How to be Deeply Present in an Un-Present World

STOP MISSING YOUR LIFE

CORY MUSCARA

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in an Un-Present World

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LIFE LONG

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For my parents, Cory and Lori.

Thank you for teaching me to dance, love,
cry, sing, and care.

I owe everything to you.

Sit. Feast on your life.

—Derek Walcott

PREFACE

MY STORY AS AN UNLIKELY MEDITATION TEACHER

One title you could put on my business card is "meditation teacher." It still feels odd for me to say that out loud because I recall how I originally pursued meditation for a rather youthful, wayward reason: I was trying to impress a girl.

My girlfriend in college was into meditation. I was an economics major and knew next to nothing about meditation. I figured if I meditated, she would think I was cool. So, I started meditating.

She broke up with me two weeks later.

Despite my somewhat superficial undertaking and the unfortunate breakup, I continued to meditate. I didn't really know what I was doing. I would lie down on my dorm room bed, put my hands on my belly, and think "INHALE… EXHALE… INHALE… EXHALE." I thought it was weird, but I did it for fifteen minutes a day, three times a week. Within a month, some cool things started to happen.

The first related to sleep. At that point, I was a restless sleeper. It started in adolescence when my mind would race throughout the night. I tried sleep meds, but they made me groggy. Within a few weeks of hands-on-belly "INHALE… EXHALE," I went from waking up every half hour to only about two or three times a night. I even started having nights when I didn't wake up at all, which, outside of waking up hungover, hadn't happened before.

Another positive shift related to focus. I was going to class, but I wasn't actually *in* class, meaning my body was in one

place, but my mind was in another. I really wanted to be focused, but my mind just wandered all over the place. After about a month of meditating, though, I felt like I had this new superpower that some people call "paying attention." With it, I actually started to enjoy learning, my grades improved, I became a better listener, and my mind wasn't so chaotic.

A smile would sometimes creep up on my face. There was a lightness in my step. I felt more peaceful.

Now, I don't want to oversell it. It's not like the clouds parted and all my problems went away, but having struggled with anxiety and depression through adolescence, feeling "good" out of seemingly nowhere was a major development in my life.

Then, something happened that took this from an interesting hobby with perks to becoming an integral part of my life.

My junior year, thirty of us from the economics department visited the New York Stock Exchange to meet with some bigwig hedge fund manager. Everyone said this was *the* guy to meet. We took the eight-hour trip from Allegheny College to Manhattan, where we sat in a conference room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. Eventually, this guy walked in wearing what must have been a $10,000 suit. He pulled up his slides and gave a two-hour PowerPoint presentation. By the end of it, I felt like my soul had been sucked out of my body. I was bored, uninspired, and completely turned off. I remember my visceral repulsion and thinking, "I don't know what I want to do with my life, but I know for sure I do not want to end up like this guy."

To be fair to him, I have no idea what was causing his misery. He may have had a colonoscopy before he came in the room, so I can't confirm that he was perpetually unhappy. Regardless of what was actually going on, I owe him a thank-you, because that experience made me ask myself, "If that's not what I want, then what is it that I *do* want?"

After spending months with this question, one answer kept

coming to the surface: *I want to be happy.*

I still cringe at how trite that sounds. It reeks of every social media post that says "life is all about happiness" or "happiness is a choice," which turn me off as much as that Wall Street hotshot. But I can't deny that happiness was my new focus. I became engrossed with one big question: What does it mean to cultivate a happiness that is not solely contingent upon external variables like money, my job title, or things going "well"?

I'm sure you can imagine a young man coming home from college, talking to his father, saying, "Hey, Dad! I know I was going to go into business, but now I want to understand what it means to cultivate a happiness that is not solely contingent upon external variables!"

You might imagine a response like, "Good for you, son. Now, go get a job."

Fortunately, that's not how it went down. Instead, one of the great gifts of my life is that my father, a family practice physician on Long Island, had already started studying ways to help patients change their behaviors, improve their health, and become happier. He had been getting frustrated with the direction that health care was going, feeling like he couldn't serve his patients in the way he sought to from the outset. So, he turned to studying evidence-based modalities for fostering health and well-being in the science of mindfulness meditation —a practice to develop moment-to-moment awareness—and positive psychology, the scientific study of well-being.

When I told him that I was interested in happiness, instead of shutting me down, he encouraged me. And so did my mom, who is a social worker and also has a deep interest in helping people live better lives. They basically said, "People will always want to be happier. There's new science to help people be happier, so if you pursue this study and cultivate the right skills you might be able to create a career in this." My dad gave me a book on mindfulness meditation called *Full Catastrophe Living*, by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn—an MIT-trained

molecular biologist credited with bringing mindfulness into Western medicine—and *Authentic Happiness*, by Dr. Martin Seligman—a world-renowned psychologist who in 1998 called on the field of psychology to not only focus on what goes wrong in life, but to also focus on what goes right in life. Both books helped me understand the simple idea that happiness is something we can develop with the right tools and training.

At the time, mindfulness caught my attention the most. I think there was something compelling about the prospect of actually being present for my life, as well as having a very clear practice to cultivate that capacity: meditation. I went on my first mindfulness meditation retreat three months later, and by the end of it, I was crying my eyes out in front of 150 people. My brother, who was also on the retreat, still makes fun of me for that moment—snot dripping down my face and onto the microphone, as I whimpered through tears, "There are just… so… many… beautiful… people… here." We laugh about it now, but there was something profoundly meaningful in it.

The tears weren't because I had touched into some really deep suffering; they were because I felt like I was reconnecting to myself and the world around me. I had this new appreciation for my life—colors seemed brighter, food tasted better, I felt more calm, and I started to experience deeper connections with people. I was more present and happy. I hadn't realized just how much of my life I was missing.

I remember thinking, "If the promise of mindfulness and positive psychology is happiness, and what I'm looking for is happiness, I can't go wrong following this path further. Even if it means living a modest life, different from what I had thought I wanted, this path will take me to a place of fulfillment. Why not first devote all my focus to understanding what makes an *actually happy life* rather than take a gamble on a different path that may or may not bring me happiness?"

It made so much sense to my twenty-year-old mind. And

again, I was lucky that I had the support of my family to pursue this. I know that it's a privilege to even get to ask the question, let alone pursue it.

So, I started taking psychology, meditation, and yoga classes at Allegheny College. I went on mindfulness teacher training retreats through the Center for Mindfulness at UMass. I traveled back and forth to Duke Integrative Medicine to become a health coach. I consumed as many books as I could on the topic of well-being. Through all of it, mindfulness meditation continued to stand out to me as the most compelling, and I found my attention getting more and more focused in that direction.

When I graduated college, it was time to make some decisions about next steps. My life had improved drastically during the last year, but I was still nervous about what the best next step forward would be. I had watched some of my peers and elders pursue conventional success. Friends who were a few years older than me had gotten "dream jobs," and thought they were set for life, only to find within two years that they felt trapped in a place they no longer wanted to be. I witnessed people getting into relationships and marriages, thinking this person would bring them happiness, and then several years later, complaining that the same person was making them miserable. Then there were the people who wanted to make a lot of money, thinking that this was going to make them happy, but once they had it they were still struggling with whatever had plagued them before.

I knew that I, too, could fall into this trap, trying to put all the right puzzle pieces together and thinking, "This is the picture of happiness I always imagined," only to find out later that I was wrong. I still believed that if I could first cultivate a happiness that was less dependent on external variables, that would be the foundation to build the rest of my life on. I could still strive for all the other things—the house, the car, the relationship, the kids—but I wouldn't *need* these things to be happy. And if my life someday got flipped on its head, it wouldn't throw me into the pits of despair, because my

happiness resided someplace deeper. This was my logic at the time, at least.

So… I decided to separate myself from the things that were currently bringing me happiness—friends, family, status, plans for the future—and see if I could develop a happiness within. I deferred over $50,000 in student loans and traveled to Burma. There, I lived in silence as a monk for six months in a Buddhist monastery, meditating fourteen-plus hours a day, studying under a teacher named Sayadaw U Pandita—widely considered one of the greatest (and most intense) living meditation teachers of the time. There was no reading, no listening to music, no speaking, no contact with the outside world. Every day, we woke up at 3:00 a.m. and went to bed at around 9:30 p.m., eating breakfast and lunch before 11:00 a.m. and then fasting till 5:30 a.m. the next day (no dinner). It was often over 100 degrees with no air-conditioning; there were mosquitoes, ants, and spiders everywhere; and the mattresses were so thin you could squeeze them between your fingers and feel the bone on the other side.

It was the hardest thing I have ever done, which might sound like an embellishment when you consider that I was safe, all of my meals were cooked for me, there were no e-mails to respond to, no kids to take care of, and from the outside, it looks like we're just sitting, walking slowly, and doing a whole lot of nothing for days on end. But it was the most intense "nothing" you can imagine.

When all of the distractions and pleasures of your life are stripped away—the smartphone, the music, the news, the friends, the career, the sex (yes, I was celibate; not even masturbation was allowed)—you're left with just yourself. You and yourself, all the time, 24/7. The meditation adds another level of intensity to this by bringing deep awareness to your inner world—your thoughts, emotions, and pains… all of it.

Looking in the mirror in this way is hard, but wow, is it incredible what can happen once you do. It's when you can meet yourself fully, turning toward not only your joy and

goodness, but also your deeper hurts, and possibly shame, that you can do the work of appreciating, understanding, forgiving, and making peace with yourself. Otherwise, you risk running from yourself. The same problems, distorted thinking, and negative patterns that you've always had persist beneath the surface, never getting resolved, continuing to diminish your happiness and that of those around you. When we bring more awareness to *all* of our experience, not only aspects of ourselves that we are grateful for but aspects we've been hiding from finally get the chance to surface. Even though it can be painful to see and feel some of these parts of ourselves, meeting them with gentle awareness, as we do in meditation, allows these experiences to start to transform, integrate, or pass entirely.

This process, of being attuned and present to the totality of ourselves, combined with a mind that is compassionate and calm, leads to a very deep sense of peace, as well as an ability to move fluidly with the constantly changing landscape of our lives and the world.

When I returned from Burma, though, I was hit with a stark realization. It was one thing to have peace and contentment in a secluded forest monastery where I could meditate all day with little distraction. It was another thing entirely to maintain this equanimity amid relationships, family dynamics, money struggles, smartphones, the news, and overscheduled time. The "real world" posed challenges that I did not have to contend with in the monastery. Even though I was significantly better equipped to work with those challenges than before, it was a new landscape for me to navigate.

I decided *this* is where I wanted to do the work—the work of being deeply present in the world we live in, learning how to be human among other humans, and finding real happiness amid the chaos. I wanted to do it here, in the real world, where it's most difficult and most needed. It is what I've committed my life to, and it's what I hope to help others do as well.

It's a privilege to be on this journey with you.

INTRODUCTION

FROM “PRESENT” TO “PRESENCE”

I’m sitting in a classroom at the University of Pennsylvania where, for the last four years, I’ve served as an assistant instructor for a graduate program in applied positive psychology. Despite the superficial ideas it may conjure up, positive psychology is not about positive thinking and perpetual smiles; it’s a science devoted to understanding flourishing in individuals, communities, and organizations; that is, it investigates the question of what it means to live well.

On this day, Angela Duckworth, world-renowned researcher and author of *Grit*, is presenting. For those of us in the world of positive psych, this is like going to a Beyoncé concert. Angela Duckworth is a legend. For the lecture, I’m sitting next to my friend Julia, a fellow assistant instructor. Julia and I have one of those unique brother-sister kind of friendships that involves mostly making fun of each other and pretending that we don’t like each other.

(when I put it that way, it sounds more like a dysfunctional marriage than a bond between siblings)

Whatever it is, it works for us, and there’s mutual care and love beneath our banter. The thing I most appreciate about our friendship is that we call each other out on our BS.

Julia and I are sitting in the back row of a room of about fifty people, all eager to hear Angela speak. Julia is obsessed with Angela. Like, *obsessed* obsessed. I love Angela, too—seriously, she’s incredible—but I’ve seen her present upward of twenty times at this point, and I have quite a bit of my own

work to do at the moment. So, about ten minutes into her talk, I pull out my phone under the table to check some e-mails. As discreet as I try to be, Julia sees my eyes look down and without missing a beat, she quips, "Oh, look at you, Mr. Mindful. You're writing a book about presence, and here you are glued to your phone. Nice!"

(eye roll)

Damn you, Julia.

I've been called out. I give her a snarl, begrudgingly put my phone back in my pocket, and return to the lecture. All the while Julia sits there with her characteristic poise, her upright posture, hands clasped together on the table, and a proud smirk on her face.

Again, damn you, Julia.

Usually, interactions like these get brushed off and do nothing more than add fuel to our playful banter. But this was different. For the next half hour, something stirs inside me that I can't quite put my finger on. It's a frustration from her comment that continues to gnaw at me. It's not because she called me out; I'm used to that. It's not that I feel embarrassed for not walking my walk; I have too many foibles to pretend to be the Buddha. It's something else. As I'm watching this tension build inside me, it finally hits me.

She's missing the point of what I teach. She's missing the point of this book.

Julia's comment reduced my work to an overly simplified, one-dimensional, even commercial idea of presence: "Be in the moment." Which is *part* of what I teach. But the kind of presence I'm interested in is, well… bigger.

Before I explain what I mean by that, let's take a look at our current landscape. If you haven't noticed, we are chest deep in the age of "be present." This idea is featured in magazines, plastered on bumper stickers, and I've even seen watches that, instead of telling you the time, just say "be present." Although I still can't understand why you would

spend money on a watch that doesn't tell time, I am glad the world is opening up to this idea.

And yet, as it grows, the phrase "be present" has become little more than a platitude imbued with the message:

You should be present for the sake of being present.

Have you noticed this? The idea of "being present" is slowly becoming unquestionably accepted as "good." In the same way that "drink your milk for strong bones" used to be considered obviously good. Or "listen to your elders" was unchallenged wisdom.

My concern is that if we view being present as an endpoint worth pursuing in and of itself—that is, *the* thing that will bring us happiness—we're going to get stuck. Being present makes sense when things are good, but it stops making sense when they're not.

Of course, we want to be present for this lava cake as it oozes into our vanilla ice cream. Of course, we want to be present for our children as they take their first steps, smiling ear to ear. Of course, we want to be present while we're falling in love or watching a fleeting sunset. Those are moments we *want* to be in. But what about moments that are full of pain, stress, trauma, confusion, or grief? What about moments when our partner is yelling at us? What about moments of feeling completely lost in life with no idea of our next step? We usually want *out* of those moments, and being present for them often seems to make the pain *more* intense.

And yet, when the "be present" truism goes unchallenged, and we gleefully place it on our walls next to the "live, laugh, love" decor, these nuances don't get addressed. My fear is that without a deeper understanding of where "being present" is taking us, and the kind of happiness it's cultivating, there will be little motivation to incorporate it into our lives when it doesn't fit our quick-fix goals for happiness, ultimately writing it off as another half-baked personal development fad of the season.

I believe we need a bigger "why" to pull us into the present moment. Something we are working toward, and for which we're willing to endure some discomfort. And something that will enrich our lives, our relationships, and our communities—an actual way of being that we're inspired to deepen.

I'm calling this way of being and relating Presence. And I think we're primed and ready for it.

A CULTURAL SHIFT TOWARD PRESENCE

Despite it seeming that more and more people are living with their head in their phones, caught up in chasing the next shiny thing and getting more "likes" on Instagram, I see a parallel storyline: a world that is waking up and wanting something more. And not "more" like a new toy, but "more" like something truer and deeper.

We're disillusioned by the perfectly staged Instagram pictures and the guise of "having it all together." We're tired of being fed messages of "Once you get this or achieve that, you'll be fulfilled."

We want honesty. We want love. We want intimacy. We want to connect in the raw, messy, reality of life, not through the look-how-great-my-life-is false covers. The anxiety needed to keep up that shtick is crippling, and it's catching up to us. Behind each luxury lifestyle is a real person, with real issues, real needs, and a real story. So, when people start living and sharing from that vulnerable place, we're drawn to it.

The longing for this authenticity, I believe, is a deep, primal, existential craving… a hunger… no… *starvation* for some permission… a permission to be our real human selves. Permission to feel hurt. Permission to be confused. Permission to be wrong. Permission to feel joy. Permission to love. Permission to cry. Permission to desire. Permission to care

about things, deeply. Permission to not have to maximize every minute. Permission to actually feel just how big and beautiful this complex thing called life is, without grandiose ideas of "mastering it" or "winning."

This is the first dimension of presence: *softening the walls we put up, the masks we wear, and the judgments we hold that keep us constantly having to be something other than what we are, unable to honor the many parts of what it is to be human.*

But that's not the whole story.

We need something else: We need minds that are equipped to be with the complexity of life. Minds that can stay grounded, centered, and open to the full range of being human —the highs and lows, the twists and turns, the relationships we're enjoying right now and the ones that are challenging us —without having to numb, shut down, or retreat to looking down at our phones or TVs when we feel too burdened or bored.

At the heart of presence is the capacity to stay open to the fullness of ourselves and the world around us. Developing the internal resources to do that not only enables us to live in harmony with our world and relationships therein, but also creates some of the deepest levels of well-being.

Presence is the opposite of missing your life.

WHAT YOU WILL GET FROM THIS BOOK

To summarize, this journey toward *presence* (and really to start living your life more fully) requires two things:

1. Softening the walls that cause us to shut down to life ← LIFE! That's a big thing.
2. Building the resources to stay open to life ← so we

don’t shut down and miss it!

Take a moment to ponder those two points. What does it feel like to consider developing them?

Both of those are big endeavors, and even if this doesn’t readily appeal to you, I will argue that the journey toward each leads to what you might say you want most:

You want focus? It’s in here.

You want intimacy? This, too.

You want to feel less anxious? Yup.

You want to sleep better? Sure.

You want to be more productive? Done.

You want a better relationship with your partner and kids? Got it.

You simply want to enjoy life and more of what it can offer? Even that.

We often try to develop these things in isolation. But you’re not going to be able to focus well if you’re dealing with unprocessed anger. You won’t be able to experience intimacy without letting your guard down and being truly vulnerable. You won’t be able to manage your anxiety without first developing a mind that feels safe and equipped to navigate complexity.

The things you most want are extensions of your ability to be integrated—all the parts of you working together—which requires softening the walls that keep us shut down to our life, and building new resources to stay open to life. This takes focus, a settled nervous system, an open mind, creativity, love, compassion, boundaries, acceptance, and more. As we develop our ability to stay open, we nourish these many parts of ourselves, which directly impacts all of our relationships and what we most care about in the world.

A few areas we will look at:

- How all of us have experienced some degree of trauma, and why we can't talk about presence without acknowledging the way trauma has impacted us
- How we build internal walls, which I refer to as "the pain box," that used to protect us but now inhibit us from connecting deeply with others and living a meaningful life
- Why it feels like a risk to be our true selves in the world, and why *safety* (which does not mean comfort) is one of the necessary ingredients to experiencing presence
- How prematurely portraying presence can actually cause us to bypass the very things we need to meet, and work through, in order to develop presence
- The four pillars of presence—focus, allowing, curiosity, embodiment—and how practicing them is our key to deepening presence and not missing our life
- How we can create new behaviors, stop sabotaging our own growth, and let go of the things that hold us back from a fuller life
- Why meditation doesn't necessarily improve our relationships and communication, and what is really required to create intimacy and connection
- How to use a relational meditation practice called circling to practice the art of connecting deeply with others

Stop Missing Your Life is for those who sense there is a deeper, more expansive, and more fulfilling way to be in the world. It's about recognizing that all of life has nuance and uncertainty, and in order to thrive we must develop a mind that is equipped to be with this constantly changing landscape.

So, no, I don't think being present for the sake of being present is compelling. But being present for the sake of cultivating *presence*? That's something I can stand behind. And that's what this book is about.

ONE LAST (IMPORTANT) NOTE

This book is different from other books.

I'm sure all authors say that about their book, but there are a few things that make what we're doing here unique.

We're going to come out of the gate being real. The first two chapters discuss "The Trauma of Life" and "The Risk of Being You." These aren't exactly positive and uplifting.

And that's precisely the point.

I want us to acknowledge upfront that being human is not easy. Experiencing all life offers us is often more challenging than avoiding it. Being deeply present is not automatic. If it were, everyone who ever read a personal development book or an article on mindfulness in *Time* magazine would be happy and fulfilled.

It doesn't work that way, and I don't think we're doing a service to anyone when we pretend that it does.

The difficult part of guiding you to deeper presence through a book, however, is that I'm not with you in person—I don't know what your past has been, and I don't know what you're currently going through. Because of this, there's no way for me to specifically tailor these teachings to you, such as moving more slowly if it feels like too much, too soon. And, although I have quite a bit of training in helping people navigate pain and trauma, I am not a doctor, and this book is not purporting to give medical advice.

So, I want us to make an agreement: If at any point something feels too overwhelming, I ask that you prioritize your own intuition and self-care over what I might be suggesting you try. You can take a break from reading, skip sections, or close your eyes for a few moments, and come back when you're ready. If you're working with a therapist, you can also share what practices (such as meditation) you're doing and ask for support.

We're going to have a lot of fun in this book. My teachings are intended to be practical, relatable, playful, and with no shortage of corny jokes. But we are also taking a direct journey into the heart of what is required for real change, growth, and happiness. Sometimes that's easy, and sometimes that's difficult.

Go at your own pace. Trust your instincts. And practice self-care.

I'm already proud of you for making it this far.

Let's begin our journey.

PART 1

WHY PRESENCE ISN'T EASY

CHAPTER 1

BEING HUMAN IS HARD

What is it like to be you?

If you're like me, you're already frustrated with this book because it's asking you to stop the flow of reading and go inward.

Because yes, I'm seriously asking you, "What is it like to be you?"

You don't need to change anything you're already doing. Maybe you're sitting in your favorite armchair, lying in bed, commuting to work, or listening to the audio version in the car. Wherever you are, I invite you to take a deep breath, and start to notice the felt sense of being you, that only you can know and no one else.

Take a few moments to tune into this before you read on.

I'll wait.

As you tune in, what are you becoming aware of?

Is it a particular sensation in your body? Can you feel where your body is making contact with the chair or floor?

Is there an attitude in your mind? Curiosity, apathy, or maybe skepticism?

Are there any emotions present? Joy, sadness, or enthusiasm?

For me, I notice a few things.

First, there's a part of me that's nervous. This is my first book, and I can feel myself wanting to get it "right" so that you have a good experience. With that also comes a desire for you to like me, and now, a flash of insecurity as I admit that to you.

There's another part of me that is excited. I've seen what is possible when people start reconnecting with themselves, and it makes me smile to think that this may be the beginning of that journey for you.

I also feel some fatigue, probably from long hours of writing and needing to take some time away from the computer.

This is what it's like to be me right now. Not always, and not forever, just right now.

How about you?

Maybe life has been full of stress and chaos lately, and when you stop to check in, you can feel the exhaustion that's been lingering beneath the surface.

Or maybe you're feeling inspired and excited, eager to learn how to be more present for your life.

Or perhaps you've had a string of difficult events recently, and there's a sense of heaviness and frustration; even a feeling of being lost.

Or maybe there's not much at all. Things feel relatively neutral for you in this moment.

Whatever you're experiencing, I want you to know that it's all welcome here. While we're together, you don't need to be any different than you are. I understand it may not feel safe yet to embody and express your full self with others and in the world, but within the pages of this book is an invitation to be you, and to really explore the depth of what that means.

We each have a universe inside of us that creates the experience of being "ourselves." A part of us might be happy, another part might be sad. We may be uncertain about one

aspect of our life and have full conviction toward something else. We may feel loving in one moment and angry in the next. We may feel reluctant, powerful, proud, depressed, bitter, ashamed, grateful, jealous, peaceful, chaotic, or vulnerable.

These are the many experiences of being human, the "multitudes" within you that Walt Whitman talked about, and it's in these experiences where I want to meet you, and where I hope you can meet yourself.

When you ask yourself the question "What is it like to be me?" you get to connect with this inner universe that is messy, beautiful, and constantly changing.

This capacity to check in, feel, and stay present to the different layers of your experience, without immediately trying to make them different, is the foundation for the kind of happiness we're developing.

There will certainly be times when we want to change our experience and grow, and there is indeed a fine line between embracing ourselves as we are and holding ourselves to the standard of who we want to become. But the two are not mutually exclusive. You can allow yourself to feel what it's like to be you without making it wrong; at the same time, you can take action to experience something different in the next moment. Another perspective, while it might sound counterintuitive, is that the very act of embracing yourself as you are *is* the most radical catalyst for positive change and growth. We'll discuss the details and nuances of this throughout the book.

For now, I just want us to see how if we're always fighting *what is present*, not liking ourselves for what we feel when we pay attention to what we're feeling, or denying ourselves a moment of sadness in an effort to supplant it with joy, then we're setting ourselves up for a lifetime of tension. Life's full range of experiences—the joy, sadness, confusion, etc.—never go away, and the deepest enlightenment doesn't change any of that. Instead, we find more peace and ease being with the continuous flow of it all, understanding that all of these parts

of us contribute to the whole of who we are. Even the Dalai Lama, arguably one of the most enlightened people on the planet, will cry when talking about the death of his mother or when contemplating the suffering of his people in Tibet. He shows flashes of anger, and then in the next moment, he's in a deep belly laugh.

His mind is able to *be with* experiences fully and then release them as they come and go. It's this ability to move fluidly with his moments that creates a deep well-being; it's *not* that he experiences never-ending positive moments. He honors his experience while it's there, doesn't hold on to it, and then lets himself fully experience the next moment. This is the kind of happiness we're developing throughout this book.

But here's the thing: There's a reason we're not readily able to be in a graceful relationship with all of our moments. We've had a lifetime of experiences that have taught us to not feel certain feelings and to not think certain thoughts. We've had a lifetime of experiences that have taught us who we "need" to be so as to be accepted, loved, and safe. And we've had a lifetime of experiences that have taught us that maybe being in the present moment is too intense, and it's better to actually *not* be there.

We'll call these experiences the trauma of life.

THE TRAUMA OF LIFE

When I first started teaching mindfulness and meditation, I remember thinking that I wasn't going to work with trauma. I thought it impacted a small subset of the population and was reserved for talk therapy about childhood and painful conversations about tragic experiences. I was excited about *my* work because it seemed more about being in the present than focusing on the past, and I didn't think people needed to understand their past to do the work of being in the present.

I'm embarrassed by my naïveté.

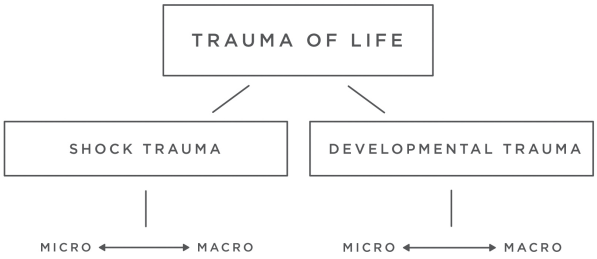
Having now worked with thousands of people, both one-on-one and in groups, I have a new awareness about the ubiquity of trauma and the many forms it can take. I've also seen how not respecting the significance of our past often leads to a half-baked prescription for living fully and deeply in the present.

Often when we hear the word *trauma*, we think of serious psychological and emotional events like sexual assault, domestic violence, military combat, cyclical poverty, isolation, abandonment, or childhood neglect.

This is true, and these experiences often register as trauma. However, trauma is not defined by the experience itself; rather, by how the experience impacts us. Two people can experience the same event, but develop different degrees of trauma. What makes an experience "traumatic" is when our sense of predictability, order, and safety are compromised, combined with an inability to process and integrate the experience such that we can't settle back into our normal flow of life.

We can think about trauma on a scale of micro to macro—small things that have impacted us, and bigger things that have impacted us. This range might include experiences like sexual assault, a car accident, a breakup, social isolation, hate speech, and much more. Different people will experience these events in different ways, but you could probably imagine how some of these experiences could shift (often radically) our sense of safety, ability to trust others, and capacity to be connected to ourselves and the world. Even something like watching a tragic event in the news could have a lingering impact on our perceived safety.

For this reason, the "trauma of life" casts a wide net and refers to any experience, past or future, that causes us to feel less whole, less safe to be ourselves, and less able to experience the fullness of life. Within this, we will explore two general categories—shock trauma and developmental trauma—and the varying degrees through which they can occur.



I haven't had what you'd think of as a traumatic life. By most measures, I am the poster child of privilege—able-bodied, cis, straight, white, male, born in and living in the United States. I experienced minimal loss and tragedy growing up. I had parents who were incredibly loving toward my siblings and me.

Yet, when I got home from my six-month meditation retreat in Burma, I noticed something interesting. I had just spent over three thousand hours in meditation practice, working tirelessly and deliberately to train my mind to be at peace. In the last month of that retreat, I was able to spend twenty hours a day alone in a dark room with mosquitoes and 100-plus-degree heat, meditating in total bliss. I felt at ease, deeply peaceful, and proud knowing that I had actually developed a happiness that could exist independent of my conditions.

And then, three days after returning to New York, I was having dinner at my parents' house, sitting in the same chair I had sat in for eighteen years while growing up, and my father made a comment to me along the lines of "All right, well, now that you're home, it's time you figure out how you're going to make money."

Although he wasn't trying to be hurtful, it came across with an undertone of "You're not in monk-land anymore, buddy. Time to work like the rest of us."

So, what did I do? Well, I met that comment with equanimity, processed it, and then let it go as I transitioned into a beautiful conversation with the rest of my family.

Not quite.

As soon as he made that comment, any sort of peace I had

was vacuum-sucked out of my body, my shoulders deflated, my head dropped, I got quiet, and I started ruminating about how much I hate being home.

All this after six months of silent meditation and living as a monk.

His comment pushed a button in me that caused my mind and body to fall into a familiar script, written through years of being in relationship to my dad. Even though I knew how much he loved and supported me while I was growing up, I also knew the standards he had for me. So, when they were invoked by this small comment, I immediately felt inferior and resentful, the same way I would have as an insecure fourteen-year-old who just got in trouble at school. Now, a decade later and months of training my mind, I wasn't able to meet his comment with openness because there was so much "stuff" stored behind it. I shut down.

I noticed lots of things like this come up with my family and in "the real world" that were not resolved in the monastery: deeply conditioned psychological and behavioral patterns that could only be worked through in the settings that triggered them.

I know this experience is small fry compared to some serious childhood traumas, but it's simply to show that we all have a lifetime of experiences and conditionings that both make us uniquely us, and also can prevent us from living the life we most want. It may be tempting to try to avoid looking at these aspects of ourselves, but all that will do is keep us subconsciously anchored to a version of ourselves we no longer wish to be. If we're interested in true, deep presence, and all the peace, joy, and richness it can offer, we'll need to be conscious of how these conditionings are still showing up, so that we can invite them into the present to be healed and transformed.

This is not about dwelling on your past. It's about acknowledging that the past often leaves wounds, big and small, that, when unhealed, continue to bleed in the present,

even if we think we've put them away or moved past them.

You don't need to rush this process. We have the entire book and beyond to develop the necessary inner resources to do this. For now, we're just cultivating an awareness of how our past can inform our present.

WHEN LIFE SHOCKS YOU

While I was growing up, our home had a wraparound porch. Adjacent to the front door was an octagonal-shaped music room where I practiced piano. It had clear windows overlooking the yard, and in the summer time, it was a pleasant place to be with the light shining through.

Sadly, on bright days, the windows were so clear that the birds mistook the reflections of plants and trees as the real thing, sideswiping the windows and sometimes hitting them head on. Not wanting to hurt the birdies, we eventually learned to put the blinds down so the glass didn't look so clear.

One day in July when I was about sixteen, I was playing the *Titanic* theme song on the piano (don't be too impressed, I'm a one-hit wonder), and in the middle of my heartfelt performance I heard a BAM. It was the loudest smack I had heard from a bird yet, and I looked over to see that I had forgotten to close the blinds.

Crap.

I rushed outside to check on it. Not surprisingly, the bird was lying on the ground, motionless. I sat with it for a few moments, almost certain it was dead. And then something happened that I'll never forget. It jumped up on its little bird legs, clearly stunned, and started to shake out its whole body for ten seconds to the point of nearly vibrating. Once it was done, it stayed perfectly still, standing there on the porch as I sat beside it. After about a minute of stillness, it shook its body for five more seconds, rested for another five, and flew off,

never to be seen again.

It was an incredible experience to witness.

What does this have to do with us?

Well, every day, life is coming at us whether we want it to or not. Sometimes, things are relaxing and easy, and other times, they're intense. This ebb and flow is a normal part of life, vacillating between moments of high intensity and low intensity. Every once in a while, though, we fly into a window and fall to the ground. And this is in a different category of experience, because it's these experiences that can lead to what is commonly referred to as shock trauma.

We can think of shock trauma as *too much, too soon, too fast*—taking in too much stimulation without enough time or ability to process, integrate, and/or release the excess energy from the experience. In computer terms, it would be like an overload of data without enough bandwidth—the computer starts to slow down, it might heat up, or it might shut down altogether. This is the form of trauma we often associate with events like a car crash, military combat, sexual assault, child abuse, sudden loss, natural disasters, domestic violence, serious injury, and so on. The consequences of trauma related to a car accident will be different than trauma related to sexual assault. But at the heart of each, there is a deep compromise to our sense of predictability, order, and safety, combined with an inability to process and integrate the experience in a way that lets us settle back into our normal flow of life.

Maybe you've experienced an event like this yourself. Something happened that affected you so deeply that it made you question who you could trust, what you could trust, and whether or not you were safe in your environment. You may have felt a lingering impact from the experience long after it was over, perhaps still to this day.

Or maybe it wasn't a big event, like a car accident or abuse, but a series of smaller events. Have you ever had an experience, or a day, or even a year that felt like too much, too soon, too fast? I think most of us can identify with this: we

have an intense experience, or a series of intense experiences, and then quickly transition to the next thing without the chance to resettle ourselves and process what happened.

It could be as simple as an argument with your partner that abruptly ends before you start your busy day at work, leaving you no time to reflect on what happened and calm down. It could be dealing with unexpected needs from your kids for days at a time, without feeling like you have a chance to rest and take care of yourself. Or it could be planning an event with lots of moving parts and no time to pause, and then quickly transitioning to the next thing on your to-do list that's equally demanding, even though your body is screaming at you for a break.

When we don't have the opportunity to resettle ourselves and discharge some of this excess energy from our nervous system, even if it's minor, the buildup of it can lead to anxiety, depression, and exhaustion, as well as prevent us from experiencing positive emotions like joy, enthusiasm, and gratitude. It will be harder to focus on small tasks; it will be difficult to have a conversation with our child in a calm way; we'll have less patience; we'll react more quickly or with anger; *or* we'll just start zoning out because it's all too much to be present with, making it feel easier to scroll through our Facebook feed than actually face the world.

Have you ever noticed this happen?

It's one of the reasons why many people who come on my retreats will often feel like very different people within a day or two—they'll be nicer, calmer, more sensitive and patient—not because they fundamentally changed (that takes more time), but because they had some space to be present. The excess energy that was jammed up in their nervous system finally had the chance to be released and integrated, allowing a natural joy to emerge.

If we think back to the bird that hit the window, do you remember what it did? It took time to shake out its body, stay still, shake again, and then fly away. It couldn't fly freely and

gracefully until it resettled itself. This is a natural and intuitive way that animals discharge excess energy from their body and continue on with their lives.

We (humans), on the other hand, in our fast-paced, grin-and-bear-it world, often hit the window and immediately get up and keep flying.

Even though we intuitively know something is off, we're often less in touch with feeling and responding to our bodily instincts, and instead push through life as usual. Only now, instead of going back to flying gracefully, we're a bit more meandering, slow, and disoriented.

To compensate, we push harder, trying to focus and be positive, doing our best to fly through life despite everything we're holding.

Periodically, we might slow down just enough to feel what's been lingering beneath the surface—the fear, loss of safety, unpredictability, anxiety, exhaustion—and since that seems *way* too intense to be present with, it reinforces our pattern of pushing through and shutting down, never mind that this is what is *actually* required to recover and find peace.

We'll distract ourselves from our thoughts by playing loud music, having a drink, or staying constantly busy.

We'll numb ourselves to the stress we feel by disconnecting from our bodies, losing our capacity to experience the bad *and* the good.

We'll keep interactions on a superficial level, sensing that the vulnerability required to connect more deeply would also open the floodgates for everything else we're holding in.

In other words, we shut down to the fullness of our lives, in big or small ways, just to get by.

Are you starting to see how this ties into our journey toward presence? And why developing presence is not as simple as "just be present"?

The way to work with all of this is a little more complex

than shaking ourselves out like the bird. In addition to being less in touch with our bodies and able to release trauma energy more intuitively (like animals), we have very large brains that keep us thinking, ruminating, and imagining events, long after they're over, that continue to reinforce the painful experience in our minds and bodies.

Developing presence enables us to stay connected with ourselves, manage the rumination from our minds, and release the stuck energy from these experiences so that we can live our lives at their fullest potential.

There are other forms of trauma, though, that can happen in more subtle ways, and over longer periods of time, often starting from a very early age.

BREAKING DOWN WHILE GROWING UP

Have you heard the phrase "Mommy/Daddy issues"? Yeah, well, it's a real thing, and we all have them. Our childhood so deeply molds our thoughts, behaviors, and ability to self-regulate, that it's impossible to enter adulthood unscathed.

And yes, you most likely value things about yourself that come directly from your childhood, whether from positive experiences or struggle. But none of us were able to work through *every* struggle. So if, for example, you're not as open as you'd like, or you avoid all conflict, or you need to always be in control—there is a very good chance it's related to the earliest years of your life. Gaining some understanding of how those early life experiences currently influence your life can be powerful.

In the book *Healing Developmental Trauma*, Dr. Laurence Heller and Dr. Aline LaPierre discuss five core biological needs that all humans have—connection, attunement, trust, autonomy, and love-sexuality. As babies and small children,

we are not able to take care of ourselves, so we rely on our caregivers to help us meet these core needs. Our ability to express these needs throughout our life is most strongly impacted by how well those needs were met in our earliest years of life, and if they're unmet, we will adapt in very predictable ways in order to not have to feel the pain of them being unmet again.

An example of how we might adapt is what Heller and LaPierre call "turning our shame-based identifications into pride-based counter-identifications." That is, we create a new narrative or personal identity that helps us avoid feeling the pain of this unmet need. Let me see if I can translate: We feel that we're unlovable because our parents always put us down (shame-based identification), so we create an identity as someone who is good at being alone and doesn't need others (pride-based counter-identification). We feel small and powerless because we always lived with uncertainty (shame-based identification) so we create a life that makes us appear successful and in control (pride-based counter-identification). We feel needy and unfulfilled because we didn't receive the attention we most longed for as a child (shame-based identification) so we become the shoulder that everyone can cry on, making us feel indispensable and needed (pride-based counter-identification).

We will literally build a whole new story or lifestyle that helps us be more okay with this deeper pain we're holding.

And it's pretty cool that we have a mind that does this, no? I mean, it cares so deeply about us feeling okay that it will go through all of this crazy effort to make sure we don't have to take something personally. It will literally turn our shame into a virtue. Who else in the world will jump through that many hoops for us, day after day, trying to make us feel better?

Say it with me: *I love you, mind.*

And yet, as I'm sure you already know, these cover-ups come at a cost. The more we mask this pain, the stronger it grows beneath the surface, which then takes continuous effort

to suppress, ultimately causing us to shut down and deny more parts of who we are. Additionally, building a particular lifestyle to compensate for an unmet need (which we tend to do subconsciously) will often lead us into relationships, careers, or communities that don't nourish us in the ways we most need.

Of course, we can live this way, but we won't be able to embody a deeper presence, which can only come from unburdening ourselves of the tension created from suppressing our true experience.

Since presence is what we're working toward, it's important for us to see these ways we shut down or mask our deeper experience. Only then can we do the healing work of learning how to meet these needs in a healthy way (which we'll discuss throughout this book).

The first step is being honest with and open to what may be lingering beneath the surface—our deeper needs, shames, and pains. If we've spent our whole lives swimming in these pains, cover-up identities, and traumas, we often aren't even aware we have them.

We don't need to dig. Our understanding of these patterns tends to arise organically as we develop more self-awareness and start the process of deepening presence. For now, we're just acknowledging that life can be tough, in big and small ways, and our past may be confining us to a limited expression of who we are, as well as preventing us from experiencing as much joy, calm, and peace as we could be.

CHAPTER 2

THE RISK OF BEING YOU

> Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.
>
> —Rumi

Every year, I take twelve students to upstate New York for a retreat. We spend five days nestled along a river between the Berkshire and Taconic mountains. Here we create the conditions for deep learning, healing, and growth. Of all the programs and retreats I run, people report this as the most intensive and transformative.

One of the exercises we do on the retreat is called the Birthday Circle. In it, one person sits in front of the group, while the rest of the group huddles around them in a semicircle, making eye contact and offering their full attention. From the outside looking in, it kind of looks like a bunch of people staring at a fish in a fishbowl. From the inside looking out, it kind of feels like you're a fish being stared at in its fishbowl. At least initially. It can seem weird and unnatural, but the intention is simply to be curious toward the person sitting before you—to *see* them as if for the first time. The person receiving that full, 360-degree attention gets to *be* seen, dropping us into a deeper connection than what we typically get in day-to-day life. It can go on for ten minutes or sometimes over an hour, and both the group and the person being circled have an opportunity to share what they notice and are experiencing in real time. Nobody is required to do this exercise, but most opt in once they see how powerful it can be.

A woman named Naomi volunteered to go.

At age forty-five, Naomi has seen a lot. Most of her family has passed away. She grew up with a mother who had a severe mental illness. Naomi has survived breast cancer and has lived with diabetes since she was nineteen. This trauma has been a centerpiece of her life, so she wanted to go on this retreat to remember who she was beyond this pain and struggle. More than that, she wanted to find real connection with people. Years of pain created strong defense mechanisms, both protecting her from the world around her as well as preventing her from connecting with the world around her. In her words, she felt like there were slabs of concrete guarding her heart. As much as she was starving for love and connection, she didn't let people close to her. She didn't let them "see" her. The thought of being seen in the birthday circle was terrifying, but she knew it was what she needed.

Naomi settled into the birthday seat, sitting in front of the group. Before anyone said anything, the concrete slabs were apparent. Sitting there with all the attention on her made her squirm, brace, cross her arms, laugh nervously, and make jokes. Her discomfort was palpable. And it was clear that all of the squirming, bracing, and humor was her armor against having to feel the vulnerability of being seen so plainly in front of us.

We spent the first few minutes in silence, settling in together, getting acquainted with our eyes: Twelve sets of eyes steady on Naomi, hers moving from person to person. It wasn't long before the tears welled up.

"I don't know why this is so hard," Naomi said, wiping her eyes. "I trust you all so much and feel very safe with you all." She took a few deep breaths. "I think it's because I have no family… I'm nobody's priority. To make me the focus of your attention makes me a priority. And I've never, *ever* experienced that before. It's so… scary. I don't… I don't know how to receive it." Her voice cracked as she tried to speak through tears.

We could all feel the layers of pain behind her words. We stayed with her, not trying to fix or heal, remaining steady with our attention. We wanted her to know it was okay for her to be scared, and we were here for her through it. Different voices in the group chimed in:

"Thank you for your honesty," one person said. "I feel in awe of your courage," said another. "I appreciate your vulnerability," yet another chimed in. Naomi nodded in appreciation as the words of encouragement came in, but I noticed she became more stoic.

The intensity of the experience was a lot for her to hold. Watching her interact with the group seemed to trigger a freeze response. I wanted to help her stay with the discomfort as much as she was willing, since staying with traumatic energy and defense mechanisms is the only way they start to soften, integrate, and release. Numbing or dissociating from the discomfort just keeps the energy stuck in the nervous system.

I asked Naomi what she felt in her body.

"I feel a wall from my neck to the bottom of my abdomen," she said. "It feels tight, like a giant, twisted knot."

"Thank you," I replied. "I imagine that must feel uncomfortable."

She nodded.

We stayed in silence for a bit. I also noticed that shifting eye contact from one person to another seemed like a way for Naomi to not let someone see her for too long. I could see the discomfort build as she made eye contact with someone for more than a few seconds; she would quickly look away. I asked her if she would be willing to just focus on me for a bit. She agreed.

"You're my only priority right now," I told her.

Her eyes watered and she bit her lip.

"I mean it," I said. "It's just you and me."

We stayed in silent eye contact for the next few minutes.

She would periodically close her eyes to move away from the discomfort, and after a few moments I'd gently encourage her to stay with me. Her face would tense up, still bracing from the unease, and after a few moments I would invite her to soften her jaw. She would cross her legs, finding a more defensive, but safe-feeling posture, and after a few moments, I would ask her if she was willing to find a more open posture.

I was monitoring the intensity of the experience, because if it was too much, I knew it would trigger her to shut down, and it was key that she stay present with the intensity. The eye deflections and physical bracing were ways for her to reground into familiar patterns of perceived safety when it felt too intense. I wanted her to have the freedom and autonomy to do that, while also actively helping her come back to the discomfort once she resettled. This is called pendulation—stepping in and out of intensity.

We stayed in eye contact for a solid three minutes, navigating what may have come across to the group as an invisible but dynamic dance between us. I could feel micro openings in her as her face started to soften, her hands relaxed, and her breathing deepened. She would vacillate between small tensions and small softenings. And then, I noticed something was happening in her chest.

"What do you feel in your body now?" I asked curiously.

"The wall in my chest is vibrating," she said. "It's really intense. I want to move. I want to run away."

"I can feel that. We can stop at any point. I'm curious if you're willing to stay with me a little longer?"

She nodded, her eyes starting to well up again.

"You mentioned that the wall in your chest was vibrating. Do you know what happens when something solid starts to melt?" I asked.

"What?"

"The molecules move more quickly; they start vibrating. It seems like your wall may be melting."

She bit her lip and held back tears.

“Something is shifting right now. I can feel it,” she said.

“I’m right here. You’re safe. It’s just you and me.”

Her body started to quiver, the tears became heavier, and her breathing more shallow. The whole group could feel the pain and tension. It was so heavy. We were all staying present for her.

And then, in a moment, something released.

Her body softened, her face relaxed, and her breath became smooth.

There was silence.

“Oh, my,” she whispered after a few moments.

“Yes… oh, my,” I said with a similar softness of voice. “What just happened?”

“Something shifted. Something big.”

“I can feel that.”

“I’m calm. I’m okay letting you see me. I feel like I just shed a skin.”

The room settled into a still, peaceful place.

Naomi and I stayed in silence, holding eye contact. Her seeing me, and me seeing her.

After a few minutes, I quietly said, “It’s very good to see you, Naomi.”

She smiled. “It’s very good to be seen.”

THE PAIN BOX

There is a risk to being you.

It’s a risk to express your needs.

It’s a risk to fall in love.

It’s a risk to be seen.

It’s a risk to be in your body.

It’s a risk to be with your thoughts.

It’s a risk to let down your guard.

It’s a risk to care deeply.

It’s a risk to take the journey toward presence.

It’s a risk because we don’t know what sort of pain we might have to feel when we show up as our full selves, honestly, and honoring our authentic experience in the moment.

The trauma of life, however it has impacted you, creates walls between a part of who we are and the rest of ourselves and the world around us. For Naomi, these walls showed up in the form of concrete slabs around her heart. There was a part of her that wanted to connect with people, but to do that meant she needed to “be seen,” and the pain of that was too great. So, what happened in her life? She made lots of friends, was very good at being there for them, but never opened up to them in a way that they could connect with her, always leaving her relationships feeling superficial and unfulfilling.

We all have different kinds of walls that contribute to us missing the fullness of our life.

We want to make amends with a friend, and that requires admitting that we might have been wrong, but the pain of not being right is too great so we stay in our self-righteousness. That’s a wall.

We want connection in our relationship, and that requires sharing our needs with the other person, but it’s too painful to imagine having those needs rejected, so we settle for “good-enough connection.” That’s a wall.

We want to be less judgmental toward ourselves, and that requires not beating ourselves up as much for our mistakes,

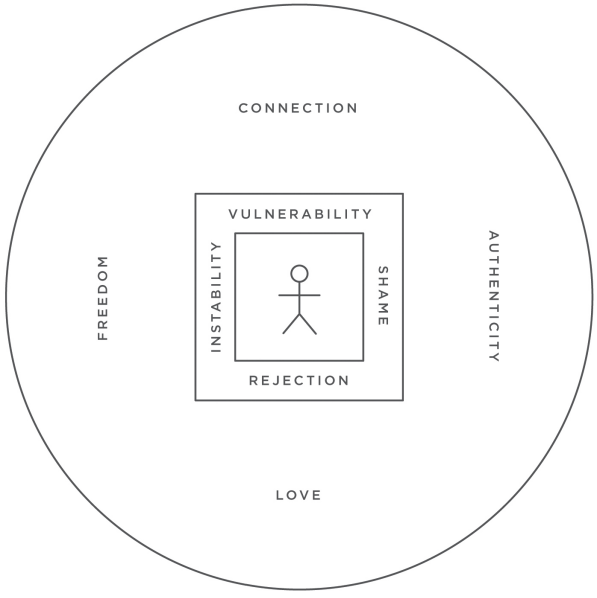
but there's a fear that if we don't punish ourselves we won't be successful in the world, and the thought of not being successful creates pain, so we continue to be our own harshest critic. That's a wall.

We want to be a good leader in our workplace, and that requires asking for feedback from our colleagues, but the potential of hearing that we're doing something wrong is too overwhelming, so we never ask people how we can improve at our job. That's a wall.

We want to be calmer and at ease, but our brain subconsciously fears that if we let go of our anxiety, we'll lose control and things will fall apart, so we continue living in a frantic state. That's a wall.

Before we know it, we put up so many walls that we get trapped in a box, confined to a certain way of being and living that we don't actually want. I call this the pain box.

It's called the pain box because the only thing that keeps us in it is pain. The walls don't actually exist—there are no actual concrete slabs around Naomi's heart. When we're not willing to feel something due to the perceived pain it will cause, it becomes a barrier, and we get stuck in our safety and comfort zone.



As you look at the figure above, you can see how the outer

edges of the box represent what you might be looking for—connection, authenticity, love, freedom—but the immediate box around you represents what you might need to feel and risk in order to get there—vulnerability, shame, rejection, instability.

In most circumstances, it's the potential pain we associate with what we want, consciously or subconsciously, that keeps us in the same place, with the same people, the same longings, and the same frustrations, even though we most desperately want something else.

This is very different than a wall that is out of your control. For instance, you might wish to express your true passion and play in the NBA, but you're only four foot eleven. There are always going to be barriers to things we want, and although it may go against the pop personal development message of "you can have anything you set your mind to!" many of these barriers will be insurmountable.

In the context of the pain box, what might be getting in the way of you experiencing deep presence and joy is not *not* having the thing you want (playing in the NBA), but instead not being able to accept the reality of the conditions of your life as they are in this moment (you're four foot eleven). The pain wall is then the sadness and anger you might need to feel in accepting this new reality (you're not going to play in the NBA). Once you're able to move through this sadness, you have access to a whole new range of resources for how to experience the joy and potential of your life as it is, versus trying to hold on to something that most likely won't happen.

Take a few moments to evaluate what some of your pain walls might be.

What do you wish you could express about yourself? What conversation do you wish you could have? Is there a part of you that you wish you could share with others? What do you wish you could accept in your life?

Then, ask yourself: What would I need to feel or experience to move toward this?

It's okay if you're not sure yet (this book will help you with that), but the discomfort, if any, that you associate with moving toward what you most want is your pain wall.

If you do come up with a pain wall, just notice what it's like to acknowledge and feel it. This awareness is a huge step, since most of the time we tend to avoid our pain walls entirely.

SPIRITUAL BYPASSING

As humans, we're really good at avoiding pain we don't want to feel—a few glasses of wine at the end of the day to escape our thoughts, eating beyond the point of being full to cope with negative emotions, getting lost in endless YouTube videos to avoid our stress, and so on.

There's one form of bypassing pain, though, that can sneak up on us, and is most relevant to the work we'll be doing. It's called *spiritual bypassing*.

Spiritual bypassing is a term coined thirty years ago by psychologist John Welwood to describe a disconcerting phenomenon he was observing in his meditation community. Although he and most of his peers were sincerely interested in their personal growth, there was a tendency to prematurely portray certain states and attributes—like enlightenment, love, or happiness—and subsequently circumvent working through unresolved psychological and emotional issues.

For instance, a person may be striving for happiness, but instead of working through their deep sadness, they just act as if they're already happy. Or a person may come across like nothing makes them angry because they're trying to be "enlightened," when in reality they're seething. Or a person may pretend they're at peace with all things and able to move fluidly through life with ease, when really they're just numbing themselves to their pain.

Prematurely portraying and holding ourselves to some

idealized endpoint, like enlightenment or happiness, can cause us to risk embracing a "premature transcendence," as Welwood calls it, where we try to rise above the raw and messy side of our human life before we have fully faced and made peace with it. In the context of the pain box, this would be like jumping over a wall instead of doing the difficult, and necessary, work of moving through it.

It's easy to get caught in this trap of spiritual bypassing. Rarely are we doing it intentionally! When we set out to develop more happiness, calm, and peace, it's understandable that we might view difficult emotions—like anger, shame, and jealousy—as contrary to what we're trying to cultivate, and therefore experiences we should avoid. However, there's a fine line between not fueling painful states and suppressing our true experience.

As a general rule of thumb, adopting an identity of being at peace with all things without actually doing the *real* work of making peace with those things is a surefire way to further disconnect from reality, from real connection with other people, and numb ourselves to the experiences of life, bad *and* good.

The most genuinely peaceful and content humans I have met did not get there by *pretending* to be peaceful with their pain; they got there by *making* peace with their pain. And to get close enough to make peace with pain requires feeling it, a process many of us underestimate.

However, sometimes we hear this and take it to the other extreme. We strap ourselves in and go, "Okay, Cory. I'm ready. No spiritual bypassing bullshit for me. Give me some pain, baby! All the hatred I've ever harbored toward my mother! I want it now! I can handle it!!"

You *so* can't handle it. (And you shouldn't have to.)

THE MYTH OF CATHARSIS

For years, the thinking within many therapeutic modalities was that it was helpful and necessary to feel our emotional and psychological pain full on. Freud was hypnotizing his patients to relive their traumatic experiences. Anger therapies had you take a baseball bat and slam it against a big square beanbag, aiming to release all the rage from your body. Personal development seminars of the ’70s had you stand on a stage and yell expletives, screaming all the things you repressed and never said to your parents.

The belief was that if we could feel, relive, and/or express all the painful emotions we’ve repressed, letting it roar to the surface, there would be a cathartic release and purification of the system. An emotional exorcism, if you will.

I love this idea. It works well for my personality that wants results, and wants them quickly. Feeling an intense amount of pain, for a short period of time, in exchange for quick healing, sounds like efficiency at its finest. And I’m into it.

The problem is, in most cases, it just doesn’t work, and goes against much of the neuroscience and our emerging understanding of the nature of feelings and emotions.

As psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk has shown, associating into a traumatic experience, letting rage overwhelm you, or diving headfirst into the deep end of all your suffering can be extremely overwhelming to your nervous system, and in many cases, it’s retraumatizing.

We have to remember that the reason we have so many of these pain walls is because they developed around past painful experiences that we didn’t have the ability to fully process and make peace with at the time they arose. When our parents said we would never amount to anything, we weren’t able to take a deep breath, brush off the comment, and remind ourselves that they are simply mimicking what their parents said to them. Instead, we internalized it, believed that the people who were supposed to love us most knew best, and now any time there’s an opportunity to grow, we self-sabotage because it triggers our belief that we’re not worthy of a better life and will

inevitably fail. When we were heartbroken that our seventh grade girlfriend broke up with us and our dad said, "Buck up and be a man," we weren't able to tell ourselves that it's healthy and important to feel sad. Instead, we replaced sadness with anger, associated "being a man" with not having feelings, and now subconsciously avoid any opportunity for deep intimacy because the last time we were vulnerable, we were chastised.

If we had the inner resources to process the painful experience in a healthy way, we would have been able to move past it without a lingering impact. But we didn't, so the subconscious memory of that experience continues to create a wall that keeps us boxed into a certain way of being, protecting us from having to experience that pain again.

Jumping back into the full intensity of that unprocessed pain in an effort to break through a wall will not necessarily serve us in a positive way. Feeling pain for the sake of feeling pain is not healing. It often just reinforces the part of us that wasn't able to process the pain at the time we first experienced it.

Although it can sometimes feel very good, alive, and empowering to experience the intensity of these emotions in such full force, especially after years of suppression, as therapist Peter Levine notes, we can get addicted to the momentary "high" it creates, mistaking it as some cathartic purge. We might even start to need this "fix" or "release" and never actually learn how to process and work with the pain and its causes in a practical way.

But what about Naomi? Didn't she have a cathartic release when the wall in her chest started vibrating and then dissolved, and she finally moved beyond the concrete slabs guarding her heart? I mean, that was huge!

Indeed, there was a release. And she did do something radical in that moment, softening a very strong wall that prevented her from connecting. But pretending like the fear of being seen was permanently purged from her mind through

this one experience would be just that—pretend—and would only serve as a romantic healing story that would get everyone excited, probably sell more books, but perpetuate nonsense about how to authentically grow.

These patterns are much more complicated and involve deeply conditioned neural circuits that need to be retrained over time. As I said at the beginning of the chapter, Naomi's experience showed her from the inside out *how* to move past the wall. Having that experience and knowledge is powerful and will greatly assist her in moving past this wall in her day-to-day life. But it's something she'll need to continually reinforce until new patterns of mind are created and the wall no longer exists.

Okay, Cory, so if bypassing pain isn't the answer and emotional catharsis can only take us so far, how do we get out of our pain box so we can live with our whole, magnificent, embodied, deep presence?

I'm glad you asked.

SAFETY: THE LINCHPIN OF PRESENCE

I'm going to make a bold statement: I don't believe we can get out of our pain box and access deep presence without feeling safe. And this is a kind of safety we don't usually think about.

It's not the kind of safety where I suggest we live in protective bubbles devoid of pain. And it's not the kind of safety we would seek if we were legitimately fearful for our lives.

The kind of safety I'm referring to is about what is necessary for us to feel willing and able to move through our pain box and not shut down to life. It's the kind of safety that enables us to meet our pain in a way that is healing and transformative, not overwhelming and destructive. And it's the

kind of safety that assures us we will be *okay* (in the deepest sense of the word) when we step into unfamiliar (and uncomfortable) territory.

Since we've been following Naomi as an example of someone who moved through her pain box and into deeper presence, let's look at how safety played a role in her experience.

Coming into the retreat, Naomi knew she wanted more connection but was terrified of letting her guard down and being seen. In the birthday circle, we created the conditions for Naomi to: (1) feel willing to step into the discomfort of being seen, and (2) believe that she would be *okay* in that discomfort.

We did this by letting her know we *wanted* to see who she really was beyond the "concrete slabs"; we let her know that we were proud of her courage; we stayed patient and loving with her as she navigated her fear; and we reinforced her autonomy and ability to create boundaries, reminding her that she could step out of the circle at any time.

All of these factors contributed to Naomi's sense of safety, empowering her to stay present with the discomfort of her pain wall long enough for it to soften. As it did, she relaxed into the connection, and we were able to, quite literally, *feel* more of her presence.

However, much of the safety that Naomi experienced was created externally, through the group and me. So, the question becomes, how do we create this safety for ourselves?

Well, I think it's important to first acknowledge that, if anything, Naomi's experience highlights just how powerful other people's presence can be for deepening our *own* presence. Our ability to feel safe enough to be our full selves is often influenced by our environment, at a relational, group, community, and systems level. Some individuals and groups in our society don't experience the most fundamental forms of safety that are a human right. And, outside the bounds of this book, this is something I hope we keep in mind as citizens of

communities that we can make safer for all.

There is another form of safety, though, that can work in tandem with external safety, and can sometimes even trump external conditions. And that is *internal* safety.

Imagine someone who feels free to "be themselves" regardless of what the world around them expects—dressing their own way, choosing an unconventional career path, coming out as LGBTQ+, speaking the truth when it is unpopular or comes with a risk.

Or, on a much more extreme level, imagine Viktor Frankl facing death, and surrounded by death, in a concentration camp, and yet fortifying himself by finding psychological and spiritual meaning in the experience, and thus creating an internal safety to live within.

Internal safety is developed by building the psychological, emotional, and spiritual resources that enable us to meet, hold, and stay present to the fullness of our life—including the worst parts of it—and still *know that we're okay*.

As we develop these inner resources, we simultaneously expand what is called our "window of tolerance," the capacity of our nervous system to be in the present moment without shutting down or getting overwhelmed. When we can meet pain and discomfort without shutting down, we give our walls an opportunity to soften. And when our walls soften, we make contact with our life.

How do we build this internal safety?

That's what the rest of this book is about. Developing the inner resources and the internal safety so that you can meet and hold all the richness of your life—the "good" and the "bad"—and feel less of a risk being *you*.

PART 2

HOW TO BUILD AND DEEPEN PRESENCE

CHAPTER 3

MINDFULNESS & MEDITATION

“How come no one ever taught me this?”

I was twenty years old. It must have been my fifth or sixth time ever meditating, and although the thought had a tinge of resentment, it mostly came from a place of awe.

I was in pain and had just been rejected by someone I loved. I pretended I didn’t care, but on the inside, I was lonely, sad, and angry; ruminating about all the things I had done wrong, and dwelling on all the ways I could get her back. It hurt.

But there I was, in the middle of the day, lying on my dorm room bed, staring at my off-white ceiling, having just finished ten minutes of meditation and actually feeling some relief. A weird kind of relief, though, because nothing had *actually* changed. The thoughts were still there and I still felt sad, but… I wasn’t consumed by it all.

I watched all these negative thoughts darting around my mind, but it was as if I was overhearing another person thinking aloud; I didn’t take it so seriously. I was also able to feel my loneliness but only as one aspect of my experience, not this all-consuming, end-of-the-world-type feeling. And the more I experienced it in that way, the less lonely I felt.

“How come I never knew about this?” I kept thinking. Just this simple idea that I could *watch* a thought or an emotion versus being sucked into it.

I felt peaceful. And, even more surprisingly, I felt empowered, like I was living my life fully. I wasn’t turning away from my misery, I was meeting it head on, and somehow that was making me less miserable.

Of all the meditations I've done, including the thousands of hours I've done on retreats, I still consider that specific meditation to be the most life-changing. It opened a door to an entirely new way of relating to my world—a door I walked through and never looked back.

I DON'T CARE ABOUT MEDITATION, AND NEITHER SHOULD YOU

These days, a big part of what I do is teach mindfulness meditation. Most of the people I have the privilege of working with come to me to learn this practice.

It's why they're caught off guard when I tell them I don't actually care about meditation, evidenced by their nervous laugh that fades into a "Wait, are you serious?"

Yes, it's true. I *don't* care about meditation. In fact, I've never cared about meditation, despite the life-changing story I just shared. I care about things like truth, wholeness, happiness, peace, wisdom, compassion, love, and connection—all the things that come with presence. That's where my heart, my passion, and my interest lie. Not in meditation.

It just so happens that meditation has been the most powerful and effective way for me to get those things (and more). And the people who embody the kind of presence I'm describing always practice some form of meditation, usually in a significant way.

The simple truth is, there's a reason meditation has been around for, oh, you know, only about five thousand years. And it didn't start because people were trying to impress their hippie girlfriends.

Meditation was born from people asking questions. Questions like: *What does it mean to be human? Why do I suffer? What leads to happiness? How can I connect to something deeper than just being blindly driven around by the endless cycles of thoughts, desires, and impulses? How can I be free from this roller coaster I'm living on, or at least find more ease while I'm on it?*

You know, big, meaty, "there's gotta be a better way to do life"–type questions.

And what do you do when you have big questions like this? Well, one thing you can do is become a scientist. And if the thing you're studying is *you*, you can become the researcher, the subject, the equipment, and the laboratory. That is, you become the scientist of you.

See, this whole meditation thing is not that far-fetched. In fact, it's about as far-fetched as a biologist using a microscope to see more clearly how a cell works.

There is so much happening in our minds that we can't see. If we're to better understand how our mind works and subsequently how to train it to work better, we first need a microscope.

And that's what meditation does, or at least the meditation we'll be doing. It's an internal technology, honed over millennia, that enables us to more clearly see the underlying mechanisms of our minds—what is a thought, what is an emotion, what is the nature of pain, why do we suffer, what leads to lasting happiness, and so on. In fact, one of the earliest forms of meditation, known as Vipassana, is often translated as "clear seeing."

But this heightened clarity and awareness is not the only intention and benefit of meditation. What I truly value about this practice, and why I think it's most relevant to our journey toward presence, is that it simultaneously builds and grows our capacity to hold more parts of ourselves and our experience, so that we can live the full depth and beauty of our life, and thus experience greater fulfillment.

This is not always easy, of course. Mainstream media may portray meditation as sitting down and dropping into some tranquil, blissed-out, Buddha-like state, which *can* sometimes happen, but I assure you that's not the full story. Often, there's incessant mental chatter, self-doubt, and mini temper tantrums about the untimely itches on our face. Meditation is about learning to be with all of this, to notice the urges to move and get rid of the discomfort, and then remain steady, graceful, and grounded amid the chaos. The more we practice this, the less overwhelmed we are, and the better we can stay open to and appreciate all the goodness there is in our lives.

In this chapter, we will explore mindfulness meditation as the foundational practice and skill set for our journey toward presence. It is the thing that will illuminate the inner workings of our mind. It is the thing that will help build our container to hold the present

moment. It's the thing that will train our nervous system to be our ally instead of our enemy. It's the thing that will develop the inner resources to have an increased sense of safety in more moments. It's the thing that… *it's freaking awesome, okay*?!

(deeeeeeep breath, Cory)

Okay. Seriously, though. This chapter is foundational to the rest of the book. If you've meditated in the past and had some trouble, don't worry, I'm going to offer you many different options and variations to integrate it into your life in a practical way. If you've never meditated before, then welcome to a new experience.

This is not about meditation. This is about intentionally moving closer to our human experience, learning how to dance with it, to be at peace with it—maybe even enjoy it.

It just so happens they call that meditation.

MINDFULNESS: YOUR INNATE SUPERPOWER

Let's try something, shall we?

I just want you to notice what it's like to see. Yes, the kind of seeing you do with your eyes.

In this moment, your eyes are taking in light, color, and shape. Are you aware that this is happening?

What's it like to be aware of it happening?

What do you notice in your field of vision?

Are you aware that the words you're reading aren't actually me, Cory, and aren't happening in real time, but are instead just little black squiggles on a page that I encrypted a long time ago? And now your eyes are seeing these squiggles and your brain is interpreting them as words, making it seem like I'm talking to you.

Maybe you notice the narrative in your head that's reciting the words as you read them.

What's the voice of that narrative?

Is it your voice? Is it my voice? Do you even *know* what my

voice sounds like, or is your brain making it up based on what you hope I sound like?

Are you now smiling because you're watching all of this happen in your mind?

Are you smiling *more* because I called you out on smiling?

All of this because of little squiggles on a page…

How about the space around the page in your peripheral vision. Can you notice that while still keeping your central focus here?

And your breath…

Do you feel yourself breathing?

Can you bring that into your awareness while still focusing on seeing?

Take a few moments to pause and notice it all.

How about the sounds? Anything you can hear?

Maybe loud sounds that are obvious, and also more subtle ones, like the soft, rhythmic sound of your breathing, moving in and out of your body.

Breathing in… Breathing out…

Speaking of your body, how is that doing? Are you in your body? As in, do you feel it?

Is your jaw tight? What would it be like to invite it to soften?

How about the rest of your face?

Is it holding tension? It's okay for your face to be exactly as it wants to be; it doesn't need to put on any mask right now.

Let yourself sink into your body for a few moments without changing anything, just feeling what it's like to have a body.

And we can't forget about thoughts.

Any thoughts passing through your awareness? You're welcome to stop reading for a moment to check.

You don't need to stop them. Just get curious about what it's like to have a thought.

Simply observe all the mental chatter that's usually happening beneath your awareness.

And before we close this short exercise, take a moment to notice what it's like to be more attuned to your inner and outer world—not trying to get anywhere, just being present to this moment, however it is.

We'll take one more breath together: Breathing in… Breathing out…

Great job.

And hey, welcome back! However, we didn't actually go anywhere. In fact, if anything, we were more *here* than we were previously. Whether you realized it or not, you just practiced something called mindfulness.

I like to define mindfulness as **the practice of *being with* our experience rather than *in* our experience, in a way that is spacious, curious, and heartfelt.**

Imagine your life as a river going down a mountain. There are two ways you could be in relation to the river: (1) you could be caught up *in* the river, smashing into the bank, drowning in the whitewater, crashing into rocks; or (2) you could be sitting on the bank of the river, watching it go by with a quality of peace and ease. In either case, you're still experiencing the river, just from two different vantage points, and therefore a different experience entirely.

This is what I mean by being *with* experience instead of being *in* experience. And it's also what I mean when I use the word *spacious*. It points to the idea that there's separation between the "you" who is observing and whatever it is that you're observing. There's "me," and there's my anger that I'm observing. *But* most often, the two feel like the same thing. ***I*** am angry. We identify so strongly with whatever experience we're having that we get sucked into it. Once inside, we get thrashed around wherever it wants to take us.

Mindfulness is a way for us to step out of that thrashing. In our journey toward presence, mindfulness is the thing that allows us to deepen our connection to the present moment without getting overwhelmed by it.

It's important to point out the potential pushback: "Well, what if I like being in the river? Am I just going to be watching my life happening without actually living it?"

The quick answer: no.

Although the river metaphor helps us capture what it's like to embody an awareness versus unconsciousness, it doesn't capture another reality, which is that you're still *living* your life, and experiencing, even *more*, all there is to experience. So, maybe there's a third way to be in relationship to the river: We're learning how to kayak. To move fluidly with the flow of our life without drowning or being trapped in it.

How does mindfulness differ from meditation?

Well, mindfulness is a quality of mind, and meditation is a dedicated period of practice to help cultivate it.

You could think of mindfulness as your fitness level, and meditation as the gym.

And if you're still thinking this is a bit New Agey, there's quite a bit of science supporting the benefits of this fitness level.

MENTAL FITNESS

For the last forty years, mindfulness meditation has been making the transition from an esoteric practice to a respected, evidence-based modality with measurable benefits. This is in large part due to neuroscience.

Up until the last few decades, scientists thought the development of your brain followed a similar trajectory to physical development—it grows until your twenties. The idea was that your brain undergoes significant transformation until around twenty-five years of age, and then remains relatively fixed for the rest of your life.

Fast-forward to the present day and fancy new brain scanning technology, and we see this notion simply isn't true. Our brains continue to change throughout our entire lives, adapting, shrinking, and growing based on different experiences and learning. It's a phenomenon known as neuroplasticity, and it happens to be good friends with mindfulness meditation.

The western world *really* got interested in mindfulness in 2005 when a Harvard study led by Sarah Lazar measured the brains of twenty people who had been practicing mindfulness meditation for roughly the previous decade and found their brains were thicker in areas responsible for focus and emotion regulation, and showed that

meditation could reduce age-related thinning in the frontal cortex, responsible for cognitive function, memory, language, decision-making, and more.

The findings have been replicated and expanded upon since, as researchers like Dr. Richard Davidson show meditation grows areas of the brain responsible for memory, empathy, self-control, focus, and joy, and that these changes can happen in as little as eight weeks of meditation practice and sometimes with as little as eight minutes per day.

I can't speak for the rest of the world's exuberance, but this piqued my interest because it showed that we can treat our brain like a muscle and develop it with training. In the same way we do curls to develop our biceps, meditation practice is an exercise to develop our brain. We can think of it as mental fitness.

All of this research has been exciting, no doubt. And now that we have science to back up the benefits of mindfulness and meditation, everyone seems to want a piece of it.

I get calls to give presentations to hospitals, high schools, universities, hedge funds, and organizations of all kinds. Invariably, when I talk to the event coordinators beforehand, they say something along the lines of:

"You're gonna talk about the science, right?"

I always do. And I'm happy to.

Honestly, though, I have a complicated relationship to the emphasis on the science. Here's why:

For thousands of years, monks and lay meditators across cultures have each invested tens of thousands of hours exploring and understanding the mind through meditation. They not only developed an understanding of the various benefits of meditation—like happiness, stress reduction, peace, concentration, love, joy—but also *how* to practice meditation to get these benefits.

It's only in the last forty to fifty years that we started studying it through Western science. Now that we can see the benefits that meditators have been talking about for thousands of years, we go, "Oh wow, meditation! What a great thing! We should do this!"

(hand-on-face emoji)

And, like, whatever. I'm fine with that. I literally would not be

writing this book if it weren't for the science. Learning about the research supporting this weird thing I was doing to impress a girl, who quickly dumped me anyway, was the impetus for me to take meditation more seriously. So, I have huge appreciation and respect for the science.

But now having explored the rich traditions supporting meditation, like Buddhism, and practicing under some of the greatest Eastern meditation teachers of our time, I get uncomfortable when we mistake the researchers of meditation as the ultimate source for how to practice, what to practice, and whether or not it works.

At the end of the day, when I want to deepen my practice, I don't go to a meditation researcher. I go to someone who has devoted their life to meditation. And I bow to all of those people and the meditative traditions that have paved the path for us to understand the mind in such depth through their commitment to the practice.

I hope we can keep that in perspective.

PRACTICE MAKES PRESENCE

You want to know one of my biggest difficulties in writing this book?

Figuring out how to teach you to meditate.

Yep, this simple thing I do, day in and day out, was the hardest thing to translate to written word.

There's something about writing out instructions in a step-by-step fashion designed for you to do at some other time that pains me.

I get *why* most meditation books do it that way, but to me, it feels so… empty.

The practice of meditation is this beautifully rich, embodied, and alive exploration. To simply write it out in bullet points kind of feels like handing you an Ikea instruction manual.

It also feels disruptive to this cool little connection we've been creating together. Like we're on this great date walking around town and then I say, "Hey, here are the directions to the restaurant. Enjoy the meal and let's meet up when you're done and you can tell me about it."

I guess, at the heart of all this, what I'm really trying to say is, "I'd like to have dinner with you. Maybe dessert, too?"

(bashfully looks down and presses toe into the floor)

I hope that's not too much to ask.

And if you're nervous about how it will work, don't worry, I have it all planned out!

I'm going to guide us through the meditation instructions in real time, similar to what we did in the mindfulness section, just with more structure.

We would typically do this with our eyes closed, but since you'll need to read, you can keep them open, and I'll offer prompts where you could close them if you choose to.

Okay?

Getting excited?

If you haven't already, you can find a comfortable seated posture. It doesn't have to be anything fancy. In fact, if you're lying down, that's fine, too. Just make sure you're comfortable.

In a bit, I'll start guiding you through the practice. Usually, I would soften and slow down my voice. So, as you read through each line, my encouragement is to read slower than usual (about half your normal speed, and even slower if you're a speed reader). Take about a one-second pause between sentences, and at least five seconds before transitioning paragraphs. The idea is not to zoom through this as if you were just consuming information; rather, to feel, practice, and integrate the instructions as we go. At any point, you can take as long a pause as you'd like to, even closing your eyes to drop more deeply into the experience.

Okay, you ready?

Everything below this line will be the start of our meditation. Get ready to slooooww it wayyyy downnnn.

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1. The first portion of this meditation is simply about settling in. You can notice what it's like to be sitting in whatever posture you're in. And also what it's like to be seeing the page in front of you with more awareness. Maybe noticing any sounds in your surroundings.

When you're ready, take a deep breath. On the exhale, feel all the

muscles in your body relax into your posture.

Invite your jaw to soften. Your teeth don't need to be clenched.

Invite your shoulders to soften.

As well as your belly and your hands.

Often we run from one thing to the next, responding to other people's needs, crossing things off our to-do list, such that it can feel weird to just stop and do something that might seem like doing nothing.

So, for the next few moments, just notice what it's like to simply "be." You do not have to get anywhere, do anything, or solve any problems. Give yourself full permission to be present with this moment as it is. You're welcome to close your eyes for a few moments and tune into this before you move on.

2. You can now guide your attention to your breathing.

You don't need to breathe in any particular way, simply allow the breath to happen as it normally would, feeling it move throughout your body.

Can you feel the belly and chest expand on an inhale and deflate on an exhale? Do you notice more subtle movements throughout the body?

Eventually, you can focus your attention on your abdomen, feeling your belly rise on an inhale and fall on an exhale. Feel free to close your eyes for a few moments to feel this more vividly.

To help keep your focus on the breath, experiment with silently labeling the inhale of the breath as "rising" and the exhale of the breath as "falling."

It's a very subtle and quiet "noting," but try to keep a consistency of awareness: "rising… falling… rising… falling." Your eyes can be open or closed.

As time passes, you might notice the mind likes to think: about things to get done, memories from yesterday, or totally random thoughts. Whatever the thoughts are, just notice them like clouds passing through the sky, and then gently return your attention to the breath.

In the same way we note the breath as "rising, falling," you can note a thought as "thinking" when it arises, and then go back to

"rising, falling." Take a few minutes to try this out, eyes open or closed.

3. Now, we will expand our awareness. Instead of just focusing on the breath, we become aware of anything that arises in our experience—thoughts, sensations, emotions, sounds, and so on. This is called open monitoring.

As different experiences arise, you can note them as whatever they are: "Sound, sound, breath, itch, sound, thinking, anger, anger, sound, frustration, boredom." There is no rhyme or reason to it; just note whatever you're aware of. Take a couple of minutes to try this, eyes open or closed.

4. In the last minute or two of this meditation, reflect on anything for which you can be grateful. This could be people in your life, things you have, qualities about yourself, or simply the fact that you're breathing. Feel what it's like to incline the mind toward gratitude for the next minute or so.

And when you're ready, give yourself an internal pat on the back, take a deep breath, and we'll proceed.…

Congratulations! You're officially a meditator.

Different things can come up in an experience like that. You may feel peaceful. Or sleepy. You may feel energized, bored, confused, or even agitated and stressed. All of these experiences are normal and can arise for a number of different reasons depending on what's going on in your life right now, what's happened in your past, how you were paying attention in the meditation, and so on.

Meditation is not about feeling "good" in the moment. It's not about *what* experience arises, but rather how you *relate* to the experience. I've had meditations where I felt like I was floating on a cloud, and other meditations where I felt restlessness, pain, and frustration. One was not "better" than the other, although one certainly *felt* better than the other. Both were opportunities to practice being with the never-ending flow of different experiences, not attaching too strongly to the ones I wanted or pushing away the ones I didn't want, but instead finding a new kind of peace that wasn't dependent on the moment being perfectly manufactured to my liking. All of this is the practice that contributes to your mental fitness. You'll get better and better at watching this river (and

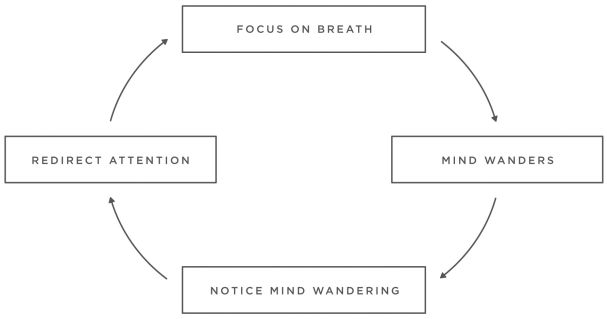
kayaking on it), and it'll start to seep into your day-to-day life.

For now, you got a taste of the foundational sequence you can use to start your meditation practice. Because we got to experience it together, I think I can now share the general bullet points of what we did without feeling like it is totally empty. Here's how it looked:

Preparation: Find a comfortable seated posture, either in a chair or cross-legged on the floor. In general, you'll want to sit so that your hip bones are slightly higher than your knees. You might need some cushions or blankets to use as a bolster. Let your spine be upright, but not up*tight*. If sitting is painful on your body, you're welcome to lie down. You can wear any clothing you like.

Step 1. Settle In: Take one to two minutes to settle and check in with yourself. This is designed to ease the transition from daily life into the practice and provides the opportunity to connect with yourself. You can use the question "What is it like to be me right now?" as a prompt.

Step 2. Awareness of Breath: This will be the majority of your meditation practice and can last for a few minutes or as long as you'd like. In this stage, you feel the "rise" and "fall" of your abdomen, making a soft note in your head of "rising" and "falling." The continuous returning back to your breath, over and over, is the bicep curl for your brain. It's training your focus, as well as your ability to be aware of thoughts, to let them go, and to resettle back in the present. The general sequence looks like the illustration here.



This is the bicep curl for your mind! Again and again and again.

If focusing on the breath is uncomfortable, feels contrived, or creates panic, you can focus on the sensations of your hands resting on your lap or on sounds that you can hear.

Regardless of what your focus point is, it won't take long before you realize the mind likes to wander. This is normal. *So* normal. If your mind doesn't wander, you might want to check that you still

have a pulse. In fact, as our meditation practice deepens, we often notice *more* mind-wandering, since our concentration and awareness are heightened, illuminating thoughts that were previously influencing us subconsciously. The best way to work with the wandering mind is as if you were training a puppy.

When you first tell a puppy to sit, what happens? It usually runs off into the other room and licks its butt. So, you gently go get the puppy, bring it back, and try again. You don't run up to the puppy and kick it in the face. It would be terrified of you, never want to come back, and if it *does* do what you say, it will be out of fear. Instead, you try again and say, "Sit." When the puppy *does* finally sit, you make the puppy feel like it just won Wheel of Fortune and you scream, "*Oh my gosh, you're the best puppy ever! I love you so much!*" feeding it a treat and smothering it with kisses. When we try it again, the puppy might run off, but we bring it back, try again, it sits, we shower it with love, and eventually, the puppy gets better and better at sitting when we ask it. Not because it's scared of *not* sitting, but because it associated joy with sitting.

Sadly, many of us try to train our mind to be present by kicking the puppy in the face. We're focusing on the breath, and then randomly start thinking about how tragic it was that Mufasa died in *The Lion King*, and as soon as we catch ourselves, we go, "Come on, seriously?! I haven't watched *The Lion King* in fifteen years! What's wrong with me!? This should be easy! Just focus on the breath! I knew I would suck at this. I have ADD. I have OCD. I have some other three-letter word. This whole meditation thing is stupid and is not meant for me anyway," and on and on. We berate ourselves into the present moment, which makes us not want to be there at all.

Instead, why not lure ourselves into the present moment like we lure the puppy into sitting? When the mind wanders, we can go, "Hey, mind, remember what we're doing, we're meditating! It's really cool. Can you come back?" and the mind goes, "Oh! Yeah, yeah, I'm back," and we go, "Oh, you're such a good mind! I love you so much!" It wanders away again, we remind it to come back, and when it does, we go, "Oh, you're the best mind ever! You're so cute and wonderful!" and on and on.

Are you getting the point?

This might sound a little ridiculous. And you don't have to go through that whole thought process every time your mind wanders,

but it's the attitude behind the thought process that I'm most interested in. One of the best things you can do for yourself early in this journey is cultivate a playful relationship with the chaos in your mind. If you take what's happening in your mind too seriously, both your meditation and your life are going to be a very bumpy ride.

Step 3. Open Monitoring: Once you feel your mind is more settled on the breath (being able to focus for roughly ten to fifteen breaths without much strain), you can expand your awareness to include anything in your experience. This is like driving in the passenger seat of a car, looking out the window, and seeing "mailbox, tree, house, person, mailbox…." All you're doing in open monitoring is noticing and "noting"—in very simple terms—whatever experience comes through your awareness. I like to see it as resting in your wholeness. Nothing is excluded from your awareness. As different experiences arise, you can even say "you're welcome here, too" as a way to invite more of the moment into your awareness. You're not indulging in experiences, you're not *thinking* about experiences, you're just resting in an awareness of whatever experiences arise, letting them come and go as they will.

Step 4. Gratitude: The gratitude portion is an optional way to close the meditation. It helps lighten the mind, and you get to practice appreciating what is good rather than always dwelling on what isn't going well.

You can set a timer for your meditation and spend as long as you'd like at each stage. My recommendation is to spend *at least* 50 percent of your practice focusing on your breath.

If you did nothing more than refine and deepen this practice sequence for the rest of your life, you would grow tremendously and expand your capacity to hold the present moment.

We will explore other meditation practices in the book to supplement this one, and you also get access to a number of resources and guided meditations (including the one we just did) in the online resources at www.stopmissingyourlife.com/resources. At the end of the book, we'll look at everything we've covered from a bird's-eye view and discuss how to integrate and implement these different practices into your life.

FACE: THE PILLARS OF PRESENCE

As much as mindfulness meditation is a big part of my work, this book is not actually about mindfulness meditation. In my view, it is about something much more compelling than that. I ask, "Mindful… toward what end?" The answer I've come to is *presence*.

Presence is hard to describe and hence not easy to advertise on the cover of a magazine, or develop a pill for, or promise in "one easy trick," and yet I think it's something we all want. You know it when you see it. Or, rather, you know it when you feel it. Presence is a quality of being that is unmistakably attractive about a person. People with presence feel both grounded and open, deeply okay with themselves and able to share that okayness with others, able to experience the layers of their emotions and not be consumed by them. And there's no faking presence. I mean, you can try. But faking is contrary to presence itself. It goes deeper than external appearances or surface-level actions. Presence allows us to lead our lives from a place of love, not be driven by the bait of fear. *Truly embodied presence is a quality most humans are drawn toward.*

Cultivating presence involves softening the walls that keep us shut down to life, and equipping ourselves with the inner resources to stay open to our lives and not be trapped in our pain box.

Mindfulness plays a foundational role in that endeavor, but to make it the sole focus would limit the strategies and practices I also believe necessary to move toward presence.

There are four key qualities that I consider the pillars of presence: focus, allowing, curiosity, and embodiment, conveniently creating the acronym FACE.

These are not hierarchical or sequential—that is, "allowing" is not more important than "embodiment," nor is it necessary for it to be cultivated before the other. Instead, they collectively create a moment of presence.

I view the pillars of FACE as the materials we use to build our "container" for holding the present moment. A small container is easily overwhelmed. A large container is spacious and has room for choice, deliberate action, and peace. As each of these pillars is more deeply developed, the bigger and stronger that container gets, allowing us to more fully experience everything life offers us, and feel more whole in the process.

Mindfulness meditation employs and further develops these four

pillars, which is why it is foundational to this book. In the next four chapters, we will look at each of these pillars individually, why they're important for presence, how to further cultivate them through meditation, and how to develop them in ways outside of meditation.

CHAPTER 4

FOCUS—STABILIZE YOUR MIND

The first pillar of presence is focus. This refers to our capacity to be attuned to, steady in, and have clarity toward what is happening in the present moment. On the most foundational level, if we are to be present to our lives without constantly bouncing around to something else, we need to have *some* stability of mind. Unfortunately, this is an increasingly rare ability in our world.

Tell me if this sounds familiar:

You're in the kitchen and think, "I'm cold; I should get my sweater." As you're walking upstairs to your room, you notice you left a bunch of clothes out. "I should put those away." A few minutes in, you realize just how messy your closet is, "Jeez, I need to organize this." Frustrated by the clutter, you think, "I should get a clothing rack; I'm sure I have one in the basement." As you're heading downstairs, you see some pictures along the wall of yourself when you were a child. "Aw, I was so cute. Oh, look, there's me with my cousin Jessie! I haven't talked to her in ages. Let me give her a call." As you pull out your phone, you reflexively open your Facebook app, and see an article your friend posted about pottery. "I always wanted to get into pottery." Now that you're in the basement, you're wondering where you might put your soon-to-own pottery wheel, but it starts to get chilly. "Let me

get a sweater… Wait…”

Our minds have become like jumpy little chipmunks, bouncing from one thing to the next, often without us even realizing it. And I don’t think we can blame ourselves for it. I mean, look at the world we’re living in: smartphones that act like little slot machines in our pockets, honking horns and street lights in bustling cities, caffeine-driven performance expectations at work and in life, and highly addictive social media apps that keep us forever glued to our devices, jumping from one person’s life story to the next.

Psychologist Alberto Villoldo says we are now exposed to more stimuli in one week than our ancient ancestors were exposed to in their entire lifetimes. Instead of having to deal with just one lion at a time, we have the entire pride coming at us every minute of every day.

In short: our brains aren’t wired for this.

While some of this stimulation can be exciting, the overwhelming and unending nature of it is whittling down our brain’s capacity to sustain focus, making us less productive, more anxious, and less happy.

In Chapter 11, we will discuss practical ways to work with the technology in our lives. In this chapter, we will talk about developing an inner focus and stability amid the chaos.

SHIFTING OUT OF AUTOPILOT

Within the first ten minutes of any workshop, I do an exercise to help people connect with the power of focus. I ring a bell and ask the audience to pay attention to the sound, which has a long, deep resonance.

Recently, I was running a workshop for a big Fortune 100 company. There were over two hundred executives in the room, all suffering withdrawal from being off their phones the last three minutes, and I was going to put them through my

meditation exercise whether they wanted to or not.

The instructions were simple: I'll ring the bells three times. If you'd like to close your eyes, you may. All you need to do is bring your full attention to the sound of the bell until it dissolves back into silence.

Everyone looked around at each other like I had just asked them to get naked and hold hands.

"Don't worry, it will be easy," I assured them. "And it will only take about a minute."

They adjusted their posture, as if reviewing the catalog in their mind for how you're supposed to sit when you do weird hippie stuff like this. Some closed their eyes; some kept them open.

I rang the bells once, and the sound ran for about fifteen seconds.

The room got quieter.

I rang the bells again, and everyone continued to listen for the sound to soften into silence.

More people now had their eyes closed. I could feel something shifting.

I rang the bells a third time, letting the sound run its fifteen seconds and watched as the group settled into it.

After the last bell faded into silence, you could hear a pin drop. The room was still. And it appeared that everyone had their eyes closed.

In a gentle tone of voice, I invited them to open their eyes again.

They stayed quiet.

"So… how was that?" I asked.

"I liked the quiet," one woman said. "I think that's a new experience for all of us… at least at work. I didn't want it to end."

“Yeah,” I responded. “So, you get a taste for just how much we’re consumed by the noise of our lives.”

“What else did people notice?”

A man raised his hand. “In the silence between the bells, I noticed a lot of other sounds in the room, especially the ticking of the clock. I was surprised I was able to hear that.”

“Very cool,” I said. “So, even though we raised awareness around one thing, in this case the bells, it enhanced our awareness of other, more subtle things.”

Anything else?

There was a pause.

Eventually, one last woman chimed in. “I just feel so calm. I’m usually caught in my thoughts and worries, and when I was listening to the bells, most of that fell away.”

The whole room seemed to nod in agreement.

I’ve done this exercise more than five hundred times and there are usually common themes in people’s responses, but the one response that *always* comes up is an increased sense of calm.

It could be that the bells are very pleasant to listen to, or that the room is quiet, or that they’re not immersed in e-mails —but it seems that when we make the intention to pay deeper attention to one thing (in this case, the bells), we’re less prone to falling into the dominating stream of thoughts and stimuli that typically consume our attention and create extra agitation.

You know those thoughts, right? The judgments, the worries, the rumination, the thoughts about the future and the past. Not only do they create agitation and stress, these pesky little critters become the filter through which we experience our life.

Some skeptics might think that I’m suggesting we clear our minds of thoughts, never think about the future or the past, and just focus on what is happening right now, all the time, in every moment.

Eh, not quite. If that were the case—or if it was even possible—I'm not sure how we would get anything done. We *should* spend time thinking about the future—planning our goals and scheduling out our day—and time reflecting on our past—what we need to improve, what went well that we want to remember. Both of those domains, the future and the past, heavily inform how we live our life in the present moment.

However, in my own life, I've noticed that my mind can go into the future and the past without me asking it to. And it's not always helpful. It often leads to extra stress, extra worry, and extra judgment about things that have very little to do with the reality of what is happening right now.

So, this is not about clearing thoughts from our mind; rather, it's about developing an awareness of *what is going on in our minds*—Where does our attention go, moment to moment? What does our mind reflect on when we're not aware of it?—and then being more intentional about where and how we direct our attention.

A thought can be a powerful and positive force in our lives, leading to creativity, planning, and problem-solving; a thought can also be meaningless neurotic chatter. We want the ability to leverage the former and not be swept away by the latter.

But, Cory, I don't want to constantly monitor myself. I want to be free and spontaneous!

The kind of freedom I'm talking about is not being trapped in the unconscious pattern of reactivity. It's about seeing what our usual impulse is in the moment and then being able to choose to follow it or respond differently.

I believe this sentiment is best captured in this quote: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth, freedom, and happiness."

The ability to respond in that space between something happening and our response to it is where we find freedom. It's where we can show ourselves a little more compassion

when we're beating ourselves up. It's where we can decide to be a little less impulsive when we're about to say (or text) something we shouldn't. And when it comes right down to it, it's where we start to make meaningful changes in our life.

FOCUS IS FREEDOM

In college, I joined a fraternity. As in most Greek life (and organizations), there are people you like, and there are people who, well, you would be okay seeing less of. For me, that person was Ryan.

Ryan and I both applied for social chair early in my sophomore year. Although he originally got the position, it was transferred over to me several months later due to some new ideas I wanted to implement.

I expected he wouldn't be thrilled about this, but I didn't expect what would ensue the next couple years.

Ryan spread rumors about me, said things behind my back, and always had some snarky remark about how I was running the social chair position. I once needed to collect $40 from each member for an event, and Ryan paid me in pennies and nickels.

I was no saint throughout this process, often getting in arguments with him and saying petty things behind his back, as well.

This tension continued for three years, and it was only fueled by living under the same roof. Senior year, I finally had the chance to move off campus with a few friends. Guess who moved next door? Ryan.

We had overlapping friends, so there was no escaping each other.

Our two houses threw parties on the weekends, so early in the year we made an agreement to share keg shells (worth a

$50 deposit) when going to the beer distributor (yes, I know I sound like a stereotypical frat guy right now).

A few weeks later, I went to their house to pick up the shell for a Saturday night party. Their door was unlocked, so I walked in, grabbed the shell, and started to walk out. There was an eerie silence in the house, though. Sort of like that scene in *The Lion King* where Simba is trapped in the valley right before the stampede of wildebeests come charging down the hill.

Seconds later, I heard the stampede. I looked over and Ryan was charging down the stairs.

He immediately got in my face: "What the hell do you think you're doing here taking our keg shell?"

"Dude, we said a few weeks ago that we would share these for parties," I said.

"Bullshit. I didn't agree to that."

"Well, everyone else in your house did, so I don't know what your problem is."

"My problem is you, asshole! Coming into my house and stealing our stuff!"

At this point, I was fuming. I felt my hands gripping into fists. My teeth were clenching. My face was red. I had reached my limit with this guy.

He continued to yell in my face. I could feel myself about to lash out at him, repeating the same pattern we'd been going through the last several years, and in a moment of what felt like divine intervention, a thought passed through my mind: "Try something new."

And in an instant, something in me let go. My fists unclenched, my shoulders dropped, I let the muscles in my face relax. When he was done yelling, I took a breath and said:

"Listen, man, I don't know what's going on here. I thought we had an agreement, but maybe I was wrong. You can have the shell back. To be honest, if we're going to be neighbors

this entire year, I really don't want it to be this way. I'm not sure what's been going on the past few years, but if I did anything to piss you off, I apologize. Can we just put all of this behind us?"

There was silence.

He stared at me with a blank face, and abruptly said: "Give me the shell and get out of my house."

Shrug.

It wasn't the exact response I wanted, but I obliged. As I walked out of the house, I thought, "Who the hell was that calm, collected dude back there?" I went to bed feeling good about myself that night.

Two days later, I was having breakfast with a friend who was very familiar with this three-year squabble between Ryan and me. I looked up from our conversation, and who do I see walking into the dining hall? Ryan. I put my head down and continued eating; I was not in the mood to deal with him.

A few moments later, I sensed Ryan standing over me. I looked up and he had his arm extended out, as if to shake my hand.

The primal part of my brain quickly kicked in: "This is a trap and he's going to slap you."

But he stayed like that, so I reached my hand out to shake his, and he said: "I'm sorry that I acted like an asshole the other night. If you're still willing to start fresh, I am, too."

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded, gave a confused smile, and eventually said, "Yeah, man, that sounds good."

As he walked away, my friend looked back at me and said, "I don't know what just happened, but that is the last thing I thought I'd ever see."

It wasn't something I thought I'd see, either. The tension between us was strong. Nobody in the fraternity thought it would be resolved. But it was. And believe it or not, Ryan and

I are now best friends. Here's a picture of us while we were backpacking Europe a number of years ago:

Just kidding, that's me with my brother.

Ryan and I are not best friends. We don't even talk anymore. But our relationship did change after that day. We went through the rest of our senior year amicably. We didn't call each other up to have brunch, but we stayed friendly. We even ended up in the same meditation class the next semester (talk about a head trip).

The new trajectory of our relationship was influenced by one very important moment: a moment of feeling every part of me wanting to react a certain way, but choosing something else; a moment of stepping off my usual pattern of conditioning and finding freedom to respond differently.

This is the space between stimulus and response, and I was finally able to discern this micro-moment and respond differently.

What I didn't yet mention is that I had some help. The summer before this interaction, I went on my first mindfulness retreat and had been meditating ten minutes each day since. The main thing I was learning how to do was to sit still, focus my attention on my breath, notice all of the different thoughts, emotions, and urges come up, acknowledge them and let them go, and then return my attention to my breath.

This basic training is what helped me feel the tension in my body when I was with Ryan, observe it without reacting, and choose a different response. It was the first time I experienced how mindfulness could create real change. Prior to that, I just saw it as a way to reduce stress or be calm. But now, it felt like a superpower. I was no longer enslaved to my usual patterns of reacting, which were often much more impulsive and fueled by the emotion of the moment.

The capacity to be aware and grounded enough to see the multitude of choices we have in each moment is likely the most important part of our journey toward presence, because this is how we change our usual way of relating to our experience. Literally, every single moment is an opportunity to learn what our usual tendencies are—do I assume the worst, do I look for what's negative, do I question myself, do I get defensive, do I get submissive, do I turn away from a pain wall—and as soon as we're aware of these tendencies, we can choose to respond differently.

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor who lost his entire family in Nazi death camps, famously said, "Everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." Even if we can't change our circumstance, we can change how we relate to it.

We will talk more about the intricacies of how to change patterns of thought and behavior in Chapter 8, but for now, I'll say that it starts by being able to recognize that space between stimulus and response.

The next time you're on the phone with a difficult family member, or someone cuts you off in traffic, or you're impatiently waiting for the slow person checking out at the grocery store, see if you can feel that space that would enable you to respond differently.

What is the initial trigger? How does it feel in your body? Can you experience it without reacting to it in your usual way? And what might another response look like?

Each moment holds the possibility for many different responses. Feel your impulse to go in one direction, take a breath, and assess if there's a response that might be more aligned with the person you're trying to grow into.

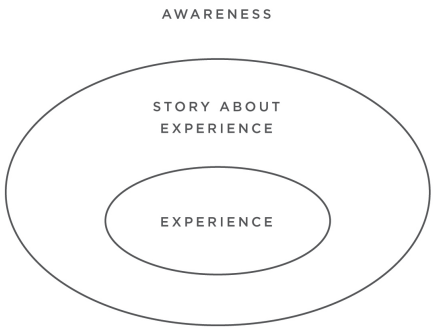
DROP THE STORY, DROP THE STRESS

As our attention stabilizes in the present, and we're not blinded by the whirlwind of our thoughts, we develop a sort of x-ray vision into the moment. Specifically, we can more clearly see three main things happening in any moment: our experience, our awareness of the experience, and our story about the experience.

When we become aware of these things, we have more choices for how we respond.

First, we have our experience. This can be anything we perceive through our five senses or in our minds. I see a red rose. I feel tension in my shoulders. I smell smoke. I'm thinking about my childhood. Pretty straightforward.

Awareness is a bit more elusive. This is the part of us that knows what is happening as it's happening.



For instance:

Try thinking the thought "I love jellybeans."

Now, as you recite that in your mind, how do you know that you're thinking about jellybeans?

Do you have to think, "Okay, now I'm thinking 'I love jelly beans'" to know you're thinking about jelly beans?

If you're not sure, try thinking it ten times in a row, and as you do, notice the part of you that is watching you recite the thought "I love jelly beans."

Do you see that there is some deeper awareness that just *knows* you're thinking?

This deeper "knowing," although subtle, is pointing to something very important and even mysterious. It's the part of us that is not tainted or compromised by an experience that arises. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says, our awareness of fear is not fearful and our awareness of pain is not in pain. There's something in the background that is just *experiencing* our life.

Psychologists often refer to it as metacognition, or our ability to think about our thoughts.

However, I don't think that fully captures the depth of this part of ourselves. The hippies (myself included) often think of it as our higher self. The part of us that is most fundamental and most expansive; the space within us that is connected with all things and everything.

We're getting a little trippy now.…

You can call it whatever you'd like: God, spirit, soul, consciousness, metacognition. For the sake of simplicity, I'm just going to refer to it as awareness—the part of us that knows what is happening.

Lastly, the middle layer, story, is the part of us that moderates the relationship between awareness and experience.

We see a dog (experience), we know we see a dog (awareness), and we think dogs are cute (story).

We're sad (experience), we know we're sad (awareness), and we believe being sad is weak (story).

We're in a dark alley (experience), we know it's dark (awareness), and we have the felt sense we should leave

(story).

We get fired from a job (experience), we know we're fired (awareness), and we're not surprised because deep down we believe the world is out to get us (story).

There are different layers of story, as you can see. It could be a thought (a thought could be an experience *or* a story), a subconscious belief, a deep-seated worldview, or something noncognitive, like a felt sense in our nervous system. If the conditioning from our childhood is not to trust people, then we might not necessarily have the explicit thought "I don't trust this person" when we meet them, it may be more feeling- or intuition-based. All of this would fall into the category of "story" because it's inserting a subjective flavor onto an objective experience.

This is why you can have a room full of people going through the same thing, with each person having a very different experience. The experience is filtered through their story. Most of us are not experiencing our experience. We're experiencing our *story* of our experience.

Check out this haiku (that's not actually a haiku when translated to English) by the poet Matsuo Basho:

The old pond.

A frog jumps in.

Plop.

That's it.

To me, this haiku is packed with wisdom. Doesn't seem like much, huh?

The old pond. A frog jumps in. Plop.

Where's the wisdom in that? It's so… simple.

That's exactly it. The wisdom is in the simplicity. The wisdom is in the naming of the absolute, fundamental elements of the experience. There is a pond, a frog jumps in it, and there is a plop. No added story, no hyperbole, no

exaggeration. It's not a tale about the heroic frog looking over the water with trepidation, taking a few steps back, then making this courageous jump with the sun glimmering over the water, the flamingos clapping and landing a perfect 10 Olympic dive.

No. It's just the raw experience.

And although it may seem dull to experience the world like this, it's quite the opposite, because we're often unaware of just how much tension is created by being caught in the story of our lives, as well as how much of the inherent goodness of the moment we miss when we're caught in the story.

I'll give you an example.

A number of years ago, I accidentally got off the train at the wrong stop coming back from New York City. I was napping, and in my dreary state, I thought I heard the conductor call my station. I grabbed my things and jumped off the train in a panic. A few seconds later, I came to my senses and realized, "Wait, this isn't right." But by the time my brain told my legs to jump back on the train, the doors were shut.

Great.

It was midnight. The next train was at 5:10 a.m. I was at least a three-hour walk from home, and my phone was dead. To top it off, I had an 8:00 a.m. presentation to give that morning.

As I walked down the main road to see if I could find a pay phone, the thoughts kicked in. "If only I didn't get off the wrong stop. I'm going to be exhausted for my presentation. I don't have a number for a local taxi company. That's assuming I can even *find* a pay phone. This is such a mess…."

In my flurry of thoughts, something caught my eye. I looked up, and in the middle of the dark sky was a full moon —the same moon I would look at during late-night meditations in Burma. It stopped me in my tracks, and like a reset button, pulled me right back into the present moment. I noticed the crickets chirping, the warmth of a June night on my skin, and

the stillness of a sleepy neighborhood. When I dropped the story of everything that was wrong, the moment was actually quite peaceful. I was able to appreciate it despite still having the need to find a pay phone.

Thirty minutes later, I found a 7-Eleven, called a taxi, made my way home, did my presentation a few hours later, and life went on.

So often, the story of our minds clouds another reality of our experience. I say "another" reality, because on the one hand, yes, there was truth to the story in my mind—I needed to find a phone, I was going to get home late, and I was not going to get as much sleep as I wanted. And yes, I did wake up groggy, and my presentation was subpar.

However, in that moment, worrying about these things was not helping me find a pay phone any faster, so what was the point? When I dropped into what was *actually* happening, independent of what "should" be happening, I found that the moment was much less of a catastrophe than my mind was making it out to be.

If we were to put this experience into the Old Pond haiku, it might sound something like this:

The man named Cory.

He's walking outside.

It's dark.

Again, this isn't even technically a haiku, but I think you get the point.

When we see the experience as something separate from the story, we're no longer trapped by the limited perspective and boundaries of the story.

You can do this exercise, too. Take any difficult situation you're in, and write down the core elements similar to the Old Pond haiku. What is *really* happening? Not your judgments about it, not what you wish were happening, but the direct experience.

The woman.

She's sitting in traffic.

The radio is playing.

The small child on the airplane.

He's crying.

It's loud.

When we view the experience in its most basic form, it's usually not as stressful as we're making it out to be. And it makes sense, because one definition of stress is *when our perceived demands are greater than our perceived resources to meet those demands*. Slow down to read that again and assess your own experience of stress: Stress is when our perceived demands are greater than our perceived resources to meet those demands.

What's the key word there?

Perceived.

Why? Because often what we *perceive* to be demanding is very different than what is *actually* demanding when we're overwhelmed by the story we've created.

Take a routine experience like being in the shower. Rarely are we *just* in the shower. We've usually brought all this other stuff into the shower with us: Our boss might be in the shower, our 401(k) is in the shower, our kids are in the shower (your kids might *literally* be in the shower with you).

So, what happens? Your perceived demands become: "I need to have a conversation with my boss; I need to plan out my retirement (and also be pissed off that I can't retire when I want to retire); I need to take care of the kids."

All while you're in the shower!

Who the heck has the resources to be able to do all of that in one moment?

No one.

But your brain is not very good at distinguishing the difference between *your thoughts* about those things and *the reality* of those things.

However, what if you drop your focus into what is *actually* happening in that moment? You're just rubbing soap on your body. You're just shampooing your hair. You're just standing. Most of us have the resources to be able to meet those demands.

But, Cory, I do my planning when I'm in the shower! Are you saying I'm not allowed to think and plan!?

No, you can absolutely plan. But there's a difference between being *aware* of a story and being *lost* in a story. Part of cultivating presence is (1) being able to see what is actually happening in each moment; (2) recognizing why we're doing what we're doing; and (3) being able to choose if that's what we actually want to be doing, rather than being blindly pushed around by the chaotic story of our minds.

And listen, sometimes the story of your life might be great: "I'm an awesome mother," "I will always love my children," "I'm a highly motivated person who never quits," "My life is going to get better."

You can use story to your advantage—to feel more positive, to help motivate you, to keep you accountable—but my encouragement is to hold it lightly. Because as soon as we attach ourselves and our identity to a story, it locks us into an expectation for how things *should be*.

When we hold ourselves or our lives to some predetermined plan, we're no longer responding in the aliveness of the moment; rather, to past ideas about how things should be. Sometimes those past ideas are important reminders of what our values are, and other times they may be outdated or limited, therefore keeping us bound to a way of being that is no longer true to who we're becoming.

When we drop out of our story for how things *should* go, we get to respond in real time, inspired by what feels true and

right in *this* moment, enabling us to adapt, grow, and move fluidly through our moments like water.

The following are specific ways to cultivate the focus pillar of presence in both your meditation practice and in daily life. I will include these sections at the end of each of the next three chapters on the pillars of presence to aid in their cultivation. You can also find video descriptions of many of these strategies in the online resources: www.stopmiss ingyourlife.com/resources.

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Cultivating Focus in Meditation:

The meditation practice itself will organically develop your focus. Each time you bring your attention back to the breath or simply back to an awareness of the present moment, you are developing your ability to focus; it's the bicep curl for your brain. With that said, there are a few strategies we can use to help this process along.

1. **Count your breaths:** After each breath that you're deeply present with, count a number in your head, starting at one—i.e., "rising, falling, one; rising, falling, two.…" See if you can get up to ten. It's harder than it sounds, so if/when your mind wanders off, simply start back at one. You might find yourself getting frustrated if you lose your spot (especially if you're type A). This is not a competition; there are no gold stars if you get to ten. It's simply to help you keep a continuity of focus. I typically do this for the first half of my awareness of breath meditation, sometimes longer if my mind is very unsettled. Have fun and be playful with it.
2. **Reduce length of mind wandering:** My teacher in Burma used to say, "One moment of mindfulness? Good, but nothing special. Many moments of mindfulness back to back? Very good, and you will create a powerful force in the mind." Deepening focus is all about reducing moments of being un-present. Counting breaths certainly helps with this, as does making the *intention* to pay *attention* to the moment when the mind starts to wander. The hardest thing when we first start out is that our minds can wander off without us even realizing it—three minutes go by until we realize we were aimlessly thinking. Start the meditation with 90 percent of your awareness on your breath and 10 percent of your awareness anticipating that split second moment when you wander off. By being more sensitive to this wandering, you're better able to catch when it happens, and then more quickly come back to the present.

3. **Relaxed awareness:** Our tendency is often to force our attention into the present moment when we're trying to focus. Instead, see if you can invite it into the present moment, staying calm and at ease. Each time you notice your body tensing, relax and soften. You may find temporary focus with a grit-your-teeth approach, but it won't be sustainable—it will create too much tension and will actually make the mind more unsettled over time. The mind naturally collects itself when it feels at ease and associates calmness with presence.
4. **Walking meditation:** Walking meditation is separate from sitting meditation, but can serve as a great warm-up to sitting or as a substitute practice if your mind is very unsettled and/or being still feels like torture. Find a walking path of five to ten steps (could be in your room, outside, or elsewhere) and slowly walk back and forth. With each step, feel and be present to the sensations of your foot pressing into the ground, similar to how we focus on the sensations of the breath when we sit. You can note "right, left, right, left" or you can count your steps, "1, 2, 3, 4…." I almost always do a walking meditation before my sitting meditation because it helps to create focus and makes sitting still feel easier; I'll try to count one hundred steps without losing my place. Walking meditation is typically performed with eyes open, looking toward the ground about 5 feet in front of you.

Cultivating Focus in Day-to-Day Life:

1. **Take 5:** Take your right pointer finger, put it at the base of the palm of your left hand, slide it up your thumb while taking a deep inhale, and slide it back down while taking an exhale. Do this five times on all fingers. It might feel silly, but the tactile nature of this exercise, combined with the breathing, is a great way to settle your nerves, step out of the chaos of your thoughts, and be more present. (P.S. Kids love this, so feel free to share it with them.)
2. **Shift "what if" to "what is":** Throughout the day, when you find yourself caught up in the "what if" mind—what if this or that happens—drop into the "what is" mind, asking yourself what is here right now? Feel your feet on the ground, your breath, your body temperature, whatever you can see, etc. Often what you'll find is this moment is less overwhelming than your mind is making it out to be, and it's a simple cognitive hack to drop back into the present.
3. **Water jug exercise:** This is an exercise I created in Burma to help keep my mind present and focused when I was tired or distracted. Fill a cup to the brim with water, to the point where you need to be extremely careful and focused not to spill any of it. Slowly lift the cup up (it's best to hold it lightly in your fingertips) and walk back and forth. Since you'll spill the water if you're even slightly distracted, it's a powerful way to focus your mind—you need to be relaxed but also sharp. Take this quality of awareness into your meditation practice and daily life.

4. **Focus on one task:** Pick one activity each week—washing dishes, brushing your teeth, tucking your kids into bed—when you will make a particular effort to be deeply present and focused. Treat it as a meditation, and as the weeks go on you'll have more and more of these deeply present moments in your life.

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CHAPTER 5

ALLOWING—PERMISSION TO BE HUMAN

It was my third day in Burma and I had been desperately waiting for this meeting with my teacher. All meditators in the monastery (referred to as yogis) meet with a teacher (referred to as Sayadaw) once every few days to discuss how their meditation practice is going and ask any questions. These meetings are called interviews. They are short—roughly five to seven minutes—and to the point—you describe, very specifically, what you're noticing in your meditation practice and nothing more. They're *not* designed to be talk-therapy sessions. This yogi learned that the hard way.

After a few days of austere monastic life, sitting still for long hours each day, I developed a sheet of pain from the base of my spine to the top of my neck. It felt like all the muscles in my back were on fire. If I dared to take a deep breath, the pain would radiate around to my abdomen, causing me to buckle over as if being cattle-prodded in the gut. I didn't think I'd be able to last six months like this. The interview was my only hope to get some advice to help the pain go away.

To keep pace with the interview schedule, Sayadaw had a system for maximum efficiency: there were always two people in the meeting room at a time. When one finished, the other would begin, and a new person would come on deck. For someone who had taken himself out of the rat race and

committed his life to tranquility, he really didn't mess around with his time.

As much as I wanted this interview, I was also nervous. I mean, this guy was a legit monk. Growing up as an Italian Catholic boy from Long Island, my last holy encounter was eighth-grade confirmation with ninety-five-year-old Father Louie, and I'm pretty sure he was sleeping during my confession.

I paid careful attention to the yogi before me, hoping to get some hints on what to do for my interview. I saw him bow on the floor three times and then put his hands in a prayer position. That seemed like brown-nosing. I figured a smile and a "thank you for meeting with me" should suffice.

I waited patiently for my turn. When I got the nod from my teacher to begin, I offered my smile, said thank you, and started reading from my report. Within a few seconds, I was interrupted by Sayadaw clearing his throat.

I looked up, confused.

He didn't say anything, just stared at me.

I glanced at the translator, who was sitting in the corner, and she made a prayer symbol with her hands and a bowing movement, indicating that I needed to do the same.

"Seriously?" was the first thought that went through my mind.

I looked back up at Sayadaw and saw his facial expression hadn't changed. He was waiting.

I cringed watching my New York ego submit in his presence.

I bowed three times, put my hands together, and read my report aloud:

Sayadaw, when meditating, I focus on my breath. I pay attention to the rising and falling of the sensations in my abdomen. When a thought arises, I'm aware of the thought and then return my attention back to my breath. I do this

repeatedly in the meditation. But to be honest, Sayadaw, I am experiencing a great amount of physical pain. The intensity of the sitting meditation, the lack of sleep, and the hard mattress are making all of the muscles in my back go into spasm. The pain is so intense that my body feels like it's on fire when I meditate. I can hardly bear it anymore and am considering going home. I'm hoping you might be able to help me with this.

I looked up and waited patiently for a response as the translator relayed my report. When she finished, he gave me a half smile and said:

"Just be more present."

I waited for him to say more.

He didn't.

THE CYCLE OF PUSH-PULL

"Just be more present" rang in my mind for much of my six months in Burma. Of the approximately sixty interviews I ended up having, I would guess ten to fifteen of them ended with "just be more present."

"Sayadaw, I'm struggling with falling asleep during my meditations.…"

Just be more present.

"Sayadaw, the noise from the roof-workers in the meditation hall is distracting.…"

Just be more present.

"Sayadaw, I miss my family and want to go home.…"

Just be more present.

To be honest, I was kind of pissed that I traveled 8,400 miles and committed myself to silence and celibacy to learn something I could have read in a fortune cookie.

I didn't think those four words were a sufficient response to my suffering. I didn't think those four words were a sufficient response to *anyone* who was suffering. Imagine if you were in searing physical pain, and I told you to "just be more present." Or you got laid off from your job, and I said "just be more present." Or you were struggling because your child was sick and I responded, "just be more present."

Every time he said "just be more present," my body tensed in frustration. But I couldn't do anything about it; I just had to bow and say, "Oh, thank you, wise one, that's such wonderful advice."

Or so I thought.

One day, about two months into my monastic life, I did something crazy.

I asked a question.

A crazy question.

Maybe the craziest question ever asked to a monk.

"Sayadaw… um… what do you mean when you say, 'Just be more present'?"

I felt like Oliver Twist asking for more porridge, expecting him to be disgruntled by my request for more clarity.

As I peered up at him, his stern face softened into a warm smile. In his monotone, broken English, he said:

"When we are present, our mind does not try to go somewhere else. It meets the moment as it is. This is our practice, learning not to run from, and learning not to hold on to, what is here. Bad moments come and go. Good moments come and go. You can fight the bad, but it will be back. You can hold on to the good, but it will pass. The only way to find real peace is to be present with what is. Just be present, more and more, more and more."

Oh… huh… well, that… that actually makes some sense.

I bowed my good-bye with a little more reverence, leaving

that interview with two dawning realizations:

1. This sneaky monk had quite a bit of wisdom up his robe, and

2. It wasn't the phrase "just be more present" that was the issue. It was that I didn't yet have an appreciation for the depth, richness, and care that is imbued in a moment of being present. What I perceived as dismissive, trite advice was actually much more wise, compassionate, and nuanced.

What my teacher was picking up on in my interviews was my aversion to *the way things are*—I didn't want there to be pain, I didn't want there to be noise, I didn't want there to be loneliness. And what *he* knew, that I didn't yet know, was that giving me some sort of prescription to get rid of this discomfort was only going to reinforce the internal cycle of push-pull.

You know that cycle? Pushing away the things we don't want and pulling close the things we do want—more of this, less of that; I like this, I don't like that; push-pull, push-pull, push-pull. If we watch our mind, most of the time it's engaged in this nonstop cycle of push-pull—grasping for pleasurable experiences and resisting the painful ones.

This is what the Buddhists refer to as Samsara—a never-ending loop of trying to find permanent happiness in something that is inherently impermanent. In other words, an insatiable path to fulfillment.

Think about it. When have you had a good moment that lasted forever? Was your wedding day the beginning of eternal bliss? Was the birth of your first child the beginning of nonstop happiness? Did that perfectly melted scoop of chocolate ice cream guarantee your taste buds forever satisfaction?

Similarly, when have you had a bad moment that lasted forever? Does the shame you felt from doing something stupid in front of your high school crush still dominate your thoughts? Does the frustration you felt sitting in traffic three

years ago still cause you to grind your teeth? Does the insecurity you felt on your first day of a new job still persist with the same intensity?

Certain experiences can linger, for sure. Your marriage may still bring you great joy. And the shame you felt in high school may still get in the way of your dating life. But the intensity and immediacy of these experiences does not persist in a static way. Even chronic pain, grief, and depression—experiences that can last a long time—have an ebb and flow to their intensity.

All experience—thoughts, emotions, sensations, sights, sounds, smells, tastes—everything that makes up your experience of being human—is in constant flux, always changing.

If we have a fantasy that *one day* it will all piece together into our perfect, permanent arrangement—that we'll attain some level of wealth, status, appearance, accomplishment, healing—and *then* it will be smooth sailing, well, I hate to tell ya, but we're running east looking for a sunset. Even if by some divine turn of the cosmos, our external conditions match everything we always dreamed, our internal conditions will habituate to this new reality, requiring something newer to provide the same satisfaction. The lifestyle we once admired with an "if only I could get *there* or have *that*" persuasion often becomes just another rung to hold on to as we continue to climb our never-ending ladder toward happiness.

Therefore, the way to develop a more stable form of happiness is… drum roll…

… for that happiness to not be so dependent on the fleeting conditions of the moment.

This is what my teacher was trying to help me develop when he said, "Just be more present." He saw me caught in the cycle of push-pull. Instead of reinforcing this by giving me some temporary solution to get rid of the pain, he encouraged me to learn to be present with the discomfort and embrace the ebbing and flowing of experience, so that I could cultivate a

happiness that wasn't dependent on any given moment being perfectly manufactured to my liking.

Of course, there is a lot we can do for our well-being by intentionally changing and crafting our lives and our world—getting out of debt, having good friends, creating laws that reduce systemic oppression. And heck, there are *so* many problems that would be solved related to our happiness by going from living in poverty to having financial security—not worrying about food, rent, health care, and so on. These shifts *will* have measurable, long-term effects on our well-being; that's inarguable.

My argument here, and the argument of my teacher, is that no matter what we attain, and no matter how much our external world improves, our mind's tendency is still to push away the bad and crave for more good, which can never be fully satiated with external conditions. Unless we do something to simultaneously address this innate push-pull approach to happiness, we'll continue to feel that "if only I just had that, I would be happy."

But hey, let's just say it *were* possible, and we could permanently shut out the bad stuff and only keep the good. Is this what we actually want?

THE PARADOX OF INVINCIBILITY

Chaundra was one of my first students. She struggled with alcoholism for over a decade. When she came to me, she was recently sober and dealing with high levels of stress and unresolved grief from the passing of her mother several years before.

The mindfulness practice was immediately impactful for Chaundra. It reduced her stress, helped her to process and move past the grief, and gave her a sense of peace she had not experienced before. It was a remarkable transformation to witness.

A year into working together, she stopped coming to our sessions without any notice. I reached out but didn't hear back. I knew her father was sick, and I feared her disappearance was related to his sickness taking a turn for the worse. Given that she had lost her mother only a few years prior and only *just* moved out of the intense grief, I worried this was going to be too much.

Months later, she returned to our sessions and confirmed my fears: She told me her father had passed away. As we hugged at the end of class, through tears she gently said, "Thank you," and went on to tell me that being present for her father's death was one of the most painful yet beautiful experiences of her life.

When her mother died, she explained, the way she got through it was alcohol. It was too much pain to handle, so she numbed herself through the experience. She was there, but she wasn't *actually* there. And she spent the following years working through the unprocessed grief, as well as the regret she felt for not being lucid during her mother's passing.

Going through the death of her father, now sober and with her mindfulness training, she was able to stay present through the pain. She could console her kids as they grieved the loss of their grandpa, she let herself laugh and cry with her siblings as they recalled memories of their father, and she was able to be at her dad's bedside for his final breaths.

Although it was one of the most painful times of her life, she said the experience softened her heart, deepened her connection to her spirituality, and brought her closer to her loved ones.

The most difficult moments of life can bring the greatest growth, perspective, and insight. They can also drop us into a vulnerability, making us more receptive to things like love, connection, honesty, and authenticity. We're more likely to connect to the people we care about and reprioritize what is most important in life.

I don't believe pain and tragedy are experiences to glorify

or try to create, but I do believe they're a reality of being human. When we give ourselves permission to experience the full range of our humanness, we experience a kind of wholeness and peace that can only come from staying open to life.

But there is another benefit to staying present to the full range of life—one that is unexpected and less discussed.

Several months after the death of her father, Chaundra described having a newfound strength and empowerment. After being present through such intense emotional pain, and remaining intact, she felt less fearful and anxious in her day-to-day life. Little things that used to seem like a big deal—people cutting her off while driving, stress at work, and juggling the various demands of parenting—felt small in comparison to what she had been through. The potential for bigger things—like if she were to lose her job, get sick, or God forbid, lose another loved one—felt less terrifying.

It wasn't because she didn't think these things would be painful—if anything, she had a new respect for just how painful life can be. Instead, her sense of empowerment came from knowing that she could get *through* the pain and not be broken by it.

Maybe you've had a similar experience. After going through something difficult—a breakup, a loss, or even something you opted into, like the grueling training for a marathon—you felt *more* equipped to handle future pains and discomforts.

This psychological vaccination is the foundation for what I call the *paradox of invincibility*.

Although the word *invincibility* tends to conjure up ideas of a stoic, "no pain, no gain" mental toughness; or a pseudo-confident, pump-yourself-up mind-set; or even reckless teenagers acting like they're invulnerable; that's not what I'm talking about.

Invincibility, as I define it, is *the belief that you can be with*

—and get through—whatever comes your way.

This isn't just *any* kind of belief. It's an embodied, deep-in-our-bones, unwavering trust that who we are is bigger than the experience of the moment; a fearlessness rooted into the core of our being.

We don't get this fearlessness from positive thinking. It won't come from reading a personal development book and feeling pumped up. It most certainly doesn't come from trying to be "tough" through pain. And we won't get it by striving to eradicate the fear.

This belief can only be earned by walking through the fire, *allowing* ourselves to experience the difficult parts of being human and seeing that we can be with this, too.

Herein lies our paradox: to cultivate invincibility, we first need to let down our mask of invincibility.

To understand *how* to be with the difficult moments and develop our confidence that we *can* be with those moments, we need to be vulnerable and courageous enough to stay present to them.

STATUE MEDITATION

Let's take a pause.

My hope is that you're starting to see there is value in staying open to more moments of your life, good and bad.

We've explored three things to make this argument:

1. Finding happiness by pushing away bad experiences and grasping for good ones is a never-ending treadmill.
2. Being present with painful experiences can open up parts of us that were previously shut down.
3. When we experience difficulty and *don't* shut down in the face of it, we develop our deepest anchor—the part

of us that can be steady amid the turbulence of living.

If you're starting to shift your perspective on the value of being present to more moments of your life, then we're right on track.

However, to actually *allow* the full experience of life requires more than just a shift in mind-set.

We may be *willing* to be present with intense moments, but if we don't have the capacity to hold those moments (our "container"), we will inevitably shut down, numb, turn away, act defensively, or react in an overwhelmed, fear-based way. A pint-size glass will never be able to hold a gallon of water, no matter how badly we may want it to.

This is one of the reasons we meditate. Meditation strengthens and expands our container so that we can hold, and therefore stay open to, the present moment when it might have previously overwhelmed us.

Before I started meditating, I would often turn away from difficult conversations in my relationships. If I felt shame, anger, vulnerability, or a sense of being "called out," I might put my hand up and say something like "I don't want to talk about this right now," completely shutting down to a moment that was important for me to stay connected to. It was rude, inconsiderate, and hurt many of my relationships. Having spent time staying present to discomfort in my meditation practice, I'm now able to notice my tendency to turn away from other forms of discomfort in real life—such as in a difficult conversation—and instead stay present in the connection.

This is the journey we're on, for which we're slowly building the resources to *allow* more aspects of our experience into the present moment.

Think about what we're doing in the open monitoring portion of our meditation. We sit and observe anything that arises—thoughts, emotions, sounds, sensations, whatever. It doesn't matter if it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; that's not

the point of the meditation. The point is for us to practice staying open and grounded in the midst of these moment-to-moment arisings, rather than turning away from or being controlled by them.

What would it feel like to notice your own breathing when you hear someone start to snap at you? Or to pause and re-ground when you realize you've made a mistake that's going to cost you double the time?

This feels near impossible when we first start out because we're so used to impulsively reacting to every thought, emotion, or sensation that arises. With practice, we get better at watching and feeling these experiences without a knee-jerk reaction.

One way to support this development is to do what I call "statue meditation."

It's a strategy I gleaned from the late Indian meditation teacher S. N. Goenka. On retreat, he encouraged his students to spend an hour staying perfectly still in meditation. Not adjusting their posture, not wiggling their fingers, not even moving their tongue. He told his students to sit with the perspective of "I will remain one hundred percent still until the end of this hour, even if I feel like I'm going to die."

I don't encourage taking it *that* far (unless you're inspired to). There is huge value, though, in practicing just a few minutes of this statue meditation.

Why would we stay still like this?

Well, think about the reasons you *wouldn't* stay still in meditation—feeling bored and wanting to check your phone, an itch on your face that you reflexively scratch, discomfort in your knee that you'd like to adjust.

All of these things are some form of "pain" that we try to move away from.

It's no different than walking away from our partner in an intense argument, reflexively checking e-mails when we're feeling the stress of a work project, not speaking up when it

feels too vulnerable, or texting our ex when we feel lonely (rarely a good idea). These are all reactions to discomforts that we're not able to, or choose not to, be with.

When we commit to being still, we're forced (by choice) to be with all of these little discomforts we'd typically react to or avoid.

Take the example of the itch on your face. You're doing your statue meditation, and since you're still, you can no longer scratch it.

Have you ever tried to *not* scratch an itch?

It's brutal.

The mind throws the biggest tantrum, like a two-year-old not getting what they want.

Well, isn't this the perfect opportunity to explore what it's like to *be with* discomfort in a low stakes, nonthreatening way?

So, what do we do?

Well, in statue meditation, if there's an intense experience, we bring our attention toward that experience, in the same way we might focus on our breath.

At first, we'll feel an internal wrestling match with the itch. We'll grit our teeth when it intensifies, and then relax again when it eases up. We'll feel the energy in our hand, ready for quick action, waiting for the moment we lose our sensibility and say, "Screw it; I'm scratching my face!" This grapple between mind and body will continue, but if we stay with it long enough, we'll eventually notice one of two things:

1. The itch will surrender and go away, or

2. We will surrender and relax into the intensity.

In each of these scenarios, we're learning that we can be *with* and get *through* the intensity of the experience. The second scenario, though—the moment where we let go and find ease in dis-ease—is particularly special, because it's often

an entirely new way of relating to discomfort. We're not stonewalling, overpowering, gripping, distracting, or numbing. We're meeting the pain head on, letting down our resistance, and softening into it.

Does it *really* matter if we scratch the itch? No.

Are we training ourselves to never scratch an itch in real life again? No.

But being able to see and *feel* what it's like to relax into an intense experience is a game changer. When we surrender to pain, it no longer becomes an enemy to what we want. We meet it fully and soften our resistance—no longer fueling the tension that is the real root of our suffering.

The more experiences we do this with—thoughts, emotions, sounds, physical pains, and so on,

- the more we develop a peace that is not solely contingent upon the conditions of the moment,
- the more we can stay present to the intense moments of life,
- and the more fearless we feel toward life itself.

BUT I CAN'T JUST ALLOW *EVERYTHING*… RIGHT?

So, how deep can we take all of this?

The short answer: pretty deep.

While there's more that goes into making peace with our moments than statue meditation (which we'll discuss throughout the book), people have used meditation for millennia as a training tool to *allow* the moment to be as it is. In fact, through meditation, we can cultivate a mind that does not resist the present moment at all.

This can sound provocative, with pushbacks being:

"Okay, so I should just stay in my toxic relationship and learn to allow the abuse?"

"Should I just allow racism and not fight against the injustices I see around me?"

"Do you want me to just stand back and watch my daughter ruin her life with drugs?"

These are fair questions, but let's get something very clear: *Allowing* is not about passively resigning to life. It doesn't mean we don't set boundaries, make decisions, speak our minds, have preferences, or try to change ourselves and the world.

Allowing is about our willingness and capacity to be with the reality of what's here. To accept that "this is what the moment is like right now," and to not shut down to that reality. It has more to do with being present to and allowing of our internal experiences—thoughts, emotions, sensations—and less to do with passively allowing external circumstances—abusive relationships, injustices, our kids' behaviors, and so on.

In the fullest expression of the *allowing* pillar of presence, we can be with whatever arises—joy, grief, pleasure, pain, confusion, sadness. We not only give ourselves *permission* to have these experiences, but we've also developed a container—our mind—that *enables* us to be present for these experiences, without turning away or denying their existence.

But, just because we *can* do this, doesn't mean we *need* to.

The ability to appropriately set a boundary is as important as our ability to be present with an experience, because setting a boundary can make us feel safe enough to show up more fully—and more steady—in the present. If we don't trust our ability to step out of a difficult experience, we'll always be hesitant while we're in it.

When we can be present to our full experience, all of the different parts of us emerge and work together to best respond to the circumstances of our life. Sometimes, that response

includes setting a boundary, turning away, or trying to make a change, and other times, it includes being still, waiting for more insight, or trusting things must unfold in their own way.

Regardless of how you respond, the ability to feel spacious and grounded enough to *choose* your response is what we're after.

That's a superpower. And one that can transform all aspects of your life.

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Allowing in Meditation:

1. **Befriend vs. transcend:** There is a tendency to try to "transcend" in our meditation practice—to rise above the mundane, normal, seemingly dull or difficult aspects of being human. This often becomes a subtle form of disallowing our experience, further numbing us to the reality we must live as humans. Instead, see your meditation practice as a practice of making friends with your experience—thoughts, emotions, sensations—pleasant and unpleasant. You might even say, "Nice to meet you, pain. I'd like to learn more about you." Chances are, you'll notice a lot of relief and peace in taking this approach.
2. **Deep breaths:** When you feel your body tensing around a difficult experience, or turning away, first try taking a deep breath. It's a simple, and even intuitive, suggestion, but it's a useful strategy to settle your nervous system, helping the brain feel calmer in the face of something uncomfortable.
3. **Watch the ends of experience:** Your mind will be more allowing of future experiences the more clearly that it sees all experiences come and go. In your meditation, practice paying attention to the "ends" of experience—e.g., the moment a thought passes, the moment an itch goes away, the moment the annoying background noise stops.
4. **Pendulation:** This is the process of stepping in and stepping out of an experience. When practicing *allowing* more aspects of your experience during meditation (and life), it's important to not overwhelm yourself, especially if it feels related to trauma. Knowing that you can step out of a difficult experience, and learning how to do that, counterintuitively enables you to embrace more experiences. At the beginning of your meditation, find an aspect of your experience that makes you feel safe and grounded—the breath, your feet on the ground, hands on your lap—or something external—a candle, a picture of a loved one, opening your eyes—and practice coming back to these places of safety when the meditation feels uncomfortable. This "stepping in and stepping out" will help the brain feel less fear in

the face of discomfort and enable you to allow more aspects of your life.

Allowing in Day-to-Day Life:

I think the spirit of allowing, and how to bring it into our daily lives, is best depicted in this short Zen story:

There once was an old farmer who used a horse to till his fields. All day long, he relied on this horse for the health of his farm. One day, though, the horse escaped into the hills nowhere to be found. All the neighbors came by to sympathize with the man over his bad luck, only for him to reply: “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?”

A week later, the horse returned from the hills with a herd of horse friends. The farmer now had all this extra help. Of course, the neighbors came by to congratulate the farmer. “What great luck you have!” they said. Again, his reply: “Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?”

Soon after, as the farmer’s son was attempting to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Again, the neighbors stopped by. “We’re so sorry to hear about this bad luck,” they said. His reaction: “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?”

A month later, the army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied youth they could find. When they saw the farmer’s son with his broken leg, they let him off.

After the army left, the neighbors ran to the farmer, “Wow, what great luck you have!”

Can you guess the farmer’s response?

“Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?”

One of the reasons we resist certain experiences is because we don’t know where they will lead. Perhaps we can take the perspective of the farmer, trusting that things may be happening for reasons we can’t yet understand.

Sometimes, the most awful things turn out to be the most important moments in our lives. And vice versa.

Trauma can lead to growth.

An exciting new job can lead to a work life you hate.

Cancer can lead to a new appreciation for life.

A new house might lead to terrible neighbors.

A break up can lead to a new life trajectory.

Instead of trying to control everything, can we move with the flow of life, seeing where it takes us, and what we can learn from it?

In other words, can we trust life more than our ideas?

When we allow experience to be here, we give ourselves the opportunity to dance with it, rather than be controlled by it. Is it good luck? Is it bad luck? Who knows! But the opposite perspective is trying to live a life in certainty, and that's an endless quest.

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CHAPTER 6

CURIOSITY—THE OPPOSITE OF FEAR

Presence is about stepping into our life more deeply, experiencing more of what it can offer.

One thing that gets in the way of this is fear.

Think about when you've been fearful of something—heights, spiders, public speaking, intimacy—the tendency is to pull back, *not* get closer. And that's a good thing. This is what fear was designed to do; it's a biological and neurological response to perceived danger. If something is perceived as unsafe, fear will make sure we don't get too close. It causes us to run, get smaller, get quiet—all these wonderful responses to protect us from harm.

But have you also noticed that sometimes fear pulls us away from our life in a negative way?

What if I apply and don't get the job?

What if people don't accept me for who I really am?

What if I open my heart and get hurt?

These are the pain walls we talked about in Chapter 2, keeping us stuck inside our box because we fear stretching outside its familiar walls. This fear is a big reason we miss the fullness of our lives. It holds us back from living more creatively, honestly, and openly.

So, if fear shuts us down to life, what can open us up to all the possibilities life has to offer?

Courage?

Trust?

Love?

These are all important aspects of presence, but I don't think they're the opposite of fear.

The opposite of fear is curiosity.

Fear is the impulse to turn away and curiosity is the impulse to turn toward.

Fear is the desire to close down and curiosity is the desire to expand and explore.

Fear presupposes danger and curiosity presupposes safety.

Imagine a life of turning away, closing down, and presupposing danger at every turn. You can probably see how that would cause us to miss our life.

So, if fear leads us to missing our life, curiosity is our bridge to being deeply present.

What I think is most powerful about curiosity, though, is that curiosity can soften fear, the same way love can soften hate. It's as if a switch gets flipped in our brain, turning on a perceived safety with which we're able to lean into experiences we might otherwise turn away from. And once we do, it gives us an entirely new way to relate to our life.

EXPERIENCE x CURIOSITY = WISDOM

Remember the physical pain I experienced during my early days in Burma? The buckling-over, body-on-fire, searing pain that I told my teacher about during my first interview, to which

he said, “Just be more present”?

Well, although I was *eventually* able to see the value in his advice, that wasn’t until two months later. I never told you how I made it through to that point. Because I was ready to leave.

Seriously.

That interview was my last hope for relief from the pain, and after receiving the seemingly dismissive advice of “just be more present,” something shifted in me. I lost the wind in my sails, and started to question if I was in over my head.

I remember lying in bed that evening, nearly in tears from the intensity of the pain, thinking to myself:

“How am I going to get through this? Six more months? There’s no way I can make it that long.”

I’ll never forget what that felt like. The loneliness and fear triggered a childlike longing for my mom. I wanted nothing more than for her to hold me in her arms and tell me I could do it; to tell me it would be okay; that she was proud of me and was rooting me on.

I knew she was, but I didn’t have her there. I didn’t have anyone there.

Two days later, I was ready to leave. It was the morning of my sixth day at the monastery, and I planned to go to the main office during lunch to discuss my departure.

I went to the morning meditations, per the usual schedule, expecting them to be my last ones. There was an immediate sense of relief knowing that it would all be over soon. Much of my dread came from the thought of having to endure this pain for six months. Paradoxically, not “caring” anymore made me *more* willing to engage in the meditation practice. I had an attitude of “Well, if these are my last meditations, might as well make the most of them.”

Sitting down for the 3:30 a.m. meditation, I went right into the pain. “Show me what you got,” I thought. I met it head on.

What'd I have to lose? I would be gone soon.

I sat with the pain. I watched it. I became curious about it.

There were so many subtleties—tingling, numbing, pins and needles, sharpness, dullness, all changing and folding into one another—it was like looking at a kaleidoscope of sensations.

As I watched all of this, I noticed something interesting. The intensity of the pain would come in waves, and as soon as those waves peaked, my mind reflexively started thinking, "Oh, man, this is brutal. I can't handle this anymore. I gotta get out of here." I could see the negative thoughts ebbing and flowing with the intensity of pain, which, for the first time, made me question if the thoughts telling me I had to leave were as "true" as I perceived them to be, or instead just a psychological response to the pain.

As I kept watching, I saw *another* interesting phenomenon. In nearly the same moment as they arose, the thoughts triggered emotions of fear, anger, despair, and yes, that primal feeling of wanting my mom.

"Whoa," I thought.

It was like having x-ray vision into my mind; I could see the inner workings of it, like the gears behind a ticking clock.

Perhaps the most interesting discovery of all of this, though, was when the emotions kicked in, they made the physical pain *worse*. That is, the angrier and more fearful I became, the more physical pain I experienced. It felt like throwing salt into an open wound.

Here I was, caught in this magnificent, awful, and dare I say, *fascinating* loop of suffering. The physical pain arose, it triggered negative thoughts, which triggered negative emotions, which triggered *more* physical pain.

The more I watched this, the more clearly I could see that there were two forms of pain. There was the physical pain that was out of my control (the primary pain) and then there was a secondary pain that I was caking on top of it in the form of

these negative thoughts, anger, and fear. Not only was this secondary pain *painful* in itself, but it also made the primary pain worse.

Could I control the primary pain? No. As long as I was going to be at the monastery, this pain was inevitable.

However, I *did* have influence over the secondary pain. And that was a big realization.

Over the next few days, I played around with two strategies to work with the secondary pain: (1) I would label the thoughts that I was caking on top of the primary pain as "thinking" and then redirect my attention back to the breath or the physical pain; or (2) I would simply watch the negative thoughts arise and smile at them as they were there, offering them some love. Both strategies were effective for cutting off this insidious mental loop.

Although the primary pain didn't go away with these strategies (at least at first), I learned how to turn up or turn down the amount I suffered, like a volume dial on the radio. Seeing that I could influence my experience of suffering is what inspired me to continue my retreat.

This insight has carried into many areas of my life, because primary pain is not merely physical. Primary pain represents any sort of pain that occurs outside of our control: The death of a loved one, loss of a job, depression that arises due to a chemical imbalance in the brain. As long as we're alive, we're inevitably going to experience primary pains; it's just part of living a human life.

The secondary pains are the thoughts and emotions we layer on top of this—"Why me? I'll never be able to recover from this. If only I had done a better job. How could God do this to me?"—creating an extra layer of suffering on top of an already difficult situation.

The majority of our stress and tension in life is *not* coming from primary pain—which is important in its own right, feeling what needs to be felt in its raw form. Most of our stress

and tension, though, comes from *secondary* pain. And the practices we're doing in this book help us stop getting caught in secondary pain.

However, I didn't share this story to talk about primary and secondary pain. I shared this story for you to see how I gained insight into primary pain and secondary pain. Because it only happened when I became more curious.

Prior to this experience, my tendency was to instinctively turn *away* from pain. I viewed it as a direct impediment to being "present." What I needed to do instead was to move toward it, to invite the pain into the present moment. Here, I could be curious about it—to better understand the pain, what was triggering it, and how to be in best relationship to it.

This idea of being present and curious for the purpose of better understanding an experience often gets missed in the popular conceptualizations of meditation, which emphasize it as a practice for calm, focus, productivity, and stress reduction. It's true, meditation does aid in the development of these things. But at the heart of it, mindfulness meditation is a practice to help us understand our human experience; that is, to help us cultivate wisdom (which then leads to all the other good things we want).

Wisdom is a big word, and it means different things to different people. In this context, wisdom is the embodied understanding of what leads to happiness and suffering. I say "embodied" because this is not a cognitive understanding. We don't get this wisdom by reading a book or hearing a talk.

In the same way that we develop invincibility by seeing firsthand that we can be with and get through a difficult experience, we develop wisdom by paying careful attention to our experience until we see firsthand what leads to happiness and suffering. And because curiosity is the quickest way to pull our attention toward an experience, we can think of the development of wisdom through this simple equation:

Experience x Curiosity = Wisdom

Experience = any constituent piece of your human experience

Curiosity = a gentle wondering about what arises in the present

Wisdom = an embodied understanding of what leads to happiness and suffering

The Buddha didn't reach ultimate peace by simply thinking about being peaceful. He had to meditate and be present through all of the different human experiences—pain, pleasure, anger, jealousy, desire, thoughts, lust—to learn how to relate to them. He had to be a scientist of his own experience, a very curious one.

By watching thoughts come and go, over and over, thousands of times, eventually he saw that thoughts are impermanent. Why take them so seriously?

By watching pleasant experiences arise and pass, over and over, he saw that no pleasant experience lasts forever. Why try to endlessly and neurotically pursue them?

By feeling the difference between a mind that is hateful and a mind that is loving, he saw that the latter is more fulfilling and the former causes more destruction. Why be hateful?

It's only when we have an understanding of what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering that we can actually do anything about it. The good part is, once we have that wisdom, most of the positive changes start to happen automatically.

YOUR MIND WANTS YOU TO BE HAPPY

Have you ever had the experience of eating a particular food that you loved, but then got sick from it? Like, throwing up, head-in-toilet sick? What happened to your relationship with that food afterward? You can't stand the thought of it, right?

Wisdom works the same way. When we finally see the pain associated with our usual way of doing something, it's like getting sick from the thing we previously thought made us happy, and we no longer feel pulled to it.

This is because your mind wants you to be happy. It's not trying to make you suffer. It just needs your help understanding what happiness *is*.

It may seem ridiculous to need to help your mind understand how to be happy. *Shouldn't it be obvious?* you might think. But we have to remember that we evolved to believe that ultimate happiness meant *surviving*, which translated to avoiding pain and getting pleasure. So, when we're caught up in agitation and stress, even though we might think, "I hate being like this," another part of our brain is thinking, "We *need* to be like this; it keeps all the pieces of our life together! If things falls apart, *we* fall apart!" The pain of the anxiety is less than the pain we associate with what would happen if we *weren't* anxious.

Much of the time we try to combat this by saying, "Stop worrying! Relax! Be positive!" but that's just like telling yourself, "Don't eat the cheesecake; you'll be happier!" We know it to be true on one level, but the primal drive to eat the cake is greater than our rational mind.

That's why, instead of saying, "Stop worrying! Relax! Be positive!" we need to bring more curiosity to moments of anxiety, *and* more curiosity to moments of peace (even if they're seldom). Only then can the mind see "Oh, when I'm peaceful, things don't fall apart as much as I think they will; and when I'm anxious, it actually feels really uncomfortable and doesn't seem to provide me that much benefit."

The more clearly our mind sees how its usual patterns are creating unnecessary suffering, the more inclined it will be to reconsider and recondition those patterns.

Here's another example:

When walking around the monastery in Burma, I wore a

pair of Ray-Ban aviators to protect my eyes from the tropical sun. Back home when I wear these, this look is a dime a dozen. In a Burmese monastery, however, I looked like I was from Hollywood.

The locals who tended the gardens and cleaned the buildings would stare, point, and smile at me as I walked by. I didn't wear the aviators for that reason, but I'd be lying if I said my ego didn't like the attention.

This was a predicament for me. Part of the Buddhist path (and most meditative and spiritual paths, for that matter) is about freeing yourself from your ego. The teachings state that when we're identified with our ego, it makes us feel smaller, less connected, less loving, and more stressed. When we let go of it, we feel a sense of oneness with others, we're more loving, grounded, and easeful. In fact, some say that when you transcend the ego, you transcend all of suffering, because there is no "one" to suffer anymore.

I was compelled by this.

I understood the logic of it. I really did. It made so much sense to me and I truly wanted to experience this ego-less, spacious, one-with-everything mind.

But I gotta be honest, when I put those aviators on and saw people looking at me, it felt pretty damn good. Definitely better than when I *didn't* put them on.

For about two months, this was a big struggle. I went back and forth between wearing them and not wearing them. When I wore them, I'd get the ego boost, and then pretend I didn't care (although I did). When I didn't wear them, I missed the attention and felt less happy, but tried to convince myself I was happier this way (although I wasn't). I still associated more pleasure than pain to identifying with my ego.

Then, one day, I had a morning meditation that burst my heart open. I'm not sure how or why it happened, but I opened my eyes feeling extremely connected, loving, and calm. It was incredible.

I took the long route back to my room. Looking at the trees, the sky, the puppies that often ran around the monastery. I felt my heart overflowing.

As I was just about to get to my room, I glanced at a few of the gardeners staring and smiling at me. I smiled back, feeling connected and loving toward them, and then… it happened.

My ego jumped in.

In an instant, I felt this beautiful, connected heart-space shrivel up and be replaced by a contracted, tense, and "separate" feeling. I went from feeling *connected* to these people to feeling *disconnected*, as if I was "better" than them. I could also feel my ego wanting and *needing* more praise; it was insatiable. It did not feel good. In fact, I was repulsed by it. I viewed it as the opposite of this pure heart-space I was in.

This was a big turning point. For the first time, I felt the pain associated with being caught by my ego and the pleasure associated with not being caught by my ego.

That experience fundamentally shifted me. Although I still get caught in my ego, I now have an embodied understanding of the joy that comes from not being self-oriented. And when I am caught in that self-orientation, I can bring curious attention to the "ego high" and feel how it's actually creating tension.

As we become more deeply present with our life, bringing a gentle curiosity to our moments, our mind organically develops a new wisdom for how to live well.

HOW TO FOCUS ON THE JOURNEY, NOT THE DESTINATION

We've been talking about curiosity as a means to an end—that is, something that can help us cultivate wisdom—but it also has a much more immediate impact on our well-being. Perhaps the most beautiful and transformative quality of

curiosity is its inherent nonjudgmental nature.

As soon as we become curious about the present moment, the moment is no longer perceived as "bad" or "wrong," because curiosity only exists to experience something—to be with it, to get to know it, to understand it better. It takes us more deeply into the positive experiences of our life, without worrying if or when they will pass. And it helps us be more gentle and loving with difficult experiences, without trying to make them "better."

Curiosity doesn't have an agenda to fix you; it embraces you exactly as you are, and helps you meet this moment exactly as it is, taking you deeper into what is *here*.

Imagine if you could meet more moments of your life with this gentle, childlike wondering. Instead of quickly passing through a moment of connection or gratitude, you stop to feel it and appreciate it. Instead of reflexively fighting a moment of anxiety, you meet it with softness, even asking, "What am I noticing in my body? What sensations are present? Where do I feel tightness, and what is that like?"

When we can meet experiences in this way, pleasant and unpleasant, they have the opportunity to be fully felt, processed, integrated, and then released.

Life also just becomes much more "okay" when we bring to it a curious attention, because all moments are welcomed with an attitude of "what's this like right *now*?" Curiosity closes the gap between what is present and what we wish were present. It opens its arms and says, "You're welcome here, too. I'd love to get to know you better." Whether it's curiosity toward an emotion, toward a person, toward a problem, or toward a sunset, it takes us out of a preconceived idea of what this moment *should* be like, and drops us more deeply into what this moment *is* like.

Curiosity is the attitudinal embodiment of "It's about the journey, not the destination." And as it relates to presence, it's the thing that connects us to our lives as they're unfolding.

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Cultivate Curiosity in Your Meditation Practice:

1. **Beginner's mind:** We can view our meditation practice as a process of curious exploration. Each time you meditate, take the perspective of a beginner, having never seen this moment before. What is it like to experience the breath as if for the first time? What is it like to observe the miracle of being able to think? What is it like to feel, hear, smell, and have emotions? Each time you find yourself caught in a "been there, done that" mind-set, drop back into beginner's mind, like a child experiencing the world for the first time.

   Bonus: My teacher used to say "if you're bored, you're not paying close enough attention." So, in 2013, I spent a year listening to the same exact song… every… single… morning. It was the last thing I did before getting up from my meditation practice. My logic was to train my mind to find freshness and joy in something that I experienced many times over; to stay curious about the experience and appreciate it in new ways. After only a couple weeks of doing this practice, I felt much more excited and interested in the world around me—I noticed the detail of trees and architecture that I had never paid attention to before; I noticed new quirks and idiosyncrasies in people I had known for years; and I was far less bored by mundane day-to-day activities. You're welcome to add this practice to your meditation to enhance your curiosity and beginner's mind. And if you must know the song, it was "Defying Gravity" from the *Wicked* soundtrack (the Idina Menzel and Kristin Chenoweth version… obviously).

2. **Interview your experience:** Larry King is a great interviewer because he's deeply curious about the person he is with. You can bring this perspective into your meditation practice as well, treating your experience—the breath, an emotion, thoughts—as the person you're interviewing. Although you might not have a dialogue with the experience, you can embody the same curiosity that you might bring if you were having a dialogue. Channel your inner Larry King.

Cultivate Curiosity in Daily Life:

1. **Listen to understand, not to respond:** Arguably the most important application of presence in our lives is with other people. Have you ever noticed, though, when having a conversation, there can be a tendency to already recite what you're going to say next? Try to take the perspective of curiosity, and instead listen with the intention to *understand* what the person is saying, and let the

response unfold organically.

2. **Find the extraordinary in the ordinary:** Take a routine experience like driving to work, snuggling under the covers after a long day, or eating a meal and see if you can experience it with the beginner's mind we spoke about. What would it be like to experience this as if for the first time? What's the experience like when you bring deep presence to it?
3. **Train your mind to appreciate goodness:** As I mentioned, our mind will change what it values and pursues if it sees a better alternative for happiness. Instead of trying to overpower your negative tendencies, become more curious about them. If you want to be less attached to sugar, notice what it's like to crave sugar, what it's like to *need* more, what it's like to feel the frantic sugar rush, and what it's like to feel the crash. Let your mind really feel and experience the discomfort it creates. If you want to be more allowing of your moments, good and bad, notice what it's like to grip onto life being a certain way. Does it feel good? Or does it create tension? And then, what's it like when you *do* allow things to be as they are? Notice the moment when a good experience passes and when a bad experience passes—let your mind see the impermanent nature of all moments so it learns that holding on is wasted energy. The closer we pay attention, the more we help the mind to see what we really need to be fulfilled.

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CHAPTER 7

EMBODIMENT—YOUR GATEWAY TO THE PRESENT

The fourth and final pillar of presence is embodiment.

I have to admit, I almost missed this pillar until the most obvious fact hit me over the head: *I live in a body*. My body is, quite literally, how I access the present—the chair underneath me, the light in the room, the sense of excitement writing this sentence. I spent six months in Burma paying attention to what arose in my body. It's not just some ideal that we should be connected to the body; it's our most fundamental reality. If I want to be connected to the present moment, then I *must* be connected to my body.

Often when we think about our bodies, it conjures up ideas related to appearance—size, color, shape, what we like and don't like.

In the context of presence, though, embodiment points to something deeper and more subtle. It's not about what you see in the mirror (on the outside), but instead what you can feel (on the inside).

Let's try something: Take five seconds to squeeze your hand into a fist.

(waiting as you squeeze)

Okay, what do you feel?

Chances are it is some combination of tightness, warmth, and tingliness.

Right?

These are sensations! This is what it's like to feel your body. And in the moment of paying attention to those sensations, you are practicing the skill of embodiment.

Okay, Cory, big whoop, what does this have to do with my happiness and presence?

Well, sensations are to life what flavor is to food.

When we experience joy, is it just a thought?—"Oh boy, I'm so joyful." No, there's also lightness in our face, warmth in our chest, maybe a sense of ease in our belly.

What about stress? Are we just thinking "I'm really stressed" or is there not also a beating in our chest, tightness in our jaw, and shallowness in our breath?

What if I ask you how you're doing right *now*? What would you say?

Good, bad, bored, peaceful, excited?

How do you know?

You have to first feel something, right?

To think that you're "good" requires you to first feel something good. To think that you're sad requires you to first feel something sad. To think that you're excited requires you to first feel something exciting.

This is true with hunger, love, concern, gut instincts, fear, safety, and virtually any experience you can be aware of.

Even solving a problem, something we primarily associate with our minds, is coupled with a wave of ease or lightness.

These feelings happen in the body. The capacity to experience the texture and taste of our lives is in direct relationship to our capacity to feel what is happening in our

bodies.

But here's the thing: much of the time we're not connected to our bodies. Many of us spend our days sitting sedentary at a desk. We're encouraged to "think" our way through emotional problems, relationship issues, and important life decisions. Even our therapies are performed mostly from the neck up, talking through our struggles, discussing our past, and trying to help us change our thoughts.

All of this discourages, or at least doesn't *encourage*, learning how to feel, listening to our emotions, trusting our intuition, living in tune with the internal rhythms of our lives, and experiencing our lives in a body that can *move*.

This isn't to say that critical thinking, imagination, and problem-solving are unimportant. These are essential aspects of being human, especially with large-scale societal problems to solve. When I use the term *embodiment*, it's not meant to privilege "being in your body" over "being in your head"; it's meant to ensure that we include *both* in how we relate to the present moment. To be embodied is to be connected to all the ways we experience and understand our world as a human—thoughts, sensations, beliefs, emotions, all of it.

When we're not attuned to our bodies, we're disconnected from the very thing that carries us throughout our lives. We not only miss the potential of living a fully integrated life, but we also miss an important intelligence that can guide us in how we live.

WHAT WE CAN ALL LEARN FROM THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

And this takes us to menstrual cycles. Stay with me now.

I've spent a lot of time lately reading about the menstrual cycle.

This is what happens when your girlfriend is a sexuality educator and also has a deeply embodied relationship to her menstrual cycle.

It turns out, the menstrual cycle is full of this bodily intelligence. There's one book in particular that I really dig called *Wild Power*, by Alexandra Pope and Sjanie Hugo Wurlitzer, which has reframed my understanding of what I only really had known as "that time of the month" and its associated inconveniences and emotional volatility. I hadn't thought of it much beyond that.

And the authors confirm my culturally inherited view. They write that the menstrual cycle's wisdom has been "denied, demonized, and rejected," and that we've been led to believe it's a "limitation or a weakness [needed to be] overcome in order to succeed."

Instead, the authors see the menstrual cycle as a woman's "wild power," as her cycle takes her on a journey each month through its different phases and their associated superpowers (my word). They describe a mindfulness practice called menstrual cycle awareness where a woman tracks her daily observations of dominant feelings, desires, energy levels, perspectives on life and the world, or whatever else stands out in order to get to know—and live in tune with—this internal rhythm. While they encourage every woman to know her own unique cycle, they provide a fascinating insight about how the phases of the menstrual cycle can map to the different seasons of a year.

Here's an example of what it might look like:

Menstruation is akin to winter, when we might slow down, take it easy, reflect on the previous cycle and plan for the next. The preovulatory phase is like spring, when our creativity begins to pick up and we are inspired to make plans and get started on projects. The week around ovulation corresponds with summer, when our energy is at its peak, and we feel most engaged in the world around us, like in our relationships or our work. The time before menstruation, which they call the

premenstruum (and we know as PMS), is like autumn and a time of discernment and truth-speaking.

By the time I finished the book, I actually felt jealous that I didn't have a menstrual cycle.

A month later, I had read the book three times.

THREE TIMES.

I'm still not entirely sure why I was *so* compelled by it, but there was something about this fundamental experience of the body—the menstrual cycle, which roughly half of humans experience and have for millennia—that felt important to understand. And while not everyone experiences a menstrual cycle, *we all live in cycles*.

And that's the key point I want to hone in on. We each experience cycles within a day, over a month, and over the course of a year. We feel the cycle of an emotion. We go through cycles within a long relationship. There is a cycle to grief and a cycle to joy.

Even a forest needs to go through cycles to be healthy. Cyclic burns remove excess plant buildup, and a postfire forest creates important habitat for new life. Life requires cycles.

And yet we have this expectation in our society that we're supposed to show up the same way every single day, maybe every waking moment. And that's just not how we as humans work.

Throughout the day, we'll experience different energy levels, sometimes higher and sometimes lower. Within a relationship, we'll experience periods of lust, periods of doubt, and periods of deep companionship. Throughout life, we'll experience stages when we're more inclined toward growth and expansion, and stages when we're more drawn to peace and tranquility.

I think what I've grown to love about the way *Wild Power* relates to the menstrual cycle (and cycles in general) is that it's not only about giving yourself permission to embody and experience the truth of what is here, but also to be empowered

by it. Each season has its own mood, perspective, opportunities, and challenges—its own wisdom.

To be embodied is to be in tune with and present to the body's—and your life's—internal rhythms and cycles.

This attunement can happen in every moment. Where are you right now in your day? High energy, low energy? Are you focused outwardly or inwardly? Are you looking to the day ahead or reflecting on the day behind? What season is it, literally? What emotions do you feel in this season? Wherever you are, what if you experimented with the idea that *there is wisdom right here*, that the particular state you're in may have something to tell you, offer you, or may simply be part of a larger cycle that needs to run its course?

If you're like me, you feel intrigued to explore this other world. And if you're also like me, then you know there are a lot of things that can get in the way of attuning to our bodies with this kind of clarity and presence.

MY BIG, FAT, SICILIAN NOSE

When I went through middle school, my body decided it no longer wanted to be a cute kid, and that it was time to grow into an adult. It took its dandy ol' time with that process, putting me through several years I'd be happy to forget. Aside from the voice cracks during my solo as Perchik in *Fiddler on the Roof*, my body was just… awkward.

I had long hair parted just right of center, I started my growth spurt that refused to go vertical, I woke up with pimples, and I grew a nose.

Yes, a nose.

Not a little button nose. Not a downhill ski slope nose. But a big ol' Sicilian nose, with a classic Sicilian bump, planted front and center on my chubby little-boy body.

As much as it didn't fit the rest of my body, I didn't notice it. In fact, I hardly noticed any of my awkwardness. It took others to point it out before it came into my awareness.

I remember being at school, going down the stairs to gym class one day, minding my own business, trying to fit in so as to fly under the radar of anyone's attention, when I walked past my classmate, Benny.

(gulp)

Benny was the popular kid. He got into fights, didn't seem to care about anything, and strutted the halls like he owned the place. In my middle school eyes, he did.

I kept to myself as I passed him, not wanting to be the target of his bullying, but it didn't work. In a quick glance up, we made eye contact. I smiled as an offering of respect, an acknowledgment of his status. He stared me down with cold eyes.

From there, everything went into slow motion.

I continued walking, lowered my gaze, gripped my books against my chest, and just as I thought I was in the clear, he yelled:

"Check out this guy's nose. He looks like Big Bird."

I froze.

Everyone around him laughed as I nervously smiled in the sea of people staring and pointing, while the world felt like it was caving in on me.

Whoever said "Sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never hurt you" never went to middle school. I would have rather endured the pain of his fist against my face than the emotional torment of being socially ridiculed.

That moment was all I needed as an insecure thirteen-year-old to spark a six-year stretch of hating my nose.

Starting that day, I spent countless hours in the bathroom mirror, looking at my nose from both sides with disgust. "Fuck

you," I would say to it, staring it down with contempt. Outside the bathroom, I would try to hide the profile of my face—with girls, during presentations, in pictures. It was the kryptonite to any confidence I might have otherwise had. I hated my nose—*hated* it—and in the most extreme moments, considered smashing it and telling my parents I fell, just so the doctors would have to do plastic surgery. Anything seemed better than having to live with it.

Things got better in high school, and once I got to college, everything changed. I became much more confident in myself. I was fortunate to have my appearance validated by others, and I figured out how to embrace my nose. I saw it as a part of who I was growing to appreciate myself to be, and I no longer had a desire to change it. None. I didn't think about my nose in any significant way…

… until several years later.

The summer before my senior year of college, I was on my first, five-day mindfulness meditation retreat in upstate New York. We were practicing a body scan meditation, an embodiment exercise, which involved lying down and focusing our awareness on sensations in the body, starting from the toes and scanning all the way up to the top of our heads.

The instructor led us through the sequence, focusing first on the feet, the legs, the belly… up to the neck, and then to the jaw, and then the mouth, and to the upper lip, and then… "bring your attention to your nose."

And BOOM.

I felt this massive wave of fear and self-consciousness wash over me as if I was back in middle school standing in the hall being ridiculed by my eighth grade bully.

With my heart beating fast, I opened my eyes and looked around at everyone else lying down doing the same body scan, as I tried to regain my bearings.

"What the hell just happened?" I thought.

It took me at least a half hour to settle my nerves.

When the group broke for lunch, I approached my teacher to tell her what happened. To my surprise, she said this was normal.

Normal?!

"The body stores pains and emotions, even if we think we've moved past them. As we reconnect to the body, it can bring up these old wounds, pains, and insecurities that we never fully addressed," she said.

Her advice was to continue to do the body scan meditation and to practice bringing "compassionate awareness" to the intense sensations and emotions as they arise.

I didn't understand how compassionate awareness was going to solve anything, but I wasn't the expert and had nothing to lose by trying.

In the month following this retreat, both in my meditation practice and in random moments throughout the day, I directed my focus to my nose. A similar rush of emotions would arise, and I would try to bring "compassionate awareness" to it, sometimes even saying "I love you" to my nose.

(eye roll)

At first, it felt ridiculous, but I gradually warmed up to the idea of how bringing kindness to the painful emotions could be healing, mainly because I saw how much resistance I had to it. The "compassionate awareness" triggered the deeply embedded memories of looking at my nose in the mirror with pure hatred. "I love you" was a far cry from the "fuck you" my nose was used to hearing.

I did the body scan and the "I love you, nose" thing for five to twenty minutes a day, and each time I did, it got easier. I also noticed it was making me feel more appreciative of, and even cozy in, my body. It was as if the long-standing resistance I had toward my nose had created a general tension in my mind toward my body, and going through this self-love process was softening that tension. After about a month,

instead of feeling painful emotions when focusing on my nose, I felt a gentle affection, which continues to this day.

Here's the point:

Being embodied is not always as simple or as easy as making the intention to feel your body. There are usually reasons for why we've disconnected from our body, or parts of it, that run deeper than simply living in a world that encourages thinking over feeling.

We may have experienced physical or sexual abuse, or a trauma that led to PTSD, making us feel unsafe and overwhelmed in our body.

Perhaps our body was discriminated against for reasons related to racism, fat shaming, unrealistic beauty standards, gender identity, or age, which conditioned in us a feeling of hatred or shame toward our body.

Maybe we live with pain, illness, or disability, and there's a sense that our body has betrayed us, leaving us frustrated and resentful toward our body.

Even something as simple as never learning how to feel and process difficult emotions like shame or sadness, or the discomfort of vulnerability and uncertainty, can cause us to shut down to our bodies. These things *hurt*. Who the heck wants to feel the shame of being rejected? Or the confusion that comes from questioning your life's path? Or the sadness of a breakup? It can feel *much* easier to zone out and watch TV, or scroll through our phones, or order $20 worth of Wendy's dollar menu specials while we sit alone in a dark parking lot under a single light post and try to forget about our woes (not that I've ever done that or anything).

These numbing strategies are ways to cope with what the mind perceives as too much pain, and sometimes, we do need to respect the wisdom of our mind and body, trusting that maybe there are times when it's better to feel *less*.

As a long-term strategy toward happiness and fulfillment, though, I think we already know this comes at a net loss.

When we consistently shut out the bad, we also shut out the good. It's like boarding up all the doors and windows of our home—we might prevent danger from coming in, but we also prevent any light from shining through. We might not have to feel as much sadness, but that also means we won't experience as much joy. We won't experience as much confusion, but we also won't be able to let that confusion guide us in the soul-searching that will lead us to our next step in life.

Learning how to be in our bodies, trust our bodies, and appreciate our bodies is a delicate process. When we bring our attention to the body, it opens us up to the possibility of deeper experiences of joy, aliveness, wholeness, and intuition. At the same time, like my first experience of the body scan and the emotions surrounding my nose, it can also activate shame, fear, sadness, and hatred. We need to understand this at the outset so we can go slowly and develop the inner resources to be with all of these new experiences.

To be embodied is to feel safe in our body. It's to be attuned to our body without feeling like we need to run away from it. It's to see our body as our companion, not our enemy.

And yes, this is a skill and a capacity we can develop.

BODY SCAN MEDITATION—LEARNING TO FEEL

The body scan meditation is one of the best ways to practice and develop embodiment. It involves guiding your awareness throughout your body, starting at the feet and moving up to the head. It's not about thinking about or visualizing a mental image of your body; it's about developing a felt sense of your body, as well as a feeling of safety within it.

The instructions are simple: Find a seated, lying down, or standing posture. If it feels safe to do so, you can close your eyes. Take the first few moments to focus on your breath at

your belly (this will help stabilize your attention and ground you into the present). From there, guide your awareness down to your feet, feeling the sensations of your feet in the same way you felt the sensations of your breath, with gentle curiosity and attunement. Continue up the body with that same awareness, taking as long or as short as you'd like with each body part—calves, shins, knees, thighs, buttocks, groin area, pelvis (as a whole), low back, midback, upper back, shoulders, arms, hands, belly, chest, neck/throat, jaw, cheeks, lips, inside the mouth, upper lip, nose (!), eyes, eyebrows, forehead, temples, ears, and top of head, finishing by feeling the entire body as a whole. (I include this meditation in the resources www.stopmissingyourlife.com/resources, if you'd like to be guided through.)

It's a straightforward practice. So much so, it can appear a bit rote, especially when written out in a stepwise fashion (see why I don't like to write out meditation instructions?). But don't be fooled. The body scan is an incredibly dynamic, alive, and, dare I say, *sensual* practice.

You're literally practicing how to feel yourself. Think about what it's like to guide your fingers through cool water on a warm summer day, or to feel the softness of your sheets against your skin when slipping into bed, or to experience the touch of your lover's hands caressing your shoulders.

The body that enables you to feel these experiences is the body you get to explore in this meditation.

You may not feel the juiciness of this practice at first, but that's because we're tuning into a more subtle sensational experience—unlike a massage or an orgasm—and it can take some time (and practice) before we start to feel and appreciate this subtlety. Once we do, though, there is a new sweetness in how we experience our world.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE BODY SCAN:

- **I can't feel my body:** Sometimes you might not feel a

particular part of your body, or *any* part of your body. That is okay and normal. Become curious what it's like to *not* feel sensation (which is a sensation in itself), and notice if the mind gets frustrated at the body, wishing the experience was different. This is your opportunity to *allow* the experience to be as it is, and practice being compassionate toward your body. Over time, you'll notice more sensations arise in your awareness.

- **Should I tense and release my body?** There are two primary ways to practice the body scan. The first is what I've outlined above—scanning your body without moving, tensing, or trying to create a different experience. The second way is to actively tense and release each part of the body. The latest research shows that both practices help reduce stress, but the former better develops parts of the brain responsible for self-compassion and reducing rumination; and the latter better develops parts of the brain that enable you to relax stress in the body. Both of these capacities are important, and you're welcome to play around with each practice. My recommendation, though, is to commit to one or the other before each body scan.
- **Trauma:** If you've experienced more significant trauma, being in your body can sometimes be uncomfortable. Although the body scan can be a powerful practice to reconnect with your body, helping to release and integrate some of the stored traumatic energy, it's important to practice self-care and to go slowly. Here are a few considerations if you're working through trauma.
  - Before you start the body scan, connect to a "home base"—somewhere you feel most safe and grounded. It could be a place in your body—like the breath—or it could be an image of someone you love, the sounds outside, or holding something in your hand like a stone or soft blanket.
  - Practice pendulation: As we discussed at the end of

Chapter 5, pendulation is the practice of stepping in and out of an intense experience. If doing the body scan feels too intense, you can open your eyes, move around, resettle, and come back when you're ready.

- If it feels very difficult to be in your body, and it creates panic, you do not need to push yourself. It may feel easier to be in your body through movement, like in a yoga or tai chi practice, so you might first start with that. If you're working with a therapist, you can also practice the body scan with the guidance of your therapist.

- **My body is in pain:** If you live with chronic pain, you may have resistance toward a practice that encourages you to feel the sensations in your body more vividly. In fact, you may believe (and it may very well be true) that your ability to ignore, numb, and disconnect from your body is what allows you to find some peace in the world. Although the body scan can initially feel like it's exacerbating your pain (because you're starting to connect to your body more deeply) this is not its intention. It's a practice to help you learn how to be in a better relationship to your pain, to soften its intensity, and to see that who you are is *not* your pain. In fact, most of the early mindfulness research was about how the body scan can help reduce the intensity of chronic pain and improve the quality of life for those living in chronic pain. Here are a few suggestions if you're living with pain:

  - Self-care: Before going into the body scan, find a posture that provides as much comfort as possible, using extra pillows and blankets if necessary. Since chronic pain is often the result of pushing through preexisting pain, learning how to take care of yourself and offer comfort/relief is hugely healing in itself. Plus, it starts to soften your mind's tendency to fight, resist, or push through the pain,

which often only exacerbates it.

- Find the good: In addition to, or instead of, the normal body scan sequence, practice feeling for areas of your body that are *not* in pain, even if it's as small as the tip of your pinkie finger. When pain is constantly in your awareness, it can be a powerful moment to experience the parts of you that still feel good. It also shows you that who you are is bigger than your pain.
- Feel the boundaries: After you've identified areas of your body that are not in pain, you'll be able to see that the pain has boundaries. Practice bringing your awareness to those boundaries.

The body scan meditation is a practice you carve out time for in your day as you would any other meditation. However, you can practice tuning into your body in any moment. As you're reading this, notice what it's like to be in your body. Do you feel where your body is making contact with the ground or chair? Do you feel your breath moving through your abdomen? Do you notice any part of your body that is holding tension? What about the parts of your body that are most at ease?

So often, we're caught in our ideas of who we are, why we're great, why we're not good enough, where we need to get in life before we can be happy and successful; you know, the "story" of our minds. When we connect to our body, we connect to the present moment. Our thoughts can go off in an infinite number of directions, but our bodies are always *here.*

o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o

Cultivate Embodiment in Your Meditation Practice:

1. **Ground into your body:** At the beginning of your meditation practice, take a deep breath, and on your exhale, feel your body let go and relax, getting heavier and more at ease. This should help you feel the sensations of your body more vividly, as well as give you a sense of being grounded. After this, notice where in your body you

feel most stable—e.g., your butt against the seat, your back against the chair, your shoulders on the floor if you're lying down, etc.—and take a few moments to appreciate that stability (it's very different than being swirled around by thoughts) before proceeding with the rest of your meditation.

2. **Naming emotions and sensations:** Remember how, in Chapter 3, I introduced the idea of "noting" in your meditation practice; i.e., "rising, falling, thinking"? You can also note the specifics of emotions and sensations. For example, if joy arises, you can note "joy." If fear arises, you can note "fear." And if you don't have a label for it as an emotion, you can note "pleasant," "unpleasant," or "neutral." The research on "emotional granularity" shows that the capacity to distinguish between and name different emotions and sensational experiences leads to better emotional regulation and higher levels of well-being. We're also not as blindly driven by an internal experience when we're able to see it clearly for what it is.
3. **Movement meditation:** Separate from your sitting meditation, you might explore movement-based meditations like yoga or tai chi. There are guided movement practices in the resources, and a simple Google search should bring up in-person offerings nearby. One practice you can do on your own is what I call "listening to the animal of your body." Start in a standing, seated, or lying-down posture and wait for the impulse to move. That's it. The impulse may be as subtle as wiggling your pinkie, or as strong as wanting to jump or dance, and it may change from moment to moment. If there's no impulse, then just be still. The idea is to practice listening to the communication of your body. Its language is sensation, and if you tune in closely, it will guide you toward what it wants (and needs).

Cultivate Embodiment in Daily Life:

1. **Relax the body:** For daily tasks, we tend to use much more effort and strain than we need to. For instance, when you twist open a water bottle, are you just using your hands, fingers, and forearm? Or does your shoulder tense, do you grip your left hand tight around the bottle even though your right hand is the one twisting, do you feel tension in your face? See if you can relax the muscles that are not required for the task at hand—when opening the door, driving in your car, sitting at your computer, having a conversation with someone, and so on. This will not only get you more in touch with your body, but it will greatly reduce the accumulation of stress and tension in both your body *and* mind, helping you be more grounded, open, and at peace. Bonus points if you can catch all the times you hold your breath!
2. **HALT:** Often when we're not at our "best"—being short with our partner, feeling unusually stressed, not having much patience—it's because we haven't addressed certain basic needs. This, again, is usually a product of not being in touch with what those needs are.

“HALT” is an acronym you can reference to check in with yourself—Am I **h**ungry? Am I **a**ngry? Am I **l**onely? Am I **t**ired? Each of these has a particular feeling cue, and the more familiar you are with that cue, the better you can respond to it and prioritize these needs (getting some food, processing your anger, connecting with a friend, prioritizing sleep, etc.).

3. **Walking mega sensor:** In any given moment, depending on the senses we still have available to us, we’re experiencing the world through sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste. These senses then create an internal experience—if we see something beautiful, we might feel elevation; if we taste something delicious, we might feel satisfaction; if we touch something soft, we might feel peaceful. As you move throughout your day, see if you can notice all the ways your sensory experience creates your *felt* experience—as you get your coffee, as you change scenery, when you’re talking to different people. I try to imagine myself as a walking mega sensor, which helps me feel all the distinct ways I’m “sensing” and processing the world around me. Try it out!

PART 3

BRINGING PRESENCE TO LIFE

CHAPTER 8

HOW TO CHANGE AND GROW

Let's take a quick pause.

In the last four chapters, we discussed the four pillars of presence, FACE: focus, allowing, curiosity, and embodiment. Although we've been discussing these pillars separately, a moment of presence integrates all four as a unit, and most of our training (such as meditation) actively employs and develops this unit in each moment.

In our life, instead of thinking about these pillars mechanically—that is, as four separate "techniques" to worry about and piece together—we can think of them as a whole, making up a moment of presence that we gradually develop an intuitive understanding for how to inhabit.

Think about what it would be like to have this presence on a warm summer day in nature—your mind isn't wandering into the future and the past, you're not anxiously grasping for the moment to stay as it is, there is a sense of wonder and interest in being alive, and you're experiencing your surroundings fully with your mind and body—the breeze on your face, your feet on the ground, the breath moving in and out of your lungs.

Similarly, imagine having this presence during a difficult conversation—your attention is on the other person, you're not

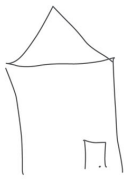
turning away from the discomfort or triggers, you're patiently interested in understanding each other's needs and how to find resolution, and you're able to relax your body when you start tensing up.

As we deepen into presence, we deepen our capacity to meet whatever the moment brings. This is about *staying open* to your life, not only so that you don't miss it (which is huge in itself), but also because it leads to a profound sense of being whole, at ease, and fulfilled.

The next chapters of this book will explore how to bring this presence into our day-to-day life, where we will feel it the most. In this chapter, in particular, we're going to look at how to change patterns of conditioning that may no longer be serving you. And we're going to do it by talking about cows.

YOU'RE WALKING A COW PATH

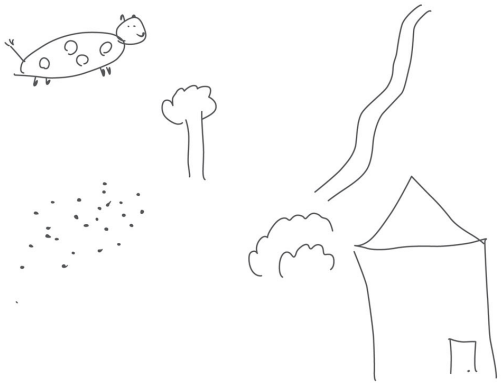
A story, first popularized by the Center for Mindfulness at UMass, is about a boy who grew up on a farm. The farm had many different animals, but the boy was most fascinated by the cows. Every day, he would watch these cows leave the barn, graze the land, and by the end of the day, end up in a far corner of the farm.



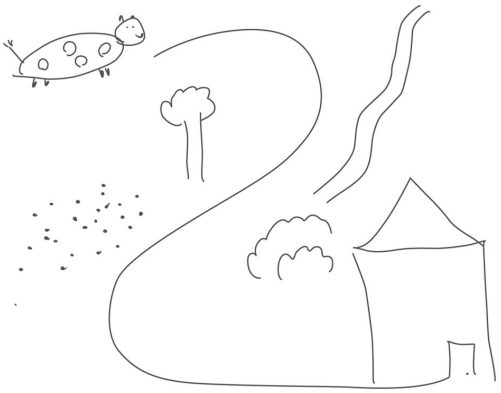
(yes, this is a cow, not a turtle or a ladybug)

Once it got dark, the cows needed to head back to the barn. However, it wasn't so easy. Not only was it a long walk, but there were many obstacles in the way—trees, a river, bushes,

and rocks.



These obstacles made it impossible for the cows to make a straight line to the barn. To get home safely, they needed to take a long, winding path around the trees, through the narrow part of the river, around the bushes, staying away from the rocks, and eventually they could get back home to the safety of their barn.



The young boy spent his childhood watching the cows walk this path at nightfall, always taking the same route, day after day.

As the boy grew up, he went to college, and his parents sold the farm. He continued his life elsewhere, pursued further education, and became a neuroscientist.

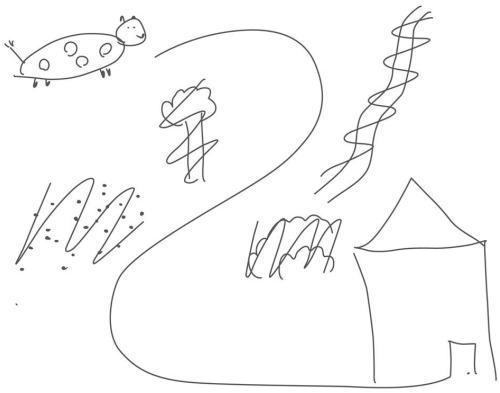
Many years went by, and one day, now in his forties, the man had the urge to revisit the farm. Much to his delight, the farm was still there, and so were the cows!

And can you guess what they were doing?

Yup. All these years later, the cows were *still* walking the

same exact path.

However…



The landscape looked very different. The trees, bushes, and rocks were all gone, and even the river had dried up.

The cows now had the ability to walk a straight line to the barn, saving themselves a great deal of time and effort, and yet they still took the same long, winding path they had taken so many years earlier.

And that is the story of the cow path.

You might be thinking, “Great. So what?”

Well, we humans aren’t so different from these cows. That’s why I love this story. We all have cow paths that were developed to meet the challenges we faced at certain points in our lives.

Maybe we learned to be quiet around authority because a teacher yelled at us for speaking up.

Maybe we learned to always be busy and not give ourselves a break because rest and play were considered lazy in our family.

Maybe we learned to be anxious about achievement because anything less than perfection was considered a failure in the eyes of our parents.

Whatever they were, these cow paths were put in place to *help* us, and for that reason we must honor them and the role they played in our lives at that particular time.

However, these cow paths are also the unconscious driving forces of our lives, and often times may no longer be serving us in a positive way. If we are to honor our future selves and who we're trying to become, it will require changing some of our cow paths.

WHY DO YOU DO WHAT YOU DO?

As simple as it might sound, the first step to getting off a cow path is to realize that you're walking on one. Most of the time we have no idea we're walking them; they're just our default operating system.

If you were to ask a cow why it's walking its path, and if for some reason that cow could speak, it would most likely say, "What path?"

And we'd respond, "The cow path you're walking on, silly."

"What's a cow path?"

"It's that long winding trail you're taking!"

"Oh, no, that's just how I get back to the barn."

"Yes, but you can take an easier, more efficient route. Why are you walking in this big curve?"

"I don't know what you're talking about; this is what I always do."

How many times has someone said, "Why do you do that?" and you respond with something along the lines of:

"That's just who I am."

"This is what I'm used to."

"This is what I need to do. I've always done it this way, and it works."

Often what we perceive to be "just the way I am" is instead

a pattern of conditioning that has been reinforced so many times that we've misconstrued it as "me"—a fixed identity. Or, we're totally unaware that there is any other way to do things.

Therefore, the first step in getting off a cow path is to simply become aware that you're walking on one.

This is one thing that mindfulness, and specifically the pillars of FACE, help us do: they build a self-awareness that naturally gives us more insight into what we're doing and why we're doing what we're doing. We become aware of and curious to the turns we're taking, the reactions we're having, the patterns we fall into again and again. We start to see that when someone says something to us, we react in a predictable way, and how when a certain emotion arises, we respond in a particular way. Over time, the bumps, turns, and crevices of our cow paths are illuminated.

Maybe you've become aware of some of your cow paths already just in reading this book. Many of these patterns were first created through the various traumas of life that we discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

Most of us have a sense of a few cow paths that we've been walking. There are also probably some lingering in the back of our awareness that are just waiting for us to admit them to ourselves, and which would have a big return on investment if we shifted.

And sometimes, the cow paths that we *most* need to change to improve our lives are the ones we're most clueless about. We have yet to wake up to them.

But do you know who is *not* clueless to your cow paths? The people around you.

Those who know you best will see your cow paths much more readily than you are able to. Therefore, one of the most powerful things you can do to grow is to illuminate your cow paths by asking your closest friends and family what your blind spots are.

Here's an example of what it might sound like:

Hey, Partner/Mom/Dad/Friend/Cat,

I need a favor. It's gonna sound a little weird, but hear me out. I'm reading this book right now so that I can become a better person. It's all about trying to be more present in life and not shutting down to things that are uncomfortable. I don't know if I'm totally into it, but I already bought the book and now I feel obligated to try what he's telling me.

One of the things he says is to ask other people to help point out my blind spots. Since you're someone who knows me best, I'm hoping you might be able to help. I've never done something like this, so I'm a little uncomfortable, but I appreciate you venturing into this territory with me.

Do you think we could try this?

Yes, I'd be happy to help!

Great, thanks. The main thing I'm trying to find is what patterns I have that you think I need to work on. For example:

When do I get defensive?

When do I shut down?

What do you think my blind spots are?

Really, anything that you observe about me that I might not see would be great information.

After the conversation, you may be hit with some hard truths:

"I think you spend too much time talking and not enough time listening."

"I think you keep falling into the same bad relationships because you don't actually love yourself and therefore don't think you're worthy of someone loving you."

"I don't think you know how to let yourself experience joy."

Take a deep breath, notice if you get defensive, and just feel what it's like to hear these perspectives. Whether or not you agree, it's important to recognize that this is the truth of their experience of you, at least right now. Therefore, let's use it as an opportunity to be curious and ask some questions.

Might this be true? When might I do this? Where does this show up in my life?

Once we have a sense of a cow path that we'd like to work on, our impulse may be to immediately change it. Again, not so fast.

Just because we see we're walking a cow path doesn't mean we need to immediately get off it. In fact, there is huge value in walking a cow path *with awareness* as opposed to your old way of doing it on autopilot. You can now learn more about the cow path, how it's been serving you, and whether it's *still* serving you.

You might see that you don't know how to rest and play, and instead you work constantly. Or you might see that every time you feel stressed, you isolate yourself to feel safe. Or every time you're left alone, you immediately feel uncomfortable and distract yourself by going on social media.

Even though you're walking the same path you're so accustomed to, you're now learning something.

Remember my story about sitting at the dinner table with my family after meditating for six months in Burma, and then my father made that comment about me needing to work? I felt myself get quiet, my confidence dropped, and my shoulders deflated. That's one of my cow paths, put in place in childhood when it felt easier to get small and quiet than to speak up for myself. As a grown man, this is a cow path I continue to notice, learn about, and work on in my relationship with him even though we have a great relationship and he's an incredibly loving father. I pay attention to when my body posture shifts, when my eyes look down, when my voice gets softer and less confident. Each time I go through this cow path with awareness, I learn more about it, and I see more opportunities (and feel more empowered) to change it.

When you walk a cow path with awareness, you learn how the mind interacts with different triggers and the subtle reactions in your body. When you notice those sensations in the body, you become aware of the opportunity to try

something else. And then you start to see that so many things that you've just taken as "who you are" are actually little decisions or reactions happening in single moments that previously felt out of your control.

Do you follow?

The awareness of the cow path gives you power. And in the context of stimulus and response, you're learning where that space is between the two and what might be required to respond differently in that space.

If you decide that this is a cow path worth changing—maybe to align more to your values or what you want most deeply in your life—the next step will be inhabiting that space between stimulus and response, letting go of your current path, and moving toward a new one.

LETTING GO

I see the process of letting go as having two key features:

1. Learning about *why* you're holding on to something and *how* it's still serving you
2. Creating a compelling future that is only available when you *do* let go

We'll start with the first.

When we think of "letting go" of something (like a cow path), we usually think of turning away from it or creating more space between it and us. I would agree with that. However, the paradox of being able to let go is that we first need to move closer to the thing we want to let go of. We need to understand what this thing is that we're holding on to, how it's been serving us, and whether or not it's still serving us. If we're not clear on this, we'll start doing other things to get whatever it was that the original thing gave us (excitement, comfort, drama, etc.) and effectively self-sabotage our growth.

We won't really have let go.

Here's an example:

I once worked with a woman, Debbie, who wanted to lose weight. She could feel it negatively impacting her health, energy, and ability to do the things she wanted, like hiking with her family. She tried different diets and exercise programs for years, but every time she started to lose weight, she would go right back to her old cow paths, self-sabotaging her progress.

When we started working together, I wasn't as interested in her losing weight. My only encouragement to her was to bring mindfulness to her relationship to food—to notice her cravings, her experience while she was eating, the moments when she wanted more, and what she felt after she'd finished.

She had two big insights within the first week of doing this: (1) She continued to eat after her body was full and even when it was painful to eat more; and (2) if she were to stop eating in those moments, taking a mindful pause, she felt a lot of fear. She told me it was a kind of fear she hadn't experienced since being a kid.

Debbie revealed that she was sexually assaulted as a teenager. Soon after the assault is when she started to gain weight. This was her subconscious strategy to avoid getting attention from men, which felt threatening after the assault. This became a cow path in her relationship to food: eat to the point of hurting with the belief that "If I'm less attractive, I'll be safe."

It was painful for her to share this with me, but it illuminated a deeper pattern. It wasn't that she needed to let go of overeating; rather, she needed to let go of the fear of the attention she might receive if she didn't employ the strategy of being overweight as her "safety."

This is where the meditation practice came in.

Through meditation, she learned to reconnect with her body in a compassionate way. She practiced being with her

anxieties and fears without reacting to them and practiced cultivating an internal sense of safety. Her eating patterns were no longer blindly driven by fear.

She continued bringing mindfulness to her eating. When she noticed the desire to eat beyond her body's hunger, the fear pattern was still there, but she felt less overwhelmed. Over time, the fear gradually reduced. Eventually, her eating patterns shifted entirely and she not only reached her weight-loss goals, but felt much more at peace with herself.

If we're holding on to something (like a cow path) despite wanting to change, it usually means it's serving us in *some* way that we're not aware of. In Debbie's case, she was subconsciously holding on to her eating patterns because they helped her avoid feeling a particular fear. It can take many different shapes, though:

"I'm holding on to this mediocre relationship because the potential pain of being alone feels too overwhelming." This is serving you to not have to experience loneliness.

"I'm holding on to anger because *not* being angry would require me to accept and make peace with a painful reality of my life." This is serving you to not have to feel a deeper sadness.

Even though it may not be what you consciously want to do, your subconscious mind is trying to help you feel better. Sometimes, the things that we feel should be easy to let go of have a lot more going on beneath the surface. Until we can see what those things beneath the surface are, we can't address the root cause of why we do what we do and why it's so hard to change.

Once we understand why we're holding on to something and start to come to terms with actually letting it go, the next step is getting very clear on what will replace the old cow path.

This is the second piece of letting go—creating a compelling future that is only available to you when you *do* let

go. Although this might sound simple, I notice many people put so much effort into trying to "let go" that they forget what they're trying to move toward. First, it's hard to let go of something if you're preoccupied with the thing itself. Second, it's hard for the mind to justify letting go of something if it doesn't see a very compelling alternative.

This is where you get to have some fun with the letting-go process. Why is it that you want to let go of this cow path (or anything)? What is the kind of life you could experience once you do let go? What would you feel, who would you meet, what might you be able to do, and what kind of person would you be?

These are the kinds of questions you want to ask yourself to prime your mind for stepping off your current cow path.

Maybe you don't have anything in particular you're moving toward, but you're excited about the peace that would come from not holding on to your usual cow path. That "peace" is your compelling future. The more compelled you feel about moving toward something, the less you worry about losing the security of what you've been holding on to. Let that excitement for who you're becoming override the fear of letting go of who you are.

And with all that said, there's often only so much we can do to facilitate this process. Letting go sometimes needs to happen in its own time, at its own pace, and in ways that are out of our control.

SOMETIMES WE'RE MUSH

When I was a kid, I was fascinated with butterflies. Starting around age six or seven—the earliest summers I can remember—I would take my ten-foot butterfly net, run around in my backyard, and catch as many butterflies as I could, mainly monarchs, tiger swallowtails, and black swallowtails.

I had this little kid's tent from Toys R Us, and every time I caught a butterfly, I would put it in the tent until it was filled with over twenty butterflies. Then I would go in the tent, lie down, and watch them all fly around and land on me. Afterward, I'd let them go and repeat the experience the next day.

I was not only fascinated with the butterflies themselves but their entire life cycle—they'd mate as butterflies, lay eggs on the milkweed and spicebush, hatch into caterpillars, eat until they were big, form a chrysalis, and after a couple weeks of stillness, become a butterfly. I was most intrigued by the transition from caterpillar to chrysalis because it seemed like magic. How could this little wormy caterpillar go into a shiny green shell it created out of nowhere and then emerge a completely different being, with wings and an ability to fly?

In my childhood wonder, I once peeled apart the chrysalis of a monarch butterfly. I was so curious to see what was inside. To my horror, there was nothing but mush. I'm not sure what I was expecting to find, but it wasn't that. I tried to tape the chrysalis back together, but needless to say, that caterpillar never turned into a butterfly.

I felt terrible and spent much of the next several years of my childhood helping to raise, nurture, and take care of the butterfly population.

In much the same way as a butterfly's metamorphosis, we all go through stages of growth. Sometimes, we're a caterpillar; sometimes, we're a butterfly; and sometimes, we're transitioning from one to the other—we're just a pile of mush.

The "mush" stage can be disconcerting and make us think, "Maybe I should go back to being a caterpillar!" Or "I need to hurry and become a butterfly already!"

It's helpful to remember that this stage is part of a larger process of growth, and certain processes must unfold in their own time.

As you go through your own journey of discovering and deepening presence, you will inevitably transition from one way of being to another. This is exciting, no doubt, but it can also be scary.

If at any point in the process you're confused, uncertain, or lost, remind yourself this may just be your chrysalis stage. Try to be patient with yourself as you grow. These transitions are opportunities for self-care, inner exploration, compassion, and trust. See if you can give yourself the permission to be in that stage; the maturation may have to happen in its own time, and you'll emerge when the time is right.

CHAPTER 9

BECOME YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND

Much of spiritual life is self-acceptance, maybe all of it.

—Jack Kornfield

People always ask me what the biggest benefit has been from my meditation practice. Knowing that I spent six months in silence at a Buddhist monastery, they usually suspect it's going to be something "cool"—transcending my ego, learning how to levitate, or some sort of psychic powers.

It's less exciting, I assure you.

The most important thing I've gotten from my meditation practice is that I've become my own best friend. I actually *like* myself. Not in an arrogant way; in an appreciative way. I know everything Cory has been through, everything he's working on, where he falls short, where he tries really hard and still can't get it right. I have a lot of appreciation for this Cory guy.

It feels good to like myself. *Really* good.

Because it wasn't always this way.

I used to place high expectations on myself, and my inner critic was ferocious. I would beat myself up for not getting things right, whether it was something big or small. I didn't know any different at the time, but looking back, it was much more difficult living that way. I still have expectations and I still make mistakes, but I rarely beat myself up for them anymore. I check in and ask myself how everything is going. Do I need anything? Do I need to reevaluate some stuff? If I

notice that I'm more edgy, I might check in and ask, "Is everything all right, man? This isn't like you. What's going on?"

It might sound silly, but it's changed my life. At the end of the day, we have to go through this life alone. We can have great family, friends, and communities to support us in our journey, but only *we* can experience our thoughts, our emotions, and our pains. Unless we can be our own best companion through that process, we stand in the way of our own happiness.

Imagine this—What would it be like to become your own best friend? To feel cozy in yourself? To actually enjoy being with your own company?

We're going to look at how this is possible.

Up to this point, we explored the four pillars of presence—focus, allowing, curiosity, and embodiment (FACE)—and looked at how practicing these pillars:

1. builds our capacity to experience more of life, and
2. softens the walls that keep us stuck in our usual way of being.

These pillars also have a natural befriending effect. They enable us to meet ourselves *as we are*, curiously and nonjudgmentally, so that we're not constantly beating ourselves up. With this foundation, we can now apply more specific practices and strategies to deepen this friendship and love toward ourselves, especially where it's most difficult.

There are many ways to be a good friend, but the two that stand out to me are:

1. letting a friend know that they're loved, especially in times of struggle, and
2. supporting a friend to grow and experience more happiness.

More often than not, we're better at being a good friend to

other people than being a good friend to ourselves (although some of us certainly have work to do in both departments). In this chapter, we'll explore how you can develop that friendship with yourself—accepting (and even loving) all of who you are, even the parts you may have disowned.

RECLAIMING YOUR SHADOW

We all have parts of ourselves that we don't like. These parts could be our grief, pain, trauma, depression, anxiety, fear, deep anger, shame—anything that we think drains our energy and makes our life worse.

There's an understandable desire to get *away* from these experiences, to inhabit a mind, heart, and soul that is not tethered to such suffering. To accomplish this, we often ignore, suppress, or disown these parts, casting them into the shadows of our awareness. This is why psychologist Carl Jung called them our shadow parts.

Unfortunately, it's not so easy to get rid of them. The more we push these parts away, the stronger they become.

Have you ever heard of non-Newtonian fluid?

It's a type of fluid that becomes thicker, or more viscous, under pressure and stress. If you were to fill a pool with it, you could actually run and jump on the surface without falling through. In fact, the *harder* you press against it, the stronger it becomes. But the moment you relax and stand still, the surface softens as if it were any other liquid. Check out a YouTube video to see for yourself.

Our shadow parts are like non-Newtonian fluid. They're fortified by our struggle, our frustration, our resistance. The more we fight or suppress them, the stronger, bigger, and more destructive they become. But as soon as they are met with softness, they too soften, sometimes becoming our greatest allies.

In other words, the best way to not suffer from our shadow is to be at peace with it.

Here's an example:

Every year I run a five-day retreat in upstate New York. One year, a high-achieving entrepreneur, husband, and father, and self-proclaimed type-A personality, attended. His name is Keith. Although Keith had a lot of great things in his life, he was plagued by his shadow that he refers to as "Little Keith."

"Little Keith" represents the part of him that he perceives to be fearful, uncertain, weak, and confused. He calls this part "Little Keith" because he remembers feeling this way as a kid in relationship to his overbearing father. Keith hated this part of himself, and for years tried to fix it, ignore it, overpower it, and even once visualized himself drowning Little Keith in a well, wanting to be rid of him once and for all. All this did, though, was create more tension, stress, and resentment.

I was excited for Keith to be on this retreat because Day 3 is specifically devoted to befriending and reclaiming these shadow parts—the parts of us that we disown, avoid, and resent. "Little Keith" certainly fell in this category. What makes this day so powerful is that we relate to these parts of ourselves in a radically different way than we're used to. In most cases, we've spent a lifetime shunning these parts and hating them; now, we're turning toward them and welcoming them. That shift in perspective, alone, is big.

The day has a particular arc to it, designed to gradually take us through the befriending process. We first spend time getting in touch with what our shadow feels like and where it is in our mind and body. We then give it a form—shape or color—so that we can communicate and interact with it. Then, we have a conversation with this part, as if we're getting to know a long lost friend. We let it know that we're not here to hurt or get rid of it; we just want to better understand its intentions. We even ask it questions to find out what it needs. Once we've developed some trust and rapport, we thank this part for its positive intention, and ask if there's anything we

can do for it. As best we can, we try to offer something. And finally we ask how we can work together to best navigate our life.

By the end of this day, Keith was in tears. Here is what he wrote and shared with the group:

"For years, I have disallowed the parts of me that are imperfect, scared, weak, confused, alone, and sad. I assign these qualities to my scared little boy, 'little Keith,' but it's me, today, as a grown man that has these qualities. I spend my time trying to fix, ignore, chip away at, even drown, these parts of me. But these are part of who I am. It's what makes me sensitive, empathic, supportive, and generous. I am these things *because* of these qualities, not in spite of them. I always thought that to be a man, I couldn't be scared, uncertain, or confused. But that sounds like half a man to me now. Without these things, I wouldn't have the qualities I treasure the most."

Six months later, I received this text from him:

"Dude, I have been feeling AMAZING. I feel light and fun and without pressure. I notice it all day long. It's like I took a huge emotional shit and relieved all the discomfort I was experiencing. I can't even begin to describe how good it feels. Little Keith is like my best friend now."

We often don't realize how much of our stress, anxiety, depression, low energy, and emotional heaviness is coming from constantly needing to regulate and fight our shadow parts, almost always happening at a subconscious level.

To help alleviate this tension and heaviness, I've written out a structured practice you can use to start this journey toward reclaiming your shadow and becoming your own best friend. It is a combination of techniques from Ericksonian hypnosis, compassion-based meditation, Chöd meditation (an ancient Tibetan Buddhist practice), and Lama Tsultrim's book *Feeding Your Demons*. I have also included a recording of this in the resources, if you'd prefer to go through it with guidance (www.stopmissingyourlife.com/resources).

I recommend clearing at least a half hour for this meditation, more if you can spare, so you can process and journal afterward. The practice itself doesn't need to take longer than ten to fifteen minutes. Although you may not choose to do the practice now (which is understandable), still read through the steps and see if you can feel what it might be like to take this approach to those parts you've most struggled with.

STEP 1: PREPARATION

- Find a relaxed, seated posture (you can lie down if you don't think you'll fall asleep). You want to feel comfortable and safe for this meditation, so feel free to use pillows, blankets, or even stuffed animals if it helps you feel more settled.

STEP 2: FIND THE SHADOW

- Identify the shadow part you would like to work on. What's a part of you that you struggle with or don't like? Once you've identified this part, see if you can feel where you experience it in your mind and body. Get a sense of its presence, location, boundaries, and qualities.

STEP 3: GIVE IT FORM

- Once you have a sense of your shadow, it's time to give it more form. If this shadow were to be a particular color, shape, sound, or substance—like a dark cloud, a yelling voice, or flimsy reed—what would that be? If an image or character comes to mind, like a mangy dog, a helpless child, or an unforgiving dictator, you can use that, too.

STEP 4: CREATE TRUST

- Once the shadow has a form, imagine that you are sitting down and meeting with it. You can imagine an actual bench in your mind that you and the shadow are sitting on, or you can imagine that the shadow is sitting in front of you.
- Make sure both you and the shadow feel comfortable with the arrangement (you may need more or less space from each other), and let the shadow know (through words and body language) that you are not here to hurt it or get rid of it. Rather, you want it to feel safe.

STEP 5: BECOME CURIOUS

- Ask the shadow: What is it like to be you? What is something about you that I don't know? How are you trying to help me? Just listen to the responses, curiously, and thank it for sharing.
- *Optional: If you feel comfortable doing so, you can associate into the shadow—i.e., imagine you are talking as the shadow—so that you can respond to the questions from its perspective. If you're sitting, you might consider switching your position so that you're facing your original seat.*

STEP 6: FIND THE POSITIVE INTENTION

- Let the shadow know that you trust it is trying to help you in *some* way, and ask if it could share its positive intention. "What are you trying to help me learn, understand, or experience? How are you trying to serve or protect me?"
- *Optional: Associate into the shadow to respond with its positive intention.*

STEP 7: SHOW APPRECIATION

- Think to a time you tried to help someone but you felt like that person dismissed you. If you can't think of an example, you can imagine what this would be like. Now consider that this is how your shadow must feel. It's been trying to help you, and your response has been to shun or dismiss it. But now that you see it more clearly—if you're willing and ready—you can thank the shadow for doing its best to help you, even if you don't fully understand its motive.

STEP 8: MAKE A CONNECTION

- If you feel ready, try to make a physical connection with the shadow from a place of compassion. This is a first step toward feeling what it's like to embrace one another. You can imagine giving it a hug or holding it gently in your hands. It's okay to go slow. Remember, you've spent a lot of time avoiding this shadow, so it may be difficult to get close at first; you don't need to rush the process.

STEP 9: MAKE AN OFFERING

- Ask the shadow: What do you need? How can I help you? What can I give you?
- *Optional: Associate into the shadow to respond, "What I need from you is…"*
- Once you get a response, imagine yourself offering this to the shadow and see the shadow receive this gift from you.

STEP 10: INVITE THE SHADOW INTO THE LIGHT

- As you sit, imagine the many different parts that create who you are—the parts that are loving, positive,

protective, sad, curious—a whole community of parts, all with different forms. Notice how most of those parts are in the light, and the shadow parts are in the dark. Imagine all the different parts of you inviting this particular shadow part into the light, embracing it as a part of the community of you, to be seen, appreciated, and accepted.

STEP 11: INTEGRATION

- Once the shadow has been welcomed into the light, imagine all of these parts dissolving into One, creating an embodied sense of wholeness.
- Rest in an awareness of the whole, feeling the goodness of it as you breathe and relax. Take however long you need before closing the meditation and opening your eyes.

However you decide to engage with this meditation, guided or self-guided, be sure to practice self-care, and trust your own intuition if any of the steps feel like "too much, too soon." When working with these shadows, we're working with some very deep parts of ourselves, many of which we've spent a lifetime shunning and resisting. We don't need to heal everything in one session.

Remember, this practice is about befriending and integration, not purging. It's a radical act of kindness to embrace the many dimensions that make up *you*. The journey is not always easy, but each step we take in the direction of integration is a step closer to deep fulfillment, self-love, and wholeness.

GOOD-ENOUGH HEALING

This feels like a good place to offer a few words of reassurance. With all of our discussion on deepening into

presence, you might be getting the impression that you need to "fix" everything, change all of your negative conditioning, fully heal from all of your trauma or "shadows" before you can really start living.

Be careful not to get caught in that trap. I've yet to meet any people who have fully "purified" themselves (I'm not even sure what that would look like in a person). In fact, so much of what makes people great is their particular conditioning, their unique past, and their personal struggles that have molded them into who they are today.

You don't need to solve, heal, or understand everything that has ever happened to you. There may be some really deep stuff —some "shadows"—that just feel too exhausting or stressful to work on.

That's okay!

Sometimes all we need is healing that is "good enough"—good enough so that our "baggage" doesn't completely hold us back from experiencing our lives in the way we want to. If, or when, we feel inspired to go into the deeper stuff, it will be there. But we never have to, nor should we force it.

Some of our wounds will have healed without leaving a mark, others will have scarred, and some may still be raw. You can still live your life—*today*—with all of this at play.

You're going to experience anger, you're going to get triggered, you're going to feel jealous, you're going to say the wrong thing, and you're going to feel overwhelmed. These are all aspects of being human. Practicing *presence* is less about getting rid of these things and more about meeting these moments with openness, curiosity, and heartfulness.

You do not need to wait until you have healed all of your "stuff" before you can have a good life. And there's much you can do to continue to nurture what is already "good" and life-giving inside you.

NURTURE THE POSITIVE

In 1998, Dr. Martin Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, gave an address as president of the American Psychological Association, in which he argued that psychology, as a whole, has done a great job at understanding pathology—that is, what goes "wrong" in life and how to alleviate that suffering. The field has made fewer strides in understanding what is best in people, and how to cultivate more of that. On that day, a new science was born—the field of positive psychology.

Positive psychology was designed to balance out the field of psychology. Many researchers were studying mental illness, negative emotions, anxiety, and depression; few were studying positive emotions, optimism, resilience, perseverance, and, well, happiness. Positive psychology is a science devoted to understanding what it means to be well and live well.

In this book, there has been a lot of emphasis on what can go wrong in our lives and how we navigate it. I mean, heck, in the first two chapters we talked about trauma and "the risk of being you." I don't apologize for this. In my view, it's incredibly important—in fact, essential—to acknowledge and make space for these realities when developing your presence. We can't simply bypass them by cultivating positive emotions and experiences (nor would positive psychology make this claim). If we don't attend to our pains and shadows, we'll be shut off from important parts of ourselves. So much of our suffering is for that very reason—fracturing the whole into parts that we accept and parts that we don't accept. As we integrate the more painful parts of who we are, there is an organic sense of wholeness that arises, and an associated depth in our happiness.

And yet, there are many ways we can further develop our happiness—nurturing our strengths, focusing on what's going well, remembering the positive aspects of ourselves that we appreciate. This tendency to focus on what is "good" doesn't

come naturally to us, unfortunately. Here's why:

Our brains have a built-in tendency to focus on the negative, referred to in psychology as the negativity bias. This means we're more inclined to focus on what is or could go *wrong* rather than what is or could go *right*.

You might wonder, "Why would the brain do such an awful thing like that to us?"

To answer that question, we have to look to evolution.

Imagine two of our ancestors out hunting for food a couple hundred thousand years ago. As they're walking through the forest, trying to find something to eat, they come across a big dark cave.

They both stop in their tracks.

One of them says, "Whoa. Wait a second. Do you see that cave? We should… totally *go in there*! I bet there are cool bugs and plants and cave things! Oh, wow, this looks great!"

The other replies, "Are you crazy?! We have no idea what's in there! There could be bears and other big animals! I'm running back to camp!"

The other says back, "Ah, well, you were always kind of a loser. More fun for me! I'm going in!"

So, what happens?

The happy-go-lucky Neanderthal goes into the cave, wakes up a sleeping bear, and gets eaten.

Tough luck, friend.

And the other one? The superanxious, fearful, no-fun Neanderthal?

Well, that Neanderthal goes back to camp.

And survived.

And procreated.

And then passed down those shitty, anxious, threat-scanning genes to all of us.

Bummer.

We are literally wired, through natural selection, to focus more on what could go *wrong* rather than what could go *right*.

The ancestors who had all the genes we want for ease of happiness—the ones who were superpositive, who trusted everyone, were totally fearless, and walked around thinking, "Oh, let me pet that big, fluffy bear over there!"—well, they died very quickly.

The ones who survived were the ones who could stand in a corner and think, "*That* could go wrong, and that could go wrong, and that could go wrong… so, I'm gonna stay right here, where it's safe, and only talk to these few people that I know."

This is the genetic disposition we've been handed. It's why you can have a hundred great things going on in your life, but if *one* bad thing happens, it's all you can focus on. Psychologist and researcher Dr. Rick Hanson at UC Berkeley says our brain is like Velcro for the negative and Teflon for the positive.

Unfortunately, this negativity bias carries over to our internal ruminative patterns, causing us to beat ourselves up rather than build ourselves up. We're more likely to survive with a thought pattern of "Don't screw this up again, idiot!" than "It's okay, don't worry, you're doing great." But this is *not* more likely to make us fulfilled.

There is good news, though. We can retrain our negativity bias to be a bit more positive. In fact, the practices we've been doing in this book help relax this instinctive pattern. We can take it a step further, though, and intentionally train ourselves to appreciate the good.

The following are three strategies you can use to retrain this pattern of mind, cultivate more positive emotion, and develop self-love.

1. POSITIVE SAVORING

This first one is so straightforward and simple that we often completely neglect it. It's essentially practicing "feeling good."

You can practice right now. What is something that makes you happy? A person, a thing, an event, a memory? Bring to mind *anything* that elicits a positive emotion, like gratitude, joy, excitement, peace, love.

As you start to reflect on it, you might feel a subtle sensation or shift in your body. Focus your attention there, and see if you can enhance that positive feeling. What do you need to reflect on to make the feeling bigger and more vivid?

Let yourself savor and absorb the positive feeling like a sponge taking in water. You're just letting it sink in.

How does it feel? If you don't feel much, don't worry, this can take some time. Instead of trying to create the positive experience, you can wait until you have one, and then practice savoring it—expanding the positive feeling and deepening into it.

When you do this, you're training your brain to experience, appreciate, and nurture positive experiences so they don't quickly run off like water on a Teflon pan. This strategy might seem counter to what we discussed in the *allowing* chapter, when I pointed out the perils of constantly "grasping" for pleasant experiences. However, this is different.

There is a difference between *pleasure* and *positive emotion*. Although they both make us feel good, Barbara Fredrickson's research at UNC Chapel Hill shows that pleasure causes us to narrow our attention, drawing us inward to our desires and needs. Positive emotion, on the other hand —like joy, gratitude, enthusiasm—broadens our attention, causing us to expand and open up. Those who experience more positive emotion tend to be more resilient, optimistic, and accepting. This is in alignment with what we're cultivating in presence. And we can bring a savoring mentality to *pleasure*, too. Say you're eating something delicious or receiving a sensual touch on your skin. Instead of grasping at

it obsessively, you can fully allow yourself to feel it and actually generate a positive emotion from it.

At the end of the day, this is about training your mind to fully experience the good that is in your life, and maybe even create a little more. We don't need to go through life missing all the wonderful things it has to offer.

2. FOCUS ON YOUR STRENGTHS

Have you heard of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a.k.a. the *DSM*? It's basically what it sounds like—a tool to assess and diagnose mental disorders. Although it certainly has its limitations, it is also considered one of the great advancements psychology has made in understanding and treating disorders.

Did you know that there is *also* an assessment tool to discover what your top strengths and virtues are?

It's called the VIA Character Strengths Test, and you can take the free questionnaires at http://www.viacharacter.org/www/. It will help you identify your top strengths from a list of twenty-four strengths valued across cultures. They include things like love of learning, bravery, leadership, and forgiveness.

For one, it just feels good to have someone (or something) tell you what your strengths and virtues are. It feels a lot better than a tool that tells you everything that's maybe *not* great about you.

Above and beyond that, research shows that those who *use* and *focus* on their strengths in their day-to-day lives are happier, less depressed, and report higher quality of life.

Once you figure out your top five strengths, you can choose one to focus on throughout the day. Explore where it shows up, how you might be able to employ it in conversations and tasks, and you can even bring it into your meditation practice!

3. LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION

Loving-kindness meditation is an ancient Buddhist practice, often practiced alongside, and as a supplement to, mindfulness meditation. Unlike mindfulness, it involves reciting a series of phrases to cultivate acceptance, care, and kindness to yourself and to others, as well as the larger world around us. It's a powerful practice for developing self-love (befriending yourself), nurturing the positive, and also can help in simply feeling calmer, warmer, and steadier in ourselves.

Dr. Barbara Fredrickson has been studying the effects of loving-kindness meditation for the last decade. Her research consistently shows that the practice leads to increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions.

The practice is simple. Either sitting, lying down, or walking (with your eyes open), you repeat the following phrases:

May I be happy

May I be safe

May I be healthy

May I live with ease

Recite the phrases at a cadence that feels right to you (and as slow as you'd like). It may be helpful to place two hands on your heart, or one hand on your heart and the other on your belly, to elicit a gentle and compassionate quality of heart.

Keep in mind that the phrases themselves are not what's important; rather, it's associating into the feeling and intention behind the words. In fact, I suggest waiting until you feel *something* related to each phrase—a warmth, softness, or ease—before moving onto the next. You can change the language however you'd like to help the phrase resonate. Perhaps it's "May I be able to trust myself" or "May I experience happiness in this moment regardless of what is going on in my life."

Do you remember Naomi from Chapter 2? The woman in

the birthday circle who felt like she had “concrete slabs” around her heart? Well, I saw Naomi at a different retreat a year after that experience and I hardly recognized her. She was calm, easeful, and profoundly grounded in herself. I literally could not believe this was the same person from a year ago.

I shared with her how taken aback I was, and she told me she had been practicing loving-kindness meditation for five to ten minutes every day since our last retreat, and only missed five days in the last year.

(!!!)

Her transformation is a testament to the transformative power of this practice, and how it can be particularly powerful if you’ve endured significant hardship, hurt, and trauma.

Loving-kindness can also be offered outwardly to other people; however, being able to first offer loving-kindness to yourself is important for being able to genuinely, freely, and abundantly offer it to others, a point that often gets overlooked in the meditation community.

You can do a loving-kindness practice at the beginning or end of your normal meditation practice, or as a separate practice altogether. If you’d like to use a guided recording, for either loving-kindness to yourself or to others, you can find those in the online resources, www.stopmissingyourlife.com/resources.

LIVING IN ALIGNMENT

In the context of becoming our own best friend, we’re going to have trouble liking and respecting ourselves if we’re not living in alignment with our personal ethics and values. The depth of how true this is wasn’t clear to me until after my second month in Burma.

Day 63 Journal Entry: Remorse

The last few days have been rough. I’m going through something

important, but it's not fun.

The other day I started to feel an intrinsic desire to help others; a deep compassion for all beings. It was more pure than anything I had experienced before, like my heart had burst open. Almost immediately accompanying this feeling, though, was a thought that said, "This isn't who you really are. This is just temporary because you're meditating this much."

Wow.

That hit me hard. It illuminated an apparent subconscious belief I have about myself that I'm not a good person. This feeling of compassion is genuine, but my mind won't let me experience it that way.

It has sparked a several day pain vortex of reliving past mistakes, shames, and remorse. I had heard about monks going through this "purification of remorse" in their practice, sometimes weeks at a time, but I didn't think it was something I would endure—I consider myself to be a fairly good person.

I have no control over it. The thoughts, beliefs, and memories flood my mind—ranging from little things like the time I pretended to trip and fall on the front lawn when I was 10, feigning a cry so that Keelan [my brother] would have to do the chores (which he graciously did because he felt bad for me) to bigger things I can't yet write on paper; there's too much shame.

I told Sayadaw, and he said it's part of the process of my mind purifying itself and will eventually pass. As our mind gets more peaceful, loving, and compassionate, he said, it becomes very sensitive to "impurities"—past and present—and wishes to clear or avoid them. "Your mind is cleaning its basement."

He told me this is why morality is part of the practice. It keeps the mind clean and at ease. When we follow our ethics, we don't have remorse. With nonremorse, we experience tranquility. With tranquility, there is happiness.

For the first time, I have a respect for ethics as something that serves not only the happiness of others, but also my own happiness.

After a week of this internal torture, something shifted. The pain softened into forgiveness, self-compassion, and an

appreciation for the complexity of being human. I felt lighter, freer, and inspired to live in alignment with my heart. To this day, I regularly check-in with myself to make sure my thoughts and behaviors are congruent with the person I most want to be.

For many people I know and work with, the idea of ethics invokes a set of restrictive moral principles that one must adhere to in order to be considered a "good person." They're usually not, however, thought about in relationship to our own happiness.

I think that's a loss. The more we come to see our own happiness is connected with the happiness of others, the more naturally inspired we will be to take care of others and bring goodness into the world.

Living in alignment with our moral principles and personal ethics (or, more simply, what we might consider our "heart") permits us to go to sleep at the end of the day, with nonremorse and peace, knowing our choices and actions are in harmony with who we most respect ourselves to be. There will be no need to suppress, numb, or run from ourselves, permitting us to be more present to the totality of ourselves and our lives.

Of course, the question of "what is ethical" is big, and not one I'm prepared to tackle in this book. Our societal, religious, and cultural heritage has provided most of us with a sense of what is morally right. Although there are certainly examples of how that has gone astray—where one person's ethics causes harm to another—I do believe that, on the whole, when we align ourselves with the thoughts and behaviors that we associate with being a "good" person, it leads to better outcomes for others and the world.

My encouragement is to create a list of ethical principles, morals, or values that feel particularly meaningful to you, and then practice living in alignment with them. It's a list you can build out over time, but at least right now while you're reading, find one thing you'd like to hold as an ethical

standard. It could be as simple as listening to other people's perspectives before offering your own. Or not taking the last piece of food during a community meal. Or not gossiping about people behind their back.

As you practice making decisions and choosing behaviors in alignment with these principles, try to feel the joy and ease it brings once you do. This will provide many opportunities to nourish your heart and develop a greater appreciation and respect for who you see yourself to be.

CHAPTER 10

COMMITMENT TO CONNECTION

Throughout this book, the focus has been on *you*—how to embrace and hold more of *yourself* and *your* moments; how to change *your* patterns, to become *your* own best friend, and to be more present to *your* life.

We examined how the traumas of life create walls that keep us bound inside a pain box. We established safety as an essential prerequisite to be more open to the totality of who we are and thus experience more of what our lives can offer. We explored the four pillars of presence using the acronym FACE (focus, allowing, curiosity, embodiment) and how developing these pillars creates a foundation of safety to be ourselves and experience more of our lives. We looked at our well-worn cow paths that we walk, and how to let go of them in order to create new patterns of behavior. And finally, we talked about how to become our own best friend by integrating our shadow parts and nurturing the positive and what we most love about ourselves.

We did all this work to be open and present to more of our life.

But our life is not lived in isolation. It is lived with and in connection to others, and fundamental to being present to our life is being present to our life as it connects with others.

Building our skills to (1) connect with ourselves, (2) hold space for ourselves to experience all that we experience, and (3) understand our needs and boundaries, enriches our ability to bring presence into our relationship with others.

But achieving presence in our relationships can get a little complicated. Being human is both a joy and a challenge. Being human living among other humans is even more of a joy and a challenge. When I think back to the best moments of my life, they usually involve other people—falling in love, Christmas Eve with my family, going on camping trips. When I think back to some of the worst moments of my life, they, too, usually involve other people—feeling betrayed, going through a breakup, being socially isolated.

Have you ever gone home for a holiday and found all your personal growth went out the window? Relationships are complicated and require some additional skills and a lot (a lot!) of practice.

In a relationship, you have to contend with someone else besides you—whether that's a family member, your romantic partner, a colleague, or a conversation with a stranger in line at a coffee shop. *Relating* to another person means engaging with their personality, needs, cow paths, triggers, pain, likes, dislikes; just as you engaged with your own. Because so much of what we feel and believe about ourselves is created through our history of interactions with others, there are certain triggers, insecurities, vulnerabilities, and dimensions of ourselves that will *only* come to the surface in relationship with another person. Consequently, just as so many of our wounds, hurts, and insecurities have their origins in our relationships with other people, we may only be able to work through some of those things in our relationships and connections with other people.

This chapter will help us take what we've learned so far and bring it to where many would say it matters the most: our relationships and connection with others.

INTIMACY—BEYOND SEX AND ROMANCE

When you hear the word *intimacy*, what comes to mind?

The bedroom?

Passionate kissing?

Sex?

Although intimacy is often associated with romance, the intimacy I'm referring to can be experienced just as much in a platonic friendship or close family relationship as it can in a romantic partnership. It's less about physical or sexual connection, and more about being seen and accepted.

That's how I define intimacy: *The experience that emerges in moments when you feel truly seen and accepted.*

This might seem straightforward, but let's narrow in on one word in that definition: "*you*"—moments when "*you*" feel seen and accepted. Who is this "*you*"? As we've discussed at length, there are many different parts to who we perceive ourselves to be. We have parts that are happy, loving, outgoing, and playful, and other parts that are insecure, subdued, anxious, and sad.

Certain parts we may allow to be seen, and other parts… well, the thought of revealing them makes us break out in a sweat.

Since "you" have different layers, the degree to which you experience intimacy with another can have different layers. To get to those *deeper* layers of intimacy with others requires you to feel that more parts of you, the *deeper* parts, are seen and accepted.

You've probably realized that we've been doing this for the entire book—developing an intimacy with ourselves. The practices, conversations, and meditations have been helping you make space for more of who you are, including those parts surrounded by shame and judgment. As we've explored, not

being present to, or deliberately suppressing parts of ourselves, often leads us to further disconnect, numb, speak partial truths, and not feel at ease. As we give these parts space to surface in our awareness, they get the chance to be heard, touched, and then either be let go or reintegrated into the rest of who we are. The very act of bringing these parts to the surface, although possibly painful at first, is ultimately freeing and empowering, because we're no longer diminished from trying to hide from them. It can be like a weight is lifted from our shoulders. We feel more at ease in our own skin, secure in ourselves, and settled.

The same effect happens in a relationship. There's often so much that we're holding back of ourselves that it's impossible to feel a deep connection with someone. Once we bring more of ourselves *into* the relationship, there is an opening, allowing for a deeper sense of "seeing" one another.

While it's vulnerable work to open to the many dimensions of who we are and surrender more of ourselves into a relationship, there's a reward:

The depth of intimacy you can experience with yourself is directly related to the depth of intimacy you can experience with another person.

BUT IF YOU KNEW THE *REAL* ME…

I once worked with a couple, Chris and Jarrod.

They loved each other, but Jarrod didn't feel that he could fully surrender to Chris's love. Chris would tell Jarrod that he loved him, but in the back of his mind, Jarrod would think, "Well, if you knew who I *really* was, you wouldn't love me."

When Jarrod first shared this with me and Chris in our session, I could feel Chris bracing for something. I imagined his inner rumination to be:

"What does he mean I don't know who he really *is?"*

"Does Jarrod have some separate life? "

"Has he been cheating on me?"

"Is he an accountant by day and an assassin by night?"

I invited Jarrod to elaborate on this. Who did he perceive himself to *really* be that Chris didn't know?

Jarrod reflected with a peculiar look on his face. It was as if this was the first time he asked himself that question. We waited for a minute in silence as Jarrod thought about it.

Nothing came up.

He couldn't find *anything* that Chris didn't already know about him. There was no secret past or love affair. There was just this sense that Chris didn't know the *real* him, with no hints of what separated the Jarrod that Chris knew from the "Real Jarrod."

Clearly, Jarrod had some perceptions of himself that even *he* wasn't aware of, and these perceptions were subconsciously blocking his ability to believe and accept that Chris could actually love him.

This is where intimacy gets interesting. *You* play an equal, if not greater, part in your experience of intimacy as the person with whom you're trying to experience intimacy. *You* are the gatekeeper. It doesn't matter how much someone says they love, appreciate, and enjoy being with you; if you don't believe it at your core, they're just words that don't get through.

Jarrod and I did some one-on-one work over the next couple months to get in touch with this block.

A lot of interesting stuff came up. The biggest thing was the shame he still felt about being a gay man. Having come out as a teenager, he dealt with years of discrimination, name-calling, and feeling "less than" because of his sexual orientation. Even his parents thought he needed to be "fixed." It was not an easy childhood.

Despite now being in a healthy relationship with a

wonderful man (Chris) and living in a community of friends who love him, he still had an internalized perception of himself as "broken," which was so deep that he didn't even know why he felt that way.

Do you see why he wouldn't be able to experience a deeper intimacy with Chris?

In Jarrod's mind, there's a part of him that is broken, a part that Chris doesn't know about. So, when Chris says *I love you*, it only holds so much weight, because it's not accounting for the part that Chris believes is most unlovable—the part of him that is broken.

The craziness of it all is that there was no way for Jarrod to share this part of himself because he didn't even know about it! He hadn't yet done the work to get in touch with it, to create an intimacy with himself.

Once Jarrod was able to see and make space for this part in his *own* awareness, he could reveal more of it to Chris, bringing it to their shared awareness. He was able to share how he still feels "broken" on some level, and how he was afraid that if Chris saw that insecure part, he would reject him.

When Jarrod felt that Chris was able to see him in the same way *he* saw himself (the good parts and the broken parts), and that Chris *still* loved and accepted him, he was much better able to let that love in. Although it took some time, as well as effort on Jarrod's part to continue to bring compassion to this "broken" part of himself, their relationship deepened in a really powerful way.

As we uncover and make space for more of ourselves in our *own* awareness, we have the opportunity to bring those parts into our connection with others. This could be as straightforward as putting voice to these parts (as Jarrod did with Chris), or actually allowing ourselves to embody these parts (perhaps expressing anger or fear when we might typically suppress these emotions).

To do this isn't easy. And there's no promise that we won't

be rejected. If the person is not able to accept us in the embodiment of our full self, then it might not be the right relationship. Or we may need to evaluate how important it feels for the deeper parts of us to be seen and accepted by this person.

However, what's always struck me in my experience with intimacy is that often the thing that's getting in the way of being close with someone is the thing that when shared, actually deepens my connection with that person.

We might think, "Let me be really nice and not show them my edgy side" or "I'll spare them from my negative relationship with my mother," trying to preserve a sense of closeness by not sharing certain aspects of ourselves. However, real connection doesn't happen at the level of "you're great, I'm great, let's be great together." That's just boosting each other's egos, and it holds the same fragility as you only loving yourself when you're at your best. Real connection is about having the permission to be human with one another. When you give yourself that permission, you also give the other person that permission. At the heart of what we're looking for is a feeling that, on the deepest level, we are "*okay.*"

Take some time to journal or reflect on the following questions.

What parts of yourself do you hold back from other people?

What do you fear would happen if you brought more of yourself into the connection?

Do you ever have the sense that someone only sees and accepts a portion of who you are, or a certain version of you?

What parts of you do you feel they don't see and accept?

Who in your life do you feel sees and accepts the most of who you are? What's your relationship like with them? Is there anything you can learn from this relationship to help deepen your other relationships?

INTIMACY TAKES TIME

Now, before you start sharing all of these parts of yourself with another person, it's important to remember that intimacy is something we gradually deepen into in our relationships with other people. You do not need to share your darkest secrets on your first Tinder date, nor does your small talk with the stranger at the coffee shop have to start with, "So, do you want to hear about my shadow parts?" (That sounds creepy even within the context of this book.) In most cases, you'll just freak people out, and then reinforce for yourself the idea that being vulnerable doesn't work and people don't accept you as you are.

Without more understanding and context of who you are, sharing a big insecurity or trauma or confession can sometimes overtake someone's initial impression of you. If this is one of the first things they see, they don't have the understanding and context of all the other parts of you. When trust, sharing, and comfort build in a relationship—romantic, platonic, family, or otherwise—it becomes safer and more appropriate to reveal more parts of yourself. These parts can then be appreciated as part of the larger "you." It shows the other person that they're important enough to share your full self, thus giving them a similar freedom. Assuming you're there to reciprocate the gift!

And let's be clear, you're not going to have the same level of intimacy with *everyone*, nor should that be the goal. There are some people in our lives with whom we'll never share our biggest fears and struggles, and we can still be very close with them. In fact, we may reserve the "deeper stuff" for one or two people, and those relationships often build over a lifetime.

Sure, there are settings (e.g., therapy) and practices (we'll discuss one shortly) that facilitate more honest sharing and revealing more quickly and deliberately, but in general, these things deepen in their own time and to different degrees with different people.

I sometimes have very meaningful connections with people

I've just met. There's a kinship, or a sense of "seeing" one another—connecting over what we have in common, what is positive in our lives, shared struggles and frustration, or shared interests. So, this can sometimes happen very quickly!

If it's the first interaction, and we believe the other person sees us through and through and accepts us as we are, we'll feel an extraordinary intimacy. If we've been together for fifty years, but we feel this person only knows a small piece of us, we'll feel less intimacy. Our sense of intimacy comes back to our own perception of ourselves and what we believe another individual sees in us. The more of ourselves we feel is seen and accepted by another person (and the more *they* feel seen and accepted), the deeper our connection with them will be. In summary, we can deepen intimacy by intentionally bringing more parts of ourselves into a relationship.

Next, I will offer you an overview of one practice that can help facilitate this process.

CIRCLING—A RELATIONAL MEDITATION PRACTICE

I'm always searching for the most effective strategies to aid in my personal and spiritual growth, as well as my teaching.

It's why I've done multiple different mindfulness teacher trainings, lived as a Buddhist monk, trained in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), Ericksonian hypnosis, trauma studies, health coaching, positive psychology, and many other "personal development" modalities.

I've come to believe that any "method" is only as good as the time you invest in it, and each also has its limitations. I try to give myself enough exposure to an idea to get a sense if it's worth pursuing more deeply, and I usually end up taking bits and pieces from all different modalities, integrating them into my worldview and teachings.

Every once in a while, though, I come across something that feels particularly special and deep, worth investing into much more of my time and energy.

This is what meditation was (and continues to be) for me.

And recently, something else joined the ranks: circling.

Circling is a relational meditation practice that involves bringing the same quality of presence we've been cultivating throughout this book into connection with another person. In traditional meditation, we practice being curious about, accepting of, and nonjudgmental toward our experience. Circling is the same thing, just with another person. Instead of only focusing on my experience, I'm also focusing on the experience of another person. Instead of only being curious what it's like to be me, I'm also being curious what it's like to be them. And instead of keeping my experience quietly to myself, I allow it to be shared with the other person as it's happening in real time.

As I highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, our lives are not lived in isolation; they are lived with and in connection to others. Since so many of our life's joys and pains are the result of our ability to navigate and deepen these connections, it's important we learn the skills for how to do that.

There are many ways and methods to develop these skills, and I offer circling as one practice that has been particularly meaningful and helpful to me (and my students).

HOW TO PRACTICE CIRCLING

FINDING A CIRCLING PARTNER

The formal practice of circling can be done with a friend, family member, child, loved one, or whoever else. It can be a simple but powerful way to deepen a connection with someone you know well, or it can be done with a total stranger.

Some people may be resistant to this practice (including partners). I don't recommend forcing it on anyone, in the same

way I don't recommend forcing meditation on anyone.

If you're not able or comfortable doing this in person, you can circle online with people from around the world (one-on-one or in groups) via video conference. It's surprisingly powerful, even through the digital interface. One platform I recommend is CircleAnywhere (https://circleany where.com/) hosted by Circling Europe, the organization through which I did my training. It has intro sessions a few times a month describing the practice and how to use the platform. Maybe I'll see you on there.

If you do this in person, here are the basic instructions to start the practice (you can also use the guided circling recording in the online resources, www.stopmissingyourlife.com/resources, which will walk you through these same steps). Keep in mind that although circling typically involves eye contact and sometimes voicing things you can "see," there are many ways to explore being in connection with someone. If you or the person you're circling with have a visual impairment, please feel free to skip steps that involve "seeing" or simply adapt them for another sense. The practice of circling can be experienced just as beautifully and profoundly with the eyes closed.

PRACTICING CIRCLING

1. Setting up: Face each other, either by sitting in chairs or sitting on the ground. Set a timer for a designated amount of time (you'd be surprised how fast 20 minutes can go once you settle in), and designate one person as the guide who will prompt the various transitions through the session.

2. Settling in: To start, each of you can close your eyes for a minute or so, connecting to your own breath and bodies. Use this as an opportunity to get in touch with your personal boundaries—your space versus the other person's space—before connecting with the other person. This will help you stay connected to yourself while in connection with the other person.

3. Being in connection: When you're ready, the guide can prompt you to open your eyes, and you can make eye contact with the other, spending a few minutes in silence just seeing this person and settling into their presence. Your tendency may be to blur your vision, look away, or not make direct eye contact, and that's okay. This kind of eye contact can feel intense in the beginning of circling, but you'll most likely find it gets easier as you go, and you'll actually start to crave this deeper presence. Give it a few minutes, and practice relaxing into the discomfort.

4. Neutral observations: After a few minutes, the guide can announce that you'll begin neutral observations. At this point, you'll bring your voices into the circle, but only to name objective facts. You might say "I notice your shirt is blue," or "I notice your hands are on your lap," or "I notice your eyes blinking." The idea is to share observations of the other person and to hear observations about yourself as a simple way of acknowledging, "I see you, and you see me."

Saying "You look happy/sad/bored/tired" is not naming an objective fact; these are interpretations. Stay at the most true, unarguable layer of experience. You do not need to alternate sharing, although it often unfolds that way, and the cadence can be as slow as it wants to be.

5. Sensations: After a few minutes of neutral observations, the guide can announce that you'll move to naming sensations. To do this, you simply speak what you feel in *your* body. "There is tightness in my jaw," or "I feel a gripping in my belly," or "I feel ease in my eyes." You may be surprised at your tendency to disconnect from your body when connecting with another person (at least I was), so this is a great way to practice staying embodied in your relationships.

6. Imaginings: After a few minutes of stating sensations, the guide can announce that you'll move to imaginings. This is where it can get more interesting, because you'll be entering into the other person's world by imagining what they're experiencing and then sharing it with them—"I imagine this is uncomfortable for you right now" or "I noticed your breathing

got deeper and I imagine you just relaxed" or "I notice your eyes look soft and I imagine you're feeling sad about something." This is basically just putting to words what we usually do behind the curtains of our minds. We imagine what other people are thinking, what their intentions are, whether they like us or not. Rarely do we share these imaginings, let alone check with the other person to know if they're accurate. Circling is a structured practice to explore bringing this inner story out into the open so the other person has the opportunity to confirm, disconfirm, or adjust to make it more aligned with their truth. In doing so, you receive direct feedback on the story you're creating about the other person and can come to a better understanding of what they're *actually* thinking and feeling. It's often enlightening to see how off we are about what we imagine is going on in another person's mind.

7. Free flow. After a few minutes of imaginings, the guide can announce that you'll move into free flow. In this last stage, you're welcome to be in the space however you'd like. You can name what's coming up in your experience—sensations, thoughts, emotions, imaginings, or otherwise. You can share whatever is on your mind. Or you can just stay in silence. If you're working through something difficult with this person, this is an opportunity to explore discussing that while staying in connection.

This free-flow stage is purely an opportunity to be in relationship to this person with deep presence. One recommendation I'll make is to keep the free flow at a slower pace. If we jump right into conversational speed, we can lose touch with the subtleties of our experience, defaulting back into conditioned patterns of interacting.

8. Close the circle: After a few minutes of free flow (or when the bell goes off), the guide can announce that you'll close your eyes again. Spend a minute or so reconnecting with yourself before opening your eyes. Close the circle however you'd like—a hug, a handshake, namaste—and then take some time to debrief how it was for you.

The following are a few considerations about the practice

and what might come up.

TIME

You're welcome to adjust the length of time to fit whatever your needs are—circles can be a few minutes or over an hour. I usually aim for at least thirty minutes as this gives a good amount of space and time for each layer of the sequence (again, you may be surprised how fast this can feel in a circling context).

EYE CONTACT

The circle is set up to promote eye contact, but you're always welcome to close your eyes or look elsewhere.

In the beginning, sustained eye contact can feel uncomfortable. Rarely do we connect in this way, so it can feel vulnerable, as if the other person is really "seeing you." If "being seen" feels particularly uncomfortable, you might ask yourself what you fear the other person would see if they *really* saw you. And you can take it a step further by bringing it into the circle, "The eye contact makes me nervous and it feels uncomfortable" and just notice what it's like to name it out loud, rather than letting it hide inside of you. Over time, we begin to relax into this new way of relating, letting us more deeply sense and connect with the other person.

I often find that when I first make eye contact with someone—in circling and in day-to-day interactions—I lose connection with myself. It's almost like my body goes into a freeze response, and I hold my breath without realizing it. However, as I bring my attention back to my body, I start to settle in.

With all of this said, circling is *not* about intense eye contact (like a staring contest) or sharing our most shame-filled, vulnerable experiences. It's about learning to stay in connection and surrendering to the different layers of truth that arise, which may include, "I don't want to make eye contact right now."

THIS ISN'T THERAPY

Anything that is brought into the circle is not meant to be "fixed." It's simply an opportunity for you to explore how it impacts you and potentially share that impact. Notice if you find yourself going into therapist mode, trying to help or solve the other's problems.

For instance, if someone says "I'm feeling sad right now," you might say "I feel sad hearing that," or "I get curious where that sadness is coming from," or "I notice a desire in me to try to help you when you say that." This is different than responding "you don't need to be sad" or "what if you focused your attention on something positive?" or "maybe we should stop the circle." Do you hear the distinction? In the first, you're owning your experience; in the second, there's a subtle agenda to change the experience and/or a perception that it's "wrong." You're not trying to get anywhere or fix anything; you're simply dropping more deeply into what has arisen and the impact it has on you. If you *do* find yourself trying to get somewhere, you can voice that in the circle. In this way, you're still honoring the truth of what arises, letting it take you deeper into the present rather than away from the present.

Naomi's story in Chapter 2 is *not* a good model for the kind of circling you'll be doing. Naomi had a particular intention coming into that retreat, which was to be more comfortable "being seen," and we discussed this at length prior to her attending. If you remember what happened, I encouraged her to be with this discomfort (if it felt safe for her), bringing her attention back to the vulnerability of being seen each time she turned away. That circle had a flavor of coaching, and it's different than the circling I've described above.

Circling may not feel like a practice you're interested in or comfortable with yet. That's okay. You can experiment with bringing deeper presence into your relationships in your own way and know that the formal circling practice is here when you're ready.

THE HIGHEST FORM OF CONNECTION

It was my 165th day in the monastery. The day began like any other day, with a half hour of walking meditation at 2:30 a.m., followed by an hour and a half of sitting meditation.

For the last month, I had been meditating alone in my room for about twenty hours per day, sleeping for two, and only leaving for meals at 5:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. This was at the encouragement of my teacher, who thought my practice could deepen if I was more isolated (like a hermit).

My concentration and awareness had been strong, but something felt different on this day. It was as if my mind couldn't *not* be present; my focus was glued to wherever my attention went. Even if I tried to think about something, my mind wouldn't let me. It was the first time I had experienced anything like this.

At 5:10 a.m., I grabbed my flashlight from the front left corner of my dresser and made the twenty-minute walk to the dining hall. Each step felt like my foot was warping the ground beneath me, as if pressing into a trampoline. The boundaries of my body felt like they were blending with the boundaries of the physical world.

My concentration was still locked into the present moment, unable to go anywhere else.

I expected this all to change during breakfast, which was usually my most distracted time of day and when my concentration was most weak. But it didn't. In fact, things only got stranger.

My sensory experience was magnified—colors were brighter, sounds seemed louder, and my body felt like it was vibrating. Everything was clear and distinct.

I left breakfast in a state of awe, but I was also confused. "What's happening right now?" I thought.

On my walk back, I felt pulled to stop and be still, so I sat down on the edge of a bridge that overlooked a pond in the monastery.

As soon as I looked out into the distance, my eyes fixated on a single tree across the water. Again, it felt as though I couldn't look anywhere else.

For a few moments, my mind was more silent, clear, and calm than it had ever been.

Suddenly, an intense energy started pulsing through my body. It was disconcerting. The boundaries of my body felt like they were expanding and contracting. I felt fear, but it was coupled with a deep trust.

I surrendered to it, and poof.

Silence. Stillness. Clarity.

I completely disappeared.

My body was still there. There was a seeing of the pond, the sound of the birds, the smell of the air, but no trace of "Cory." It was oneness. Completeness. Perfection. Wholeness. And in that space was compassion and love.

The experience lasted only for ten seconds before starting to fade, leading back to a familiar sense of "Cory." But I knew I'd never be able to see myself, or my life, in the same way as before that moment. And that has held true.

A chapter on connection would not be complete without addressing this deeper form of connection that is inherent to who we are.

Albert Einstein said:

> A human being is part of the whole, called by us "Universe"; a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.
>
> This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest us.

> Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

So much of what we've been doing in this book has been about making space for *yourself* in the world—to let the world in, and to let the world experience you. This is no small task. It's a declaration of your right to be here, to be human, and to experience this human life in its fullness. It's the ultimate form of feeling safe to be who you are.

But there's an interesting thing that happens when we feel safe enough to be our full selves. We actually start to feel safe enough to *let go* of ourselves, what I like to call *spiritual safety*, allowing us to walk through the final gate to the deepest presence, one unbound by our perception of separateness.

As Einstein said, the human being is part of a whole, but we experience ourselves as separate; he calls it an optical delusion.

To truly welcome and embrace our *full* selves is to welcome and embrace the whole. Our full self is not simply our personal inner world—our thoughts, emotions, sensations. It's all of that and everything else. The fuel that creates separation between us and everything else, though, is largely made of our struggle against ourselves.

The more we embrace ourselves on the deepest level, the more we start to embrace the whole, merging with our most fundamental nature, and accessing the highest form of connection.

CHAPTER 11

TIME, TECHNOLOGY, AND DAY-TO-DAY PRESENCE

My biggest hope is that you'll read this book and start to implement the ideas and practices into your life. My biggest fear is that you'll read this book, be inspired, and never make any change. I want to do as much as possible to reduce the possibility of the latter.

Ever since I started teaching, my mission has been to create a bridge for people who would not normally be receptive to this kind of work, and in so doing, make it as accessible, usable, and practical as possible. So, let's talk about the details of how you'll actually integrate this into your life.

As I've alluded to, you have access to ample resources to support you on this journey, www.stopmissingyourlife.com/resources, which includes various meditations, reflections, prompts, and supplementary lessons related to the book. If you haven't already done so, I highly recommend reviewing these as a next step once you've finished this book.

It's also important to discuss what these teachings and practices can look like in the rest of your life, independent of these resources. Not only do I want you to feel autonomous and self-sufficient in practicing these skills (not needing to depend solely on my guidance your entire life), but I also want you to feel free to make your practice your own.

There are two forms of practice: formal and informal. Formal practice is a dedicated period of time devoted to meditation, circling, yoga, or any structured activity designed to deepen presence. Informal practice is how you bring the qualities of presence into your day-to-day life, outside of formal practice. The two feed off one another—the more you do formal practice, the more inclined you are to do informal practice; the more you do informal practice, the stronger your formal practice becomes—and I believe both are equally important to enjoying your life.

In this chapter, we'll explore the nuances and practicalities of formal and informal practice, as well as how we develop presence in a world where technology consumes our attention.

FORMAL PRACTICE

One of the most important things you can do for presence is maintain a steady meditation practice. When you do, you are literally training your ability to stay in, be with, and hold more of the present moment. And yet, one of the hardest things for people to do seems to be integrating and sustaining a meditation practice in their life. I'll give you some of my best tips for how to think this through and tailor a meditation practice in a way that's inspiring and sustainable (and for the record, those two go hand in hand).

THE MAGIC OF ONE MINUTE

For most people, the biggest hindrance to meditation is time. They want to start, but they don't know how to fit in. If you fall in that camp, here's my suggestion: start with one minute.

Why one minute?

It's very hard to argue yourself out of doing one minute of anything. If you tell me you don't have one minute, we really need to evaluate what's going on in your life.

The beauty of committing to one minute is that we eliminate the biggest barrier to entry—time.

Here's how it plays out:

You're going about your busy day, a reminder goes off telling you to meditate, you think about all the other things you *need* to do right now, but a voice in your head says, "Come on, it's just *one* minute; you can spare that." So, you sit down in your chair and close your eyes.

Here's where the magic happens.…

When you sit for one minute, it's usually *justttt* enough time for you to settle in, relax a bit, and think to yourself, "Ah, I could probably spare another minute."

You continue to meditate, and at the end of the second minute, you think:

"Hmm, I didn't realize how much I needed this, let me do three minutes; I'll just do three."

Three minutes go by.

"Ah, this feels kind of good, I can probably go longer; other things can wait. I'll do four."

Four minutes go by.

"I could do five, right? I mean, five minutes really isn't *that* much in the grand scheme of my day. The last four minutes went by fast, I could totally do five."

Do you see what happens?

You start arguing yourself *into* the meditation rather than arguing yourself *out* of the meditation. It's much easier to go from one minute to five minutes than zero minutes to five minutes.

This method also facilitates you *choosing* to meditate, rather than feeling like something outside of you is *making* you meditate. The reason this is so important is because, according to leading researchers on human motivation, Dr. Richard Ryan and Dr. Ed Deci, a key to staying motivated is

feeling like you have autonomy, or choice to do something—that is, feeling internally inspired to meditate rather than feeling forced to meditate. When you feel that you're in control, you're more likely to sustain the behavior over time.

The other advantage to this strategy, which I often recommend for long-term meditators who are used to setting a timer, is that when you opt in to each moment of practice—as you do when you choose to sit for "just one more minute"—you're more likely to be present with, open to, and curious about difficult experiences that may arise—a pain, an itch, lots of thoughts, etc.—because you're choosing to be there instead of waiting out a preset amount of time.

Think about the difference between being told you need to do something difficult versus choosing to do something difficult. The former will lead to gritting your teeth and waiting for it to be over. The latter, although you still may not like it, will be met with more interest and willingness. When you meditate for a set time, even though you opted into the practice, it can create a sense of "needing to do it." We eliminate that by committing to only the smallest increment of time.

And! It's important to note that if you only want to sit for one minute, *just sit for one minute.* If you start thinking, "Yeah, but the intention of this is to sit for more than one minute, I should really do that," then you've lost the magic of it, and the next time you think of doing "just one minute," you'll really be thinking "five minutes" or "ten minutes." Even if you did nothing more than one minute of meditation per day for the rest of your life, that would be a great investment of time and energy.

Worried about how you'll keep track of how long you're sitting without a set time? I've got you covered.

Download the free meditation app Insight Timer, www.insighttimer.com. You can set the meditation period for as long as you'd like (let's say, one hour) and then set interval bells that will ring every minute. After every bell, you know a

minute has gone by. Only want to sit for one bell? Great. Three? Go for it. Twenty? Game on.

Make sense?

Cool, because my next suggestion for sustaining a meditation practice is the complete opposite.

MEDITATE *MORE* THAN YOU THINK YOU CAN

In 2017, I watched a documentary called *Walk with Me* about the famous Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. It was beautifully produced and had me in tears. It opened the part of my heart that will always hold a special place for monastic life.

The documentary reinspired me to deepen my meditation practice. I wanted to see just how much I could bring meditation into my life outside of a retreat setting, so I went from doing thirty minutes a day to doing three hours.

It was a huge jump up in time commitment, but the impact of it blew me away.

In my day-to-day life, I felt so much more grounded, peaceful, connected, loving, focused, and, believe it or not, productive. I was getting *more* work done by taking an extra few hours out of my day to meditate, and was less drawn to wasting time on my phone and social media. I even cut my sleep down by one hour without losing any energy (meditation can sometimes substitute for some sleep once concentration deepens). I appreciated my life more and really took notice of how much I had still been living on autopilot. I felt more connected to my spirituality, I was less triggered by mundane things, and people seemed drawn to my presence (which was much more open, calm, and inviting). In fact, after being single for a number of years, I fell in love within two weeks of increasing my meditation practice (you can ask me about that later). Not only was I feeling better, but all of these positive things started to happen in my life. The more I saw all of these benefits, the more my meditation practice became a top priority.

The reason I share this is because another big reason people don't meditate is because it's simply not a priority. They've tried doing a few minutes, they feel a little bit better, but the impact is not perceived as substantial enough to continue. When you commit *more* time to the practice, you give the meditation an opportunity to show its power; you really start to see what it means to deepen into presence.

What if you became a more compassionate person? What if you became a better listener? What if things that used to bother you passed much more quickly leaving you feeling less stressed and more at ease? What if you were truly present with your family, truly connecting with them? What if you were becoming a much happier person without anything else changing in your life?

As these things happen, *then* it becomes a priority, and all of a sudden you're able to find more time. Nobody practices meditation for the sake of becoming a good meditator. We practice because of what it will do for us.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you meditate three hours a day. That's a huge time commitment, unrealistic for most people, and is not even necessary in the early stages of your meditation journey because you'll spend most of that time mind wandering. You're much better off doing five minutes of highly focused and attentive practice than three hours of unconscious mind wandering.

What I *am* suggesting is perhaps to try doing more meditation than you think you can, while still keeping a high quality of practice. If you think you can only do two minutes, try four. If it's ten, try twenty. Thirty? Try an hour.

Sustaining a meditation practice is all about trial and error.

Do you like the idea of just one minute? Do that.

Are you inspired to try doing more meditation than you think you can? Go for it.

Would you rather just stick to the length of the guided meditations that come with this book? Great.

The best meditation practice is the one you actually do. My goal is to just give you different doorways in.

MAKE THE PRACTICE YOUR OWN

Once you decide how frequently you'd like to practice, the next questions become, what kind of practice should you do, when should you do it, can you break it up throughout the day, and so on.

In Chapter 3, I walked you through a particular meditation sequence that you can do on your own, without guidance, which will develop the core pillars of presence we've discussed. You can take that practice to the bank.

We also discussed other practices you can do—body scan, statue meditation, loving-kindness, circling, shadow integration, and more—that you may be interested in integrating into your repertoire. There is a lot of flexibility with what practices you do, when you do them, and how you fit it into your day. To help illustrate, I'll share with you how I think through, structure, and fit in my meditation practice.

I've always been an early bird, so I like to do my biggest chunk of practice in the morning (around five a.m.). After sleeping for seven hours, my body does *not* like to sit in the morning (plus, I can easily fall asleep) so I start a walking meditation outside, from my apartment down to the bay. I count my steps as I go, seeing if I can get to one hundred. If I lose my spot, I start back at one. This helps keep me concentrated on the practice rather than making it a sightseeing adventure.

I *love* my walking meditation. It's a great way to awaken my body and energize my mind. Even when it's freezing in the winter, I'll put on my favorite sweatshirt, jacket, scarf, warm gloves, and, when it's *really* cold, a full-face mask.

The walk takes between twenty-five and forty-five minutes each way, depending on my pace. I try not to freak out the neighbors by walking *too* slow down the sidewalk.

Once I get to the bay, my mind is more awake and concentrated, making it easier and more appealing to do a sitting meditation. I'll sit on a bench overlooking the water, practicing an awareness of breath and choiceless awareness meditation for ten to thirty minutes (about 50/50 for each practice).

On my walk back, I continue the practice of choiceless awareness in my walking meditation (instead of focusing on my feet, I remain aware of my body moving through space, and am acutely attuned to my surroundings instead of getting lost in thought). After ten or so minutes, I transition to loving-kindness (while walking). I start with one phrase: "May I be happy." Each time I say it, I try to *feel* the words and embody that happiness in *this* moment. Sometimes I'll say a different phrase: "May I be peaceful" or "May I be joyful," or anything I feel drawn to—"May I be loving." I see this practice as charging my heart battery.

Once I start to feel the loving-kindness energy build within me, I then extend it outward to others. I like to imagine that there's a bubble of loving-kindness energy around my body. As I walk, I imagine and feel that bubble expanding—enveloping the trees and insects along the sidewalk, then the homes and people inside, then my entire town and community, then all of New York, then the United States and the Americas, and then stretching out into the oceans—until I can no longer sense the bounds of the bubble, and it's enveloped the entire world, expanding infinitely in all directions of the universe. As I walk and emanate this loving-kindness, I'll say, "May you all be happy. May this world find peace and goodness. May people who are suffering be able to experience ease."

Even if we take the perspective that my good wishes aren't actually doing anything for anyone, the practice itself connects me with my fellow beings and the world I inhabit, and I feel much more inspired to do good in the world when I'm done.

By the time I get back to my apartment, I've done between one and two hours of practice, ready to start my day. Depending on the day, I'll try to do another hour or so of

walking or sitting meditation, breaking it up in chunks of 10, 20, 30, or however many minutes. I'll do walking meditation down the halls of my apartment, sitting meditation in my closet, on the train if I'm traveling, while lying in bed before sleep (if I can stay awake), and really any time I can fit it in. Some days I'll incorporate yoga, tai chi, a body scan, or something else, but I try to do at *least* ten to thirty minutes of focused sitting meditation, since I find a lot value in practicing stillness.

I don't always put this much time into meditation; it often depends on my travel schedule and what I have going on in my life. For instance, as I finish up this book, all of my waking hours are spent writing, so my meditation practice is usually less than fifteen minutes a day. I don't beat myself up for this —different times throughout the year and different times of life will provide different conditions for practice.

I share my practice schedule with you not to set an unrealistic standard of *how much*, but so you can see all the different forms a meditation practice can take, and the ways it can be adapted to fit your personal needs and interests. If you don't feel excited about your meditation practice in some way, you'll most likely let it go, and to me, that would be the biggest loss.

The key is to find a way to fit it into your day that works best for you. It could be morning, afternoon, evening, or a combination. It could be before the gym, after the gym, during lunch at work, or in a parking lot in your car before you come home to a chaotic household. Look at your routine and see where it fits.

Do you want to lie down and do a body scan? Go for it.

Are you drawn to the idea of creating safety for yourself? Maybe spend ten minutes in the morning lying under your covers with a warm blanket, one hand on your belly and another on your heart, feeling the goodness of taking care of yourself.

Maybe you want to connect more with your partner. Try

lying in bed, holding them while they sleep, placing one hand on their belly, feeling their breathing, syncing your breathing with theirs, and just be fully present.

Perhaps you're inspired to explore stillness, so you do some statue meditation to start the day.

Or maybe you just want your cup of coffee and there's no amount of monk-splaining that I can do to convince you otherwise. Great! Bring your coffee to your practice. Slow it down a bit. Taste each sip fully. Between lifting your coffee to your lips, become aware of your body sitting, and the breath moving your belly up and down.

This book is designed to show you the qualities of mind we're cultivating for presence. Once you understand what these are, there are myriad ways to practice. And if you're interested in using an app to meditate, I recommend Simple Habit, www.simplehabit.com, where you can find more than two hundred of my meditations.

The biggest thing to remember is that sustaining a meditation practice is a practice in itself. In the same way that we refocus our attention each time the mind wanders, even if it wanders for thirty minutes, we restart our practice again and again, even if we let it go for days, weeks, or years at a time.

INFORMAL PRACTICE

Our informal meditation practice is how we develop and embody presence outside of our formal meditation practice. Once we understand what presence is, it's easy to see many opportunities to practice being focused, allowing, curious, and embodied.

If we're caught in traffic, can we feel the tension and impatience it creates, and invite our shoulders and jaw to soften, allowing the moment to be as it is? Or we're having a conversation with our child; can we practice being fully

present and curious toward their experience? Or we get bad news about something and we notice our mind creating all of this secondary pain; can we just allow ourselves to feel the discomfort, the fear, and the hurt?

The entire day can become a meditation, really. We see all of these pockets to explore our patterns of conditioning, to practice being more focused, to fully embody our experience, to bring curiosity to our lives. The day, from start to finish, is a playground for presence.

Sometimes, we don't give much credit to the potential of these little moments throughout the day. When it comes to improving our lives, we're usually looking for things that will make *big* change for us (I'm a sucker for this, too). We're often less drawn to things that might improve our lives by a few percentage points.

However, things like burnout and overwhelm happen in the margins. You're not going to have one stressful day and go, "whelp, can't do life anymore." Instead, it's when we extend ourselves a few percentage points more than we can handle, day after day, week after week, month after month, that eventually our emotional rubber band snaps.

Similarly, the development of contentment and peace is happening in the margins. You're not going to have one big insight, breakthrough, or joyful experience and then have total bliss the rest of your life (unless you're Eckhart Tolle). Instead, we gradually get a few percentage points better at staying open to our emotions, not shutting down to discomfort, savoring what is good, connecting with other people, and being present to our life as it's happening.

All of this to say that if we can add a few percentage points of presence throughout the day—the ones that may mitigate, say, 5 to 7 percent of our stress, and nourish 5 to 7 percent of what cultivates goodness—although it might not feel significant in the moment, the long-term implications are substantial.

Throughout the book, I've offered many different strategies

you can use—Take 5, shifting "what if to what is," focus strategies, beginner's mind, savoring, and so on. I encourage using these throughout your day. When you feel a subtle positive shift, celebrate those moments. They're doing more than you might think.

GETTING WISE WITH YOUR SMARTPHONE

Ah, yes, it may have taken us a while to get here, but a conversation about presence would not be complete without addressing our technological devices. In fact, I think it would be irresponsible *not* to discuss it. This technology is so embedded into our lives—how we interact with people, how we remember things, and how we interact with ourselves—that I believe it's necessary to treat it is an extension of our humanness, similar to our thoughts.

Our thoughts can create a tremendous amount of stress for us, but it doesn't mean we should campaign against humans having brains. Instead, we must learn to relate to our thoughts in a way that promotes happiness rather than suffering.

I view this technology in the same way. As much as I might sometimes want to do away with it, or regret the energy I spend battling it, I think we're best served to explore its role in our lives. In doing so, we can learn how to best work with it, relate to it, and leverage it for good. The fact that technology makes our lives more complex just means we need to develop new skills.

Since the biggest culprit and most accessible piece of tech is our smartphones, that is what I will focus on in this section. However, you're free to use these recommendations with any technology that you have a relationship to. Think: YouTube and Netflix Autoplay.

MEDITATE WITH YOUR DEVICE

No, I'm not talking about having a meditation session where your phone sits at your side, nor am I talking about using your phone to access meditation apps. I'm talking about making your phone *the* meditation.

The following three meditations are designed to bring you face-to-face with this thing that has come to have a prominent role in our lives. We can ask ourselves, what is it like to be in relationship to this device? Does it feel good? Can we feel ease when we're without it?

Although you're welcome to make these a part of your meditation practice, their primary purpose is to act as a wake-up, and for us to be more intentional with our gadget.

MEDITATION #1: PHONE SEDUCTION

In this meditation, you're going to go on a date with your phone and learn all the ways it tries to seduce you. Here's how it works:

Step 1: Sit down at a table or desk.

Step 2: Put all other technology away. (You're on a date; you need to focus.)

Step 3: Place your phone faceup in front of you within arm's reach.

Step 4: Don't do anything. Just look at it.

(feel free to light a candle if you're feeling extra romantic)

Your only task is to become curious about whatever's going on inside you: the internal play of desire, boredom, impatience, grasping, frustration, justification, or anything else that arises. Let your mind contemplate how many Facebook or Instagram notifications you might have. Notice your desire to tweet about how cool it is that you're meditating with your phone so that you can get better at not tweeting so much.

What are all the ways that your phone tries to lure you in?

And what do these things *actually* feel like in your mind and body? Do they create ease? Tension? An expansive mind? A narrowed focus?

What do you feel in your hands? Do they feel activated? Does your mind convince you, on some nonverbal level, that if you just look at your phone, you would feel better? Do you believe that? Has that been true in the past?

Now, what is it like to watch all of these thoughts, urges, and sensations come and go without reacting to them? Is there any ease in the nonreactivity?

If you *do* react, what is that like? Did you reach for it within thirty seconds? Did your mind say, "This is a stupid meditation"? How did you justify picking it up? Did you notice that moment of decision when you did pick it up?

You can do this for a few minutes or much longer. I like to stop *only* when I no longer feel a strong urge to pick it up. Have some fun with it.

MEDITATION #2: THE SCROLLERCOASTER

Most of our social media scrolling starts out innocently:

"Let me just see if I have any notifications… Oh, look, Cathy got a new cat! It's so cute! I wonder how Cathy's kids are doing (looks through Cathy's pictures). Oh, my, Jeremy is getting so big. Time flies, I can't believe how fast… wait… Jeremy works for NASA? When did that happen? I wonder if Cathy knows that my son is still living at home with me. He's really gotta get his act together. Maybe I wasn't a good enough parent. Screw that, I'm a better parent than Cathy. Her son was kind of a prick anyway. Oh, look, baby elephants rolling around in mud!" and on it goes.

I call this the scrollercoaster because as soon as you start scrolling you step onto the rollercoaster of emotions, brutal comparisons, superficial assessments, and fleeting entertainment. The scrollercoaster can start in a matter of seconds, below our awareness, putting us in a low-grade bad mood for a reason we can't even trace back to its source. The

less present we are to this happening, the more likely we are to get sucked into it.

So, are you up for the scrollercoaster meditation? Great, let's go!

Step 1: Take out your phone.

Step 2: Set a timer for 5 minutes.

Step 3: Close your eyes for a minute, focus on your breath, and settle into the present.

Step 4: Open your eyes, open your favorite social media app, and start slowly and mindfully scrolling.

Step 5: As you look at different stories, pictures, and posts, notice how your thoughts, emotions, and sensations shift in relationship to what you're seeing. Make it like an actual meditation with your eyes open, engaging in this activity. See if you can feel the highs and lows of the scrollercoaster.

Step 6: After a few minutes, practice zooming your focus in and out—zoom your attention in on the screen, completely absorbed in what you're seeing, and then zoom out, noticing the outer edges of your phone and the space around it in your periphery.

Step 7: Stop when the timer rings. Truly. Stop. Don't keep going. The meditation, and the scrollercoaster, are over.

This meditation illuminates just how much our seemingly benign scrolling has on our well-being. The zooming in and out also helps us see what it's like to be caught in the story in our heads of something that is really nothing more than a bunch of colorful pixels shining through a sleek glass screen. It offers a bigger perspective, keeps us grounded in our actual surroundings and what is *actually* happening in that moment, and starts to free us from the grip of this ever-alluring, steady stream of often-aimless stimulation.

MEDITATION #3: STOP, DROP, AND BE

What's the first thing you do while standing in line at the

coffee shop? Or while sitting at the DMV? Or waiting at a restaurant for a friend?

If you're like most people, there's a goooooood chance you pull out your phone.

This third meditation can be done during those moments. When you find yourself out in public and you reflexively grab your phone, stop yourself, drop the phone back to where it came from, and just *be* (stop, drop, and *be*). You don't need to close your eyes; simply feel your body sitting or standing, notice what it's like to wait, to feel awkward (if you do), to not know exactly what to do while you're idle, and to not fuel the voice in your head saying, "What am I missing?!"

Once you're in "*be*" mode, notice anything around you that you weren't aware of before—people nearby, the surrounding scenery or color patterns on the walls. There's a lot we miss when our heads are down.

If nothing else, I promise you'll feel special for being the lone person standing there without your face in your screen. You might think you look awkward, but people will be impressed with (or jealous of) your ability to just be present (or let's just pretend that's the case).

THE LIFE-CHANGING MAGIC OF TIDYING UP… YOUR PHONE

What if your phone could spark joy?

A few years ago, I jumped on the minimalist bandwagon and read Marie Kondo's book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up.* Although this wasn't my first foray into organizing a life around fewer things and less clutter—I think the monks mastered that a long time ago—Kondo's book did introduce me to a new, inspiring way of thinking about the "tidying-up" process. Instead of focusing on what to get rid of, focus on what you're excited to keep.

Her now famous question that guides whether or not you should keep something is: Does it spark joy?

If it doesn't spark joy, trust that it served its purpose, thank it, and let it go.

If it *does* spark joy, keep it, and continue to love it.

By the end of my weeklong tidy-fest, I had a closet full of shirts, pants, sweaters, and yes, boxer briefs, that made me happy. I had a bookshelf that made me smile rather than feel overwhelmed. I had a desk that brought peace and inspired productivity. I even had a bathroom that I enjoyed being in.

I had *so many great things*, and many, *many* fewer things.

My space nourished me. I wanted to be there. And I felt more present.

All of this made me think: What if we could do this with our phones?

What if, instead of it causing anxiety, stress, neuroticism, and emotional volatility, our phones could lead to joy, presence, and fulfillment? What if our phones nourished us, rather than depleted us? What if we approached our relationship to our phones through the lens of "how can I make this more enjoyable?" rather than "how can I be less addicted?"

We have this amazing device that connects us with the world, gives us access to practically anything we want to know, and makes our lives much more convenient. Just because it also has negatives doesn't mean we need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We need to reconnect with, discover, and prioritize the *good* aspects of this technology.

My challenge to you: How could you set up your phone, and your relationship to your phone, in a way that it *actually* sparks joy, fulfillment, and presence?

This will require some reflection, because the reason we're on our phones so much in the first place (to the point of it *hurting* our well-being) is because a part of our brain already believes this gives us what we want. This is the nature of addiction. So, you'll need to take some time to think about the moments when your phone *does* nourish and energize you.

When are the moments that you thought it would bring joy but actually led to more distress? Who is the person you're looking to be in the world, and how can your phone support that?

This is a highly personal process and will vary based on your profession and your social relationships, but it's designed to be fun! You're approaching this from the perspective of "How can this enhance my life?" What an opportunity!

We've already been trying to do this work with our minds; why not do it with our phones?

The following are some ideas to get you started:

NOTIFICATIONS

How nice would it be to have a phone that wasn't constantly dinging, vibrating, and lighting up like a slot machine in your pocket? Can you feel the peace that would come from having a more calm, tranquil, and quiet phone?

Much of this excess noise and distraction is due to having unnecessary notifications for things like mail, news, sports, social media, etc.

Ask yourself: Do these notifications spark joy? Do they enhance my life?

Unless you have a resounding *yes* to a certain notification, I recommend turning them *all* off for one week (with the exception of messaging apps, which may require more immediacy) to see how it goes. You can always switch it back.

How to do it:

1. Go to Settings
2. Click Notifications
3. Find the app and click Off

APPS

Do you feel a genuine appreciation for the apps you have

chosen to put on your phone? Are there some you downloaded years ago that have served their purpose and are ready to go? Do you have certain "crack apps" that you use obsessively, but when you actually reflect on it, they don't support the person you're trying to become or the presence you're looking to embody?

Go through each app on your phone and ask: Does this enhance my life in a meaningful way?

If it's a "no" or an "eh," quickly delete. If it's a "but I might need it for XYZ reason!" delete it for a week and see if life goes on without it. Unless you have a job that depends on your interaction with certain apps (which can sometimes include social media) there's a good chance you can get rid of it without consequence.

Arrange your phone to have *just* the apps that excite you, inspire you, and support you.

SCREEN TIDINESS

Once you've decluttered, you get to have some fun with organization. You can group apps together in folders—e.g., travel, finance, productivity, entertainment, social, etc.—*and* you can place different apps on different screens, depending how you like it. As an example of what it can look like, here's what I do:

- 1st Screen: Inspire—I only keep a handful of apps on my home screen, and these are the ones that I've determined energize, rejuvenate, or reconnect me in some way.
  - Examples: Insight timer (my meditation bell), Simple Habit (another meditation app and one I teach on), Evernote (for pondering and note taking), voice memos (for audio notes), camera, and dictionary. On the bottom row, I keep my clock, calendar, messages, and contacts.

- 2nd Screen: Utility—These are the apps that have value for me, I use regularly, and I don't feel a complicated relationship toward (i.e., they're not my crack apps).
  - Examples: Settings, WhatsApp, weather, travel apps, finance apps, kindle/audible/podcasts/Spotify, GPS, etc.
- 3rd Screen: Sporadic/Infrequent Usage—These are apps I use enough to justify keeping on my phone, but not enough to keep on my second screen, nor do they inspire me enough to keep on my first screen.
  - Examples: Photo editing apps, Dropbox, Google Drive, app store, etc.
- 4th Screen: Intentional Moderation—These are apps that I like or need, but can suck me in if I'm not careful. The apps on this screen vary, but can include:
  - social media apps, web browser, games, podcasts, and others.

Once you have it all organized, consider tidying up the view of your screen a step further by switching to grayscale. Much of the addictive nature of our phones is because of how colorful they are. You may counterintuitively find more peace in relationship to your phone if it doesn't have the added allure of color. Different smartphones have different instructions for how to do this, so a simple Google search of "grayscale" and the type of phone you have will give you the instructions you need.

SOCIAL MEDIA

How many posts do you see on your social media feeds that don't enhance your life in any meaningful way?

What if your feed was *only* filled with posts from people who nourished, opened, challenged, and inspired you, rather than pulled you into a vortex of jealousy, comparative thinking, or mindless entertainment?

There's a simple solution to that. It's called "unfriend" or

"unfollow." You can even "snooze" people on Facebook for thirty days or mute people on Instagram.

If you've been on social media for years, there's a good chance you've friended or followed some people along the way that you no longer have, or *never* had, a connection with. Go through the list of people you're friends with and unfriend those that are not positively serving your well-being.

Does unfriending people on Facebook sound too harsh? You can unfollow their accounts so you no longer see their posts.

If you'd like to do this more gradually, or you're still deciding who you'd like to surround yourself with, wait until you see posts in your newsfeed that snag you and consider unfollowing them.

I'm not suggesting you unfriend people simply because they have different views than you. I keep a healthy dose of Facebook friends who I completely disagree with on issues, just to make sure I continue to engage with different ideas and perspectives. But if there is a clear feeling that your energy is drained, or they're not contributing in some way to your well-being (even if that means challenging/growing your perspective), then it's hard to justify staying connected.

WHEN DOES IT MAKE YOU HAPPIEST TO USE YOUR PHONE?

Too much of a good thing can be a bad thing. And a good thing at the wrong time can also a bad thing.

Connecting with a friend can make you happy. However, being with that same friend for sixteen hours straight could be exhausting, and being with them while you're trying to finish an important task may feel like an inconvenience.

I don't believe being on our phones is bad. It's when we're on our phones all day long, and at the wrong times, that it starts hurting our well-being, productivity, and presence.

When I am in the healthiest relationship with my phone (and e-mail/social media), I don't check e-mails until 11:00 a.m., and I stop checking them at 6:00 p.m. I give myself permission to browse social media during two one-hour chunks (one in the morning and one in the evening; I'm not on it during the entire hour; it's just meant to create boundaries around the other hours of my day); and I charge my phone in another room at night (research shows this actually makes you happier).

Those three things go a *long* way for me.

So much of our angst isn't coming from being on the phone (although that's certainly some of the cause). Rather, our angst comes from having access to it in every moment, which creates a jittery, neurotic, unconcentrated attention that needs a "quick fix" in order to be settled. Each time we check it when we're uncomfortable, bored, or stressed, we weaken our ability to focus and be at peace with what is. However, when we set clear times for using and not using our phones, we no longer feed this pattern, and the mind naturally starts to find more ease.

Don't underestimate how powerful this can be. The first time I did it, it felt equivalent to adding an hour a day to my meditation practice. *Seriously*.

You can structure this principle in any number of ways, so I'll let you determine what would be best for you. The main question to explore is: How can you set this up so that your use of your phone feels healthy, practical, and meaningful?

POSITIVE RESTRAINTS

There are a number of apps that you can use to actively block *other* apps for set periods of time. Three of these are Forest, Freedom, and Flipd. These are helpful, but I recommend them with one note of caution: If you rely solely on restraints, it's easy to bypass the work of actually addressing the root of the problem.

Similar to “yo-yo dieting,” having very restrictive parameters around technology can lead to “yo-yo techno-detox”—we don’t go on social media at all for a week, and then we’re right back to our all-consuming social media habits.

If you’re going to use these constraints, or if you’re going to do a longer technology detox (like no social media for a week), make sure that you’re also doing work to create a healthy relationship to your phone like we did in the technology meditations, exploring how it can be used to promote goodness.

Here are some guiding questions to come back to if you get off track:

1. In general, do I feel more energized or depleted in my relationship to my phone? What needs to change?
2. Does my phone increase or decrease my mental health? What needs to change?
3. Does my phone help me connect more with others, or less? What needs to change?
4. Do I feel more or less stressed the more I use my phone? What needs to change?

At the heart of this is having an honest conversation with yourself, your device, and everything that comes with it, and getting excited about how it could be something that nourishes you, rather than something you merely have to become less addicted to.

Technology is an integral part of our lives and therefore another experience we get to explore, learn from, and grow through.

CONCLUSION

This book started with one concept: presence.

To have presence is to soften the walls that keep you from fully connecting with yourself, others, and the world. It's to have cultivated the capacity to experience and stay present to more of who you are and more of your life. When we have presence, we're unburdened by the tension created from suppressing parts of who we are, making way for a profound sense of peace and wholeness. It's more than simply being aware of the moment; it's bringing our full selves into the moment, and the fullness of the moment to ourselves.

In Part 1, we discussed why developing this kind of presence isn't easy. We looked at how the various traumas of life, micro and macro, create walls that keep us stuck in a pain box—a zone of comfort that prevents us from living freely and connecting deeply. We discussed how simply being "positive" or trying to bypass these pain walls will only further disconnect and numb us to the fullness of our life. And, on the other side of this spectrum, recklessly pushing through these walls with the hope of purging the pain from our minds and bodies often just reinforces the part of us that does not know how to skillfully hold and process this pain. Instead of either of these extremes, we need to develop our internal safety—our inner okayness—that empowers us to move through our pain walls and *make contact with life*.

In Part 2, as a way to develop this internal safety, I introduced the building blocks of presence—focus, allowing, curiosity, and embodiment—and a variety of practices to help us cultivate them, most centrally, mindfulness meditation.

Focus helps stabilize our attention in the present, grounding us, and enabling us to more clearly see the different layers of our experience—awareness, story, experience—like a magnifying glass for our mind. *Allowing* gives us the ability to meet the moment as it is, without grasping or pushing, helping us move fluidly through our moments and embrace the unknown. *Curiosity* brings us closer to our life, in all its many forms, facilitating the development of a deeper wisdom for how to live well, and helping us find ease and joy by experiencing life with a gentle wonder. And *embodiment* reminds us that we cannot access the present moment without connecting to the very bodies we live in. Learning how to feel, listen to, and trust the innate wisdom of our bodies helps us more skillfully and more fully meet, process, and integrate all the different experiences of our life.

To fully develop these four pillars requires us to learn how to set boundaries, be patient, manage negative rumination, soften resistance, navigate pain, allow joy, remain steady, and make space for discomfort—all of which contribute to the internal safety that empowers us to work through our pain walls, stay open to our lives, and feel more whole.

Lastly, in Part 3, we explored how to apply this presence to, and further refine it within, the most important domains of our lives. We discussed how to become aware of, and let go of, the cow paths that are no longer serving us, making space for new ways of living and relating. We explored what it means to become your own best friend—developing an intimacy with yourself—by integrating the "shadow parts" that, when resisted, drain our energy; and nurturing what we most love and appreciate about ourselves and our lives. We then extended outwardly, exploring how to develop intimacy with others, and highlighting that the depth of connection we can experience with another person is directly related to the depth of connection we can experience with ourselves. And when we fully embrace ourselves, we subsequently embrace our connection with the larger whole. And in the last chapter, we looked at the practicalities of how to develop presence in your

day-to-day, navigating time constraints, technology, and the realities of living in the "real world" so that you feel equipped to make this journey your own.

We've been through a lot within these pages, and it has all been in service of creating the conditions for you to experience deep presence. Some of these learnings you may have already integrated into your life, and others may take more time. Developing and practicing presence is a life-long journey; I'm practicing right along with you. These teachings will always be here for us to come back to.

COMING HOME

As I wrote this final chapter in a coffee shop on Long Island, I had a chance encounter with my first yoga teacher, Lara.

I worked at her studio, cleaning floors and bathrooms, in exchange for free yoga when I first got back from Burma. I had no money and was still figuring out how to bring these teachings into the world. It was a confusing time in my life, trying to integrate what I touched so deeply in the monastery with the realities of a world that needed me to make money, have an identity, and "do" something.

Lara offered me my first space to start teaching mindfulness. She gave me a three-hour time slot, once a week for eight weeks, free of charge, and helped advertise to the yoga community. My first class had eleven people in it.

When Lara showed up at the coffee shop recently, I hadn't seen her in over six years. I felt a wave of emotion and gratitude thinking back to those early days of teaching.

I gave my full heart to those eleven people.

Two dropped out after the second week, but the rest stayed through to the end.

I made mistakes. I said the wrong things. I learned a lot.

I tried to lead each class from a place of love, spending the week in between classes wondering how I could connect with each person more deeply, tailor the teachings to them, and help them feel the power and potential of living with presence. I sometimes doubted myself, but I never doubted the practice.

Writing this book felt like starting over again. It was scary, inspiring, vulnerable, and humbling.

I tried to write from a place of love, trusting there was a message here. And I'm also sure I made mistakes.

It is custom in the Buddhist tradition for a teacher to ask for forgiveness at the end of a retreat. If for any reason I have caused you harm in this book, I humbly ask your forgiveness.

If this is the beginning of a new journey for you, I say welcome. Although it might not feel like it yet, there's magic here.

If this is a continuation of a journey for you, it's been a privilege to meet you here.

We don't know where the journey will take us. We don't know who or what we'll meet along the way. But as Rumi said, be grateful for whoever comes through the door of your guest house, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

I wish you well on your path.

Burma, Day 187: Coming Home

It was my last day today.

I went to visit my teacher this morning in his room and asked if I could pay my respects.

He nodded, with his familiar half smile.

I walked up a few feet before him, kneeled on the ground, and put my hands together.

I bowed in gratitude, three times, each time lowering my chest, forehead, arms, and hands to the floor, outstretched before him. My movements were deliberate.

This time, my bowing was not forced.

It was not out of submission.

It was not for him.

It was because of him.

As I sit in this taxi driving away from the place that has given me so much through so little, I feel a combination of things. Excitement, sadness, gratitude.

I look forward to seeing my family and friends again.

I look forward to seeing my old world through new eyes.

I look forward to sharing what I learned with others.

Now the real work begins.

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This book would not have been possible without the help of many other hands, minds, and hearts. I'm grateful to have the space to offer my gratitude, and I'm already terrified that I'll leave someone out. If you do not see your name, please know it's because of my brain, not my heart.

First and foremost, to my family. Mom and Dad, this book is dedicated to you. Whether it was my chasing butterflies in the backyard, selling candy in high school, spending entire days at the golf course, or deciding to run off to be a monk, you supported me each step of the way. I love you and am so grateful to have you as parents. Keelan and Kiera, "my blood," thank you for your endless love and sibling support, for keeping me humble, and for being as excited as I was to go see the Backstreet Boys live (as adults). To my grandparents, the Mendozas, the Raks, and the Caliendos—I'm pretty sure we hit the family lottery. Thank you for all of your love, encouragement, laughs, singing, dancing, and good food over the years. And for making fun of me when I quote myself on Instagram. You all are my roots.

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SOURCES

CHAPTER 1

This definition of trauma is a combination of ideas from Bessel van der Kolk's, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York: Viking, 2014), and David A. Treleaven's, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

More information on burnout: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/high-octane-women/201311/the-tell-tale-signs-burnout-do-you-have-them.

Processing and discharging trauma energy is often much more nuanced than simply "shaking out the body." However, the idea that we can understand how trauma is discharged from the body by observing animals is discussed in Peter Levine's book *In an Unspoken Voice* (New York: Random House, 2012), as well as in the YouTube *Nature's Lessons in Healing Trauma: An Introduction to Somatic Experiencing (SE)*.

CHAPTER 2

In *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York: Viking, 2014), Bessel van der Kolk discusses the necessity of staying present to discomfort and trauma energy in the body for it to process and integrate, especially with the sensations it brings up in the body.

The late John Welwood gives a good description of spiritual bypassing in the article "Human Nature, Buddha Nature: An Interview with John Welwood," *Tricycle: The Buddist Review* (Spring 2001), https://tricycle.org/magazine/human-nature-buddha-nature/.

For more thoughts on the downsides of cathartic-based practices, you can read *Release Based Cathartic Therapy: Cautions and Considerations*, https://www.sheaheart.com/release-based-cathartic-therapy-cautions-and-considerations-2/.

The idea that diving full into your pain can be retraumatizing (and is seldom healing) is echoed in Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, David A. Treleaven's *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), Laurence Heller and Aline LaPierre's *Healing Developmental Trauma* (New York: North Atlantic Books, 2012), and Peter Levine's *In an Unspoken Voice* (New York: Random House, 2012), 344–345.

To learn more about the "window of tolerance," you can explore this article, www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/window-of-tolerance, and www.stmichaelshospital.com/pdf/programs/mast/mast-session 1.pdf.

CHAPTER 3

Although the concept of neuroplasticity is discussed broadly and deeply in a variety of texts, one of my favorite overviews is in Robert Kegan's book *Immunity to Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

The findings on page 48 are from Sarah Lazar's study "Meditation Experience Is Associated with Increased Cortical Thickness," *Neuroreport* 16, no. 17 (November 28, 2005): 1893–1897.

More research on the neuroscience of meditation can be found in *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*, by Dr. Richard Davidson and Dr. Daniel Goleman (New York: Avery, 2017), which also discusses how eight minutes of meditation per day can lead to reductions in mind wandering and improved concentration.

CHAPTER 4

One Spirit Medicine, by Alberto Villoldo (New York: Hay House, 2016).

Although the quote on page 63 is often attributed to Viktor Frankl, it's actually a conglomeration of different ideas and references from people like Rollo May and Stephen Covey. More can be learned here: https://quoteinvestigator.com/2018/02/18/response/.

Man's Search for Meaning, by Viktor E. Frankl (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

This Japanese haiku, originally written by Matsuo Basho, has been translated in hundreds of different ways, but the version I use in the book ("The old pond. A frog jumps in. Plop.") was translated by Alan Watts.

CHAPTER 5

The idea that we habituate to our life's conditions, ultimately coming back to a previous point of happiness, is known as the hedonic treadmill. There is a bit more nuance to this, which can be read about in "Beyond the Hedonic Treadmill: Revising the Adaptation Theory of Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 69, no. 4 (2006): 305–314.

CHAPTER 6

The idea of secondary pain creating more stress and suffering than primary pain is written about in a variety of ways in the book *You Are Not Your Pain*, by Vidyamala Burch (New York: Flatiron Books, 2015).

Experience x Curiosity = Wisdom: This simple linear formulation is not mathematically correct, of course. The actual equation is certainly nonlinear and perhaps will never be known. Also, this is only one particular flavor of how wisdom can be conceptualized, used to describe our understanding of how the mind works to create happiness or suffering. The idea of paying attention to the subtleties of our experience for the sake of understanding the nature of that experience and how best to be in relationship to it is widely discussed in the Buddhist tradition, specifically the Theravada Buddhist tradition. A meditator pays attention to thoughts, sensations, emotions, sounds, and other phenomena with the intention to understand three characteristics of all phenomena—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self. As a meditator matures in these noncognitive understandings, they are said to be developing wisdom. This is most in alignment with what I am referring to when I describe wisdom as experience multiplied by curiosity.

CHAPTER 7

The quote on page 114 is taken from the first couple pages of the introduction to *Wild Power: Discover the Magic of Your Menstrual Cycle and Awaken the Feminine Path to Power*, by Alexandra Pope and Sjanie Hugo Wurlitzer (New York: Hay House, 2017).

You can learn more about the practice of menstrual cycle awareness at these two links: https://redschool.net/how-to-practice-menstrual-cycle-awareness/and http://thisislifeblood.com/free-love/.

See Dr. Gunes Sevinc, et al., "Common and Dissociable Neural Activity After Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Relaxation Response Programs," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 80, no. 5 (June 2018): 439–451.

You Are Not Your Pain, by Vidyamala Burch (New York: Flatiron Books, 2015).

CHAPTER 9

Feeding Your Demons, by Lama Tsultrim (New York: Little, Brown, 2008).

Dr. Martin Seligman and Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi discuss the new field of positive psychology, and why it's needed, in their article "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2014): 5–14.

Hardwiring Happiness, by Dr. Rick Hanson (New York: Harmony Books, 2013).

Love 2.0, by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson (New York: Plume, 2014).

CHAPTER 11

Dr. Ed Deci and Dr. Richard Ryan have decades of research on human motivation, citing "autonomy, competence, and relatedness" as the three core psychological needs for being intrinsically motivated. Their research on self-determination theory is brilliantly summarized in their book, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2017).

Nicola Hughes and Jolanta Burke, "Sleeping with the Frenemy: How Restricting 'Bedroom Use' of Smartphones Impacts Happiness and Wellbeing," *Computers in Human Behavior* 85 (2018): 235–244.