



**PURPOSE
FOCUS
AND
PRACTICE**



*The Life, Lessons, and Legislation
of Joyce Cohen*

JEFFREY LEVY

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jeffreylevyauthor.com

jlevy49@comcast.net

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This book is dedicated to the will-force shown by Joyce, along with her ongoing courage in meeting whatever has come her way.

INTRODUCTION

I first met Joyce Cohen in 2012 at a class at the Taoist Tai Chi Center in Portland, Oregon. Paralyzed on her left side, she used a walker to cross the floor and take part in the class. Since there were a number of members in various states of rehabilitation, I didn't pay any particular attention to her until she began to tease me. I was a new practitioner, still learning how to release the pelvis in an exercise called a "don-yu" (down spine) that looks like a squat but is stretchier and more relaxed. "Jeffrey's found his hip," she said. The comment felt good-natured and even supportive in a challenging way.

Other members told me she had been an important Oregon legislator and was still involved in advising and contacting politicians. When the Tai Chi Society was planning its yearly Chinese New Year banquet, Joyce was in charge of invitations to all the local and state politicians, from mayor to state legislators to US senators. Because of her connections, many attended the banquet. Joyce was also known for hosting a dinner as one item that could be bid on at the banquet's silent auction; it was one of the top fundraisers for the society.

After getting to know her, I offered to do a poetry reading as part of the following year's dinner. That's when our friendship bloomed. I arrived early to help Joyce prepare the meal for the ten-person party. She had several courses planned, and though she could manage with difficulty to do all the dishes, it helped to have someone who could bend and reach and chop and arrange with more facility than someone with one useful arm.

Her loft, in the Pearl District of Portland, was the top floor of an old warehouse. It was a gorgeous space with high ceilings, floor-length windows with views of the city, lovely wood floors and beams, and artwork. She had moved into the space after the stroke she'd had many years before made living in her previous house difficult. She and her former husband, Fred Hansen, had bought the property just before the area had undergone the gentrification that made it one of the prime locations in downtown Portland.

The dinner – pork roast, asparagus, salad, and wine – was a success. The poetry reading went well. I read poems by some of my favorite authors, mixed in with a few of my own works. Joyce, along with a guest who was also a poet, encouraged me to publish. It was Joyce's inspiration and support that led to my first book of poetry, *Until One Faces North*. It also cemented our relationship.

After three years, Joyce's appearance at Tai Chi diminished. She had suffered another somewhat minor stroke but serious enough that it made living independently no longer possible. By then, she had been divorced from Fred for several years. I had almost lost touch with her when I heard a rumor that she intended to take her life. The rumor turned out to be only half true, as I learned when I visited her. It was then that the idea for this book came about.

I already found Joyce remarkable in the strength and determination she showed in pursuing Tai Chi, independent living, and travel even though she was paralyzed. As her history unfolded with the exploration of writing this book, her life seemed even more surprising and inspiring. Her journey – from isolated farm girl to medical tech in pioneering open-heart surgery; from medical researcher to witness of the Watts Riots and Black Panther movement; from serving as one of the most important Oregon legislators for twenty years to being a world traveler and investigator of spiritual and energy movement – was as curious to her, in the telling, as it was to me. It was, as this book intends to highlight, a life of purpose, focus, and practice.

Over the course of researching this book, I have had the op-

portunity to meet many individuals whose lives have been touched by Joyce. Naturally, this doesn't include the hundreds of thousands or more who have been affected by her legislative work. I did not meet anyone who didn't speak with admiration and even awe of her willpower. Repeatedly, I heard, "Joyce is the strongest person I have ever met."

Sitting with Joyce on a day when her eyes were bothering her and she was feeling muddled with a palpable sense of decline, I saw her briefly tear up. What she can still do becomes more and more limited, yet she perks up with the spirit and humor that has defined her life. "I can do my exercises," she says. "I can appreciate the birds chirping at the feeder. I've had a good life, and it is still going on."

Talking with Joyce, even when she feels diminished in acuity, is to field a nonstop barrage of anecdotes, connections, memories, and insights. Although conversations may not be obviously guided by organized focus, methodical practice, or predetermined purpose, they always contain a thread of each.

For Joyce, to have purpose means having a vision of an alternate future and a commitment to something greater than the self; it means to have curiosity about the world in which we live no matter how mundane (or exotic); it means making the time and space to gather and to think; and it means daring to act on the uncertain. Though beset by brain and vascular anomalies since childhood and the confusions and compromises of medicine, Joyce practices purpose and focus every day.

On the most basic level, it takes purpose, focus, and practice to get out of bed and attend to bodily function. With her disability, she has to concentrate on moving her arm and leg to roll over and sit up, to get into her wheelchair, and to go to the bathroom. Every day she exhibits determination to go outside and practice her Tai Chi and Qigong exercises—the repetitive stretching and strengthening that counteract the limitation in muscle tone and circulation in her body.

She finds it vital to interact with the maples, cedars, humming-

birds, and rabbits that appear in the backyard and neighboring park of her living facility. Each plant and animal deserve attention, and it is part of her practice to engage with the natural world assiduously.

Purpose, focus, and practice support each other. Practice without purpose is deadening routine; purpose without focus is dreamy talk; focus without practice is prone to error and misjudgment. The more effort put into making visions real, the more the ideal can live. And the more commitment to a high purpose, the easier and more necessary a real practice becomes. For Joyce, the elements of purpose, focus, and practice reinforce each other to make an effective and meaningful life.

Although this book is in many ways a biography, Joyce was insistent from the start that our work together be about lessons learned and how they might help others, especially young women, working in the public sector. To that effect, this book is organized into three parts, each of which highlight thematic lessons from her life. Part one focuses on her childhood and young adult years in South Dakota and beyond; part two dives into her years in the Oregon state legislature and the lessons she learned along the way; and part three features her later years of adaptation and acceptance that encompass the loss of physical abilities and the heightening of her energetic and spiritual awareness. Woven throughout the book are the principles of purpose, focus, and practice that represent the whole of her life. May you gain as much from reading about her life as I have by knowing her.

PART I
EXPLORATION AND
DISCOVERY

CHAPTER 1

Reframing Purpose

Imagine clear, fiery eyes shining out of a face topped with a mop of white hair; the left side of the face is partially immobile, while a torrent of memories, insights, and decisions pour out of the vibrant aging woman before you. The words are in restless contrast to the paralyzed features of the woman in a wheelchair, who was born on the Midwestern plains in 1937 as the Depression wore down. Each person is a story, and the story of Joyce Cohen is, in her own words, one of purpose, focus, and practice.

The assisted-living house is on a suburban but loosely packed road outside of Portland, Oregon. It houses four or five residents, most of whom are partially withdrawn in their decline, watching endless television or dozing in their chairs. Joyce's room is small with a handicap-accessible bathroom off to one side. A large window looks onto a patio where Joyce does her exercises. Beside her bed sits a computer and an adjacent desk. The only other furniture is one upright chair and a small display table.

On the wall hangs a display of bow ties she wore in the Oregon Senate. Next to the computer is a boxing glove – a reminder of a safety regulation she helped to enact. In desk drawers are papers with headline after headline about her work with six governors and other main political actors for thirty years in Salem.

Under the bed is a stack of books filled with dog-eared pages, slashes of highlight pen, and scribbled notes: Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Leadership in Turbulent Times* about Lincoln, the Roosevelts, and Lyndon B. Johnson; *Opening the Dragon Gate* about the forming of a Tai Chi master; *Lab Girl*, about the development of a young scientist. *New Yorker* magazines abound, along with books and articles about trees, sleep cycles, mediation, and interpersonal communication. The items in her room suggest a mind very much alive. Still, Joyce came here to die.

Joyce's decision to terminate her life was brought about following a second minor stroke. During care, a blood pressure cuff was left on her good arm overnight, causing more damage and ending the possibility of living independently. With that, her sense of purpose diminished. Incessant pain, loneliness, crippling disability, and even perhaps sacrifice – the idea of moving on without regret – fueled her decision. It was not a new thought or an epiphany. All her life she had known and not been mystified by endings. It is a natural consequence when purpose, focus, and practice practically cease.

Joyce's whole history had taught her both decisiveness and familiarity with death: envision a purpose, focus on the means, and prepare for the result. She might well have quoted William Butler Yeats's 1916 poem entitled "A Man Young and Old, Section XI From Oedipus at Colonus":

*Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span;
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied aged
man;
Delight becomes death-longing if all longing else be vain.
Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say;
Never to have drawn the breath of life, never to have looked into
the eye of day;
The second best's a gay goodnight and quickly turn away.*

Yeats imagined the exiled, weary Oedipus – the ruler, master politician, ruthless truth-seeker, self-blinded, paradoxically beloved of the gods – at last finding solace in acceptance of the inevitable.

Joyce’s decision, which came after months, and even years, of developing this kind of acceptance was met with opposition not only from those who knew or worked with her but from the medical establishment. Confrontation with the latter was not new. Joyce had had a long history of challenging medical management and following her own advice. The fact that doctors wanted her to take medication that she felt diminished her agency was a sore spot. She refused; her care-takers insisted.

Very well. Enough would be enough. Despite the standard of care for most patients in these circumstances being the prolonging of life at all costs, Joyce would take care of her life herself. Without a larger purpose, the potential loss of focus, and no ability to practice, there was no life.

In Oregon, physician-assisted suicide has clear restrictions. Ironically, Joyce had been involved in making this pioneering legislation for the state. For a doctor to participate required a considerable set of safeguards. Some of the conditions Joyce did not meet, and Joyce was well aware of this.

She also was aware of other ways to commit suicide “acceptably.” Voluntary stopping eating and drinking (VSED) exists in legal limbo in several states; in Oregon, it is considered an acceptable way to take control of one’s own life, with medical intervention only used to alleviate some of the discomfort of dehydration. (State-by-state information is available at the Patient Rights Council.) All this takes is enormous will and determination. Joyce was prepared.

What kept her from going through with her initiative will be explained later. But in a nutshell, she reframed her purposes; she continued to consult with legislators, offering advice and insight into current negotiations. She met with old friends and collaborated in a variety of historical reminiscences of her dealings in Salem. She entertained fam-

ily and friends and encouraged her grandchildren to actively pursue scientific studies addressing climate change and the environment. She decided to help frame a book (which you are reading now) that could offer advice and insight on a meaningful life, aimed especially but not exclusively to young women who choose to enter politics.

Viktor Frankl, in reflecting on the unimaginable horrors of his time in a Nazi death camp, wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." Joyce has reframed purpose all her life and, in doing so, found meaning in discovering purpose even in decline. It is the freedom of reflection and its use for others.

Her long life seems improbable to her. It began, after all, in the era of the Great Depression. Let's go back...

“While many people know Joyce Cohen as a former Oregon legislator, few know the story of her courageous triumph over adversity, and her inspirational journey of self-discovery. The many facets of Joyce Cohen captured in this book are a gift to Oregonians and to people everywhere.”

John Kitzhaber, former Governor of Oregon

“Joyce is one tough cookie—but with a big heart of gold. Her tenacity, intelligence, strategic thinking, compassion, and interminable patience marked her outstanding service to her community and the state in the Oregon Legislature.”

Jane Cease, former State Senator

Once joyfully known as “the smiling barracuda,” Joyce Cohen was a force in Oregon politics for over twenty years—formidably forging ground-breaking legislation: the Oregon Health Care Plan, criminal justice reform, and the use of Lottery funds for education and the environment. Her biography shares lessons of growing up on an isolated South Dakota farm, work on pioneering heart surgery, and taking up social activism to become the first female chair of the powerful Judiciary Committees in the Legislature. Despite a paralyzing stroke, she retrained her body using Tai Chi and reframed her mind using the forces of nature. Joyce’s life illustrates how purpose, focus, and practice can surmount overwhelming difficulty. Whether you are a young woman entering the fray of politics or a retired senior facing the challenges of aging, her story offers insight and hope.



*Jeffrey Levy is a playwright, poet, and director who taught many years at the California State University, led the TADW, one of the oldest teenage theatre training workshops in the nation, and helped found a Waldorf High School. He trains and teaches Tai Chi in Portland. His first book of poetry, *Until One Faces North*, was published in 2019.*

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