

The Art of Authenticity

How To Be You

Mary Sorensen

The Art of Authenticity: How to Be You

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For my Mom,
one of the wisest and best people I know.

and

For My Sweetheart,
Who brightens my days just by being.

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BREATHE First

Smile

Breathe in deeply
Close your eyes
Breathe out
Smile again

Repeat

You are here because you are searching for something.

Please know that nothing I say in this book is intended to give you the impression that you are flawed or lacking.

There will always be room for improvement in all of us, but at the same time, we are all worthy of love right at this moment.

Thank you for taking the time to work on you.

Breathe again.
We can do this together.
One step at a time.

INTRODUCTION

My intention for this book -
This book is meant to be an introduction. It is supposed to have bite sized ideas and subjects to give you a place to start. I am intentionally trying to keep it short and simple; which is not the same as easy or shallow. I know it is easy to get overwhelmed, so I want to provide a starting place. Let's have a conversation.

This book is not meant to be read cover to cover in one sitting. It is a workbook. Read a chapter and think on it for a week or more. When you are ready for something else, read another chapter.

Not all of these ideas will resonate with you or be something you want to work on. You can pick and choose what works for you and what you are ready to think about. You don't need to answer every question. Choose the ones that spark something within you and explore your answers.

There are adult conversations in this book. I talk about many aspects of being human - without shame. I try to use examples from all walks of life because I believe in including everyone. I do not

expect you to make the same choices I have made and I am not trying to bring you over to my agenda. My only agenda is to help you make the right choices for you and be your true self. If you do that, I will be very happy, and so will you. I only have my story to tell, so that colors my writing and my personal journey.

I am not a therapist nor a counselor. This book is based on my personal experiences, my own learning journey and my observations of people who have come to me looking for someone to listen. I am a person who is on this road the same as you. I have found some things along the way which I really want to share with you. This is just a conversation between you and I.

I am here to tell you that making mistakes is part of being human. Pain is part of being human, but suffering is optional, as the Buddhists say.

It is all right to be afraid. It is all right to not know the answers. You can't know the answers until you do the work, and then there will always be new questions.

Sometimes we just need someone to tell us what we already know. Hearing things in

a new way or hearing it at the right time to absorb it can make a real difference.

Maybe we want permission to do what we already know we need to do - you have my permission and I would like to help you grant permission to yourself. Maybe we just need someone to tell us it is ok to make that tough move even when we are afraid - or perhaps it needs to be done because we are afraid. I tell you now, it is all right to make that move. It is even all right to go back if we find that move was a mistake. We sometimes need someone to remind us it is ok to make mistakes along the way as well. Things will be better for everyone after we work through it and get to stability on the other side.

All of this has been said before, but it hasn't been said by me, and it hasn't been presented in this way to my knowledge.

If there is anything contained here that fuels a spark in you, there are many other books, resources, therapists and practitioners (including me) you can consult to continue your work with yourself. I hope you will do so.

Being the best you is a continual journey, not a destination.

**I want you to be your
best and highest self.**

What is true is already so.
Owning up to it doesn't make it worse.
Not being open about it doesn't make it go away.
And because it's true, it is what is there to be interacted with.
People can stand what is true, for they are already enduring it.
– Eugene T. Gendlin

1 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AUTHENTIC?

Authentic - adjective

1. Not false or copied; genuine; real.
2. Having an origin supported by unquestionable evidence; authenticated; verified.
3. Representing one's true nature or beliefs; true to oneself or to the person identified.

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/authentic>

Yes, I know. It is pretty cliché to start with a dictionary definition. Well, there is a reason things become cliché. There is value in returning to the beginning, validating our assumptions and making sure we all have the same understanding.

When someone is authentic, they present their real self to the world without apologies. They represent their true nature or beliefs to themselves and to the world. They are able to hear dissenting opinions or criticism without

feeling threatened or afraid. They are true to their own self.

Authentic, grounded people who have a solid foundation of conscious core beliefs or values can accept there will be people in the world who won't agree with them, but who are worthy of respect. Others opinions of them do not define their worth. Those who are comfortable in their own authenticity are able to understand that not everyone will like them, and that's ok. They can release those people and move on to find the people that do nourish their soul without allowing the opinions of others (imagined or real) to affect them.

Should we always be authentic?

Once you know who you are, you can be true to yourself. This does not mean you can declare yourself to everyone and always be accepted and get your way. Unfortunately our culture is such that there will be times you decide to make compromises to get along. Being authentic also doesn't mean you always have to tell everyone everything about you. Some people are not safe to share your story with. They may not deserve to see your true self, or be capable of accepting your truth.

Being true to your self means that you don't get involved in anything that goes against your nature. People who attempt to shame you or cause you to feel bad about yourself have no

role in your life. You don't allow others the control to influence you to do things against your nature. Remember no one can make you feel anything unless you buy into it.

**No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.
- Eleanor Roosevelt**

The first step - Find out who you are. First you need to discover yourself so you know what to be true to. It is very difficult to be authentic when you don't know who you are.

Being Authentic –
Allowing others to see who you are.

You can be genuine with the people in your life, not duplicitous. You mean what you say and say what you mean. When you give your word, you follow through. You don't pretend to like something or support something or commit to something that you actually hate and later flake out on. You don't give people the answer they want to hear when you have no intention of following through. You don't present a persona to the public which belittles the lifestyle you live in private. You don't manipulate people for fun. You make your reasons plain and your motivations clear if needed. Being authentic means not living in

contradictions. You don't feel the need to hide yourself. You are comfortable being yourself in front of the people in your life. You are comfortable being alone with yourself and can enjoy your own company.

You can say, "I don't know", "I'm not sure", and "I'm afraid" and it won't shake your knowledge of your own self worth.

When you are comfortable being authentic, you don't have to constantly censor yourself or hold yourself back from what you want to do, be or say. You can say or do it and it will feel good and right to you and the people you choose to have around you will accept you as you are. Just writing that feels like a relief to me. Did you just let go and exhale? Try it. You can have that all the time.

Why do I want that for myself and for you? People who know who they are and can present themselves confidently are the kind of people I want to have around me and in my community. We may not always agree and we may not even like each other, but at least we will see the real person and can make decisions based on that reality. If you are true to yourself and represent yourself truthfully, I can respect you. This world needs more respect between people.

A journey, not a destination -

Defining ourselves is a lot like trying to hit a moving target. Some things may remain the same over our lifetimes, but others will change. It is important to check in with yourself and make sure you are still being true to yourself as you grow, learn and evolve over time.

Knowing yourself is life's eternal homework.

– Felicia Day. *You're Never Weird on the Internet, Almost*

As human beings, we are dynamic. We are always changing. It is important to give yourself space and allow yourself the freedom to adjust and redefine when needed.

The Thesaurus is a great tool.

<https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/authentic>

Authenticity –

Accuracy, correctness, credibility, legitimacy, purity, trustworthiness, truthfulness, validity, dependability, veritableness, factualness, realness,

Actuality, certainty, certitude, genuineness, substantiality, verity, what's what, intelligence(fact), like it is, naked truth, solidity, stability,

Absoluteness, reality, being, certainty, existence, how things are, validity,

verisimilitude, way of it, name of the game,
palpability, perceptibility, presence, real world,
realism, realness, substantiality,
substantiveness

GENUINE true
Actual Verity
REAL
Integrity

Truth - accuracy, actuality, certainty,
correctness, exactitude, exactness, facts,
factualism, factuality, factualness,
genuineness, truthfulness, veracity, verity,
honest truth, legitimacy, perfection, plain talk,
rectitude, rightness, trueness, truism,
Sincerity, candor, credibility, honor, integrity,
fidelity, loyalty, uprightness, word, impartiality,
openness, trustworthiness, reliability,
constancy, faithfulness, fidelity, honesty,
safety, security, soundness, steadfastness,
trustworthiness.

What does authenticity have to do with cuddling? Everything.

I have learned in my cuddling practice to make the following agreements: I will tell you when I am uncomfortable and I need to be able to trust you to tell me when you are uncomfortable.

It is all right to ask for what you want, because I will give my true answer, and I know that my answer will be respected. This works both ways.

Absolutely the only way to obtain intimacy and true connection and sharing with someone is when we are communicating our truth to those we are connecting with. If you cannot let someone know your boundaries, your desires, or share your true and authentic self, then what is the point of spending time with them? Cuddling practice, at least the way I practice it, is about enjoying real, healthy, wanted connections.

There cannot be real, healthy connections without authenticity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR JOURNALING

What does authenticity mean to you?

What does it mean to be authentic?

Why is comfortable authenticity important?

Do you want to be authentic?

How does authenticity relate to vulnerability?

Can you present your true self if you don't feel safe?

What would it take for you to feel safe presenting your true self to those around you?

How do you let the opinions of others affect you?

What is the difference between stretching outside our comfort zone and being inauthentic?

What is the difference between saving parts of yourself for private situations or sharing different aspects of yourself with different communities and being inauthentic?

Share or write about a time you decided to act in a way that didn't feel true to yourself.

Why did you feel the need to hide yourself?

How did the presentation of this 'fake you' affect your long term interactions with people? What was the outcome? Was it a lasting/sustainable outcome?

The heart of my story is that the world opened up for me once I decided to embrace who I am. Unapologetically.

My story demonstrates that there is no better time in history to . . . Just be as weird as you want to be and not have to be ashamed.

- Felicia Day. *You're Never Weird on the Internet, Almost*

Mary Sorensen

2 CHALLENGE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Create your own Foundations consciously. Find out, define, and choose who you are.

Before we can present our true self to others, we have to discover or decide who and what that true self is. The first step you have to take is to figure out, choose, define, uncover or recognize your real self. Once you know who you are, you could write a mission statement for yourself like a business. This will give you a foundation to refer back to which will help you make important decisions in your life. We spend hours, days, and months working on a business plan, but we usually don't make any time to work on a plan for our life or to define our character and who we want to be.

There are things we KNOW to be true that we never examine because we think we already know it. We think these base assumptions, core teachings and values which were formed when we were creating

ourselves are set in stone. They are not. As human beings we constantly evolve and change and we need to re-examine these core beliefs and evaluate if they still serve us. Assumptions limit our options.

When you come to know who you are, when you accept yourself, when you love yourself, and you can express who you are to anyone in a simple, confident way, you will feel relief. It will seem as though a weight has lifted. You actually will have lifted a major weight of uncertainty from your life.

Challenge your assumptions -
We all have base ideas, teachings, morals, unconscious choices, core beliefs and values that rule our life. These ideas need to be conscious choices. There are teachings and experiences that created these assumptions for us in the past. There are times we just don't realize or recognize that another option is available if we don't understand that we have already made assumptions or choices.

When you hear a statement and say "of course, that's a given", or "I had no choice" these are the kind of assumptions I'm talking about. The things you don't question are exactly what I urge you to question now. What may seem obvious to

you is not obvious to everyone. Things you think are 'given' are really just choices you have made, possibly with insufficient or incorrect information. There are many people in the world who breathe, live, and love while making different choices.

Example: I have to wear clothes. You are probably thinking 'of course, we all have to wear clothes. We get arrested when we don't wear clothes.' Or maybe 'I have to uphold a standard of modesty I was taught before I could talk.'

The fact is, you don't have to wear clothes. You choose to wear clothes. You put clothes on every day of your own volition. You choose to live in a society that requires you to wear clothes to interact with them. You may wear pajamas to bed every night even when no one else sees you in bed (side note - sleeping naked is awesome and has actual physical health benefits, I hope you try it).

There are communities on this earth where those who don't want to wear clothes can go to live. There are many communities where very minimal body coverings are the norm and full coverage clothing seems very strange and completely illogical to them. You could decide to live in any of these communities

or live on a desert island or an isolated cottage in the woods if wearing clothes was really against your true nature. There are definitely times I wish I could live like that. Other times I get cold and I am grateful for clothes. While I enjoy the freedom to not wear clothes in times and places where it is appropriate, I am not ready to forsake western society in order to be a nudist. I do, however, think shoes are predominantly evil. Even though my Sweetheart could not live without shoes. (He made me put that in.)

Do your core beliefs still ring true for you? There may be assumptions we allow to direct us which no longer serve us well. Unfortunately, we don't know what it is we don't know. We all have blind spots. We have assumptions, choices and core beliefs we put in place a long time ago which we base our life decisions upon without even thinking about it. Sometimes things which were true when we learned them may no longer be true for us. We start feeling conflicted when we try to stay true to those assumptions which no longer hold value in our changing reality.

Baby elephants are tied by the leg with a rope or chain that is strong enough to hold them. They learn that it is futile to pull against the rope. They cannot break free and the attempt can cause them a lot of pain. These young elephants are trained to understand that the rope will hold them and they cannot escape.

As adult elephants, that rope which they could now break in a moment is enough to hold them because their experience taught them they cannot break that rope. They have learned a core teaching or created an assumption about the rope.

Obviously, what was true for them as a baby is not true for them as an adult. The idea of the rope being an unbreakable restraint is a teaching or base assumption they continue to live by their entire lives. They have been conditioned to never challenge the rope again.

Are you allowing a breakable rope to hold you back?

Choices –

How often do you hear people say “I had no choice”? This is a false statement.

There is always a choice.

We often say this when we have already made a choice and we believe our choice to be irreversible or irrevocable. We have been taught or have experience to validate our belief that this assumption is (or was) true. We made that choice consciously or unconsciously and we now treat it as immutable. We may not be open minded enough to look for or be aware that there are other options. It is not the case that you had no choice, you have already made a choice and are basing your decisions on that. I urge you to examine it and make conscious choices instead of basing life decisions on personal blind spots.

Example.

I know a mother with young children who had difficulty supporting herself and her children while her husband was attending college. They moved in with her parents and sister for an extended period to reduce expenses and help with childcare and the interpersonal dynamics put a strain on them all. It was suggested that everyone might do better if the children were left to live with their grandparents

and the mother and her husband moved into a small apartment nearby. She refused to think about the possibility because in her mind she had to live with her children. A mother does not leave her children. She had learned this and taken it to heart. It was the opinion of several near them that everyone, and the children especially, would be better served by her and her husband moving out and allowing them to be cared for full time by their aunt and grandmother. Having the mother and the aunt in conflict about caregiving was not good for the adults nor the children and it created a lot of instability for everyone involved. Moving out was not an option the mother would allow herself to even consider.

Of course everyone has to make their own choices and do what they think is best. Sometimes the best choice or solution may be something you have closed your mind to without realizing it. Sometimes you may find your original idea of the best thing to do is actually reinforced when you examine all of the choices with an open mind and choose consciously.

Choose consciously

I like to speak a lot about using conscious choices to define your life.

It may be that your beliefs have served you well. When you examine them, you will find they still serve you well now. You may decide that assumption/core belief/core value/choice has your full support and IS still true for you. This will give you renewed determination and strength to live according to that tenet. When you create your foundation consciously it will be a lot stronger foundation for you than if you just let it happen.

For instance, many of us grew up in a religious family and culture. There usually will come a point when we must decide if we will continue in what we were taught or determine that we do not subscribe to it because that religion does not serve our truth or may even actively campaign against our truth.

There is a point when every solid member of a religion has had their own personal conversion. Some people never come to this conversion point and let themselves float through doing what is expected. These people are usually not solid in their faith. They may go out partying on Saturday night and then to church on Sunday. They do not find comfort in their religion when they are in crisis. The

tenets of 'their' religion may cause conflict or shame in them.

If this describes you, it is time to examine your beliefs. Do some research, get some education, check out other opportunities, other congregations or other faiths. Then come back to the religion of your experience and compare. Examine the teachings and decide if they help you be your best self or harm you. Do they sustain you and nourish you or do they create shame and conflict for you?

If you don't want to examine your religion because you are afraid you will find out it doesn't serve you any more, I invite you to really think about that. If it no longer serves you, it is time to move on. If it is still valid for you, your faith will be renewed and now on a firmer footing. Either way, the outcome will be positive for you.

Do not postpone your examination because of fear. If this religion is right for you, conscious weighing will help you become stronger in your faith. If this religion is not consistent with your true self, wouldn't you rather find out sooner vs. later? Then you will be able to move on and find a belief system which IS consistent with your core self.

Fear of change or new ideas which may challenge your paradigm is normal. If you are afraid to examine other opinions or points of view, that is normal. It can be very scary to acknowledge fallibility in something you have always held as truth. It can be a shock to realize that those closest to you advocate a truth which is not true for you. If you are afraid, that is a cue you should not ignore.

Pay attention to your fear, it is telling you something. If the original teaching or idea is true for you, you will be able to verify the truth of it, and make it a conscious choice and a rock solid value to base the foundation of your life upon. If it no longer represents your truth, you will be able to move forward and do the work to release it and find a foundation that does work for you.

There are two possible outcomes when you examine a belief, assumption, value, unconscious choice or teaching you have been operating with. You may find the idea is still consistent with your truth and it serves you well. You can re-affirm and decide consciously to live your life according to that belief. You will create a stronger, firmer foundation for yourself by making a conscious choice for that belief to be part of your foundation.

The second outcome is to find that belief no longer serves you. The rope can be broken easily now, you don't have to stay tied up. You can move on to define what does now serve you and create an appropriate foundation for yourself.

Possible results of examining your assumptions:

1. Find out that your assumptions are correct and true choices for you and choose them consciously to create a more solid and aware foundation for yourself.
2. Find that your assumption or core belief no longer serves you and then start the work to release it and find/create a new, actually effective and solid foundation to build yourself upon which does not cause a schism within you.

Either of these is a positive outcome. Either result will create a stronger you, so you are not risking anything by doing this. You will be a stronger person. Fear is an indicator that your beliefs really do need to be examined. Do not allow fear to hold you back from examining and challenging your beliefs.

Assuming other people's beliefs -
We often make assumptions about other people's beliefs, intentions, or choices and base our own decisions on what we think

they think. We need to ask them to verify our understanding of their thoughts before we make decisions. Always do a reality check before making irrevocable decisions.

Example

Scene from the movie *Emma*:

Emma runs into the house in a crying fit and tells her fiancé that she can never marry him. That is the end of it, she can never see him again. Then she runs out. He follows her and finds out the actual decision she has made is to never leave her father. Emma wants to always live at her father's estate and continue to care for him. Her assumption was that her fiancé would never agree to leave his own estate and live with her and her father. She didn't tell him her problem or ask him how they could make it work together, she just told him – "I can never marry".

Emma was basing a major life decision on an assumption which was not valid. Her fiancé told her he would happily live on the estate with her and her father and of course they lived happily ever after. He had the courage to follow up, discover her reasons and correct her false assumption and good things followed.

Finding blind spots is a skill -
This works for small things too. Often I am trying to solve a problem and I think I know the steps to resolve it. I get stuck on the steps I've decided on and forget what the original problem is. There may be another way to solve the original problem. If I have blinders on and can't make my original idea work, I may become discouraged and give up completely without seeking other options for resolution.

Example

I was trying to connect a TV monitor to a laptop to watch some streaming video on the bigger screen. The cable I had wasn't working, so I went searching for another HDMI cable. I knew I had a box with some computer cables in it, so I went to look there. I found a VGA cable, but no HDMI cables. I went to report my failure. I thought we just wouldn't be able to watch the big screen that night.

The problem I was trying to solve was: find an HDMI cable. I could not find one, so therefore, I thought I had failed. Then I realized I did have a VGA cable and that would solve the actual problem at hand - which was to connect the laptop to the monitor.

Now, I always try to verify what the real problem is. Very often we get stuck on a possible solution and we miss opportunities to find alternatives or even better solutions when we move forward with narrowed vision. If we can keep the original problem in sight and be open to unforeseen opportunities, good things will come to us.

Example

I was wearing a dress with a very itchy tag in back. I couldn't get the tag out just then, I had no scissors. I was about to scratch my back to pieces when I realized that this particular dress was the same in the back and the front. It occurred to me that I could turn it around and put the tag in front so it would stop scratching me.

My assumption was that tags must be worn in the back. In this case, my assumption was based on the convention and my experience that tags are always put in the back, not some moral conviction or teaching. There is no reason tags have to be worn in back when the garment is identical front and back. I had a blind spot and thought my problem had no resolution based on an assumption I was not even aware of. I had to think outside the box to realize I was basing my

decision to continue to suffer an itchy back on an untrue assumption.

Try the opposite -

A good way to evaluate a belief is to make a statement of the opposite and see how it feels to you. Example: I have to be naked all the time, I can never wear clothes.

For me, my first reaction is - no! I need to wear clothes sometimes. I get cold. I have to go to the store and I have to go to work in my office. I don't want to live in a nudist commune, I like western culture and society. This is a good indication that my truth is to mostly wear clothes and enjoy clothing optional opportunities only on isolated occasions. I have since made this a conscious choice. I know I don't have to wear clothes, but I choose to in order to do other things I want to do. This is called a compromise.

Some possible assumptions/core beliefs /values/choices you may want to examine. This is a list I brainstormed and is by no means all inclusive. I know the list is fairly long, but I wanted to give many examples since we are talking about things that could be in our blind spots which are very difficult to identify.

Morality

I keep my word and do what I say I will do. I live my life with integrity.

Hurting others is wrong.

Lying is wrong.

Lying is fine as long as it doesn't hurt anyone.

It is ok to steal candy bars or other small things at the store, they build in a budget for stuff like that.

I have to own a gun to protect myself. I am willing to shoot another human being and possibly kill them.

I hate guns and will not have them anywhere around me. I teach kids to not point guns at other people, even if they are just pointing a stick or their fingers.

Cultural Norms

Women should have long hair.

Men should have short hair.

Man buns are sexy.

Drinking alcohol is the best thing to do for social outings to help me have a good time.

Drinking alcohol is bad and any place that serves it should be avoided.

Men need to wear a white button down shirt to church.

My daughter will not wear makeup until she is 14.

How I am perceived

Real men don't cry. I can't show my emotions.

It is shameful to share my vulnerabilities with anyone. I don't ever want to be seen as weak.

I can only listen to one type of music or all my friends will think I'm strange.

I can't share my love of xx. That's weird and no one will like me if they knew.

I tell everyone about my love for xx. They will either love it too and we can talk, or they will just move on.

I have to maintain a shocking or unruly appearance so I know why people don't like me. If they are going to reject me anyway, I can give them a reason for it.

I need to keep up with current news in order to sound educated.

I can't share my love of online gaming, people will think I'm a geek and look down their noses at me.

I have to maintain a certain appearance in order to be respected and have people like me.

I have to buy a house and a car in order to be successful or to be seen as successful.

I have to present myself with the trappings of success, ESPECIALLY when I'm not successful.

How I am perceived

If I don't hang out with the 'cool' kids,
people will think I'm not cool.

I share my vulnerabilities with the
people I am close to because it brings
us closer together.

I have to maintain my lawn to be
respected in the neighborhood.

My Labels or Roles I take on

I have to offer service to others, I can't
allow them to serve me. I am the
Caretaker and the Care Giver.

Others need to Serve me, I deserve it. I
don't Serve anyone.

I have to wear clothes and shoes.

I need to live as a nudist.

I am the only one who can cook
Thanksgiving dinner every year.

I have to practice three hours a day in
order to meet expectations.

I have to cook for my family every day.

I have to stick with my partner no
matter what, I made a commitment.

I have no personal value outside of
motherhood/fatherhood.

My Life Plan/ my routine

I need to have a job making xx amount
of money. I need this because _____.

I deserve to have a high paying job.

I have to live in a house.

I have to live in an apartment or a rental, I could never afford a house.
I need to take a shower every day.
I need to drink two liters of water a day.
I need to drink two liters of soda per day. I should be able to do this if I want to, other people do it.
I have to go to college to get a good job.
I have to put my kids through college even if I have to get a second job.
My kids can earn their own way through college like I did. I can't afford it.
I have to go to trade school to learn a skill to earn a good living.
I am meant to be single my entire life, so I may as well give up looking for a partner and get a cat name Emily Dickinson to come home to at night.
I am meant to be single my entire life, so I may as well have some fun with as many good friends as I can.
I am meant to be part of a couple. I don't know who I am outside of a we.
I have to have a partner and be in a relationship no matter what, I can't be alone.
I will never be married, I am too independent.
I will never be fulfilled unless I get married.
I can't cook healthy food, it costs too much and takes too much time.

My Life Plan/ my routine

I can't eat that junk food, it actually costs more than healthy food in the long run and is detrimental to my health.

I have to stay in my current situation (job, relationship, housing, family). There is no other choice for me.

If I am uncomfortable in my current situation (job, relationship, housing, family), I will just bail at the first sign without asking for anything to change. No one would ever change for me or consider my needs as important.

I have to live near my parents / friend / siblings, I would never move across the country for my spouse or my job.

Sexuality

Sex outside of marriage is wrong.

Sex is bad and shameful. My sexuality and desire is something I need to tame and stamp down.

I love sex and I want to find many intimate friends to have good, healthy pleasurable times with.

Masturbation is wrong and I should be ashamed for thinking about it or wanting it.

Self Pleasure is a healthy way to relax and I like to do it often for my own mental and physical wellness.

Marriage must always be monogamous.
I believe in ethical non-monogamy.
My partner and I can interact with
others any way we want to, I want an
open relationship and I enjoy hearing
about my partner's connections.

Interactions with People

I will always avoid a certain type of
person because someone of that type
hurt me once.
I can't tell that person I like them. I
have to hide my true feelings.
I am always uncomfortable interacting
with the opposite sex.
I can flirt with the best of them. I know
how to treat a lady right or make a
guy feel like a man.
I don't go out of my way for anyone but
me. It's all about number one. I take
care of myself.
I never see doctors, they are all quacks.
I have to do exactly what the doctor says
even though it doesn't work for me.
I always do what other people tell me to
do, of course they know better.
I am a friendly person, I accept everyone
who acts with respect around me.
I never accept anyone until they prove
they are my type of people.
I trust people until they give me a
reason not to trust them.

I don't trust anyone until they prove they can be trusted.

I am kind and will go out of my way to do something nice for a friend or a stranger because I choose to live in a world of kindness.

Religion

I believe in God's wrath because my parents taught me to be god-fearing.

I am a member of _____ religion.

I couldn't possibly question it.

I have to be active in church.

I can't go to church. No one there wants me.

God will punish me because I am ____.

God will punish others because they don't believe the same as I do.

What men think God has told us is not relevant to my life.

The idea of God(s) is not relevant to my life.

I love God and I know He loves me. I pray every day. His love lifts me up.

My Attitude

Everyone will always do what I ask for, I am entitled to have it my way because I'm so cute/handsome/pretty/special.

I question everything.

I love to paint, but my paintings are no good.

- I have to maintain a large collection of stuff in order to be happy.
- I need to be a minimalist and get rid of everything in order to be happy.
- I can't sing. No one wants to hear that.
- I have to sing/play, it is a form of expression I must have available.
- I have to have a dog in order to meet my emotional needs. If I have to choose between my boyfriend or my dog, the dog is staying.
- I am ashamed and terrified of being different.
- I can't take that leap to do what I am passionate about, I wouldn't be able to support myself.
- I can't get a 9 to 5 job, I am a free spirit. I follow my passion.
- I am proud of my differences and I own them. I love to share differences.
- I have to do whatever I can to fit in.
- I have to work out two hours a day in order to maintain the fit, chiseled body I want.
- I have to have a fit, chiseled body.
- I will never have a fit, chiseled body, I am made to be a couch potato.
- I can never have a dog, I am not capable of caring for it properly.
- No one wants to hear my opinions or what I have to say. What I have to say is not important.

My Attitude

I need to eat vegan in order to be healthy.

It is important to me to be educated and open minded. I always do appropriate research.

I already know everything I need to know. I don't need to research anything.

It is my responsibility to always tell people when they are wrong.

I can't stand up for myself, I don't have that kind of chutzpah.

I am weak, I could never defend myself if I were attacked physically.

I am physically superior to most people.

I have trained in self defense. No one can hurt me.

I have to be the best at whatever I put my hand to. I am an alpha.

I will never be the best at anything. I was meant to be in the background.

I will never attract the opposite sex, my body is _____.

I am a sexy beast, everyone who approaches me is totally in to me.

I have to xeriscape my yard because I am not good at maintaining it.

My girlfriend should never talk to other guys. She belongs to me.

My boyfriend can't appreciate other women, that means he is disrespecting me.

I need someone to take care of me, I
couldn't possibly do my own laundry.
I trust my partner completely. If I
didn't, we wouldn't be together.
I don't trust my partner, I have to check
up on them constantly, but I refuse to
let go.
I am loyal. I stand by my friends,
family, and coworkers, even when
they disrespect me.
I stand by those who stand by me. I will
give them the benefit of the doubt
once or twice, but if they abuse my
trust, I have to take care of myself.

Build yourself a solid foundation on the
rock. If your foundation is supported by
something weak like sand, or you just
shelter under whatever you find, or that
someone else has left there for you, your
house will be washed away when you are
faced with the storms of life. You need to
create your own foundations consciously
to define who you are and have a solid
support.

Your friends and family who support you
and accept you for your true self are also a
part of your foundation. The physical
place you choose to be can also nurture
you or hold you back.

Choose your Foundation consciously - Please take a look at your core values, beliefs and choices and make them conscious choices. This is difficult since we all have blind spots and may have difficulty seeing past blinders we have voluntarily put on ourselves.

A solid foundation will make your future challenges and choices much easier. It will also help you be more comfortable presenting yourself to others later on. Always do a reality check on your assumptions before making life decisions.

EXERCISES

Think of the basic rules for life you were taught as a child. Think of assumptions you have made and how you live now based on your experiences. Write them down. Try to capture all of your basic life beliefs and choices you have made. This will be very difficult since we don't realize what we believe, we have many assumptions we may have made unconsciously. This is not an exercise we can do in one sitting, but will come over time with observation of our behavior.

Get Feedback. Ask others what they think your beliefs, values, choices and assumptions are, based on their observations of your actions.

Write down evidence or experiences which support your belief and write down evidence or experience which shows your assumptions are false. Weigh the evidence and make a conscious choice regarding that belief.

Examples:

My own morality is fairly simple, so it is difficult for me to come up with moral assumptions. My morality is: Don't hurt. Don't hurt others, don't hurt yourself, Help anyone who is in a significant state

of suffering, including myself, to work through and rise out of suffering.

Evidence for: When I cause hurt in others or myself, there is no joy in my world. I suffer when I see suffering. When I can facilitate happiness and joy, that causes me to feel good and know that I am worthwhile and have purpose. Hurting others can be prosecuted and punished under the law depending on what it is. When I cause hurt, it always comes back to me. If I hurt or shame someone, they will want to do the same to me. They may be waiting for their opportunity to get back at me. It feels bad to me when I cause hurt.

Evidence against: When I hurt someone, there are times when I can move on and no repercussions come back to me. I can get more for myself by walking on the backs of others. Some people think hurting others and shaming them is fun. They often get away with it.

Rebuttal: I never have fun causing someone else hurt. I might be able to have short bursts of gain by pushing people down, but that is never sustainable, it makes me feel bad about myself, and usually comes back to bite me. I don't want to be that kind of person. I may be able to avoid worldly reper-

cussions, but I will think about my guilt all the time. That will drag me down and make me miserable.

Reaffirmed Belief: I consciously choose not to cause hurt. The world, those around me, and I are better served and we will all have better outcomes when I pursue joy, happiness and kindness.

Another Example -

Assumption: I have to wear a bra.

This was one of my own personal struggles. I have never liked wearing this garment. It has always been uncomfortable, no matter what style, how I get it fitted or how much I pay for it. It was always just a given to me (an assumption, a core teaching) that a grown woman, especially a woman of size like me, wears a bra. A fact of life. I have to be modest and under no circumstance should anyone ever see that I have nipples.

I realized one day that while a bra gives me a lot of discomfort, it does not give *me* any benefit other than a 'better shape'. The only reason I was wearing it was that our culture expects me to wear it. I thought some people might be shocked when they realize that I am not wearing a

bra. They may feel I am being immodest or brazen and judge me negatively.

Evidence for: A lot of clothes, especially professional clothes, are designed so they will not look well without a bra. When I lift and separate, my silhouette matches the accepted ideal better. There are people, mostly women, who will judge me and think less of me if they realize I don't wear bras.

Evidence against: When I went out for the first few times without a bra (I was actually scared), I found that most people didn't care or even notice that I wasn't wearing one. I was able to find clothes that look decent and professional without a bra to wear to the office. I make sure to get thick t-shirts so my bralessness is not obvious. I am much more comfortable without it. Who am I creating a 'better shape' for, anyway? I have found that the men who want to get close to me are actually more interested and appreciative when they find out that I generally don't wear a bra.

Outcome: I go without a bra most of the time. I still have some clothes that need a bra to look right, so once in a while I do wear one. It always reminds me that I hate wearing them. The last time I wore a bra, it created raised welts all along under

my breasts. I didn't like it at all. I have been braless for about two years now and I have received a lot of appreciation and no negative comments. People may be thinking things about me, but no one has talked to me about their unrequited expectations regarding my bra wearing as a negative aspect in their life. I have become much more confident and comfortable in my body as a result of this change in my life.

New Belief: Bras are optional for me and only for when I want a certain look. It serves me better in terms of physical comfort and body confidence to not wear one most of the time.

Notes: While this may seem a bit glib, this was an actual process I went through. It took me months and even years to get fully comfortable with my new choice to generally not wear a bra. Right at first, I was very conscious of it. The first few times I didn't wear a bra to work, I felt a little undressed. Now, I rarely think of it. I don't check people out to see if they are checking me. Most days, bras do not come into my consciousness at all except when I see someone looking very uncomfortable wearing one and I just want to yell "Free the nipple!"

When you find a belief or an assumption you realize does not serve you any more, it will take a while to process the change. That's ok. It usually won't work to just flip a switch and re-write decades worth of belief and programming overnight. These things take time and will probably be uncomfortable at first. It is important to continue to evaluate periodically and make sure you have made the right choice for you. If it was right, the discomfort will decline. If it wasn't right for you, the discomfort will grow worse over time. You will know.

For every core belief or assumption you have identified, **ask yourself what your world would look like if the opposite were true.** The opposite of 'I have to live in a house' would be 'I cannot live in a house and be true to myself'. What would that look like? Could you sell your house and travel with one suitcase? Could you live in a cave in the woods? Could you sleep in a hammock on the beach and spend your days fishing? Do you want to live on a boat or in a RV? Would you live on a cruise ship and just sail around the world all the time?

Write your Personal Mission Statement.

Go online and google 'personal mission statement'. Find some instructions or examples which inspire you. Spend some time with this. Include your core values/choices/ beliefs that you identified after reading this chapter. Post your Mission Statement in a prominent place and use it as a guide when you make decisions for your life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

What defines you?

How do you identify yourself?

What groups do you consider yourself a part of?

What do you like to do?

What do you believe?

What do you work for?

What will you stand up for or defend?

What are you passionate about?

What did you internalize as a child regarding your morality or how you should represent yourself?

Why is it so difficult to identify our core beliefs or recognize our assumptions?

Why are we sometimes afraid to examine our assumptions?

Why do we say 'I had no choice' to justify our choices?

Was examining your assumptions a useful exercise for you?

Did you find any assumptions that no longer serve you?

Did you find any assumptions that may have been valid for you before, but are no longer consistent with your core values?

Did you find any assumptions you thought no longer served you, but you were able to reaffirm they still have value for you?

Did you find any core beliefs that were shaky that you were able to shore up by consciously choosing?

Do you think you don't have any values or core beliefs? (Hint: You do.)

Why is it so difficult to discuss our beliefs, especially with those we think have a contrary belief of their own we think they don't want to question?

Why do we make assumptions about other people's beliefs and base decisions on what we think they think? Why don't we ask them to verify their belief for us before we make important life decisions?

3 LABELS

HELLO, I AM: (some options)

Smart, ugly, gender-fluid, straight, open-minded, Black, Asian-American, spiritual, religious, ethically non-monogamous, kind, ambitious, ashamed, arrogant, sexually repressed, homosexual, independent, fat, entitled, deserving, thin, self-sufficient, self-absorbed, crafty, handy, impotent, weak, pretty, political, sexy, problem solver, dependent, victim, drama queen, dieter, virgin, healthy, diseased, father, republican, musician, monogamous, good listener, polyamorous, Mexican, American, vain, bossy, authoritative, fit, alpha, beta, clever, proud, intelligent, educated, loved, loving, nurturer, differently abled, user, gardener, teacher, care-giver, healer, sado-masochist, dom, sub, vanilla, runner, athlete, mother, couch potato, talented, popular, handsome, never on time, new-ager, worthless, old, young, energetic, lethargic, loquacious, disgusting, conservative, liberal, martyr, self-righteous, harmless, socially awkward, autistic, obese, disabled, angry, hippy, special, precious, self-confident . . .

I define myself as open-minded and educated. I will always listen to new information and opposing points of view so I can evaluate problems for myself. At this time, I don't think this label will ever become obsolete for me. I have chosen to make it a defining part of my personality and my character. This is my truth now, but I know that authenticity is a journey and I have to always come back to evaluate my own evolution.

I am a knitter. There are days and hours when all I can think about is knitting and I just want to sit in front of the TV and work on my projects. There are also days and months and sometimes years when I don't think about knitting and I'm not really interested. This is a neutral label that comes and goes for me. What if everywhere I went, people whispered behind their fingers "ooh, she's a knitter", even if I hadn't picked up needles in a year?

I am a cisgender, straight, Caucasian woman (cis= on the same side; I identify with the gender I was born with). For many who don't fit the white, cis, straight majority, their racial, sexual, and gender identity can be a major defining part of their life. It constrains the people you like to be around and what you like to do, who you can be yourself with, where you can go and even what house you can live in and be safe. There may be people who will

persecute you when you decide to live true to one of these labels. I have many friends in the LGBT and racial minority communities who live with this identity large in their lives every day. They can never leave behind this defining label as a part of their life.

I can forget I am a knitter, and I can forget I am straight, but some people have identities they can never forget or deny or leave behind even for a moment. What are yours? Did you consciously decide what they are, was the identity just a part of you, or did you let someone else give you that label? Having a Caucasian genetic history is part of me that I have no control over. I do have control over how I present myself and what groups I choose to be a part of.

Remember that labels are relative. When we compare ourselves to others, our label depends on what we are comparing ourselves to. You may be considered light-skinned to some and dark-skinned to others even though your skin is always the same shade of brown. If everyone in your family is a world class classical musician, you may think your jazz guitar playing by ear is worthless and nothing to pursue.

Think about how you came by your labels and if you are comparing yourself appropriately. You may be holding yourself to a standard that

is inappropriate or impossible for you; or allowing someone else to pressure you with their impossible or unrealistic expectations. For me, walking a quarter triathlon (swim 6 laps, bike 5 miles, and walk 1.5 miles) and finishing it is a major athletic accomplishment even though I came in last after people who went through the course twice. For marathon runners, that might be considered a warmup. Compared to an A-type personality, I may seem extremely lazy, rough looking and unmotivated. Compared to a high school dropout who lives in his parent's basement and plays video games all day, I present a polished look and I am extremely well-accomplished. Compared to that same dropout who is able to fulfil his bliss all day, and even earn money within the game to support himself appropriately, I may lead a very depressing life of being a wage slave with a lot of stressful expectations.

Your labels may be dependent upon the people around you who have created an expectation for you or in you. If you were hanging around with another tribe, that label could be irrelevant or at least not have the significance it carries for you at the present. I may be an amazing swimmer, but in Utah where I work an office job at the age of 45, that label doesn't do a lot for me. If I lived on a Pacific Island and ran a pearl diving business,

being an amazing swimmer would be highly relevant and important.

It often takes less than 5 seconds for us to assign a label or a stereotype to categorize someone. It is important to remember that every one of us is a three dimensional, complicated human being and we all have a lot more within us than any one label can ever capture. Once you have categorized someone, it is easy to dismiss them (or ourselves) as only that one thing. It takes an open mind to realize our labels could be wrong, or at the very least, nowhere near the whole story. Sometimes our labels might even seem to be contradictory. For instance, I am a 45 year old unmarried woman who likes to knit, but I don't own cats and I am definitely *not* a harmless, submissive old maid spinster. I am a woman of size, and I am also body proud, sexually active and not shy or ashamed of myself. I live in Utah, but I am an ocean lover.

Brené Brown talks about unwanted identities in her book *I Thought It Was Just Me*. We may have identities we cannot deny, but which we choose to not allow to define us. I don't become a scientist despite being a woman, I can be a scientist who also is a woman. I may have been abused as a child, I could be an Abuse Victim or I could be a normal person who was abused once. I may be an amputee who runs marathons. I can choose to be a

runner. Even if I have no legs. Do not allow the labels others give you (or which you give to yourself) to limit you if that is not your truth.

We get to decide how we manage our labels. If you were abused as a child, you do not have to allow everyone in your life to ascribe all of your reactions to being a victim. You decide who you are and what roles or labels you will use at what time.

EXERCISES

What labels do you apply to yourself now?
Write them down.

Some labels are neutral, some are positive and some are negative. If you find yourself only applying labels of one kind - for instance all negative or all positive, try to think of some labels of all three types.

Take each one and examine it. Remember that you do not have to accept a label that someone else has given you. You don't have to continue to apply a label to yourself that you may have thought was yours for a very long time. I suggest you break up this exercise and work on each major label for a week. Examine your assumptions regarding that label or that role. What would happen if you didn't have to be in that role? Can you leave it behind for a few days? If you can't not be that thing, then you know that label still applies and you can make a conscious choice to keep or accept it.

Remember that labels are relative depending on who you are comparing yourself to. Check out the context for each of your labels and see if that gives you any insight.

Here is an example -
Mary's labels: strong, powerful, responsible,
good cook, procrastinator, single, good

listener, sexy, under achiever, giver, wellness practitioner, lacking motivation, straight, agnostic, bossy, loud, self-possessed, spendthrift, teacher, cisgender, talented, knitter, self-reliant, sarcastic, intelligent, sister, daughter, crafter, girlfriend, friend, overweight, large, red-head, brash, clumsy, good worker, singer, actor, educated, musician.

Examine your label -

Self-reliant. I have always believed that I would take care of myself. I am capable of taking care of myself and I will always need to take care of myself. I don't remember a time when this wasn't my thought pattern. Even as a child, I knew I would grow up and get a job and support myself. I would go to college and get an education and I would work my whole life. I knew that other people made different choices or plans, but for me, this didn't seem like a choice. It was just the way things are. It is an assumption I made early on about the way things would be. I was taught to work for what I wanted and I was taught and learned that I was capable of doing it. Now as I am experiencing a relationship with someone who wants to take care of me, I have been struggling with the idea of allowing it. I don't need him to take care of me or support me, but I am trying to be open to the idea of allowing his support and care. I have a worry that I may get dependent on being cared for and lose my ability to care for myself. My need to define

myself as self-reliant has been a slight source of conflict for us. He is accustomed to taking care of his partner and has had an equally difficult time adjusting to my self-reliance. Do I really need to continue to be self-reliant as a base of my personality? Do I have to keep proving it over and over?

Growing up as a girl, I was taught that girls act a certain way. Being self-reliant is not feminine. Even if you are, hide it. Boys don't like girls who are independent. I challenged that early when I decided I take care of myself.

Thinking - thinking - thinking -

This part could take several days.

I will try out what my life would be like if I were not being self-reliant in every moment. I went out to a concert without taking my wallet, phone or keys. I felt quite vulnerable. It was a different feeling for me. Even though I felt vulnerable, I also felt trust and safety that my partner would handle whatever needed to be done. I knew that I would not be stranded without transportation or money or a way to call for help. What might my life look like if my partner and I combined our finances? Could I possibly quit my job?

I don't want to quit my job. I need work to get me out of bed. I need to know that I have my own resources to put food on my table. I would not be comfortable having someone else

support me financially all the time. I need to know that I could support myself and my partner if that every became a necessity.

Conclusion -

Right now, I believe I will always be self-reliant. I want to always be able to take care of myself and not need anyone to support me. That doesn't mean that I won't allow anyone in. It just means that I will be conscious and try to not become dependent on it. I will keep up my professional skills and I will not wait for anyone to rescue me from anything. I may allow and enjoy being cared for, but I don't need to be cared for.

I make a conscious choice to continue to be self-reliant, support myself financially and always be able to take care of myself in all my interactions. I want to have the capability to support those I care about if that becomes needed. I also choose to try not to be defensive or belligerent, as I have in the past, when someone who cares for me offers to support me or take care of things right now. Even though I don't need it, sometimes I *want* to be cared for and sometimes my partner needs me to allow him to take care of me.

I am self-reliant. I support myself financially. I am able to handle and take care of myself in all interactions without asking someone else to speak for me or shield me. I am capable of

managing my life and my assets without anyone else. I will allow others to help me take care of things at times. It can be a pleasant luxury to be cared for and having others want to care for me is a good thing, not something I want to react to with anger and defensiveness.

This is something that has evolved for me, and it could change in the future as well. I still want to be self-reliant, but I have changed in allowing myself to be vulnerable by depending on others sometimes.

Notes - I typed up this example rather cavalierly in about 10 minutes. I wanted a real example to show you. I admit that I didn't spend the time on it that I recommended. It was about three days later that an old acquaintance was in town and offered to buy me dinner. He wanted to show appreciation for what I considered to be a very small favor I would do for anyone. In my head, the favor was not worth an exchange of dinner. However, to him, it was worth showing appreciation.

My immediate reaction was to refuse. In the past I have been uncomfortable with men buying me dinner. It has generally been in dating situations with someone I have met online and don't know yet. I am still uncomfortable with a new person buying me anything when I don't know what may be

wanted in exchange. I usually only let people buy me dinner when I know that I will be buying them dinner next time.

In the light of this recent exercise, I gave myself pause this time. Fortunately, he had messaged me instead of working out dinner on a phone call, so I had time to work through my response. After taking time for thought I realized that in this case, he truly just wanted to do something nice for me to show appreciation.

Taking into account my new conscious choice to allow others to care for me, I wrote him back to tell him that it would be nice to have him buy my dinner.

I was actually still a bit uncomfortable, but based on my new conclusion to allow others to care for or provide for me, I let him buy my drink and I thanked him for it. We had a lovely evening together with our reunion group without the tension of me arguing with a nice guy and causing bad feelings by refusing. This may seem a trivial example to you, but for me it is a change in my core values.

Trying to recognize and define yourself takes time. It is not usually something you can just decide upon and then have everything fall into place. This is a journey, not a destination.

MORE EXERCISES

Ask others how they describe you.

Ask them if the labels you have chosen for yourself have truth in their eyes

Take some sticky labels and write your labels or labels others apply to you on them. You can invite others to label you as well if you want. Stick them on your shirt. How do you feel about owning each one?

Take each one off and set it on the altar, throw it away, perhaps even burn it. Do you have a replacement label you choose to apply to yourself that would be more appropriate?

Another way to do this exercise is to write your labels on a mirror and stare into it for five minutes. Then you can erase the labels you no longer want to carry, add the labels or roles you want to represent yourself and look again.

How would it feel to just release all labels?

How does it feel if you apply the opposite label to yourself? This may help you decide what labels are still part of you and what may need to be let go. For instance, to test my self-reliant label, I could try saying 'I am comfortable being dependent on others'. That gives me a negative gut reaction, so I am pretty sure I've made the right choice.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

What labels have you chosen to apply to yourself?

Are your labels helpful or harmful?

Are the labels and the roles you apply to yourself still valid?

Are there labels someone else has given you which you have gone along with or embraced?

Do you have unwanted identities which you cannot deny, but you choose to set behind you and not allow to rule you or limit you?

Can you leave behind or work to change any negative labels you use or accept for yourself?

Can you think of a label which used to be really important which has changed for you?

Are some labels more defining or large in your life than others?

What would happen if you decided to leave behind a label or role for a while?

Do I really need to continue to define myself with that label?

Are my labels consistent with my core beliefs, values and choices I identified in the last chapter?

Are my labels consistent with my personal Mission Statement?

What are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves? Are the stories true?

4 FEMININE AND MASCULINE

We talked about masculine and feminine at Authenticity discussion group in the park today (May 2018). I decided this needs to be in here to assist your work defining yourself.

Do not confuse this with male and female. All humans have masculine and feminine traits working together within us. It can be enlightening to recognize when you are acting from your masculine or feminine and to know which may be dominant for you in certain situations.

It is important to cultivate the mature aspects and try to leave behind the immature or shadow aspects. Relationships often work best when the couple has complementary and supportive yin-yang energy. This is something you can work on in yourself. If you cultivate the mature masculine and feminine in yourself, you

won't need to attach yourself to someone else to supply those aspects for you.

<p><u>Immature Masculine</u> Dominating Selfish Controlling, Tyrannical Stronger than x Aggressive Angry Need to be the best Boastful Action without thought Jealous / covetous Stoic, unemotional, detached Bossy</p>	<p><u>Mature Masculine</u> Leader / authoritative Provider Strong Problem solver Assertive Independent Self-reliant Ability to Hold safe space well, create safety Ambitious, goal- oriented Protective Logical</p>
<p><u>Immature Feminine</u> Manipulative Gossiping Self-absorbed Seeking validation through appearance Overly Sensitive Submissive, retiring Insecure Passive - inability to take action Drama queen Martyr</p>	<p><u>Mature Feminine</u> Supportive Nurturing Emotionally aware Empathetic Care giver Compassionate Tactful Intuitive Graceful – physically and in dealing with others Creative</p>

These traits are on a spectrum. It is possible to move between them fairly quickly. None of them is static. You may feel your masculine is dominant on certain days or in certain situations and the opposite is true with other situations.

Men in our culture are taught they must not show any feminine traits, but this is extremely damaging. Especially to those men who have a strong feminine. To completely deny a part of yourself is not healthy. We are finding the results of this in a lot of men who completely shut down and don't know how to show any emotions because of this.

A person who is secure in the mature masculine has no problem supporting others in exercising their strengths, or even in allowing them to grow by giving them an opportunity to save themselves instead of stepping in to act the hero. The immature masculine often wants to be the hero. It is important to realize that you cannot save someone if they don't need or want to be saved. It is also important not to jump in when someone else is in the process of saving you. Sometimes I want to be the hero and my partner needs to support me in that.

A person who is trapped in the immature feminine may believe they have to manipulate others through sex or gossip in order to survive in the world. Those who are strong in the mature feminine want to nurture and care for others and do what is best to support them rather than take advantage of them in unhealthy ways.

I have seen examples of men and women who were predominant in each of these four quadrants. This is not related to your physical gender. It is related to your personality. Unfortunately, our culture tends to look down on men who have a strong feminine and women who have a strong masculine.

Notes - For a long time I thought I was just an awkward female. When I was exposed to these ideas regarding the masculine and feminine, I realized that I actually feel more comfortable in my masculine most of the time. When I realized that, it was a revelation for me. I have strong masculine traits and that is not a problem, it is an asset to me in the work I do now. It's not a bug, it's a feature. I also realized that in my personal relationships, I get along better with men who have a strong connection with their feminine side. We complement each other.

Captain Liberty on dating: “I mean, what are our choices? On the one hand, you've got a bunch of musclebound mutants who think that just because they can bend steel, we're supposed to bend *over*... and the civilians, well, they're afraid we're gonna zap 'em with a ray and shrink their johnson!”
- from the live action TV superhero show *The Tick*

I may or may not have a Captain Liberty outfit in the closet. I definitely don't look like Liz Vassey if I wear anything like it, but I do love to channel Captain Liberty at times.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

How do you manifest your masculine?

How do you manifest your feminine?

Do you have more traits on the mature side or the immature side?

How do you relate to your masculine and feminine?

Which one is dominant in you? Does it ever change with your circumstances?

How do the masculine and feminine within you work together to create you?

How do the masculine and feminine as manifested within you relate to your gender stereotype?

How do you feel when connecting to your masculine or feminine? Especially when it is opposite from your gender stereotype?

Do you have more traits to add to the lists?

5 BE WHO YOU ARE, AGAINST OPPOSITION

Those people who go through a personal conversion to understand themselves and be who they are despite opposition are very confident in themselves. They have had to work through adversity to come to an understanding. They create a solid foundation for themselves. They have had to make conscious choices to go against the mainstream in order to be their true self.

Personal conversion is absolutely necessary. If you want a solid foundation for your life, you need to create this conversion for yourself even if you don't have the opposition or persecution to trigger your need to define yourself.

It is very difficult to come to the understanding that everyone around you is telling you something you cannot agree with or subscribe to. There are many in minority communities who have to work through this to be at peace

with themselves. Those people who make a conscious choice to be who they are know that it is worth the risk to be true to themselves, even when everyone around them may persecute them for it.

I invite you to look at the confidence and serenity you will find in any person who has gone through this journey for themselves and come out the other side with a solid foundational idea of who they really are.

Here are some examples:

Religious persecution

Religious conversion

LGBTQ

Creative types who decide to follow their
passion

Monogamists and purity pledge people in
hookup culture (PS, why do boys never take
purity pledges? Hmmm)

Hippies

New Agers

Conservatives at Liberal colleges

Nudists

Polyamorists or Ethical Non-monogamists or
sexually liberated in conservative culture

Activists for political or environmental causes

If we go through life floating along, doing what is expected of us, letting the tide push us wherever it will, we end up floundering and not

knowing how we got to where we are. Of course we don't know how we got where we are because we did not make a conscious choice to go there or plan where we really wanted to go.

House on the Rock

Build your house upon the rock and not upon the sand and when the storms come, you will be able to stand firm. There is a reason why these stories persevere. Whether you are religious or not, building your identity on your own personal foundational rock is good advice. There will come a time when you will experience opposition to your true self. You will need to be grounded and solid on your foundation or you will be washed away.

If you don't know where
you are going, you'll end
up somewhere else.

- Yogi Berra

EXERCISES

Case studies on life - What examples do you have of people who have no idea where they are or why?

What examples do you have of people who defined themselves and are exactly where they want to be?

Talk with some of these people and see if they can give you any insights into personal conversion and having a plan for life.

Notes - I considered adding in some stories here about people that floated through life and found themselves where they didn't want to be. I also wanted to compare that to stories about those who truly had to commit to themselves. I decided that this is a group effort. The only one who can change your life is you. My examples are surely not as powerful as the examples you have personal experience with. So please, think about the people in your life and model your own case studies on what you know.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

How did you come to be where you are in life?

What choices brought you into your current situation?

How can you effect your own personal conversion to fully invest in your own life?

Do you feel you have no idea how you got to where you are?

Do you know people that let themselves just be pushed with the flow and ended up in an unhealthy place?

Do you know people who figured out their plan and have a mission statement for their life?
How do they compare to those who drift through life?

6 MORALITY

Morality - the extent to which an action is right or wrong.

There is no **wrong** way to be you other than if you are hurting yourself or others.

There is no **right** way to be you other than to live your life with integrity in a way that brings happiness, joy and love to yourself and those around you.

Don't give people power to tell you that real <fill in the blank> have to <fill in> or real <fill in the blank> don't <fill in supposedly shameful behavior here>.

Examples of things you are not required to subscribe to:

Real men don't cry.

Real women are feminine, quiet, submissive and deferential.

You have to be flamboyant and wear bright colors if you are gay.

You have to be boring if you are an accountant.

Nope.

Only YOU get to decide the right way to be you. No one else.

“Sin is anything one does or thinks which causes one to be unhappy! Human beings who are in sound physical and spiritual health should always be at peace with themselves and always happy. Any form of mental or physical misery is sin. The most common and most destructive of all sins is fear and ignorance.” - the Devil being forced to tell the truth. From *Outwitting the Devil* by Napoleon Hill

A word about morality.

People will tell you that morality is absolute. They are wrong. They have decided their own morality and it is absolute for them, or so they think. Some

will tell you that God has defined morality and it cannot be changed.

Warning - personal opinions ahead. I say that Man has interpreted God's morality. If you are religious (unlike me), you probably believe that God made you the way you are. Why would God create you to be something he supposedly despises? Why would he give you tendencies and desires for something he has forbidden? How could God love you unconditionally and then put conditions on His love?

My own belief as an agnostic is that if there is a god, I could not believe he would be so petty and manipulative as to purposely create us to live in suffering. He has chosen to leave us to our own free will, as a parent would for a grown child. He wants for us, and has given us the capability, to find joy in living. This is why good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people, not because God is making them happen, but because we make our own world and we must then live with the consequences.

If your morality is based solely on what you think god wants for you, I invite you to examine yourself and see if you can find your own reasons for your moral

stances. As an agnostic, I know that being a good person and acting respectfully and kindly towards others brings its own rewards in the here and now. Everyone gets along better when we work together. We always lift ourselves higher when we are productive, respectful members in community. The whole is a lot more than the sum of its parts. When I help others, I know there will be someone there to help me when I need it. I know that we all can accomplish more and travel further together than I could on my own.

My morality is: Don't hurt. Don't hurt others, don't hurt yourself, Help anyone who is in a significant state of suffering, including myself, to work through and rise out of suffering. Treat the world, the people in it and myself with respect. This brings me rewards now by creating communities of respect and support.

Example - Thou shalt not kill. We all believe that killing is wrong. Yet, there are situations even you could be brought to where you would kill or condone killing and know you had made the right choice. Consider this. Soldiers kill for the sake of the safety of our country and all of the people in it. They do terrible things in the name of the greater good. Those of us

who eat meat condone killing every time we have a hamburger. We pass judgement on violent criminals and decide they need to be removed from society for the safety of all. If someone were threatening your child and trying to kill them in front of you, I am willing to bet you would choose to trade their life for your child.

Doctors take an oath to do no harm, yet in order for the surgeon to get to the damaged area, they must cut through healthy tissue.

There is no black and white in morality. You must decide your morality for yourself. You can define and decide on your own black and white, but it may be gray for someone else, or even turn gray for you when your circumstances change.

You may have some moral choices to make as you work on defining yourself and finding comfort in your authenticity. I want to encourage you to make the choices that feel good and right for your best and highest good. Those choices should not damage or disrespect others (or yourself) nor break the law. I know that some decisions you make may trigger hurt in others for the short term, but in the

long run when they see you being confident in your best self, they will come to a better place of understanding. It is damaging to everyone to remain in a situation of shame and suffering.

Sometimes you have to weigh short term hurt against long term damage and the value of truth in your life.

I consciously choose not to cause hurt. The world and I are better served and will have better outcomes when I pursue happiness, kindness and joy.

What is your own morality?

Notes -Warning: Sexual talk ahead. So far my biggest moral struggle has centered around my sexuality and the fact that I have sexuality. I was taught that sex was only to be enjoyed within marriage and sex or sexuality outside of marriage was bad and shameful. Since I never wanted to get married, sex was kind of off the table for me. Masturbation was never even mentioned. As a single adult I had my first sexual experience at the age of 23 with a friend I then dated for over a year. We were not monogamous and I had two other partners during that time. I was not really wracked with guilt over it, but I did

have the idea simmering in the back of my head that something was not right. It was one of those blind assumptions I thought I had dealt with, but it kept returning. After that relationship ended, I found myself in a place of not pursuing intimate friends or dating. Looking back now, I think the idea that I should be ashamed of myself was a whispering murmur in the back of my mind. Nearly inaudible, but there, nevertheless. If I didn't date, I couldn't be 'bad'. I was celibate for 17 years. I had asked a few guys out and gotten no for an answer. I was pursuing theater and choir for social interaction and waiting for someone to come to me. No one approached me.

At the age of 41, and in the midst of 40's hormones that left me feeling like I was in heat, I had an epiphany and realized that something was missing in my life. It was like discovering fruit is actually incredibly delicious and I love it and I can get some any time I want to instead of ignoring the produce section at the store, because only 'those' type of people ate the fruit. I decided to pursue intimate friendships and do some self education and work on enjoying sex and self pleasure. Even though I had broken with my conservative upbringing more than 20 years previously, I still struggled through this moral sea

change. I found communities that enjoyed responsible pleasure just for the sake of it. It felt very strange at first, but then it felt so freeing and good to me that I knew I was in the right place. I decided to pursue a lifestyle of ethical non-monogamy. No, this is not the same as ‘sleeping around’. I don’t want to denigrate anyone’s choices, but that was not my choice and that is not the meaning of non-monogamy. I have never stood on the corner with a sign that said “free sex”. I have done this with a “Free Hugs” sign, but that is totally not the same (Can I use emojis in books? Why not? 😊). My process for developing connections involves getting to know someone before I become intimate with them. I need to develop a level of friendship, establish that we enjoy each other’s company and gain a level of trust through shared experience before I share physical intimacy with a partner. I always let them know that I was a single, sexually active woman with multiple intimate friends and I liked it that way. I didn’t need a boyfriend or a husband and I wasn’t looking for commitment beyond friendship and respect. It took a while for this new way of life to sink in. I took up online dating and I attended several Meetups looking for connections. This is how I found Cuddle Party.

Even though I had made a moral choice to reject the idea that sex is bad and shameful, it took quite a while for me to rewire my brain. The more I found people to talk to and hang around who also believed that pleasure was good, the more normalized it became for me. We all like to be validated by others who agree with us. My attendance at the week-long ISTA Spiritual, Sexual, Shamanic retreat was instrumental in my journey of releasing shame. I went back twice more over the next couple of years and connected with some wonderful people who are now very dear to me as part of my ISTA tribe.

A new paradigm

My new morality is that pleasure is good for me. It is good for you too. As long as everyone involved is consensual, respectful of boundaries and aware of the physical and emotional pitfalls, it is good and Good to experiment with wanted touch and enjoy yourself. I do still have throwbacks occasionally. Sometimes I feel ashamed that I no longer feel ashamed about admitting I like sex. It is complex.

Sexual Education is Absolutely Vital.

I know from personal experience that it is very damaging to teach our children that sex and sexual urges are bad and

shameful. Most of us intend to say this with the following qualifier: unless you are in a committed monogamous relationship which usually means marriage. However, the qualifier gets lost because when we are children/teenagers, all it means is that the feelings and urges we have right now are shameful and have to be stamped down.

This is the way most of us were probably taught about sexuality: You may be feeling something, it is bad, don't feel it and definitely don't do anything about it. Was that effective for you at the time?

It is practically impossible to be told something is shameful our whole lives, decades sometimes, and then when we sign a paper and have a ceremony, magically it is all right now! Go, enjoy yourself! Don't be ashamed to be sexual with your wife or husband just because we have told you for years how bad and damaging sex is and how disgraced, degraded and dishonored you should be for even thinking of sex or physical connection. It just doesn't work well for most people. We also get a lot of people who decide to get married because they just want to have sex. This is not a good way to choose a life partner and often ends in divorce.

I fully understand and support you if you decide yourself that sexual intimacy should only be shared within marriage. However, we need to be sending the message, and learn ourselves, that fully sharing is something good and sacred and wonderfully fulfilling that deepens intimacy between people and that is the reason to wait and share it only within a committed relationship. You have to be able to talk about it in a way that does not attach shame; for yourself or the partner you are talking to or the children you are responsible for.

If you feel you cannot speak about sex, then you should not be having sex and you should not be complacently thinking your children will get any messages on healthy sexuality from you through osmosis. Think back, how did you learn about sex? Do you really want your children to learn about sex from the internet, porn, media and other children? If you don't have the tools, get yourself educated first so you can help educate them.

There is a great curriculum called *Our Whole Lives* sponsored by the United Church of Christ which offers adult sex education and also appropriate education starting with children as young as 5

teaching them consent and boundaries. I highly recommend it.

The first fundamental problem is – don't do what? Many people are even confused about what sex actually is. Can you really get pregnant if you make out with someone while wearing a swimsuit? (No.) If you can't even talk about the fundamentals, we are truly lost.

I also know that if you truly want to lower the rate of teen pregnancies and lessen abortions, the only effective way to do that is through education. Abstinence-only education plainly does not work. Check out the statistics if you don't believe me. In European countries that teach about contraception and sex education openly, the teen pregnancy rate is at least half what it is in the US. I found several sources, some reporting a teen pregnancy and abortion rate 1/5 that of the US. I won't list sources here, I encourage you to do your own research.

We must all learn the truth about the real pitfalls of sexual intimacy and sexual activity including emotional entanglements, sexually transmitted infections, and how to avoid unwanted pregnancy. Just saying 'don't do it' didn't

work for our generation, and it isn't working for us nor our children right now.

This is barely the tip of the iceberg on this topic of sexual education. It is definitely one of my soapboxes. So I will leave it here for now. The upshot is, *talking* about how to manage our sexual needs (we all have them) should never be shameful and you need to learn about this universal aspect of humanity from reliable, responsible sources for yourself and for the sake of your children.

She's telling you again – this a Journey, not a destination.

Reconciling your morality is something that will take time. I know I keep saying this is a journey. I mean it. Something that may have been true and absolutely right for you when you were 12 may not reflect your truth at the age of 41. That is what happened for me. Something you internalized at the age of 12 may not have been appropriate for you then and maybe it still isn't now. You will never know until you examine it and make some conscious choices about how you really feel. Perhaps those things you internalized back when are absolutely still appropriate for you and you can reaffirm them for yourself as part of your conscious foundation.

Some possible moral ideas –

All of these examples are moral choices that some people on this planet have chosen for or against.

Perhaps eating shrimp and pork really isn't a big deal for you.

Perhaps you did the sexual freedom thing and it didn't feel right. You want to wait for a committed relationship before sharing physical intimacy with a partner again.

Perhaps you have sexual tendencies or preferences that are not accepted as mainstream and you might want to look for answers to your questions at the LGBT center or the local BDSM club instead of at your church.

Perhaps you cannot bear the over-sexualized world we live in and you love the quiet contemplation and service to god you can do outside of those influences at the monastery or abbey.

Perhaps you feel that cutting your hair would not be an offense to god after all.

Perhaps you feel that wearing your turban is the way you demonstrate to the world what you stand for and you will never forgo this symbol of your religion even under harassment.

Perhaps you like to torture kittens. You are wrong and you should not be doing this.

Perhaps that statue of buddha just looks cool in the garden. Having an idol isn't a problem for you. *(BTW, buddhism is actually compatible with christianity. Check out Thich Nhat Hahn's writings.)*

Maybe you choose to work on the Sabbath because you need to feed your family.

Maybe your parents were horrific to you and don't deserve to be honored.

Perhaps you don't enjoy serving the homeless or volunteering for charity.

Perhaps you enjoy the nudist lifestyle and need to find a nudist resort to live and work in.

Perhaps coveting your neighbor's possessions is a good motivator for you to work hard so you can have the same things.

Maybe the command "thou shalt not kill" is absolute for you and you would be a conscientious objector if you ever were drafted to the military. You wear a mask when walking outside so you don't accidentally inhale and kill an insect.

Divorce is not an option. You made a commitment and you will not unmake it.

Marriage is a commitment you don't take lightly, but if you both have tried and can't make it work, you refuse to stay in misery. Get a divorce and move on.

Perhaps you campaign against the death penalty for violent criminals.

Maybe you find it necessary to stand on the street corner and tell _____ how much god hates them. You are wrong and should not be doing this either.

I do have some moral absolutes of my own and I am not ashamed to tell you about them. Much as I wish I could accept and show kindness to everyone, there are some actions I will not condone. Anyone who consciously chooses to hurt others, in any way including shaming, needs to be taught they are doing wrong. They can be shown a better way to meet their needs. If they choose to keep their hurtful behavior, they need to be punished or isolated.

I know that Real Love is good and should never be cause for shaming. If you have love for something, someone or even several things at the same time, there needs to be a way to reconcile your morality with that love. Be sure you do not confuse Love with infatuation, jealousy, greed, or lust. This is often done in our western culture.

Love for a place, pets, hobbies, your work, the earth, a game, a subject, a fandom is all love for you and therefore integral to

your life. Love for another human, especially when it is reciprocated, is something to be treasured, nurtured and cherished. Real Love is not wrong. I recall the sermon given at an episcopal commitment ceremony as one of my treasured memories. The Rector said “where there is Love, there is god, and Love is never wrong”. Even though I don’t strictly believe in ‘God’, this brought up emotions for me. Even now as I type this, I get choked up. I fully believe that love between two people is an absolute embodiment of the divine or the higher possibilities within us.

There is an amazingly beautiful scene in the movie *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* (2008). It stars the most popular actor in the world you probably never heard of, Shahrukh Khan. This is a wonderful love story set in India and I highly recommend it for anyone looking for some good clean entertainment. Like so many couples, the hero (what they call a leading actor in India) falls for the girl instantly. It takes most of the movie for her to love him. There is a scene at temple near the end where she bows to touch his feet and says “I see God in you”.

Seeing God, the divine, or the higher nature in another is the recognition that

we are more than we appear to be on the surface and is a way of seeing Love for another. I hope you can see the higher nature in those you profess to love, including yourself.

Organized Religion –

It's no secret that I am generally not a fan of organized religion. However, I do know that religion has done a lot of good for a lot of people. If you feel that your religion truly uplifts you, you love hearing the sermons and reading scripture gives you a sense of peace, then I will be happy to pick you up and drive you to church.

If religion for you brings up shame and a schism between what your heart is telling you and what 'religious' people and doctrine is saying, that is not healthy or sustainable. You feel bruised by the sermons and going to church feels like personal attacks on who you are, then call me and I will pick you up and take you away from that abusive situation.

Please choose what truly supports and uplifts you to be the best you can be.

EXERCISES

Write down your moral choices.

Now say the opposite out loud and see how it sits with you. Your reaction could give you an indication if that moral choice is still correct for you or if it is something that needs further thought.

Examples:

Killing is wrong. The opposite would be: Killing is fine, I could kill anyone I felt like killing any time I want to.

I don't know about you, but for me, I experienced an actual physical shiver reaction and a frown to type that sentence. It definitely does not feel right for me to say that I could ever kill anyone. My morality includes the tenet that killing is nearly always wrong.

I do no work on the Sabbath.

"I always work on the Sabbath, I do not need a day of rest nor do I need a day to dedicate to religious service." - While I usually do not work on Sunday or Saturday, I do not need a day to dedicate to religious service because I do no religious service. I do think a day of rest is a good idea, so I usually try to minimize my buying on Sunday. But if I do need to go out on Sunday, I don't let this idea stop me.

Sex is something that should only be shared between a married man and woman in the pursuit of a family. “Sex is something that can give great pleasure to any number of consenting adults in any way they choose to pursue it together. It is no one else’s business.” - Yes, this one feels right for me. I was taught the first statement, but when I finally examined it, I realized how incompatible it was for me. It took a long time for me to actually examine it consciously and make a change in my base assumption.

Find someone you trust and explain your moral stance to them in a real conversation. You need to be able to represent yourself truthfully and be comfortable enough in your moral choices to talk about them forthrightly. If your choices seem controversial, please choose someone safe to practice with the first couple of times.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

Have you ever questioned the morality you were taught as a child?

In what way and why?

Has your morality changed over time?

Do you have an example of something you believed was the right moral decision at one time which you no longer agree with or believe?

Have you made decisions in your life in order to be 'morally upright' which didn't feel right to you?

Have you made decisions in your life in order to rebel against what is 'morally upright' which didn't feel right to you?

Have you ever done something 'immoral' which felt very right?

Have you ever done something 'morally upright' which was very difficult for you which you can verify now was absolutely the right decision for your own best and highest good?

How does your morality now jibe with what you were taught as a child?

What morality do you teach your children?
Is it consistent with your own morality?

What other moral questions do you have
for yourself?

Remember, you can look up other sources
for inspiration or direction, but ultimately
the real answers regarding your morality
can only be found within you.

7 LOVE YOURSELF FIRST

Does this sound familiar? You want people to like you, you want to do what it takes, you want to be who they want you to be just so you can get some attention and connection. You are at a total loss about what to do to find or create connections with others. You feel desperate to find someone to like you and want you.

Unfortunately, until you like yourself, you won't believe anyone else could like you no matter what they do to prove it to you. You must start with loving yourself. You don't need anyone else to validate your existence. I know even without meeting you that you have worth and you are worthwhile. There are people waiting for you to find them just as much as you are aching for them.

Many of us are terrified to be alone without a relationship. If you are with someone because you don't want to be alone with yourself, or because you don't know who you are outside of a relationship, that is an indicator that you need to spend some time alone with yourself

and work on you. Remember that scene from Runaway Bride when she realizes she doesn't know what kind of eggs she really likes? Whenever she is asked, she says "I like the same eggs you like." She finally sits down and tries them all to figure it out for herself - This is work you need to do as well.

Can you commit to yourself?

Can you commit to loving yourself and taking care of yourself for the rest of your life?

If you can't love and care for yourself, you won't be able to hear it from anyone else.

The work has to start with you.

Try writing a love letter to yourself. Example:

Love letter to yourself -

I love you. I care for you and I commit to loving and caring for you for the rest of my life. I will care for you as my own beloved. I will care for and about you as I would my partner, my child, my aging parent, my lover. I will give you nourishment that feeds your soul, your spirit and your body in healthy ways. I will always remove us from any abusive situations we may find ourselves in. I will protect you the best way I know how. We are in this together. I will never leave you or give up on you. I will love you forever.

Love, Me

There are many self-help books and programs and practitioners to help you with whatever your own insecurities may be. I am not trying to tell you that you are perfect, no one is perfect. Focusing on reaching perfection is a sure way to extreme frustration and failure. There will always be room for improvement. There will always be someone smarter, better looking, faster, more ambitious, and more successful than you. No matter what. You need to get over trying to beat them. The person you need to measure yourself against is you.

Even though there are things you probably want to improve about yourself, it is important to love yourself now. When you lose that extra weight, when you graduate, when you get that fancy car, job, commission, or that relationship, you will find the goal has moved and you will need something else to be satisfied. You have to learn to appreciate and love and be happy with who you are in the only moment you will ever have, which is right now.

Take a look at the narrative of many super models and body builders. I remember a woman who had a small scar from an appendix removal. She was a fitness model and felt that she could never wear a bikini again. She was able to get past this and posted a picture of herself in a bikini pointing at the scar - which was all but invisible to me. To her, it was very

distressing and a major hurdle to get over. She was proud when she could come out and show the scar and not allow it to rule her. I can tell you that even if anyone possibly noticed that scar, they wouldn't care unless they were especially superficial and nitpicky about perfect physical appearance. This woman was beautiful and fit and 99.9% of those looking at her would notice her smile and athletic body before seeing any imperfection like the scar she was worried about.

Even though her scar was trivial to me, it was a problem for her, therefore it was a problem. She did hang out and work in a community that was very focused on appearance. Until she was able to get past it, she couldn't be confident in herself. No matter how she worked and how she maintained her body and what she looked like, she would not be happy until she could accept herself with that scar. Even if that scar was somehow neutralized, if she chose to be worried about that kind of thing, there would be something else she would find to be dissatisfied about in herself. This is why acceptance as you are now is so important.

Even fitness models can be unhappy with their bodies if they choose to be, I know some very fit, beautiful people personally who have low body confidence. I also know many people who do not have perfect bodies who have

confidence in themselves who can be nicer to be around.

There will always be something else you decide has to be different for life to be good if you allow yourself to let your imperfections keep you from loving yourself.

Self Care-

You have to fill your own bucket first before you have anything to give to others. If you are a care-taker, you must learn to Receive. If you keep giving and giving without getting anything back, you are heading for a breakdown. You will not be able to care for others if you do not take care of yourself first. Self Care is not selfish. You must take care of yourself first so you will be healthy and whole and have the energy and peace to be able to fully take care of others in your life.

You are worthy now.

You are amazing now.

You are lovable now.

Yes, you are.

You can do it now. Don't put your life on hold.

You will always be able to find something wrong with yourself if that is what you are looking for. Let's celebrate what is right and treat ourselves like we treat those we love. There will always be room for improvement for all of us, but if you cannot love yourself now,

you won't love yourself when you reach whatever goal you have for yourself. Have some compassion for yourself and the things you are doing right. What is something good you did today?

Affirmation: I make smart, healthy choices for my best and highest good.

Look yourself in the eyes in the mirror and say this:

your name here,
I love you.
I commit to care for you
To the best of my ability
For the rest of my life.

Some words about self-sabotage. This happens when you know what you need to do, but you just don't want to do it or you just won't do it. You know you should eat that salad in the fridge, but you stop at McDonald's on the way home. You know your ex is toxic, but you can't seem to help yourself from going over to fix her car and hope she smiles at you. You know that practicing gratitude takes 30 seconds and can vastly affect your attitude for the better, but you somehow never remember to take that 30 seconds. You know your husband is abusive when he's drunk, but you

still stock the bar in the living room. You know you feel better after you go to the gym or even after taking a walk, but somehow watching that next episode on Netflix seems more important night after night. You would like to be able to play the piano better, but something always gets in the way of practice time.

All of these examples are symptoms that you haven't found a good enough reason to fuel your goal or you really don't want to change. This resistance to change may be centered in your subconscious. It is very difficult to convince your animal brain that it is better to do something hard in order to get a result in the future. The animal brain deals in the now. You may not have done the work to make the choices to define yourself or have a solid enough foundation to build the framework of you upon.

This is something you really have to examine in yourself to find out if you can do the work on your own or if you need professional help to work on this. In the attempt to fight against your subconscious, you will never win. You have to get your subconscious on board with your conscious choices.

One tool that could help with this is using Visualizations to show your subconscious how you want to be. Your mind can't differentiate between reality and visualization. Jon Gabriel

who wrote *The Gabriel Method* uses visualizations extensively to help train your brain to the outcome you desire. Every morning and evening for about 10 minutes, close your eyes and imagine yourself the way you want to be. You can see yourself running on the beach in your ideal body, talking confidently to people at work, following your ideal schedule for self-education, exercise and choosing healthy food, or having a forthright healthy communication with someone who triggers you. Visualize yourself doing the routines you want to reinforce in yourself.

Many athletes and performers use visualization techniques as part of their training to help bring about desired outcomes.



EXERCISES

Get a card or make one and write yourself a love note or a love letter.

Put it up on your mirror and read it every day.

Spend some time alone with yourself without electronics or media. You can do your favorite creative hobby, go for a hike, meditate, read a book, take a walk, ride a bike, work in the garden, take yourself to dinner, try some visualizations, write in a journal, practice music or just sit in the park and watch the sun set and give yourself time to think. How does it feel to be alone with yourself without distractions? Can you do it? Can you enjoy it?

If the answer is you do not enjoy being alone with your thoughts, what work do you need to do to get to a place where you can enjoy being with you?

Is your self-talk a positive or a negative influence on you?

Try positive self-talk for a week and see if anything changes in your outlook.

Imagine hearing someone else talking to your son or daughter the way you speak to yourself. Write it down and come back to it the next day to really see it with fresh eyes. How would you react? Does this reaction to the idea of

hearing someone talk to your child the way you talk to yourself prompt you to want a change?

What would you say to support your son or daughter if they were dealing with the same issues you are?

Do you speak to yourself as you would to someone you love and want to support and nurture?

What if you actually DO love, support and nurture yourself?

Can you be alone with yourself? Can you spend time with yourself?

If you don't want to be with you, why would anyone else?

Practice Gratitude. If you do nothing else from this chapter, this is the best thing you can do for yourself. When you go to bed at night, think of one thing you are genuinely grateful for. Say it out loud - "I am grateful that I have a warm bed to sleep in every night." When you wake up in the morning and also several times a day think of or say one thing you are grateful for. I promise that even in the worst circumstances possible, there is always something positive to be found. Practicing gratitude will help you bring your mood up and the effect is cumulative over time. When you have a positive outlook, you will be open to

seeing good things and finding opportunities you may have been closed to before.

Practice Forgiveness. Forgive yourself. Forgive others. Forgiveness is for you, not for them. Holding a grudge or negative thoughts in your heart is damaging to you. If you are holding on to hateful thoughts, you are allowing them to have power over you. Forgiving someone is not the same as trusting them again when they have proved they are not worthy of your trust. Forgiveness also does not mean putting yourself back into situations where you can be hurt. Practicing forgiveness and letting go will bring you freedom.

Ask the people in your life what they appreciate about you, what they like, what they love about you. You may want to ask them to write a letter for you so you can take some time to process it and save it. Listen to what they have to say and try to see yourself through their eyes. Believe it and know that you are worthy of their regard for you.

When people say nice things about you, believe it. Look them in the eyes and say 'thank you'.

Visualize an interaction you have been worried about which you would like to have a positive outcome. Visualize yourself doing behaviors like positive self talk or having your ideal body

or communicating your boundaries. Visualize yourself doing or being whatever you want to be with confidence and ease.

You can do an eye-gazing exercise with yourself. Get a mirror and just look into your own eyes for 3 minutes or so. Set a timer. What do you see?

Look in the mirror into your own eyes and say “<your name here>, I love you.”

What happened?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

Who/what do you love? What happens when you put yourself on that list?

Tell us about love in your life. What/Who do you love, who loves you?

Often when we ask about love, people want to share stories of grief, betrayal and heartache. I invite you to think about and share stories of actual active and euphoric love, not those times when expectations of love turned out to be unfulfilled.

What are my faults?

What are my good qualities?

Is there someone you love that has those same qualities? How do you feel about the positive and negative in that person?

Do you believe you are loveable?

What am I doing right? What good have I done in the world today?

Do you give yourself credit and compassion for what you do well?

Do you dismiss love? Oh, that's just George. He has followed me around like a puppy since we were in Kindergarten. Or maybe, that's my Mom, she has to love me. What would it be like if those people were no longer there to love you? Do you take them for granted?

Find someone who loves you, and then – perhaps you can allow it.

How do you talk to yourself?

Can you be alone with yourself?

How do you spend time when you are alone?

Can you take yourself on a date and enjoy the evening in your company alone?

When was the last time you took yourself on a date? How was it?

Have you written yourself that love letter? How does it feel? Do your feelings change over time as you continue to be reminded that you love yourself?

8 AFFIRMATIONS AND FLATTERY

Making mistakes is part of being human. No human is perfect, that is also part of being human. Pain is another part of being human, but suffering is optional, as the Buddhists say. It is all right to be afraid. It is all right to not know the answers and try options until something feels right. It is all right to know the answer and be reluctant to do it. You are all right and I know that you are doing the best you can. If you feel like you need help, it is ok to ask for it. If you know you need to make a change, it is ok to work on the best way for you to do it.

You are not alone. There is someone out there who has gone through or is going through the same things as you are and felt the same feelings. Your body is human, your feelings are human feelings, your experiences are within the human experience. At the same time, you are unique. There has never been a you

before and there never will be again. Who you are even changes from moment to moment and year to year compared with yourself.

The most common question anyone has ever asked is “Is this normal?” or “Am I normal?”. What is normal anyway? You are 99.999% likely to be way more similar to all the other people in the world than you are different. You have my permission to be you. You have my request and my direction to be your own unique self whether it is normal or not. You probably are ‘normal’, but being normal is really not something we need to aspire to.

When we want to know if we are normal, we are asking if anyone else has had the same experience or same challenges we have. The only positive outcome I see from this is to find those people and learn if their experience might help you with your experience of life. Otherwise, giving ourselves reasons to separate or thinking people judge us as ‘other’ because our experience is rare or different is probably not going to be helpful and may even be detrimental to you.

Your feelings and experiences are valid. Even if no one around you gives credence to them or acknowledges them or everyone

thinks your triggers are trivial and belittles your reactions. If something is upsetting you, it is ok to be upset. Being uncomfortable cannot be argued with. No matter how logical it may seem to someone else that a certain trigger should not be upsetting you, that doesn't matter. It did upset you. That is a fact which needs to be addressed. Anyone who cares for you and truly understands that you are in distress will want to assist you to a place of non-distress. Allow yourself to feel your feelings. We cannot control feelings. You can control your reaction and what you do with your feelings, but you cannot control your feelings or make yourself feel something different without doing some serious reframing work with yourself.

What you hear and what you tell yourself has power. I am going to engage in some flattery right now. Even though I may not know you, I am confident these statements are true.

There are people who like you.
You matter to people.
The world wants to hear what you have to contribute.
You are the architect of your own life.

Everything in your life is there because you put it there or you allowed it. If you don't like it, you can change it.

There are people who want to be near you.

There are people who enjoy your company.

There are people who recognize your beauty.

There are people who accept you just the way you are.

No matter where you are in life, there are people who are waiting to love you in the future, they just haven't met you yet.

There are people who love you now.

There are people waiting for you to reach out to them.

There are people trying to reach out to you or building up the courage to reach out to you.

Actually, these statements are not flattery. Flattery is what happens when we exaggerate to help someone feel good or get something from them. Excessive or insincere praise is flattery. These statements are not insincere, they are 100% actual truth. Read them again with that in mind.

These statements are truth.

You need to put your thoughts and energy into the people that are there for you and

release those who do not appreciate you. They do not deserve your energy, your thoughts or your anguish. We all know that not all people in the world will love you. You will find those who do not like you, who think badly of you and may even want to hurt you. If you are holding out for universal popularity, you will always be disappointed. It is important to recognize those people that are here for you now instead of lamenting and wishing for what you don't have.

Some Affirmations:

Everything I want is within my reach. I
just have to stretch out and grab it.

I am attractive.

I am worthy.

I have confidence in myself

I am a good mother / father / son /
daughter / husband / wife.

I don't have to make the right choices all
the time. I am still a good person.

I did the best that I could, and that is
good.

I am wealthy in every way that matters.

I am healthy

I am motivated

I am accomplished

I am an author with a finished book (*yes,
that is one of mine which helped me
finish this.*)

I always do what I say I am going to do.

I enjoy taking care of my belongings and my space responsibly. (*I use this one to get myself to do the laundry and the dishes.*)

Daily affirmations have power:

I don't have to make the right choices all the time, I am still a good person. I know that I did the best I could with the information and experience I had at the time.

I make healthy choices to support my best and highest self.

Decide it will be so, with no equivocation, and your brain will believe you and make it happen.

When that first Body for Life contest was over, I was awestruck by how many great people there are in this world who *don't even know they are great.*

- Bill Phillips *Body for Life*

Giving and Taking Compliments -

Is there someone in your life who just won't take a compliment? Is it you?

Try sharing feelings instead of judgement.

Even positive judgements can be disagreed with, but feelings cannot be disputed. You

can ask for this from the people around you if this is something you struggle with.

For example: "You look lovely today."

They think: No I don't.

Instead: "When I see you looking like that It makes me smile and gives me goose-bumps."

Instead of "You have the best butt", say "I can't stop looking at your butt".

Example: "You did a great job. Good work."

They think: It was nothing.

Instead: "I feel so proud when I hear about the work you are doing and your accomplishments."

Example: "Great performance!"

Instead: "Your singing performance really touched me and made me feel good."

- This idea came from my friend
Nelson LeDuc

What do you think?

Which one sounds better and leaves less room for dispute?

Beauty -
Surround yourself with those who
recognize your beauty and it will never
occur to you that you are not beautiful.

I am beautiful.
If you don't see it, that
is a fault in you, not me.



I
See
You

Failure

If you have never failed, that just means you never tried. In order to succeed, you will fail. *You will most likely fail multiple times if you are doing it right.*

The one who is a Failure sits down and cries in the dirt. The one who will Succeed does the exact same thing, but then they get up one more time and do it again. There is a difference between failing and being a failure. The difference is having that motivation to do it again or try a different way until you find success.

“Failure is not the opposite of Success, it is part of the process.” - Karamo from the TV show *Queer Eye*.

A word about being average -

There can only ever be one ‘the best’. Even if you achieve the title of ‘the best’ whatever it is you are striving for, the impermanent nature of our human lives means this will be a temporary state. There is nothing you can do to change that. You can always strive to be better than you were, but striving to be the best as your top priority in life at the expense of everything and everyone else is not

something which is compatible with a healthy, well-rounded life.

Being really good at what you do is a wonderful goal. Don't turn a blind eye to how good you already are or give up if you find someone better than you. Learn from them, be the best you can be, or the best you want to be, and enjoy your life.

We don't always have to be the best, sometimes being average is enough. If you are an overachiever that is used to putting on your blinders and driving toward a goal at the expense of everything else in your life, you may want to read the *Underachiever's Manifesto* by Ray Bennett. There is something to be said for doing what needs to be done and just stopping there so you have more time to smell the roses. Does it really matter if you cooked 4 different kinds of brownies from scratch for the bake sale vs. picking something up at the grocery store? Do you really need to spend the entire weekend editing that project when all of your co-workers thought it was fine? Will you even remember the incident a year from now?

I'm Good enough
I'm Smart enough
And doggone it,
people like me!

- Stuart Smalley from
Saturday Night Live

EXERCISES

What do you need to remind yourself of?
Create some daily affirmations that mean something to you.

Positive reinforcements:

Do you have any reinforcements you use to encourage your own positive behavior and meet your goals? Rewards may be a good motivator.

Create a page of affirmations and visualizations. Spend 10 minutes every morning and evening reinforcing them with yourself.

Ask some of the people in your life what they like best about you.
Ask them what you do really well.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

Do affirmations work for you?

Have you used affirmations in the past?
What was your experience?

What is your favorite affirmation?

What affirmations do others recommend for me?

What is the difference between positive reinforcement, visualization and affirmation?

What happens when you practice visualizing your desired outcomes, behaviors or results?

What have you done well lately?

Can you give yourself credit for doing something good today?

Mary Sorensen

9 SHINE YOUR TRUE LIGHT

Hey, have you allowed anyone to see your true self today?

It feels like when you have had your hair up in pins all day and you finally can take it down, shake it out, release all that built up tension, move away from the process of winding tighter to unwinding, and just be. It feels like when you get home, take off your confining clothes and put on your jammies. Take off your shoes and let your feet run free. Wouldn't you prefer to feel like this all the time?

If you haven't been able to unclench recently, I hope you will find the right person and/or people to spend some time with so you can allow yourself to relax fully.

It is important to allow your true self to be seen appropriately. There are people out there waiting to be with you who are looking for you. They will not be able to recognize you if you are showing a false face or false light to the world.

If everyone else seems to be shining a red light, we want to keep a red masking gel in front of our blue light in order to belong. When we do that, the ones looking for that true blue light won't be able to see us, find us, or recognize us.

When you wear a filter, or present a false self to the world, you get stuck always pretending to be someone else. Those who get to know your false self, or who are attracted to your false self, do not truly love or care for you, they care for the false persona you presented to them. It is very disrespectful to present what they want when it is not the real you. It is like lead coins masquerading as gold. When they find out you are not gold, there will be a reckoning. When they are looking for lead (and yes, lead has many desirable qualities), they will dismiss you because you look like gold. You cannot base a meaningful, healthy relationship on lies. It is not sustainable.

I know the world tells us that we need to act a certain way, wear certain clothes, and have a certain look, in order for other people to accept and like us. We need to understand that not everyone in the world is going to like us no matter what we do. Just as we don't like or accept all of them. Everyone has standards and preferences for the people they want to be around, just as you do. When you find those who meet your standards and preferences, and

you want to spend more time getting to know them, it can be shocking and feel like betrayal to realize they were actually presenting a false front.

When 'everyone' thinks that 'everyone' is doing something a lot of fakeness abounds. Maybe no one really wants what we think 'everybody' wants or does what 'everybody' does. You will never know who else might love snakes if you never let anyone know that you love snakes.

Never, ever, let them see your real self, because of course, no one will like or accept the real you.

You need a beauty product, a specific set of clothes, a new car, to act in a haughty manner, to only like the things it is 'cool' to like, to look a certain way, in order for other people to like you.

This is the message we are constantly barraged with by media, society, and entertainment.

I am telling you right now –
these are lies.

The only way to find someone who will love and appreciate the real you, is to allow the real you to be seen so they can find you and get to know you. This is such an important concept to understand.

Contemplate this scenario. You are a sports lover. Your life revolves around your teams. You love tailgating, you love going to the games, you knit sweaters in your team's colors, you know the names of all the players and you spend your free time memorizing statistics and playing fantasy leagues. You meet someone at the sports bar that loves sports as much as you do. You talk about sports when you are together. Your first date is the big game. You think you have found your soul-mate.

After you had been together for a year your partner tells you that they actually hate sports. They only pretended to like sports to get near you. They never had fun at games. They don't like learning the statistics. It is torture to them. Now you are stuck with someone who doesn't enjoy the things you want to do or the connection you based your relationship upon. This person doesn't have anything to talk about that interests you and wasn't having a good time during all those months or years when you were really enjoying their acting. Do you feel flattered they would go through all of that to get near you, or do you feel betrayed that the person you cared for doesn't really exist?

The opposite happens as well, you feel like you have to hide your love of sports because it doesn't meet someone else's expectations of you, or none of your friends like sports. What if

you could find friends or partners that might share your love if you ever stopped hiding long enough to connect?

I hope you can see from this example, that presenting a false face to someone who may come to care for you is actually extremely disrespectful to them and to yourself.

It may feel like everyone around you is red, so if you are blue, you are wrong. Being blue is probably not wrong, it is just different from the majority of those around you. There are some people who enjoy and respect differences and there are others who are afraid of or angry at those who are different without understanding why or even recognizing their fear.

We all are subjects of our own human nature. We all want to be part of group. When we can identify with an 'US', our social needs are met and we feel like we belong and will be cared for. The problem is, that in order to be part of an 'Us', there must be a 'Them'. Us vs. Them is the oldest conflict there is. Some people have to artificially create a 'Them' in order to have an 'Us'.

If you become a member of a group you don't actually belong in, there will come a time when you will not be able to pretend any longer and

some people, including yourself, will feel betrayed.

If you present yourself with that mask, they will like your mask, not the real you. This is not sustainable and will not work for any length of time. We all want to be liked / loved, but what we really want is for our true self to be loved. When they like the mask you are presenting, they don't really like you. This is not what you really want or what you really need. It may feel sweet in the beginning, but it is like a shot of sugar when you need real food. There will eventually be a crash when they understand the concept of you they liked is not reality.

When I am looking for someone who is blue, and all I see is red and yellow, I feel very isolated and alone. I feel like I have to shine out red or yellow to fit in. Now I can't see the blue and no one else can see my blue and we won't ever be able to connect. My people won't be able to find me if I continually hide who I really am.

There have been times I have wanted to speak up. Times when something was not right, but no one else seemed to be bothered, so I have held my tongue. When I eventually do speak out, there are usually quite a few people that step up and say – 'me, too, but I didn't think anyone else felt that way'. The moral of this story is that if you are feeling something,

someone else is probably feeling it too. You are not alone.

I know it sometimes feels like we have to wear a mask and hide certain aspects of ourselves in order to get along in the world. Think about who you are trying to get along with and what this compromise means for you. You may decide it is worth it to wear clothes that are uncomfortable in order to have that job you want. That is all right, but it needs to be a conscious decision on your part and you need to understand what it costs you and what you get back for that compromise in presenting your true self. Even if (or maybe, especially if) you choose to compromise for some parts of your life, you must find a time and place and people with whom you can share your real, uncensored, unedited self.

Most people feel very vulnerable when sharing their true self. We get embarrassed, we wish we hadn't said something. We wish no one ever saw us getting emotional. We feel they could use this information to hurt us somehow, so we generally try to hide our true self and our emotions. If that sounds familiar to you, I invite you to remember a time when you helped someone through strong emotions, or you witnessed them in a raw, vulnerable moment.

Most people feel these vulnerable or embarrassing times are exactly the moments

that bring us closer together. Someone who cares for you will not be ashamed of your emotions, they are gratified and honored you could share your vulnerable self with them. Witnessing vulnerable moments helps create more closeness in relationships. We have to be open to vulnerability in order to create intimate connections.

How can you help others feel comfortable sharing their true light with you? Listen to them. Ask about boundaries, don't assume. Don't force yourself on them. Set aside quality time for them, show them you are interested in seeing their true self and sharing your true self with them. Show them you are safe for them to be vulnerable with by adhering to boundaries, listening, being respectful and not shaming them.

EXERCISES

Find someone you were vulnerable with or felt embarrassed by something you did or said to them. Ask them to share the event from their point of view and how it affected their relationship with you.

What would happen if I let my true self be seen? What am I really afraid of?
Do a reality check. Is this fear grounded in reality? What would be the worst case scenario if I allowed myself to be vulnerable and let people in?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

Are you wearing a figurative mask to interact with certain people in your life?

Are you presenting a false front in order to please someone?

Think of someone you found out had tried to please you by being fake. How did you feel?

What masks do I have to wear to get along in society? Do I really have to wear them?

What if I took off my masks and shared my true self, what is the realistic worst case?

Could I remove that mask if I found different people to be around?

Could I find environments and people that match who I want to be?

Would the people around me actually reject the real me, or might they be relieved to know that I can be real and share my vulnerabilities with them?

What if your friends and family got real with you and shared their vulnerabilities?

How does it feel to think about the people in your life being real or fake with you?

Mary Sorensen

10 YOUR SURROUNDINGS INFLUENCE YOU

What and who you keep around you influences you.

If you want to be the type of person who does not use crass language, it is difficult to do that if you hang around people that use crass language as their normal every day operating mode. If you enjoy swearing whenever you like, it will not be supportive for you to hang out at church. If you want to work on creating yourself as someone who speaks well, find some educated speakers to be with. If you want to be a creative type of person who makes crafts, go to places where you can hang out and interact with crafty, creative types to inspire you. If you feel most comfortable wearing revealing or minimal clothing, you probably shouldn't loiter in Amish communities. If you want to maintain a certain moral standard, watching movies

that carry sex and violence ratings could normalize sex and violence for you. If you want to accept your body and your looks, hanging out with people who put a lot of emphasis on looks and clothes can be detrimental to your self-image. If you want to work out a lot and present a highly polished image, spend time with others who have those same ideals and they will help hold you to that high standard. It is important to find the right people to have around you to support who you want to be.

The more exposure we have to people who have certain attitudes or behaviors, the more those attitudes and behaviors become acceptable and normalized for us. These influences can be positive or negative for you depending on where you are and where you want to go.

You may think you are above these kinds of environmental and peer influences. We can be above it to a certain extent if we are making conscious choices and being very aware, but exposure over time WILL influence you whether you choose it to or not.

You will conform to the expectations of those around you.

Keep people around you who expect great things from you and you will do great things.

“The people we surround ourselves with either raise or lower our standards. They either help us to become the best version of ourselves or encourage us to become lesser versions of ourselves. We become like our friends. No man becomes great on his own. No woman becomes great on her own. The people around them help to make them great. We all need people in our lives who raise our standards, remind us of our essential purpose, and challenge us to become the best version of ourselves.”

The Rhythm of Life: Living Every Day with Passion and Purpose by Matthew Kelly

Choose to surround yourself with people who reflect your core values and beliefs as you identified them in the first chapter. You will start to reflect the values of those around you, so choose people who will help you uphold your values.

We can choose to surround ourselves with people who reflect our values or else we will start to reflect the values of the people around us. It is one or the other.

Environment -

Beyond the people you choose to spend time with, your environment is also a big influence on you. Is your house cluttered and dirty? It is difficult to have self-respect when you live in squalor. Are there some things you have been promising yourself you will take care of, but you keep putting off? You don't have to walk around with that duct tape covering the hole in your shoe. Get yourself some new shoes. You are worth it. If money is tight, go to the local thrift store and find something for less than \$5. It will still be better than that shoe with a hole in it. Is your car filthy? Clean it or get it cleaned.

You are worth having a clean and tidy environment. Do you have stacks of clutter everywhere and you also cannot seem to sleep at night or get a clear vision of what you want? Clear out your real and figurative clutter and you will find it easier to think and breathe in your space. Your home space should only have those things you love in it. If you don't love it, get rid of it. If you do love it, display it or take care of it properly so it can bring you joy.

In the *Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo, she advises only keeping possessions around you that you love. Things and people who support and inspire you will help make your life more fulfilling.

Having piles of stuff and outdated relationships around that you don't care for does not feel good. You may think you love it all, but you are not treating it with love when you leave things or people to be neglected and ruined at the bottom of your piles. Keep only what you love around you and take care of it/them well. Seeing things you love being ruined through lack of care is detrimental to our psyche.

EXERCISES

Think about what and who you would like to have around you to help you become your best and highest self. This could be a mentor or a coach, a teacher, a class, a church, a community center you volunteer at, or a museum you go to. Identify one element you can work on adding to your environment, or identify an environment you want to put yourself in, and make a start today.

Look around you. Can you identify three things or people you love? Is there something you can do right now to care for that relationship or possession which will uplift you and have a positive outcome?

On another day, look around again. Can you identify three things or people that are negative influences in your life? Can you change your relationship with these things or people to something positive and supportive? If you can't change it, can you release that possession or relationship? This may be something that takes some time to work through.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

What environments or relationships do I participate in that are a good influence on me, lift me up, and help me be my best self?

What environments or relationships do I participate in that are a negative influence on me and bring me away from my best self?

What is something I could remove from my environment to support me in being my best self?

What is something I could add to my environment in order to be my best self?

How does it feel when I am around people who have energy which feels good?

How does it feel like when I am around people who have different values?

Is there anyone you spend time with who really brings out the worst aspects of your personality?

Are there people in your life who inspire you to be your best self?

Is there anyone you hang around with who makes you realize you like who you are so much better when you are with them? Maybe you could let them know.

What would happen for me if I surround myself with people who help me to be my best self and support my goals?

11 COMMUNITY IS ESSENTIAL

I have said several times throughout that you need to find your people and they want to find you. Your tribe is waiting for you. We are social animals and we need social structure, social interaction and support from other humans. We need to have meaningful work in our lives giving back to people we care about. We must find friends and people we can have healthy, wanted connections with.

Think about the communities you are part of. Community may be a product of where you live; your neighborhood or apartment building, your common goals, beliefs, work or experiences together. Do you find community at the gym or at your favorite coffee shop where you go to hang out every day? Many find community through religion. Community is something that most religions do very well. Can you find community outside of religious affiliation? Maybe it is your book club or your hiking group or the cosplay creative space where you go to make your outfits. You know if you needed help, they would be there for you

and you for them. Whatever group it is or wherever you find them, you need to have those people you can spend time with and enjoy each other's company as your true self several times per week.

Community, friends, and family support is the number one thing which has been found in social research to positively affect depression.

Most communities are held together by location, common belief systems, common goals or common interests. You must find a place or places you enjoy where you are accepted for yourself. You may not get to choose all the people there, but you grow to respect and care for the people there because you have shared experiences.

I have a list of communities or activities that bring people together on the next page. I highly recommend Meetup.com to find people who like what you like. If you can't find any groups that look good, you can start your own group. You have the power, just like everyone else who started their own group. One person who had an idea is the only way all groups or projects or group of people coming together ever got started. Becoming a Meetup Organizer is easy and free (for groups under 50 members). When you start the group yourself, you can be sure to attract people who have common ideals and interests.

Faith/religion/spirituality - it is worth checking out. If you are disenchanted with your childhood faith you could try another congregation. It can be very beneficial to visit several other churches and see if any of them feed your soul. I am generally not a big fan of organized religion, but if you do find one that truly uplifts you, this is a great way to find community. I even know a few people who are not religious who have chosen to be part of a faith community in order to have that community. Of course if you decide to do this, do not misrepresent yourself as a believer if you are not. Most faiths will still welcome you as long as you act with respect and follow their moral code.

Spanish club/ language practice group

Therapeutic Touch practitioners group

Reiki practitioners Share group

New age bookstores will have groups posted

Board game night

Singles meetups

Political activism

Music - bands, play alongs, karaoke, choirs, orchestras, garage band or just playing

Guitar Hero together (*I actually had a friend who invited us over once a month for Guitar Hero night. It was so much fun!*)

Theater - audition for community theater, build some sets or run the light board if performing is not your thing. Opera Chorus has been a great source of friends and community for me.

Library programs

School clubs - be a volunteer or mentor

Crafting - leather, pottery, blacksmithing, knitting clubs or knit shop hang out nights, cosplay costume craft shops, photography, sewing classes at the local quilt shop, crochet classes, state fair entries, baking, woodshop, model making, jewelry – whatever you like to make.

Gardening - bonsai clubs, gardening clubs, Master Gardener volunteering, water garden clubs (ponds).

Hiking groups

Running events like 5k or marathons - find some training buddies

Photography groups

Paint Along Nights

Play chess in the park

Personal improvement or achievement groups

International School of Temple Arts

Tantra

Yoga

ISTA retreats

Workshops and retreats create community

Cuddle Party!

Athletic teams or clubs. Do you remember loving volleyball in high school? Find a drop in volleyball group and go play. Like boxing? Find a gym. Volunteer to Coach or work with a kids team. Soccer was your thing? Join a recreational team at your local university, community college or rec center. These things are not just for kids.

Most of these groups are centered on play, but there are also many discussion and support group communities available.

Divorce support group
Alcoholics anonymous
Addiction support
Obesity support
Grief/death support group

Whatever issue you are going through, there is probably a support group of people out there going through the same thing. You can help each other.

We can also find community through paid work. In the workplace you choose how much you want to share with people you see every day. I know some who have found lifelong friends at work. If you just need some social interaction, getting any job could give you a boost.

If you don't need to pursue paid work, you can volunteer at:

Museums
Libraries
Hospitals
Hospice
Retirement centers
Day care center
Farms
Animal Shelters

Perhaps you are saying – ‘I don’t need people, I have my stuff!’

“We’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning.” - President Jimmy Carter

Things cannot replace people. Some of us try to satisfy our feelings with food, shopping, hoarding or buying a new car every year. This never works. You can never have enough of what you don’t really want.

The only outcome of trying to meet your needs with things is obesity and debt and a house you can’t get into because of all the stuff you have crammed in there. Your connection needs will remain unmet.

In the movie *Minimalism: A documentary about the important things* they say Minimalism is about living deliberately. Does this thing, person, activity or community bring positive value to my life? If it doesn’t, it is time to release it. If you have nothing in your life that is a Yes answer to this question, you must go out and seek those things, connections, and people who will add positive value to your life. This is necessary to living your best life as a human being.

The point is, you have to get out and talk to or work with people. Create some shared

experiences. Find people whose company you enjoy or who you have a common purpose with. Even if you are introverted and tend to avoid people, you still need community and friends. Perhaps for introverts, your connections are just in smaller and more controlled or planned doses. You don't have to do something every night, perhaps just once a month in the beginning. Please give it a try.

You must have connection with people in whatever way works best for you in order to be your best self.

Find people to be with you in your truth.
Be ruthless about it.

Finding safe spaces for acceptance is very important. If you don't have that in your life, I hope you will make it a priority to find it. Do not fake who you are to be accepted to a certain place, that will not be sustainable. You won't be able to keep it up. Besides, you don't need fake acceptance of your fake self, you need real acceptance of the real you to feed your soul.

Find someone or some group that feels like a safe space for you. A person/people that you can identify with and be yourself with. You will know you found the right person or people when you can walk into their presence and exhale and it feels like you are no longer

Mary Sorensen

constrained and can let your guard down. You won't know how wound up you are until you find that place for release.

EXERCISES

Assignment: Sign up on Meetup.com and find one group that looks good to you. Go to one of their meetings. Remember to increase the mileage radius in the search window if no groups you like come up at first, then search again.

If nothing looks good to you, take some time to consider starting a group for something you enjoy.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

How have you enjoyed community in the past? Are you still in that community? Why or why not?

When has being part of a community served you well?

When did it not serve you?

Have you given up on people?

What is a community, group or activity you have been wanting to try? What is holding you back from it? Do a reality check and see if your fear of worst case scenario is realistic. What is the best case if you try it?

12 SPEAK UP WHEN YOU ARE IN DISCOMFORT: USE YOUR VOICE

We have to learn to speak up. This is something we can practice and get better at. Once you learn to speak up in safe situations, it will be easier in hard times.

If you stand up and express yourself, someone else will likely stand up and say 'me too! I thought I was the only one'.

The first step is to recognize when you are in discomfort. You should not have to remain in uncomfortable situations.

The only time it is appropriate to stay in your discomfort is when you have chosen consciously to make a compromise, or if you are driving through something to reach a bigger goal as when exercising.

We all know there are bad people in the world. There are those who will not

change when you tell them something is wrong for you. There are those who do what they do *because* it causes you discomfort and they enjoy your discomfort.

If you are around these kind of people, start now to find a way to release them or release yourself from them. There are many people and resources you can call on for help with this.

Most people in the world are just doing the best they can. The vast majority of people in this world are not evil or cruel. They are not intentionally or knowingly trying to cause you anguish or shame or discomfort. I very much believe that the vast majority of us are good people and will do the right thing given the appropriate knowledge and the chance to do so. When we know something is going wrong for you, we will do anything we can to help you feel safe and resolve it.

You will not know which type you are dealing with until you tell them how you feel. You must recognize your discomfort and stand up when you are uncomfortable and let the people around you know that something is wrong. I am going to be frank here.

If you don't let the people around you know when you are in trouble, you are absolutely contributing to your own problems with your inaction.

Signs it is time to speak up or move on: You feel tense, you cannot relax, you are very conscious of what you say and do and constantly hold yourself back in order to avoid triggering, your mind is elsewhere or wandering, your mind runs in the same thought circles over and over and gives you headaches, you want to run away, you cannot relax, or you cannot enjoy the moment with someone.

It is all right to not know what will happen next. You do know that the current situation needs to change and you can address that now.

If you don't tell your partner when you are uncomfortable, they may believe that silence means yes. For instance, you are on a date, you are having fun, holding hands, making out, and you like each other. Your date reaches to touch you somewhere that feels uncomfortable for you. You continue kissing and don't tell them how you feel. They think it is all right because you didn't say anything. They continue moving forward. Eventually

you realize you have gone so far already, it feels weird to say No now.

Guess what, you need to man up or put on your big girl panties and say what you think. When you don't, you are making your partner an unconscious predator.

I know there are true rapists and predators out there who won't stop when you say No and there is nothing you can do to change that. You still need to actually say No. There are many more people who WILL stop IF they know you are not having a good time with them. There are those who do ask and get a false yes from you, so they have done everything right and you are the one making them into someone who is hurting you without their knowledge. This is something that IS under your control. Don't do this to people and don't do this to yourself.

This happens to men too. Let's not fall down the hole of false assumptions. I know many cuddly men personally who really mean it when they say they want to watch a movie and cuddle on the couch. "Oh, we might as well just go to the bedroom." She said. Well, he wasn't ready and it was awkward. Yes, it is fine for a woman to initiate sex and yes, it is

also fine for a man to say – “I really just want to sit here and hold your hand.”

How to tell someone -

It is good to use language like “I am uncomfortable”. This statement is difficult to dispute. It is not a judgement nor an accusation. People get defensive when they believe they are being judged or accused and that can escalate a tense situation.

Here is how to do it. Look them in the eye and say, “That makes me uncomfortable” or “I am uncomfortable”. If it is a touching incident, you can take their hand and move it or physically move away from them. Don’t laugh, don’t try to belittle it, don’t minimize your feelings, don’t embellish and you don’t have to explain unless you want to. Show them with your actions that you are absolutely serious.

If this seems next to impossible for you, I suggest you try some role play practice with someone you can trust. Find a good place to practice saying no and practice telling someone else you are uncomfortable. Cuddle Party is a great safe place for this kind of practice. It is important to practice saying the words if you know there are difficult situations that will come up for you again.

You can work on communicating your boundaries; it is a skill you can develop. **You have the power to create your own safety.** The more you say the words, the more comfortable your body will become and you will develop a muscle memory that will help you react automatically in the way you have programmed yourself to react.

We are all looking for connection. If you go along with something when you are uncomfortable, that connection will not be there. Remember a time when you chased someone you really liked who was being polite, but didn't really want to be with you? Even when they said yes, it felt strange in the end. The interaction was weird and unfulfilling.

When you say yes to someone when you don't want to, the connection they are really seeking won't be there. You will be wasting time even though you both think you are giving and getting what is wanted by saying yes. You will both have an unpleasant experience. It just isn't necessary and it won't make either of you happy.

Practice at all times, so it is easier to pull on your experience and muscle memory in bad moments. Create a muscle memory

for yourself so if you have a tendency to freeze in unexpected situations, your muscle memory and experience can take over and bring up your voice to say No.

The world is not black and white. Someone who seems creepy to you and pushes your boundaries or makes you uncomfortable is probably not evil or out to hurt you. If you assert yourself confidently, they will back off. We are all looking for healthy, wanted connections and so are they. Don't be afraid to say so if the connection is just not working for you.

Use your words. Use your voice.
You have power.

EXERCISES

It is important to practice saying the words. Find someone you trust that you can role play with. They don't have to do anything. Just look them in the eye and say, "I am uncomfortable". Sit with that for a moment and then say it again.

You can try "I am ready for something different", "I am ready to move on", "Thanks, that was nice. Can we sit up and talk for a bit? "

Actually saying the words to another human being helps you know that it is all right to say them. The more you practice something, the easier it is to do when the time comes and you need to do it for real.

Next level role play

If you do have a certain recurring situation that you want to work on, I suggest you find someone to role play with you and act as the triggering person acts with you. Perhaps you have a co-worker that is very touchy-feely and likes to come up to you from behind and give you a hug. You don't like it. Have your friend, sibling, partner, parent, child hug you from behind and then push their hands away easily, step away, turn to face them and

say “I am uncomfortable when you hug me without my consent. Please ask me next time”.

Practice Transitioning Out of a connection - another role play. Find someone you trust to help you practice your boundaries. Ask them to push your boundary in a specific way and practice extricating yourself when they won't hear your initial no.

Some phrases you can use:

I'm ready for a change.

Thank you, that was nice. I'm done.

Thank you, I'm finished.

I want to connect with/talk to my friend - I see she's available now.

I feel complete.

I need some alone time.

I enjoyed your company in a group/public setting. I am not ready for more.

I need to visit the rest room.

I'd like to get some water.

I'm ready for some food.

It's time for a break.

I said no. Would you like to instead?

Let's just talk.

I am uncomfortable.

I did not hear you ask.

I did not consent to this.

Some actions:

Get some eye contact, use your serious voice/face and say this forcefully - "I said NO. I mean it. You will stop now."

Practice in the mirror.

Take their hand and move it off you.

If they are directing your hand, take it back or remove your hand from where they put it.

Sit up, move away, stand up, change seats; physically put some distance between you. If they follow, put another person between you. Ask another to assist you or stay with you until you safely separate yourself.

You have the power to influence your own safety. Speak up when you are in discomfort.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

Do I allow people to push or ignore my boundaries? Why?

What is the worst case if I tell someone No? What is the best outcome?

How did it feel to practice speaking up in the role play exercises?

Do you have trouble speaking up, or is it easy for you?

13 FACE YOUR FEARS

Is being authentic the same as being vulnerable? Many are afraid to be authentic because they believe it is the same as being vulnerable. You are only vulnerable if you allow someone the power to use their knowledge of the real you to shame you or embarrass you.

If you are not ashamed about or embarrassed of yourself, you will not feel vulnerable sharing your true self.

For instance, I am not ashamed that I love cuddling. At first, a few people tried to tease me or laugh at me about it. I simply stood my ground, cuddling is awesome and you should not knock it until you try it. I know it isn't for everyone, but it is definitely for me. Of course, I don't stick around someone who chooses to willfully disrespect me, but that is not the same as allowing them to shame me into hiding or letting them trigger me to feel bad about myself or the things or people I love.

I recall a scene from some TV show where a woman was in the bathtub at a retreat center. This guy who was trying to get a date with her jimmed the lock and came in the room. He was smirking and thinking he had the upper hand with her in a vulnerable position as he teased her. The thing is, she had the power. She stood up naked and unashamed and calmly asked him – “Is this what you want?” with a straight face - “Then you can leave.” She basically dismissed him. He had no response and slunk away. Her confidence in herself and refusal to give him the power in the situation completely turned it around.

Now, you would think most women confronted by a man while naked in the bath tub would feel vulnerable, but that is a choice you make. It is influenced by our cultural conditioning to be ashamed of our bodies, or feel vulnerable when naked, but when we choose to believe it, we are giving away our power.

If you do the work to not be ashamed of your body, then being naked will not be vulnerable for you. If you do the work to not be ashamed of your true self, then presenting your naked, true self will not feel vulnerable to you.

Most people don't understand the things they fear. Fear is some nebulous scary thing hiding in the closet and you don't know exactly what it is.

Choose something you fear and learn about it, confront it head on. You may be right to fear it, but at least now you will know the truth of it, you will know how to handle it and that will make it less scary.

Some fears:

Afraid of what someone thinks of me. We don't even know what they might think that we don't want them to think. When you can release the fear of someone thinking of you in a way you don't want, you will be free to be yourself.

Fear of failure. If you don't try, you have already failed.

Fear of success. What if you actually did succeed? What then?

Fear of not belonging. We all want to be part of group.

Fear of not being accepted. There will be those who won't accept you. That must be acknowledged. It is important to find those who will accept you.

Fear of not being loved. Same as not being accepted.

Fear of suffering. Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional. Decide you are one who can work through pain and find joy beyond

suffering. Pain is part of life. There is no way to avoid it. You can choose what attitude you face your pain with.

Fear of love. What if someone does get close enough to actually love me?

Fear of missing out.

Fear of injustice.

Fear of confrontation. Often when we confront someone, we can come out the other side of our confrontation with a more healthy relationship. See Awkward conversations.

Fear of being perceived as weak.

Fear of things or certain situations are phobias. Phobias are not quite the same as the interpersonal fears I am generally talking about, but they can also hold you back.

How do you work through or minimize a fear?

First thing to do is think about the reality of your fear. If the thing you feared happened, what would be the most likely, realistic outcome? Not the outcome you fear, or the worst possible outcome, but the actual, probable outcome. If you cannot get past thinking of the outcome you fear, you can ask other people what they think the actual outcome would be.

Of course, our emotional mind is not logical, so this may not help you and thinking about your fear may give you more anxiety, so gauge yourself during this work.

You could try acting out the outcome you actually fear with someone you trust. Exposure could reduce the fear for you. You can role play the situation you fear and play out a more positive outcome. This can help you break out of a thought loop regarding your fear and also train your muscle memory to a better response in a negative situation.

You could Avoid your fear – short term
You could do everything you can to avoid any situation that might bring up your fear. A lot of people try to cope this way. This may be a good short term strategy to just get you into a calm place, but I do not recommend this long term. You probably will not be able to avoid your fear forever. It will be much better for you if you control how you confront it, rather than letting it surprise you. If you are afraid of people, you could choose to live in a cave as a hermit, but I really don't recommend that as the fulfillment of wellness and joy for your life. If you are afraid of that confrontation with your landlord, you could probably arrange your life to not see your landlord for a while. However, the confrontation will be much easier to manage if you take the time to mentally prepare and go to them up front with some ideas for compromise instead of waiting until they come to your door in anger.

You could Deal with your fear.
Take that leap and see what happens.

Remember the difference between fear, excitement, and respect for danger.

I know that animals can be dangerous. When I think about approaching a dog I have no experience with, I am not afraid, but I respect the possible danger. I remain calm and I take steps to mitigate the danger. If the owner is present, I always ask if I may pet the dog. If not present, I approach slowly and talk to the animal. I put my hand out cautiously from the opposite side of the fence for them to smell and see how they react. If they are still friendly, I will reach over the fence and pet them. If they are growling and barking, I back off. I have not allowed fear to cripple me or rule me in this situation. I don't back off because I am afraid, but because I know there could be danger in the situation which I prefer to avoid.

Primal fears and emotions are felt in the body. This is why you can't logic yourself out of it. Let yourself feel what you are feeling. Observe your body and really feel your energy. If you don't allow yourself to feel your feelings and allow them to move through you, they will get stuck. When doing the body check, treat your body like a friend who just wants you to listen and witness. Tell me what's going on. Feel what your body is feeling before analyzing or judging. Listen to your body without expectation and hear what it is saying to you.

The physical reaction to fear is very similar to the physical reaction of being excited. You could reframe your reaction to excitement and see if that changes your outlook. I was very . . . keyed up when I went to the ISTA Spiritual Sexual Shamanic weeklong experience by taking the leap and deciding to go the day before it started. It was scary, but also very exciting and a great growth experience for me.

Just Own It –

It is important to own your choices. If you have gotten this far, I hope you have made some solid foundations for yourself. Don't be afraid to let people know your decisions. I know a young man who decided he didn't want to serve on a church service mission. He was able to get his dream job right out of high school and was happily working at the age of 19/20. He had no intention of breaking that up to be gone for two years. He became uncomfortable at church functions because everyone was asking him when he would be serving a mission. In this culture, that is a common small talk question to ask a young man of his age. He even started to avoid going to church activities, which he used to enjoy. He just didn't want to answer that question and felt he was being judged. If he could come to a place of mental stability, and tell them in a matter-of-fact way that he has chosen not to serve a mission, they would all just go on to talk about something else.

EXERCISES

Choose something you fear and learn about it. Confront your fear head on. Write a list of actual pros and cons in the outcome if you face your fear. You may be right to fear it, but at least now you will know the truth of it and that can make it less scary.

You can role play the situation you fear and try scripting a positive outcome. You could try scripting the outcome you actually fear with someone you trust in a role play. Exposure could reduce the fear for you.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

What do you fear? Are your fears holding you back?

What am I really afraid of?
What is an actual, realistic outcome of facing that fear?

What fears have I worked through in the past and what was that experience like?

After I worked through a fear, what was the outcome for me?

Can you truly be confident in yourself while you are holding on to your fear? Perhaps you can, but it is more likely your fears will keep you from feeling secure in yourself.

14 LEARN TO NOT CARE WHAT OTHERS THINK

I first called this ‘how not to care’. But I know we all care. The problem is to keep from worrying about what people think and keep your story of what they are thinking or even what they are saying from bringing you down. Often, we allow ourselves to be crushed by what someone else has said. We spend a lot of time going back and forth on our mouse wheel worrying about what we think other people think.

It is really important to get to a place where you do not allow the story in your head or even the direct comments from others to ruin your mood, change your path or shut down your enthusiasm.

Part of getting there is all the work we’ve been doing up to this point. Create yourself consciously, build your values and life choices on a solid foundation and you will be solid. It won’t hurt you if

someone else does not agree with you or judges you. You know who you are and you are not ashamed.

We all want to be accepted for who we are. we want to find those people that will get to know us and appreciate us exactly the way we are and the way we choose to be. Acceptance is so important to the social creatures we all are as human beings.

The irony is that until we accept ourselves, and until we get to a mental place that does not require constant approval, there is no way we will get genuine acceptance from others. Even if they do accept and love us, we won't be able to believe it from them.

You have to get to a mental place where other people's thoughts do not affect your self-worth. It is very difficult. You will have to be comfortable with yourself before this happens.

Of course we will still want and enjoy approval and acceptance, but we won't live and die by it. When we don't get it, we are able to move on without it affecting us and our life decisions.

This is the subtle art of not giving a whatever you would give to something you

care about which doesn't actually deserve your mental energy.

If someone is judging you or trying to bring up shame in you, they are not your people. No one can make you feel anything unless you buy into it. You control your reactions. They might try to trigger you or shame you, but they do not have the power to do anything unless you give them that power. When you are strong and grounded and comfortable with who you are, the opinions of others will not carry any weight for you. People who look down their noses are the ones who have a problem, not you.

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

– Eleanor Roosevelt.

Yes, this quote is important enough to put in the book twice.

Be careful to not assume negativity in others. We often base our decisions on what we think other people are thinking about us. You need to do a reality check and ask them what their meaning or their true intention is. Always taking things the wrong way makes us very difficult to be

around. I'm sure you know someone you feel you have to watch your words around because they will always assume the worst about whatever you say and become very defensive. You can detach yourself from being responsible for their attitude.

Saying things that are true is something we all need to be able to do and we all need to be able to hear truth without become defensive. Of course, tact and sensitivity can help truth be received better. Taking every comment as a personal attack is not a good way to live your life and is probably a symptom that person has some personal work to do on their own self confidence and self love.

If people around you are abusing you and treating you badly that is not something you have to put up with. They need to be told their behavior is not acceptable to you. If they care about you, they will work to respect you with their behavior. If they don't care about you, they are not worth you caring about them and you need to release them and find people who will treat you with respect.

Those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind.

If you live for the approval of others and their good opinion is the only thing that matters to you, this is a symptom. If a glance from a stranger looks like a negative judgement and triggers a spate of crying, that is a symptom. If you assume everyone you interact with is thinking negative things about you, that is a symptom. If the shaming of others triggers shame in you and you shame yourself, that is also a symptom.

If you live or die by the approval and acceptance of others, this means you do not accept or approve of yourself.

You need to resolve this fundamental issue before you can move on and truly be comfortable being authentic with yourself and with others.

You can't be worried about what people think and live your best life. What they think is none of your business.

First of all, there is no way to know what people are thinking unless they tell you. All too often, we allow ourselves to be influenced by what WE think THEY are thinking or they MIGHT be thinking. Many times there was no such thought or judgement happening. You can clarify

this when you ask them. Many times if you ask for clarification, you will find that they actually had no negative thoughts, only good ones in support of you.

You can't be worried about what people think and be completely secure in yourself. You have to live your life in the way that is best and most healthy for you.

The center of your universe is you. It can only be you and will always be you. You only have your experience and your perspective and your own life to live. You must worry about what you think first because you are the only one who will always be there with you and for you.

Once you have confidence in yourself and are comfortable in your choices, you will be able to move along without allowing the opinions of others to phase you. You will know that your choices are right for you because you have a strong foundation.

Embarrassment, shame, humiliation, guilt, scandal, stigma, debasement, dishonor. None of these things can happen without your acceptance and belief that they are correct.

You can put two people into the same circumstances and one will experience all

of the above and the other will not. Your attitude and your belief is a choice you can make. You will have a much stronger base to stand on once you forge your foundation by doing the work we have been talking about in this book. It is not easy. It is not simple. It is worthwhile.

When I first listened to Brené Brown's audiobook, *The Power of Vulnerability*, I was about three quarters through writing this book. I thought, man, I should just pack it in, Brené wrote all of this first and she did it better. She has scientific method with data to back her up. Then I realized that her superior work does not mean mine has no value. We can work together. I haven't actually met her, but I know that great people help lift others up and I believe she would subscribe to that as well. Competition doesn't serve anyone in this field of personal growth. The more the better as we all try to live our best lives. There is always the chance that hearing a message in a different way, at a different time or from a different person will help you internalize it this time.

If you have not experienced Brené's work, I highly recommend all of it.

Here are some excerpts from *The Power of Vulnerability*.

You cannot shame someone (or yourself) into changing behavior. It might work for the short term, but shaming does not work to affect behavior change in the long term. Shaming usually only makes people want to engage in that behavior more.

First Guidepost for Wholehearted Living: Cultivating Authenticity and Letting Go of What Other People Think.

In order to cultivate authenticity, the shame trigger or the vulnerability of that is letting go of what other people think.

Authenticity is a choice. People who want to be authentic practice authenticity every day; multiple times per day.

Definition from the data - ***Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we actually are.***

Choosing authenticity means cultivating the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries and to allow ourselves to be

vulnerable. (Authenticity is also about boundary setting. One of the most difficult components of practicing authenticity is setting boundaries.)

Authenticity is expressing compassion that comes from knowing that we are all made from strength in struggle and nurturing the connection and sense of belonging that can only happen when we believe we are enough. Authenticity demands wholehearted living and loving, even when it's hard, even when we are wrestling with the shame and fear of not being good enough and especially when the joy is so intense we are afraid to let ourselves feel it. Mindfully practicing authenticity during our most soul searching struggles is how we invite grace, joy, and gratitude into our lives.

Mantra for living –
Don't shrink, don't puff up, stay in your sacred ground.

Authenticity -
When I write about authenticity, I get more controversial and heated comments than any other topic I write about. People say: "if you have to talk about authenticity, you are not authentic. There doesn't need to be a conversation about authenticity."

I agree in a way, because when words like authentic get co-opted and commercialized . . . we get burned out on the word. But to say that we don't need a conversation about authenticity reminds me a lot of when people say if you have to ask how much it costs, you can't afford it. I know a lot of people who have a lot of money. They know exactly how much everything costs. It's those of us who don't have a lot of money, who come from not having a lot of money who are afraid to ask how much things cost. People who have a lot of money always ask how much things cost, that's why they have a lot of money. So the idea that you could shame us into not talking about authenticity because if we are authentic we shouldn't need to talk about it, just doesn't work - I don't buy it.

We are talking about the practice of letting ourselves be seen.

You are going to piss off and frustrate a lot of people.

So much about authenticity is about boundaries. It's about saying no when we can't do something and conversely,

it's about saying yes we really want to do something when our shame gremlins try to talk us out of it.

So much about authenticity is about vulnerability. We take on things we don't want to take on. We choose 90 seconds of comfort and saying what people want to hear in exchange for a lot of resentment later. Choose discomfort (*what Mary calls Awkward Conversations later in this book*) over resentment.

From *The Power of Vulnerability* by Brené Brown

You can't truly be yourself if you are constantly worried about the reactions of others. Give yourself the freedom that comes with getting out of your head. Get off your hamster wheel of spinning thoughts and live out of your heartspace for a while without thinking so much and see how it feels.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR JOURNALING

What would you do differently if you didn't care what the reaction of others might be?

What does your heart tell you to do?
What is stopping you from living out of your heartspace or doing what your heart wants you to do?

How do you help your best friend when they feel put down or ashamed by what someone said?

Can you use these same strategies with yourself?

Mary Sorensen

15 REFRAMING REJECTION: COULD HEARING NO BE A GOOD THING?

No one likes to hear someone say No to us. I know it can feel like they are rejecting everything we are and disapproving of our whole self. We get our hopes up that we may have found someone who wants to share with us, and we take the scary plunge and let them know we are interested, and they say No. I know we have all felt that droop and pulling in on our self when we realize our hopeful expectation will not be met this time.

We are all looking for connection and we all get disappointed or dejected when we are hopeful it might be there, but find it actually is not. Many of us decide that it isn't even worth trying. We feel like if we don't put ourselves out there, there will be no chance for rejection.

Reframing

I CHOOSE to see it a different way. When we reframe, we change our point of view or move

the frame on a picture to see things in a different and more positive way. In any situation there is always some positive that can be found and emphasized instead of getting overwhelmed and completely stuck in something not fun which is just part of life. The picture or the reality doesn't change; our outlook changes. We can do this consciously for ourselves. It is a skill that gets better with practice. Let's reframe rejection together.

What risk?

You entered the room without having a connection, so if you leave the same way, that is just status quo. Nothing is lost. There is no risk here. If you do find a connection, that is a gain! Something you didn't have before! If you decide to ask, it is really a no risk proposition because if the answer is No, you just stay exactly where you were. There is nothing lost, but there is a lot that could be gained.

Remember that YOU know what you are worth and no one else's opinion of you is going to change that. You know you have a lot to offer. If you don't know that yet, it is time for you to affirm it for yourself. You need to recognize your own worth or you won't believe other people when they tell you of your value. When you find someone who sees you, appreciates you, and feels drawn to you, there is a possible connection. Anyone who doesn't see your value is not worth worrying about or wasting

your mental space on. Release them to the world with a whole heart to find their own place.

Rejecting yourself? Stop that.

If you don't put yourself out there, you are creating rejection for yourself. You are rejecting yourself on behalf of the entire human race. Is that really fair? Do you know for a fact what every single person in the whole world wants? If you do, I know a lot of marketing companies that would be very interested in you.

When no one has a chance to meet you, you are withholding yourself from the people who are looking for you.

I promise, your people are out there wishing they were with you, just as you wish you could find them.

The upshot is that you are anxious you will be alone, so you make yourself alone. We know that isn't logical, but the emotional mind is not logical. As a facilitator for connection events, I know that if you approached me with this fear at the beginning of an event, I would help you look for an appropriate connection, or stay with you until you felt comfortable doing it on your own. I am sure other connection facilitators would be happy to offer you the same. You don't have to be alone. Use your voice and

ask for help from resources that are available and open to you. You could also bring a friend to help bolster your enthusiasm for searching for connection and remind you how wonderful you really are.

I won't lie, there is always a chance you won't find anyone you want to connect with at any given event. However, there is a 100% chance you won't find anyone to connect with if you don't go and meet some new people. Anyone you do have a pleasant interaction with puts you in the plus column. At any kind of gathering, I can always find someone to at least have an interesting conversation with, and that connection is not trivial.

Trust issue –

can I really trust you to say No to me?

When someone tells me No, it is actually a relief to me. It shows me that I can trust them to give me their true answer. Because I have a strong, self-confident persona, it is sometimes difficult for me to discern if people are going along with what they think I want, or they actually want to do what I have proposed. Let me be clear. When I ask what you would like, I actually truly and genuinely want to hear your real answer.

Saying Yes when you want to say No is very disrespectful.

When I propose sharing a hug or more, I

genuinely want to know if you are fully invested or not. I am looking for a healthy, wanted connection and interactions that will nourish my soul. I want that for you too. If you are not ready to answer with a "Hell, yes", then I would much rather move on and see if I can find someone who does want to answer "Hell, yes" to me. If you are uncomfortable or actually wanted to say No, that connection won't be there.

You will NOT be giving me what I wanted if you say Yes when you want to say No. It is actually very disrespectful to represent yourself as a Yes when you would have rather said No.

It doesn't do anything good for me if you tolerate an interaction with me. In fact, just writing that sentence feels very hurtful and painful to me. I never want anyone to tolerate a hug or a touch from me. If that is how you feel about it, please, please, say No! I am absolutely not in the business of forcing hugs or anything else on anyone. My mission is to facilitate healthy, WANTED connections that will feed and nourish us both. I want to help you learn how to find those connections on your own with confidence.

Saying Yes to my face and then backing out is horribly disrespectful.

How many times have you bowed to pressure, committed to something and then ghosted it?

Just flaked out? How many times has someone done this to you just to get you off their back? Wouldn't you have rather gotten the No up front? You might have had time to find someone else or figure something else out, instead of having to scramble at the last minute. It is the height of disrespect to say Yes and then flake out. Just say No in the beginning.

I will always remember my high school prom date. He said yes, but then just ignored me. I was excited to have a date, to know there was someone who wanted to spend time with me. However, that was not true. He did not want to spend time with me. I will never know why he said yes. I went to Prom by myself. I might have been able to find another date to have a special night with if he had just given me his real answer in the beginning.

Saying No is Respectful.

As we search for real, wanted, healthy connections, it is important to respect anyone who has the courage enough to ask by giving them our real, true answer. It is also important to realize the same when we are the ones asking.

Do you really want to be with someone who doesn't want to be with you? Has someone said Yes to you and then you found out they didn't want to do it? Perhaps they agreed, but

backed out at the last minute or just didn't show up or they did show up, but were a misery the entire time. That will not give us the soul food we are looking for. Do you really want to say Yes to someone you don't want to be with? You are letting yourself in for a lot of uncomfortable exchanges. You are also tying yourself and your would-be partner up in a doomed exchange when they could be moving on to find what they are really looking for. Also, remember that your partner did everything right by asking and waiting for your answer. If you say Yes when you wanted to say No, you are making your partner into an unconscious perpetrator. That is a horrible thing to do to anyone. Please respect your partner enough to say No when you want to.

It is also good to remember that we don't want be unconscious perpetrators ourselves so hearing No is a good thing. Help them know that it really is all right for them to say No. Give them space (physically and timely) to answer. When someone answers No, an appropriate response is "Thank you for taking care of yourself and giving me your true answer. I appreciate it. Thank you for respecting me enough to trust me with your true answer and know that I will respect it." (Credit to Cuddle Party.)

It takes as many No's as it takes to get a Yes.

Try reframing your thoughts. Instead of, 'no one will want to be with me', how about - 'I will invite people to talk with me until I find someone interesting I want to spend more time with'. Look at it as an opportunity to find a positive without worrying about possible negatives.

The truth is, it takes as many No's as it takes until you find a Yes. That's all. You could even make it a contest. Instead of counting the phone numbers you get or dates you successfully make, challenge your friends or your wingman (or wingsister) to see how many No's you can get. You have control over your actions in trying to connect with people, you have no control over their compatibility or desire to share connection with you. You won't know if you are compatible until you take some time together and try to get to know them and give them a chance to know you. When you ask and assume the answer will be No, then when you find a Yes, that will be a lovely surprise.

**I have not failed 10,000 times, I
have successfully found 10,000
ways that do not work.
- Attributed to Thomas Edison.**

Focus on the find

I hope you can focus on finding one you want to connect with, instead of worrying about how many you may talk with in order to find them.

When we go shopping for that certain item of clothing, we are focused on what we are looking for. If I want a blue silk dress shirt, I'm not going to take the first brown cotton tee that pops up in front of me. I will sort it out of the way, with respect, and then keep looking until I find something that suits me. Of course the shirt cannot give consent, but I hope the analogy still stands.

I'm not upset that the brown cotton won't work for my style. I just move on to look at the next one. The brown cotton will be there when someone else comes along who is looking for exactly that and can appreciate it for what it is.

Maybe I do find a blue shirt that looks good at first, but it doesn't fit me right. It can be a little sad to realize this, but I don't waste a lot of time trying to make it fit when it doesn't or wearing it anyway and being uncomfortable. I go back to the store and find the right size because at the end of the day, I need something that will actually work for me and bring happiness.

Failure is not the opposite of success, it is part of the process. Finding ways that do not work

is how you get to find something that does work. You just have to keep going, testing your hypothesis until you do find what does work. When something doesn't work, that will help you revise your working hypothesis to make it more likely you will find what does work the next time you make the attempt.

It is all right to rest and gather your energy or spirit between attempts, but do not wait too long to live your life.

What is the goal?

Remember the end goal, which is to find those people you can actually enjoy a healthy, wanted connection with. We want to find and connect with those people that will feed and nourish us the same way we can feed and nourish them in an equal relationship. With this mindset, hearing a no will not be cause for sadness or distress, it will be an occasion to say "thank you for taking care of yourself and trusting me with your no."

Remember, you still have everything you came with; you have lost nothing. You are the same person you were when you came in, no matter what someone else may say to you or think of you. Nothing has changed. 'No' only signifies that it is time to move on with a whole heart and a smile and talk to someone new.

EXERCISE

Matching egg experience

I found a set of 12 eggs that split in half to help children practice their matching skills for colors and shapes. I used it to create a matching experiment.

Each person chooses half an egg piece. Go around the room and ask your fellows to show their egg half until you find a match. Some people may not find a match. Use your voice and ask may I see your egg? Are you a match for me?

How did that feel? Were you upset when you got a No answer?

For those that didn't find a match, how did that affect you?

It usually isn't that upsetting when you remember the goal - you are searching for that matching connection. If the connection is not there, the answer is No. It can be that simple. This is not about rejection, it is just about finding that match.

More advanced egg match experiment:

Everyone takes an egg half. This time you are not going to show your egg. Keep it private in your pocket. Go around and ask people what color they are and then what shape. Try to find your match.

Here's the twist - the facilitator will tell a couple people to lie about their shape or color. Once people are matched, have everyone reveal their egg piece to see who actually has a match.



For those in the couple who misrepresented themselves and thought they had found a match, but actually did not match, what was that like? How does that compare to real life when we meet people who do not represent themselves authentically? How does it feel to be the one misrepresenting yourself when you had to make the reveal that you were not telling the truth and there is no match?

QUESTIONS FOR JOURNALING AND DISCUSSION

Have you ever agreed to something you didn't want to do because you wanted to please someone or you were just embarrassed to say no? What was the outcome?

How does it feel when someone misrepresents themselves to you?

What happened when you misrepresented yourself to someone else?

How have you allowed rejection to affect you in the past?

Do you think you can change your attitude about hearing No?

Did the egg matching experience give you any new insight into finding connections?

Mary Sorensen

16 THE POWER OF NO

You must learn how to say no when you want to say no.

This skill is absolutely essential.

Don't allow someone else's expectations or desires put you in discomfort or bow to their pressure when you really don't want to.

This IS a skill you can work on. You will develop more comfort and ease with practice.

Of course, sometimes we do things for the people we care for even when we don't want to. Compromises are part of relations with other people. However, you must search yourself and know if what you are doing is really necessary for your relationship. You must decide if it is something you truly can do with a whole heart for the sake of the relationship or if you hate it. If you truly hate it and how it

feels, you need to learn to say no and hold your boundaries solid.

The only way to truly allow someone to get close is when you know your boundaries will be respected. Having clear boundaries actually allows us more freedom. We are only able to drive on our highways because we have laws - boundaries. We know and trust that other drivers will drive within their lane and all follow common agreements of behavior so we can all drive faster. If there were no traffic laws, we would only be able to drive 2 miles per hour because there would be no way to know what the other drivers are doing and no safety. When boundaries are agreed to and trust is established, we have more room to explore because we know where the line is.

When we don't know where the boundary is, like the kids on the playground with no fence, we stay right in the middle where we know it is safe. We don't know how far we can go and still be safe. When they put the fence back on the playground, the kids all went to play around the edge of the fence. Knowing where the boundary was actually gave them more freedom and more space to play in.

Most of us are looking for a real connection when we ask someone to share with us. We can practice this easily at Cuddle Party using the context of sharing touch. When we want to share touch with another, we want to be with someone who wants to be with us. If they are uncomfortable, the connection will be uncomfortable and it won't give us the relaxing, fulfilling connection and release we are looking for. You may think you are giving someone what they want, but having someone tolerate touch with you is not a healthy or fulfilling way to meet your touch needs. It will feel strange and uncomfortable for both of you.

Saying yes when we want to say no may seem like you are giving someone what they want, but it is actually extremely disrespectful. They could have moved on and found someone who genuinely wanted to share with them instead of wasting time on trying to make an awkward connection with someone who wasn't interested. It truly helps no one in the long run to say yes when you want to say no.

You can change your mind. You are not stuck in a contract. It is never too late to say you are uncomfortable. You must respond to the moment as it is, not as you thought it would be.

If you do change your mind, you need to communicate that to your partner. They may have developed an expectation based on past behavior and make assumptions about what you want to consent to. You need to tell them that something has changed and re-negotiate consent to follow your current boundary. You will need to find your inner strength for this. It is important to stick to your convictions and communicate that your boundary has changed.

Remember when I said this is a skill? That means you can get better at it with practice. When you practice saying No and extricating yourself from uncomfortable situations you will gain confidence and feel empowered to create your own safety.

The No exercise on the next page will help you develop a muscle memory and also demonstrate for you that the world won't end when you say No or hear No. If you have trouble saying No, the No exercise can be very important for you.

EXERCISES

The No Exercise from Cuddle Party:

Ask a partner to ask you questions and practice answering No. The questions don't really matter, the exercise is about practice saying and hearing No.

Example Questions:

Will you hold my hand, Will you wash my car, Will you braid my hair?

May I hug you, may I cook dinner for you, may I paint your toes?

Your partner will ask you three questions, and you will say No three times.

Then you ask three questions and they say No three times.

Keep asking and answering No until you feel comfortable saying and hearing No.

QUESTIONS FOR JOURNALING AND DISCUSSION

How does it feel when you say No?

If you have trouble saying No, why?

Do you get more comfortable saying No
after you practice?

How do you handle someone saying No to
you?

17 POWER OF YES

You must learn how to say yes when you want to say yes.

You are worthy and you deserve it. It is all right to accept service or offers from others if you want to.

You need to trust that when someone offers you something, they really want to give it to you or do it for you. If you are unsure, then you can tell them explicitly that your expectation is they will only offer what they actually want to do and you are always going to take their words at face value. During the Cuddle Party Welcome Circle, we make this explicit. Don't offer what you don't really want to give.

Trusting others to speak the truth is counter to our culture. We are supposed to give hints, second guess what people mean and always question the hidden context and base our interactions on all of this hazy crap supposedly going on behind the curtains. Life is much

easier if we just decide not to play this adolescent guessing game. Don't infer, don't guess, don't give hints or expect someone else to know what you are thinking. Don't accept this from other people either. Come right out and say what you think and let others in your life know that you expect the same from them. Let them know you will trust them to speak the truth to you and assume that everything they tell you is the truth.

If someone offers you something, and you would like to accept it, then you should say yes.

I know we are taught that service to others is something we all need to aspire to do. In order for so many people to give service, someone has to receive. You need to take your turn receiving when someone offers so they can have the satisfaction of giving as well. You can help them best by allowing them to do something good for you and let them feel needed.

Givers and Caretakers

If you are giving all the time, you will eventually run out of energy to give. Giving and giving is not sustainable. You must take the time to receive and fill your bucket so that you have something to give tomorrow. Self Care is vital for those of us who are Givers. We have to

take care of ourselves first so we are ready, healthy and able to take care of other people tomorrow. This is such an important lesson to learn.

Stepping out of your comfort zone

There may be something that is drawing you, but also scares you. If it keeps coming back to your awareness, then perhaps it is time to take that leap and say yes. Going outside of our comfort zone is the only way to grow. If you always do what you have always done, you will never move or change from where you are right now.

Perhaps you are ok with where you are now, and that would be fine. However, I know that you would not be reading this particular book if you were entirely happy with your current life. You can stop thinking of all the reasons you can't or won't do something and start thinking of the reasons why you can.

Facing our fears and taking that risk does mean we have a possibility of getting hurt. We can mitigate the risk by developing our self-confidence and knowing our self-worth. We can also develop a good support network to help us in case we have downturn. If you don't take that risk, the long term effect of stagnation will also hurt you. Remember what we talked about in the fear chapter? Perhaps your body is just communicating excitement.

18 PLAY

As children we have an openness, a sense of wonder and whimsy with the world. We know we can do anything and everything we do has our full attention and intention behind it. If that activity doesn't capture our full intention, then we just don't do it. If we want to do something, we just do it.

Ask a room full of children - can you draw? Of course I can draw. Want to see a flower or a sword or a rainbow or a dragon? Here it is! Can you sing? Of course, I can sing. I sing all the time. I love singing! Can you write? Sure, here are my letters!

As you get older and are asked the same questions, you are much more likely to see the answers change to - No, I can't draw or sing or write. I'm no good. We lose our self-confidence and self-worth as we become adults, and then we turn around and do the same to the children in our lives which was done to us. We tell them

they can't draw because their drawing isn't good enough and pretty soon they believe it, just like we did.

Here is a very badly kept secret: We never grow out of our childlike wonder and joy in playing, we just have it programmed out of us as we grow older. We are told not to act a certain way, not to like certain things because they are 'childish'. We eventually learn that most of what we do is not good enough, therefore we shouldn't do it.

We are all just children inside, with a few years of experience. We still want to draw, we want to sing, we just don't because we think in order to sing we have to be at the level of a professional opera star. It isn't true. Everyone can sing. You may have to come to the understanding that not everyone may want to hear you sing, but you CAN sing. If you find joy in singing, then you MUST sing.

We still have the same thoughts and feelings and likes and dislikes we did as children, but we are taught to suppress these 'childish' urges. I say, stop suppressing what I would rather call these mindful human urges. Find and enjoy the wonder and whimsy in your life.

Explore Play for no other reason than it is fun for you. Skip in the park. Get some crayons and a coloring book. Wear some rainbows. Write a letter and put some glitter on it. Find some finger paints and get really messy. Watch some clouds. Sing for no reason other than it makes you happy and you want to do it for yourself. Get a kite and fly it in the park. Smell some flowers, play with jacks, get out the Legos. Go to Disneyland with your spouse and leave the kids at home. You know you want to.

We need to reinstate Play as a necessary part of our lives. This is a large part of the reason we enjoy spending time with children, they allow us to play with them and have fun without judgement. As long as there are children with you, you can play because it is for them, right? Well, it is for you too and there is no reason to deprive ourselves of something we all want to do.

How are you going to play today?

19 SAY WHAT YOU MEAN, MEAN WHAT YOU SAY

Speak with integrity. Don't play games with hints and clues. Don't get mad when someone doesn't read your mind or divine what you are trying to say without actually saying it.

Don't play hard to get and then get mad when someone doesn't chase you, otherwise known as 'honoring your stated boundaries' or doing what you asked for. We want to encourage people to honor our boundaries and requests, not teach them to ignore what we say.

Just say what you actually mean. I looked at this sentence for quite a while before I realized it doesn't need any explanation. It really is that simple.

Mean what you say. Don't say things that are not true. Don't say things you don't believe. Require the same from others in your life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND JOURNALING

Have you ever gotten mad at someone for doing what you asked them to do?

Have you been angry that someone didn't do what you wanted, even though you never asked them for what you wanted?

Have you ever played hard to get when you actually liked the person, but wanted them to chase you? How do you feel about that experience now?

Have you ever missed someone's hints and they got mad at you? How did that feel?

Have you ever honored someone's boundaries and then had them react badly?

Have you pushed boundaries or had your boundaries pushed and then had a good outcome?

20 AWKWARD CONVERSATIONS

There are times you feel uncomfortable, but you just don't want to bring it up. It seems like the conflict that will arise is not going to be worth it. You think you already know the answer. You think that nothing will change even if you talk about it and make a request. You decide to suffer in silence and just stew in your bad situation. Sometimes this can go on for years or even decades.

There's a girl you like. You've seen her several times. She smiles at you, but every time she does, you freeze. You can't get up the courage to talk to her. You want to see that smile again. All of the media shows that men are supposed to make the first move. Women are supposed to like men who are forceful. When you try it, women you like get creeped out and never want to talk to you again.

Your roommate brings home friends that smoke in the back garden. The smoke flies right into your bedroom through the open window. Smoke gives you an instant headache and nausea and sticks in your curtains and bedding. Your roommate already knows that smoke makes you sick.

What if you could resolve your situation with a conversation?

Yes it will be awkward and uncomfortable, for several *minutes*, until you come to a resolution or a compromise or a decision to move on. Will you really be uncomfortable for years for the sake of a few minutes of awkwardness? If you are with someone you think will become violent when you bring up this awkwardness, then I hope you can see that is an abusive relationship and you must make a change.

With friends, family, and partners who care for you - they will want to know when you are in distress. Think of the people you care for, wouldn't you want to know if something you are doing is a problem for them?

Go ahead and have that awkward conversation, then you will know the true situation and won't have to keep thinking

about it. You will have actual facts to move forward with.

Tell that girl you would like to spend time with her and ask her how she would like to proceed. You can meet at a coffee shop to chat. Or maybe she would prefer some phone conversations, or perhaps she answers no. At least you will know you did all you could do and you can move on to look for someone else.

Let your roommate know you have a problem with the smoke. Suggest compromises. Perhaps there is a different area guests can smoke in. Perhaps they can let you know so you can get the window closed. It may be no problem to notify you that someone is going out for a smoke and you can close the window.

I know these examples seem trivial and the conversations you have been avoiding are probably not trivial. The example that comes to mind for me is a conversation I had with my partner. I knew the possible outcome of this conversation could be his decision to give up on our relationship. We had talked about this subject before and I thought I knew his answer. However, the topic kept coming up to my awareness and was causing me extreme discomfort. I had had a few signals that

his position might have changed. When I finally brought the subject out again, and I was able to let him know my feelings and clarify our compromise, we became closer after we were able to talk freely. I didn't want it to be a deal breaker, but I was distressed enough that I couldn't continue thinking about it every day without saying anything. The outcome of this very awkward conversation for me was serious either way. It could have been a break up, but the actual outcome was to bring us closer and strengthen our relationship because I was willing to be vulnerable and awkward for those minutes.

21 CHANGE, ACCEPT OR LEAVE

Here are some practical steps to take when there is something going on which you don't like or which creates discomfort for you. It is important to address those situations which cause you a significant problem.

CHANGE

The first step when working on an uncomfortable situation should always be to try to change it through communication. It may be that those around you are not aware of your discomfort. Even when you think it is obvious and you have given plenty of hints. Hints rarely work. No one can read your mind. Think about how you have felt when someone else got upset about you not understanding their hints or reading their mind.

This could be something very easy. Perhaps your partner sat next to you on the couch and they are sitting on your clothes and pulling at them. They are probably not even aware they

are doing it. As soon as you ask them to adjust their position and they realize something they are doing is causing you discomfort, they will change to help you be comfortable because they care for you. This is a very simplistic example, but it works.

Don't wait to communicate your unhappiness until it builds up and you blow out in anger. That is a very ineffective way to achieve understanding. Now you have two problems to deal with, the original issue and whatever you said in anger which will probably put your partner on the defensive.

The best case is that the people or person causing you discomfort or unhappiness is unaware and will be glad you told them because they don't mind changing to help you be happy. The worst case is that they are enjoying your discomfort and misery and have no intention of changing. Most situations will probably fall somewhere in between.

When you communicate your requests in plain language, you will be able to find out for sure what their intentions are. The one causing you discomfort may not even know they are doing it. It is very important to let them know. Presumably, when our loved ones love us, making some changes won't be that difficult. The outcome will be that those who care for you will either make a change or tell you they

cannot or are not willing to make a change. Those that don't care for you probably won't make any effort.

Hopefully you will have some discussion and come to a beneficial conclusion or a compromise. If you don't, it is time to take what you learned about your partner's boundaries and make a choice.

After you have a clear idea of their feelings/intentions regarding you, you have the information to move on. You may decide what they are giving you is worth the discomfort and you will Accept it, or it is not and you will Leave.

In any case, clear communication and request for change is the necessary healthy first step. Please do remember when you attempt to change a situation that people are not 'fixable'. Only if they are open to it can they learn, create a new understanding, agree to a compromise or be shown a different way. They may not be open to it and you cannot help them if they don't want to be helped or will not admit there is a problem.

You must clearly communicate your issue. This is not an attack, but a communication to let them know you are uncomfortable. Remember to be assertive and say what you need to say, but being assertive is not the

same as being aggressive. People are more likely to listen if they don't feel under attack or triggered to be defensive. Their world is not the same as yours. The center of your universe is you, and the same goes for them. You don't know their story or where they are in their journey. Invite them to tell their story and why they want things the way they want it and then start a discussion to come to an understanding or a compromise that will work for both of you.

Simple example - A group of three friends came together to a Cuddle Party. There came a transition point when a few other people had decided to leave. Friend One suggested it was time for the group of three to go and started making preparations to leave. Friend Two talked to the Facilitator and said they were leaving. The Facilitator reminded her that there was a Closing Circle coming up in about half an hour and asked if they would consider staying for that. She said her friend wanted to leave, so even though she wanted to stay, they had to leave now. Friend Three also chimed in and said she would like to stay as well, but I guess we are leaving. Of course, I as the Facilitator asked them to go tell Friend One that they would like to stay and find out why he wanted to leave. It took a while for me to convince them to talk to him and tell him they wanted to stay. When they did ask him to change, it turned out he had no problem

staying. It had just felt like a natural transition time, so he had suggested leaving. He wasn't invested in the idea of leaving if they wanted to stay. It was no problem at all to stay.

In this case, the two friends were so used to subsuming their desires to others and being around people who didn't care what they thought that they had learned to not speak up and just do whatever someone else wanted.

When you are with the right people, they will WANT to hear what you want. They will want to do things that make you happy, especially when there was really no investment in doing the opposite, it was just a suggestion. They were all three glad to stay and enjoy the Cuddle Party and finish the experience with the Closing Circle. I asked them afterward if it was worth staying and they all three effusively agreed that it was.

If they had left without asking for the change, they would not have had the full experience. The two who had wanted to stay who were going to just go along with leaving would have felt dissatisfaction at missing out on continuing an experience they were enjoying. There could have been tension between them for the rest of the evening, not the peaceful and blissful feeling they were able to take away after the Closing Circle.

The Bubble Template for energy exchange negotiation Desires, Fears and Boundaries- Negotiation

One way to negotiate a change is to use the Bubble Discussion Template. I learned this template at the ISTA Level 1 retreat. In the most formal use of this format, you sit together with another person and create a figurative bubble or sphere that encloses the two of you within it. You can choose what you want to bring in to your sphere and what you want to throw out. The point of creating the bubble is to enclose the two of you in it and remove outside distractions. I usually want to bring in trust, fun, truth, and joy. I want to leave out the worry of what other people might think, expectations, shame, judgement and tension.

Once you have your bubble set up to shut out the world and create the right environment for your negotiation, sit knee to knee and express your Desires, Fears and Boundaries for the proposed experience. For instance, my desire may be to create a deeper connection and help my friend relax by serving him with a massage. My fear is my skill at massaging may not be very good, or I may drip sweat from my forehead and that could be perceived as unpleasant. I may also fear that if we experience this together, my intention for a platonic friendship may be misconstrued as moving to something more physical or sexual. My boundary may be that I want this to be a

platonic exchange and I want him to remain clothed in shorts. Then my partner will express his Desires, Fears and Boundaries for the proposed activity. After we both hear each other's desires, fears and boundaries, we can negotiate how to enjoy a shared experience together.

You can also use this model informally without your partner knowing the template. For instance, I may have a situation at work that I need to resolve. I go to my boss and tell her – 'I'd like to speak with you in all honesty. I want to meet your expectation for finishing this project on time, but I have other priorities from you that also need to get done and I have to leave by 6:00pm to be home for my kids.' I created a bubble for us by asking to speak to her, I brought honesty in to the bubble, I have expressed my desire to do a good job, my fear is that I won't be able to finish on time, and my boundary is that I have to leave by 6:00. This is the beginning of the negotiation to work together. Obviously this is a very simplistic example. In a real work situation, I would also bring in some proposed solutions for meeting the deadlines and that would be part of the negotiation.

You can use this template when you feel something needs to change. Hearing that you have the same goal or desire to work together

for a pleasant/good outcome, often helps further the process. Hearing what you desire and what you fear also helps people understand your reasons for wanting something to change.

Giving your boundary is essential. Having your boundaries encroached upon is probably why you want the change in the first place. If you never explain what your boundaries are, you cannot expect others to abide by them.

The discussion is also essential. This is a negotiation; it is a two-way street. Hearing your partner's desires, fears and boundaries may explain why they feel the need to do what they are doing which bothers you.

Change -

Your first attempt must be to try to change any situation you are having difficulties with. I have given some small examples to show that this is scalable, but we need to think of big issues here too. If your wife is a spendthrift and keeps getting you deeper into debt and this bothers you, you must try to achieve a change there. Don't just yell at her for spending money, but talk to her and try to find other ways to meet her needs in a more healthy way. Make realistic suggestions for addressing the underlying issue that causes her to want to go shopping to feel better and for replacement

behaviors that may meet her needs in a better way. Looking for real solutions together is essential to actually achieving change.

If you have done your best and clearly communicated your request to change and the answer to your request is No or silence, you then have two options. You can Accept the discomfort, knowing full well it is your choice to stay and make that compromise or you can remove yourself.

ACCEPT

If you have made the clear request to change and the answer is No, then your next option is to Accept the situation as it is. Every individual has the right to set their own boundaries - including you, your partner and everyone you interact with.

You can make the choice to accept the discomfort and move forward if the good you get from the relationship outweighs the uncomfortable parts.

This is not the same as giving up. Giving up means you are still exasperated, you still hate the situation, you still have the problem, you have just decided to ignore it. Giving up will come back to haunt you. The results are cumulative over time. If you find yourself bringing it up again and again, even though you have 'accepted' it, you need to do some internal work to truly Accept.

All relations - business, personal, family, acquaintances - involve compromises. When you meet someone you get along with really well, the compromises may be very minimal or seem trivial, but they will still be present.

When you have a healthy relationship, the choice to compromise will be an easier choice. The benefits of the relationship can make it easier to Accept a compromise to please

someone you truly care for who cares for you because the positive benefits you get from the interaction outweigh the negative. You don't do this because your partner has laid down the law or will not allow you to do certain things, you do this because you know there are things that would hurt your partner, so you choose not to do those things because you do not want to hurt them.

Communicating boundaries is not about giving permission. It is about respecting your partner and acting in a manner which does not trigger hurt but fosters safety, trust and intimacy between you.

In order to know how to do this, you must talk together about your deal breakers and your preferences. Deciding to accept a boundary which is a deal breaker for your partner is something only you can weigh. If their boundary is a deal breaker for you too, it is time to exercise the option to leave.

If you do choose to accept it, you must truly Accept it. Don't go around complaining about it or nagging them about it. Don't bring it up at every opportunity to show them how much you are sacrificing. It is your choice to stay, knowing the circumstances and the

compromises that are needed to make that relationship work.

Caveat: I never advocate staying in an abusive situation. Nothing is worth that. If you are in an situation where you are being abused, including bullying, emotional abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse or manipulation - you need to remove yourself from that person.

Notes - I was going to cut this chapter, thinking it was just a little too much information for this book which keeps getting longer all the time. Then I re-read it myself. I needed this right now. There is a compromise I have made which I thought I had Accepted. I realized that I haven't accepted it fully. I keep bringing it up to my friends and telling them I wish it could be different even though I made the right choice. I keep wanting validation that I am suffering for this relationship and being the bigger and better person by giving up what I preferred. That is really not what has happened at all and makes me feel petty now that I've recognized it. I know this is not the best way to maintain a healthy relationship and show respect. Every time I re-examine my choice to make this compromise, I know I made the right decision for us. I know this compromise is worth it. Even though I have struggled a bit, I have made a decision to accept and I need to truly Accept.

I can tell you this is not easy. I know that it is possible and it can be very worth it. I am still working on this and I hope to become even more comfortable with it over time.

If you have not been able to Change the situation with clear communication and requests, and you are unable to Accept it, it is time to remove yourself.

LEAVE

You do not necessarily need to leave the relationship or the person all together, you may be able to just remove yourself from a specific recurring situation.

Many people have the assumption that once they have committed to something, leaving is not an option. I agree that commitment needs to be taken seriously and not dismissed lightly. However, if you have gone through the real work of trying to Change or Accept, and the situation is not viable, then whatever you had committed to is probably gone already. Staying there in misery does not give you virtue points, it just wastes your life and theirs.

It is possible to love someone and know that you do not work well together. You may have to love them from afar. Loving someone does not automatically make it right to be together. Once you know that you are not a 'hell yes, I want to be here doing this with you' then it is time to let your people know that you need to move on. They are not your people any more. This does not have to be a bad thing. It is good to finally recognize that the fit is just not there and you cannot make it be there. You cannot be a purple square when you are really an orange triangle (see the egg matching experience in chapter 15.)

Be sure you have really done the work in attempting Change and Acceptance before you come to the understanding that it is time to Leave. You need more, and you want more for the people you care about. You want them to be happy and you want to be happy and you are both not happy with this clash going on which you have not been able to resolve. You can release your loved one in to the world so they also can find someone they connect with fully and more easily.

Example - Your partner's parents are not welcoming to you. Every time you go to visit, they drop disrespectful comments and say really mean things within your hearing. You have told them you do not accept being treated disrespectfully and asked for a change. You have asked your partner to help effect a change. They said they would change, but they have not. You decide that you will not put yourself in the position to be talked down to. You do not go with your partner when they go to visit their parents any more. You remove yourself from the problematic situation.

Example - Your partner is a horrible driver. You feel unsafe every time you get in the car. You are worried for your life and theirs. You have offered to drive and they refuse to allow you to drive. You decide to never get in the car with them and you drive your own car to any event you may be heading to together.

It can be difficult to give up something we know for the unknown. However, if you have communicated your issues clearly, there is no attempt to change and you truly cannot accept your situation, you must leave if you care about yourself and your partner at all. It is important to stand up for yourself and recognize your worth. If the people around you do not respect you or support your strength, it is time to find new people who do uplift you.

I promise, your people are out there looking for you. They want to find you as much as you ache for them. If you are currently committed to people who are not right for you, your true tribe will not be able to find you.

You can find healthy, fulfilling relationships with friends, lovers, partners and colleagues when you communicate authentically and let them see the real you. Some will be attracted and others will draw away. Shine your true light so your people can find you. This is the dance of life and staying with someone who constantly steps on your feet doesn't do either of you any good.

Breaking up -

Adam Lyons, the 'pickup artist' has some good advice on breaking up the right way. I know he has gotten some criticism for teaching guys

how to get what they think they want, but if you actually listen to him, you will see that he advises telling the truth, learning how to act at ease with others and helping people gain confidence to attract the opposite sex. His methods make sense.

When you decide it is time to break up with someone and they deserve the courtesy, you need to give them the proper respect and time. If this person does not deserve the courtesy, is abusive, dangerous, or will not listen to you, you may need to just walk away.

Presumably you cared about this person once, even if you may not care as much now. Choose a place that will be most appropriate for both of you for a possible long discussion and possible emotions, like at home or your favorite park bench. Don't give them time to get up in their head about why you want to speak to them by saying "We need to talk, how about next week?". Find a time when you know you both can spend as much time as is needed without having to go to work in half an hour or go to any other commitment.

Sit them down and say, I am not happy and I know you are not either. I want more for myself and I want more for you. I care about you and I want you to have a life with someone who will give you what you need.

Be sure to give your partner all the time they need to be heard. Hold them if they need to cry. Let them hold you if you need to cry. Spend the time together to process the release until everything they want to say has been said. At the end of a healthy break up, you will have moved through any anger and even though you may be sad at the lost opportunities, you will know that you are both doing the right thing.

Recognizing that you need to remove yourself from an untenable situation can be scary. Whether you are just removing yourself from certain situations or you are releasing a relationship entirely, I know it is a big move. Sometimes you have to move through pain and misery in order to get to a place of healing.

FOURTH OPTION?

The big pitfall most of us choose by default is the untenable fourth option. We stay in the situation, unwilling or afraid to ask for change, unable to Accept it, and afraid to Leave. This is not a healthy place to be. You may tell yourself that you have Accepted it or become resigned to it, but if you are miserable or continue to get triggered or feel taken advantage of, you have not Accepted it.

Not making a choice is also a choice. You choose to stay where you are in a bad situation, hoping it will get better magically. Suddenly you realize that years have gone by in misery and you have been wasting the potential of your life and the potential of those around you as well to have a real healthy, wanted connection.

The time comes when you do have to make a choice and do what is best for you. I know you have the strength to do it.

Release is not a bad thing. If it is needed, it is a really good, positive move. I like to use the word release instead of 'leaving' or 'breaking up' or 'ending the relationship' or even 'getting away from'. It has more goodwill behind it.

Freedom is not the same as Release, but in order to find freedom, we must first release what is holding us back. When I realize it is

time to move on and release someone, I want them to go find what is right for them. I have realized what is right for them is not me.

SUMMARY

If you have a situation that is untenable, you have three choices for moving forward.

Change - attempt to change the situation with a clear request and communication.

Accept - if it will not be changed, you can choose to Accept it.

Leave - if it cannot be changed, and you cannot accept it, you must Leave.

When we are in an uncomfortable or untenable position with the people in our lives, the first thing we need to try is to Change it. Engage in clear communication and let them know your boundaries have been crossed and you are having trouble. Make a clear request regarding the change you need to be comfortable and happy. Of course, everyone is allowed to have their boundaries just as you do, so the answer to your request may be no. There could be many reasons for this. However, the reasons don't really matter to what you will do next.

You have a problem, you have tried to change it, the answer was No. The next choice for you to contemplate is whether you can Accept it or not. If you choose to Accept things as they are

and make that compromise, you need to be fully invested. Don't complain about it, don't bring it up to your partner constantly as a sacrifice you make for them. This is the most difficult one to do and requires a real mental adjustment on your part. Truly accepting something is different than giving up or going along reluctantly.

If you have tried to Change the situation and the answer was No, you have tried to fully Accept it and you have been unable to, then you need to Leave. Remove yourself from the untenable situation. You will have to decide whether your issue is a deal breaker for the relationship or not. You may be able to remove from the situation which bothers you and still remain in the relationship. You may not.

Only you can make the best decision for yourself. Healthy, wanted connections should not bring shame, anger or misery to you.

22 ALL YOU HAVE IS NOW

The only time you have to work with is right now, this moment.

Now is the only time you can ever do what you want to do and be what you want to be.

There is no other time available to us.

Stop waiting.
You are enough now.
You know enough now.
Decide to be an expert now.
Start before you are ready.
There is never a good time to write a book, it is like having a baby.
You just do it.

- Drew Rozell *Book In 90 Days*

There is never going to be an ideal time for a lot of the things we want to do or be in life. Most people who have accomplished amazing things will tell you that they were

not ready when they started. They felt like imposters, they felt like someone else could probably do it better. But they went ahead and did it. The ones who take action are those we see as leaders and can look back on as the ones who bring value to our world.

Living in the past -

Everyone has mistakes or regrets in their past. It is important to fix what you can and then forgive yourself. Perhaps life was better for you in the good old days and you just want to go back to when you were together with your partner, or you weighed less, or you had that perfect job. You spend all your time thinking about what went wrong and your energy is completely focused behind you. You can't recognize or realize any future opportunities because your vision is turned backwards.

Living in the future -

You know that life will be better when you get married, when you lose 20/50/100 pounds and can wear that outfit, when you get that perfect job, when you buy that house, when you graduate. You can't go on that date or take that vacation or apply for that job because you don't deserve it or you are not worthy now. You deny yourself now because you know things will be more ideal at some point in

the future. All your energy and time is focused somewhere in the nebulous tomorrow.

Living now -

It is time to live right now. The only time we have to BE is right this moment. You can decide to be happy now. Yes, attitude is a choice you can make. It is important to see and fully experience what is happening now so that you are not missing your children smiling, your aging parents, your flowers in the garden.

We can remember the past with fondness and learn from our mistakes. It is also good to plan for the future and develop goals to work toward.

At the same time, we must choose to be happy and enjoy life now. We must learn to love ourselves right now. If we cannot, we will *never* be able to be happy or love ourselves or enjoy ourselves, because the only time we have is now.

That future time will be now when you get to it. If you live your life focused on the future, when you get there, you will just find something else you have to wait for in order to truly live.

Mary Sorensen

Live life deliberately and fully. Appreciate the moment you have been given.

Timeline for Life:

Gone ^ NOW Not here yet ^

Your life is right now! It's not later! It's not in that time of retirement. It's not when the lover gets here. It's not when you've moved into the new house. It's not when you get the better job. Your life is right now. It will always be right now. You might as well decide to start enjoying your life right now, because it's not ever going to get better than right now - until it gets better right now!

- Abraham Hicks

23 WHEN NOT TO SHARE YOUR WHOLE SELF

When is it a good choice to not share your full self?

There are times when people don't deserve to see your true self. There are times when you have to be around people who will not be safe for you if they know your true self. There are people who don't deserve to hear your story.

You can still act with and represent yourself with integrity. You don't always have to share everything about yourself, especially if you know your safety or emotional balance could be compromised.

There are also things about yourself which are private, only to be shared with your most intimate friends and family. Private does not necessarily mean secret and there should not be shame attached if you want to keep some things just for you.

For example, perhaps you have naked lady tattoos on your upper arm. You work in a bank. Your boss doesn't need to know that you have tattoos. You always wear sleeves at work to cover them. If they knew, you might get fired. You love working at the bank and you love tattoos. You can reconcile these two things if you are all right with the compromise of wearing professional clothing that covers your art while at work.

Of course, that is a really simplistic example. There are aspects of our personalities that cannot be set aside or covered up and there are other aspects of our true self which we don't need to project every moment or make known to all the people in our lives.

However, you need to be able to be your true self with your closest circle of family and friends. If you feel you cannot, you need to find new people for your tribe. I can guarantee that whatever you are and whatever you enjoy, there are other people who like the same things and who can relate to and appreciate you. They are waiting for you right now.

We have to make choices and compromises sometimes. We need to remember that they ARE choices and we have decided to make the compromise for the benefit of what we get back. For instance, I would love to never wear

shoes again. I live in Utah and I work in an office, so I have made the choice to wear shoes to work because that is an expectation of the workplace I choose to go to every day in order to support myself with the security of a steady paycheck and work that suits my abilities and temperament. I also wear shoes in the winter because I dislike being cold more than I dislike wearing shoes. If it really was against my core being to wear shoes, I absolutely could make different choices. I could move to the beach and sleep in a hammock. I could try to find an online job so I could work from home and never worry about what I'm wearing. I could go live in a nudist commune. People make these decisions every day.

You are NOT stuck where you are, pretending to be something you are not, you have chosen to be there. There are always choices. Remember the reason why you have chosen to do what you do and that may help you with the compromises you choose to make. Another example is the compromises we make for family. No one likes cleaning up diapers or spit up, but we choose to take this on willingly when we choose to bring up a child. I might say that clearing up that kind of thing is something I would never choose to do, but when it is my own child or someone I love, I can do it willingly with a happy heart because the caring relationship is worth it to me.

Another example. I am not religious, but my family is. In order to be there for big family moments, I have chosen to attend church on several occasions to support them. Church can be a bit of a trial for me, but I am able to act and dress appropriately for these family occasions because I choose to be a part of this family. They understand that I have other preferences, and they appreciate my presence and support at these religious events which are very important to them. It is against my core being to represent myself as a member of any religion, but it IS consistent with my core self to support my family and others in the choices they have made that help them to be their best and highest self.

When you realize that what you get back is not worth the compromise you have to make for it, then you need to make a change. You also need to be sure that the compromises you do make are not counter to your core self. Even though I don't like shoes, wearing them is not something that hurts my soul. If it were, I would definitely need to make different life choices so my soul could be nourished, not damaged every day. If I really had mental anguish every time I had to clean up a mess, perhaps I need to choose not to have children or I could hire a nurse or nanny to handle that part of it. If going to church felt like knives in my heart, I would have to let my family know that I would find other ways to support them.

Sometimes we choose to take on different roles in different communities, and that is fine. Your different roles should not contradict who you are. I do not wear my Free Hugs t-shirt to work every day or put up Cuddle Party fliers constantly in my office. When I go to church with my family, I don't tell everyone I meet about ethical non-monogamy or invite them to my sex education class (most of the time, anyway). I also don't tell them I believe in monogamy and plan to get married soon because that is counter to who I am. I don't always take on the role of facilitator for personal journeys at work or when I am out in public since that is not usually what I am there to do. I try to be aware of where I am, what role I have taken on and what is appropriate to share.

There are times when it is the right choice to keep parts of ourselves private. Just be sure it is your conscious choice and you know why you are making that choice. You can still be authentic without sharing everything with everyone.

24 WHAT NOW? PRACTICE!

Take it one bite at a time.

Allow yourself time to process.

Practice.

Set up reminders or routines to bring you
back to the work and your goals.

Attitude is a choice you make.

Play.

Engage in your passion and find flow.

Clear your clutter.

Help someone.

Be an advocate for others.

Join the True Crew.

I hope there were some ideas in here that helped you to think of things you can implement to support healthy connections in your life. In order to make those healthy connections with others, we must have a healthy and optimal wellness connection to our self, first. Figure out who you are and then engage in the practice of allowing yourself to be seen. That is what authenticity is about.

The purpose of this book is to facilitate your personal work by presenting information, ideas and exercises to help you consciously choose and understand who you are and then become comfortable sharing your true self and acting with integrity with the people in your life. My goal for you is that you can be comfortable with yourself and comfortable sharing your true self with the people around you.

Remember this book is a bare taste of many different ideas. This is just the beginning. Keep going. If you want to work with a therapist or a counselor, there are many sources you can look to. I hope you will continue your research and self-education and find outside help if that is right for you.

The most important thing to learn is that there is always more to learn.

One bite at a time -
Choose one idea and work on it until you feel comfortable with it. Read a chapter once a week, or as often as you can process it.

When you have any goal, it is important to come back to it periodically to review and focus your energy back to working on it.

Sometimes you have to give yourself time to process, time to let your subconscious mind work things through while you decompress with a diversion or just go to bed and sleep. I find when I really cannot decide what to do, it is best to just go to bed. Our mind needs the down time of sleep to process and come to clarity. Things always look differently in the morning and getting a good night's sleep can only help your outlook.

Practice -

This is a practice, and I mean that literally. You have to practice being your authentic self. You have to practice saying what you mean and meaning what you say. You have to practice speaking up when you are in discomfort. Just like an athlete practices and visualizes winning the race, you have to practice and visualize what you want to achieve.

Most of us take comfort in structure, routine, and habit. Develop your habits and routines to support your highest self. We also need to break out of our routines at least once a year or so to relax,

rejuvenate and engage in planning our life and setting goals.

Attitude is a choice -

Remember that you may not choose what happens to you, but you absolutely get to choose what you do with it and how you react to it.

You can decide to be happy or decide to be miserable. You can choose to change your surroundings if you are not comfortable. You can make the best of any situation you are in or you can whine about your circumstances and remain in suffering. We will all experience pain, but it is my choice whether to stay in suffering or not. Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.

Play -

Find something fun and lose yourself in laughing. This is a big reason we enjoy spending time with children, they know how to play. When we are with them, we can play too. You don't need to be around kids in order to play. Find some play for yourself. Do something for the sheer joy of it. Do something that has no purpose other than to be a fun experience for you. Play is very important, but most adults have been indoctrinated to believe that play is no longer relevant. The truth is, if

you do not play, you cannot be a well-rounded, healthy and optimally well person.

Engage your passion -

What keeps you in the moment? What do you do that takes up your whole brain? I know we have all experienced those times when we are doing an activity, but our mind is on something else. We can't stop thinking or worrying about what happened in the past or what might happen in the future or what chores we have to do, or what other people are thinking. When you engage your passion, there is no room in your mind for anything else and these extraneous thoughts fall away. We achieve flow. I hope you can fit passion and flow into your life on a regular basis.

Clear your Clutter -

Look around you. Is your house, car and/or office full of stuff that gives you a headache just looking at it? It is time to address the physical clutter in your life. It can be a mirror to the mental, emotional and relationship clutter you are holding on to. When you clear your physical space, you will be able to breathe more freely and you will find more room to work on your mental clutter. Clutter has been

shown to have a correlation with depression.

Start with where you are sitting. Get three of those empty Amazon boxes I know you have laying around your house.

Something bigger than a shoebox would be great. Mark one for Trash, one for Keep and one for To Do. Sort everything you can reach into the boxes. The first one is easy. Trash; throw it away. The second one is Keep - find a permanent solution for tidy storage if it is something you need to keep, don't just set it in another pile somewhere. Only keep what you love around you (*Art of Tidying* by Marie Kondo). Display it properly if it is something that you want to display. If there is no room to display your entire collection, you might think about packing some away for now. Put the date on the box, if you don't miss it within a year you can sell or donate it or give it to someone else who has space to love it. If there is a storage or display solution that you need to buy or find, put it in the To Do box.

Now go through your To Do box. Make a list if that helps you. Spend at least 10 minutes twice a day handling your To Do list. When you get through the entire list or the entire box, it is time to refill the boxes and start again.

Let me know if this method works for you. The important part is to take it one small, bite-sized piece at a time so you actually get your space clear without getting overwhelmed and giving up.

Help someone -
Sometimes helping someone else shows you how to address your own issues. Sometimes working through something with someone else shows you your own value and worth. Often the best way to learn something ourselves is to teach it to another. Find a way to help people who are having some of the same issues you are experiencing. Just creating a discussion group where people can talk and share about these issues can be cathartic. They may help you in return.

If you want to avoid people, you can always volunteer at the animal shelter to play with and take care of the animals. The dogs and cats need some social interaction and time out of their cages every day, so socializing with them is a great low key volunteer role to take on. Animal therapy works for a lot of people because animals never judge you.

Even if none of that sounds right for your situation, helping someone else will

help them. It always feels good to know you did something good.

Be an Advocate for others-

Find a community or a person that is struggling and become a sponsor, mentor or advocate for them. In AA, the sponsor program has helped many people. It goes both ways to help the sponsor and the person being sponsored or mentored. It feels good to be needed.

Join the True Crew Community -

I have a private Facebook Group to help you keep authenticity practice at the top of your list. If these ideas have sparked your interest and your desire, it is important to renew your spark with bite-sized chunks over time. In the Facebook group, I will focus on a different chapter every so often for us to work on. We can support and help each other in community.

25 WHY THIS BOOK?

We all need connection.

Healthy, wanted, touch and connection helps you relax, raises your immunity, lowers your blood pressure and releases oxytocin which can give you a blissed out feeling. We need connection and touch just as much as we need adequate sleep and good nourishing food. We can live on junk food and not enough sleep, but our health deteriorates, our mood goes in the dump, we are much more likely to get sick and we are no fun to be around. I facilitate healthy, wanted connections between people.

For optimum health and wellness, we as human beings need to nourish our body, mind and spirit with healthy food, good sleep and sharing quality time connections and touch with others. A friend of mine calls this Vitamin H for Human. We all need an infusion several times a day. In order to feel comfortable connecting with others, we have to feel comfortable with ourselves first. Getting to a state of confidence and comfortable authenticity is the only way to be ready for creating healthy connections.

Skin hunger is a real thing. You have probably felt it during those times when you are feeling lonely and bored and nothing seems to hold your attention. You feel jumpy, like you are itching out of your skin. Perhaps you are prompted to try to hold yourself by crossing your arms and rubbing yourself as if you are cold. Taking a bath might help, or wrapping up in a luxurious blanket, because your skin is just starving for touch. Unfortunately, these solutions will not satisfy for more than a few minutes. You need some time with another real person.

The treatment for skin hunger is as easy and available as the person next to you. Lean shoulder to shoulder or back to back with your friend for a bit. Hold hands for five minutes while you talk and you will feel immensely better. Ask for a hug. It breaks my heart that so many people allow themselves to get into such a state of touch starvation when the answer is so easy and accessible.

Some of us feel we cannot ask the people in our lives for this attention, touch and connection. This is why there are professional cuddlers who can hold you and help you relax. When you are starving, it feels impossibly difficult to take the time to find and cook a meal that contains proper nutrition. It is the same for skin hunger. If you are starving, you will

probably gobble up the first possible connection that you recognize. This has been the beginning of many unhealthy relationships, because there is no time for healthy set up. It is better to see a cuddler to get these needs met, and experience what a healthy wanted connection can feel like. Then you can take the time in a calm state to set up quality, wanted, intimate relationships without feeling you have to rush to meet your needs for touch and connection.

Oxytocin is my drug of choice and it is a completely sustainable resource. Giving your full presence to another human being with quality time in conversation is also a form of connection and intimacy and can offer some of the same benefits as touch connection.

There is a full spectrum of intimacy available to us and it is important to learn that you have many options for connection which fall between sex or nothing. Connection can be as simple as making eye contact with someone walking by on the sidewalk for 2 seconds and sharing a smile. Showing someone you see them can be very powerful. Think of the last time someone smiled at you walking by and how that connection affected you.

Absolutely the only way to obtain intimacy and true sharing with someone is when we are communicating our truth to those we connect

with. If you cannot let someone know your boundaries, your desires, your fears, your true and authentic self, then what is the point of spending time with them? There cannot be a real, healthy connection without authenticity. Cuddling practice is all about enjoying that real, healthy, wanted connection.

I want to help you. I want to help others. I want to help your friends and family and future friends and family so you will be ready for them when they are ready for you. I want to get this information and these ideas out to those people who need to hear it. I want those people who need these concepts to be able to find them and be able to hear and process them. I want to facilitate safe spaces as you do your own work to become your best self.

As a Facilitator, my goal is to create opportunities and spaces to make it easier for you, but you have to do the work yourself. Facilitators make the process easier, but we can't do it for you.

The problem I want to solve with this book is to help you find confidence and pride and joy in you. If you go through this work, you will be able to say what you mean and mean what you say. You will have confidence presenting your

true self to everyone in your life. You will consciously know, or decide, or discover, who you are and you will be able to release shame about yourself. You will find confidence and power within yourself and you will be able to find people and connections that truly nourish you.

I want healthy, happy, well-adjusted people running my community and my world. The only way to make the world a better place is to help the people in it be their best and highest self through understanding and reduced suffering. World peace is not out of our reach.

This is the work I can do to contribute to peace, one hug at a time.

I facilitate healthy connections between people and expose them to tools for communicating and navigating relationships in healthy ways. I am a public speaker. I lead workshops on communication and consent, I facilitate Cuddle Parties and I also do work as a communication coach, a life/wellness/authenticity coach and a professional Cuddlist with one-on-one clients.

It feels good to help you. It feels good to have confident, self-aware, happy, and fulfilled people around me, contributing to my community. If you have been searching for yourself, I hope my words can help you on your journey. I also hope the ideas here will assist

you to find confidence, comfort and peace in presenting your true self to the world; to shine your true light so you can find nourishing connections with those people who are desperately trying to find you, just as you are searching for them.

I also want to show you some of what I am about so you can get to know me. If what I have to say resonates for you, perhaps you will want me to work with you in the future as a speaker, facilitator, cuddler or coach and be part of my tribe.

Our tribe consists of all the people who nourish our souls. People we enjoy spending time with. People we can learn from, people who want to learn from us, people who are willing to learn together in proximity, people who have common goals, common ideals or common experiences.

Nourish - to care for and feed with essential nutrients for growth so you truly thrive.

My tribe accepts me for who I am, appreciates me, respects me and supports me even when they don't agree with me or even like me. I hope to help you find your tribe and your tribe

to find you. I also hope to find members of my tribe through this book; my community, my colleagues, my clients, my teachers, my mentees, my mentors, my chosen family. If what I have to say does not hit a good note for you, I release you on a wave of good vibes to find your own tribe elsewhere.

I want to help people release any shame and make conscious choices about who they are. I want you to find peace, confidence and comfort presenting yourself to the world just as you are. Let's do it together.

Sometimes, we just need someone to tell us what we already know. We need permission or validation to do what we know we need to do. We need someone to tell us it is ok to make that tough move; things will be better for everyone once we get through to the other side. I hope this book can do some of that for you.

Why is the title the 'Art' of Authenticity?
Because being You is an Art! It is entirely subjective, not scientific. You change from moment to moment and being you is a lifelong artistic, creative and observational study. You are the expert on you and you design your own life.

26 RESOURCE LIST

Book list recommendations.

Banyan, Calvin D. *The Secret Language of Feelings - A Rational Approach to Emotional Mastery*. Banyan Hypnosis Center (December 6, 2002)

Bennett, Ray. *The Underachiever's Manifesto: The Guide to Accomplishing Little and Feeling Great* Chronicle Books (April 27, 2006)

Brown, Brené. PhD. *The Power of Vulnerability: Teachings of Authenticity, Connection, and Courage* Audible Audiobook – Original recording. Sounds True (Publisher) (2013)

Brown, Brené. PhD. - TED talks, audiobooks, books, her work is all good.

Chapman, Gary. *The Five Love Languages*. Northfield Publishing; reprint edition (January 1, 2015)

Day, Felicia. *You're Never Weird on the Internet (Almost): A Memoir* Simon & Schuster Audio. Audible.com (August 11, 2015) I highly recommend listening to the audio book. Felicia's reading of her own writing is delightful.

Gabriel, Jon. *The Gabriel Method: The Revolutionary DIET-FREE Way to Totally Transform Your Body*. Atria Books/Beyond Words (December 30, 2008)
<https://www.thegabrielmethod.com/>

Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Thich Nhat Hanh: Essential Writings (Modern Spiritual Masters Series)*. Orbis Books (June 1, 2001)

Hill, Napoleon. *Outwitting the Devil*. Sterling; Reprint edition (October 2, 2012)

Jiang, Jia. *Rejection Proof: How I Beat Fear and Became Invincible Through 100 Days of Rejection* Audible Audiobook – Blackstone Audio Inc (May 8, 2015)

Kondo, Marie. *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*. Ten Speed Press; 1st edition (October 14, 2014)

Manson, Mark. *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck: A Counterintuitive Approach to Living a Good Life* Harper; 2nd Edition edition (September 13, 2016)

Phillips, Bill. *Body for Life: 12 Weeks to Mental and Physical Strength*. William Morrow; 1st edition (June 10, 1999)

Rhimes, Shonda. *Year of Yes: How to Dance It Out, Stand In the Sun and Be Your Own Person*. Simon & Schuster; Reprint edition (September 13, 2016)

Robin, Vicki and Joe Dominguez. *Your Money or Your Life: 9 Steps to Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence: Fully Revised and Updated for 2018* Penguin Books; Revised edition (December 10, 2008)

Rosenberg, Marshall B. PhD. *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict: What You Say Next Will Change Your World*. Puddledancer Press; First Edition (October 28, 2005)

Rozell, Drew. *Write Now*. Wellness Professional Network (August 30, 2013)
<http://www.bookin90days.com/>

Ruiz, Don Miguel, and Mills, Janet. *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom (A Toltec Wisdom Book)*. Amber-Allen Publishing (November 7, 1997)

Online Resources

Betty Martin and the Wheel of Consent -
<https://bettymartin.org/>

Meetup –
<https://www.meetup.com/>
Find or create a group with like-minded friends. Utah Cuddle Club is my online Meetup for Salt Lake Cuddle Parties.

Cuddle Party -
<http://www.cuddleparty.com/>

Cuddlist –
<https://cuddlist.com/>

International School of Temple Arts (ISTA)-
<https://www.schooloftemplearts.org/>

Mary Cuddler –
<http://MaryCuddler.com/>
Check out the most recent info about what I'm doing on my website.

Our Whole Lives – Sexuality Education
http://www.ucc.org/justice_sexuality-education_our-whole-lives

True Crew Facebook Group for working on Authenticity -
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/TrueCrewAuthenticity/>

27 MARY'S STORY

This book contains my personal opinions. I am a person, going through life, just like you. I have learned some things I want to share, so here it is.

I am not a therapist. My relevant certifications and training are my Cuddle Party Facilitator Certification #099, and my Cuddlist training. I have attended multiple retreats, classes and workshops, read many books, and done a lot of personal work on these topics, but have I no other formal training in these areas. I have hosted dozens of Cuddle Parties and worked with many people at workshops and retreats as well as personal clients.

I am a Facilitator. I cannot do the work for you, you have to do it for yourself. I hope to make it easier by holding safe space (either at events or one on one) and perhaps give you some tools, options, or a direction. That is what a facilitator does, facilitate your own journey. At the end of the day, you are responsible for your

own decisions and actions and the direction you choose to take in your life.

I am a procrastinator and a 'good enough' kind of person. With this book, I decided I would do something good. Just to make my life really complex, I can also be a perfectionist at times. I often procrastinate and put things off because I don't want to call it finished if it isn't perfect. Usually that ends up with nothing getting done or something being rushed through at the last minute. I've been having that dilemma with this book. I would like it to be perfect. It could have been done six months ago, but here I am working on finishing this right under the wire of my self-imposed deadline. I am typing this on September 15, 2018 as I spend the weekend powering through to finish this book so it will hopefully be printed for the first ever CuddlExpo in Chicago in two weeks where I will be speaking on Reframing Rejection.

I know there are some places where I may be inconsistent with formatting or in the style of voice I used for each chapter. I wrote some of these topics for other purposes over time – like web articles or Facebook posts – and I have adapted them for this book.

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

- Walt Whitman, "*Song of Myself*"

I am aware this book is not perfect. It will never be perfect. It isn't even the best I could make it - because if I wait for that, it will never get done. There will always be something else I could find that I could have written better. I want the ideas in this book to get out to you, who is reading it now, more than I need it to be perfect.

I was inspired by Drew Rozell and his <http://www.bookin90days.com/> website. I clicked a link on Facebook. I read his book *Write Now*. That book is pretty rough, but it got the message across and the content worked for me. It did what it was designed to do and showed me I could get this done and have it be worthwhile.

Finished is better than perfect. I just have to trust that hopefully you will find some of what you are looking for here even if my work is an imperfect messaging medium.

I know I still have work to do in these areas of Authenticity myself. If there is something in here that triggered you to feel defensive, angry or ashamed, I hope you will contact me, let me know and help me learn a better way to communicate.

In order to change, we have to admit that what we did in the past no longer serves us. It

wasn't necessarily wrong, or bad. I know we all live life the best way we know how with the information and experience we have at the time. If we are not happy with where we are, we seek out new information and experience to help us find a new path that will work better for us. There is really no right or wrong in the realm of personal growth and relationships, just what works for each individual or couple and what doesn't.

Even though this book isn't perfect and it never will be, I know it has value. I hope it will help you find and be your highest and best self. I hope you can find peace and comfort and confidence in yourself. I hope you can pay it forward and help others do the same. I have a self-interested motive for this. I want to find and grow people to have around me and interact with in my world who are self-confident, happy, open minded, communicate well, and conduct themselves with integrity.

Let me introduce myself -

I am a normal person, just like you. I work full time at my day job in an office. I get up every morning and put my pants on one leg at time, brush my teeth and go to work. I am a semi-professional singer and I perform with the Opera Chorus and in community theater. I have a large extended family. I have never been married and I have no children. I like to

read science fiction and fantasy, knit, crochet and various crafting, and I enjoy working in the garden and watching things grow.

My story -

It is the fall of 2017 as I commence writing this. I had a life changing epiphany about three years ago around my 41st birthday. I realized that I had been in a rut for years; going to work, going home, spending weekends on the couch and waiting for something to happen.

I had an awakening when a persistent friend of mine showed me what a deeper connection could be like. He had been pursuing me since college and this time when he was here for a visit, I realized I did not have any good reasons for keeping him at a distance. We are friends, we care for each other, our friendship has stood the test of time and a more intimate connection would be a good thing for both of us. We shared a night together, which is something I hadn't done in a very long time. I realized intimate connections were missing in my life and that the gaping hole I just realized was there needed to be filled. Unfortunately, this particular friend lives out of state and I was not able to see him often. I decided that I needed to seek out more connection in my life and make it happen. I made a decision to get out into life and look for those connections I was missing.

I took up online dating and I found Meetup online which helps people find like-minded friends. As I searched through Meetup for likely groups to join, I came across Utah Cuddle Club. I was very excited. I had actually heard about Cuddle Party maybe five years before that, but at the time I looked it up, there were no Cuddle Parties in Utah.

About the same time I looked up Cuddle Party back then, someone else in Utah also looked into it. The difference was, she decided to do something about it and became the first facilitator in Utah, while I closed the web page and thought - what a shame, I would have really liked to go to a Cuddle Party. She took action and made it happen and I will forever be indebted to her for creating the opportunity for me to find Cuddle Party. Her actions have influenced my life profoundly and I will always be grateful.

I went to my first Cuddle Party in late 2014. Everyone there was so welcoming and accepting. It was a completely relaxing evening. I had some wonderful Quality Time conversations and even got to know a couple of new friends I was comfortable sharing some touch with. I left that evening in a state of oxytocin bliss. If you have never experienced that connection high you get after your first Cuddle Party, it is difficult to explain how floaty and relaxed you feel. Your face won't stop

smiling. I would have gone to Cuddle Party every other day if I could have made that happen. It was like dying of thirst and finding an oasis in the desert when I didn't even realize I was thirsty or that dying in the desert of thirst was not normal.

From the evening of my first event, I felt fully invested in the ideas and healthy connection culture which Cuddle Party promotes. I completed the facilitator training less than 6 months after that first party so I could become part of the movement to help people find healthy connections. The more I facilitated connections and healthy communication between people, the more I felt called to this work.

I love helping you to get comfortable giving your true answer, communicate your boundaries confidently, and find healthy, relaxing, wanted connections with other people.

I do think it is important to act out of healthy self-interest, so I also host Cuddle Parties for me. Self-care is not selfish. I need connection too and I love sharing quality time in conversation, sharing touch, and cuddling. I have met so many good people over the last few years that have become important parts of my life. We have spent a lot of good times enjoying each other's company and I have

gained many moments of support and care from the connections I've made through Cuddle Party. Cuddly, open-minded people are the kind of people I want to have in my life.

After facilitating Cuddle Parties for a year, I found Cuddlist which was founded by other Cuddle Party facilitators. Cuddlist trains professional cuddlers using the same conceptual foundation as Cuddle Party. I decided to become a professional cuddler and offer to hold safe space for clients on a one-on-one basis. I have had many people come to me at Cuddle Parties asking to talk and needing personal attention, so I already had experience coaching and cuddling one on one. I know this is something people need, and it is something I am very good at and enjoy doing.

When I had my review session with another professional cuddler acting as my client, I felt very validated in this work. She had been doing this for a long time, but she told me my service to her really helped her to relax and reminded her why we do this. Often we get in care-taker mode and forget that we also need safe space for release as well as offering it to others. It showed me how much all people need connection. We all need to have a safe place to be witnessed without judgement and just be accepted for who we are. This is what professional cuddlers do, along with offering healthy touch. Anyone who agrees to our code

of ethics and acts with respect will be accepted in the cuddle community.

Growing up in a conservative family and living in conservative Utah for the last 25+ years, I have felt a need to hide, or at least, not broadcast, those parts of me which don't fit that perceived mold. I was constantly censoring myself in conversation and in my posts on Facebook. I felt unable to share my true thoughts and feelings as I dealt with mid-forties hormones, an increased need for touch and connection, a high sex drive and explored sexual freedom. Even now as I write this, I am struggling with how much to tell you because I don't want to scare anyone away from the message by getting you bogged down in the details of my story.

I have watched and helped several close friends come to terms with homosexuality, divorce or disillusionment with their religion. These struggles are real. It is so hard to realize that what you have been taught your whole life is not consistent with who you actually are. Things we took for granted because 'everyone knows' or everyone tells you the same thing are causing a schism for you mentally and bringing shame to you because you cannot reconcile your thoughts and feelings with the way people tell you that you 'should' be thinking and feeling. You need to find new people. It is as simple as that.

I know my decision to become sexually active and pursue ethical non-monogamy as a single woman at the age of 41 is not as earth shaking as the decisions some of you have to make for yourselves. But it was, (and sometimes still is) a struggle for me in a morally conservative environment. It is my biggest authenticity struggle and my story is the only story I have to tell.

The more I allowed my self-expression to be free, the more I found people who said “me too, I thought I was the only one”. There has been very little actual fall-out for me, even though I was very worried about how I would be perceived.

I don't worry as much these days about how people perceive me because I promote cuddling and I admit that I like sex. They can take or leave me. I am not trying to promote my solutions, I am trying to promote finding your own solutions through education and being comfortable with your own decisions and boundaries. If they don't approve of my choices, they are not my people and I release them to find their own people who choose to follow similar ways of thinking. That's all. I have received much more positive reception and support from those who are in similar circumstances than any negative reactions.

I am just a person like you, searching for meaningful connections, trying to find out who I really am and what I really want.

I want to share what I have learned with you.

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

...

*Will you speak before I am gone? Will you
prove already too late?*

...

*The spotted hawk swoops by and
accuses me, he complains of my gab and
my loitering.*

*I too am not a bit tamed, I too am
untranslatable,*

***I sound my barbaric yawp over the
roofs of the world.***

...

*I depart as air, I shake my white locks at
the runaway sun, I effuse my flesh in
eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.*

...

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from
the grass I love,*

*If you want me again look for me under
your boot-soles.*

...

*Failing to fetch me at first keep
encouraged,*

*Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.*

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" from Leaves
of Grass (: Norton, 1973)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>

BREATHE Again

Smile

Breathe in deeply
Close your eyes
Breathe out
Smile again

Repeat

You are here because you are searching
for something.

Please know that nothing I have said in
this book is intended to give you the
impression that you are flawed or lacking.

There will always be room for
improvement in all of us, but at the same
time, we are all worthy of love right at this
moment.

Thank you for taking the time to work on
you.

Breathe again.
We can do this together.
One step at a time.

Looking for more?

Join our True Crew Authenticity FaceBook Group and work on your authenticity with other people who are also on the same journey. I am active on this page. If you want to send me questions about the book, this is the best forum.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/TrueCrewAuthenticity/>

Check my website at <http://MaryCuddler.com> for services and events I currently offer.