

"Spring for me starts as soon as Christmas is over," said Marie Under in one of her most beautiful poems – one that I'm always reminded of when February rolls around. It's a time when the sun starts to share a little of its warmth again, and when the birds start to sing again, but at the same time freezing conditions prevail and the lake waters remain trapped beneath the ice. It will be a few months yet before the leaves start to reappear on the trees, and expectation and a sense of hopelessness go head to head. Last year was a difficult one for a lot of people. Even some of those for whom it didn't go all that badly found it so exhausting that talk of how to build themselves up again in the spring and the newly begun (and hopefully better) new year made its way into conversations with friends.

It got me to thinking about a chat I'd had some time previously with a well-known psychologist. It had been a stressful time at work; a lot of things had gone wrong all at the same time, and I felt much the same way inside. I continued that way, simply floating along, until exhaustion gave me a short, sharp shock. I should have asked for help straight away, but I thought – wrongly – that my batteries would recharge themselves more quickly than if I spent money having them recharged for me. In the end I went to see a psychologist I remembered from my university days. The conversation we had is so clear to me that it's as though the intervening 10 years never happened. It had such an impact on me that I still recall every word, and none of them have lost any of their relevance.

"So what brings you to me?" the doctor asked me as I stepped into his office. I noticed the twinkle in his eye straight away. It did nothing to lessen the anxiety I was feeling – which, despite me having worked in a psychiatric clinic for a year and a half while at university, was rather crippling. We're only talking a decade ago, but even that recently it still wasn't very common to go and bare your soul to some doctor you barely knew, if at all.

"Let's get straight down to business," he said. "You've studied medicine. What do you want from me?" For a moment the question simply hung in the air. What did he mean – "Physician, heal thyself?" Sensing my disquiet, however, he smiled and paraphrased what he was asking: "What do you believe in?" he said. "Tablets, or the power of nature?" The penny dropped. Of course I didn't want to start taking tablets! "Good, because I don't want to prescribe you any," he said. "But that means it will take hard work, and discipline, and faith, and patience."

This is the advice he gave me.

"Put together a daily schedule for yourself, and stick to it. Wake up every day at the same time, early, around 6:00 or 7:00. Set your alarm for 10-15 minutes before that so you can start the day right there in bed. Keep your eyes closed and pray. Thank the Creator or somebody else on high for the day that lies ahead of you. Thank them for everything that's important to you at that particular moment in time. Then wish everyone you love a good morning, making sure you say it to everyone, spreading positive energy to start the day right. Believe me, that energy will worm its way into all of them, and into you, and it will have a very therapeutic effect. Then you should go for a little run around your garden, or whatever – something along those lines – to warm yourself up. Or do stretching exercises. Those five Tibetans really work. And then, after a wash, take a cold shower. If you live near the sea or a river or a lake, jump into the water, whatever the weather – just make sure you start when it's warm out. But a cold shower or bath will do the trick, too.

"Make sure you eat breakfast, and your other meals should be regular as well. Always go for pure and light if you can. Try to give up any stimulants. Yep – coffee, black tea, alcohol, sugar... They're all a burden on your nervous system. If you can, go to the market and stock up on farm-fresh stuff. Cook for yourself. Make your own food. That way you'll see how something as simple as chopping up vegetables can dispel any bad thoughts. Two things can't fit in your head at the same time, you know, and if you don't focus on what you're doing you'll chop your finger off! And what you make will taste all the better if you put your heart into it. The last time you eat should be at least three hours before you go to bed.

"Try to choose the people you associate with and the situations you find yourself in; don't let them choose you. That's often – not always, but often – within your ability. It's your life. Keep away from bad things. Don't let them near you.

"Sport is something you should be doing every day. Something you really enjoy. Sport is nature's way of beating the blues. It makes your body produce the same hormone you'd otherwise take in chemical form under treatment. But if you're tired or you haven't slept, it's terribly hard to get yourself moving. You have to though. Get a dog – let him take you for walks three times a day! You already have one? Great!

"Sort things out around the house. Give away anything you don't need. It doesn't matter whether it's eau de toilette or old clothes. Things weigh us down. A tidy home makes a tidy mind.

"Forget the media: read books, so long as they're positive ones. Cookbooks would do! Listen to classical music instead of disco or rock, or better yet the sound of silence. And keep doing so until you've regained control of who you are. I've heard that in some city somewhere they've started playing Mozart on public transport and that it's stopped people pushing and shoving.

"Try meditating. Find the still point within yourself – even if it's just for 5 minutes once or twice a day. It cleanses and refreshes you. Standing on your head is really good for you, too. And if that's not for you, try at least pushing yourself up so that you're supporting yourself on your neck, and count to ten. Every night. And go to bed early. Even if it's at 22:00, that could be just the right time for you so that you wake up truly rested. And if you still feel like you can't cope on your own, try acupuncture or massage. See what works for you. Be persistent and be patient, and don't miss a single day. Discipline is the most important word when it comes to treating yourself. Write it on a piece of paper and stick it on your fridge. And now, off you go!"

Things didn't go quite that smoothly, of course. I was perplexed that the hardest thing for an athletic person like myself was to get back into a regular exercise routine. Once I even ran out of the changing room in a panic – that was how much I didn't want to be there. But then I ran into someone I knew who needed to lose 20 kg, and suddenly what I was hoping to achieve seemed more realistic. So we supported each other in our utopian aims. I started jogging and going to the beach in the morning, all the way through summer and right up until early January, when the water froze over. The shot in the arm the cold water gave me always lasted until the middle of the day, and I came to understand why winter swimmers have such a hard time giving up the sport. Cold water remains a part of my morning routine even now. So too do the good vibes greetings I give my family when I get up. Back then I even found a masseur to go to, and tried acupuncture for my sleeplessness. It was unbelievably hard-going in the meantime, but I got there in the end. I found myself again, and I got my balance back. The problems I was having at work eventually sorted themselves out, and life flowed on, unhindered and unburdened.

It was all one big lesson. I learnt how to recognise the signs of burnout. I learnt that there are situations where you shouldn't be ashamed to ask for help or advice. And I learnt that everything comes from inside you, and that that's where the key to treating yourself lies. You can't just forget yourself. And you should always be grateful.

Spring is a time of hope. It's a good time to renew your friendship with yourself and to show the world your best side. It's a time to turn to face the sun and say 'hello'. And that's why spring really does start straight after Christmas!