

Asking For What You Want

Mariah Fenton Gladis

The Inspirational Series

Books by

Mariah Fenton Gladis

Tales of A Wounded Healer

INSPIRATIONAL LIVING SERIES:

Bitterness Is Not An Option

Creating Moments That Matter

Asking For What You Want

The Art Of Receiving Well

Your Relationship With You

Magic Words To Fulfilling Relationships

The Experience of Forgiveness

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About The Author



In 1981, Mariah Fenton Gladis was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Three prominent neurologists gave her a 10% chance of surviving more than 2 years.

Yet, three months after the diagnosis, Mariah married and proceeded to have two children. Today, she continues to be a loving wife, a doting mother, an author, a renowned psychotherapist and motivational speaker. Mariah's courage to continually go forward with grace and determination—and without bitterness—demonstrates the amazing survival capacity of the human spirit.

Mariah continues to conduct workshops across the globe, addressing a wide range of human challenges: from early life emotional trauma to debilitating grief and loss, from life threatening illnesses to people seeking more meaning and joy in their lives.

In Mariah's words:

"People often ask me how I do it, listening to people's problems all day long. I tell them that I don't hear problems. I hear people wanting to change, wanting to be better human beings, wanting to create happier families. From every continent and all walks of life I hear people wanting to love

and be loved more effectively. I hear people wanting to remove barriers in their lives and provide a healthier environment for their loved ones. This is a privileged position that I have, sharing so many compelling and heartwarming moments of laughter and tears with people working toward healing.”

Asking for What You Want

Moving out into the world and asking for what you want can be a scary business. It takes strength and assertiveness to ask your boss for a raise; it takes tact and directness to ask your siblings for help with an aging parent. Putting yourself out there and asking for what you want can be fraught with risk. You might hear a no. You might get into an argument. You might be disappointed.

On the other hand, your siblings may not have been paying enough attention to the situation and may be glad you asked for help. Your boss may have been distracted and may not have realized it was time to honor you with a raise. Neither might have happened without your movement or expression. The capacity to represent yourself well in the world, and move out on your own behalf by asking for what you want, ensures that your needs are communicated, known and respected.

Q – Sometimes I’m not sure what I want or need. How do I know?

^m - You can search within your body for clues. Needs always are housed in your body, and your body has its own language and way of communicating those needs. A physical need of thirst is recognized by a parched mouth; hunger is recognized by pangs in the stomach. How do you recognize loneliness in your body? For me it's a sensation of emptiness in the area of my chest accompanied by a longing for comfort and connection. Clenched teeth could identify a need for respect, as a reaction to not having it; trembling hands could suggest a need for reassurance. A need for understanding might show itself as a withdrawn numbness; tight shoulders or a pounding heart could signal the need for safety.

It's also important to discern whether the body sensation is expressing a physical or emotional need. For example, tightness in the throat could be simply thirst, or it could signal anger, fear or sadness. If it's thirst, you may want water. If it's an emotion, you may want to share your feelings with someone.

I often tell my clients to become fluent in the language of your organism's hungers. As artists are drawn to color, texture, and imaginings, some needs are deeper longings for that which defines us in our uniqueness. They have only to complete their being-ness. A scientist will be drawn to questions, information and exploration, a schoolteacher to information, a carpenter to wood. If you're lucky or well guided you'll be able to recognize these longings as needs early in life. That will set a path of your labor of love that may last a lifetime, serving as a wellspring of fulfillment as you contribute your gifts to the world.

Q – Why are my needs so important?

^m - Well, because needing is the life force of your organism, a vibrant and healthy drive of hunger and longing. You need

breath, air, water, shelter, human contact, laughter and tears. Your organism is continually shifting and bringing them to the forefront of your awareness. For example, I wake up, my legs want to stretch and I want to be still for a few minutes before I rise. I want to move, reach for my partner with a warm good morning and then retreat to the privacy of my bathroom to complete what is my ritual of beginning my day. Need is presented. Then I satisfy that need and a new need presents itself to be satisfied and so on and so on.

If a need is not satisfied, it can become difficult to move on to the next one. That happens in not only a physical way but also an emotional, intellectual and spiritual way as well.

Q – Are we all the same? What I mean is, do we all need in the same way?

M - As infants we all start life being totally dependent. Our survival depends upon our needs being met from the outside world. Gradually, we become more able to meet many of our own needs; concurrently, we become more and more independent in our functioning. As adolescents and young adults, we strive for higher levels of independent functioning. After we have solidified our independence, we move on to further maturation, growing into a healthy state of interdependence, where we are reliable for others to depend on us and we are able to depend on them. We have matured enough to recognize the value of and need for social and emotional contact, where we are honored, assisted and loved by other people and where we have the wisdom and generosity to allow others to depend on us.

A healthy family is one that is aware, responsive and respectful of the ever-changing needs of each family member and of the family as a whole. A healthy society is an inclusive society; one that recognizes the needs of its

members and responds in appropriate and generous ways. Needs are both individual and universal.

Q – From an individual standpoint, do I have any basic needs I should be aware of?

™ - You have many kinds of basic needs: physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual, social, functional and economic. Physically, you need air, water, nourishment, shelter, clothing, breath, movement, sex and sleep. Intellectually, you need information, education, skills and fulfilling work. Emotionally, you need bonding, touch, love, self-esteem, security, connectedness and hope. Spiritually, you may need community, self-actualization, a moral path, connection with nature and the Source and a deep reverence for all others. And these needs range in their intensity from a mild inclination to a clear preference and all the way up to a burning passion. Your needs give you information about how to maintain balance in your life. Looking at it another way, they are intelligent guides to harmony and your compass to fulfillment and health.

The needs may be small, such as clearing your throat or stretching your neck, taking a walk or scratching an itch. Frequently they involve self-care: washing your face, brushing your teeth. You take care of these small needs all day, every day and their successful completions are the foundation upon which you are freer to address other, more complicated needs. After all, you can't begin to think of what you need in a relationship with your spouse when you have something in your eye.

Q - What happens if I don't know what I need?

™ - When you do not discover or have the opportunity to follow your path, you can become like a fish out of water. Something in your soul withers. I know a man who was by

nature a gifted artist. At the age of 13, his father died. The man had to quit school and go to work to help support the family. He became a pipe fitter and lived a long life of chronic resentment, frustration and addiction. I imagine if he had been encouraged and allowed to follow his nature as an artist he would have been a more self-aligned human being and a myriad of positive possibilities would have emerged. It's tragic when you try to swim on land.

Q - Sometimes I think I confuse what I need. I'm not always sure what I want.

M - Where you can get in hot water is by confusing superficial longings with deep, emotional or spiritual needs, and then proceeding to mismanage them. This can be an unintentional self-deception about what really matters. Do you need that cigarette or do you need love? Do you want that extra slice of pie or do you want connection? Addicts are one of the clearest examples of this self-deception. Does the alcoholic really long for the sickening oblivion he compulsively marches into time after time, or is there a deeper longing in him that he is too afraid to face, or too unskilled or unaware to discern?

One of the surest roads to recovery for someone with addictive behavior is the development of a sound spiritual and emotional life. Often the spiritual and emotional longings of addicts have not been heard or met. When these needs are met, compulsions become easier to manage. When the addict allows himself to feel that deep emotional and spiritual longing for connection to himself, others, nature, and a God of his understanding, he is on the path of honoring and fulfilling his true, deeper longings.

Q - You mean I might be wanting the wrong thing?

M - Let's take an example of physical needs. There is an

explosion of obesity in this country that constantly points to people's not understanding their nutritional needs. They listen, instead, to advertisers promising satisfaction if they consume products that are nutritionally unsound. They are not aware of the nutritional needs of their bodies. They are physically mismanaging their dietary needs. I have a client who is learning to understand that her constant craving for Burger King cheeseburgers is, in fact, a craving for relief from job stress (comfort food). Food has become a comfort in the face of her co-workers' perceived arrogance and attitude. Although it tastes good in the short term, her needs were being mismanaged to the detriment of her physical and emotional health.

Q — Did you ever misread your needs?

M - After many years of strategizing and experimenting with a nutritional approach to my own healing, I now crave healthy foods such as raw organic vegetable juices. The thought of drinking a Pepsi repulses me because my body has a natural rejection of that which is toxic to my health. This is a complete change for me. In childhood, I used food more often than not to address emotional needs. My mother, obese herself, actually gave me food and sweets to comfort my needs instead of her presence and affection. It took a lot of years of purposeful behavior change for me to identify my true needs. I had cravings, but never recognized them for what they were. My body may have been craving vitamins back then. I thought I wanted a milk shake!

Q – I think I take care of my daily needs very well, but you seem to be talking about more important ones.

M - What I'm mostly addressing here are the needs that live at the core of each of your levels of functioning: physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. They are the ones that clearly express your deepest, authentic needs. They're not

band-aids or balms or substitutes. A true need is not ice cream, fame or fortune (although I'll argue when it comes to fine dark chocolate). True needs go right to the heart of the matter. They are "what's important."

These true needs are so important that, in their absence, the quality of your life can be severely limited or impaired. As a dramatic example of this, it is common for infants who are totally deprived of touch to develop *mirasmus*, a condition that results in failure to thrive, and possibly death. *Mirasmus*, also known as infantile atrophy, is a Greek word meaning "wasting away." In the 19th century, more than half the infants diagnosed with *mirasmus*, died before they were a year old. It was later discovered that babies who were not touched on a regular basis literally would starve themselves to death.

Q – What are some ways I can use to get my needs met?

M - Sometimes, when you want something, you simply need to gracefully ask for it. At a recent Thanksgiving dinner, which is traditionally at our house, my cousin made the announcement that she needed help cleaning the dishes and a load of pots and pans stacked in the sink. Leftovers needed to be put away, and general cleanup was necessary. She was even more specific; she asked the men to help. They had not volunteered, but all got up willingly and participated. She didn't whine, complain, accuse or transfer any negative attitude. She simply and politely asked for what she needed. It makes it easier on the person you are addressing when you are clean and clear in your communication.

Children often respond well to this concept. My friend Ben's young son, Nathan, said to his dad, "Don't ask me if I want to help you with something, just ask me to help!" My husband tells the story of negotiating a special situation with a caterer with whom we had worked for years. This small

problem had the possibility of becoming a deal breaker. Her husband overheard their animated conversation and, knowing our long history, politely interjected the old Indian saying “Never trip over small stones.” To get each of their needs met, they needed to shift away from complaints and judgments to a fairly expressed mutual exchange of requests. They needed to simply and respectfully ask for what each wanted.

Q – What if I ask and the person says “No?”

M - Of course you don’t ever want to leave yourself alone out on a limb. When you take the risk to make a request, you want to be there to comfort and support yourself if you hear a “No.” For example, if you work up the courage to ask out on a date someone you think is special, and she says no, the last thing you want to say to yourself is, “She was too good for you, anyway. You should never have asked her out.” You do want to hear something like, “Good for you, you went for it. She doesn’t know what she’s missing.” Even if the other person does not come through for you, you must be there with compassion and support for yourself.

Q – I hear you, but sometimes I don’t ask for what I want because I don’t always feel I deserve it.

You’re not alone in that. Many people can need love, comfort or affection, and yet feel too unworthy to ask for it. Since they feel that “needing” is wrong or dangerous, they search for a substitute, eating or drinking compulsively to avoid feeling their longing. Healthy people know that their desire for affection is a good and natural longing. They are able to effectively communicate this desire with a loved one, and are more likely to get, as well as give, what they want.

Q – But what if I’m too needy?

^m - Please don't misunderstand the experience of wanting or longing and consider this "needy," equating need with something bad or weak. The truth is that, in response to what you feel, you want or need something all the time. In fact, needing is a sign of natural, healthy functioning. Having a need places you off balance. Satisfying a need returns you to equilibrium. Such is the inner pulse of your living organism, always striving for balance. There is an old saying, "It's not the mountain that defeats the man, it's the grain of sand in his shoe." Neglecting even small needs can make your life chaotic, disorganized and uncomfortable.

It's not the fact that you are "too needy" that gets you into trouble; rather, it's how you communicate your needs that frequently is the source of the dysfunction.

Q — I can understand that. But as a child, I don't remember being told I was too needy.

^m - In childhood you probably learned about needs from watching the adults around you manage their own wants and needs. You might have watched a parent constantly deny her own needs, while instead, meeting the needs of everyone else around her. Or you may have watched a parent turn to anger and violence because he was impotent to meet his own needs and those of his family.

This is not to say that your every need should have been met. It is more to say that it is unfortunate and sometimes tragic when children learn to turn against themselves, and disrespect their normal hungers, and then substitute unhealthy behaviors in order to deny their true needs.

A child may need help with homework or learning to ride a bike or throw a football, or just some plain old time and affection—all healthy, normal wants and needs. To an overburdened and exhausted single mother, these requests

might feel like unwanted intrusive demands and she may rail against them and her child. “How can you ask that of me—can’t you see I’m busy. You’re selfish. All you care about is yourself.” When greeted with this kind of response, a child usually learns that her needs hurt her mother. A template of guilt, self-recrimination and self-loathing is set.

You, as a child, did not have the ability to understand that your needs were legitimate, especially if you were faced with an adult who implied otherwise. You may have learned that your needs were too much or too selfish or just plain wrong, and that it was better to deny your organismic instincts.

Q - When I ask to have a need met, there’s always seems to be a problem.

M - A common mistake people often make is asking for what they don’t want instead of asking for what they do want. They tend to create a battleground instead of a negotiating table. They fight to get their needs met. “Don’t leave your room like a pigsty” instead of “Please take the time now to clean up your room. It will help you and me feel better.” I overheard a coach say to one of his male players, “Don’t kick the ball like a girl” instead of “Make sure you leave enough space between yourself and the ball so that you can make a full kick.” A wife might say, “Don’t track mud all over this house” instead of “Please leave your work boots at the door.” Or “Stop criticizing me” instead of “If you’re giving me difficult feedback, please do it with kindness and respect.” One is an underlying or outright attack. The other is a positive request.

When people rant about what they don’t want instead of openly expressing what they do want, they often assume the other does not want to give them what they want. This is frequently not the case. A spouse often does want to give his

mate what she wants but is responding defensively to an attack. Try assuming that your mate really does want to meet your needs and approach her from that perspective. Instead of “Stop driving like a maniac” you might try “Honey, I know our family’s safety is important to you. Would you consider driving more slowly?” Often it takes a considerable pause to figure out how to say what you do want in a way that supports the other person as well as yourself. It’s well worth the effort.

Q - Can you give me some other ‘asking’ skills?

M - Yes. Another way to productively ask for what you want is by making “I” statements instead of “You” statements. In other words, talk about yourself and your needs, rather than making statements about the other person’s behavior or character. Again, this involves openly expressing your needs. Don’t bypass being vulnerable by saying, “You don’t do this” or “You never do that.” Rather, make I statements such as “I need this” or “I need that.” Instead of saying, “You never tell me I’m pretty” say “I would really love it if you would tell me you think I’m beautiful.” In this way, instead of placing the responsibility and blame outside yourself, you own your own needs and wants and take responsibility for reaching out and getting them met. Needless to say, this makes it way easier for your mate to be generous with you. If you ridicule or belittle, point your finger and say “You,” “You,” “You,” it usually creates defensiveness, and a lack of cooperation or motivation. The lesson here is to turn your criticism into a request.

Q – There are some people who see any interaction as confrontational. How do I ask them for what I need?

M - There are times when it may be too abrasive to be totally direct and it is more advantageous to set the stage for creating the occasion for having your needs met. Make it as

easy as possible for the other. Take positive initiative. Give clues to what you need. Give opportunity. You want to facilitate an ability to know what you need and provide for it. You might do it by a joke or by putting your arms gently around your partner and saying you need to be held. I do this a lot with adult children and parent healing work. If you want your father, for the first time in his life, to tell you he loves you, you want to make it as easy as possible for him to do so. You don't want to criticize him for past inaction or complain that he always lets you down. You want to let him know how much his love means to you, and how he could positively change your life by speaking those words of love now.

Q - I'm afraid of telling people I need something. Why should I always need to ask for what I want? Shouldn't it be obvious?

M - My new clients often resist the idea of revealing their needs and asking for what they want. "If I have to ask for it, it doesn't count. What good is it?" they ask. They want to hold onto the childhood notion that others should instinctively know their needs, read their minds and give them what they want. All of this without any direct communication about what they feel and need. They don't want to do the work of artful negotiation; instead, they long for the other to know them well enough and anticipate their every need. This is a romanticized and idealized view of human interaction. We are each responsible for managing our own needs, and that includes revealing them in skillful and easily heard ways. Ironically, this sometimes is more difficult in our closest relationships, where we are highly vulnerable and have the most at stake.

Q – Is there any key to providing for my needs?

M - Yes. It's critically important to have a relationship with

yourself that includes a healthy respect for your needs and the ability and commitment to provide for them. When you possess this healthy respect, you are more likely to creatively provide for yourself and communicate your needs to someone else in a manner that is not apologetic or implies you are wrong for wanting. You also are less likely to substitute or confuse possessions or substances as objects of your desire, when your true longing may be for a richer emotional and spiritual life.

It's also important for you to understand that your needs are good, right and healthy drives that can help promote balance and harmony in your life. Your job is simply to learn how to correctly identify these needs, embrace them, and find responsible and loving ways to fulfill them. And one way is simply asking for what you want.

BIOGRAPHY: Mariah Fenton Gladis, LCSW, BCD

Founder and Clinical Director of the Pennsylvania Gestalt Center for Psychotherapy and Training since 1976, Mariah has been a faculty workshop leader at *Esalen Institute* since

1987. She received a Social Worker of the Year award from NASW, a Living Legacy Award from the *Women's International Center*, and is one of "Pennsylvania's Best 50 Women in Business."

Mariah is on the Board of Advisors of *Camp Dreamcatcher* – a camp for children affected/infected with HIV/AIDS, faculty and trainer for *Center for a Healthy World*, a volunteer-driven psychotherapy cooperative, and belongs to the *National Association of Social Workers*, where she is a Board Certified Diplomate. Mariah is the author of *Tales of a Wounded Healer*, an accessible description of her psychotherapy practice.