
LIFE LESSONS BY...

Ursula James

The hypnotherapist and author of many books, including *The Soul Midwife*, reflects on her life-changing move to France and how, when your world gets smaller, one person can make a big difference.

When I first moved to France from London, I had no idea how much my life and attitude would change.

I didn't realise so much of what I thought was me was actually my behaviour, and that behaviour had been defined by my environment: noise, speed, constant activity and stimulation had made me into someone who, to be honest, was not the nicest person to be around. However, when you are in it and everyone around you seems the same, it's hard to change.

The community I moved to in France is small.

A tiny hamlet with only four houses. There is a village nearby, Fontaine-Daniel, and I joined the co-operative there where we ran a shop with eco and local products. I am a writer and started researching the amazing history of the village. I started to give guided tours. I began to feel important – as if I belonged.

But then my husband became ill, so my world shrank to the hamlet. Each day I walked to the local farm to get milk, and that was my entire social contact – except for the fact I had to walk past an elderly neighbour's house to get there.

That neighbour, Chris, waved every day.

One day as I walked past, she had a glass of wine in her hand and held it out to me. From then on each day I would visit her, first for coffee in the morning, and then for an aperitif in the early evening. I soon came to realise that people loved her. Her jam, her hugs, her genuine interest in others meant that, even though she hardly spoke any French, she was often visited by people nearby.



What I've learned from my neighbour Chris is to take time over meals, laugh more, exercise, enjoy nature, be kinder, and to not judge.

My world had shrunk so much by then, so I started to take the time to really listen to Chris. She's led an amazing life, though not an easy one. As she told me about herself, I realised why people gravitate towards her. She really cares.

What I learned from Chris is to be kind, interested, and not to judge.

Take time over meals. Laugh – a lot. Share what you have, whether food, knowledge or time. Above all, care about nature and the people around you. And exercise daily. She's 82 and does calisthenics outside her house each day. All this before she pushes a full wheelbarrow up the hill, minces food for the birds and stays on the go all day.

Chris and her husband became characters in my recent novel, *The Soul Midwife*.

Although set in another era, I wanted to preserve something of this amazing woman. All I can say is, no matter how small your world might become, it is still full of amazing people, all with stories, dreams and fears. My husband recovered and now we live a very different life from the one we imagined. We have less money but more time and love.

Setting up an art residency was one of my long-held dreams.

I meet great people and help those who would not otherwise have access to these breaks. Each evening, though, I get back to the hamlet in time to share my day with Chris. She has taught me more about life than anyone I know.

■ Find out more at ursulabenjamin.co.uk or email ursula@artspacegites.fr.

WORDS: KATY SUNNASSEE. PHOTOGRAPHS: URSULA JAMES



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