women I've worked with say 'Oh, screw that, I don't need him, I'm moving on.' That's not going to get you there; that's not resilience. You need to have the grace to let go and rebuild. That's why grace and resilience in equal portions is critical. I call it leading with grace and resilience," says Wellbeing, "because we're all leading something or someone. Even if we're not leading in a corporation, we are leading lives."

What is your definition of resilience?

I was recently asked to do a talk on resilience at Number 10, at the Prime Minister's office. They asked me because I said resilience is no longer like what we did after the Industrial Revolution, that is, knuckle down, strap up and get on with it. That's not resilience. What resilience is, is building our capacities physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, those four elements holistically, so that we can embrace the complexities of life, we can weather the storms. We have an inner firmness and unshakeable endurance. That's resilience.

Tell us about your concept of a winter of the soul?

Mother Nature has been around for billions of years and we know there are rhythms and cycles we have to pay attention to, like the seasons Mother Nature needs to survive and thrive. Mother Nature lets go in the autumn and has a winter, the time of regeneration of seeds in the soil before they burst through in spring. In a corporate environment, they only want the spring and the summer. In our own cycles as human beings, grace is being able to let go, like the tree does its leaves. It gracefully surrenders, trusting that there will be a winter where there's a stripping back.

Can you share any of your own experiences?

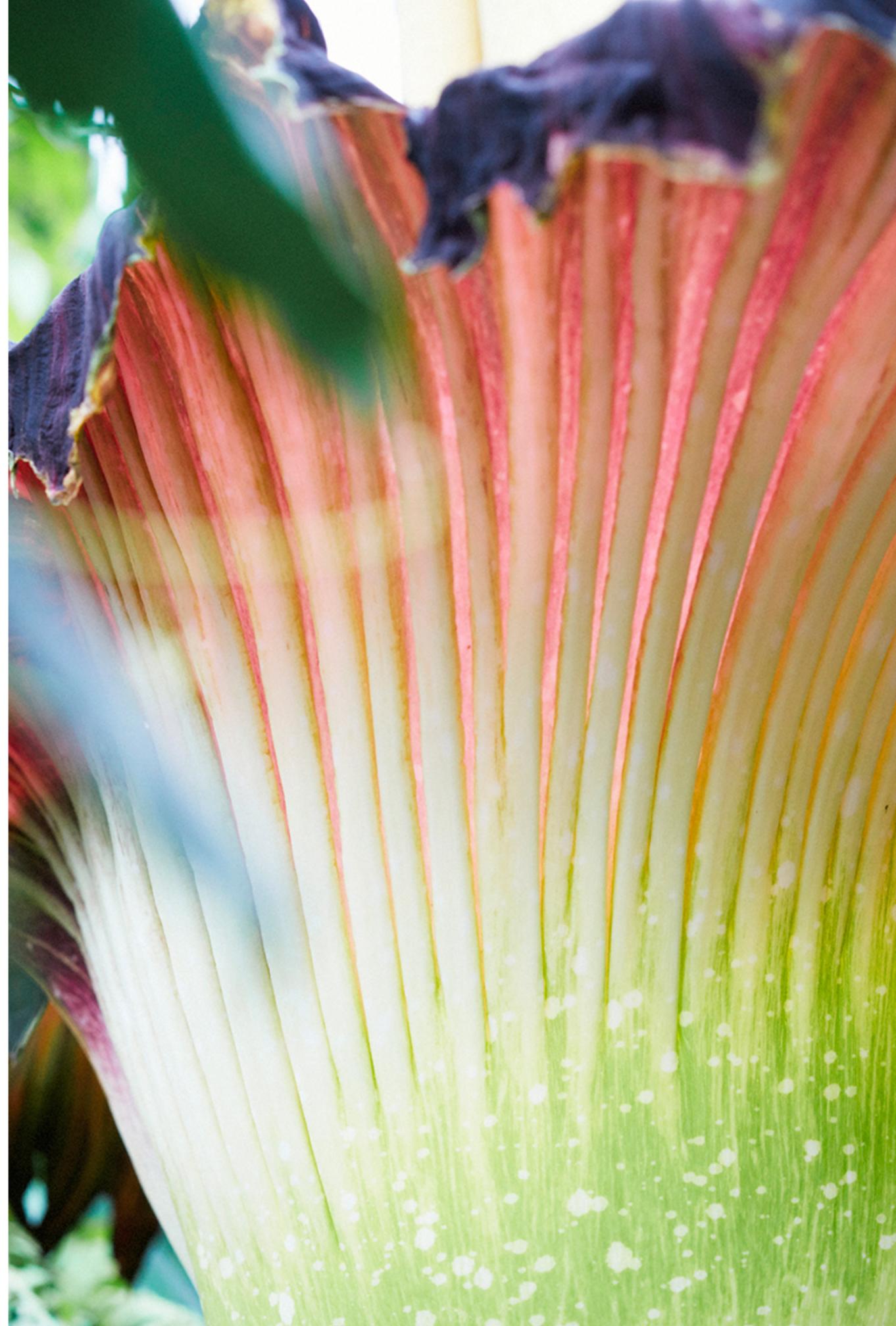
In 2001, my husband went off with a 23-year-old. I was broken-hearted as he was the love of my life. My business had been sold and I was to lose my home and husband in the space of a week. I could hardly put one foot in front of the other, so I decided to get a 'normal' job in a coffee shop. A group of cyclists used to come in every morning for their coffee. (I don't know how, but I was smart enough to pick a very cool coffee shop.) One morning when they all rode in I thought to myself, I have to get back on the bike of life, I am not doing well. One of the guys asked me out to dinner and I decided to ask him to coach me. I bought a really smart bike and began training five hours a day, and for every turn of the pedals I cried with grief and sorrow for my husband. I worked at the coffee shop in the morning and afterwards would get out on my bike. To make my cycling worthwhile I decided to compete in the World Masters Cycling Championships. I had five months in which to make the grade.

This was the resilience part. I trained and trained and trained on my own until I was confident enough to ride with the boys. At five o'clock every morning through the winter, I would get up and join them on a 50-kilometre ride. There were about 80 in the peloton, mostly men. You've seen the Tour de France, right? Where they ride in a big pack. Eventually I got strong enough to stay in the pack. But one morning, I began to fall behind. One of the guys stayed with me and pushing with his hand in the small of my back three times, he helped me catch up. I'm telling you this because it was an important part of my learning. I kept saying 'It's okay, it's okay. I'll make it. I'll meet you at the coffee shop.' And he said 'If you don't make it, none of us do.' He wouldn't let me drop behind and I thought, that's what I want to do for human beings. We don't all make it.

What does it mean to flourish?

You could say that flourishing is a dynamic emergent phenomenon, that is to say when we have the experience of being the best of ourselves combined with a deep sense of wellbeing, engaged in meaningful work and contributing to the wellbeing of others, and the sense that we are living true to our purpose. It's not a goal to attain. You can experience it even in the face of adversity. No one can tell you when you are flourishing. It is an internal state, an inner knowing. We all know the right thing to do but often ignore the whispers of our conscience. This is why grace is important to flourishing; listening to our inner counsel, our intuition, the knowing of what is the right thing to do. Then, resilience; acting on this with an inner firmness and unshakeable endurance. We see this in nature, our greatest teacher and healer and for us humans our source of energy for this must come from a strong foundation of wellbeing. Flourishing is really when we have a good relationship with ourselves first, then the outer world."

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The tree metaphor is central to your work...

The greatest example of grace and resilience for me is the tree. In a lot of my work with the corporate world around high performance the analogy of the athlete is used. But athletes can also burn out. The time comes when they are no longer fit enough for the Olympic Games or competitive biking or whatever. There are many examples in Mother Nature of things living for hundreds of years. Some trees on the planet are thousands of years old. So I want to shift the analogies we use to Mother Nature.

An acorn starts as a seed of possibility, the possibility of becoming an oak tree. Then biologists will know that a tree has two phases of growth. In its primary growth it achieves height and in its second, breadth. With breadth comes the strength to weather the most violent of storms. Human beings reach full height at around 18. From 18 to our early 30s we are transitioning and figuring out life. This is the period when we are gaining our breadth, our capacity. From around the age of 35 we need to do the deep inner work that keeps expanding our resilience.

One of your many practical tools for grace and resilience is aromatic dressing. I love the idea of an aromatic wardrobe. Can you lead us through the technique?

The idea is to do it straight out of the shower. You have your box of oils and a little bowl in which to blend them. So you're still naked and you dip your fingers into your chosen blend. You rub your fingertips together to warm the oil then start massaging at the bottom of your leg up the calf to the knee. You dip back in, do the other leg and continue in this manner up the body. At our workshops we'd have the women doing the moves. Dip-dip the oil, rub-rub the hands together and massage. Dip-dip, rub-rub, massage! [Laughs.]

What's the maximum number of oils one should use?

The usual recommendation is three oils because they are complex in their own nature. It's not just the smell that you're taking in, you're also taking in their healing qualities. Some of the oils have up to 150 constituents. The science behind aromatherapy is one of the reasons I fell in love with it, because it not only smells beautiful, it is scientifically proven through the chemical components that exist in the plants. One of the things Rudolf Steiner said about plants is that they are an expression, or a mirror, of us as humans. If you think about the plant's blossom, it's the final expression of the plant; it's where all its last processes happen. Our digestion system is like the root system of the plant and our lungs are like the leaf system.

It's also a good alternative to perfume...

I think the notion of aromatic dressing and massaging the body with oils every day is empowering because you're nurturing yourself instead of just spraying on a perfume. It's much more powerful than spraying on a chemical scent that has been designed by a perfumer to elicit a response in others and not just yourself.

We have to be mindful when we're aromatically dressing, whether with essential oils or perfume, this notion of restoring grace is about connecting to the plant.

What are some of your favourite oils?

An absolute favourite is Neroli (orange blossom). The orange tree is special because three essential oils are extracted from it, which is very rare. Neroli comes from the blossom and for me is the quintessential oil of grace. It's sweet but also used for hysteria, when someone's hysterical or extreme in their emotions. It's very centering and restorative. Oils have yin and yang properties and it's very much a yin oil.

The second, which is more the resilience part, is frankincense. We know the story of it being given to Christ by the wise men and of frankincense in mythology, but it also has therapeutic qualities in healing old wounds, physically and emotionally. It is said to connect you to your higher self.

Does the perfume of the oils stay present all day?

As a human being, our sense of smell fatigues. Have you noticed men will often go way over the top with their aftershave? They can't smell it! The natural chemical qualities and constituents of essential oils stay in your body and contribute to your immunity. When you are aromatically dressed you have an aromatic aura around you. People will always say to me 'oh my god, you smell so good!' It's very subtle and they can't quite detect what it is because you created it.



Can you share any other wellbeing rituals?

One of the simplest techniques that I've used for years is the ritual of the bath. If you're letting go of something you can literally pull the plug and drain the water and the thing that you are needing to let go of. Whatever it is, tears, a relationship, a job loss, you have almost to embody the water and let it go down the drain.

Also when you're out in nature, just be in nature and reflect, let yourself be meditative. There's also the ritual of gratitude each morning. Gratitude to me is grace. It brings us back to our humility, our softness, our appreciation, and that fuels it. There seems to be a yearning in people these days for silence. I think the ritual of being silent and quietening our inner chatter is an important part of grace, to be still and have a moment of meditation or go into nature. Even aromatic dressing is a form of meditation. It's about a profound connection to the inner aspects of ourselves and how we want to communicate with the outer world. HONORE