Mid-late December and I’ve finished week 3 of couch to 5k and the Shadow work book, which I’ve been calling it. The Dark Side of the Light Chasers is what the author calls it so I suppose I should also share that title.

Musing this morning as I ran in the dark, stars out, two dogs in tow – or at times towing me, about how it was all about small actions, done consistently that often help effect change. Too often we think we should be able to do something immediately, to have what I refer to as the X factor effect. Back to the ‘How many times have you tried it?’ that I mentioned last time. It’s a question I’ll ask my daughter when she tells me she’s done something but it’s not great. For starters it’s usually pretty good – she’s one of those people who can turn her hand to most things – and for seconds, it’s usually the first time. ‘Talk to me when it’s been a hundred times’, I’ll say. Of course, there’ll be encouragement along the way, but the fact that a first attempt isn’t great – well, surely that’s the learning, that’s how it's supposed to be.

That said, consistency isn’t something I’m great at. I was in Kefalonia when that really hit home for me as a practical demonstration as a dislike for routine. Routine wasn’t a word I was really able to use when I was a new parent, instead using the word pattern. Bedtime pattern – it felt less constraining, albeit in reality probably was the same thing. Bath, book, bed. Anyway, back to Greece, I woke early the first morning we were there and left a note for my parents and daughter, picked up the running shoes, got dressed and off I went. A 2k jog to the beach, followed by a sunrise skinny dip and a jog back – partly barefoot, partly with barefoot runners encasing my feet. I learnt, many years ago in Thailand, a great skinny-dipping trick, and have shared it with many fellow swimmers, so I see no reason you can’t benefit too. I’m not sure there are measurable differences scientifically with swimming naked or clothed, but my mind certainly feels the benefit. It feels more primal, more in tune with our surroundings, so different and I love it. If you’ve never tried it, I suggest you give it a go when you can. I think it’s like organic food and food – the organic should be called food and food with pesticides should be called just that. Skinny dipping and swimming, well, for me it should be swimming and swimming with clothes.

This trick makes it easier to enter the water clothed, strip, keep hold of the items without holding onto them so you can enjoy swimming properly, dress and leave the water respectably. Easier done in a two piece than a full costume, and there’s a funny story about fishermen and a full costume left on the bank. There comes a time one must get out of the river. Still. Back to the bikini/tankini. You take one leg out of the pants, twist and put the leg that’s already in them back into it. Pull up onto the thigh like a garter and away you go. I’ve done similar with the top, though I find it easier to just go in pants on. That’s how men do it after all. I don’t get the issue about women’s nipples. As a relatively small breasted, slim-ish woman, I’ve seen plenty of men on the beach with bigger (uncovered) breasts than me.

Anyway, I digress, but hope you’ll find the tip handy. I think there’s nothing better than feeling the water along your body as you swim, and without clothes is even better! I ran to the beach for my sunrise swim daily. Reaching day 10 I realised I was bored of doing the same thing. Which was when it hit me, repetition and I really don’t mix – if I was bored of what I’d describe as two of my favourite things… Bored of thinking I had to do them because I was in that place, not bored of the activities. So, I have to work hard at consistency. It’s definitely one of my flaws. Debbie Ford, author of the Shadow work book, would suggest that brings other traits – perhaps my spontaneity is related to it, on a natural polarity, or my sense of doing things that are fun. I definitely feel a bubbly side that has the opposite to being told what to do, an impish, rebellious nature. To bring change though, a little consistency can be a good thing.

That’s one thing I like about my planned year of discovery. The idea that there can be change, can be different activities done, whilst still working to a bigger goal. If I was to plan to do the very same thing daily, I’m pretty convinced there’d be more battling than making this look appealing to me. Which is a bit of a lesson in itself. If you’re the type of person this year would be a nightmare to – please don’t do it! I’m a huge fan of getting outside of our comfort zone and believe life is best lived stretching it. The magic happens ‘out there’ usually, not inside our bubble of comfort. That said, a stretch doesn’t have to be a jump. I don’t believe we should be living our lives in terror, albeit that works well for some people. For me, encouragement and stretching are good. A little step at a time. And then you look back and you’ve undertaken things you’d never imagine you would have done. Things that were inconceivable at the beginning. But you did them. There’s a great sense of achievement, of wonder there for me.

The early morning runs, which have an unwanted – for some at least, side effect of happiness are being undertaken with our German Shepherd X Greyhound and our Pug X Lhasa Apso. The two dogs seem really unconcerned that a 28 minute activity stretches into 45 minutes, sniffing and the rest, and I’m happy to have company on my runs. When I say run, I’d like to clarify, it’s most definitely a jog. Sometimes a jog on the spot as I’m waiting for used food to be deposited on the pavement pre clearing it up, sometimes a jog as I wonder what I’m doing and was it really a good idea to run with my mistake of skipping week 2? I’d ended up going week 1 to week 3, having previously done week 2 months ago and forgotten the rewind. So, I’m no Usain Bolt. And no plans to be. What I love about running is moving through the air at a different pace, I love the lightness I feel as a bounce. In the past with long hair, my hair bouncing as I ran would make me smile. In my head I’m a gazelle. I may look like a Heffalump off of Winnie the Pooh, but that’s OK too. The whole thing makes me smile. And I feel good for it. The dogs aren’t stretched by it, and at times are faster than me, seeming often to prefer the jogging bit to the walk.

For anyone who’s not done the Couch to 5K type apps, and I hadn’t before a few months ago, I’m a big fan. I’ve always gone out there tried to run, done it for a while, and not been great at sticking to it. Using barefoot shoes, you need to start slow, and I’m sort of a dive in kind of type… so the app, guiding you from zero to hero, or at least the potential of a 5k run, works really well. It’s achievable whilst still feeling to make a difference to fitness, to mental health. I really like. And whilst I don’t like being told what to do, apparently a chirpy unicorn named Runicorn on the app can do it.

I’ve also been musing over what really bothered me about Mary. Today as she spotted me from a path above our houses, she had to cough several times to signal her presence (for those in the covid hangover time, she was wearing a mask), and talk loudly to her dog all the way down the steps towards the house. Why, I’ve no idea. A desperate need for attention? My shadow work signals me to examine this within myself and when I’ve had this… I guess really, I can have it quite a lot. I can make a drama out of all sorts, and whilst I think I am pretty low maintenance, fairly chilled out, I’m incredibly grateful to the support I’ve had allowing me not to freak out over things. I can get in a flap over ex-husband stuff – far less so now, but in the past threats over taking me to court would take me days, months to get over at times. The ex-mother in law talking about me in less than positive ways in the pub would drive me mad. And I would moan and moan, particularly to my mum, probably going around in circles. I’m very lucky to have a great family and know everyone isn’t quite as fortunate as I am there.

Break ups sat watching Anne of Green Gables – the box set of the original, not the Netflix rebutchery – sorry remake. I strongly recommend the original if you’ve not seen it, and if you’ve not read the books, you’re in for a treat. Go read. So, there are definitely times, and times that I’ve felt victimised, had to get attention. The other day I said, for the first time, ‘when I left my daughter’s dad’, which amused me. Firstly, because it’s not what happened, but secondly, after he’d left, I would have told anyone who’d listen about how unfair it was, that our daughter was less than 1, that it wasn’t what anyone should do. I went through a phase of saying, once I’d done much work on things, ‘when we split up’, but to have reached the point I’d re-written it where I was in control was amusing if nothing else.

So, I suppose I can definitely be demanding of attention, and seeing that trait in myself, knowing it’s not usually in my light side, meant I was more compassionate towards noting it in Mary. I need to dig deep and do the exercises on paper as the book suggests, I’ve done them all in my head so far, but know there’s more healing to be done, more liberation to be achieved.

There’s been a few anniversaries this month, most recently our wedding anniversary, Christmas Eve, 14 years ago. I used to joke about that I’d picked that date so I couldn’t forget it. Be careful what you wish for! The anniversary of my ex-husband leaving, 22nd December, 13 years ago. They’re great dates to look back at how far I’ve come. I think it’s so positive to have something to measure progress by. It’s not on an app, or a graph of any kind but thinking of Christmas 13 years ago – I was a mess. Now, in a very different, more emotionally mature, happier, more contented place, still work to do, and excited about doing it. I’ve a 13 (and a half!) year old business that I set up myself – and even a toast made to me on Christmas Eve by a happy patient’s father, and the patient himself.

That was a great Christmas present this year, a young client who had had a migraine and started vomiting, and despite well matching homeopathic medicines, wasn’t stopping. Well, not the situation, but the response to homeopathy was brilliant. Having spoken to their GP, the medics were keen if he didn’t improve soon to take him into hospital. I’d had an email from his mum and messaged to get some more info. As we were going almost past their house on a quest for lizard food, I was able to drop off remedies at home for them. Within 10 minutes of driving away, I’d had a text to say that he was feeling better, was downstairs for the first time in 3 days. By another 20 minutes he was like a different child and the difference was huge. He continued sick free all night, managed to eat some apple and drink some water, whereas before he’d been sick when he’d tried for either. His dad, from a place of possible interest, having seen great results with homeopathy in other members of the family, was apparently now a convert.

Was it a temporary remission? He was sick again in the morning, they repeated the remedy and he was back on track. By Christmas Eve, I was being toasted for ‘her homeopathic genius’ by his dad, and the client was thanking me for making him better as he ate his Christmas Eve dinner. Of pizza, which as luck would have it, we were enjoying also, in our home 7 miles away. He’s brilliant about space, planets and knows way more than I, and described his tummy as a ‘super massive black hole’. I think the pizza probably helped! I don’t share the story as a one to show how brilliant I am, the homeopath could have been anybody. But I am fascinated about how quickly this medicine can change things. He’s been in that place in the past before and ended up admitted to hospital and on a drip. His mum told me I’d ‘saved their Christmas’. A great present indeed. If you’ve heard what the media says about homeopathy, I’d agree scepticism is likely the best route, however, just hang on there with me and let me tell you a short personal story about the media…

It was during the floods in Hebden Bridge, which is a small town about an hour away that unfortunately is easily flooded and has had extensive flood damage in the past. For 18 months Isla attended a democratic education setting there. I had a phone call from her one day telling me that Newsround were going to the school to do some interviews and could she be interviewed by them? ‘Do you want to be?’ ‘Yes’. ‘Of course you can, go for it’. The story she told me later both fascinated and horrified me. It was probably a brilliant lesson in life and I’m glad she learnt it, especially in our current times. They’d asked her how she felt about there being less children in school that day as the floods had meant some couldn’t make it in. ‘I like it’ she responded, ‘it’s quieter’. Considering on the busier days there was a maximum of 14 children in the older class that she was in… but anyway. They obviously hadn’t been wanting that response, so asked her again. And again. Then, and this is the best, or worst bit. They told her what they’d like her to say. Which was that she was scared as climate change meant it would be happening more often. Seriously. A 13 year old. Being told what to say for a program for children to watch. So, as you do when told what to do. Or as she sometimes does when told what to do (she’s also delightfully questioning too), she said it. Apparently she kept messing up and they had to record it several times before she had it ‘right’. I was incensed when she told me. How dare they tell a young person to lie for the TV. I thought I should object everywhere, and speak with school, Newsround, the BBC… then I calmed down, and realised she’d learnt a huge, HUGE lesson. What comes out in the papers, what is streamed into our homes, is what someone wants us to learn, to know, to think. It’s not necessarily the truth. It’s probably often not. It’s being presented to you by people who are prepared to manipulate a child and share that with other children. Trustworthy? I really think not. We talked about it and she said she thought before that day that everything in the news was real, and now she knew that’s not the case. To see it this clearly, from the manipulation of school age children, shows me just how little can be real out there.

She’s not afraid of climate change. She’s not living in fear. And neither do I want her to be. I want her to act, to do what she can, to care, to preserve, to nourish, to nurture our earth. And, for me at least, that doesn’t generally come from a position of fear. To love it, to appreciate it. Those for me are the important things, and I’m really hopeful that she’ll carry the mantle forwards. I’ve bought her the brilliant Isabel Losada’s The Joyful Environmentalist for Christmas this year – though she’s not a huge reader and hoping the process of osmosis will kick in ;). It would be wrong of me to let you think she’s an earth mother type at this stage, she’s a fairly typical normal teen. I’ve stopped being able to buy her second hand clothes, stuff from charity shops, but then hopefully I balance that out to a certain extent.

I made a challenge to myself 10 years ago to see whether I’d be able to not buy new clothes for a year – and, well, I’ve bought a few over the last 10 years now, but did it for a year, and beyond. If I’ve an occasional black tie do, which I do love – usually at a conference, then eBay has been brilliant for Coast or Monsoon type dresses – and not only saving the impact of the clothing industry, it’s a fraction of the price. Summer dresses I’ve also found eBay great for – and charity shopping gets me some items I’d never have considered before but look great. There’s been times that I’ve pimped them up a little with new ribbon, a bit of embroidery or the like, and others they’ve been good to go as they started. My top tip in this area is to find out what size and brand you like – for example I know in general a 12 long Next jean fits me perfectly. I know a size 10 Coast dress will be great. Monsoon is a 10 also. Desigual a medium. 12 Next for dresses. Fatface is a size 10. So, then I’m away and can bid to my heart’s content on clothes that I like, knowing that they should fit when they arrive. And worst case? Re-list them and sell them on if they’re no good. Sleeves are an issue for me, for some reason long legs are now available (phew after a teen-hood (is that a word – or does it go straight from childhood to adulthood?!) of scarring with unintended half-mast trousers!), but long arms most people are still to catch up on. So short sleeved stuff is good online and in charity shops you can check it out yourself. The available long sleeve day will come.

Anyway, if it’s a challenge you fancy, it’s fun, or was for me, and actually much easier than I thought it would be. Saving time, money, and reducing a fairly unenvironmentally friendly industry causing more pollution. Not in my name.

Back to the shadow work. The book’s title The Dark Side of the Light Chasers, doesn’t feel to sum it up fully for me, and I’d likely have passed it over if I hadn’t been recommended it by a friend. That said, I think there is such liberation and potential contained within its pages, I’d recommend it to anyone grappling with an issue, or irked by anyone around them. Or even just aware of staying in the light and perhaps there’s less balance there. Shunning our shadow is shunning a vital part of ourselves. It’s like loving half of a person. That’s crazy. Yet, we probably spend much of our time doing that. Probably because we love half of ourselves. You often hear the phrase or suggestion that if there’s something annoying you about someone else, it’s because it reminds you of something in yourself. And, how quick are we, I for sure, to deny this suggestion, even when I’d attempt to see it in the past. Surely there are some people who can just annoy you without you needing to see something of yourself there. Well, Julia, the author would suggest possibly not. If you’re irked by them (I do love that word, it reminds me of a great story Tony Robbins tells about the power of language), there’s something resonating. If you’re cruising along in your balanced space and something happens, changes are if you’re the Dalai Lama you’ll be able to offer a beautiful smile and move on.

What is starting to excite me now about any annoyance is that it’s a flag, a sign, of an area that I need to grow in. That there is work to do. Throughout the book, after every chapter, there are exercises to do. There’s a lot of work, in a really positive way. The friend who suggested it to me told me she’d read some, got the drift of it and found it really powerful. Many of the exercises involve writing (more on that in a moment), which I believe can be very healing in itself, and I’ve spent time meditating on them, doing them in my mind but am yet to journal on them. It’ll come, that’s in my plan for January now. I believe there is more freedom still from working with them in this way.

On writing, as I feel this is important to share, I’ve spent much of this last year working with The Artist’s Way and have been doing the Morning Pages most days. It’s got a little harder with doing my early morning runs and was definitely more challenged to find time to do it as life returned to more normality, but I plan to keep doing, at least several times a week, perhaps opposite mornings to the running. A mindfulness practitioner once described them to me as a morning mind dump, with the theory that you get up, go to the loo, have a shower, and then why wouldn’t you do the same for your mind too? To start the day after being rid of the old thoughts. It works well for me. Julia Cameron, the author and creator of The Artist’s Way, offers instructions of 3 pages, longhand, of free writing. This isn’t journaling, doesn’t have to have any structure, you just write whatever is there. Reading back over my writings (one of the week 10 tasks) I found themes that I was either stuck with at the time or even still stuck now, which were intriguing, and that sometimes I was beautifully eloquent and others not. Which is all fine, all normal, and all helped by the writings.

Boxing Day and I’ve started week 5 of the Couch to 5k. Running for a couple of 5 minute stretches feels good and sometimes is challenging. I ran a different route today which was far more sociable and had a couple of stops to chat. That human interaction is so important to us all I believe, and starving us of that depletes our immune system. I read of a study this year that talked about how loneliness was a valuable aspect to take into account around susceptibility to respiratory infection. Fascinating. We’ve heard barely anything about how to support our health this year, except that a magic jab will fix it all. In my humble opinion it won’t. Supporting our health, reducing our susceptibility for me is the big elephant in the room. And why? No money in it. Wim Hof features as one of my months of focus this year and having been gifted the book by a College I do some work for, I passed to my partner to read as it had also been one of his Christmas presents. Far from being disappointed about the early gift duplication, I passed the other copy to my dad.

Steve, my partner was excited to tell me about one tale in the book, not realising I’d told him months ago about the same thing. He assured me he listens to me (mostly!). Wim had felt his method had boosted his immune system so much that he could resist dangerous bacteria and been so confident that he was happy to be injected with it. Using his breathing exercises, he was able to clear his body of the bacteria, without any negative effects upon himself. The other people in the study suffered way more than Wim. OK, well obviously he was a medical anomaly. He thought not, and invited others to take part too, training them in his methods first. Not only did they all do the same as him, the study was written up in Nature and another highly respected journal. And so then the whole world would surely know? Well that’s when it all went quiet. Why? No money. Health doesn’t equal wealth anymore. Not to big companies at least. Sickness = lifelong customers = wealth.

I want to say here that it’s not that I think vaccines per se are bad, I think the concept is brilliant. I am also aware as a homeopath I’m already branded an ‘anti-vaxxer’ and for that probably should be hung up on a stake and burnt. Remember the media in the story earlier. This term was one thought up by media to divide, to demonise. Where it came from? To my awareness anti-vaxxer is a negative term for someone who questions. Someone who is unsure. Surely it could be a less emotive term? I know medics who chose not to follow the mainstream path, scientists, researchers. Parents who have scepticism or have experiencing issues with their children and are pro-choice. It’s slightly unsettling that my spell check recognises it as a word. It’s not a word I resonate with, I’ve had them in the past and would do if I had to again. I would say I am pro-choice, pro-safety and anti-suppression of data. Burying research isn’t something that I admire, but it is something I’m aware that goes on, in this and other industries. I am curious about why you aren’t allowed to question. If it’s so safe, so brilliant, then why the name calling? Why the putting down of someone that questions?

Why someone curious, for example right now, about how a drug that’s being brought to mass market and yet there is still a clinical trial running for two years into the future shouldn’t be questioning. There is no long-term safety data. I am curious about how, even when the drug was in development, trials were being run at Yale about the best way to get people to take up this experimental drug – was it guilt, shame, embarrassment, bravery, or other of the 8 emotional tags? I am curious about how new technology, never before utilised, will interact with the human body. I am curious about how a real-world risk reduction of getting a virus, if using the magic jab, is reduced by 1% but is being touted as a 95% effective drug. Well to me that meant there was a 95% chance of not getting the virus until I was pointed to the editor of the BMJs article actually explaining the statistics. Remember Newsround? Sadly, it’s not always what it seems. The absolute risk is 1% less than it would be without it. Statistics.

We’re not always being told the things that might give us a fully informed choice. Capitalist society? Plain old society? I don’t want to be negative about this concept as I actually think it’s incredibly positive, once we’re aware of it, aware of the media influence, the advertising slant, the persuasion – how often do you see apples and bananas advertised on the TV? You don’t see food advertised that’s good for you? Have you noticed this before? It took me years to do so. You see it advertised to make you think you want the McDonald’s, the KFCs, the money-making food. Health making is a different matter. Once you’re aware of how much of a difference you can make yourself, how hugely you can turn your health around, I think it’s incredibly empowering. It’s also confusing. Why would it happen like that? Why would we be lied to? I encourage ‘why’ and always have, though do wonder at times how helpful it is to us. ‘Why did that happen to me?’ can take us in many directions. ‘How can I move forward?’ is one that I’m really starting like. ‘Why me?’ is a tough one. There is so much inequality, so much unfairness in the world. ‘Can I make things better for me and those around me?’ is another one I like more and more. Often there’s something you can do. And in terms of health, I’m excited there is much potential.

It was during my first year of discovery that I discovered food properly. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve loved my food for a long old time. As a lanky teenager, ‘hollow legs’, ‘human dustbin’ were two of my not so complimentary nicknames, albeit lovingly given by family. They bounced off me with no negative resonance, and I was happy I’d be able to have double servings of everything, triple at times, and continue to be slim. It wasn’t until I hit 30 or so I’d have to think more about serving size, although I did do a bit of ridiculous food restriction in my late teens after the death of my much-loved grandfather. During 2012, doing so many things meant I explored eating differently as there was only so much time for more activities to learn or enjoy. And so, going veggie then vegan was how it went. The spark was lit by Scott Jurek’s Eat and Run book, as I mentioned before. For an ultra-runner to realise he felt better, recovered faster and was healthier eating this way meant me, a fledgling triathloner, thought it was worth a shot.

I’m glad I did. It changed my life, reignited a joy of making food, creating, discovering and inventing. It led to study around nutrition and helping others on paths of health. And yet, it is confusing. I lectured recently sharing some of what I know and found that there were many questions around other ways to help diabetes. There are other routes than plant based, and I’m happy there are. I don’t think we should be restricted; I don’t think we shouldn’t have choice. But I can assure you, no one healed anything eating McDonald’s daily. If you’re in doubt, the documentary Super Size Me should help convince you of the health benefits of the McDonald’s diet. It’s not to say the occasional one will kill you either, and I like to take a practical approach, though do bear in mind the advertisements aren’t for veg boxes from your local organic farm. Which may help heal things.

I’ve seen people with type 2 diabetes work with Dr Neal Bernard’s Reversing Diabetes book, well, reverse diabetes. I’ve one client who was taking metformin for 7 years and hasn’t needed to for the past 2 years. I’ve another been able to reduce her diabetic medication significantly. I’ve another told she was pre-diabetic be able to easily get her numbers into a healthy place again. I love Dr Caldwell Esselstyn’s Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease and find I recommend it to many. As a surgeon in the states, he was finding that he was encountering the same issues, in the same patients and having to do more surgery. Changing diets made a huge difference, and he tells of the patients that adhere to his whole food, plant based lifestyle plan who have no further incidents of heart disease. Utterly remarkable. There are plates showing scans in the book, of before and after the dietary change. It’s worth a read if you’re interested.

Health was the reason I was intrigued to switch my diet, and my health, and that of sentient beings around me, and our planet, is the reason I continue it. There are other ways to feel good, full of life, and I would invite anyone reading to explore it. In general, I’d like to finish that we don’t usually have a deficiency of fast food in our body that needs correcting or balancing. I don’t like to preach just one way anymore and would love to encourage experimentation. Feeling bad after a few drinks is something that I experimented with stopping drinking for, and I feel good, most days. Experiment. Play. See what suits you.

My year plan is evolving as I go so the latest look is here… I’d love to have book suggestions of bad ass types, or anything else you’d thought of if you read through December’s chapter.

I’ve just bought Wim Hof’s Fundamental’s course to add to the breathing and showering. My plan was to get it later in the year, but as ever, I got over excited and now have that, possibly to get started with in January. There’s currently a 50% off discount so if you’re interested in the Iceman and his methods, it may be of interest too.

See you next month! Em x

December: Read The Dark Side of the Light Chasers – shadow work. Couch to 5K training. Read Becoming Bullet Proof Evy Poumpouras. Zach Bush lecture. https://www.youtube.com/watch?fbclid=IwAR28uDLolc0w0upXO4kLGoDqJgHuR-SHlpEgqZnkWlnM5vY4ndoQHpvf1lo&v=fi5vII2WO0c&feature=youtu.be

January: Laughter Yoga course. Continue shadow work – do the exercises from the book. Read Becoming Michelle Obama. Continue C25K. Start Wim Hof course?

February: 5K runs by now (training during Dec/Jan). Start 5k to 10k training. Wim Hof course.

March: HIIT focus

April: Achieve 10K. Easter Holidays

May: Start Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

June: Martial arts

July:

August: SUP skills

September:

October:

November:

December: