

# THE POWER TO CHOOSE

By Robbie Swale

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## A note on this edition

I was at a workshop with the psychologist and author Robert Holden in 2019. He led a short meditation, inviting us to allow – among other things – a word to emerge. The word that emerged for me was ‘trust’. The word felt deep and important for me in that moment; I *knew* it was *right*.

The following section of the workshop, that afternoon, was on the enneagram, a map of personality traits which Holden brought to life with wisdom and humour. I often struggle with personality tests, finding myself landing in the middle with no clear results. This has happened to me when I have taken enneagram tests, although I usually come out marginally a ‘Type 6’. Holden began talking through the different enneagram types and then, having finished talking about Type 5, flicked the slide to reveal, for Type 6, in big letters: The Path of Trust. I laughed aloud. The word definitely felt right.

As I explored the way this word might support me in my life, this book was in my mind. Unfinished despite having been worked on for years. Unfinished despite my having promised myself I would get it done. But: trust. Trust, for example, that when it did finally come out, that timing would be perfect.

I didn’t get it done last year, either, as I had promised not just myself but also my mailing list subscribers (hoping this would be what made sure it finally got finished). And then, last week, I was sitting, in the middle of the coronavirus outbreak, thinking: what can I do? How can I help?

I had had a few other ideas (you can read more about them at [www.robbieswalecoaching.com](http://www.robbieswalecoaching.com)) including gifting some coaching to those in need and several pieces of writing. And I had spent a number of moments in the previous few weeks, as the seriousness of the outbreak became clearer and clearer, being grateful for all the work I had done on myself which enabled me to deal far better with the uncertainty and chaos of the outbreak than I would have done years ago.

And then, while listening to an interview with Brené Brown (more on her in Chapter Two) on the Tim Ferriss Show, I had an insight: I could share this book. Not all of it, but some of it. The most important part. The part which is about how and why I think I am dealing far better with the uncertainty and complexity of the current situation than I would have years ago. This part, in fact, is almost ready. And that’s what you have here.

It’s not perfect – I’m sure you’ll find the odd typo and confusing phrasing – so please forgive me that, and may not be well-formatted if you are reading on a Kindle or similar. And it’s not complete: Parts Two and Three include far more context about taking the ideas from Part One out into the world, so also please forgive the references to parts of the book I haven’t shared yet. And it’s not finished: when this book is finally complete, there will be changes to these sections, some of which I already know about, and some of which I’m sure I don’t.

When I had the thought last week to share this writing, I thought back to that workshop with Robert Holden, and that word: trust. I had worried that the time for this book would pass, that my delaying publishing or sharing it would make it less relevant. But I should have trusted. Just as I wanted to share something that might help people in these strange times, I have something, ready and here. Because, after all, this is a book about the complexity of the modern world and about being our most skilful selves so that we can cope with uncertainty. And have there ever been more multifaceted, complex and uncertain times than these?

Robbie Swale

March 2020

## About the Author

Robbie Swale is a leadership coach, writer and student of the craft of creating positive change in our lives.

Robbie trained as a coach with The Coaching School in London and has provided coaching, training and facilitation for, among others, Swiss Re, 64 Million Artists, BetterUp (and through BetterUp several of the most forward-thinking companies in the world) and The University of Edinburgh.

In his coaching practice, he works one-on-one with leaders and entrepreneurs who want to change the world. He runs two group coaching programmes: *The Genius Accelerator*, for leaders and entrepreneurs who want to spend more time in their Zone of Genius; and *The Coach's Journey*, for coaches who want to grow their business and increase their impact with their clients.

As a serial learner, Robbie makes it part of his work to spend time in the presence of some of the leading thinkers in the world. As part of that mission he has attended training, talks and workshops with, among others: Robert Holden, Rich Litvin, Jennifer Garvey Berger, Jordan Peterson, Loch Kelly, Steven Pinker, Karen Kimsey-House, John Gray, Brett Weinstein, Heather Heying, Katie Hendricks, Jim Dethmer, Jamie Smart, Jordan Hall, Michael Neill, Brené Brown and Jonathan Haidt. Taking the ideas of these people and more, applying them to his life and then sharing himself, deeply and with love, is Robbie's Zone of Genius.

Prior to working as a coach, Robbie worked across the public, private and charity sectors in the UK. This included leadership roles as a director of a higher education organisation in his first job after leaving university and as the senior member of staff in several arts organisations. His move into training, leadership and career development began with the Royal Opera House and the internationally renowned Clore Leadership Programme. He has a bachelor's degree in Mathematics.

You can read more about his work – and many of his articles – at [www.robbieswalecoaching.com](http://www.robbieswalecoaching.com). His popular 12-minute blog – with each article written in just 12 minutes – is available on LinkedIn at [www.linkedin.com/in/robbieswale](http://www.linkedin.com/in/robbieswale). His second book, a compendium of that blog called *I Wrote This Book In 12 Minutes* and put together to support you to create extraordinary things in your life, will be published in 2020. He is the host of The Coach's Journey Podcast: <https://www.thecoachsjourney.com/>

## Praise

*'Robbie will push you as far as you are willing to go and encourage you into places you didn't know existed – go with it: you can only end up somewhere more truthful than before!'*

— Alice Mayor, Founder, We Built This City

*'Robbie has helped me to change the way I think about my business, from one of worry and scarcity, to one of possibility and abundance; the anxieties of first-time entrepreneurship have been replaced by joy and hopeful anticipation.'*

— Faisal Sheikh, Managing Director, Monmouth Capital

*'Working with Robbie ... has had a transformational impact on my career direction and ambition.'*

— Charlotte Bennett, Co-Artistic Director, Paines Plough

*'My business has gone from strength to strength, as well as areas of my personal life, and I really think that I wouldn't be in the confident, successful place that I am now if it wasn't for Robbie.'*

—Kate Rees, Founder, Kate Rees Coaching

## A Note on Client Stories

Confidentiality is very important in my work as a coach. In this book, when I tell a story about a client, details have been changed to preserve that confidentiality. Sometimes several clients' experiences have been amalgamated or, if the story felt specific to someone in particular, I have asked permission from that client and they have kindly given it. In each case, I hope the spirit of the experience and the insights available in it have been maintained.

## Introduction

I didn't mean to write a book. It first came into my mind when Joel Monk, my coach at the time, asked me what I would be excited to share with him if we met up several months later. It turned out, somewhat as a surprise to me, that I would be excited to share that I had written a book. I hadn't thought about it seriously before that moment and I'm not sure where it came from, but as we discussed it further the topic of what became this book emerged.

Several years before that, I had faced what the psychologist and author Robert Holden calls an 'involuntary stop'. The world moves so fast these days that many of us fail to notice what is happening to us, running along at breakneck pace without ever really checking if we want to be going in that direction in the first place. If we are lucky, or wise, we sometimes make a voluntary stop, slowing down and taking perspective. For many of us, however, it takes some form of adversity to stop us in our tracks. For me, it was the end of a relationship which had lasted since I was at university: at the time almost my whole adult life. The break-up seemed to come from nowhere and it disrupted my past, present and future. The gift of it – which, once the pain slowly died down, I could begin to see – was that I started to look at things differently.

In particular, after that involuntary stop I began to crave to understand myself and the world on a deeper level and, over the years that followed, the new ways I found of looking at the world seemed to make all the difference across my life. The topic of the book, which emerged through my conversation with Joel, was to find out: is this new way of looking at the world valid?

The ideas in this book have left me happier and more fulfilled than at any previous point in my life. I have increased the impact I make through my work and enjoy it more than ever before; I have a better and more fulfilling romantic relationship; I engage with the political world with less anxiety; I am more courageous and more skilful across my life. I feel better about myself – and life as a whole – more of the time.<sup>1</sup>

This shift has been transformational for me and that's what this book is about: it's about sharing this way of looking at the world with you.

## Giving Your Gifts

When I was in my early 20s, I wanted to be an actor. I was probably good enough, too. One year, I *almost* got into four of the United Kingdom's top five drama schools. I was in final rounds, on shortlists, on reserve lists. I didn't get a place, though, and as I reflected over the next year, I realised that a career as an actor may not have fulfilled me.

Strangely, this realisation came to me when I first watched *The West Wing*, one of my all-time favourite TV shows, following the fictional President Bartlet and his senior staff. I say 'strangely' because up until that point in my life, it was seeing amazing pieces of television, film or theatre which inspired me most towards a career as an actor. But as I watched *The West Wing* I realised something different: yes, taking part in a piece of art as influential as that would be an amazing way to make an impact on the world, but not as amazing as working in the *actual* White House. I had more gifts than just my ability to act and, as I discovered the fickle nature of the acting world (remarkably, I didn't get through a single audition as I applied to drama schools the following year) I also realised that to be fulfilled I wanted to make sure I was having as big an

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<sup>1</sup> You will notice here and throughout the book, I speak of the things that have changed for me as 'more than before' or 'less than before' and almost never anything as certain as 'at all'. This is most certainly not a journey that is complete.

impact as I could. Not only might that be in the real world, and not as a character in a show, but I felt that in the real world I would have much more control over using my gifts (my career wouldn't be ruled nearly as much by the whims of a casting director).

I shifted my focus and began a career as a leader in arts and culture. My next two jobs were managing and running arts centres leading teams of staff and volunteers (while briefly thinking of myself as the Yorkshire art scene's answer to Josh Lyman, President Bartlet's bolshy but effective Deputy Chief of Staff).

Then came the break-up and, forced by that shock to stop and look at my life, I saw something about my work. Whilst I was using *more* of my gifts than I might have as an actor, I was tired. Exhausted in fact. At times I found myself anxious and stressed about my work, worrying at weekends, unable to sleep. And somehow I didn't want to end up, down the road, in the arts jobs that had once felt like a dream to me.

I started to see that the contribution I was making in the arts wasn't fulfilling me and I began to be seduced by ideas like the one that I first heard from the Integral Coach Brett Thomas: that there might be a sweet spot where our skills, what we enjoy and the way we contribute to the world all meet. I set off in search of that and, several years later, found myself working as a leadership coach.

That was the first gift of the involuntary stop: it gave me the space and perspective to take action in my life, to choose something different.

But that was only part of the gift. I also realised that part of the reason I was struggling and – particularly – the reason I found myself stressed and anxious was down to the way I looked at the world, the way I thought about it. Not only that, but the way I was responding to the world was hampering my ability to give my gifts. I was wasting time and energy in worry and stress, and when I was like this I couldn't be as creative or decisive or skilful as when I was at my best. I wasn't being effective.

It was here, in shifting my internal experience of the world, that my most impactful work was done. Over the following years I developed a series of ideas which helped me to live life less and less from a place of stress, anxiety and exhaustion, and more and more from a place of possibility. I was able to be more skilful, whatever the world threw at me, and make an even bigger contribution. This was vital, because as I pursued the path of giving my gifts, I faced challenges and crises of confidence and self-belief. If you want to give your gifts, then you will face those challenges too. The ideas that could shift me to more possibility in those moments of struggle were fundamental, and I'll share those ideas with you in Part One of this book.

I then took those ideas and applied them in different parts of my life, in particular my career and my romantic relationship, but also as I interacted with the increasingly polarised modern political world. I'll share what I learnt as I did that in Parts Two and Three.

That, then, is what this book is about: it's about how to create shifts in the outside world and in your internal world, too.

## The Complex World

One of the great pleasures of my work as a coach is to get to spend time in the company of some of the leading thinkers in my field. As I was working on a draft of this book, I took part in a training course on the cutting edge of adult psychological development and coaching. Adult psychological development is, in essence, the process by which we develop our sense of perspective on the world; the stages of different ways of thinking that we go through in our



lives. At the simplest level, as we develop we can see things more clearly and from more and more different angles.

I had up to that point been sceptical of the societal narrative that the world is faster and more complex than ever. I think part of this is because, by the time I entered the world of work, computers were already in existence and smartphones weren't too far behind. For those of an older generation, who remember how different it was before those devices, of course it is clear just how different things are now. I began to see the truth of the challenges of complexity as, in my work with leaders and entrepreneurs, I saw again and again how the technology and pace of the modern world can lead to incredibly complex, high pressure situations, and how beneficial it is to have the voluntary stop of a coaching session to slow down and take stock. Due to the power of modern technology, as more people around the world get connected to the disruptive and innovative powers of the internet, the change will only continue to accelerate.

In her book *Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps: How to Thrive in Complexity*, consultant and researcher Jennifer Garvey Berger, who was on the teaching faculty of the Adult Development course I took part in, unpacks the ways that the human brain falls foul of complexity in the modern world. As I read her book, I realised that many of the lessons in it were also the lessons in this book. Although I hadn't realised it at the time, in the preceding years I had been working through the challenges of being a human, with a brain evolved for simpler times, in a complex world.

Those challenges are many but particularly, perhaps, focus on the ways we get side-tracked by instinct and caught up in simple ways of looking at the world when more complex ones are needed. Indeed, according to Garvey Berger and other developmental psychologists, it is the increasingly complex nature of the world that is calling us all to develop ourselves, to see things from more angles and with greater perspective.

I had seen this with my clients. So many of the things people wanted, the challenges they faced, were almost impossible. How do you get 'clarity' about what a choice would mean in a world where there are more moving parts than at any point in history? How do you develop a plan for the future when uncertainty in everything from the job market to the political landscape seems to be on the rise? How do you manage your time when the technology we use is designed by the cleverest people on the planet specifically to grab and keep our attention?

In the complexity of the modern world, many of the ways humans have traditionally worked through these challenges no longer work: clarity, plans and many techniques for managing our time catch us out as often as they help. What I learned – and what Garvey Berger and others share in their work – is that instead you need to create the conditions for good things to happen. You become more aware of yourself and the world and therefore less likely to become side-tracked. You work to become nimbler and more skilful, both in your own internal experience (the world inside you) and outside yourself as you interact with the world. You become more in tune with what you want, deep down, so that when opportunities arise you can take them (or say 'No' to them, whichever is the right choice for you). You become more responsive and more responsible for yourself. That was the journey that I had been on.

As I realised that the faculty on the adult development training course were speaking about some of the same ideas that I had come to as I wrote this book, I got the answer to the question I had asked with Joel: is this new way of looking at the world valid? Well, according to some of the leading thinkers at the forefront of my field, it was not only valid, it was vital. Not just for me, but for the leaders, entrepreneurs and coaches that I worked with. And not just for them, for all

of us, as we try to survive and then thrive – in ourselves, in our work, in our relationships – in a complex world.

That, too, is what this book is about: it's about how to thrive in all parts of our lives in a world of uncertainty and complexity.

### Make Things Better, and Don't Make Things Worse

In the Hero's Journey – the pattern of story popularized by Joseph Campbell – just as the hero most needs it, she or he receives supernatural aid. In my journey to writing this book, one moment of supernatural aid arrived as I came across the work of futurist and thinker Jordan Hall. In a world of increasing complexity, with high fears that humanity could make itself extinct through weapons or environmental catastrophe, and with political uncertainty seemingly on the increase, what can we do? His answer is straightforward. In essence, we each do our best; that, after all, is all we can do. To do that, you must first understand what makes up the unique mix of skills and gifts that only you have, and then find the place in the world which needs them, bringing to bear the fullest aspect of what you have to offer.

That is the journey I have been on in my own life and it is where my work with clients has become more and more focused. Supporting them to use their strengths and gifts, to find – in the phrase coined by psychotherapist Gay Hendricks – their Zone of Genius.

Then, continues Hall, you must make sure that in each moment you are making the best choice with the highest degree of skilfulness you can. That way you are doing the best you can to contribute using your gifts, but more than that, you are doing the best you can to contribute *skilfully* so that you know (as far as you can) that you are making things better, and not making them worse.

That, too, is what this book is about: it's about how to make sure you are doing the best you can to make the world a better place by giving your gifts and giving them skilfully.

### Who Knows How Long We Have to Steady This Ship?

When I started writing this book, I was worried that if it took a long time to come out (which of course it has) it would become less and less relevant. In the end, it feels like it becomes more relevant by the day.

Institutions that looked like they would last forever a few years ago no longer look so permanent. The European Union, the main political parties in both the United Kingdom and the United States, even democracy itself, all seem to have uncertain futures. There seems to be a crisis of trust in institutions, with low trust for politics, the media and academia. Social media is having strange effects on our mental health, our attention spans and the way we consume news. Each of these problems and more not only seem enormous but also incredibly complex.

In order to meet these challenges, we need people who can use their gifts to make things better. We need skilful and responsive leaders: in politics and business and charities, yes, but also in homes, schools and workplaces across the world. It is down to each of us to lead in our lives, to be as responsive and skilful as we can and to support others to do the same. We are all on this ship together; who knows how long we have to steady it?

That, perhaps above all, is what this book is about.

It is about how to live more as what I call the **Higher Self**. Others use different words for this: some call it 'centred'; Jordan Hall calls it 'sovereign'. It is the state you are in when you are responding from the wisest and most skilful place in yourself, when you are responding with

grace, elegance and strength to whatever life throws at you. It is a place of presence, of flow and of possibility.

There are times when life feels different to me, times when feelings of grace, elegance, strength and possibility make me feel like a different person. I behave differently and respond differently: I am clearer and braver and more loving. It is the noblest, wisest part of me; the kind of person I would like others to see me as; the kind of person I am proud to be. That is what it means to be living as my Higher Self.

In order to live more and more as our Higher Selves, we have to understand what I will call the **Deeper Self**. One of the things which I will explore over the course of this book is how our behaviour is often governed by unconscious parts of us. That is, by instincts that we aren't even aware of but that lead us to behave in certain ways. A key part of the journey to spending more time as our Higher Selves is to become increasingly aware of when our instincts are at play, increasingly aware of our Deeper Selves. In our Deeper Selves are the values at our core, the things which matter most to us. And, in our Deeper Selves are the evolutionary instincts from our ancestors and the safety mechanisms and patterns we learned as children and adolescents. At times in our history or childhood these things kept us safe, but each are sometimes short-circuited in the complex adult world.

As we grow to know our Deeper Selves, we become more aware of our values and our patterns. With greater awareness, we are no longer ruled by them: we can notice them, step outside them and act from a place of perspective. In a complex world, our instincts can swiftly sweep us along, triggering us into behaviours and reactions before we know what is happening. This, often, is where we respond from the baser parts of ourselves, where we do the things we regret, where we act without skill and make things worse in our work, our relationships or the world.

Each time I or my clients look inside ourselves with curiosity, we learn something new. With greater knowledge of ourselves we become bigger, more grounded and more in control of our lives and our responses. Whether we learn something good or not so good about ourselves, understanding those things – understanding our Deeper Selves – makes us more rooted in who we are and gives us more or swifter access to our Higher Selves.

That is what this book is about: understanding our Deeper Selves and living more and more as our Higher Selves.

### Perspectives and Possibility

Throughout this book, you will find me inviting you into new perspectives on everything from the way you think, to the way you relate to others, to the way you relate to parts of yourself. Each time, you will have the opportunity to choose. First, to choose whether to engage with the new perspectives I am inviting you into. Then, if you come with me on the journey into seeing new perspectives you may be blessed with one of the most exciting feelings I know, one which feels inextricably linked to the idea of the Higher Self. I refer to this feeling as **possibility** and I wish you many, many moments of it over the following chapters.

It is – for many of us – a physical feeling, almost an emotion. It is a feeling of creativity, of freedom, of choice.

Many of us spend much of our time in a space opposite to possibility: a space of scarcity. The human condition of scarcity is – for the most part – an outdated concept, a gift from evolution for times when we had to fight tooth and nail for survival. In scarcity, we are focused on winning or losing, on others failing so we can succeed, on what we *don't* have. From here, our evolutionary or childhood instincts can take over and it is hard to be our skilful, noble Higher

Self. The complexity of the modern world takes us into scarcity far more than is helpful. It is an unpleasant, stressful place to be. The ideas of this book, individually and combined, are designed to give you the space and perspectives to shift from scarcity to the possibility of our Higher Selves.

That is what this book is about.

### A Starting Point

This book is a starting point. It may be, I hope, a voluntary stop for some of you. An opportunity for you to take these ideas and create change in your life. I hope, too, that you will make that a change for the better by becoming more your noble, wise Higher Self. I hope you make those changes for yourself, for your loved ones and for the world. I hope you will step up, because the world needs you to: we need more nimble, noble people acting with elegance and grace across all parts of our societies.

We need you at your best. We need you at your most skilful and wise.

My journey to live increasingly as my Higher Self is far from finished. But what pleases me – and this is true for all the principles in this book – is to be moving onwards in the direction that I believe is right, towards that Higher Self. I am my Higher Self more this year than I was last year, and far more than I was before that involuntary stop. I am doing better today than I did yesterday and the day before and the day before that, and that is what matters.

No one knows which one of us will change or save the world. The chances are – in a world as large and complex as ours – that it will be no single person. It will be all of us together. Taking brave and heroic decisions in organisations, in schools, in workplaces and in homes across the world. Being better today than we were yesterday and the day before that.

To change the world together, to steady the ship we are all on, we need you to be the best and most skilful that you can. And we need you now.

## How To Use This Book

I work as a coach and – as I sometimes say when explaining what working as a coach means – coaching isn't really coaching unless there is some action at the end of it. That's true for this book, too. I don't mind how you take action, but I mind that you do take action. If you aren't going to create change in your life or the world, why are you reading this book in the first place?

Those changes can be large or they can be small; they can be in the outside world or they can be focused on changing the way you think. But make sure they happen.

## Chapter Summaries

Each part of the book contains numerous ideas and insights that I have discovered and which I believe you could apply in your life, just as I have applied them in mine. You will find a summary at the end of each chapter that you can use as a quick reference guide. Each summary contains the key ideas of that chapter and some of the key exercises or practices, often in the form of questions or thought experiments. Also in the summaries are further reading or other ways to learn more about things that I may have mentioned as I went along.

## Structure

You know far more about how you learn than I do, so it's up to you to choose how you read this book. I was a 'good little boy' and have a fear of missing out and a desire to eke every little bit of learning out of what I read, so I tend to read books from start to finish. That is how this book was written and intended, with each part building on the last. But you may be different, and if that's the case feel free to skip liberally or read it out of order.

**Part One** contains the three key ideas of this book: the building blocks that it is built on. They are ideas which can help you live more and more as your Higher Self in all parts of your life. I am by no means perfect, but these three ideas have been incredibly powerful for me in allowing me to give my gifts and act more frequently as my Higher Self. In **Chapter One**, I unpack the idea that how we see the world isn't quite as true as we think it is; how just as we gradually understand that we can affect the outside world by the actions we take in it, so we can also change how we *experience* the world by changing the thoughts we think and the assumptions we make. There are far more choices available to you than you think, and **you can choose**. The corollaries to this are many and varied and make up the rest of the book. They include our relationships and our work, but as I share in Chapter One, I have even managed to relieve some symptoms of illness which I thought were physical by making a different internal choice.

In **Chapter Two**, I share one of the most profound areas in which we can choose, one which can create rapid shifts to our Higher Selves. This is in our relationships with other people, where one question – one assumption – even just as a provocation to yourself, can open up possibilities in relationships with friends, family, colleagues and strangers that didn't seem to be there before. That assumption is ***What If Everyone is Doing Their Best?*** I will share how this has changed relationships in my life and in clients' lives, in retrospect and in the moment, throughout the chapter and the rest of the book.

In **Chapter Three**, I ask you to put your attention and curiosity on yourself. In order to learn more about our Deeper Selves and free ourselves from the patterns inside, we need to pay attention to when we have strong emotional and physical reactions that take us away from our Higher Selves, feelings I will call **contractions**. Most of us don't want to have these contractions, which often bring feelings of anxiety, stress and fear, and lead us to act as anything but our Higher Selves. Instead, we can learn to celebrate the contractions and use them as an opportunity to learn about a part of ourselves we haven't yet understood. We need the key idea

of Chapter Three to do this: ***curiosity is the antidote to contraction***. Using curiosity to work through these unpleasant and sometimes frightening moments of contraction gives us more perspective on ourselves allows us to become more resilient to those times in future. With that resilience, we will find ourselves contracting less and bouncing back more swiftly.

Each of these three ideas is a practice. Whilst each can make a difference in a moment, most of us need to practise them over and over again, reminding ourselves and recommitting to them when we realise we have slipped. We may need help from our family, friends, spouse or coach to do this.

You can choose which parts of the book to read, based on which sections you think will have the most power for you. I hope the ideas contained within have as much impact for you as they have had for me.

## Part One

## Chapter One – You Can Choose

When I was a child, I passed many hours engrossed in Choose Your Own Adventure books. In this series, you read a part of the story and then at the bottom of each section you have a choice about where the story goes.

*You come to the end of the corridor. To the left there is a door; to the right there is a flight of stairs, going up.*

*If you want to go through the door, turn to page 43.*

*If you want to go up the stairs, turn to page 56.*

In a normal novel, we get the beauty of learning about how someone else works, reading the story told through their eyes. Here, it's a different type of involvement: an active involvement where you can affect the outcome.

This is the first part of our journey together: just like in those books, you need to understand that you can take an active role in changing the story of your life. ***You can choose.***

That's the key idea of this chapter. *You can choose* your own adventure, no matter how difficult and hopeless things may seem in some moments.

If we are lucky, this belief that we can affect the story of our lives is part of our upbringing and of our early experience of life: the caring parents, the great teachers, the older siblings give us ideas like 'you can do this', 'you can belong here', 'you can work to improve the situation you find yourself in', '*you can choose*'. It isn't always the case: for reasons ranging from the views our parents hold about themselves or the world, to the environments we grow up in, to random twists of fate, to the stories we or society tells about 'people like us', we can find ourselves believing something different. This might be: 'There is a circumstance in my life I can't change, that I can't affect in any way,' or 'There's *no way* for us, or our lives or society, to be different.' Whether these beliefs appear deliberately or unconsciously, through individuals or societies, they are insidious. That's why this work is important, why the stories that each of us tells ourselves about our lives is important: we must offer an alternative to the story that we can't effect change in our lives. It is in those ways that the work of parents, teachers, social workers, sports coaches and so many more is heroic: because when we are young and impressionable, stories are created for us, through our life experience. Those around us when we are young have the power to help us create a story where we *can* create change in any part of our lives.

Whether or not the story that *we can choose* is planted by heroic adults around us as we grow up, as time goes on (apart, perhaps, from some very unlucky ones among us) we gradually find evidence that we *can* affect our life. We see the consequences of our actions; we see we have an impact on what happens to us. Then, if we are lucky, if we do the right work, we begin to shift out of the sense of 'life happening to us' and move to a story where *we can choose*. Almost always, as we shift out of scarcity and into a story where we are in control, our Higher Selves – the person we are on our best days, when we are at our most skilful, responsive and wise – becomes more available to us. This is a powerful shift to go through and one I have worked on regularly with my coaching clients: taking people from seeing important parts of their world as simply happening to them, to showing them that they can create what they want to create. They can be a creator and not a victim: of their stories, their circumstances, their world.



Helping people see and then hold onto this understanding – the agency of the creator – has within it the power to affect so many of the challenges we, as individuals and societies, face in the modern world. So much of the disquiet, the discontent, the anger and the disappointment we experience in life comes from a sense that we can't affect the story, from a lack of hope when we feel as though life is outside our realm of influence. This lack of agency and freedom leaves us with a sense of being trapped: unable to express the things we want to express through our actions in the world. A sense of being stuck: unable to move ourselves, unable to change things, doomed to stay exactly here forever. As Frank Turner beautifully said in his song, *The Way I Tend To Be*, 'It turns out hell will not be found within the fires below, but in making do and muddling through when you've nowhere else to go.'

In the aftermath of the break-up I mentioned in the introduction – around the same time as *The Way I Tend To Be* was released – I was making do and muddling through. I was stuck in a place of scarcity and couldn't see the way forward. Whole parts of my life had been taken out of my control by one of the people I trusted and cared about most in the world. I felt lost and adrift and alone. I felt hopeless.

What shifted – what showed me that there *was* somewhere else to go – was finding new perspectives on what had happened. And in those perspectives and the insights I uncovered was a sense of 'I can change this'. That next time it could be different. Then, things that had looked unchangeable – my failure in the relationship, with a series of conclusions I had taken from it about my worth in the world, about my friends, about my failures as a person and as a man – began to appear as something less fixed. Things were within my reach and my capacity to change: maybe I can do things now that I hadn't been able to do before; maybe I can find a place where my worth can be greater; maybe next time, I can create a better relationship. When something that previously looked completely fixed suddenly seems changeable, then there is possibility and the world becomes a very different place to live in.

And in this you can see how choosing your own adventure is affected not just by what we do, but by what we think. Nothing about what had happened out in the world had changed, but a series of insights changed the way I saw things and the way I saw myself. Those insights, which I will share in this and the following chapters, enabled me to see other possibilities for my future. But this only took me so far. I spent most of my life knowing, at least intellectually, that I could take action and from that create change in the outside world, even though it wasn't always easy. Yet despite knowing that, I still found myself regularly in judgment, in fear and in a place of lack. In scarcity. I knew I could change my job – I was able to effect change there – but changing it didn't always make me happy. I knew I could effect change in my organisation, in my relationship and in the outside world: in my community and even, if I wanted to, on a bigger scale. But sometimes that didn't feel meaningful, or good, or fast enough. Or the changes didn't work out how I'd imagined. Doing more or different things in the outside world can make a world of difference to us, but it isn't everything. Why, for example, do we see people achieving their 'dreams', only to end up unhappy? Making things happen, but still angrier than they want to be? Hugely successful in one part of their life, but not in others? Why are some people able to face challenges and emerge stronger, while others slip and stumble in a downward spiral?

The first possibility that I want to open up to you here is that seeing things differently can help you effect change in the outside world. It did this for me: seeing new perspectives – seeing ways I could change things – took me from a place of hopeless stasis back into action in the world. It empowered me to believe that in my next relationship things could be different, and to believe that I *could* find work that was deeply fulfilling for me. Second, and here's the big bit: sometimes

choosing a different adventure inside your mind, in the way you think or the way you see the world, can create the change you are searching for *in itself*. Right here, right now.

One of my clients once spoke to me about her experience of this<sup>2</sup>. Looking to create more autonomy in her life, she no longer wanted to feel trapped and out of control as a result of the pointless meetings she ‘had to go to’. In some cases, she was able to create change in the outside world: to literally stop going to the meetings, sometimes quite quickly and sometimes by making decisions over a number of months to relinquish roles or to decide only to attend regular meetings some of the time. But what she was able to do *straight away* was to *feel differently in the meetings she was going to*. One way of doing this was to remind herself of why she was *choosing* to go to that meeting. In doing that – by reminding herself of the autonomy and control she had, or that boring as the meeting was, it was progressing her towards her overarching goals – she was able *instantly* to feel the agency she had in the situation. That didn’t always make the meetings exciting, but it did enable her to be more present in each of those meetings and act, in each of them, more from her Higher Self.

### It’s All Invented

As I leaned into this idea that *I can choose*, I came to be able to see more and more these opportunities to change things in the moment even without the outside world changing. Key to this was *The Art of Possibility*, a book by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander. The book, based on Ros Zander’s work as a family therapist and Ben Zander’s experience as a conductor and music teacher, is a beautifully written and deeply touching set of practices designed to help us live, more, in possibility. It teaches, in many ways, the principle of this chapter: that *you can choose* to live in a place of possibility, not of scarcity or measurement. *The Art of Possibility* was where I first began to see what a beautiful word ‘possibility’ is for describing a feeling I recognised from my best moments and which I now think of as a fundamental part of living as my Higher Self.

The Zanders aren’t the only thinkers to have shared the idea that *we can choose* – and I’ll share some others in this chapter and beyond – but the first practice in *The Art of Possibility* is a beautiful one for demonstrating the sense of what might be possible for us in our internal world. This first practice in the book is: ‘It’s All Invented’. The core of that practice is, essentially, to ask ourselves: what if everything we see in the world is invented? If it is, shouldn’t we invent some things that are helpful to us?

This may sound farfetched, but as neuroscience becomes more and more advanced, we are able to see just how much our brain creates for us, showing us not ‘actually’ what is happening in the world, but an approximation of it. An example of this is in our peripheral vision, which experiments show is a product of approximation on the part of our mind – filling in gaps and making assumptions – rather than showing us what is actually there. It shouldn’t come as a surprise that we don’t see *everything*. Broadly we are aware, when we think about it, that there are parts of the animal kingdom with superior senses to us. We know that dogs can smell things that humans can’t, that bats can hear things that humans can’t. We don’t seem to remember this with what we see, however, so it is important to note that there are also creatures that can see ‘more’ than we can. Not just in terms of distance or clarity, but literally what they see. Bees, apparently, can make out ultraviolet patterns on flowers; owls (and many other nocturnal

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<sup>2</sup> As a reminder, when I tell a story about a client in this book, details have been changed to preserve the confidentiality of the client – sometimes several clients experiences have been amalgamated – or I have asked permission from the client and they have kindly given it. In each case, this is done to maintain the spirit of the experience whilst preserving the vital confidentiality in my work.

creatures) can see far better than we can in the dark. So if there are things which other creatures can see which we can't, and our brain is only giving us an approximation of what is out there anyway, it seems clear that what we see isn't 'reality'. It is, to a greater or lesser extent, invented.

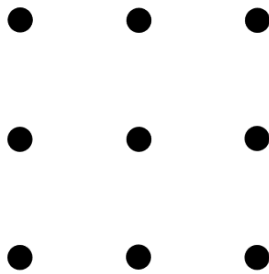


Figure 1: This is the 'nine dots' puzzle: join all nine dots using four straight lines or fewer, without lifting the pen and without tracing the same line more than once.

This idea of 'It's All Invented' gets even more visible when our assumptions start to play tricks on us. *The Art of Possibility* memorably reminds its readers of a famous puzzle (Figure 1): participants are shown a square with nine dots (three rows of three) and asked to 'join all nine dots using four straight lines or fewer, without lifting the pen and without tracing the same line more than once.'. (Try it, if you like, before reading further.)

Almost everyone who tries the puzzle struggles with this, because they assume an extra rule without even noticing they do it. They add in, at the end of the task, the words 'without using the space outside the dots'. This added assumption comes because our eyes show us not simply 'nine dots' but 'a square'. We then assume instantly that the edge of the puzzle is the edge of the square. This happens without us noticing and with this added assumption the puzzle becomes impossible. Remove the assumption – which, again, we can note was invented by us without our even thinking – and the puzzle becomes suddenly *possible*<sup>3</sup>. This also happens to us in optical illusions, where a simple change of perspective can show us something completely different. In one well-known optical illusion, once we have seen both possibilities, *we can choose* that the picture is an older woman, or *we can choose* that the picture is a younger woman (see Figure 2).

This is happening to you all the time. Your mind is inventing assumptions which might be making the puzzle of your life impossible to solve. It is happening across your life: from what you literally see through your eyes, to your interactions with people every day, to how you view yourself, to your relationships, to the worlds of work and politics. What if, instead, you are able to see the multiple possibilities available and invent, as the Zanders suggest, something which actually helps you? What if *you can choose*?

One of my favourite moments of the 'It's All Invented' practice in *The Art of Possibility* comes from a later chapter. Ben Zander is teaching a class about leadership to students in a prestigious music school in Boston; he realises that to help the students to think freely and creatively it's important they aren't trapped into competing with others due to their worries about their grades in the class. But it's also important that they attend the class amidst a lot of pressure to get good grades, so he can't simply remove the grading system altogether. To make it worth their while, he guarantees them an A for the course as long as they write to him explaining why they deserve an A and then come to every class in the year. This, it turns out, allows them to think more freely and creatively: from a place of possibility. But what demonstrates how 'it's all invented' is when one of the students shares what has shifted for him. In his former school in Taiwan, he explains, he was ranked number 68 out of 70 students. 'I come to Boston and Mr Zander says I am an A. Very confusing. I walk about, three weeks, very



Figure 2: Is it an old woman or a young woman? Once you have seen both, you can choose which perspective to take.

<sup>3</sup> You can find a solution in the Chapter One Summary.

confused. I am number 68, but Mr Zander says I am an A student... I am Number 68, but Mr Zander says I am an A. One day I discover I am much happier A than Number 68. So I decide I am an A.'

Before reading that book, I would have thought that one of these was more real: he was the 68<sup>th</sup> best in the class. The A just for 'writing a letter and showing up' isn't real, that's just a music teacher playing around. But the book showed me another possibility: 68/70 based on what? Based, simply, on a convention: a mutually-invented story that it is useful to rank students based on their ability, measured by assessment. The school (or rather another school, a long time ago) has invented it and it affects how the student is, how happy he is, the work he does, how he engages and learns, and who knows what else? Ben Zander recognises that in this situation, the way it is affecting him *isn't helpful* and so invents another way to grade the class, and the effect on the student is marked. The student then beautifully chooses the assumption that actually helps him: that if he writes the letter and comes to the class, he is an A student in that class and can think of himself as that. He realises he can decide. *He can choose.*

You can probably imagine what it is like to be 68/70. To know that you are almost at the bottom of the pile. You can probably imagine the pressure of a prestigious school and the sense that you are failing. This can be useful: it can make you resolve to lift yourself up the list (I'll touch more on the positive sides of competition in Chapter Four). Sometimes, however, the scarcity of competition stops us from seeing what is important, stops us from thinking clearly, stops us from doing our best work, stops us from enjoying life. In this particular case, 68/70 wasn't even the rank of the student in *that* school, it was his rank from his previous school being carried by the student as a definition of himself as a person. At the very least, it sounds like it was stopping him enjoying his education in Boston. At the worst it may well have been hindering his creativity, his decision-making, his thinking, his relationships and his ability to act as his Higher Self. And the shift to 'A' instead may have opened up his potential. And what possibility there is then: suddenly he can look at these two options and decide which is more useful. Which allows him more freedom or creativity? Which spurs him on to perform better? Which makes him happy? The scarcity of 68/70, for most of us, does not allow us the freedom or responsiveness or happiness we desire. But the possibility of the A and the access to our Higher Selves, that's something different.

Try this for yourself. For many of us, being ranked according to our competence doesn't happen much when we are adults, although those in certain professions (salespeople, for example) may find themselves ranked in line with targets. But as children and students it was much more common. Take yourself back to a time you came low down a list which mattered to you, a time when you were disappointed with the result. A time when it hurt. Perhaps it was in a maths test or an art exam, perhaps a time you were picked last or near last in sport, perhaps when you were given the smallest part in a play or performance or didn't even make the cast. Take yourself back to that time, remember being ranked like that, tell the story to yourself: I was 21 out of 22 in football; the best 30 performers were selected and I wasn't so I am 31<sup>st</sup> at best; I came 120<sup>th</sup> out of 140 in my year. Take yourself right back to that moment and see how it feels. See if you can remember how much access you had to your Higher Self. Then, see what would happen if you invented an assumption. Make it one that could be true: if you *had* to give yourself an A for your role in that situation, how and why would you give yourself the A? See what changes for you as you find that reason.

My story at university was a little like the inverse of that of Ben Zander's Taiwanese student. At school, I was the best at maths in the year. I learnt this when we had a standardised test aged 14

and I came top, a couple of points ahead of the next student. Being top of the class was my story about mathematics and it served me well. It spurred me on and filled me with confidence, and I scored very highly at GCSE and A Level. I then went on to study undergraduate mathematics at University College London, at the time one of the top-ranking universities for maths in the UK. Something was different at university. It was painful to find out that I wasn't so talented after all: I struggled with my university work just as much as I struggled with settling into life in one of the biggest cities in the world. I stuck it out and passed the year, limping to mainly Cs and Ds. It was a relief in the end not to fail the year altogether.

Simply passing would not have been acceptable to me of the previous year but I found myself reframing the story. What I can see I did retrospectively was to find the way that I could give myself an A for passing the year: I was a Grade A student because I put in the effort, I didn't stop despite the shock to the system of the different style of learning required and the struggles I had adapting to life away from home. I was a Grade A student for what I did outside of my course.

The key here is that this story was not about making excuses for my failure, it instead allowed me to see clearly what I was gaining from my time as a student. Is my literal grade all that matters at university? If it is, not being an A-grade student is demoralising and painful and the right decision might be to give up, leave and find something else to study. If my literal grade *isn't* all that matters, then I can see the value in how hard I had worked, and the value in the way I had made new friends, made connections and begun to live a fulfilling life outside my studies. This new story was powerful for me: instead of being a literal Grade A student, I can give myself an A for passing despite everything; *I can choose* what is important to me. This meant that by the time I failed two exams in my second year (I don't think I'd *ever* failed an exam before) it didn't faze me: it was clear to me that that wasn't what mattered. I was an A Grade student if I was making a contribution to university life, if I was making friends that might last for decades, if I was growing as a person and having lots of fun. And I did all these things. Not only that, but they were what led to me being elected as co-president of UCL Students' Union, meaning that my first job out of university was as director and trustee of an organisation that turned over £2million pounds and employed hundreds of people. That sounds like pretty good preparation for the world.

So take the time to rewrite your stories of disappointment. At first, test it out: try looking at a situation through your old story and then try finding the ways in which you can give yourself an A: as a footballer who played as well as you could even though you were picked last; as a performer who was vulnerable and courageous to sing in front of people and be judged despite not having the training that some others did; as a student who improved their ranking from 120 one year to 100 the next. Again, the aim is not to give yourself an easy ride: the game is to shift your perspective between different assumptions and see what changes, see if the puzzle of your life becomes easier to solve.

If 'It's All Invented' anyway, isn't that the obvious thing to do?

### The Rational Optimist

Reading *The Rational Optimist* by Matt Ridley was another important step as I learnt that *I can choose*. Whilst *The Art of Possibility* gave me many tools and philosophies to make my shift into a life of more possibility – to shift in any moment towards my Higher Self – Ridley's book gave me something different.



First, it showed me that there is another way of looking at our world. I had learned and been taught in all sorts of ways, including by the bias of news media towards negative stories over their positive equivalents, to look on the modern world as one of depravity and greed, always on the edge of disaster. Throughout *The Rational Optimist*, however, Ridley paints a different picture. In it he tells story after story (with convincing, rational, broad-ranging arguments and plenty of evidence) which opened my mind to alternative viewpoints on topics that had felt closed to me. Ridley's clear and rational approach showed me that it's possible to make different assumptions to the ones I was making on everything: from trade, to economic problems in Africa, to politics, to climate change, guided and backed up each time by evidence and highly qualified thinkers. You don't have to believe all (or indeed any) of the stories he tells, but if you can read them as possible, suddenly it opens up the idea: what if some of these are true?<sup>4</sup> I had thought these issues were fixed, complete and settled. Ridley's storytelling and research opened me up to the possibility that they might not be.

So, if there is a different way of looking at the world which gives such a different story, then how do we know which is right? And what is the impact on you – your life, your happiness – of choosing to believe a different one? Does one leave us in scarcity, and does one open up our Higher Selves?

In one particularly memorable section, Ridley describes a cosy, Dickensian family scene. Children and parents huddled round a fire in their living room, one of them reading, perhaps, and a bird singing outside. It is the kind of scene that makes me smile, reminding me of costume dramas on the BBC, of a simpler time without my phone buzzing or emails unanswered. It sounds idyllic. He then opens up statistically what might have happened to that family: the father likely to live into his 50s only if he is lucky; clothes ridden with lice and the baby to die of smallpox; toothache for the mother and no light other than the fire because candles are too expensive; the bird to be trapped by the family and eaten the next day because they are hungry and food is scarce.

Which is true, then? Is it an idyllic, simpler time, or horrible and painful compared to a modern fireside scene? Perhaps both? Or neither? The question you might want to consider is: as you consider each of those stories, what happens to how you feel about your life in each case? What happens to how you feel about the world?

In another reframing of assumptions in *The Rational Optimist*, I had believed that one of the challenges facing the world was that of overpopulation: that we could not continue to use resources at the rate we do because the world was impossibly crowded and due to get more so. Further, I had believed that we were likely to run out of food and other resources because of this. I learned from Ridley that, although no one knows for sure why, population growth is slowing, and that people have been saying we would run out of resources due to population for centuries without food running out (although with, of course, many people who still do not have enough). To demonstrate just how false my assumption of the planet being impossibly crowded was, it is worth pausing on a rather illustrative story: if we gave every person in the world a house of average size, all of those houses would fit into the area of the US state of Texas. This is so counterintuitive that I have checked the maths on it several times and – to my continuing surprise – it seems to add up<sup>5</sup>. If we all lived in Texas, it wouldn't allow for much space to move

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<sup>4</sup> The seed of doubt which can result from questions like this is vital to shifting from fixed perspectives and opening possibility to ourselves. We will come back to questions like this over the course of this book.

<sup>5</sup> This article from Which? suggests the average size of houses built in the UK since 2010 is 67.8m<sup>2</sup> (<https://www.which.co.uk/news/2018/04/shrinking-homes-the-average-british-house-20-smaller->

around in terms of roads or gardens, though. We'd need two Texas for that, and a bit more space for when the population reaches 9 to 11 billion (where experts say it is likely to peak), but suddenly the planet doesn't seem so small.

And so, what happens when you shift between two different perspectives about the population of the world? You can do this, just like you might switch between the view of the young woman or the old woman in the optical illusion, or from being '68/70' to being 'A'. One point of view is that the world is massively crowded, people are bound to starve and there are just too many people around. Another is that there is an enormous amount of space to fit 7.5 billion people in and we haven't run out of food – despite centuries of worrying about it – because, essentially, we have become far more efficient at creating food from the resources we have available. In fact, we seem to be successfully feeding more and more people every year.<sup>6</sup>

I give the examples above – about the Victorian fireside scene and overpopulation – not to try to persuade you of a particular viewpoint but to show that there are assumptions taking place in each moment, about things as notable as history and the population of the planet. *You can choose* which story to believe and choosing differently can change how you see the world and how you feel about it. It's important that you know this, so *you can choose* what best enables you to create what that you desire.

### Suffering is Never Caused by What is Actually Here Now

I am lucky to have learned from many great teachers. One of those whose work almost instantly shifted the way I thought was Jim Dethmer, co-author of *The 15 Commitments of Conscious Leadership*, who I have been lucky to be on several online workshops with through the coach training organisation Coaches Rising. In one workshop, Dethmer took my fellow students and I through a practice he teaches to all the leaders he works with. It is to set up an app (Mind Jogger for Apple users or RemindMe for those with Android) to ask a certain number of times a day: 'Robbie, what is actually here now?'

Dethmer says there are only three categories of things which can *actually* be here now: sensory experience (including emotion); thoughts; and a sense of a personal self. (In essence, this categorising is, of course, invented and what is present in any moment could be split in other ways. These categories, though, are a particularly useful split for this exercise.) Once you have noticed what is actually here now, you ask yourself questions such as 'Can I accept what is here now?' The reason for these questions lies in ancient wisdom: that psychological suffering is never caused by what is actually here now. Instead, it is caused by *resisting* what is actually here now.

This is a big idea. In Chapter Three I'll come back to this, because this idea introduces the concept that our psychological suffering is not caused by things which happen outside us.

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[than-in-1970s/](#)). Rounding that up to 75m<sup>2</sup> and then multiplying by 7.5 billion (the 2017 population) gives us an area of 562,500km<sup>2</sup>. The area of Texas is 696,200km<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>6</sup>The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, for example, declared that in 2015 there were 200 million fewer undernourished people than there were in 1990, despite the population increasing by more than 2 billion people in that time (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/28/world/united-nations-reports-global-hunger-down-since-1990.html>). Although data seems to show a slight increase in the proportion of undernourished people in the world between 2015 (10.6%) and 2017 (10.9%), total population has increased by so much that there are still more 'nourished' people in 2017 than there were in 2015. Data on this and much more is available on the amazing website [www.ourworldindata.org](http://www.ourworldindata.org). None of this means, of course, that we don't need to continue to do important work to support the poorest people in the world to have enough to eat.

Instead, this idea gives us the possibility that psychological suffering is caused by our response to what happens in our lives. And the key here is that if 'It's All Invented' – if it even *might* be all invented – then you have a choice. You can assume that your pain is caused by things (including people) outside you and your control. In this case, you remain a victim, with your pain or struggle outside of your sphere of influence. Or you can assume that by responding differently you can reduce, remove or change your pain and make your experience of life better. The adventure I am inviting you on is the latter: choose that your pain – the feeling you have of being trapped, the times you don't behave how you wish you had – is caused by *your response* to what is actually there in those moments.

When Jim Dethmer shared this idea in the training course, I had a moment of 'ah, this one again.' Because I'd heard it before, several times in fact, through popular culture or perhaps other books and learning I had done. I had always found it hard to grasp. But this time, I was able to grasp it and hold it with a deeper understanding. That was because earlier that year, with the ideas in this book in my mind, I had decided to test the principle of this chapter – *you can choose* – when I caught a cold.

I am someone who in my life up to that point really hated being ill. It affected me mentally and physically. My frustration at not functioning at 100% was enormous and had been for years. I hated that I couldn't *make the most* of my time because I was ill. I hated that I was *missing out* on things. I hated that I couldn't even enjoy the things I enjoy: a beer, for instance, or reading a fantasy novel. I couldn't enjoy them because beer isn't a sensible thing to drink when you are ill, and I wasn't able to focus enough to lose myself in my book. I started to develop a cold while writing a draft of this chapter, so I decided to try applying what I was writing about to my life in a new way: what would happen if I *chose* to enjoy being ill? And I was genuinely astounded at the result. I felt better. Not totally better – I still had the physical symptoms of a cold – but it suddenly became clear to me just how much of the bad feeling when I was ill was because *I was resisting the cold*. I was *resenting* it. I was *wishing* it wasn't there, wishing it away. My mind was full of thoughts of scarcity ('I'm missing out', 'I'm wasting time') and regret ('I *wish* I didn't have this', '*If only* I could drink a beer guilt-free'). By this time, I was reasonably practiced, through the ideas in this book and my work on developing myself, at shifting perspectives and trying something new, so I just did it: I stopped resisting. It's interesting, in some ways, to reflect that really that's all there is to it: there isn't a secret. I just shifted my viewpoint, just as I am able to with the visual illusion of the old woman and young woman, or with the story about the Dickensian family. However, that isn't quite the full story.

Whilst the core principle of this chapter is simple, it is not always easy. What made my shift of perspective about my cold stick so well was that I had a constant and regular reminder of what I was choosing. What happened was that every time someone asked me how I was, I told them the story I am telling you here. I would say, 'I'm ill, but I've decided to stop hating having a cold and it seems to make it a lot better!' I'm not sure how many people believed me, or tried it for themselves, but each time I told the story I found myself smiling, laughing even, at the ridiculousness of it all. And they were laughing, too, at how I had spent almost every cold up to that point in my life, resisting – and suffering more as a result.

This is what Dethmer's practice using Mind Jogger or RemindMe does: it gives a regular reminder not to resist what is actually here now; it is an invitation to accept what is actually here now instead.



If you want to choose an adventure which doesn't reducing the suffering you go through, another powerful practice is to ask yourself the question, *What is the gift in this situation?* This question opens up the possibility of a different adventure to the one that you are initially experiencing. Perhaps the gift of a different cold is to be able to stay in bed and watch Netflix, or to make you slow down, or to allow you the chance to not work yourself to the bone. This is not to say that the physical symptoms disappear: this is simply to give yourself the chance to choose an adventure which includes those symptoms *and* perhaps some gifts, too.

Of course, life knows how to hit you and it can be incredibly difficult to do this, at least in the moment. A serious illness, for example, could affect you physically and psychologically for a longer period and make it very hard to find gifts in the situation. But even then, many people tell stories about how a risk to their health was the catalyst they needed to change things for the better: finding the gift in their involuntary stops like I found the gift in mine.

Above all, though, I tell these stories about physical illness because they illustrate that the options for choosing our own internal adventure are almost endless. They can have an almost instant effect on anything from our ability to solve a problem – like the 'nine dots' puzzle – to the way we see the world – like changing our story about overpopulation – to something as tangible as how ill we feel. It's up to us to play and to practise.

### Thought Taking Form in the Moment

Jamie Smart, a coach and bestselling author, explains in his work how he believes everything about our experience of life is caused by thought taking form in the moment. Even your emotions start from thought, and with a full understanding of this, you can change the way you experience life beyond recognition. He and the many people whose lives have been changed by his work – and work along similar lines by others, such as Michael Neill and Sydney Banks – think the realisation of this and the ways it can help people out of their psychological problems will be a psychological revolution. Smart, in particular, believes that in this idea lie the principles to end psychological problems and that, one day, people will look back at us like we do people who believed that the world was flat, or who treated disease by bleeding the infirm. This, again, may seem like a big idea, but it is clear that therapists, psychologists and coaches across the world work with the beliefs and assumptions we have – the thoughts we have – all of which take place inside us. I do this work with clients: we work on the way they see the world and how much this is affected by the way they *think* about the world. As the old saying goes, we see things not as *they* are but as *we* are. I see the change in my clients and the results that follow as their stories about themselves and others change, just as I see the changes in myself. This is truly amazing if you think about it. In essence, all that happens in coaching or psychotherapy is that our stories about ourselves change or become more conscious and yet the feedback that a great coach or therapist gets can be extraordinary. One of my friends, for example, talks about how psychotherapy *saved his life*.

Our assumptions and beliefs have a huge hold over us and they are things that we can change. *You can choose* what goes on in your head far more than you think.

### How Do I Do This?

It could certainly be argued (and has been by many self-help books over the years) that the ideas in this chapter are all you need: away you go and get on with it, happy forever more! My experience has been different, though. In fact, the idea that 'I just need to think differently' has at times been infuriating to me.

An insight is only as good as the way it is used, and the insight that *we can choose* to think differently must be used repeatedly throughout our lives in order to have the kind of effect that will be transformative. We have to *choose* to think differently so many times that it becomes our *instinct* to think in ways that are more useful to us, to think in ways that allow us to live more and more as our Higher Selves. Yes, for some people and in some cases, the insight that *we can choose* to think in a different way can have an almost instant transformative effect. That has sometimes been true for me, and it will be for you, if you start to experiment. For me, however, the power of *you can choose* has been as something to practise every day. It has taken extensive experimentation across my life to find the methods that make the biggest difference. And then it has taken practising over and over again to embed those into the way I am. I expect it will be the practice of a lifetime. As you embed this into your life, you will regularly be faced by choices: choices of whether to continue in the patterns of behaviour that have been yours up to this point in your life, or to choose something different. Each time you are ill, or late for a train, or someone upsets you, you have the power to choose.

*If you want things to be as they have always been, think as you have always thought.  
If you want things to be different, choose a new adventure.*

## We Can Choose

I have learned that *I can choose* through the stories I have told here, through experiences like those described in the next few chapters, through my work with clients and through extensive reading and learning about people. Through all this I have grown my understanding of what it is to be me and what it is to be human. I'm still learning about it in different parts of my life but this chapter contains, really, the underlying principle that will enable you to change your world. We do not have to be victims of our lives in the outside world; when we see possibility, when we have the right support, *we can choose* to change our situation, change our job, change our relationship. We can take charge and be the creator of our lives. And even more importantly, just as we do not have to be victims of circumstance in the outside world, neither do we have to be victims inside our minds, inside ourselves. *We can choose* how to respond, inside and out.

People are born into and live through incredibly difficult challenges, challenges that express themselves outwardly and inwardly. There are times we have to buckle up on the inside as well as the outside in order to get through testing moments. Sometimes some of us may even *need* to put the power and the blame outside of us, to be a victim, to get through the most difficult moments. But even then, I believe that transformation, recovery and growth all start with us taking responsibility as the creator of our lives.

Far more than we think, we can create the change we want to see in the outside world, even if only a little at a time, if we can live a little more as our Higher Selves, feeling possibility. And we can create the change we want to see in the inside world, too. In fact, our power is *even greater* inside ourselves.

And even if you don't quite believe me, ask yourself this: wouldn't you prefer it if I were right? Wouldn't you prefer it if you could choose to be less of a victim or choose to feel that feeling of possibility more often? And isn't that a story worth trying on, an assumption worth inventing?

You will see over the coming chapters that so much of this book is based on this principle. At each stage of my journey, as I have developed ways to understand things with greater perspective, I have been able to choose more and more which perspective serves me best in each moment. Each chapter to follow will give further guidance on the kinds of ideas and

attitudes I believe are worth choosing if you want to live more as your Higher Self and create more of the life you want.

Above all, I want you to take away from this chapter that *we can choose* what we think and – more than that – *we can choose* how we think. All we have to do is decide to choose our own adventure.

## Chapter One Summary

**Key idea:** The world isn't as fixed as you think: we see often see things not as they are but as we are. Given this, it is important to understand that you can control what goes on in your head far more than you think. *You can choose*, inside and out.

### Exercises and Practices:

- **What if everything we see in the world is invented?** If it is, what if you are able to choose a different adventure and invent, as Ros and Ben Zander suggest, something which actually helps you?
- **What am I assuming here?** What else could I choose to believe? What else could I choose to think? Is there another assumption that would be more useful? In particular, is there one that would allow me more of whatever I feel I am lacking, or more access to my Higher Self?
- **Give yourself an A.** Next time you find yourself scored low on a list, see how it feels. See how much access you have to your Higher Self. Then, see what would happen if you invented an assumption. Make it one that could be true: if you had to give yourself an A for the part you played in finding yourself scoring badly, how and why would you give yourself the A? See what changes for you as you find that reason and ask someone for help if this is difficult.
- **What is actually here now?** Set up Mind Jogger or Remind Me to ask yourself this question at random points throughout the day. Then, once you have an answer, ask yourself, 'Can I accept what is actually here now?' See what happens if, instead of resisting, you accept what is actually here in this moment.
- **What is the gift of this situation?** Perhaps, by choosing to see the gift in a challenging situation your perspective will shift and your experience will change. This is best done by yourself, as advice from others on this can feel patronising. But sit with the question, and see if you can find the gift no matter how small it seems. When you see it, what is different?
- **Remember: you can choose.** In each moment, you have far more choice about your experience of life than you think you do.

### Further Reading and Learning

- *The Art of Possibility* by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander
- *The Rational Optimist* by Matt Ridley
- *The 15 Commitments of Conscious Leadership* by Jim Dethmer
- *Clarity* by Jamie Smart

- *The Inside-Out Revolution* by Michael Neill

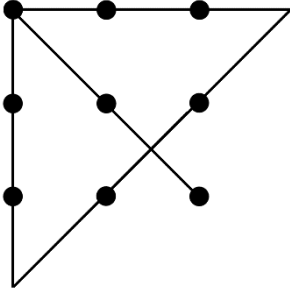


Figure 3: A solution to the 'nine dots' puzzle from earlier in the chapter.

## Chapter Two – What if Everyone is Doing Their Best?

If this book is about, as I wrote in the introduction, living more and more as our Higher Selves – the person we are on our best days, when we are skilful, responsive and graceful as we interact with the world – then one of the most important areas of our lives to explore is how we interact with one another. If this book is about giving our gifts, about thriving in complexity and about separating ourselves from our patterns and evolutionary instincts, then one of the most important places to explore is how we relate to other people. And if there is one place where most of us want to make things better – and not make things worse – it is in our relationships with the people who matter to us. Indeed, much of Parts Two and Three of this book concern how we relate to other people, both inside our minds and outside in the world. There's a reason for that.

We humans are ultra-social animals. For many millennia, our ability to cooperate and relate to one another has been what kept us alive. From tribes hunting on the plains to the many modern tribes, like the organisation we work in or the sports team we support, we are bound into powerful groups which have an enormous impact on our lives. The number of interactions each of us has with other people in an average week is many, and any of these – whether with someone we live with, or someone we meet once and may never see again – has the potential to affect our day, to affect our work, to affect our world. If you're anything like me, you will have seen evidence for this often and regularly across your life. You will have seen it in the times you have fumed for hours about an inconsiderate stranger, and in the times when you have been cheered up by a joke told to you by a checkout worker in a shop you only visit once a year. You will have found your days affected by the postman you see every week and the sibling you have known since you were born. The relationships with those around us can influence us in so many ways, including restricting or releasing our Higher Selves. Indeed, one way to think about your Higher Self is in relation to others: were you the person you are proud of, who you want others to see you as? Were you the person you want to see reflected in the eyes of those around you?

### It is Our Response to Others That Affects Us

In Chapter One, I shared the idea that *we can choose*, inside and out, and in particular how the way that we choose to think can affect our experience of life. It is up to each of us, then, to choose to think in ways that allow us to behave more and more in the ways we would want to on our best days. As I took this idea out into the world, it swiftly became apparent that the way I related to others was often causing me anxiety and stress and making me less effective in the world: less skilful at influencing and communicating and more often caught up and unable to act due to worry or frustration. Just as in Chapter One I suggested that it is often *resisting* what is here in any moment that causes us suffering, in this chapter I will argue that how we choose to *respond* to others can have an enormous impact on our relationships and our lives.

Details and stories about that follow, but for now it is enough to ask: are there places where your interactions with others are affecting your mood, your life and what is happening for you? And if this changed, would your life be easier, happier or less stressful? Would better relationships with those around you help you get more done in the world? More, would you be behaving more often in alignment with the kind of person that you want to be? Would you spend more of your time as the adult, clear, creative version of you? Would you act more as your Higher Self?

For most people, the answers here are yes. So at this point I will share with you the most useful tool I have found for dissolving the feeling of lack and adversity that can come in our reactions

to others. It is the most useful idea I know for shifting into a place of love, calm, strength and possibility in our relationships with other people. It is a question:

***What if this person is doing their best?***

I am by no means the first person to ask this question – I stole it directly, in fact – but it is the frame which allowed me to develop an idea and a practice fundamental for me in living a life of possibility. After choosing to ask this question many times, the idea has now slipped into my subconscious, staying there as a foundation for the way I live.

This question and others like it have fundamentally changed my relationships and enabled me to live far more as my Higher Self. My Higher Self is loving, caring and patient, yes. But when I am my Higher Self, I also try to stand up for what is right, be direct, and speak the truth even when it is sometimes uncomfortable. Holding these things in balance isn't easy, and I have struggled with it all my life: how can I be caring and patient whilst also being direct and sharing uncomfortable truths? How can I stand up for myself without slipping straight away into my pettier or more harmful patterns and reactions? It turns out that all of these things are easier when choosing a particular assumption; it turns out that all of it is easier when I assume that the person I am speaking to is doing their best.

### When I Can't Sleep

One of the starkest examples of this assumption in my life comes from perhaps the first time that I truly realised the potential of putting ideas like the ones in this book into practice. I was lying awake, unable to sleep. Time was ticking on. Midnight gone, 1am approaching, then passing. My morning alarm and a day of work were getting closer and closer. My mind wouldn't stop whirring and, more than that, my chest was full of tension. A sense of breathless tightness, of being trapped, so familiar to me at the time.

It is a feeling I think of as a contraction and it is so often a signal of being out of my Higher Self, being in a place of scarcity. Sometimes when that feeling comes upon us we can't draw the line of cause and effect. Then we have to really engage our curiosity about ourselves, which I will discuss more in Chapter Three. But this time I knew the origin, and it was a conversation on Twitter. Not with just anyone, but with two people I know and respect in real life. Two people who I'd spent many hours in the company of. I had retweeted an article about the decline in absolute poverty in the world which felt like good news (because it's gone down a lot!). As part of my interest in trying to see the truth in the world, rather than accept the negative story told by vast swathes of the media, it felt important to share that story. In return, I received a barrage of tweets from one of my friends, expressing how mad it made him, because of the authors of the article: he felt they were only sharing it to follow a pro-free market economics agenda and accused me of wilfully only sharing articles which pursued that same political agenda. I've just been back to the tweets now and even years later I can feel some of that same contracted feeling in my chest.

I suggested I was sharing it because it was good news but was accused by the second friend, arriving ten or eleven tweets into the exchange, of ignoring the point. Even now, years later, as I read back the exchange, I can't help but read my messages as balanced and theirs as aggressive and angry and mean. Part of that, of course, is that I remember the impact this exchange had for me. I felt tiny, my views mocked, accused of things which weren't true and unable to express what I wanted to. The medium of Twitter doesn't help at times like this: the limit of 140 characters (as it was then) allows for headlines, but never for sophisticated or nuanced



conversations. Not only that, but looking back I can see how I was struggling with new ideas: I had just seen, as I'll talk about in Chapter Six, the incredible power of free market economics to transform the world and in particular to lift people out of poverty. As someone who had never really expressed any political views in the world in a big way, I had never experienced what it was like to do that and then feel the vitriol of someone who holds different ones.

Looking back, I can see that many stories were at play here: their assumptions about me, mine about them and, indeed, mine about me. After the exchange, I went to bed. But I definitely didn't sleep.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, still awake, I switched my bedside light on again and saw the book *The Art of Possibility*, which I discussed in Chapter One, by the side of my bed. I had enjoyed reading it so much and thought, 'This is a book of practices. There must be something in it to help me right now.'

I opened the book and scanned the headings, my eyes coming to rest on the chapter 'Giving An A'. As the authors, Ros and Ben Zander, explain, this isn't just a practice which can be used in a music college (as I described in Chapter One) and it isn't always about giving *yourself* an A. When you have a difficult relationship, they suggest, what if you assume that this person deserves an A for their performance in that relationship? If you assume this, how does their behaviour look then? This, you can see, is a very similar question to the one at the core of this chapter: *what if this person is doing their best?*

In one of the most touching moments in *The Art of Possibility*, Ros Zander tells the story of how using this practice to think differently about her deceased father allowed her to understand his behaviour in a way she had never been able to understand when he was alive and which then allowed her to see new things which added up with her new story. If he was a grade A father, why, then, would he have done these things?

'Well,' I thought, looking at the book. 'If these people are Grade A friends, why then would they be sending me these tweets?' And the answer came back: a great friend would want their friends to understand the world. And, for me, a great friend would want the world to be a better place, to put in place the systems and policies which would improve it. At least, that's a requirement I would have for someone who was going to be my Grade A friend. A Grade A friend would call their friends out if their friend was being misled or was behaving badly. A Grade A friend would want to help me understand more deeply.

And from this place, imagining these Grade A motivations for my friends, the feeling of contraction dissipated. Not completely, but these possible qualities in my friends were qualities I could get behind. I could see how they might be doing their best. Before the practice, I had assumed – and it was an assumption, no matter how well I may think I know these people – fury from them and judgment of me. I was telling myself a story that they thought I was stupid, naïve and foolish. I had assumed they were laughing at me together. And those things hurt.

Choosing to see them as Grade A friends made the whole thing look different. With the assumption that they were doing their best for me and themselves and the world, I could choose to look at these friends as people who wanted to challenge me and share their wisdom. I could see them as people, who were – perhaps – as they said, joking with me, playing with me. I could see them as people who want the world to be a better place for everyone rather than people hell-bent on making me feel awful, on picking on me, on bullying me into taking their viewpoint.



And, with that second set of assumptions, the sense of being trapped dissipated. The contraction opened. And, remarkably, I drifted off to sleep.

You can see how this different assumption, these different thoughts, made a positive difference for me. But you might also be wondering, what is the truth here? Well, sitting down years later, my best guess – and it can only be a guess – is that the ‘Grade A’ assumption wasn’t quite right, but that the truth lay somewhere *much closer* to that than to my initial assumption. These people, after all, are good people who I have spent many hours with. Overall, in the cold light of day, they like me. They do care about the world, about keeping me honest, about all those things in the ‘Grade A friend’ definition. *And* they weren’t particularly kind or skilful in how they acted.

By looking for a second story that could be behind their behaviour – giving them an A – I was able to make what I believe was a clearer and more truthful assessment of what was happening in the world. Before giving them an A, I was anxious and stressed and scared. Then, I changed my response to them by essentially asking *What if they are doing their best?* and my situation changed for the better. I could sleep and I didn’t believe the most hurtful things that I had been thinking previously, about me or about my friends. Without that shift this situation might have become resentment carried with me from that interaction into the next time I saw these people, as it has for me on many other occasions. Instead, it could dissipate. And in the end, I know that as my Higher Self, as the person I deep down want to be, the person I am when I am my best, I am able to have difficult conversations about things like politics. If one of these stories makes me feel judged and judge others, *and* it hampers my ability to make a clear and truthful assessment of what is happening, *and* it stops me having conversations I want to have, then that is not a story taking me towards my Higher Self. Better, by far, to choose something different.

### My Life is Better When I Assume That People Are Doing Their Best

‘Giving an A’ could almost have been the title of this chapter, as it is an incredibly helpful way to unpack this chapter’s central idea. So, too, could one of the favourite maxims of writer and podcaster Tim Ferriss. ‘Never put down to malice what you can put down to incompetence or busyness,’ Ferriss often shares. This, too, is a wonderful way to check your assumptions and to give yourself a better chance of living in a space of possibility (instead of pent up judgment and fury and contraction).

Ferriss’s way of speaking about this often brings to my mind my experience with a colleague years ago. She would *never* reply in a timely fashion to my emails. It used to *infuriate* me. She clearly didn’t give the slightest damn about how hard my life was made by having to constantly chase her for things while she did whatever else it was she did. I had been feeling this tension and frustration over months of working with her, when a co-worker happened to observe that the colleague in question had *thousands* of unread emails in her inbox. Whether that was down to busyness or incompetence at managing her emails, it doesn’t matter. What was clear was that it was far more likely down to incompetence or busyness than that she didn’t care about or value my work specifically. It seems interesting that just like with my friends on Twitter, my instant reaction was to assume something deliberately malicious on the part of others. Assuming either incompetence or busyness or both was certainly preferable to the alternative story I had created: that she was making my life harder because she thought my work was so worthless or pointless that it wasn’t even worth replying to me. It’s much easier, after all, to be around, believe in or even like someone who is incompetent than it is someone who you believe actively dislikes you. Before long, I began to notice other ways in which this colleague was

disorganised, and the incompetence angle seemed increasingly likely.<sup>7</sup> That enabled me to be more patient, develop better ways of working with her and even to give her support.

Both the Zanders' practice and Ferriss's idea are powerful tools for embedding this idea in your everyday life, but they weren't what embedded the idea clearly and crisply into my mind. Instead, that happened when I went to see sociologist Brené Brown speak at the British Museum in London in November 2015. Brown is one of the most present and engaging speakers I've ever seen and, over the course of an hour or so, she made an audience of several hundred laugh, cry and change their perceptions and perspectives. She was there promoting her book, *Rising Strong*, an examination of what people who come back from adversity have in common.

'What's the question you have been asked the most about this book?' asked the interviewer at the event.

Brown replied: 'Well, it's about "What if everyone is doing their best?" People say. "Do you really mean everyone? Even this jerk I work with?"' You may be having similar thoughts as you read this chapter.

As Brown said this, we all laughed. The interviewer delved further and Brown relayed the story, which she also tells in *Rising Strong*, about how people who rise strong from adversity have something in common regarding their attitude to other people. In short, they live through the assumption that *everyone is doing their best*. In testing this (while internally thinking it was complete nonsense), Brown spoke to her husband Steve. He, it turned out, was among the strange group of people who held that view.<sup>8</sup>

'Do you *really* think they are all doing their best? Really? Everyone?' asked Brené.

Steve said: 'I don't know. I really don't. All I know is that my life is better when I assume that people are doing their best. It keeps me out of judgment and lets me focus on what is, and not what should or could be.'

Steve's words gave me a message loud and clear. This is an assumption *I can choose* to make; an adventure *I can choose* to take. And, just like with my friends on Twitter, just like with my colleague who didn't reply to my emails, if we choose to assume it, our lives are better. We see things more clearly and with more perspective, not distorted by how we wish they would be.

The message of this chapter can feel counterintuitive to our experience of life. Partly this is because many of us have spent years and years assuming the opposite: that people are selfish and that our first thoughts about their intention are correct.

It isn't easy to change something that has been part of us for a long time and so for many people it isn't easy to live with the assumption that others are doing their best, to hold onto it in the

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<sup>7</sup> If you play with this practice, you might find that when you choose a different assumption – that the other person is doing their best, for example – you begin to see evidence to support this assumption, evidence that you didn't notice before. This is because our brain filters what we notice in the world based on what it believes is important: this is why when we are learning to drive we notice more L plates, and when we are preparing to move house we notice more 'To Let' and 'For Sale' signs; there aren't more L plates or signs, it's simply that our brain shows us more of them. As I discussed in Chapter One, what we see isn't everything: sometimes changing our assumptions can have a real impact on what we notice.

<sup>8</sup> Brown also recounts this story in *Rising Strong* and some of what is quoted here is quoted directly from that book.

practicalities of daily life. But this assumption is something that has made my day-to-day life easier and more fulfilling and it has, as Steve said, enabled me to see things more as they are and less as what should or could be. It has enabled me to leave more and more experiences feeling happy and satisfied with the way I have responded, rather than wrapped in ‘I should have said X’ or ‘I wish I hadn’t said Y’, both of which were incredibly common experiences of mine but are now rare.

### The Train Guard

It’s important to share that the practice of *What if everyone is doing their best?* isn’t just something that can be done in retrospect or in advance. It can be powerful in the moment; *you can choose* it, even in the heat of an exchange with someone else. Several years ago, my wife Emma and I were travelling back to London by train after visiting her family in the West Midlands.<sup>9</sup>

We had paid for Standard Class tickets, and had been assigned seat reservations in Coach D. However, when we got on the train, due to some problem which we didn’t quite understand, Coach D was the designated First Class carriage. We approached the guard on the platform and asked her what to do, and she told us to find some seats in an alternative carriage. Fine with us.

We calmly settled into some empty seats until, three or four stops later, the train arrived at Oxford. Suddenly, the train became very full and an elderly couple approached us with reservations for the seats we were sitting in. Of course, we let them sit down. By way of explaining why we were in their seats, we shared what had happened and the old man suggested going to sit in Coach D, even though it was First Class. ‘It’s their fault,’ he said.

By this point the carriage we were in was full and people were even sitting on the floor in the vestibules between carriages, so we took his advice and found two empty seats in First Class Coach D. We were both a bit anxious about this: we didn’t have a First Class ticket and so weren’t technically allowed to sit there. In the end, our worries came to fruition: the train guard came to check our tickets and explained that we needed to move as we hadn’t paid for First Class. His words were polite, but his manner was abrupt<sup>10</sup>.

I could feel my response building in me with a sense of anger and injustice: ‘How can he say that to us? We’re in this situation because the train company messed up the reservations. And his colleague gave us terrible advice! It always gets busy at Oxford and she should have known that.’ It is worth pausing to notice how this reflects what Brené Brown’s husband said: I was judging the guard and his colleague and I was focused on what *should be*, not what *was*.

I said something first and then Emma started venting her frustration at the guard. As soon as Emma was in the conversation and I was just watching I could see what was happening: both she and the guard were preparing for an argument, getting ready to fight it out until one of them backed down.

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<sup>9</sup> Even for those readers who aren’t familiar with the vagaries of the UK railway network, I imagine you will be able to draw a parallel here with something you have experienced, perhaps a different customer service experience when ‘the rules’ of a situation or institution seemed unjustly set against you.

<sup>10</sup> On some level the train guard may have already been making an assumption about us at this point: perhaps something like ‘these people are trying their luck because the train is full and they don’t want to stand.’

Fred Kofman, an academic and leadership consultant who has held roles at Google and LinkedIn, gives a beautiful demonstration of what is happening in situations like this in a video published by Lean In<sup>11</sup>. In the video – about how to have difficult conversations – Kofman works with a volunteer from the audience. He asks her to hold her hand up in front of her, palm towards him. He then asks, ‘If I push... What do you want to do?’ and pushes his hand against hers, applying pressure towards her. Her response is immediate: to push back, without the need to even think about it. This is an instinctive reaction most of us have when someone pushes us: it’s like closing your eyes if something is dropping into them, or moving your hand to bat away an insect from your face, or being ticklish. It’s a part of being human: if someone pushes us, our instant natural instinctive response is to push back. Not just when someone pushes you physically, but also in relationships and conversations.

Back in Coach D, I caught what was going on. I said, ‘Just a sec, Emma.’ I took a breath and took a different point of view: this man is doing his best. If he’s doing his best then, underneath, he wants to help, because that’s what a train guard who is doing their best wants, that’s what a Grade A train guard does. He may have been frustrated by us or by other things in his day,<sup>12</sup> and as his frustration pushed up against us, we began to push back. Seeing this from the outside – and from the place of *What if this person is doing his best?* – I explained the situation we were in, the full sequence of events. He said, still irritably, ‘You should have come to me before and explained.’ At this point, I had to pause: he was pushing against me again and my instincts said, clearly and with a physical response in my body, ‘Push back’. That’s normal, that’s human. There were many questions that flew through my mind, some sharp words I could have shared with him, but instead I took another breath and chose – again – the adventure of *What if he is doing his best?*

‘We’re explaining now,’ I said, maintaining calm. ‘How can you help?’

It was strange to watch what happened next. I suspect, doing the job of a guard on a train, he isn’t used to people taking that line with him. He was gearing up for the fight which probably ends up with Emma and I either paying for a First Class ticket or standing in the vestibule fuming and complaining on Twitter. Instead, I could see him physically relax, switching out of pushing and into something different. He took our tickets and wrote on them ‘OK to stay in First Class,’ followed by the date and his signature. And there we sat, relaxed, for the rest of the journey.

I hope, from that example, you begin to see what might be possible. There would of course have been other ways to deal with this: we might have been able to batter him down without that assumption, through arguing or complaining. He might have relented. If we had complained furiously enough – to him or someone else – we might have got some money back, or even have got the train guard disciplined by his superiors. But here is why I think this assumption is so powerful. Those other options, maybe all of them, would have left Emma and I contracted in confrontation mode. And they would have left the train guard the same way. The confrontation

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<sup>11</sup> <https://vimeo.com/75893191>

<sup>12</sup> If I delve into empathy here, it is also not too hard to imagine that making sure only people with First Class tickets sit in First Class is probably one of the most difficult parts of a train guard’s job, almost always leading to confrontation, and it may be one of the bits he is judged on most harshly by his superiors. He also needs to look after and be fair to the First Class passengers who have paid extra to be in a quieter and more spacious carriage. Not only that, but in the story in question, the guard had probably just worked his way through the whole train, full of frustrated people, hot and crowded, annoyed and frustrated that reservations weren’t where they were supposed to be.

mode in that case is physical: different chemicals are pumping in our body, different parts of our brains are engaged. That's why he relaxed *physically* when I offered him the chance to relent by asking the question, 'How can you help?' He was shifting out of some version of the fight/flight/freeze response.<sup>13</sup>

When you think about confrontations or disagreements, or put yourself in my position with the train guard, one question you may ask is: *why should it be my responsibility to do this, to take a breath and take responsibility?* Why is it me and not the train guard who needs to do this? Well, the world would be a wonderful place if everyone had the nimbleness in every moment to shift a conversation away from unnecessary confrontation and vitriol. But none of us can do this all of the time. As I will share in Chapter Five, when I write about intimate relationships, even when both people are aware of the possibility of making a shift like this it won't always happen: each and every one of us sometimes gets carried away in our instinctive reactions. So, when you *can* make the shift, when you have the awareness and nimbleness in the moment to do it, you should try. You should try because, in all the ways I shared at the start of the chapter, our interactions with others colour our days. If you have the skill and grace to handle a conversation with a frazzled train guard well, he is more likely to do the same later for other customers, or when he goes home to his family at the end of the day having had one fewer unpleasant interaction and one more positive resolution. Judgment, resentment and anger can ripple out; or connection, kindness and possibility can ripple out. *We can choose*. And that's how we change the world, one interaction at a time.

### Away From the Scarcity of 'I'm Right and They're Wrong'

If we had argued with the train guard, he might have changed his position. Maybe. Or maybe he would have pushed back furiously as we pushed at him, digging his heels in and stubbornly sticking to the point that we had not paid for a First Class ticket. And he would have been right. But Emma and I were right that the situation was confusing and difficult. *And*, he was probably right that we should have spoken to him earlier. And, *we* were probably right that his colleague shouldn't have given us bad advice. But being right about those things didn't solve our problems or his. Instead, by stepping back from the confrontation – and the sense of scarcity that comes from 'I'm right and they're wrong' or 'only one of us can be right here' – we stepped into possibility. We did that through the assumption of *What if he is doing his best?* It allowed us to reach a conclusion that both he and we were happy with, and it allowed all of us to leave the situation feeling connected, in touch with each other and in touch with the higher parts of ourselves.

Pursuing an argument to 'win' the situation is a game for your ego alone. It's a game for a lower part of you, an animal part. It's a game for the child in you who lost and was embarrassed, humiliated and scared, who is still a part of you and wants to win *now* to heal the wounds of the past. I can tell you that it won't heal the past. You might feel better for a few minutes, you might get what you want on the outside, but you will still, next time, 'need' to win. Instead, there is an opportunity to step into your Higher Self, to step past those difficult times you have lost and do something different, something good for yourself and the other, instead. Win together by assuming that they are doing their best.

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<sup>13</sup> Essentially fight/flight/freeze is the idea that when in danger, our brains tend to respond in one of those three ways: fight the danger, flee from it or freeze and hope not to be noticed. These responses are happen incredibly fast and without the awareness of our rational mind.



## Move Into The Dance

The truly remarkable thing about this practice is how often and how fast the behaviour of someone else changes when you change how *you* are and don't even tell them what you are doing. That's what happened with the train guard and I have seen it happen with clients, friends, shop assistants and, as I'll share in Chapter Five, my wife.

One client who saw the change happen quickly was an entrepreneur a few years into a new business venture. Improving the client's relationship with his founding business partner – fundamental to the functioning and future success of the business – was part of our work. In one session, as this came up, I shared the idea of *What if everyone is doing their best?* For the client, it landed best through the practice from *The Art of Possibility*: 'What if I gave him an A? What if my business partner is not only doing his best, but what if I assume that he is doing his best to a standard that deserves a Grade A?'

Almost straight away, the client saw how he was *not* doing this. He found himself reading an email from his business partner with another member of their team and suddenly caught not only himself but also the team member assigning Grade C (at best) motives to the business partner. My client was able to catch this – taking a breath, as I did with the train guard – and read the email again from a different point of view. What happened over the next few weeks was spectacular: the client took a strong commitment to assign only Grade A motives and to listen for and acknowledge those motives carefully in his conversations. This took concentration and commitment, ignoring, often, how things had come across (in person or in writing) in favour of that assumption. The improvement in the relationship was as big as it was swift: over only a matter of days my client observed dozens of interactions that might have gone down the road of conflict, which had previously been a regular occurrence. Instead, these conversations were productive and the relationship between the two partners was strengthened: they were able to trust each other more, be more assertive and even be defensive with each other more, without the relationship suffering and without resentment being carried into other areas of their work and lives. As the quality of their conversations became more productive, both were able to assume more secure and well-defined roles in the organisation. The business results – which relied on both their strengths – soon followed.

This is precisely what happens next in Fred Kofman's video about difficult conversations. After demonstrating the principle of how we push back when we are pushed, Kofman shares what happens if you do something different: if you can catch yourself pushing back and choose to behave differently, possibilities emerge. Kofman invites us to assume that if someone pushes against us in a conversation, they may be seeing something we don't; he invites us to give them the benefit of the doubt. To demonstrate this, he moves with the woman's push, and they begin to move together. Kofman is Argentinian, and they move into a tango. This is what I was able to do in those moments with the train guard, thanks to much practice with the assumption *What if this person is doing their best?* And this is what my client was able to do with his business partner with a conscious shift of emphasis in emails and meetings. By giving his business partner the benefit of the doubt instead of pushing back against him, they moved into the dance.

## Are You Sure?

The process of shifting our perspectives isn't always easy. The idea of *What if they are doing their best?* – and, underlying that, the assertion that people's motivations may be different to what we initially assume – can be hard to hold onto. Our behaviour and our thoughts can be very settled, very stationary, very final, built up over many years of a certain way of seeing someone or something. The way through these most settled and stationary assumptions, I offer

to you, lies in the seed of doubt, in the possibility that the certainty we feel may be what is holding us back. We'll come back to the idea of a seed of doubt later in the book, in particular in Part Three.

The following piece of writing, by my father, Pete Armstrong, was instrumental in giving me the gift of less certainty. The question that exposes this lack of certainty, sows the seed of doubt and opens up possibility is the title of the piece: *Are You Sure?* It speaks to those times when we are *sure* our assumption is correct, stationary and final, and to the necessity of the seed of doubt.

***Are You Sure?*** by Pete Armstrong (unpublished)

*If you are a car driver you may have experienced certain behaviours from other drivers, and learned to label them.<sup>14</sup>*

*For example you may be driving along a rural A road and come up behind a steady stream of traffic. The road is single carriage-way and winding. Overtaking is not a safe option, and you settle back to be part of a convoy until the nature of the road changes.*

*However the driver who comes up behind you does not, apparently, see the situation in the same way. He is hanging on your tail and edging out into the road looking for a chance to shoot past you. You may well feel uncomfortably tense at his behaviour and notice other feelings and responses starting to rise in you.*

*You may well therefore feel relief when, at an opportune moment, he accelerates past you and pulls into the gap ahead. Because you are a careful driver, the gap ahead of you is quite large. However, the same is not true of all the cars ahead, and as you watch the driver make his hurried way up through the convoy, you see lots of sudden red brake lights as the car pulls into narrow gaps to avoid oncoming traffic.*

*If all the drivers were connected by radio, no doubt the airwaves would be full of complaints and invective: 'stupid risk-taking', 'dangerous driving,' 'all BMW drivers are the same,' 'where are the police when you need them?' 'he's going to die soon in a head-on, and he'll deserve it.'*

*Perhaps most of the time, the driver in question would respond in similar vein: 'get out of my way, losers,' 'it's a free country, I'll do what I like,' 'if you all drove like me, life would be more exciting,' 'all you little people, get back to your hovels and stop cluttering up the roads.'*

*But can you be certain what the response would be? Perhaps, just occasionally, you might hear the driver say something like, 'I'm very sorry, but can you let me through? I've just heard my mother is dying in hospital, and I must get to her.'*

*In situations where critical judgement seems called for, you may like to ask yourself: am I sure?*

*Maybe, in the absence of radios, giving someone the benefit of the doubt is the correct choice.*

It is hard for me not to think that my dad's normal, careful driving might have given way to weaving in and out of traffic in the moment he found out his mother was dying. It's hard not to

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<sup>14</sup> It is a story about driving a car but, of course, it is a story about much more than that. For the non-drivers among you, I'm sure you can find the parallels with other parts of your life.

imagine that mine would, too. And that for either of us, or someone else, it would be understandable even if not advisable.

*What if this person is doing their best?* allows us a way to shift in the moments when the sense of ‘uncomfortable tension’ rises. It’s the same if someone pushes in front of us in the queue at the supermarket or bashes us out of the way as they race for the train or down the street. Tension rises, and as this happens our quality of thinking falls. We are swept into the pushing match, sometimes with someone who by that point is out of sight, but who we hold onto through our tense and contracted reaction. Then, locked in an imaginary pushing match, our decision-making ability and our thinking gets worse. In a station or on the street perhaps this doesn’t matter so much. In a car, hurtling along the motorway at 70mph, having our thinking clouded is mighty risky. And what about when you are having a meeting with a colleague or a manager when your thinking is still polluted by the dangerous driver? Or what about when it’s your wife or husband or boyfriend or girlfriend whose behaviour has you locked in a sense of uncomfortable tension? If there was a shortcut out of that, to clearer and more effective thinking, wouldn’t you rather take it?

That shortcut is in the seed of doubt: are you sure? And it is in the question, *What if this person is doing their best?*

We all have these contractions, these animal or child-like behaviours. We all have these moments when someone pushes against us and we push back. But, am I sure? What if I had been through what they have? Or, what would I have to go through to be where they are? For you, it might have taken more than they have been through to do something like weave dangerously through traffic, or it might have taken less. It may be a story the same as theirs, or it may be different. But *are you sure* they don’t have a good reason?

If *this was the best they could do* in their situation, what might they have been through for that to be true? And if you shift to this perspective, what changes for you?

## The Question of Values

In the final parts of this chapter, it’s important to address the question of ‘What does it mean to do our best?’ And the question, beyond that, of values, of what matters. This is important because we have to ask ourselves: if everyone is doing their best, where do we draw the line of what behaviour is acceptable and what isn’t?

The answer to these questions lies in the Deeper Self: the sometimes-unconscious parts of us, the patterns and instincts that can guide our behaviours without our even noticing. Contained here, if we look closely enough, are deep and core values, which can govern our behaviour and our attitudes to others and ourselves. Each of us holds different things as deeply important, and when we are at our best we honour these things in our behaviour: honouring these values is, in some ways, the definition of the Higher Self. In order to honour them, we need to know what they are, and discovering this isn’t always easy.

Our values can be covered and confused and numbed in our daily life. They are covered by our ego as it works to keep our sense of self safe from perceived harm. They are confused by ideas we learned explicitly and implicitly from our upbringing, which taught us how to stay safe and how to be loved. They are numbed by the habits we fall into and the grind of the day-to-day.

Sometimes, they are obscured by ideologies: from stories, from politics, from books, from philosophers, from friends. These ideologies give us a new set of beliefs and rules to live by. The



experience of an ideology can be something like ‘If I follow these rules, then I am a good person.’ It could be the socialist ideology, the free marketeer ideology, the environmentalist ideology, the nationalist ideology or many more. Most of us fall foul of the powerful seduction of ideology sometimes, and no wonder: how wonderful to have an easy way to know what to think, what to believe, what to assume. I’ll share more about political ideologies and my journey navigating them in Part Three.

I suspect that in simpler times, it was possible to live out your life through the values of an ideology. In today’s complex world, however, at least for me, the inherent contradictions in each of the ones in which at different times I have found myself made that impossible. These contradictions are more visible in the modern world, exposed through the tools of the communication age and as they run up against the complexities of the challenges of the twenty-first century. Without the availability of these ideologies, we really only have one choice if we want to live a coherent life, one that feels in alignment with the truth as we see it. If we can’t rely on the rules of an ideology in order to know what makes us a good person, we need to reflect on what is deeply important *to us*. We need to *choose* how to live our life. This allows us more access to our Higher Selves: once I know what matters deeply to me, *I can choose* to honour it. It also guides us when we need to understand whether someone has crossed the line of acceptability with their behaviour. And, overall, it makes each of us individually and all of us together more fit for complexity. In the challenges to individuals and societies of the complex modern world, one single ideology or set of beliefs is never going to be sufficient. But if seven billion people do the deep work to understand what matters to them at their core as a human and then act out those things, perhaps we – individually and together – can face the challenges and do what is needed.

There are many ways to do this work to understand the values that are deeply important to you. You can start by simply asking yourself, in a moment when you feel calm and clear, ‘What is central to who I am?’ The answers might come back as concepts, behaviours or in other forms that are specific to you. Or you can consider the things which would make you sad at the end of your life: how would you have been or not been, what would you have done or not done, how would you have lived your life, that would leave you with sadness on your deathbed? Another valuable mine of data is to notice when in life you are frustrated or upset by others: what about their behaviour is upsetting you? Could it be that they are violating one of the things that matters deeply to you?

Defining your values isn’t the end of the journey, but it does open up space so that *you can choose*. It can guide your behaviour with yourself and with others; it can guide micro and macro decision-making in your life. But, because you are human, sometimes you won’t act in line with those values, no matter how clear you think they are. Sometimes you will slip out of that Higher Self, away from those values, because of the unconscious patterns and instincts contained alongside your values in your Deeper Self.

With all this in mind, we might then define ‘doing our best’ as: wrestling with those patterns and instincts to try to live up to and into our values, the battle each of us fights with the unconscious parts of our Deeper Selves to release our Higher Selves. This definition of ‘doing our best’, and our knowledge of how hard the wrestling match can be, can often be enough to give us compassion for someone who seems to be struggling to live as their Higher Self.

For many of us, perhaps even most of us, we mostly live in ignorance of the patterns and instincts that often govern our behaviour. I certainly did, until the involuntary stop I spoke

about in the introduction woke me up and showed me something different. But once we know that this is happening, that our childhood patterns and evolutionary instincts guide our behaviour, this creates further implications for the idea of 'doing our best'. Once we understand that these unconscious patterns are at play, then there is an imperative to step up, to do the work to understand your deeper self. Only by doing that work – which we will speak more about in Chapter Three – can you make sure that you really are doing your best. When we do the work, we make sure we have the best possible chance of winning that wrestling match with the more base patterns and instincts that are part of our Deeper Self. Then, we are able to live more as our Higher Self, respond more skilfully tomorrow than we did today, just as we responded more skilfully today than we did yesterday. That's how we build our capacity, as individuals and societies, to respond to complex challenges. That's how we know we are doing our best.

*What if everyone is doing their best?* can be a practice in uncovering our values and our Deeper Selves: developing perspective on ourselves through developing perspectives on others; looking at others to understand how they are doing *their* best can teach us things about how we are doing ours. I have sat in conversation with many, many people and I have heard their answers when I ask what is important to them and why. Those answers are heart-warming and inspiring: there is deep goodness in everyone I have spoken to about these things when we dig into their Deeper Self. Why, then, we might ask, do some people do things which are terrible, twisted or even evil? I believe this happens because some people lose the battle with their instincts and patterns, because their baser instincts and patterns take over, leaving their Higher Self hidden away and impossible to see. Or, sometimes, it happens because the patterns and beliefs and assumptions they hold are so thick, so twisted, so complex that they can no longer touch the heart-warming, inspiring, touching goodness at their core. Each of us have the potential for this: we all remember moments of cruelty and vindictiveness when we have done damage to others. That's a part of life; that's a part of being human. And that, again, is the importance of this work: how do we make sure we do that less this year than last year, and less next year than this?

*What if everyone is doing their best?* can therefore also be an exercise in deep compassion and in understanding of the human condition: through it you may come to understand what other people might have been through in order to do the things that look unpleasant (or even awful or evil) to us as outsiders to their experience of life. And as we continually do this, stretching ourselves to understand what others may have been through in order to do these things, we will sometimes see more clearly the ways that we, too, are victims of the patterns and beliefs and assumptions that we hold.

The scars humans take away from their interactions with each other can create the patterns and instincts of our Deeper Selves, which hold us back or sometimes lead us to act outside of our values and our Higher Selves. So it is particularly important to be sure that we are doing the work to understand our Deeper Selves and be as skilful in any moment we are relating to others. If we are going to call someone's behaviour into question, to decide a certain behaviour is unacceptable, to stand up for our values against someone else, we need to do what we can to not add to the scars and patterns that they carry, to not make things worse as we do this. To call them out in a way that encourages them to do the work so that they will do better tomorrow than they did today. This takes us to the final part of this chapter: the distinction between guilt and shame.

## Guilt and Shame

There could be an idea that assuming that everyone is doing their best is about giving people an easy ride. For some people, this may be a partial outcome, depending on the Higher Self they aspire to be. In my life, I have found that assuming that people are doing their best actually means that I can be more powerful and clear in my condemnation of those who, in my opinion, get it wrong. Further to this, I can be stronger and clearer in the way I conduct myself in arguments or disagreements and my communication at these times is more effective (although, I should add, I certainly don't always manage to do this).

I suspect that some form of confrontation will continue to exist for all of us, even as we learn to act more and more as our Higher Selves<sup>15</sup>. For example, as we uncover our values and Deeper Selves, we may find that self-care and care for others are at the centre of how we live as our Higher Selves. If this is the case, there will come times when, in order to live as our Higher Selves, in order to stand up for other people or for our values, we may come to a boundary that we cannot allow someone to cross. We may find ourselves saying: 'Look, I know you are doing your best. I know something has led you here and I believe you are trying to act from your innate goodness. But this behaviour is hurting me, it is hurting you and it is hurting others and it has to stop. And if it doesn't stop, then there are consequences.'

Brené Brown spoke about this at the talk I attended in November 2015. She described the example of a friend who drinks too much. Most of us can probably relate to this; someone who has been through a tough time, perhaps, or someone struggling with their life in some way, whose ability to control their drinking has slipped. They may embarrass you and upset you, or they may even upset or hurt someone you know, but you mostly forgive them because you know things have been hard and they are doing their best. I have seen people behaving like this, and I have undoubtedly behaved like this myself. But there may come a point where you have to say to your friend, for their good, for your good or for the good of others, 'No, you have to stop now. This is too far. That is the boundary.' Perhaps to say something like what Brown said to a friend of hers. It might be: 'I can be here for you, I can look after you, I can try to help you through this. But I can't have you in my house, drunk like this, when others are here. It is hurting me and it is hurting others.'

Dealing with people who cross our boundaries brings to light a key distinction: the distinction of shame and guilt.

As a simple working definition, guilt is: you *did* bad, I *did* bad. Shame is: you *are* bad, I *am* bad. This may seem small, but is vital: there is almost no way back from 'I am bad'. This is how I *am*. Forever. But from 'I did bad', there is the possibility to change.

Brown talks about shame as an epidemic in our societies. Shame is the story which keeps us trapped, keeps us contracted and keeps us away from a sense of possibility for ourselves and others. Shame stops us from reaching or even acknowledging that we have a Higher Self. Instead, we are left with the terribly permanent assumption that 'I am bad'. From the seeming permanence of shame comes a story that I or you can't possibly be a good person, ever. To a greater or lesser extent, this is the story that we tell when we blame, punish and hold our boundaries from a place different to 'I believe you are doing your best'. However, when we use that assumption – even when stopping someone at our boundary with *I believe you are doing your best* behind what we say – we are not telling them that they *are* bad, we are telling them

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<sup>15</sup> I should add that, as in the story of the Train Guard, 'confrontation' from our Higher Selves has a very different flavour to confrontation from our baser instincts.

that deep down we believe they are good, doing the best they can in the moment. But, this time, we see that they *did* bad. This gives them the opportunity to change. This gives them ‘*next time, things can be different*’.

As Brown’s husband, Steve, said, *What if everyone is doing their best?* almost always enhances our judgment of others, making it clearer and more grounded in reality. This includes in condemning or calling out the behaviour of others, if or when we feel they have crossed a boundary. In the examples from earlier in this chapter, for example, clearer judgment might lead us to conclude that failing to organise your emails is not acceptable in an organisation, especially if it leads, say, to financial costs. We might also decide that some of the ‘jokes’ my friends made to me on Twitter were offensive or cruel or uncalled for. We certainly might decide that speeding through traffic in a dangerous way is beyond the line of what is acceptable whatever the intention and reasoning of the driver.

Importantly, *What if everyone is doing their best?* shifts us into judging what these people *did* and not who they *were*. It helps us be clearer and less tense as we say what might be a difficult thing to someone we may care about, and it allows us to treat people with the honour and understanding that we ourselves would want to be treated.

There are people in the world who need to be stopped, for their good or for the good of others. There will be times in your life where you will have to do that stopping, if you want to act as your Higher Self. It will take courage, but the assumption of this chapter will help you to be brave. As you do these things from the assumption *What if this person is doing their best?* you will increase the likelihood that you can express clearly and correctly the challenge you are facing *and* you will increase the likelihood that the person you are speaking to hears you and changes, because you are speaking to their behaviour and not their sense of self.

And through your courage, the courage to believe the best in others, to give them the benefit of the doubt, your relationships will be transformed.

### How Do I Do This?

This whole chapter is an exercise in understanding the perspectives of others. And it is a practice: it’s something you have to do repeatedly to give yourself the nimbleness to respond in the moment. Sometimes, if you just remind yourself of this idea – when frustrated with the slow service in a coffee shop, or when someone pushes in front of you in a queue – the situation will shift for you and you will be able to respond more patiently and get the results you want. Or, pausing before you send an email, you may notice, ‘Ah, I’m giving this person a Grade C here. How would I get this same point across to them if they were a Grade A colleague?’

Sometimes, it takes more thought. A long-standing, particularly tangled relationship may take significantly more reflection. If you need to, take some time to write out how it might be possible that someone is doing their best; or get some help from someone else to help you see it, especially if your attitudes to this person have been the same for a long time. Sit down and ask yourself the questions that are in this chapter; this can be done after an event to work through frustration, and it can be done in advance of a conversation you know you will find difficult. Work your curiosity. *How could this person – even in this moment where I am left frustrated or upset – be doing their best?* Or, when faced with someone who has done something that you think is unacceptable, something which makes you furious or annoyed or even hysterically upset, ask: *what would it take for me to behave in this way?*

Find the answer. Because you could behave in that way. You know you could, if circumstances were different, or if your day had started a certain way, or if your life had started a certain way. Or, if you really can't find yourself in that situation, ask what it would take for your husband to behave like that, or your mother, or your son.

So much of our life is circumstance. The place and time we were born, the education we've had, the friends we make. We are all *so* similar to every other human on the planet. So much of where we are came down to essentially the roll of a dice. Almost always, it could be us.

Sometimes, we need to understand the bigger, longer-term picture of how someone may be doing their best. Their upbringing, their education, the things they have been through in their formative years. For the most part, however, it's easier than that. We can imagine being the irritable train guard, or an obstructive colleague, or a person making a joke which is hurtful to someone else, because we have at times behaved in a similar way ourselves (if we are honest). We can then reflect on what it would take for us to behave in that way again.

We don't always need to forgive people for the things they have done, although often we may choose to. But by choosing the key assumption of this chapter, we will see things more clearly. With that clarity, we will act more carefully not to make things worse and we will act more effectively to make things better.

To make this shift, you need to work your curiosity muscles on other people. The questions you need are scattered throughout this chapter and outlined in the summary below: What would it take for them to behave like this? How did they get here? If I got here, or my brother got here, or my mother, or my spouse, how would I want them to be helped or spoken to? And at the centre of these questions is, *What if this person is doing their best?*

Start small. Experiment. See what happens.

Even for someone like me, who was lucky to have this principle implicitly present in their upbringing, it was only when *What if this person is doing their best?* had been brought to light for me several times in my adult life that I started to make it a bedrock of who I am. Even then, I still slip up and take wrong turns, and it needs ongoing work and reminders so that *I can choose* to come back to the path of my Higher Self. As with all change, just seeing the insight isn't enough, you have to apply it every day.

As time has gone on, I have seen more and more clearly that there is no fulfilment in 'winning' in conversations, in shaming or hating people, all of which used to be far more common in my way of being. Those things don't help me and don't make me feel good in the longer term, even though my baser instincts try to persuade me otherwise. Life is about more than the short-term rush, or at least it is if you choose the adventure I am inviting you on. Life, instead, is about making the world a better place when you leave than it was when you arrived and living like that every day. 'Beating' people, hating and shaming don't change others in the long term. These things just add to the complex and tangled patterns and stories which get between them and their Higher Self. These patterns and stories are a part of what leads to each and every one of us acting from our baser and more vindictive instincts at times in our lives. As I have said: on the journey to creating a world with all of us living more as our Higher Selves, more able to respond skilfully to the complex challenges the world may present, it is up to each of us to do our best not to add to the tangled patterns and stories of others. To send out ripples of connection, kindness and possibility, and not ripples of judgment, resentment and anger.

In any moment, you can change the relationship you have with someone, the situation you are in. You can probably change the way they feel and you can certainly change the way you feel. This chapter and, indeed, this whole book, is about helping you to make that shift, from tension and contraction to possibility. *You can choose* when it comes to how you feel about the people around you. In choosing to assume that they are doing their best, you will find *their* behaviour shifting and you will find yourself moving from scarcity and tension to possibility and to your Higher Self.



## Chapter Two Summary

**Key idea:** Our relationships with others will be improved if we choose to live through the assumption of *What if everyone is doing their best?* When we choose to assume this, we shift out of judgment and see the world as it is, not as we think it ought to be.

### Exercises and Practices:

- **What if this person is doing their best?** Ask yourself this when you find yourself frustrated or angry or upset with someone. Practise it when your interactions leave a bitter taste or you feel like a victim. Notice what changes.
- **If this person deserves an A for their performance in that relationship, why might that be?** For what reasons could you give them an A? What might be leading to their actions and words?
- **Ask, am I sure?** How might I be wrong? If I have a little more doubt and a little less certainty, what can I see about this person that I couldn't see before?
- **Do the work to understand your values.** Start by simply asking yourself, in a moment when you feel calm and clear, 'What is central to who I am?' The answers might come back as concepts, behaviours or anything else that is important to you. Consider the things which would make you sad at the end of your life: how would you have been or not been, what would you have done or not done, that would leave you with sadness? Notice when in life you are frustrated or upset by others: what about their behaviour is upsetting you? Could it be that they are violating one of your values?
- If you need to, to practise, take some time to write out the answer to '**How could this person be doing their best?**', or get some help from someone else to help you see it, especially if your attitudes to the person have been the same for a long time. And then reflect: What happened when you got some answers to the question 'How could this person be doing their best?' What difference did it make to your interactions, your conversations and the way you experience life?
- **Ask, what would it take for me to behave in this way?** What would I have to go through to be how they are? If *this* – what the person has done – *was the best they could do* in their situation, what might they have been through for that to be true? And what does this change of perspective change for you? If I found myself here, or my brother/mother/partner, how would I want them to be helped?

### Further Reading and Learning

- *The Art of Possibility* by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander
- *Rising Strong* by Brené Brown
- *Difficult Conversations* with Fred Kofman: <https://vimeo.com/75893191>. For further reading by Kofman, I recommend particularly his book *The Meaning Revolution: The Power of Transcendent Leadership*.
- The writing and poetry of my father, Pete Armstrong: <http://www.holybloke.com/>



## Chapter Three – Curiosity is the Antidote to Contraction

If there is one single attribute that we need in order to create the shifts that will lead us towards our skilful, clear, nimble Higher Self, it is curiosity. In Chapter One, I explained that *you can choose* from different sets of beliefs and assumptions far more than you think. To do that, you need to engage your curiosity about the way you are thinking: What am I assuming here? What else could I choose to believe or think? Which choice would best enable me to live life as my Higher Self, living as the person I wish to be? Throughout Chapter Two I asked you to work your curiosity with the people around you, asking *What if everyone is doing their best?* Getting curious about the perspectives of others enables us to step out of judgment, see things more clearly and live more as our Higher Selves in our relationships with other people.

In this chapter, I will ask you to turn your curiosity on yourself again. Not on your thinking directly, however. Through the key idea of this chapter – *curiosity is the antidote to contraction* – I will invite you to delve into your Deeper Self: the unconscious parts of you, from your genetics and your life experience, that often govern your behaviour. When we do this, we give ourselves a greater opportunity to choose not to act on out-of-date evolutionary or learned instincts. If we want to live more as our Higher Selves, then in the long term it is vital to be courageous enough to look deeply at our experience of life. From this place, we can begin to untangle the patterns which hold us back, which leave us contracted. Curiosity is the path to understanding our Deeper Selves, where we come from and what matters to us at our core. By understanding our Deeper Selves, we can see more and more the traps that we sometimes fall into. Once we see these traps, *we can choose* to make the choices of our Higher Selves.

### The Opposite of Contraction Isn't Openness

Around the time of the involuntary stop I described in the introduction – the break-up of the relationship which at the time had lasted all of my adult life – my brother, writer and coach Ewan Townhead, sent me a recording. It was of a conversation he had had with Guy Sengstock, a coach, trainer, facilitator and philosopher, and one of the founders of Circling, a relational practice which supports people to develop authentic connection with others. Ewan sent me the conversation in part out of sympathy and a desire to connect with me at a time when I needed it. He asked for some feedback, which I gave, although as far as I know the recording never saw the light of day. But it certainly had an impact on me.

Ewan and Guy's conversation opened up some important language for me as I grappled with a set of circumstances that I didn't have the skills to deal with. The language we have available to us affects much of our ability to describe our own experience; once we can describe something that is going on for us we can take perspective on it. And, as I have discussed already, once we can take perspective on something then *we can choose*.

One of the terms that Ewan and Guy introduced me to was 'triggered'. At the time, this term wasn't much used outside of psychology textbooks and therapy rooms. Now, it has become far more commonplace, so much so that for many readers it may not require a definition. In the world of psychology, however, it has a very specific meaning: something – often a sight, a sound or a smell – which brings back feelings of trauma. This might apply, for instance, to someone suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Today, that meaning has expanded as its use in broader society has increased. For the purposes of this book I give a definition as this: being triggered is when something in our life brings a historical experience from our past into the present. Even if we haven't experienced the kind of deep trauma a psychologist might work with, each of us has had difficult experiences, particularly as a child or adolescent. We all also

have a set of evolutionary responses, such as the commonly discussed fight/flight/freeze<sup>16</sup> response to danger. And sometimes there are times when we slip into a different state, the stimulus in the world seeming to lead directly to a change inside us (although for most of us it will thankfully never be the extreme reaction of someone suffering from PTSD).

Guy and Ewan also used another word, 'contraction'. This was a word that, in this context, was new to me, too. But with the gift of the language to describe it I began to notice the 'contraction' feeling in myself: it was happening all the time in the aftermath of the break-up. This is the state I discussed earlier in this book: a feeling of our breath changing, our mood changing, sometimes our whole physiology changing as a response to something that has happened in our world. For me, contraction is a feeling of tightness in the chest, almost as if my shoulders are being folded in on themselves, squashing my heart in between (it feels like my body is literally contracting). It can be a state of fight or flight, or more often, freeze. In that final case, I simply can't react. I don't know what to do. I feel like I need to escape, from my situation or from myself. It can be frightening. I came to notice that it tended to follow some kind of trigger and – through reflection and greater learning – I came to see that this state is almost always a historical response, sometimes an evolutionary one and sometimes from my past. It brings with it fear and scarcity: it is not a place I want to spend time; it is certainly not a place where I can be my Higher Self.

I had to listen to Ewan and Guy's conversation several times to grasp these new concepts and begin to integrate them into my experience of the world. Sometimes it takes a long time to learn something that changes your perspective. It may take a whole book, read slowly and then applied over weeks or months. Or it takes three different people sharing the same thing with you in different ways. That's what happened with the principle *What if everyone is doing their best?* I had years of that idea popping up or being shown to me, but only at the Brené Brown talk did it finally sink in. At other times it takes just one moment of insight, combined with a chance to immediately put the idea into practice over and over again. That moment arrived in the recording when Guy said: 'The opposite of contraction isn't openness. It's curiosity.' And then, 'Curiosity is the opposite of contraction.'

This idea has been my tool in my most difficult moments ever since; it is quite fundamental and requires a little more explanation. First, we need to distinguish between states and processes. This sounds like it could be a small distinction, but is important. A *state* of openness actually *is* – in my experience and maybe yours – a pretty good description for the opposite of the *state* of being contracted. So, if we are feeling contracted then it seems sensible to wish for openness, to strive for it. Unfortunately, striving for openness is a little like striving for calm when you are panicked or trying to clear your mind by putting in more and more effort ('Meditate harder, you fool!' says my internal voice, definitively not helping me meditate). Note again that openness is the opposite of the *state of being contracted* (or at least a good approximation for it). *Contraction*, however, is a noun which means *the process of becoming smaller*. The question is then: what on a psychological level, helps slow or stop the process of becoming smaller? What helps us with the process of becoming bigger, the process of becoming *more open*? And the answer, in my experience and that of Ewan, Guy, my clients and many other thinkers, is curiosity.

Curiosity is the kryptonite for contraction. Curiosity is the equal and opposite force to the force contraction. If you're contracting, it won't help you reverse that process of contraction to think

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<sup>16</sup> Again, fight/flight/freeze is the idea that when in danger, our brains tend to respond in one of those three ways: fight the danger, flee from it or freeze and hope not to be noticed.

of openness (no matter how hard you think). In fact, my experience is often that I can't even remember what the state of openness is like when I'm in that contracted state; it feels a long, long way away. What you need in those moments is a force to help you, something that will slow and then reverse the effects of contraction. You need an antidote. And *curiosity is the antidote to contraction*. Through curiosity you will find the path to your Higher Self: in the moment, out of your contraction and back towards your normal self; and also over the long term, as you learn more and more about yourself through your most difficult moments and gradually open up your patterns to reveal the deepest version of yourself.

As I heard the phrase 'Curiosity is the opposite of contraction' from Guy in the recording and as he and Ewan explored ideas around it, the concept slipped into my awareness. At the time, I desperately needed something to help me: I had tried everything else and things were not going well for me. I had been living in contraction: thoughts, ideas and reminders triggered me into that state, taking me back into grief for the lost relationship and the lost future that I had imagined. I was wrapped in guilt for who I had been and fear that I didn't know who I would be next. I resented people around me who I felt had let me down and I was resentful of the loneliness at losing them. I physically moved myself away to a different town, to get away from those reminders and to give myself the space to deal with the loss I was feeling. Getting away did allow me to insulate myself from at least some of the reactions I was having, but still the reminders were everywhere, trigger after trigger and contraction after contraction.

Some things made a difference: developing my understanding through conversation, ideas and learning helped. But still contractions came, and I felt helpless, lost and adrift. I was desperate to feel better and – although I couldn't see it clearly at the time – the 'better' that I wanted was the feeling of control and agency in my life. That, in the end, was what arrived through the key idea of this chapter.

I don't think the maxim is true: time doesn't, in fact, heal. I think it's perfectly possible to sit, ignoring a problem, ignoring an unresolved part of your story for many years without anything shifting and without feeling any better at all. If we want to genuinely heal our mental or emotional selves, I think that what we need is more understanding, not more time to pass. And understanding comes from curiosity.

Guy's idea – that curiosity is the opposite of contraction – gave me the power to act in the moments when I found myself contracting. It gave me *something to do* when I felt helpless, and that something worked. It gave me a way to deal with what was coming up for me, to take control of my situation. It gave me an antidote to my contraction and to my hopelessness. And the change was powerful.

### It's Not About the Chicken

Recently, my brother shared a story with me. It's a story he heard from Fred Kofman, the consultant and author whose work on difficult conversations I mentioned in Chapter Two. It comes from his work on authentic communication and it goes something like this.

Kofman was having dinner in a small restaurant. As the dinner went on, he became aware of a couple sitting a few tables away, engaged in some kind of disagreement. The size of the restaurant meant that he and the other diners gradually picked up on the tension between the couple. A few minutes later, as the disagreement came to a head and discussion in the restaurant quieted, the woman looked up at the man and said, 'It's not about the chicken, Harry. It's about the last 20 years.'

This is what is happening for us when we get triggered and find ourselves contracting. In the present moment we feel pain or contraction, but the pain and contraction are *almost never* about the chicken: they are *almost never* about what they first appear. Rosamund Stone Zander, in her 2016 book, *Pathways to Possibility*, writes about how our strong emotional reactions can be viewed as memories. What happens in our life is what our definition of ‘triggered’ says: something in the world in the present brings back a historical experience from our memory, just like a sight, sound or smell may for someone suffering from PTSD. From her career as a family therapist, Zander speaks from experience, using clients’ examples to demonstrate that these contractions are memories from our childhood, when life was much scarier and further outside our control. When our behaviour comes from these memories we are much more childlike, different to the more adult clarity of the Higher Self. Curiosity in the face of these memories, these contractions, can teach us about ourselves and our upbringing. It can show us how and why we developed our patterns and behaviours and allow us to integrate them into our adult selves with compassion. We can look at them, then, and see them as a memory rather than a fact about our present circumstances. With the perspective we gain from seeing them in this way, we *can choose* in the present to act or think differently to where the memory would otherwise take us.

Sometimes we are taken even further back, triggered and contracting into the ancient evolutionary patterns of our ancestors and into the parts of our brains that we share with vast swathes of nature’s creatures, including the fight/flight/freeze mechanism. In the lives of our ancestors, let us not forget, the risks were very, very real. Abandonment by the tribe or the family, exposure on the plains, predators in the jungle: these and many other risks could, and often would, lead to death. For almost the entirety of the existence of the human race, that was the harsh reality, and we have evolved to deal with a world where that is the case: where there is real, present danger.

In the modern world, for most of us, we are very rarely faced with a true life-or-death situation. And what a wonderful thing that is. Sometimes, though, our outdated biology can leave us trapped in a kind of short circuit. It can be confused or tied in a knot because we are operating in a world which has changed beyond recognition compared to that of our ancestors. The instinctive parts of us – like the parts of our brains which are no different to those in lizards or other mammals – don’t know everything our conscious mind knows and they can act without our conscious thought. Sometimes those instinctive parts of us feel the significance of a situation without knowing, as our conscious mind does, that we are physically safe. They sense the import to us of what is happening and they *act* as though it is literally life or death, triggering neurological and hormonal responses as if we were in actual danger. The response of our body to situations like these – often a contraction – can be frightening to be inside. In these situations, following curiosity toward this contraction – asking, what is happening here? What am I frightened of, deep down? – can often lead to deep evolutionary fears like abandonment or death. This kind of confusion from our instincts is why public speaking regularly tops surveys of people’s biggest fears: our instinctive parts think that we are actually at risk of death from the judgment of an audience, even if our rational mind knows this isn’t the case.

Once we see these deep, underlying fears for what they are, we can forgive ourselves the stresses we feel: if my entire existence feels at risk here, then no wonder I am incredibly anxious. With that greater perspective, we can acknowledge the fear for what it is and also see in the light of day that it is unfounded in the present. This leads (sometimes very quickly) to a lessening of the fear and contraction, and enables us to see that *we can choose*.

After my break-up, emotional and evolutionary triggers were regularly happening in my life and so I experimented with Guy's idea and focused my curiosity on the contractions. In my experiments I found that the hypothesis held true. It wasn't always easy, and it didn't always work right away, but overall it made a difference. As I looked inward at what was happening for me when I felt a contraction, things shifted and some of the reaction eased. And when I looked outward at other people and their behaviour and examined them with curiosity, that helped too. Often, for me, this was about a shift from blaming myself to understanding myself. That understanding allowed me to integrate my behaviour, to own and understand and forgive myself. That, in turn, lessened the power of the contraction in the moment and over time allowed me to understand myself and the world more deeply, developing my resilience to contraction: I began to contract less and become more skilled at bouncing back when I did. More than that, I began to heal and to grow.

### Choose Responsibility

There is another important thread to draw out, here, which for me also originates in that discussion between my brother Ewan and Guy Sengstock, and which complements the idea that *curiosity is the antidote to contraction*. It takes us back to an idea I shared in Chapter One: that suffering is caused not by what is actually here now, but by *resisting* what is actually here now. Here in Chapter Three, what this means is this: fundamentally, it isn't possible for one person to trigger someone else; it is and can only be the responsibility of the person *being* triggered and *their interpretation* that causes the trigger. That is, if I am triggered, it is *down to me*, rather than the person who has said or done something. It is *my interpretation* that causes the trigger.

Choosing to believe this is vitally important because it puts us in control of our own experience. It was this idea, along with the new antidote I had to my contractions, which helped me feel the kind of 'better' that I wanted after my break-up. If I choose to believe that my emotional reactions are my responsibility, and not something to be blamed on someone else, then this takes me out of the victim mindset and into control of my life.

Does this mean that we shouldn't blame people for the cruel ways they victimise and trigger other people? No, it doesn't. As societies, we have to organise ourselves and in doing that set boundaries on what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, via laws, customs and common practices. And as individuals on this journey, we have to create boundaries for ourselves and those around us, even while assuming that *everyone is doing their best* as we discussed in Chapter Two. However, even where someone has behaved unacceptably, it is almost always better for the victim of that behaviour to believe that they have the power to choose their response to it.

For me, wrapped in a cycle of triggers and contractions, this belief was transformational. If it's up to me, I can change it. I am not a victim of the situation: my response is down to my interpretation, so it is within my power to choose something different. *I can choose*. In particular, I can choose to stop feeling like this. However, there is another side to this coin. There is a freedom in being able to affect what happens inside us, but it is also a dreadful freedom, because suddenly, everything is down to us.

If *you can choose* that it is down only to you whether you are triggered or not, then that is a lot of responsibility for you to hold. It takes courage to choose that, instead of placing the blame outside yourself, but it is worth it. If you are committed to deepening your understanding of yourself and to spending more of your time as your Higher Self, this is the only adventure to choose. It is the adventure of a creator, not a victim; the adventure of contracting less and less in



our lives; the adventure of growing more capable and more skilful as we navigate the complexities of life. It is the adventure of taking responsibility not just for our actions in the world, but for how we interpret the actions of others.

*What if that person, that event, isn't upsetting me? What if instead my interpretation of the person and event is what is causing me to feel this way?*

There is the responsibility. It's down to me and it's down to you. With the responsibility comes wonderful and dreadful freedom and with that freedom you truly do have the power to choose.

### It's Not About the Suits

It's not always easy to take that responsibility. Even if you are committed to this journey, as I am, it can sometimes be very hard to choose curiosity in the moment and follow it to the understanding that helps. When we were planning our wedding, my wife and I were sitting on our balcony, having a conversation about some of the logistics of the event. We had moved to the balcony because I was struggling, getting anxious and stressed. But out there it didn't get better, in fact it got worse. I can feel it now: sitting there, faced with a 'simple' situation, about ushers and suits. Who would be ushers and who in the wedding party would wear what? But it somehow wasn't simple: I couldn't think, *I couldn't speak*. My normally incredibly active rational mind was completely still. Worse than still: empty, frighteningly empty. I sat, looking at the balcony rail, unable to look at Emma. I was waiting desperately for a thought to come, grasping for it. Anything. I wanted to say something, to talk through it with her. Nothing came. No thoughts, no words.

It was frightening, and it was clear that this wasn't about what Emma was saying or doing; it wasn't about ushers or suits or any of the logistics. *It's not about the chicken, Harry*. On the surface, our conversation about the wedding had left me feeling like this, in perfect 'freeze': like a rabbit in the headlights, frozen and hoping in vain that the threat would pass me by. But of course, my life wasn't at risk and, rationally, nothing about the ushers and suits should have left me feeling that way. Something different was happening: something about the conversation was triggering something in me. Something about my interpretation of what was going on was taking me to a historical experience: a different place, a different time.

I shared this experience with my psychotherapist. And as he suggested a way to work with this kind of thing if it came up again, I almost laughed. I was working on this book at the time and here's what he suggested. First, notice what's happening: 'Ah, I'm shutting down here. I'm getting triggered.' Then, he suggested, get curious: 'That thing is happening. What is going on?'

And he went further: 'It might be hard to do that yourself sometimes. You could even ask Emma to help here, ask her to say something like, "It looks like you're shutting down, Robbie. What's happening?"'

A week later, after sharing this suggestion with Emma, we were having another conversation about the wedding. And it was happening again. Emma caught it: I could see it was difficult for her – she was getting frustrated with our exchange – but she managed to catch it anyway, assumed I was doing my best and said, 'Robbie, you're shutting down. What's going on?' She caught it quite early and even then it was still hard for me to shift out of the contraction. I struggled to bring curiosity in the face of that question, but managed get outside the contraction just enough. After a minute or so I found I could speak through it. And I shared what was going on in that moment, a fear: *If I can't even make this decision about suits, how can I support you when you need my help? And how can we work together for the rest of our lives?* And her curiosity,

engaging mine and then enabling me to share what was *really* happening for me did shift the contraction. The openness and access to my rational mind returned to me, a little in the moment and then more over subsequent minutes and hours. And, gradually, I found myself returning to my calm, adult self. Only from that place could I solve the problem and make the decisions.

Later, through more conversations and more curiosity about another deep contraction around the wedding and the suits, I saw two stories, two memories from another time. These were, perhaps, the historical events that were being triggered in me.

The first was a story of being trapped and alone without the answer, feeling cornered. Perhaps the story of a small boy, home educated by incredibly understanding parents and then later sent to a primary school with people who didn't understand him, a place with *so many* rules he didn't know and questions he couldn't answer. *Alone and without the answer, feeling trapped and afraid.*

The second was a story of just wanting everyone to be happy. Perhaps the story of a small boy in a family struggling with the challenges of step-children and long-distance relationships: a mother who wants her partner to move to live with her; a father who is struggling to juggle his son and partner in one town and another son from a previous relationship in a city many miles away; and a half-brother who, underneath, just wants his father to *come home*. And the small boy is the only person who *just wants everyone to be happy, together.*

And somehow, in awareness of those stories, everything becomes easier. Next time, I will have more perspective on what is happening as I find myself *alone and without the answer, feeling trapped and afraid*. Or as I find myself stuck, unable to make things work because I *just want everyone to be happy, together* and that isn't always possible. I know where those feelings, those contractions, come from. I can see them and I can forgive myself for finding them hard. And if someone else had been through those things, well, they would probably find the same things hard, too.

And so, these things that I do – the contractions that catch me – they become things that are separate to 'me', rather than just being 'me'. They are stories I tell myself and they are stories I can tell others. So next time I find myself in that space, I am a little less trapped, unable to speak or move or decide. And a little bit less the time after that and the time after that and the time after that. They are parts of me: the young boy alone and without the answer and the even younger boy who just wants everyone to be happy, together. They are parts of me I want to integrate into my adult self. They deserve to be loved, not pushed away, just like all the other parts of me do.

I can use *curiosity is the antidote to contraction*. I can get outside of those stories, and then *I can choose*.

It's not about the suits, Robbie. It's about the last 34 years.

### The Patterns That Keep Us Safe

This is just one example, but I could have shared many from my own life, as situations like this showed up and I struggled. I could tell you client stories about the energy shift for people when they understand and then integrate into themselves the source of their struggle. This often happens, like it did for me, when they can see the time in their past from where the stories they tell themselves originated. They see that at those times it was perfectly understandable to feel and react as they did: it kept them safe. It really helped back then but now, in the present day,



they don't need its help anymore. They can love the part of themselves, the memory, that is causing trouble instead of trying to shut it down and push it away.

The contractions we feel, once upon a time, perhaps, protected us. Perhaps, for me, sitting on the balcony unable to think or speak is the freeze mechanism from the parts of our brain we share with other animals<sup>17</sup>. Perhaps it is a sense that *I am not safe and I need to stop and hide*. Perhaps it is a way for us just not to make anything worse. It makes me think of a deer, or other animal, trapped in brambles, who instinctively knows that moving is making things worse. *Something is going wrong, just stop*. But it doesn't help us anymore. Not really. Almost all the time in the modern day, this part of us is an outdated mechanism that doesn't make anything better for us, but can absolutely make things worse, like the rabbit in the headlights, freezing in vain as the car races towards it.

If you are triggered at your work, the way to succeed in work is not through contracting further. We don't do our best work when we are fighting, fleeing or freezing.

In your romantic relationships, the great joy that love brings to you and your partner is not manifest when you are contracting. Worse, your reactions from within a contraction will often carry pain and arguments and hurt to those you love, as a response from your own fear.

With your children, the guidance and wisdom they need is hard to come by when your chest is tight and your fear is high.

If you are committed to living as your Higher Self, to being the person who you are on your best days more as your life goes on, then the idea that *curiosity is the antidote to contraction* is not something you will want to overlook.

### Guilt is the Path to Growth

I need to warn you about something. If you use *curiosity is the antidote to contraction*, and through this learn more about yourself and develop more and more perspective, you will find things you regret. But that is ok. That is a part of growing as a human: as time goes on and we learn, our perspective develops and our decision-making processes become more effective and sophisticated. And, if we develop our perspectives on ourselves and the world, then sometimes we will look back and realise the things we did, the choices we made in the past, are not things we would do now. In the story with the suits, I was freezing, but there are plenty of times in my life where I have 'fought' or 'fled' out of some outdated fear. Once we have greater perspective on the deeper parts of ourselves, we suddenly see this behaviour in a new light, and upon reflection we may feel regret for the ways we have behaved. This brings us back to guilt and shame, as I described in Chapter Two.

Guilt is healthy. It is realising we have done something in the past (even if it is sometimes the very recent past) that contradicts our values in the present, that contradicts how we now think people should behave, that contradicts our Higher Selves. It is *I did something bad*. Or, if 'bad' is too strong, it is *I did something I'd rather not do again*. Guilt is how we learn. It shows us we have developed our perspective and our ability to respond skilfully to the challenges of the world: we know something different to what we knew then. It is how we decide 'never again' and 'it will be

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<sup>17</sup> The 'freeze mechanism' is when we are under threat and our nervous system subconsciously tells us that freezing, not fighting or fleeing, is the best path.

different next time'. Shame, on the other hand, is a different beast altogether. Shame is being unable to distinguish one's actions from oneself. Shame, remember, is *I am bad*.

It is impossible to integrate and accept a part of our self about which we feel deep shame. Shame, in fact, wraps us in patterns that stop us owning and accepting parts of ourselves. Guilt teaches us that there are things we might have done in the past that we shouldn't do again, for the good of ourselves or others. This helps us be socialised creatures, and gradually adjust our behaviour for the better. Shame, on the other hand, teaches us that there are parts of ourselves that *shouldn't be*.

To fully give all our gifts – to achieve our potential and be our Higher Selves – we need all parts of us to be at our disposal. We need to develop perspective on our shame and reintegrate those parts of ourselves which we have pushed away.

### The Castle

Writer and Leadership Coach Vegard Olsen talks about this like a castle. When we are young, he says, we run around the castle, playing freely in any part of it with the beautiful freedom that children have. As our life goes on, we learn that certain parts of the castle are not safe for children, maybe not safe for anyone. Or that 'good little children' don't go there. We learn this from our parents, from our teachers, from our siblings and from our internal interpretations of what we see in the world around us.

The top of a tower, perhaps, or a dark room in a cellar, is unsafe or is where 'good boys' or 'good girls' don't go. So we don't go there. But we are children when we hear these messages, and sometimes we confuse them. We are so frightened of what might happen at the *top* of the tower, or in that *particular* room in the cellar, that we don't go in the tower or cellar at all. Out of fear of accessing that one particular room, we deny ourselves access to a whole part of the castle, a whole part of our playground, a whole part of our selves.

For me, the top of one of my towers is the kind of anger which could lead to physical harm to someone. Only bad people get angry like that. Perhaps, I *am* bad when I am angry like that, so I will not go there again. But somewhere I got confused: I haven't locked just the top floor, I've locked the whole tower. Somewhere lower down that same tower are other parts of the same quality, anger: the ability to stand up for myself or others, the ability to be direct, the ability to speak my mind when it might offend someone. The ability to debate healthily with someone else is in the same tower, too, as is the ability to express my frustration when someone oversteps my boundaries. These things are perfectly healthy, perfectly acceptable things for any adult to do in the course of their daily life. More than that, without them I am powerless in certain situations. I admire deeply people who can be direct, people who are able to debate with others, with clarity and humour, people who express their frustration rather than letting it fester. My Higher Self is someone who can do all these things – I *know* it is – but with the tower locked, my power to do each of these things is locked away too. My ability to be myself is reduced. My ability to create change – for myself, my loved ones and the world – is lessened.

The key distinction, then, is guilt and shame.

Shame is *I am bad* if I go in this tower, if I access any of those things. Shame is a fixed way of being and requires a fixed response: a lock on the door of the tower. A hiding of and a restriction on certain parts of ourselves, at all costs, in all situations.

Guilt is knowing that *acting in a certain way* is bad. Guilt is the power to choose: will I do it again this time, or will I be different? How much of this quality should I use in this moment? Guilt is the tower left open, unlocked, so *I can choose*. With guilt – healthy, important guilt – I know what could happen if I go to the top floor of the tower at the wrong time or in the wrong way. I know it may be unsafe, I know it may conflict with my values and how I want to be. It is there and available to me and I *choose* not to go there. I don't need to lock it away and at the same time lock away the other floors of the tower. Instead I can integrate and own the things I have done and the person I am, knowing I will do better next time. This is what we need if we are to access our greatest potential.

Without guilt, it is impossible to grow and to change. The stories I have shared across this chapter started very much from a realisation that in my previous relationship I had not been the person I wanted to be. I had not behaved well; I had made mistakes and I had hurt someone I cared deeply about. I hadn't done anything terrible, by most measures. I hadn't slept with someone else or been violent. But there were many ways in the relationship that I could have been better or kinder. I hadn't been the kind of man I'd always hoped I'd be. One of the ways I was supported in the aftermath of that break-up was to be in guilt and not shame; I remember now the words of my mother on several different occasions, giving me the message: yes, you could have behaved better, but you are not a bad person.

That isn't the first time that I have behaved as I would rather not, and I'm sure it won't be the last. In each of my romantic relationships there are things I wish I hadn't done. I have said things I really wish I hadn't said. I have let down, even betrayed, friends. I have been violent, although thankfully not since schoolyard fights. I think about many of these things regularly. They come into my mind with at least a wince, and sometimes a much stronger physical reaction. A contraction. As I engage my curiosity on that contraction, what I realise is that the contraction is a message: *I don't want to behave like that again. I don't want to forget these events: I want to remember them, to savour them to make sure that next time I choose to do something different.* I don't always manage to be my best self, but the guilt I feel enables me to integrate my behaviour into myself, taking me further towards the person that I want to be, the Higher Self that I am being called to become.

Through guilt and curiosity, these mistakes become the foundations and building blocks of the person I am and the person I want to be in the future. For each of us, they allow us to understand our Deeper Selves: the values we hold dear and the patterns and memories we may be trapped in. They show us where to draw boundaries with others and with ourselves.

Follow the contraction of the guilt and get curious. And there you will see what you want to change about yourself, what value you did not live up to, what you want to be different next time. Seeing those things gives us a choice, a freedom, to make next time better.

Having compassion for ourselves, being able to see that we did our best, enables us to stay out of shame. Having the perspective to understand our previous actions in the context of our lives, our upbringing, our assumptions and our humanity is what makes our feelings a wince of guilt, not years or decades of shame. When we are in a space of deep shame, we are in a place of extreme scarcity. If *I am* bad, then what can change? If we are committed to growing, to bringing our Higher Selves into the world more regularly, to making the times we are knocked down fewer and further between, and to enabling ourselves to get up faster each time, then we will have to face things we aren't proud of. The regrets and the things we wish we hadn't done. When we do this, or when we catch ourselves feeling guilt or shame, we can choose to ask a

question: ok, maybe I didn't live up to the standards I set, or those others set for me, but what if I was doing my best?

Your curiosity, bit by bit, day by day, is vital to helping you grow. It might take time and commitment with some of the things you regret, especially if the regret runs deep. But engage the curiosity: go back to those questions from Chapter Two but turn them on yourself now. What did it take for me to behave like that? What is going on here? Where is this feeling of guilt or shame coming from? The curiosity could move you from shame to guilt. And from guilt, closer and closer to your Higher Self.

### How Do I Do This?

This chapter is about how understanding your Deeper Self is a fundamental part of your journey to living your life as the person you deep down hope to be. It is about using curiosity to grow, ever bigger, in our capacities and capabilities for dealing with the complexity of the modern world, by looking at the tangles of our psychology.

As we face people or things that are 'triggering us'<sup>18</sup> and we get curious, we will find out what it is that leaves us feeling contracted. Often, we will find something which we deeply care about, a deeply held value that someone – ourselves or someone else – is acting outside of. This will tell us what matters to us.

As we use *curiosity is the antidote to contraction*, we will uncover memories and patterns from our past, stories which may be forming a fundamental part of how we relate to ourselves or to others. Curiosity will give us the perspective to see these memories and patterns as they actually are. Once we realise that our behaviour, our patterns and the ways we are acting are a part of our past, are part memory and part story we tell ourselves, we realise that we have a choice. This – looking at our patterns and the responses we make that carry us into these contractions – creates freedom and agency for ourselves.

*Curiosity is the antidote to contraction* can take us to those two things: what matters to me here? And what stories, memories and patterns am I living out in this moment as I struggle and contract? Each of these will give us a clearer understanding of our Deeper Selves: the reasons we do what we do and the ways we hold ourselves back.

Once I learned via Guy Sengstock's insight that (in my slightly rephrased version of his idea) *curiosity is the antidote to contraction*, I embraced curiosity by delving into myself, my experience, my history, my assumptions.

A new habit began to form. The contraction – a feeling impossible to ignore – was now followed by curiosity. The questions were: 'What's *really* happening here? I'm not at risk of death, even if it feels like that. I'm not even at risk of harm. So, what is *actually* going on?' I began to *feel* Guy's wisdom. By shining the light of curiosity on myself, using the understanding I had picked up through books and podcasts and conversations, I found myself, in the end, opening up. I felt my contraction dissipate under the light of curiosity like mist in the morning sun. More than that: each contraction became an opportunity, a chance to learn even more about my Deeper Self, a chance to free myself from another chain that might keep me from my Higher Self.

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<sup>18</sup> The inverted commas are here to remind us that the people and things we see aren't really triggering us: our response is what counts.

When I was young, I used to have a kind of vocal tick, a way to slow the conversation down to give myself time to think or avoid getting things wrong. I used to say, 'Mmm... interesting.' Now, that has become a part of the way I shift from contraction to curiosity.

When something unexpected happens, and particularly when your emotions crack like a whip and your tensions or your tears rise, you can deny and you can fight. You can even strive, desperately, for openness. But those options won't take you out of contraction or the sense of being trapped; they won't give you a sense of possibility or access to your Higher Self. What you need is curiosity. It isn't always easy to stop the contractions, to make that shift. Sometimes you'll need help from someone around you, noticing when you find yourself trapped in contraction. Sometimes you might be able to bring yourself to it. In times like that, '*Mmm... interesting*' can be helpful. Use it to shift.

Bring humour and a smile with it, if you can: 'Mmm... Interesting! Wow, what is happening here? What part of my hilarious and wonderful humanity has short-circuited here? What am I up to? What's going on, *really*?'

Bring love with it: 'Mmm... interesting. There's something deep happening here, something from the past. No wonder I'm struggling with it. I am human, after all. What could *really* be going on?'

And then engage your curiosity and follow it to the possibility of remembering, of better understanding, a part of yourself. Follow your curiosity to owning that part of you and integrating it into your view of the world, accepting it as part of your Deeper Self. It is from this place that we can find the agency to act differently – to choose to act as our Higher Selves – and also to change ourselves, at that deepest, most fundamental level. We can begin to think 'Do I want to act from this set of beliefs or memories? Or do I want to choose a different belief here?' From there, *you can choose*.

Not all of the things we are dealing with involve delving into deep feelings from our past, into those childhood patterns and stories, but sometimes the changes we seek in ourselves do require looking in deep places. The path away from contraction and towards possibility is a strange one: it involves a counter-intuitive facing of the things that are difficult to face, and it takes courage. Through examination of these difficulties we increase our understanding and, as we learn about them and about ourselves, they become easier to face. As we accept the things we have done as understandable actions, we may regret them while still knowing *I was doing the best I could with what I had at the time*. At this point, they become easier to hold and to own and then we – I – become easier to love.

This process is hardest when we are in deep pain, when we are filled with regret, when we think 'I am a terrible person', 'I am a broken person'. And it starts with a small step. Perhaps now is the time to change your thinking, to choose a different adventure. It isn't about shame; it is about guilt and the path from shame to guilt and on to possibility, and it starts with asking yourself a question. It starts with getting curious.

### Chapter Three Summary

**Key idea:** When you feel yourself contracting – becoming more upset, anxious or reactive – use *curiosity is the antidote to contraction*. When we use our curiosity to face our struggles, when we

understand our Deeper Selves, we can choose to step away from our instinctive patterns and reactions and step towards our Higher Selves.

### Exercises and Practices:

- **What if that person/event isn't *actually* upsetting me?** What if instead my interpretation of the person/event is what is causing me to feel this way?
- Remember: **It's not about the chicken and it's not about the suits.** When you feel a trigger and a contraction, it is almost never about what is happening in the moment. Instead, it is taking you back to something deeper. Try to bring curiosity in the moment: what is *really* happening here? And, in the moment or later, look for any links to memories: when do you first remember feeling a feeling like that? Who does it remind you of?
- **Look for the ancient short-circuits.** When you find yourself afraid of something and you have a sense it may be an irrational fear, ask yourself: What am I frightened of, deep down? When you have an answer, try digging deeper: If that happens, *then* what am I frightened of, deep down? See what emerges: when you see what your instinctual short-circuits are combining, you may be able to have more compassion for yourself about the fear and you may decide to choose to act anyway. We'll get to a similar example to this in Chapter Four.
- Use **The Castle Metaphor.** Think of a person you really dislike. It could be someone you know or a famous person. Answer the question: what three qualities do you really dislike in this person? These may be qualities which you dislike so much that you have unknowingly closed off a whole tower of your castle. The game then is: what is a smaller version of each of those quality, a more acceptable one? In my example from this chapter, the quality of anger was one I disliked, but that led to me shutting off the ability to stand up for myself or others, the ability to be direct, the ability to speak my mind when it might offend someone, the ability to debate healthily with someone else and the ability to express my frustration when someone oversteps my boundaries. What might be possible if you allowed yourself just 5% more access to the qualities you like in your daily life? What might that look like?
- **What's *really* happening here?** I'm not at risk of death, even if it feels like that; I'm not even at risk of harm. So what is *actually* going on?
- **'Mmm... interesting.'** Develop a habit of bringing this phrase to mind when you notice the contractions. Bring humour and a smile with it, if you can: 'Mmm... interesting! Wow, what is happening here? What part of my hilarious and wonderful and flawed humanity is short-circuited here? What am I up to? What's going on, *really*?' Or bring love with it: 'Mmm... interesting. There's something deep happening here, something from the past. No wonder I'm struggling with it. What could *really* be going on?'
- **What if I was doing my best?** Maybe I didn't live up to the standards I set, or those others set for me, but what if I was doing my best? Yes, I could have behaved better, but I am not a bad person; I am doing my best.
- **What did it take for me to behave like that?** What is going on here? Where is this feeling of guilt or shame coming from?

### Further Reading and Learning

- Guy Sengstock: <https://guysengstock.wordpress.com/>
- Ewan Townhead: <http://www.ewantownhead.com/>
- *Pathways to Possibility* by Rosamund Stone Zander







## Afterword

These are strange, complex, turbulent times. I hope the ideas in this book help you to deal with these times with more skill, looking out for yourself and those around you. I hope they allow you to see the possibility amidst the scarcity and the opportunities to change things for the better amidst the struggle to keep things afloat.

I hope you take at least something from reading this and create change in your life. I hope that leads you to understand the deeper parts of you more clearly, and that you find ways to live out your life that little bit more as the person you are on your best days.

I hope that happens for you, for those around you, and for the world at large.

Together, we might be able to steady the ship.