

Be Yourself

The Science & Spirituality of Who We Really Are

By Luke Robell

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Introduction

Knowing “who you are” affects everything in your life, and is therefore one of the most important things you can know. This informative self-help book is for anyone who does not feel like themselves anymore and either wants to change or feel like themselves again. In an age where confusion, trauma, existential and identity crises seem to be at an all-time high, I believe many feel this way. My purpose in writing this book is to present how ancient spiritual concepts about “who we really are” align with research from frontier evidence-based science. This book will offer you a forgotten philosophy of “who you are” that I believe is the perfect catalyst for self-transformation. Lastly, this book will show you how by first being exactly who you are now, you can use this philosophy in a practical way to move towards becoming the person you have always wanted to be.

This ancient wisdom, stemming mostly from Eastern spiritual traditions, has become popular amongst “new-age” spiritualists. However, because of our busy modern lives, most people lack the chance to integrate the profound teachings

found within this wisdom into their daily lives. We no longer have the time to sit on top of a mountain for ten hours a day and contemplate the meaning of existence. We have to get up and pay the bills. This can lead to us taking in these teachings at face value, risking misinterpretation. Thankfully, there are already people with the empirical reasoning of scientists and the faithful curiosity of spiritualists who have done the hard work for us and found a way to present this transformational ancient wisdom in a modern, practical and easy-to-understand way. I believe that only by bringing the world's two most dedicated truth-seekers together, the scientist and the spiritualist, can we come to a universal transformational truth.

At times you may find the information here repetitive. This is intentional so that these concepts will not only resonate with different people but also help readers connect the concepts with their direct experience. Direct experience, when we see our experience for what it is and not what our thoughts “tell us” about it (E.g. my experience is not bad, but I am having a thought telling me that my experience is bad) is where some of the slightly less tangible realizations in this book happen. I drill concepts in similar ways, and I also interchangeably use words

such as “experiencing,” “consciousness,” “awareness” or “aware being.” Take your pick.

*

This symbol will be used throughout the book in areas where I believe the reader needs to pause and contemplate what they’ve just read. We will explore topics that many of you may not yet have heard of and will need to process. A book designed to generate profound realizations in an individual requires small breaks for processing, so I recommend that you pause for a moment when you reach one of these symbols.

Although this book offers a few practical exercises, if you find that you need extra help, you can find our self-transcendence retreat program over at projecttrueself.com. We offer everyone one session for free because it truly is our desire to help you become the best you! If you are struggling with a mental health diagnosis, consider getting in touch with a therapist who understands the concepts presented in this book (i.e. mindfulness). You can always shoot me an email at luke@projecttrueself.com. I would love to get back to you when I can!

1. Come As You Are

Suffering: It's Part of You

Our generation is experiencing an identity crisis. People don't feel content in their own skin, in their own mind, and are suffering. Something needs to change. Suicide rates among children as young as five years old increased annually by nearly 15% between 2012 and 2017 (Ruch, et al. 2021). Can you imagine experiencing thoughts like "not being good enough," "not feeling like yourself," "hating yourself," or that you "would rather be dead" as early as five years old? Can this be considered a "normal" part of child development or are we doing something wrong? The expression of one's individuality is of huge importance today, especially in America. Important as it is, and as easy as it may seem, it's actually hard to be yourself, and for some, it's even harder to know what "being myself" even means.

Take the modern gender identity topic. Today, gender is being defined by millennials as a "spectrum." The media brand Fusion recently surveyed 1000 respondents aged 18-34 and

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determined that “half of all millennials believe that gender exists on a spectrum, and shouldn’t be limited to the categories of male and female” (Rivas, 2015, para.1). A quick Google search shows that in the English language, as of 2024, there are over 100 gender identities one can now identify with (Wikipedia contributors, 2024).

It’s not just the younger generation on the stereotypical path of self-discovery who are struggling to find themselves. In an age of mass information, or mass new-information, we question what we have been told and the very person who is the product of that conditioning ... ourselves. Many are struggling with what is right or wrong, and starting to question their beliefs. Some desire to express themselves, yet are still trying to figure out how.

I believe that we are living in an age of self-transcendence. We see what others are doing on social media and ponder our own potential. We want to do great things too. If you’ve bought this book, you are most likely either wanting to change yourself or feel like yourself again, yet you may find that your very self gets in the way. What does that mean?

When we don’t like something about ourselves, we are hurting and want to change. Everyone who has ever picked up

a self-help book has experienced this truth. Of course, if I felt great all the time and thought I was perfect ... I wouldn't want to change. I wouldn't need a self-help book. But we want to change those parts of ourselves that cause us to hurt. Why is that? Why do I desire to be myself, yet run away from the part of me that hurts? Do I want to be myself or do I not want to be myself? Even though we try running away from this hurtful part of us, all too often it seems we can't. Why is that? Am I just this way? It's almost like we can't get past the hurt. We keep buying the next self-help book, in order to help or relieve that part of us that causes the hurt. That's our goal: relieve the hurt. It seems that if we can do that, then we will finally be okay again ... we will finally be free to be who we want to be. In this book, we will be exploring the curious blockage that occurs when even though I, myself, desire to change, my very self seems to get in the way.

*

I think that most of us would agree that if anything can stop us from real change, it is going to be some kind of hurtful or challenging thing we might experience within ourselves. As the saying goes, "You are your own worst enemy." If you experienced no challenges, would you not freely be able to do

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whatever you want and have no need to buy self-help books? But some challenges appear during change. There are hurtful things within all of us. Consequently, it hurts to be you.

In the words of Julien Blanc, a well-known transformational coach on YouTube, “Transformation is not peachy. Who ever told you it was going to be peachy?” (JulienHimself, 2023).

So what if we accept that it’s not “peachy?” What if we don’t have to get rid of the hurt we are faced with during our attempts to change? What if we don’t have to make what we are trying to change into our greatest enemy? What if we can drop the struggle with the parts of ourselves that we hate? Would we then feel more free? Would we feel more like ourselves if we stopped being a dictator towards certain aspects of ourselves? Seriously, why do we make ourselves into the enemy? I’ll tell you why: It’s because we are not willing to have those hurtful things be a part of us. We are not willing to hurt at all. Why does our hurt have to be such an enemy? What if suffering is a completely normal part of being yourself?

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You may respond to this with, “Of course it’s okay to suffer, it’s a part of life!” Well, that’s true, as will be shown

shortly. It is normal to hurt. However, not only is it normal to hurt, it is normal to hurt a lot. It's normal to be damaged. It is normal to be "abnormal." Presently, I don't think we accept suffering as a normal part of life. Our societies' leaders in the field of suffering strictly adhere to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illnesses (DSM) which suggests "abnormal" suffering occurs when the intensity of symptoms reaches a certain point or inhibits you from completing the tasks society requires you to complete. U.S. statistics show that lifetime prevalence rates for these mental diagnoses are now approaching 50%, while even more people suffer the emotional distress of problems with jobs, relationships, children, and the natural transitions that life presents to us all (Kessler et al., 2005). Almost half of the college-age population met the criteria for at least one DSM-related diagnosis within recent years (Blanco et al., 2008).

Again ... it's normal to hurt a lot ... it's normal to be "abnormal" as at least half the US population are now suffering "abnormally" with a mental disorder. So, what have we, the general public, come to believe abnormal suffering to be? Well of course ... dis-orders. Whatever is "out of order" is not normal, right? So if I have a disorder, does that mean I am

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abnormal? What if I told you that the people who diagnose disorders might not know exactly what they are ... would you believe me? Even the people who coined mental disorders into existence are questioning if abnormal suffering even exists and are starting to see disorders as simply overactive, normal cognitive processes. What follows are several excerpts from the report of the American Psychiatric Association planning committee for the fifth version of the DSM (Kupfer et al., 2002):

“Many, if not most, conditions and symptoms represent a somewhat arbitrarily defined pathological excess of normal behaviors and cognitive processes.” (p. 2)

“The goal of validating these syndromes and discovering common etiologies [Etiologies are the causes of a condition.] has remained elusive. Despite many proposed candidates, not one laboratory marker has been found to be specific in identifying any of the DSM-defined syndromes.” (p. xviii)

Not a single diagnosis was found to be able to live up to its purpose. That purpose being to identify specific “abnormal” issues in order to determine a specific treatment. The cause of the symptoms associated with disorders has remained elusive, suggesting that for a long time, we have not known what causes

these disorders, or these “overactive normal cognitive functions,” and there is room for speculation.

“Epidemiological and clinical studies have shown extremely high rates of comorbidities [Comorbidity rate is the simultaneous presence of two or more disorders. In recent times, it is approaching 80% (Kessler et al., 2005).] among disorders, undermining the hypothesis that the syndromes represent distinct etiologies. Furthermore, epidemiological studies have shown a high degree of short-term diagnostic instability for many disorders. With regard to treatment, lack of specificity is the rule rather than the exception.” (p. xviii)

This idea that symptoms associated with mental disorders are mostly “overactive normal cognitive functions,” seems to be true with most of the people suffering from mental distress who I meet on a day-to-day basis. Most of them are just experiencing a whole bunch of hurt, and dealing with overactive normal cognitive processes like fight or flight, or an attitude of unwillingness to experience something. The facts stated in the above extract are enough to question the integrity of the whole diagnostic system.

The book *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (Hayes, Strohhal & Wilson, 2011) beautifully enlightens our

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understanding of the kind of progress we are making in the war on human suffering. The book mentions, “Tragically, as the DSM’s vision of human suffering has expanded across the world and has increasingly pathologized normal human difficulties, the ability of non-Western cultures to deal with suffering in a way that maintains behavioral and social functioning has gone down, not up (Watters, 2010).”

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Things are not working, and there is room for speculation. I believe that the root cause of most of our suffering lies in our struggle with the part of us that hurts. Perhaps we are just afraid of facing ourselves. We are afraid to be who we really are, face our demons, and embrace the responsibility that entails. The popular psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that in order to know ourselves we had to face ourselves fully, and meet our “shadow.”

In Jung’s book, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1991), Jung writes about what happens when one “faces themselves fully.” He writes, “This meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one’s own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. But one must

learn to know oneself in order to know who one is. For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty, with apparently no inside and no outside, no above and no below, no here and no there, no mine and no thine, no good and no bad. It is the world of water ... where I am indivisibly this and that; where I experience the other in myself and the other-than-myself experiences me.” (p. 21)

Jungian therapist Connie Zweig helps us understand the concept of “the shadow” further in her book *Meeting the Shadow*. “The shadow goes by many familiar names: the disowned self, the lower self, the dark twin or brother in bible and myth, the double, repressed self, alter ego, id. When we come face-to-face with our darker side, we use metaphors to describe these shadow encounters: meeting our demons, wrestling with the devil, descent to the underworld, dark night of the soul, midlife crisis.” (p. 3)

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We are not willing to be that part of ourselves that hurts. This is why we “make ourselves into the enemy.” We are not willing to fully be ourselves. We are not willing to face our shadow. We suffer over suffering. That’s why we are stuck when

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we are confronted with those painful challenges on the road to change. The moment hurt comes up ... we just turn away.

Most psychology is a hypothesis. In that sense, psychologists are almost the same as the philosopher or the spiritualist. This is why we must be open. Retain logic and the mystery simultaneously as all who have discovered great things did before us. (Maybe the world is not flat!) I ask you to approach the findings I have compiled into this book in this way. The same findings that have saved me personally, and possibly will save you too.

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So, we got something wrong. Yes, suffering is a major part of our lives. But relating to suffering in a way where you believe it's this abnormal thing that needs to be solved, doesn't work for humans. Suffering is here to stay. Not only do our day-to-day experiences attest to this, but the numbers do as well. Hurt is a part of life but most of the hurt we experience actually comes from our struggle with it. Many of us have a tendency to be rigid towards our suffering, rather than flexible—open to work with it. Consequently, we can become chained by our hurt and have it run our lives.

It's not just the scientific community that approaches suffering as something to be solved. Often parents are hurt by seeing their children hurt (again, there is nothing wrong with hurt) and try to "solve it" instead of approaching their child's hurt in a truly accepting way. Instead of telling children "It's okay not to be okay," I've often heard parents reply with something like, "You're fine. Get over it." My father engaged in this kind of parenting, and it led to tragic, unnecessary guilt—he blamed himself for my "abnormal hurt." His mind was plagued by thoughts like, "Was it me? Did I do something wrong? Could I have done better? Should I have been able to solve his problem?"

We tend to lean away from the experience of being hurt and see it as something to be controlled. When we feel happy, we want to stay that way at all costs. When asked the question, would you rather feel happy or sad, how many people do you think respond with "I don't mind?" Many people today, children included, are addicted to "feel good" drugs. They dangerously decide to take whatever drug they can get their hands on to control how they are feeling in some way. Their inability to be flexible with how they are feeling, and responding in this way, has dangerous consequences.

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Psychiatric drugs are usually prescribed to be taken alongside therapy, where new coping strategies can be learned and put to use when we experience something undesirable. Yet, I believe it's ironic how therapy to learn coping strategies is encouraged, yet prescribed drugs are designed to remove our ability to experience that which we need to practice our coping strategies on. These drugs can mute the very feelings we need to practice our coping strategies on and can leave some unable to feel anything at all. When I was on Prozac, I remember not being able to feel sad, let alone cry, despite experiencing some of the saddest moments of my life. I could barely feel much of anything. I was experiencing a widely-reported side effect of anti-depressants psychologists call “emotional blunting.”

It is believed that around half of anti-depressant users experience emotional blunting, and according to a team of researchers at the University of Cambridge, emotional blunting can even affect learning processes. Specifically, their research suggested that anti-depressants can affect a person's sensitivity to rewards and their ability to respond accordingly (Langley, et al., 2023). When we experience emotional blunting, our emotions are muted—emotions we may need to feel fully in order to learn the lessons they are trying to teach us.

I want to clarify that I am not completely opposed to anti-depressants. In some situations—for example when an individual might cause harm to others or themselves—then professional medical care and perhaps anti-depressants may be necessary to give someone a much-needed “break” from distressing ruminations. I am not 100% against anti-depressants in every situation, nor am I advising against them. My aim instead is to provide facts about our conventional approach to mental health care and suggest we make a change in how we relate to our hurt if we are to see large-scale results.

There are extreme cases out there where the “muting” of our pain can be beneficial, especially if it’s a case where someone’s pain is causing them to want to hurt themselves or others. I believe that anti-depressants are a helpful aid in these situations. However, for a person who is not in a current emergency, I believe that using anti-depressants is unnecessary, and unhelpful, especially if your reason for doing so is to “mute” your pain. Research has suggested that these medications have a clinically significant impact superior to a placebo in only the most extreme cases (Fournier et al., 2010; Kirsch et al., 2008).

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These pills are so commonplace that they have contaminated our drinking water. A research study found traces of antidepressants in bed sediment, as well as in the brain tissue of native white suckers (*Catostomus commersoni*) collected upstream and at points progressively downstream from outfalls discharging to two effluent-impacted streams, Boulder Creek (Colorado) and Fourmile Creek (Iowa) (Schultz et al., 2010). Identified antidepressants included fluoxetine, norfluoxetine (degradate), sertraline, nortriptyline (degradate), paroxetine, citalopram, fluvoxamine, duloxetine, venlafaxine, and bupropion in all three sample matrices.

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So, the situation is hopeless. Our magic pills aren't working, it's normal to suffer, and we have to feel our hurt. Transformation isn't "peachy," and it hurts to face ourselves. It hurts to be "me." We're doomed ...

Or are we?

Is it really better to be emotionally blunted, or avoid your suffering in some way, than to fully be yourself? We avoid ourselves and our hurting in the same way we avoid the suffering of others in our world: We just don't want to see the truth ... we turn away ... because we don't want to admit that

we have a responsibility to experience this hurt. In taking responsibility for our own hurt, we can take back control of our lives, and real change can finally begin. When we face ourselves fully, the good parts and the bad parts, we can finally feel like ourselves again, as we are no longer running away from ourselves.

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When I was diagnosed with OCD I thought there was a major problem with “me” that needed to be solved. This is what really happened:

I made myself the enemy.

Specifically, I made that part of me that was anxious the enemy. I made the letters OCD the enemy, and I did not accept the symptoms that went along with those letters as a part of me. I was unaware that being “abnormal” was common as has been conveyed in this chapter. I did not know that it was okay not to be okay. I wanted to change. I wanted to fix my problem ... I wanted to fix “me.” Just like so many others believe about themselves, I thought the part of me that hurt was the enemy that needed to be eradicated. I wanted to avoid this problem, and the suffering involved, at all costs. I spent years turning away from this hurtful side of me ... running away from me ...

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and I consequently did not feel like myself. I started hating myself too, of course, and got diagnosed with depression shortly after. I wanted to be myself again, so that was the first thing I told my therapist.

I later realized during my recovery, why my obsessions and fears were getting much worse. They were getting worse because my problem-solving mind saw myself as a problem, and seemed to judge anxiety as the cause. “If I can only get rid of anxiety, then my suffering over myself will go away... then the problem of me having OCD obsessive thoughts and being too anxious will go away. Then I will be okay ... I will be fixed ... and feel like myself again.” This was my way of thinking. But what about when I didn’t “feel okay?” Was sometimes not feeling okay part of “being myself” as well? Looking back, it’s amusing how adamant I was that anxiety, however acute or seemingly abnormal, should not be a part of me. Why did I think that only if I eradicated a very real part of me first, would I feel like myself more? The way I see it now is that I didn’t feel like myself because I didn’t want to be myself at all. By seeing my anxiety as an issue, I became afraid of being afraid. I started struggling with the struggle itself.

And oh boy, how much further pain the decision to struggle with struggle produced. Instead of actually feeling the way I felt and then deciding the best course of action, I lost control of myself. I was bound by “trying to figure it out,” and questioned everything that made me hurt. I thought I hurt “too much” and that my hurt was “abnormal.” I believed that if I could “figure it out,” by finding the cure for my anxiety, I wouldn’t have to feel the way I was feeling anymore. I would be “normal” and not hurt as much. Yes, I made hurt the enemy ... and it really hurt.

At the time I didn’t see anxiety as a part of me, and therefore something I had to take responsibility for. Instead, I saw anxiety as something that happened to me, and therefore something that I was a victim of. Most people believe things happen to them, rather than just simply happen. But we can never be “victims” of things like feelings that come, go, and change constantly. How can you be bound to something that doesn’t stick around?

“But the hurt I feel does stick around!” I hear you say. That’s true, I am not denying that. It’s most likely why you keep buying self-help books and why I am writing this book in the first place. When I was a victim of my own experience, I

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didn't see this hurtful side of life as part of me, or something I am responsible to experience. Instead, I believed it to be outside of myself as something that needed to be destroyed or avoided in order for me to be free of its grasp. In seeing things this way, I made myself a continuous victim of my own experience.

But anxiety didn't "grasp onto me" ... I was the one who grasped onto my anxiety in the first place when I made it into the enemy. I *decided* to be a victim of my own experience. I *decided* to hate myself. Every single day I woke up and *decided*... and that decisive moment was where my potential freedom lay. That is why the experience of hurt never left me. I did not allow it to pass naturally as experiences do. I kept on turning away from, and wanting to destroy, a part of me ... No wonder I didn't feel like myself, right?

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I originally went to a cognitive behavioral therapist when I was around 14 years old for my obsessions and anxiety. I learned from that therapist about Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP), which is about exposing the client to distressing things slowly in order to build tolerance. Sounds great right? It kind of sounds like what we are talking about

here: Learning how to be okay with not being okay ... learning how to be open to that hurtful part of you ...

One thing I was obsessing over at the time was whether or not I was going to fall and crack my head open while entering the shower. I know it sounds silly, but it was a serious worry for me and I wasn't willing to face the possibility of it happening. I would ruminate on and imagine myself falling and cracking my head open so much that my body would tense up completely and I felt a physical pull to check and make sure the shower was not too slippery to enter. It was life or death. Sometimes it would take me almost ten minutes or more just to step into the shower and feel comfortable enough to move around in the tub.

If anyone reading this has no idea what obsessive compulsive disorder is or how it works, allow me to give you a definition that sums up my personal experience over the years. According to the Merck Manual Professional Version, OCD is “characterized by recurrent, persistent, unwanted, and intrusive thoughts, urges, or images (obsessions) and/or by repetitive behaviors or repetitive mental acts that patients feel driven to do (compulsions, rituals) to try to lessen or prevent the anxiety the obsessions cause” (Stein, D. J., Phillips, K. A. (2023).

Sounds like normal cognitive processes with a major dash of unwillingness to experience painful events to me.

I struggled with an interesting sub-category of OCD called “Pure O.” The compulsions of people struggling with this kind of OCD are mostly mental and involve fighting anxiety with reason and logic. The thinking I used to combat my fears during ERP went something like this, “Well, obviously if I tell myself that it is logically ridiculous to slip, fall, and crack my head open in the shower, and then approach the shower next time getting in faster instead of being overly careful, my fear should subside because I understand I don’t have to be afraid of a possibility so slim.” The problem was, in reality I really was afraid of that slim possibility ... I was afraid of cars hitting me however far away they were ... I was afraid of even the most harmless germ being on my hands. Don’t forget, that it seemed logical to me that washing my hands multiple times did help clean my hands more thoroughly. It was logical to me that the further away from the cars I walked, the less chance I could get hit by them. If I was so afraid of slipping while entering the shower, it was logical to me to take a lot of time and make sure I was careful when getting in the tub.

Here’s the problem with ERP: Anxiety is still the enemy.

The goal is still to get rid of anxiety in the end. The philosophy of this approach still feeds our unwillingness to be afraid, or to experience hurt. Even if technically ERP is designed to help you approach your fears ... you are doing so to have relief in the end. You still can't deal with your own hurt. Some people may demand, "What is wrong with wanting relief?" Nothing. The desire for relief hurts too. And that desire for relief is a part of us that we need to be with as well.

The best and most logical thing I could have done for myself during my OCD battle would have been to realize that it is okay to be afraid.

Yes, I am talking to you.

The people out there who are just like I was, who are sick and tired of finding no relief. What if the relief you have been looking for this entire time could be found simply by being okay with not being okay? What if your desire to be authentic, or feel like yourself again, is being blocked by something as simple as you not allowing yourself to be you? The best "logical" thing I could have done was to fly to southeast Asia, shave my head, and sit with a bunch of monks and do nothing with my hurt. Looking back on the severe OCD I experienced,

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I realize now I wouldn't have needed compulsions if I was simply at peace with being hurt.

I remember coming home to my dad, ecstatic after learning about ERP. "Dad! I figured it out. I'm normal. I don't have any fucking problems! I just gotta get in there, expose myself to my fears and I will be good!" And I did. I went back to the shower and rushed in hoping for the best. I was adamant about healing that anxiety for good. I felt afraid but I kept my eye on the prize, which was, no more anxiety. You know what, it actually worked. I felt great ... for about two weeks. When the fears started to return, I wasn't willing to feel them even though I did my daily exposure practice. I struggled to understand what had gone wrong. Again, I'll tell you what went wrong. The whole reason I took up practicing exposure was for the prize I had in my head: to rid myself of anxiety. I thought my obsessions would finally disappear. And they did. But they came back with a vengeance because I was never truly willing to be afraid in the first place.

As I mentioned earlier, the ERP cognitive behavioral therapy model, that has been around for about 100 years, is close to what we are talking about here: Learning how to be okay with not being okay. But why did I go to therapy and

decide to expose myself to challenges in the first place? To help me conquer those challenges, to help me get rid of my anxiety.

That was my issue.

I was willing to try ERP and face my fears ... only if it would help me get rid of them. Was I truly willing to face my fears? Was I acting with true courage? Was I really being okay with not being okay? Was I really wanting to be myself? It's something to think about.

How Did We Get Here?

So how did we get this way? Why do we feel that suffering should not be a part of us, something that should be combated, or something that we are victims of? Why do we think suffering is an issue to be either ignored or solved? Why can't we just let ourselves hurt? We can't make good decisions if we don't allow ourselves to hurt. We lose ourselves in our hurt and we know this all too well. If I don't allow myself to hurt, when you nuke me, I can't deal with it and nuke you back. Pretty soon we have World War III on our hands. Can you see how our world would change overnight if we were all just okay with being hurt? Put from another perspective, are you able to see that

hurt is a part of us, and therefore if we are not willing to hurt then we are not willing to fully be ourselves? Can you see how we wouldn't create any further pain within ourselves if we just simply did not struggle with pain itself? How did we become this way? Allow me to introduce Dr. Steven C. Hayes.

Hayes is a renowned clinical psychologist and a leading figure in the field of psychotherapy and behavioral science. Hayes has made significant contributions to the understanding and treatment of various psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, substance abuse and chronic pain. He is best known for his groundbreaking work in developing Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) that blends mindfulness, acceptance strategies and behavioral change techniques.

Hayes earned his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from West Virginia University in 1977. He began his academic career as a faculty member at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro before joining the Department of Psychology at the University of Nevada, Reno, where he currently serves as a Foundation Professor of Psychology.

Throughout his career, Hayes has authored over 600 scientific articles and numerous books, including *Get Out of*

Your Mind and Into Your Life (Hayes, 2005), which has been translated into multiple languages and has sold over a million copies worldwide. His research focuses on understanding human language and cognition, the role of experiential avoidance in psychopathology, and the development of evidence-based interventions to promote psychological flexibility and well-being. His work has had a profound impact on the field of psychotherapy, inspiring clinicians to integrate mindfulness, acceptance and values-based action into their therapeutic practices to help individuals live more meaningful and fulfilling lives.

In his book *A Liberated Mind* (Hayes, 2019), Hayes gives us a good Western psychology recap by examining the history of psychology in the form of waves. Hayes explains how in the 20th century during the dawn of CBT, psychologists began to move away from purely behavioral analysis and started to recognize thought as playing a significant role in one's mental wellbeing. Thought was no longer viewed as purely random, but instead scientists started to view it as intrinsically connected to the behaviors we exhibit.

During this time, the psychological strength of an individual was believed to be determined by how well an

individual was able to control their thinking in a healthy manner. This is reflected in a central tenet of CBT which tells us that we need to change distorted or dysfunctional thoughts and instead think more rational ones in order to achieve optimal mental health. However, the truth is that defining “dysfunctional thinking” is a subjective matter. Usually, if someone’s beliefs of “what is normal” clash with another’s, one person is going to be looked at as thinking dysfunctionally. This is not accurate, because the thinking of one person that could otherwise be considered as dysfunctional by another could actually work for them.

In contrast, the modern behavioral science movement’s view on psychological strength is that flexibility and openness of mind combat rigid behavior. Being willing to feel our hurt frees our attention and allows for us to be flexible, which in turn helps us make decisions truer to ourselves and our values.

Hayes writes about the results that psychological flexibility processes have produced in clinical settings in his book *A Liberated Mind* (2019), “The science of psychological flexibility now spans well over a thousand studies, which have tested it in almost every area of human functioning. In clinical research this breadth is called a transdiagnostic, meaning that

targeting psychological flexibility works across a wide range of traditional mental health categories (anxiety, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders and so on). It turns out even that is not broad enough. ACT is transdiagnostic on steroids. The same flexibility processes also help us step up to the challenge of physical disease, or manage our relationships better, or reduce stress, or organize our business well, or play competitive sports.” (p. 14)

Now, in the 21st century, psychological strength has come to be viewed by some as the complete opposite of how it was viewed in the 20th century. Psychological strength comes from being flexible—not from putting more rigid rules on yourself. Flexibility comes from a willingness to be yourself—all aspects of yourself, not just the “good” parts. Modern psychology better be considering some opposites because mental problems have actually gotten worse in recent years. In 1990, depression was the fourth leading cause of disability and disease worldwide after respiratory infections, diarrheal illnesses and prenatal conditions. In 2000, it was the third leading cause. By 2010, it ranked second. In 2017 the WorldHealth Organization (WHO) rated it number one (Steel, Z., et al. 2014).

Hayes has coined this new age of therapeutic practice focusing on flexibility as the “third-wave of behavioral therapies.” Not only has ACT become mainstream, but new developments such as mindfulness-based CBT closely follow where flexibility processes are incorporated into traditional CBT such as meditation and mindfulness techniques.

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This emphasis on accepting suffering as an inevitable part of life (rather than struggling with it) seems to be alien to Western culture but has been a central theme of Eastern philosophy for thousands of years. In Christianity, a predominantly Western religion, the sin within us is perceived as something evil that we must repent over. Heaven promises a place where “there will be no more tears.” A promise of a place better than this cruel world bound by both good and evil, where we will no longer have to suffer. In the West, we live in an instant gratification society where avoiding punishment and chasing after rewards is the cornerstone. Beauty billboards tell young girls what they should look like vs. what they shouldn’t look like. TV commercials are dedicated to convincing you that you are not happy unless you buy their product. In the case of anti-depressants, if used to mute your emotions for quick

relief, the cost could be to no longer feel what you're hurting over ... no longer be able to learn what you need to learn from your hurt ... no longer feel what you really care about ... no longer have the ability to be fully you.

Over in the East, the Buddha's first noble truth is, "Life is suffering." This is disheartening for the Western individual obsessed with gratification and always feeling good. However, this truth ... well ... is true. Suffering is a part of life. But why is a tradition based on "finding enlightenment" and ultimately the "transcendence of suffering" telling us it's always going to be here? What happens when suffering ends? The Buddha is silent on that. In Buddhism, suffering is often seen as stemming from attachment and desire, something at the forefront of our Western instant gratification culture. The concept of "dukkha" in Buddhism refers to the inherent unsatisfactoriness of life, caused by craving and clinging to impermanent things. These impermanent things include our self ... and the inevitable cycle of suffering and happiness we experience in our lives. Buddhism asks us to be open and flexible with these things.

Hinduism teaches us that if we accept pain and detach ourselves from any struggle with the experience of pain, then painful or pain-free states would be honored and accepted

equally as cycles of life. Hindus believe that only through recognition that the self is not bound to this world of suffering, and by detaching from it, can release be achieved.

Eastern practices like mindfulness encourage individuals to observe their suffering without judgment or resistance, fostering inner peace and equanimity. These practices are not just traditional pastimes in the East. Mindfulness is a serious practice that has produced positive results, forcing scientists in the West like Hayes to start changing paradigms in the cognitive sciences. There are now many modern evidence-based therapeutic approaches that include the mindfulness-based flexibility processes involved in ACT.

In Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (MBCT), elements of cognitive therapy are combined with mindfulness practices to prevent relapse of depression and reduce symptoms of anxiety. MBCT helps individuals recognize and disengage from automatic patterns of negative thinking that contribute to depression and anxiety. Mindfulness-Based-Stress-Reduction (MBSR) is an evidence-based program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn that teaches mindfulness meditation and awareness practices to reduce stress, alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression,

and enhance overall well-being. Participants in MBSR learn to cultivate non-judgmental awareness of their thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations, and to develop a compassionate attitude toward themselves and others.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), developed by Marsha Linehan, is a comprehensive treatment approach originally designed for individuals with borderline personality disorder (BPD) but has since been adapted for other conditions. DBT incorporates mindfulness skills alongside techniques for emotion regulation, distress tolerance and interpersonal effectiveness.

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Western science is even starting to consider psychedelics as an alternative to traditional psychiatric drugs in the treatment of mental disorders. This is interesting because when we ingest psychedelics, areas of the brain some scientists believe to be involved with our “ego” are affected.

In the medical blog *Verywell Health*’s article titled *Psychedelic Drug May Be As Effective as Your Antidepressants* (2021), clinical psychologist, psychedelic researcher and ACT practitioner Gabby Agin-Liebes explains the function of psilocybin. “When you ingest psilocybin, the body converts it

to psilocin, which produces psychedelic experiences. In short, the drug is thought to “reset” the brain by quieting structures involved in the default-mode network (DMN), which is said to carry the ego or sense of self.”

The results of multiple studies have supported the hypothesis that DMN “disintegration” correlates with ego-dissolution (Carhart-Harris, R. L., et al. 2016) (Nour, M. M., et al. 2016).

“The DMN is most active when ruminating on repeated thoughts. Psilocybin seems to relax the activity in this network, which is hyperactive in individuals with major depression, and allows for helpful perspective shifts that may alleviate depressive thought patterns.”

When you are “high on psychedelics” you are forced to be flexible. You are forced to experience things without the interference of the “ego” and all of its rigid rules. The efficacy of psychedelics in the treatment of mental disorders is not mere speculation by wishful-thinking “hippy scientists” anymore. Researchers at the Centre for Psychedelic Research at Imperial College London found that psilocybin may be “at least as effective” as antidepressants, including commonly prescribed selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), in treating

moderate-to-severe depression (Barrett F.S., et al. 2020).

Verywell Health tells us that this research marks the first published data from a major medical journal of preliminary human trials examining the effect of psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy to treat major depressive disorder (MDD).

Gabby Agin-Liebes tells *Verywell Health* that the findings represent a milestone in her line of research. “This is the first study of its kind comparing two doses of psilocybin to the gold standard medication treatment (SSRI antidepressants) for depression in one of the top medical journals,” she says.

I believe that the use of psychedelics, under therapeutic intervention, can set the perfect stage for transformation, utilizing the concepts portrayed in this book. They can create enough cognitive distance to reimagine yourself.

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You may have heard the classic, “If you want to change, then you need to accept where you are at.” In other words: If you want to change, then you need to look at and accept whatever “you” is happening right now you want to change. Wow, that was a tough one to swallow. How many “yous” are there? It’s an interesting phenomenon that occurs when “I” desire to change “myself.” But before we go down that very

contemplation that will begin your exciting journey of self-transformation, yes, you need to look at yourself as you are now. You need to do what has been explored up until this point in the book and stop escaping from you. You're hurt.

But why is "accepting where you are at" the first requirement for real transformation? Because "here," this only place you get to be, is where you are at. This is what you are experiencing, and this is where you have to be right now. This is what you have to work with. Most people intellectually understand that they have to be with their current experience, but seem to still struggle to "accept where they are at."

Understanding that this current experience is all you get is so important, because "where you are at," or your current experience, is the only place you can begin to change from. Most people are waiting to feel a certain way before beginning the process of change. They put their energy towards struggling to let go of their hurt, in order to feel better first, instead of towards doing the things that would bring about change in their life regardless of how they feel. This is how struggling with our hurt becomes our barrier to change.

We have explored how most people think their suffering is bad, abnormal, or something to be controlled or destroyed. They say their trauma is keeping them from change. What if struggling with their trauma is actually what is keeping them from change? People may even think they are abnormal and even go so far as thinking it is too late to change, considering themselves life's victims, or even believing they are mentally damaged and incapable of a healthy, "normal" life. We think that a certain aspect of our current experience is affecting us and needs to change before we ourselves can change. "I need to get rid of this before doing that." "I need to not hurt so much before I am okay." "I need people to accept me before I can be myself fully." "I need people to respect me before I can respect them."

We think that the hurt we are feeling is keeping us from change and needs to be satisfied before we do something we want to do, let go, be at peace, become happy, or whatever it may be for you. But what if we were okay with our hurt? What if you were okay with the other half of your life? The other half of you? What if you were okay with not being okay? What if you didn't judge your own judgments? What if you created the

alternative belief that people don't have to accept you for you to accept them?

Would no longer putting energy into the act of reaching out and struggling with "you" give you enough space to instead create new beliefs for yourself? After all ... most of what causes us our pain is our belief system. As they say, "Everything is perspective." Every barrier to change I just described in the above paragraph begins with your belief. What if one day you wake up and decide to start loving yourself ... to be yourself. Everything about you. To be okay with hating yourself while simultaneously deciding to love that part of yourself too ...

Imagine.

One day you wake up completely in love with yourself and your whole life has changed. (Many people have experienced this self-transformation. It's real.) You would look back on how you struggled with yourself and ... laugh!

Are you able to see the space you could create with the decision to be okay with yourself? To not turn away from how you are "showing up" in this current experience in any way? The hurtful parts of you too? This other "normal" part of life? The released energy could be used towards thinking in new ways instead of being expended on the futility of resisting your

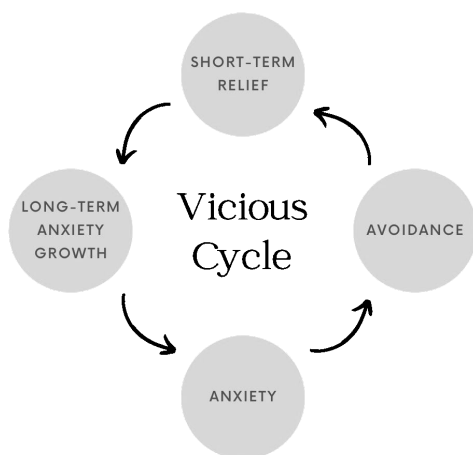
current experience, what already has decided to happen.

Instead, you could approach the possibility of a new you ... a new world.

The first step towards change is to turn back towards yourself and completely be with the parts of you that you've desperately wished to change. You must see that the only place and time you can change from is right here, right now. You have to work with yourself. You have to see that this current experience is all you ever get to experience, and you have to love yourself as you show up in this current experience. You have to be yourself as you are right now.

Not Allowing Yourself to Hurt: The Dangers

The moment my obsessions and fears peaked in severity was when I became afraid of being afraid. This is known as the vicious cycle in behavioral therapy as illustrated below.



When you avoid pain in the short term, your tolerance to feel pain goes down, and in the long term you suffer when you find yourself in situations where you can't avoid pain.

You become afraid of pain itself.

You also become afraid of being you, as pain is a very real part of you. Some forms of this kind of short-term avoidance include drug-taking, white lying, overworking, subtly convincing ourselves out of a painful feeling, and countless other avoidance strategies unique to each individual.

When people get used to engaging in actions where the purpose of engaging in those actions is avoidance, they can eventually end up losing touch with what they really want.

Studies have shown that anxious people who are rigid and avoidant, rather than flexible and open, start out intolerant of anxiety, but they end up intolerant of happiness too (Kashdan, T. B., & Steger, M. F., 2006). I can relate to this. I remember when I started to feel better, I began worrying about the next time I was going to feel worse ... and I soon started to feel worse as a result. I felt it was better to avoid all emotions rather than become happy and risk the chance of losing it again.

For example, let's say someone wants to make new friends and they suddenly get invited to a party. Instead of being excited about the opportunity to meet new people, because this person tends to engage in avoidance-based behaviors, they may respond by ruminating on what could go wrong. In the end, this person might opt to just stay home as what could happen might be too painful. They might imagine not "fitting in" and being ignored at the party while they sit in their loneliness experiencing negative thoughts about themselves ... or they might imagine opening up to someone but then something goes wrong ... The person in this example values connection but misses the chance to connect with others due to their unwillingness to experience possible hurt.

Allow me to give some more examples. Take the common modern problem of procrastination. When avoidance-based actions become a habit, the basis of most actions then becomes one of procrastination (avoidance) instead of encouragement to do what matters. What about the person who desires to love again, but avoids intimate encounters because they fear getting their heart broken again? When you open yourself up to love you also open yourself up to pain.

What we value the most, also has the potential to cause us the most pain. However, the tragic flipside is that when we ignore our pain, we may also ignore what we most deeply value too. All our energy which we have invested into our struggle with our own pain could otherwise have been used towards our natural interest in what we actually want. All too often people focus on what they don't want rather than what they do want. When we run away from our pain, we run away from what we most deeply value. We stop being ourselves.

Hayes illustrates this point well in his book *A Liberated Mind* (2019), "Pain and purpose are two sides of the same thing. A person struggling with depression is very likely a person yearning to feel fully. A socially anxious person is very

likely a person yearning to connect with others. You hurt where you care, and you care where you hurt.” (p. 13)

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So, what’s the way out of the vicious cycle? It’s to be okay with being afraid. You need to be okay with not being okay ... to be at peace with the chaos inside of you ... that’s the only way out. Not only is this the only way to save ourselves, but also the only way to lasting peace in our world. How are we going to ever stop wars if we keep bombing them back after they bomb us? How about we stop avoiding painful occurrences and take up the responsibility to experience them? Are they not part of our own experience? Instead, we come up with countless excuses as to why we are not responsible for our own pain. We turn away from our pain, become bound by it, and choose to suffer further.

You will know that you have a choice by the final chapter of this book. If you want, you can start right now with your current understanding by giving up the fight with whatever pain it was that brought you to a self-help book. You can stop creating “further pain” by giving up the struggle with the pain that’s already here. But for those of us who don’t understand how to “do” that, then these questions must be answered: How

do I get out of this vicious cycle? How do I be okay with not being okay?

I can hear someone demanding, “How can I be okay when I’m not okay?” Usually people understand these simple truths but think that applying them to their own lives is “easier said than done.” You may logically understand that if you allow the hurtful part of you to be, you’ll feel better, but then say that you “just can’t do it.”

This is wrong.

You can ... and you have to. You have already allowed the hurt to exist as you’re currently experiencing it. You can allow what’s happening to be because you already are.

When you say that “you can’t do it” who are you referring to as “you?” Are you referring to a temporary thought screaming that it doesn’t like something or a fleeting feeling of struggle? These things are not you. Thinking is an activity. When did we ever decide that thinking was our actual voice instead of just simply an activity? What about before language when there were no voices in anyone’s head? Did cavemen lack self-awareness? Is the experience of thinking essential to who I am, the experiencer? Some people say that their past or trauma is essential to who they are. Yes, it’s a part of you. But is it you?

If my experience changes throughout my lifetime, yet I the experiencer stay the same throughout, why would I ever think that a temporary experience, painful or pleasant, is essential to who I am? When I feel one way today and then another way tomorrow yet am aware of myself all the same through the turbulence of emotions, why would I ever think I am my temporary emotions?

Yet we continuously make this mistake in subtle ways, from the way we speak to the way we fulfill society's expectations. We say, "I am sad," rather than, "I am experiencing a feeling of sadness right now." Adults ask us as children, "What are you going to *be* when you grow up," rather than, "What are you going to *do* when you grow up?" We tell ourselves lies. We say, "I am an unhappy person," rather than, "Sometimes I experience unhappiness." You, the experiencer, have to be okay with the emotions you experience. The experiencer is wide open and always allows the current experience in. You are an aware being that simply is already okay with what it is aware of. You are even free to experience this struggle you are currently going through, are you not? You are free not to be okay. We have to go through death, we have to go through hurt, we have

to go through bad times ... and we have to go through good times too. But none of it is *you*, the one who has the experience.

In the upcoming chapter, I invite you to change your perspective. If you want to feel like yourself again, if you want to change, you must first accept that this moment is the only place you get to change from. After, you need to recognize what those who have accomplished real change for themselves have recognized. You must change your perspective by separating yourself from who you currently believe yourself to be, in order to create the space for you to be some other way.

2. Changing Perspective

Who Am I?

Earlier I wrote, “In this book, we will be exploring the curious blockage that occurs when even though I, myself, desire to change, my very self seems to get in the way.” Why is that? One night, I was infatuated by the statement “I hate myself.” I was pretty adamant about hating myself, but there was a major confusion here ...

Which one am I?

Furthermore, there seemed to be a major discrepancy between what I wanted and what the “little me in my head” seemed to want. What I really wanted was freedom, flexibility and not to struggle with intrusive thoughts anymore, but all I seemed to do was struggle with them. What I wanted was in direct contrast to what my thoughts wanted, and I found that curious. I remember looking at myself in the mirror and believing that there were “two of me.” One me spent most of the day struggling with undesired thoughts and demanded that “we” needed to change or get rid of the hurt I was going

through somehow. The other me seemed to be aware of the desires and constant babble of the “little me in my head” but knew that I didn’t have to go through with its demands if I didn’t want to.

Something within me knew that I was free.

This was the moment I realized I couldn’t possibly be my thoughts. I am more than the words in my head. Around this time in my life I was preparing to move to Japan, something I always wanted to do as a child and was now happening thanks to my Dad’s business overseas and him falling in love with a Japanese woman. I thought living in Japan was going to give me the peace I needed, but it ended up being one of the most miserable times of my life and a time when my severe OCD and depression were at an all-time high. I was 19 years old, living alone in the middle of Japan, worrying all day long about anything one could possibly worry about, while trying to learn how to be an “adult” in my new environment without being able to speak my own language.

After getting dumped by my girlfriend due to a major cultural misunderstanding, my dad got married, and I ended up moving from Tokyo to a tiny town in the middle of Japan

where I was the only foreigner. I worried about anything and everything possible, and finally started to worry about the worrying itself ... I was spent. Eventually, I started to worry whether it was too late to “be myself” and whether my worrying was causing me mental damage. Even though I was aware that I was simply worried about being damaged and not actually mentally damaged, I began to experience major cognitive distortion, attention issues (due to constantly directing my attention onto my internal struggle) and physical pains. It was the classic, “Don’t worry yourself sick!”

However, through my suffering the direction of my life permanently changed, and I am forever grateful. The day I hit rock bottom, in my dark Japanese puny bedroom, I decided to take the book my mother had bought me, Eckhart Tolle’s *The Power of Now* (2004), out of the trashcan. I originally had thrown it into the trashcan because I found the first line “You are not who you think you are” so threatening. But at that rock-bottom moment, I realized I hated my thinking, so the idea of me actually not being my thoughts intrigued me. I soon became obsessed with the Eastern “spiritual” concept of being greater than a collection of conditioned thoughts and feelings. I

scribbled notes, resembling the job of a schizophrenic, which ended up having a word count seemingly greater than the actual book itself. Around this time, I became intrigued by the idea of becoming a psychologist. I wanted to be the wounded healer. I wanted to be my first patient and help myself before I helped others. I wanted to be a major leader in the healing of this world and the new ideas I decided to take on gave my pain purpose.

One night I decided to listen to *The Psychology Podcast* hosted by Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman. I randomly picked out episode 90 titled Get Out Of Your Mind and Live a Vital Life, and it ended up being Dr. Steven Hayes lecturing about finding purpose in pain and living a vital life along with your pain. His scientific ideas mirrored that of Eckhart Tolle's spiritual philosophy about who we really are, and they resonated with me.

After resisting therapy and medication for so long, after hitting my rock bottom, I decided to listen to my father and went to the only American psychiatric clinic in Tokyo and embarked on a process of healing. There, to my surprise, I was offered ACT as an alternative to CBT—the therapy that the

man (Dr. Steven Hayes) I listened to on a random podcast the night before was the progenitor of! I had already tried CBT and its exposure techniques, so I decided to follow my heart and check out ACT. When I sat down on my therapist's couch, I whipped out Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* (1997) and asked if he had read it. He said, "Of course. That's some good stuff." With that reply, I was set. I knew I had found my therapist.

How The "Little Me in My Head" is Created

In Developmental Psychology 101 we are taught that infants cannot distinguish themselves from others. Lumen Learning's Introduction to Psychology course's module on childhood lifespan reads, "Infants don't have a self-concept, which is an understanding of who they are. If you place a baby in front of a mirror, she will reach out to touch her image, thinking it is another baby. However, by about 18 months a toddler will recognize that the person in the mirror is herself (Archer, 1992)."

We are very connected to one another when we experience the world as young children do. The famous developmental

psychologist Jean Piaget (1929) said that for the pre-operational child, up until around the time the child starts to develop a self-concept, the world of nature is alive, conscious and has a purpose. Nowadays with our modern understanding of physics, it's almost impossible to argue against unity as a fact. You could focus the world's best ultra-high-tech microscope on a single cell and what would you get when you zoom in all the way? Frequency and energy. What you get when you zoom in even further: Nothing. So what is matter? While in the past, unity was thought to be a belief and separation the apparent reality, now separation is the belief and unity is reality.

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How did this feeling of separation come into being if as children we danced in unity? I am postulating that it occurs simply because of our belief in separation. While language can be a major contributor in the process of learning something new, such as a new belief, not all people think using words. Visual thinking is when someone sees a series of words as pictures (Silverman, 2002). According to some studies, about 60-65% of the population learns by visual style (Deza & Deza,

2009, p. 526). However, if we examine the nature of our mind closely, we realize that people simply think in symbols. Words and images are symbolic. They represent ideas—abstract ideas or otherwise. We think and learn through symbols.

Our minds are relational in nature. If we press a red button and get zapped, then the next time we see a red button we will relate it to the experience of getting zapped and feel fear. This fear is a necessary survival mechanism but is sometimes not helpful or true. For example, what if the next red button you encounter is harmless but you end up feeling fear anyway? For this reason, the relational nature of our mind can produce beliefs (red buttons are dangerous) that are not entirely true.

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In his book, *A Liberated Mind* (Hayes, 2019), Hayes writes, “Early on in the development of ACT, my research team became convinced that if we were going to liberate people from negative thought patterns, we needed to pull the curtain back on the mind’s inner workings, so that people could begin to see the Dictator for what it is and release themselves from following its commands automatically. Much as in the movie, we don’t need to do that because we have very bad minds—to

the contrary, what we have are very good minds, just very bad Dictators. Once we stop letting our thoughts automatically control our behavior, we can make far better use of our own cognitive talents.” (p. 39)

Around the age of 12 months, children start to develop two-way relations between words and their meanings (Hayes, 2019, p 40). Because of humans’ imaginative ability, this process can cause rather “abstract” ideas, such as believing the sun is smaller than the earth, or that the dime is greater than the nickel.

Hayes further explains the complexity of these relational frames, “This is why any given thought might trigger a thought about something else, such as why having a thought about how sweet your spouse is to you can remind you of how a past relationship ended so painfully in deep betrayal, and suddenly you will start wondering if your spouse is faithful. You’ve connected your relationship with your spouse to that prior relationship through the “is opposite to” relational frame. Lots of unwanted thoughts are similarly triggered because of such embedded relations, explaining the automaticity of so much of our thinking.” (Hayes, 2019, p. 42-43)

Hayes continues, “Trying to unravel these dense networks of relations and reconstruct them, as CBT has tried to help people do, is like trying to rearrange a vast spiderweb. It’s futile. Trying to get rid of thoughts would just add to the cognitive networks that surround them. Relating could be abstract: anything could be related to anything.” (Hayes, 2019, p. 43)

This process of relation is why our thinking is so automatic and can feel so real. But this higher-order relational way of thinking is not only a curse but a true gift. It is the reason why humanity has come to dominate the planet. It is the reason we are the beautiful, creative, intelligent beings we are. Sure, it is the reason we feel lots of undesired pain, but it is also the reason we are who we are. Just as you can’t love without the possibility of getting hurt, you can’t be a creative being without the capacity to cause pain.

Hayes explains how relational frames also play a role in the development of our sense of self, “Aaron and I called this new explanation of the way we learn language and higher-order thinking abilities relational frame theory (RFT). Extensive research has confirmed that learning relations is crucial to developing our cognitive powers, and also to developing our

sense of self. For example, in research with language-impaired children, who have not developed a normal sense of self, we found that if we taught them how to do relational thinking, they would then develop both stronger language skills and more normal self-awareness.” (Hayes, 2019, p. 43)

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But how does RFT research done in the early days of ACT development help scientifically explain the phenomenon of the sense of there being “two mes,” the aware being and the “little me in my head” the aware being is aware of?

Hayes explains, “I wrote my first RFT paper in 1984 making this claim and called it *Making Sense of Spirituality* when I realized this could lead to a transcendent sense of self—the perspective of an observer within who is witnessing what is being described from a particular point of view. That was a guess but it turned out to be right. RFT research has since shown that it’s not until a particular type of relation is learned that this sense of self, of being a separate being, emerges. This type is referred to as deictic relations, which means ‘to learn by demonstration,’ but that is an arcane technical term, so here I will call them perspective-taking

relations. All of these require a certain vantage point to be understood, such as knowing that you are here rather than there. A relation like that can be hellacious for kids to learn because the speaker's 'here' is the listener's 'there' and vice versa. As a result, when you go there, there becomes here and here becomes there! (You can almost see little kids in their frustration thinking, "Could you freakin' make up your minds?!") But with enough demonstrations, children do learn perspective-taking relations. The three most critical are I versus you, here versus there, and now versus then. Children usually learn them in that order: person, place and time." (Hayes, 2019, p. 43-44)

"The perspective-taking relations of person, place and time merge into an integrated sense of perspective: a sense of observing from 'I/here/now' appears. Metaphorically, you show up behind those eyes of yours, and at the same moment, you know that your mother is behind hers. You have developed a sense of awareness of living in the world as a conscious human being, with a point of view. There is a quality of 'fromness' to this kind of awareness. You not only see, and see that you see, you also see that you see from 'I/here/now.'

What's more, this sense of self is based on symbolic relations; it emanates from the combination of perspective-taking relations." (Hayes, 2019, p. 44)

I believe that around the time children learn the abstract perspective-taking relations of I/here/now they start to believe in separation—seeing themselves as separate beings in an alien universe, in need of liberation.

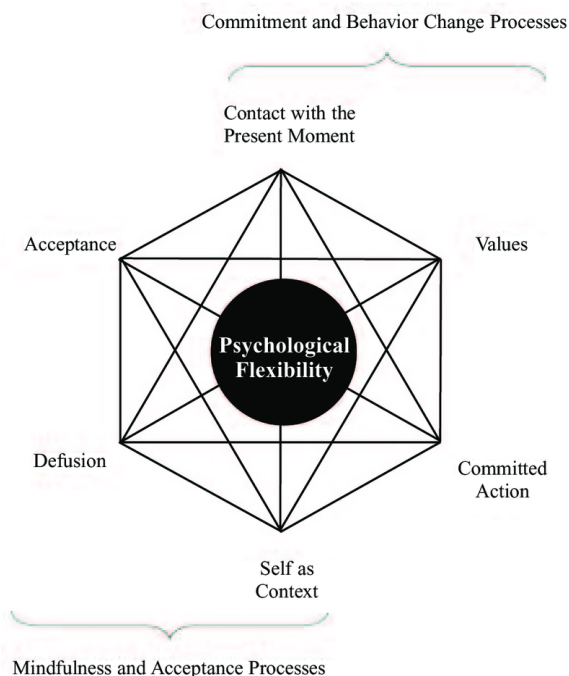
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Now there is nothing wrong with having a sense of self. Nothing is wrong with having a "little me in your head." Remember, it's part of you, part of the human experience. So if you're deciding to "be yourself," then you are deciding to be that too. Many spiritual seekers have tried to commit "spiritual suicide" by violently meditating this sense of self away in some way or another, or demonizing the ego. The problem arises when you become this "little me in your head," and as a result you constantly live from its limited perspective instead of from the perspective of the aware being you always were—who gets to decide whether or not to engage with what it is aware of.

Hayes attempts to explain, "Perspective-taking also supports storytelling about ourselves that is more

content-based and evaluative, and that part is hard to put on a leash. With the rise of our verbal problem-solving ability, the Dictator Within is born, along with the need for a liberated mind. As we begin to create our story of who we are, for example, we also start to compare ourselves to others, and to social ideals of who we should be. Thus, the unfortunate side effect of the same cognitive skills that allow a sense of ourselves as conscious human beings is that we often soon become self-critical, or excessively seek to be attended to, to be important or notable based on the specialness of our self-stories. We have begun to fashion the conceptualized self, and this imagined self often takes on the illusion of being our ‘real’ self. We begin to become the content of our stories, and the Dictator comes fully into power.” (Hayes, 2019, p. 44)

Reorientating our perspective from this illusory conceptualized self, towards the aware being we are, is how we distance ourselves enough from who we have believed ourselves to be, and ultimately see who we really are as the awareness “behind” our thoughts and feelings whose very nature is psychological flexibility.



The proposed six core ACT processes and their relationship to
psychological flexibility
(adapted from Hayes, et al., 2006, p. 8).

Psychological Flexibility

These are the six core processes used in ACT that guide an individual towards developing greater psychological flexibility, which in turn allows them to live a more free, values-driven life. I believe that Hayes' work on RFT and these six core processes allow us to scientifically understand spiritual concepts such as

the finding of enlightenment (or the transcendence of the illusory conceptualized self and finding of a “higher self”) and the power of manifestation. The rest of this section will briefly explain each of the six processes. I will also give examples of how you can practice present-moment acceptance and defusion techniques that can help free you from feeling “stuck.” Later on, when we dive into “making sense of manifestation,” I will give you an assignment that will help you connect with your values, and become the person you have always wanted to be through committed action.

Cognitive Defusion

Cognitive defusion techniques aim to help individuals develop psychological flexibility by learning to accept their thoughts and feelings rather than struggling with them, which in turn allows them to live a more free, values-driven life in which they are in control—and not the words in their head. It is an active, evidence-based method, designed to help individuals realize the futility of struggling with “what already has decided to appear within awareness.”

Cognitive fusion refers to the phenomenon in which individuals become entangled or fused with their thoughts. It happens when people believe stories in their head like, “I can’t try because I’ve failed before, and so I am a failure (even now in this new moment—this new opportunity to try again).”

Fusion happens when people assume they are the same as they were in the past because their mind tells them so. Many people live their whole lives fused with their story, unable to change. It is a very heartbreaking thing to think about. They perceive their thoughts as literal truths or as direct commands rather than as mental events that come and go. For example, someone experiencing anxiety might believe their anxious thoughts are accurate reflections of reality rather than recognizing them as passing mental events, suggestions, or simply thoughts.

Cognitive fusion, believing you are your word-machine mind and the many conditioned rules this world has injected into it, is the barrier to true independent transformation and change. It is the reason why even though “I” desire to change “myself,” my self (who I take to be the story of my mind) seems to get in the way—because I am fused with it. It is the reason

we “are our greatest enemies,” but the very proof of the beautiful power of our attention and belief.

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Cognitive defusion techniques in ACT aim to help individuals recognize their thoughts as simply mental events, rather than absolute truths. These techniques involve creating distance or space between the individual and their thoughts, allowing them to observe their thoughts with greater clarity and objectivity.

One defusion technique involves teaching individuals to observe their thoughts as they arise, without getting caught up or entangled in them. This may involve mindfulness practices originating from Eastern spiritual traditions such as meditation or focused attention on the present moment, allowing individuals to become more aware of their stream of thoughts. Metaphors are commonly used in ACT to illustrate the concept of cognitive defusion. For example, thoughts might be likened to passing clouds in the sky or leaves floating down a stream. By viewing thoughts as transient and impermanent, individuals can develop a more flexible relationship with them, which in turn allows the individual to think in new ways.

Another defusion technique involves labeling thoughts as they arise. Instead of saying, “I am anxious,” individuals might say, “I am having the thought that I am anxious.” This subtle shift in language helps to create distance between the individual and their thoughts, reducing the tendency to become fused with them. Humor and creativity can also be effective defusion techniques in ACT. Encouraging individuals to view their thoughts with humor or to engage in playful activities that highlight the absurdity of certain thoughts can help reduce their impact. For example, individuals might be asked to imagine their anxious thoughts being spoken in a comical voice or sung to a silly tune.

Self-as-Context

Cognitive defusion techniques help people connect with self-as-context, an aware sense of self that is not found within the content of experiences but rather is the context in which experiences happen. This “observing self” is often described as the “I” that is aware of thoughts and experiences, even the experience of “me and my story,” but is not defined by them. It is the part of the self that remains consistent and stable

regardless of the content of experiences and is inherently flexible—willing to experience what it is already experiencing. Remember the curious statement “I hate myself?” Connecting with this aware sense of self means shifting focus from the content of “the story about myself” to the “I” that is aware of this story happening. When we do this, we are allowed to access the freedom that comes along with our aware self’s inherent acceptance of what it is aware of.

Hayes relates the process of connecting with self-as-context to “changing perspective” in his book *A Liberated Mind* (2019), “In the simplest sense, what I mean when I’m talking about your conceptualized self is your ego—your stories about who you are and who others are in relation to you. Inside our stories, we note what is special about us (our special skills; our special needs), and we hope this will earn us a place in the group. We all have these stories, and, held lightly, they can even be helpful. However, when we hold tightly to them it becomes difficult to be honest with ourselves or to make room for other thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that would benefit others and ourselves but that don’t fit the story. In this event, the conceptualized self leads us to defend these stories as if our life

depends on it, which creates alienation, not true connection. The alternative is to connect more deeply with a perspective-taking self—a sense of observing, witnessing, or purely being aware. This sense of self allows us to see that we are more than the stories we tell ourselves, more than what our mind says. We also see that we are connected in consciousness to all of humanity—we belong not because we are special, but because we are human. Some people think of this as a transcendent or a spiritual sense of self.” (Hayes, 2019, p. 11)

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Changing perspective, and taking our stance as the awareness that is aware of the stories in our head, as opposed to being the stories in our head, is what the self-as-context process of the psychological flexibility model is all about.

Self-as-context refers to the aspect of awareness that remains constant and unchanging amidst our ever-changing stream of thoughts, emotions, sensations and experiences. It is the part of the self that observes and witnesses mental events without getting entangled or fused with them. Defusion techniques, such as observing our thoughts and feelings as clouds passing in the sky, help us reconnect with this aspect of ourselves. In

this metaphor, taking our stand as self-as-context means recognizing ourselves as the sky in which the clouds appear, not as the clouds themselves.

The goal of self-as-context in ACT is to help individuals develop an observer perspective, allowing them to step back from their thoughts and experiences and see them from a broader perspective. Instead of being caught up in the content of their thoughts or identifying with their emotions, individuals learn to view these mental events as passing phenomena that arise and fall within their awareness. Self-as-context helps individuals create psychological distance from their thoughts and experiences. Rather than being fused with their thoughts or emotions, individuals learn to see them as transient events that come and go within their field of awareness. The distance created from connecting with self-as-context allows individuals to respond to their experiences with greater flexibility and resilience, rather than reacting impulsively or automatically based on habitual patterns of thinking and behavior. It allows the individual to see how they have been being, and offers them the chance to decide to be another way.

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So, how do you create this “distance?” How do you get in touch with the observer self? For people who have always assumed they were the voice in their head, or have never heard of these concepts before, then daily simple mindfulness practices can help you understand yourself as the awareness “behind” the thoughts, feelings and perceptions that appear within experiences. I suggest you start a meditation practice for only ten minutes a day. In this practice we will not be using a mantra or “training our attention” in any way. Instead, if your attention seems to wander, you will simply be aware of where your attention has decided to go.

Many people believe that meditation is a practice we undertake in order to practice acceptance in order to feel better. This is not true. We cannot train acceptance, as acceptance of the current moment, no matter how desirable or undesirable, is an inherent quality of the aware conscious being that we are—or awareness itself. Anyone who has learned how to let go of “not being able to let go” has experienced this truth. Letting go is not something you do, as nothing is required to let go of a temporary experience that passes on its own.

Meditation is about recognizing this truth about how things are. After continuous practice, we start to realize that meditation is something we are and not something we do. When throughout your day are you not “being with your current experience?”

Based on my personal experiences struggling to find this “I” that is inherently free from the story my mind tells me about myself, I suggest that you simply recognize in this moment that you are aware. The “I” that is aware of the words on this page is the same “I” that is aware of the words in your mind that make up the story of “myself.”

This is you.

This has always been you. This is you even when you seem to get “caught up in the stories,” or when your attention wanders. After all, are you not aware of the experience of getting caught up in the stories? To free your attention, you simply need to recognize who you really are again as this awareness. That is what cognitive defusion and connecting with self-as-context is all about.

Acceptance

Acceptance and present-moment-awareness are what we experience when we reconnect with self-as-context. The opposite of acceptance is experiential avoidance, and experiencing the dangers that come along with it.

Hayes explains, “Experiential avoidance is the process by which we run from or attempt to control our personal experiences (thoughts, feelings, sensations) and the external events that give rise to them, all the way from going to a party to trying to cope with the death of a loved one. We do this because our mind tells us it’s an easy way to avoid pain, and we will be able to feel free only when we feel good. But avoidance typically only compounds our difficulties and restricts our capacity to feel at all. Acceptance is the full embrace of our personal experience in an empowered, not in a victimized, state. It’s choosing to feel with openness and curiosity, so that you can live the kind of life you want to live while inviting your feelings to come along for the ride.” (Hayes, 2019, p. 11)

Presence

Oftentimes when we are identified with the story in our head, we think only in terms a mind can—in past and future. When we are mostly focused on the content of our mind, our attention becomes rigid, and we can miss the context in which all experience happens—this present moment. When we reconnect with self-as-context, we defuse our attention from the content of experiences and allow our attention to rest in the experience of simply “experiencing.” Our attention then becomes less rigid, and freer.

Hayes writes about rigid attention, and what we can do with our attention when it is free, “Processes of rigid attention show up as ruminating about the past, or worrying about the future, or mindlessly disappearing into our current experience the way teenagers disappear into video games. As we struggle with life’s challenges, we often fear becoming lost, and we tend to look to the past and future to become oriented. But instead we find ourselves in a mental fog of what was or what will be, when there is really only what is. Flexible attention in the now, or being present, means choosing to pay attention to experiences here and now that are helpful or meaningful—and

if they are not, then choosing to move on to other useful events in the now, rather than being caught in mindless attraction or revulsion.” (Hayes, 2019, p. 24-25)

Values

After we have reconnected with our observer self that is inherently allowing of this present moment, our attention becomes less rigid as we are no longer exclusively focused on the stories our mind tells us about ourselves. We are no longer solely focused on specific things within our experience, but rather are more interested in the whole picture. We have a choice with what we do with our attention in this present moment, whether we lose it or not, because we are present and aware. While in the past, due to cognitive fusion, our attention may have been found in places that were not helpful, now we can direct our attention towards things we value and are helpful to us.

Hayes writes, “People often attempt to achieve goals because they feel that they have to. Otherwise people we care about, or whose views we care about, would be displeased, or they will be disappointed in themselves. Research shows that

such socially compliant goals give rise to motivation that is weak and ineffective. We may try to drive our own behavior with such external goals, but we also secretly resent them because they undermine our own process of unfolding. The yearning for self-direction and purpose cannot be fully met by goal achievement since that is always either in the future (I haven't met my goal yet) or the past (I met my goal). Values are chosen qualities of being and doing, such as being a caring parent, being a dependable friend, being socially aware, or being loyal, honest, and courageous. Living in accordance with our values is never finished; it is a lifelong journey. And it provides a way to create enduring sources of motivation based on meaning. Ultimately what your values are is up to you—they are a matter between you and the person in the mirror.” (Hayes, 2019, p. 12)

Action

The opposite of experiential avoidance is living life to the fullest. We do this through moment-to-moment, continuous values-driven action—with our pain along for the ride. Only by being truly present can we see why the little things, which were

previously ignored in a fused state, in our day-to-day lives matter if we are to create a life worth living.

Hayes explains, “We are always building larger patterns of action, known as habits. When we think about building habits, we tend to focus on perfect outcomes, such as quitting smoking entirely hard-stop. In fact, habit building is a moment-by-moment process. If we try to change our habits in one fell swoop, our efforts tend to lead to procrastination and inaction, impulsivity, or avoidant persistence and workaholism. The Action pivot focuses us instead on the process of competently and continuously building habits in small steps linked to the construction of larger habits of loving, caring, participating, creating, or any other chosen value.” (Hayes, 2019, p. 12)

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According to Hayes (2019, p. 12-13), the six core ACT psychological flexibility processes can be simplified using this cheat sheet:

1. See our thoughts with enough distance that we can choose what we do next, regardless of our mind’s chatter.

2. Notice the story we've constructed of ourselves and gain perspective about who we are.

3. Allow ourselves to feel even when the feelings are painful or create a sense of vulnerability.

4. Direct attention in an intentional way rather than by mere habit, noticing what is present here and now, inside us and out.

5. Choose the qualities of being and doing that we want to evolve toward.

6. Create habits that support these choices.

3. Science & Spirituality

Understanding yourself as something beyond the “story in your head” is nothing new, and is one of the only truths that has survived among many cultures in their spiritual and philosophical traditions. Science is only now catching on because its nature is to view everything through a dualistic lens. In other words, science only studies things that can be measured and observed. However, some things exist yet cannot be observed, starting with the observer—consciousness itself. The awareness that knows our experience is the only thing that we can experience for ourselves but cannot show anybody. We all know “we are aware” yet cannot show anyone our self that is aware. You can’t reach out and touch awareness. If you reached out and touched anything, it would just be another thing you are aware of. You can’t quantify consciousness, but you can quantify the objects of consciousness. You cannot quantify the knower, but you can quantify what is known.

A major debate is happening between some scientists and spiritualists. This debate aims to figure out what is more fundamental to existence: consciousness or matter? The

spiritualists say that we experience all of reality through consciousness so it is, by definition, already more fundamental. From my experience, spiritualists usually observe direct experience to come to their conclusions about reality, while scientists tend to use reason and logic to intelligently label the observed universe. The spiritualist does not believe that by “labeling” the universe will we be led to a greater understanding of reality, but instead by experiencing things for what they actually are (as opposed to what thoughts believe things to be). Is a tree really a “tree,” or is it matter? Is it “tiny atoms and molecules,” or is it protons, neutrons and electrons? Is it “energy,” or is it simply consciousness itself?

Most scientists have a different view of reality. They believe that we experience all of reality through consciousness but we experience consciousness through matter (the brain), so matter is therefore more fundamental. The problem is that we still don’t know for sure where consciousness comes from, can’t explain why it exists, and most likely never will. This is called “the hard problem of consciousness.” The hard problem of consciousness asks, “Why do things exist?” Why are we beings conscious and aware rather than unconscious and not aware?

According to The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, a popular peer-reviewed online academic resource, “The usual methods of science involve explanation of functional, dynamical, and structural properties—explanation of what a thing does, how it changes over time, and how it is put together. But even after we have explained the functional, dynamical, and structural properties of the conscious mind, we can still meaningfully ask the question, Why is it conscious? This suggests that an explanation of consciousness will have to go beyond the usual methods of science. Consciousness therefore presents a hard problem for science, or perhaps it marks the limits of what science can explain” (Weisberg, n.d.).

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I believe the reason we cannot come to an agreement on where consciousness comes from is because consciousness is fundamental and comes from itself. The fact that major researchers in neuroscience are recognizing the limits of scientific inquiry the hard problem presents, and considering theories originally reserved for only the spiritualist or philosopher, and they align with ideas from breakthroughs in the other cognitive sciences is extremely interesting.

A *Psychology Today* article titled *Can Consciousness Exist Outside the Brain?* reads, “The prevailing consensus in neuroscience is that consciousness is an emergent property of the brain and its metabolism. When the brain dies, the mind and consciousness of the being to whom that brain belonged cease to exist. In other words, without a brain, there can be no consciousness. According to the decades-long research of Dr. Peter Fenwick, a highly regarded neuropsychiatrist who has been studying the human brain, consciousness, and the phenomenon of near-death experience (NDE) for 50 years, this view is incorrect. Despite initially being highly incredulous of NDEs and related phenomena, Fenwick now believes his extensive research suggests that consciousness persists after death. In fact, Fenwick believes that consciousness actually exists independently and outside of the brain as an inherent property of the universe itself like dark matter and dark energy or gravity. Hence, in Fenwick’s view, the brain does not create or produce consciousness; rather, it filters it” (Lazarus, 2019).

The article then offers an example metaphor of what Fenwick means when he says the brain is a filter of consciousness, “When the eye dies, the electromagnetic

spectrum does not vanish or cease to be; it's just that the eye is no longer viable and therefore can no longer filter, be stimulated by, and react to light energy. But the energy it previously interacted with remains nonetheless. And so too when the ear dies, or stops transducing sound waves, the energies that the living ear normally responds to still exist. According to Fenwick, so it is with consciousness. Just because the organ that filters, perceives, and interprets it dies does not mean the phenomenon itself ceases to exist. It only ceases to be in the now-dead brain but continues to exist independently of the brain as an external property of the universe itself. What's more, according to Fenwick, our consciousness tricks us into perceiving a false duality of self and other when in fact there is only unity. We are not separate from other aspects of the universe but an integral and inextricable part of them."

So reputable scientists today may need to consider concepts such as the afterlife or the process of reincarnation. What a crazy age we live in. If this theory of conscious energy pre-existing before the bodymind comes into the world, filtering consciousness through its own perspective, turns out to be true then that would be in alignment with what many

Eastern spiritual traditions have proposed for thousands of years.

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In Hinduism, who we really are in essence is at one with Brahman, or consciousness itself. Hinduism views consciousness as the fundamental essence of existence, pervading all aspects of reality. This consciousness, known as “Chaitanya” or “Chit,” is not limited to human beings but is considered universal and all-pervasive. Hinduism teaches that each individual possesses an eternal, immutable essence known as the “Atman,” which is often translated as the self or soul. This self, who we seem to be out in the world, is actually identical to Brahman, the ultimate reality. Brahman is characterized by qualities such as consciousness, bliss and immortality. Our “Atman” is what filters Brahman, or infinite consciousness. Brahman can exist without an Atman but an Atman cannot exist without Brahman, just as “what is known” cannot exist without “the knower.” Who we essentially are is Brahman, consciousness, or the knower. Are you starting to see the parallels?

Even sectors of Abrahamic religions popular in Western culture have come to similar conclusions about the nature of God, the infinite observer of creation, and who we take ourselves to be. Sufis, the mystical dimension of Islam, view God, known as Allah in Islam, as the ultimate reality and the source of all existence. However, Sufis' understanding of God goes beyond mere theological doctrine; it encompasses a deeply personal and intimate relationship with the divine. One of the central concepts in Sufism is the "Unity of Being" (Wahdat al-Wujud), which teaches that all of creation is an expression of the divine and that ultimately there is only one reality—God. Sufi teachings often emphasize the importance of self-awareness and self-transformation in spiritual growth. The goal is to purify the self from egoic tendencies and cultivate values such as humility, love and surrender.

Long-forgotten Christian mystics offer profound insights into the nature of God and the self, emphasizing themes of divine union, purification, love and surrender in the quest for spiritual self-realization and communion with the divine. Their teachings continue to inspire and guide spiritual seekers across different traditions.

Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), a German Dominican friar and theologian, emphasized the concept of the “Godhead” or “the ground of the soul,” which he described as the divine essence within each individual. Eckhart taught that the soul has an innate capacity to experience union with God, and he spoke, rather like a Buddhist, of the need for detachment from worldly attachments and egoic identifications in order to realize this union. Central to Eckhart’s teachings is the idea of the “birth of the Word” or the “eternal birth of the Son in the soul,” wherein the individual soul becomes one with the divine in a mystical union transcending all duality.

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), an English anchoress and mystic, is known for her profound revelations of divine love and compassion, which she experienced during a series of visions. Julian spoke of God as “our true Mother” and emphasized the nurturing and compassionate aspect of the divine nature. Interestingly, Islam also views God as having a motherly nurturing aspect towards His creation that most Western Christianity ignores in the depiction of God as a male figure. Central to Julian’s theology is the concept of “the all,” which she described as the divine presence encompassing and

permeating all of creation. She taught that God's love and mercy extend to all beings without exception.

Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), a Spanish Carmelite nun and mystic, wrote extensively about her experiences of contemplative prayer and mystical union with God. Teresa described the soul as a "castle" with many dwelling places, each representing different stages of spiritual growth and union with God. Central to Teresa's teachings is the idea of a "spiritual betrothal" and "spiritual marriage," in which the soul enters into an intimate union with God characterized by love, surrender and divine indwelling.

Even within the bible of orthodox Christianity, you find many verses where becoming "Christ-like," or being "united with the Father," can be interpreted as the central theme.

John 14:20 (NIV):

"On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you."

Galatians 2:20 (NIV):

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Romans 8:9-10 (NIV):

“You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.”

1 Corinthians 6:17 (NIV):

“But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.”

1 John 4:16 (NIV):

“And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.”

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Just as the Hindus view Brahman as the essence that pervades the universe, the Muslims view Allah as the source of all creation. Exactly as Christians view God’s presence as something that watches over us, always here with us, permeating all of its creation, scientists can view “God” as conscious energy itself—this is where science meets spirituality. This is where we wake up and find out the truth about

ourselves. This is where we take responsibility for what we are aware of, and heal this world we are inseparable from. This is where we stop fighting amongst one another and recognize our unity. We will otherwise destroy ourselves if we continue to live in our lies of separation.

The time is now.

Contemporary Spiritual Teachers

In modern times, many popular teachers, not involved in any particular religious tradition, are helping guide those who have come to this realization about who they really are in a practical way. Many have helped me understand why I am not my thoughts, and with that the transformational step of “separating yourself from how you’re being, enough so that you can be another way” in ways that I am eternally grateful for.

Alan Watts

Alan Watts, a British philosopher, writer and speaker, attempted to bridge the East-West gap and left an indelible mark on the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s. Watts is

known for his profound insights into Eastern philosophy, particularly Zen Buddhism, Taoism and Vedanta, and for his ability to articulate complex philosophical concepts in accessible and engaging ways. Watts explored the nature of reality and consciousness, drawing from Eastern philosophies such as Zen Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. He challenged conventional Western notions of reality as objective and separate from the observer, proposing instead that reality is a dynamic, interconnected process that arises spontaneously and is inseparable from the perceiving mind. Watts suggested that the ego or “I” is a social construct and psychological illusion, much as scientists today are realizing it’s an illusion created from learning perspective-taking relations. He encouraged individuals to question their sense of identity and egoic attachments, inviting them to explore the deeper dimensions of consciousness beyond the confines of individual identity.

Eckhart Tolle

Eckhart Tolle is a contemporary spiritual teacher and author best known for his teachings on presence, mindfulness and awakening to the essence of being. His work, particularly

his bestselling books *The Power of Now* (Tolle, 1997) and *A New Earth* (Tolle, 2005), has had a profound impact on individuals seeking spiritual growth and inner peace. Tolle teaches that much of human suffering arises from identification with the ego, the false sense of self that is based on identification with thoughts, emotions and external conditions. He encourages individuals to observe the egoic mind without becoming identified with it, allowing for a deeper sense of presence and awareness to emerge. Central to Tolle's teachings is the practice of mindfulness and presence. He invites individuals to cultivate awareness of their inner state, including thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations, without judgment or resistance. By bringing attention to the present moment, individuals can awaken to the deeper dimension of being beyond the egoic mind. Tolle emphasizes the importance of acceptance and surrender as pathways to inner peace and liberation. He suggests that futile resistance to the present moment creates suffering, while acceptance allows for a deeper sense of peace and alignment with life as it unfolds.

Adyashanti

Adyashanti, a contemporary American spiritual teacher, offers teachings rooted in Zen Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta and mystical Christianity. His approach emphasizes direct realization of the nature of consciousness and the path to spiritual awakening. Adyashanti teaches that our true nature is not bound by the limitations of the ego or the conditioned mind. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing the inherent freedom and boundlessness of consciousness beyond the constructs of personal identity and egoic attachments. Adyashanti teaches that true awakening involves the cessation of spiritual seeking and the surrender of the egoic desire for enlightenment. He suggests that liberation is not something to be attained but is already present in the absence of identification with the egoic mind. Adyashanti encourages individuals to embody their awakening in everyday life by living with integrity, authenticity and compassion. He emphasizes the importance of aligning one's actions with the deeper truth of being and living from a place of openness and heart-centered awareness.

Rupert Spira

Rupert Spira is a contemporary spiritual teacher known for his teachings on non-duality and the direct path to spiritual awakening. Spira teaches that non-duality is the recognition of the fundamental unity of all existence, where there is no separation between self and other, subject and object, or inner and outer. He emphasizes that non-duality is not a concept to be understood intellectually but a direct realization of one's true nature. Spira encourages individuals to explore their own experience directly, rather than relying solely on conceptual understanding or belief systems. He invites practitioners to inquire into the nature of awareness and consciousness through introspection and self-inquiry.

According to Spira, awareness or consciousness is the true essence of who we are. He suggests that by turning attention inward and recognizing the presence of awareness, individuals can awaken to their fundamental identity as pure consciousness beyond the limitations of personal identity and ego. Ultimately, Spira encourages individuals to live from the recognition of their true nature as awareness in everyday life. He suggests that by resting in the awareness of being and living

from a place of openness and authenticity, individuals can bring greater peace, joy and fulfillment into their lives.

The analogy of the actor John Smith is a teaching tool used by Rupert Spira to illustrate the nature of the self and consciousness. Imagine a man named John Smith who is an actor. John Smith takes on various roles in different plays, portraying different characters with unique personalities, emotions and experiences. Despite playing these roles, John Smith remains the same person underneath, unaffected by the characters he portrays on stage.

In this analogy, John Smith represents the true self or consciousness, while the roles he plays represent the various experiences, thoughts and emotions that arise within consciousness. Just as John Smith the actor remains unchanged by the roles he plays, consciousness remains unaffected by the contents of experience—it is the ever-present, unchanging background in which all experiences arise and subside.

Through this analogy, Rupert Spira invites us to recognize that our true identity is not limited to the roles we play in life or the contents of our experience but is the boundless awareness in which all experiences unfold. Just as John Smith is

the common thread running through all his roles, consciousness is the underlying reality that permeates all aspects of our existence.

Spiritual Scientists

Even professional psychologists and therapists are now starting to take on the role and concepts of these “spiritual” teachers in their work. Something has to be true about what they are saying.

John Prendergast

John Prendergast is a contemporary spiritual teacher, psychotherapist and author known for his work in the field of nondual wisdom and psychology. He integrates Eastern spiritual teachings—particularly Advaita Vedanta and Zen Buddhism—with Western psychology and psychotherapy. Prendergast offers teachings and guidance on awakening to the true nature of reality and the self, emphasizing the importance of embodied presence and compassionate inquiry.

Prendergast holds a Ph.D. in psychology and has worked as a psychotherapist for over thirty years. He has also trained

extensively in mindfulness meditation and has studied with several prominent spiritual teachers, including Jean Klein and Adyashanti. Prendergast's teachings draw from his background in psychology, meditation and spiritual inquiry, offering a holistic approach to spiritual awakening and psychological healing.

As an author, Prendergast has written several books exploring themes related to nondual wisdom, psychology and meditation, including *The Deep Heart: Our Portal to Presence* (Prendergast, 2019), *In Touch: How to Tune in to the Inner Guidance of Your Body and Trust Yourself* (Prendergast, 2015) and *Listening from the Heart of Silence: Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy* (Prendergast, 2007).

Through his teachings, writings and private consultations, John Prendergast invites individuals to explore the nature of consciousness, embodiment and the self, guiding them on a journey of self-discovery and awakening to the deeper dimensions of being. He continues to offer workshops, retreats and online courses to support individuals on the path of spiritual and psychological integration.

Dr. Richard C. Schwartz

Dr. Richard C. Schwartz is a psychologist, author and the developer of the Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy model. He earned his Ph.D. in Marriage and Family Therapy from Purdue University and is a licensed marriage and family therapist.

IFS is a psychotherapeutic approach that conceptualizes the mind as consisting of various parts, each with its own unique characteristics and functions. According to IFS, individuals have a core or true self, which is inherently calm, compassionate and curious. The goal of therapy is to help clients access and strengthen their self-leadership, enabling them to heal and integrate their parts more effectively.

In addition to his clinical work, Schwartz has authored numerous books and articles on IFS therapy, including *Internal Family Systems Therapy* (Schwartz, 1995) and *You Are the One You've Been Waiting For* (Schwartz, 2023). He has also conducted workshops on IFS therapy internationally, training thousands of mental health professionals in this transformative approach to healing.

Loch Kelly

Loch Kelly is a meditation teacher, psychotherapist and author known for his teachings on non-duality and awakening. He integrates various contemplative practices—including mindfulness and non-dual awareness—with modern psychological approaches to facilitate spiritual awakening and psychological healing.

Kelly is the founder of the Open-Hearted Awareness Institute, through which he offers teachings, workshops, retreats and online courses on meditation, awakening and embodiment. He draws from his background in psychology, contemplative practice and neuroscience to offer practical guidance for awakening to our true nature and living with greater freedom, joy and authenticity.

Kelly is the author of the book *Shift into Freedom: The Science and Practice of Open-Hearted Awareness* (Kelly, 2015), in which he presents a comprehensive guide to awakening and offers practical exercises and insights for cultivating non-dual awareness in daily life.

Kelly's teachings emphasize the importance of accessing non-dual awareness—a state of open-hearted presence and

clarity—as a pathway to liberation from suffering and the realization of our inherent wholeness. Through his work, he invites individuals to explore the direct experience of awareness, transcendental consciousness and the spaciousness of being beyond the limitations of the egoic mind.

Dr. Bonnie Greenwell

Dr. Bonnie Greenwell is a transpersonal psychologist, meditation teacher and author known for her work in the field of spiritual awakening, Kundalini awakening and non-dual awareness. She has a Ph.D. in Transpersonal Psychology from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California.

Greenwell has been a student of meditation and Eastern spiritual traditions for over 30 years. She has a particular interest in the process of Kundalini awakening, which she experienced herself in 1983. Since then, she has dedicated her life to understanding and assisting others through the transformative journey of spiritual awakening, especially in the context of Kundalini experiences.

As a teacher, Greenwell offers guidance, support and teachings to individuals who are undergoing Kundalini awakening or seeking spiritual awakening. She emphasizes the importance of understanding and integrating the psychological, energetic and spiritual dimensions of the awakening process, helping individuals navigate the challenges and opportunities that arise along the way.

Greenwell is the author of several books on Kundalini awakening and spiritual awakening, including *The Kundalini Guide: A Companion for the Inward Journey* (Greenwell, 2014), *Energies of Transformation: A Guide to the Kundalini Process* (Greenwell, 1995) and *When Spirit Leaps: Navigating the Process of Spiritual Awakening* (Greenwell, 2018). These books offer practical guidance, insights and exercises for individuals undergoing Kundalini awakening and spiritual transformation.

4. Addressing Confusion

Hopefully you have now started to see the truth that your self is greater than the story in your head. After all, many people can understand and agree on the concept of our self being greater than the conditioned thoughts given to us by our culture. However, two confusing questions often remain. The first question I will answer now and the second will be answered throughout the next chapter.

The First Question

“Even though I understand I am not my thoughts ... why do they feel so real? Why do they always pull me in? Why do they feel like me still?”

They feel like you because they are a part of you too. The aware being that you are is intrinsically connected to what it is aware of. It has to be because you cannot have one without the other. The content of experience cannot exist without the experiencer knowing it. The problem is that the experiencer has lost themselves in what they are temporarily experiencing. The aware being that you and I are has lost itself in its own

activity of thinking, feeling and perceiving. When did we stop understanding that thinking and feeling are activities and not who we actually are? That's right ... when we lost ourselves in our own activity. We lose touch with who we really are when we become cognitively *fused* with our thoughts and feelings.

In this understanding of ourselves as consciously aware beings, the confusion of there being “two yous” I wrote about earlier begins to subside. The belief of there being “two yous” is caused by being cognitively fused with the story in your head. When we finally defuse from the story in our head, we realize that who we are is really a conscious aware being, and what we have been aware of, the story in our head, has been our own activity this whole time. We start to recognize our inherent freedom from the stories our mind presents to us. We can even start creating a new story for ourselves.

Being simply aware, or experiencing awareness itself, is all we ever directly experience in our lives. The only time we seem to experience something else is when the illusion of thought appears and starts to label things. One of the things we begin to label is “who we are.” This started the moment we learned deictic relations, or what Hayes called perspective-taking

concepts such as I/you, here/there, now/then. In becoming aware of our own perspective and developing a self-concept, we became “aware of the other” and started comparing ourselves to others. There needs to be a “me” in order to know a “you.” This is why in the learning of deictic relations, you cannot separate “I” from “you.” What does the process of learning deictic relations, or “perspective-taking” concepts, teach us? They teach us that duality is a concept.

We are beginning to understand that we are inseparable not only psychologically in regards to the illusion deictic relations create, but also physically as we know that the matter we see is a kind of unified energy field. What if the process of learning deictic relations as a child, these “perspective-taking concepts,” is the scientific process of the creation of the mind’s illusion of duality that spiritualists have been proposing for millennia? The world’s two major truth-seekers, scientists and spiritualists, start to come together. I believe that the world’s “truth-seekers” are about to find the truth.

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I fell into the trap so many spiritual seekers fall into after they learn about the notion of enlightenment, and that of a true “observer self that transcends duality.” I was led to believe

that there was a “higher-self” version of me waiting to be found so that I could be free of “lower-self” thoughts, feelings, etc. I thought that if I could know myself as the observer, I could watch my thoughts and feelings from “over here,” without getting caught up in them. So I put all of my obsessive OCD energy into trying to find this “observer self” free from “what it is observing.” I turned away, and “ran” from myself, becoming very dissociated from reality in ways that were unhelpful.

But if something is your “true self,” do you have to do anything in order to become it? Do you have to run away from anything? Are you not already your true self? Many of the contemporary spiritual teachers I mentioned earlier have reminded their followers they already are what they are seeking. I didn’t understand that. I spent almost the next five years trying to commit “spiritual suicide.” I attempted to meditate myself away and searched every single corner of my consciousness for my true, open and aware “observer self.” But what I was really doing in this search was desperately trying to find something in my experience, perhaps an observer self who was open to the hurt I was experiencing, that would accept the most hurtful parts of me. What I was doing was a very

sophisticated, or “spiritual,” method of running away from that part of me that couldn’t accept my hurt. I was still trying to destroy myself. In my free time, I continued to read books and watch videos on the topic of enlightenment as if I had missed something that would make it all finally “click” for me. Yet, the point of “the search” I was engaged in was ultimately not to find myself, but to get away from myself. “Spiritual suicide” was, for me, the ultimate form of avoiding myself. That whole time, I was still deciding to not be okay with what was appearing within me, with what was a part of me, and I thought that becoming an inherently open and aware observer self “over here” while I hurt “over there” would naturally allow myself to be. I called myself a spiritualist and claimed that everything is one, but I was still stuck in the idea of duality. I was the “little me in my head” trying to find who I really was so I didn’t have to deal with myself anymore. That’s the thing though, everything appearing within me was a part of me.

It was all me. The burning desire to not hurt anymore, to not search anymore, to be confused no longer. I just wanted to be free, open awareness, without some of the things awareness was aware of ... But how can you do that? How can you separate the two?

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One day, I started to understand. I scratched all my “spiritual avoidance desires” and sat on my bed crying, admitting that I just wanted to love myself. It felt like I was simultaneously also saying, “I just want to be myself.” I just wanted to show up as I am. After all, was that not what this whole spiritual search was all about? Did I not want to find who I really was... feel free... feel like myself again? I had been running away from things that appeared within me, awareness, that I didn’t like. Is that not the same as running away from yourself? So I began to turn towards myself ... all of me. This entire appearance of me. And “non-duality” finally began to make sense. It’s not that I am the experiencer “over here,” experiencing things “over there.” That would be duality. That would be the illusion of the here/there deictic, or “perspective-taking” relation. It’s simply just experiencing. And there is no proof of there being an “experiencer,” other than the fact that the experiencer is a byproduct of early childhood development, the time when our mind learns deictic relations. All we are ever directly aware of is “experiencing.” We simply believe that we are “over here” doing it from some

imaginary vantage point. Just as I/you, here/there and now/then are imagined. “Here” is also “there,” “then” was also “now,” and “I” can also be “you.”

Are you, awareness, inherently and by definition, free from that which you are aware of? Well, sort of. As previously mentioned, you—awareness itself—has to be with its own activity, this experience. It is a part of you, and there is no separating awareness itself from what it is aware of. True freedom from things doesn’t mean being bound by them—it doesn’t mean having to control them or run away from them. It means being free to experience everything, not selectively but equally. Being free doesn’t mean running away from the dark chasing the light—but being completely open to both. However, do you, awareness, have to continue engaging with this current experience or can you move towards something else? It is an activity after all. Everyone can direct the focus of their attention onto something new if they are willing.

I am not saying we can control our attention all the time. Our attention is often stolen from us, and things like attention deficit disorder (ADD) are a part of some people’s experience—especially in the 21st century. Yet, even if the direction of our attention becomes strongly influenced by

certain things we are experiencing, can we—awareness itself—still decide to engage with something else in that moment if we are willing? This is what non-judgmental mindfulness meditation is all about and why it is working for people. I am not suggesting that you should struggle with yourself in the form of trying to control your attention. But if you are someone who feels like you can't control your attention at all in some situations, then I suggest that you gently become aware of what you are attending to in that moment, and be honest with yourself—is this what you really want to continue engaging with?

The whole notion of an “observer self,” or a true “enlightened self,” really just puts spiritualists on a confusing path filled with sophisticated methods of avoiding themselves. After my search filled with overthinking, schizophrenic notes, and 200-video-long private playlists on YouTube, I have found one description of what awareness is to be the best:

This.

Just ... “this.” This experience happening now. Us appearing the way we are now. This. If you “get this,” it will save you from so much time and effort searching for yourself

and trying to accept yourself ... trying to be yourself. This description reminds me of the ancient Sanskrit words, “Tat tvam asi,” which translates to, “You are that/this.” “Tat tvam asi” is used within Hindu philosophy to refer to the unity of Atman (the individual self or soul) with Brahman (universal consciousness itself).

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This is what spirituality has been pushing for millennia—the idea that what we essentially are is consciousness itself. That what we are is connected to the source of creation itself. What does it mean when you are experiencing you? What are the implications of having to take responsibility for this appearance? Does that mean we are responsible for wars and the hate that appears within our world? Were we ever not? Does it mean I am responsible for our earth and our people? Were we ever not? Are we responsible for future experiences in our world? Does it mean that we are not life’s victims and have to take responsibility for everything we feel and do? You decide.

The Second Question

“If I am not who I thought myself to be, then what’s true? What kind of thoughts do I think? What do I do now?”

You have recognized that you are free from what you believed yourself to be. You see that you are not life’s victim. Things don’t happen to you, but simply are happening as you—this appearance. These appearances are part of you, so you must take responsibility for them. You are intimately connected to everything as awareness is inseparable from what appears within it.

Now you must take responsibility for this appearance—or the “activity” of awareness—and direct the focus of your conscious attention towards engaging in a new activity.

This is where you direct your focus towards engaging in being a new “self” out in the world. This is where the process of “becoming” begins. Remember the original curious thought? “I” want to change “myself.” This is where you start to engage in being a new self through the thoughts, beliefs and actions you decide to invest the power of your conscious attention in.

5. Deciding Who To Be

Hopefully you have “defused” yourself enough with all this talk of not being who you have thought yourself to be. If after practicing the exercises presented at the end of this section you find that you need extra help, I offer my course “Rediscover Yourself” over at projecttrueself.com for a decent price. I’ll help you recognize your inherent acceptance of the present moment, and create enough “distance” for you to tackle the topic of this chapter: deciding who you are going to be. What kind of “you” are you—this aware being I have been pointing to—going to become aware of? What kind of activity are you going to engage in now that you are free? What kind of thoughts are you going to think? What will you end up feeling? If you have to take responsibility for your own reality, then what is going to be your truth?

Reality Or Your Idea of Reality?

Before we jump into a practical understanding of manifestation, let’s examine the concept of “reality.” If the reality of myself is not what I have thought it to be, then what

is reality? What should I do now? What thoughts should I think? The humanistic contextual behaviorists of today, who were involved in the development of psychological flexibility processes, see reality as whatever you make it. In other words, reality is whatever works for you.

What are thoughts? Thoughts. Do you have to let all of them be? Yes, you—awareness—have to allow what it is aware of to be. Do you have to believe or listen to every single thought you think? I don't know, do you? Do you—awareness—have to direct the focus of your attention towards engaging in every thought you think? Do you—awareness itself—have to reach out and grab onto everything you are aware of?

If there's an undesired false thought you are currently experiencing in this moment, it is exactly that: a thought you don't like and that doesn't work with you being experienced in this moment. If there's a thought that feels true for you, then it is exactly that: a thought talking about something true for you. When there is a thought that states what reality is: there is a thought that states what reality is. When there's a suffering thought: you are currently experiencing a thought that is causing you to suffer. Is there a confusing one that doesn't

know what the truth really is that causes great existential suffering? Then there's a confusing thought that doesn't know what the truth really is that is currently causing you to experience great existential suffering.

The reality of thoughts is exactly that: they are thoughts. The examples from the previous paragraph are pulled straight from a cognitive defusion technique I described earlier. In this technique, you take a look at your experience more directly as it happens. Instead of habitually believing the thought "I am an anxious person," you verbally respond with the direct understanding that "I am having a thought that says I am an anxious person." In our tragic habit of instantly believing every thought that comes to mind, we can create a reality for ourselves in our mind that truly doesn't help us. However, when we become free of the habit of instantly identifying with or believing every thought that comes to mind, we can realize that we have always had the power to direct our attention towards what we wish to believe and value. In doing so, we create a reality for ourselves we can truly cherish.

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Reality is beyond just your idea about it. It is common knowledge that what's true for you might not be for me. But

there are also examples we can use to support the other view. Who said we can't both be right sometimes? Who said our perspective on reality can only be one way but not the other? When did we forget that reality is simply a perception of what we believe?

The flaws of the mainstream approach to psychological suffering over the last hundred years were briefly examined earlier. The approach was based on the idea that irrational, dysfunctional thoughts need to be remedied by more rational ones in order to reduce suffering. Thoughts disconnected from reality cause more suffering and if one can recognize the irrational thoughts from the rational and can control the irrational thoughts in some way, then they are in good psychological well-being.

But what are rational thoughts? And what are irrational thoughts? Who gets to decide? American psychologist Carl Rogers challenged the idea that the therapist should be the “advice-giver” in the therapeutic relationship with his concept of client-centered therapy. Rogers’ work emphasized the importance of empathy, unconditional positive regard and genuineness in the therapeutic relationship. His approach to therapy, known as client-centered therapy or person-centered

therapy, shifted the focus from the therapist as an expert to the client as the primary agent of change. He believed that individuals possess the inherent capacity for growth and self-actualization and that the role of the therapist is to provide a supportive and empathic environment in which clients can explore and express their feelings, thoughts and experiences. Carl Rogers' humanistic approach to therapy revolutionized the field of psychology, influencing not only clinical practice but also education, counseling and other helping professions. His emphasis on the importance of the therapeutic relationship, empathy and client autonomy continues to shape modern psychotherapy approaches such as ACT.

Rogers' client-centered therapy concept is so successful because it works. Reality is personal. Perhaps not the ultimate reality or the laws of the universe, but one could argue that one of those laws is that an individual's reality is personal. Therefore, if you want to respect reality, you have to respect everyone's reality. It's the 21st century, and we have access to the world's encyclopedia the moment we power on a computer. There are innumerable unique realities out there being lived by unique individuals.

Due to OCD, I used to wash my hands ten times believing that it would help me get rid of germs. This was an irrational thought because soap should clean your hands perfectly fine the first time. However, to me and my reality at the time, I believed ten times would clean me better than one time because I was using more soap. And it did—it cleaned my hands so well they were left chapped. What about when I was worried about cars running over me while walking on the side of the road? Was it irrational to move as far away as possible from the curb in order to protect myself from cars? Yes, probably. Yet, was it also true that moving over to the side of the walkway might reduce the chances of me getting hit by a car? Yes, maybe. Perhaps our freedom of choice in regards to what we make into our reality is the reason why therapists have a hard time shoving down logic with “reason giver” patients. It doesn’t work.

If the reality of soap cleaning better the more you use it was true for me and I decided to engage in those behaviors, then what was the issue? Well, what was also true for me was that I didn’t want to engage in those behaviors any more, as they caused me a great deal of pain and distress. I was struggling with engaging in those behaviors. It’s the reason I ended up in

therapy. I have a quick fictional story about a gay man trying to balance his religious beliefs with his internal desires to illustrate this point.

Once upon a time a man was trying to come out of the closet but was having a hard time because of his spiritual beliefs. He ended up in therapy that wasn't client-centered and was given advice by the therapist day in and day out. The therapist, from their biased perspective, concluded that the man might actually not want to be gay if he was struggling with the thought of it so much to the point where he reacted to the thought as if it was undesirable. It seemed true, as the man even said that he might enjoy being in a relationship with a woman, but something deeper was stopping the man from fully expressing himself to the therapist. The ignorant therapist, in a desperate attempt for an answer, gave all of his logical reasons why the man might not be gay, and they even made sense to the patient. But unknown to the therapist, the man, in his reality, also valued a beautiful relationship with God, and held the belief that a beautiful relationship with God entails being a certain way ... not gay. What would God think?

However, at any time, that man could have decided, for himself, what a beautiful relationship with God looks like. A

decision that could have saved him so much unnecessary suffering. What if you had a relationship with God where you show up as yourself? Does he not unconditionally love you? You get to decide that too in your belief. Some people believe God does not unconditionally love them. The man's religious denomination told him their idea of what a good relationship with God looks like, but what about him? There's a reason there are tons of religious denominations nowadays. If one's truth doesn't work for you, then make up your own. Build a new church!

What if the man in the story valued being himself? However abnormal his community viewed him according to their reality? What would a reality where "being yourself" is the cornerstone look like? What kind of beliefs would that entail ... what kind of actions? What if he decided to become compassionate towards his desire to have an intimate relationship with a man regardless if some would consider it dysfunctional? Is this not the ultimate goal of many LGBTQIA+ individuals? To "come out" and show themselves to the world? Does the thought "there's something wrong with being gay because it says so in my church's rulebook" help him achieve the desire to be himself? Would another thought or

action be functionally beneficial for him to go towards being himself? Are his beliefs working for him?

An approach that might work for this man would be to recognize that it might be time to change religious denominations, go to another more open church, or develop a more personal relationship with and understanding of God. This is where the “values-based action” step of the psychological flexibility model comes in. Is worshiping a God that doesn’t want you to be yourself helpful? No? Then drop him. He’s an untruthful God. Find another God, another relationship with God, another denomination, another church ... Something!

Making Sense of Manifestation

When we are defused enough from our current beliefs, we can decide to start creating new beliefs—hopefully, beliefs that work better for us and are aligned with our chosen values. This is where the popular spiritual ideas of intention and manifestation come in. Some people don’t believe in the power of these things because they have yet to see how controlled by their conditioning they actually are. They haven’t seen how

much our belief does matter in creating our lives. Most people are fused with their thinking, and are not aware of who they really are as an aware being inherently free from the beliefs it is aware of. They see themselves as victims of the story in their head and don't see the story in their head as a flexible activity that their conscious attention can decide to actively engage in, or disengage from, moment to moment. This is when the "Commitment and Behavior Change Processes" of the psychological flexibility model start to make sense and fit everything together into a coherent transformational tool that aligns with what the "spiritual search," a search promising meaning and transcendence at its end, has been about for millenia. By becoming free from our unhelpful stories, and consciously choosing to engage in "values-based action" is how we manifest our most deeply desired reality—a life that completely works for us.

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It makes no sense to dissociate from ourselves in order to join the spiritual search for a "higher self" if there's nothing functionally beneficial in the finding of a higher self. Carl Jung understood the solution to the question the confused individual asks themselves after dissociating from, or diffusing

from, who they have always thought themselves to be. That question is, “Just what do I do now?”

Jung wrote in his book, *The Undiscovered Self* (Jung, 1957), “Just as the chaotic movements of the crowd, all ending in mutual frustration, are impelled in a definite direction by a dictatorial will, so the individual in his dissociated state needs a directing and ordering principle.” (p. 60)

This “directing and ordering principle” is the set of values you, awareness itself, decide to engage with. You do this by directing the focus of your attention on engaging in activities that are in line with your chosen values. Jung also believed this “directing principle” is something other than the egoic “story in our heads” which likes to think it’s entirely in control of ourselves in an infused state.

Jung stated, “Ego-consciousness would like to let its own will play this role, but overlooks the existence of powerful unconscious factors which thwart its intentions.” (Jung, 1957, p. 60)

There is something very real and powerful about us—as conscious beings aware of what we are experiencing—being able to decide to be a certain way at a higher level. We can decide to be okay with not being okay, decide to not judge our

judgements, decide to let go of not being able to let go, decide to love even our “unlovable” selves, and even decide to approach our feelings of unconfidence ... with confidence.

A Practical Understanding of Manifestation

Our beliefs matter. The moment you don't believe you can do something, you cut yourself off from even the possibility of trying (consequently making it impossible). You need to at least actively try in order to see if you can do something. And if you discover you are unable, then you can decide to either keep trying (because you believe someday you might be able to) or quit forever.

Human beings have understood the laws of manifestation ever since we discovered agriculture. First, you must plant. You have to plant the idea of who you want to become in your mind. What does this person value? How do they feel? What do they do? Next, before you harvest, you must cultivate. This is the part that many of us want to skip. We've been conditioned, especially in the west, by an instant gratification society. We want to skip the hard work, the step of cultivating, and get to the harvest right away. We want the big breakthrough, the gym-goer body, the million dollars, the

partner of our dreams right away. But you have to work at things in life. You have to go towards them.

You cultivate the seed of the person you want to become throughout your day. You don't do this by looking in the mirror and repeating affirmations. You do this through the hard work of constantly engaging in values-based action. What kind of thoughts would the person you want to be, that values x, y, and z be thinking? What do they pay attention to? How do they treat themselves? How do they treat others? What actions are they engaged in? How do they organize their day? This is hard work. This is the step of cultivation ... then you harvest.

There is a three step process to manifestation:

1. You need to be thinking the right thoughts. (I.e. I can be confident, I can be loved, etc.)
2. You need to actually believe what needs to be believed.
3. You need to have your attention and your actions aligned. (What kind of activity do I need to do to actually be this way? Does my attention lie in the correct place?)

This process of “making things happen,” or manifestation, is profoundly logical. How did the concept of manifestation ever become reserved for only the spiritual?

Let’s examine a popular situation one may find themselves in. A woman desires to be in a relationship but she is struggling because the thought “I am unlovable” appears and she consequently refuses to take a chance with new love interests. Even if that thought is “false,” thanks to our mind that loves solving a good problem, she will find numerous examples that prove she is “unlovable.” In response to engaging with the thought of “being unlovable,” her mind might, for instance, produce the example that her first boyfriend cheated on her, or even the very convincing example that her own father disowned her.

This happens because of our problem-solving mind’s relational nature. The thoughts and feelings that appear as a result of this relational nature are a part of who we are and therefore have to be honored if we want to be ourselves. We are not struggling with ourselves here ... unless we decide to, of course.

What this person can do is recognize she desires an intimate relationship. She can turn back towards herself, and in doing so

discover that the whole struggle with “being unlovable” screams out a desire to be loved. Remember, our deepest values are hidden within what causes us the most pain. So ... how can she manifest love into her life? First, she can start with deciding to love her unlovable self.

How would she use the manifestation process described before to bring love into her life? First, she would have to think the right thoughts. Instead of, “This relationship will never work out because I am unlovable and everyone ends up leaving me,” she needs to instead think something like, “I can be loved by others, starting with myself.” Even if she doesn’t feel like her new ideas about herself are genuine, and there is doubt, she must decide to believe in them regardless. She must believe through the doubt. We can still choose to believe in something regardless of doubt being present.

Next, she has to imagine what loving herself looks like for her personally. During this process, she should become aware of the kind of actions loving herself would look like. She would see that loving herself means recognizing her pain, being with herself and deciding to go out with a potential love interest even if she is deathly afraid because the only thing stopping her before was her decision to be unlovable. All that’s left after

becoming aware of what needs to be done is aligning her attention and action with anything and everything that brings this love about for herself.

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This whole process, however, is bumpy. Why? Because the residues of who you “have been being” start to appear. It’s like the world is confused and tests you by asking, “Are you really being this way now?” It’s important to note that the steps of the manifestation process need not be followed chronologically. Neither do the steps in modern psychology’s psychological flexibility model. While following this process, if thoughts occur that are contrary to how you want to be, and it feels as if you are “fused” with your thinking, it can help to return to the psychological flexibility model’s “Mindfulness and Acceptance Processes.” You reconnect with who you really are as awareness itself—self-as-context—rather than the content of experience (the appearance of undesired thoughts in this case). A simple exercise you can do to remember who you are beyond the thinking mind is to ask yourself: “Am I aware?” Notice where your attention goes when you try to “find” awareness. Where is it? Do you have to go anywhere to find the experience of “being aware?” When you find your answer, ask yourself this

second question: “Am I aware, or am I this thought I am aware of?”

When you find yourself “trying to believe,” you may feel doubt and struggle with that doubt. But ask yourself in these moments where do you—awareness—find your attention? What activity are you engaging in? If you want to believe in yourself, does investing your attention in doubt help you? Sometimes we habitually invest our attention in things we don’t want in our struggle with them ... the doubt in this case. Remember when I was afraid of being afraid? Focusing on the fear just produces more fear ... focusing on the doubt produces more doubt. Remember, doubt is a part of us. But what’s wrong with the doubt being a part of you while you decide to believe through it? What’s wrong with being afraid of things you want to do while doing them anyway? You can honor the doubt within you but decide to believe anyway. Is this not what true faith is? Do you see how limited we make ourselves when we invest our attention in making the painful part of ourselves the enemy? We decide to be bound by our pain.

Have you decided to love yourself but find yourself not only thinking but also focusing on thoughts that are hard on yourself? Are you calling yourself an “addict” still, yet are going

to collect your five years sober pin? Have you decided not to procrastinate anymore but find yourself wallowing in how boring the tasks you have set out to complete are? You might be thinking the wrong thoughts, telling yourself things like, “But what I should do is boring,” or “I’ll get to it in a moment.” This is not being a non-procrastinator. This is not being someone who is disciplined and values getting things done. Do you see how powerful not only our belief is but our attention as well? We sabotage our chance at success the moment we believe we “can’t,” and if we decide not even to direct our attention towards something we want, do you ever think we will get it?

What if the procrastinator valued not only being disciplined but also compassionate towards themselves? How could they treat the common procrastination situation differently? How about honoring the fact that what they should be doing—studying, for example—actually does feel boring? Now imagine this person also wants to be flexible, as most procrastinators do, and decides to be flexible enough to take on the task of studying even while feeling bored. A few thoughts about “wanting to rather play video games” pop up, but because of this person’s new-found flexibility their focus

returns to studying even with the horrible feelings of boredom and the desire to play video games coexisting. They can even throw in a few compassionate thoughts in the process like, “I am going to learn how to enjoy studying” or “I enjoy the challenge of studying.” If what I just described became a habit, or this person’s default response when approaching challenging tasks, then they would never be perceived as a procrastinator again. They would be seen as someone who is disciplined, not because of how they feel inside, but because they are doing the things that disciplined people do. In the end, they may even start to enjoy studying.

Your Manifestation Guide

In the beginning of the book, I wrote that we would explore the curious blockage that happens when even though we desire to change ourselves our very self often gets in the way. Using everything we have learned, at the end of this exercise we will know the steps to follow to become the person we have always wanted to be. We will see clearly what thoughts need to be thought, what beliefs need to be believed in, what actions need to be engaged in, and ultimately where our attention

must lie.

1. First, I want you to write down something. In what ways do you get in your own way? In what ways does your mind trouble you when attempting to accomplish your goal of being who you want to be? Most importantly, how do you deal with these challenges? How do you react?
2. Next, visualize the person you wish to become. What would they value? The values of the person you wish to become are your values as well. You value becoming this person after all. (Examples of personal values include connection, love, peace, freedom, balance, order, integrity, acceptance, openness, etc.)
3. I want you to operationalize these values. Describe them in action. We see what others value not by their internal feelings but by their external actions. We describe others as open, patient or compassionate not by how they feel inside but by the actions they exhibit. Values are represented by our actions, not by our internal feelings that unpredictably ebb and flow. If you value patience, then a valued action

could be to find something to do in the meantime while experiencing impatient emotions. If you value acceptance, but find your attention sinking into unpleasant experiences, a valued action of acceptance could be to decide to direct your attention on something else in those moments. If you value connection with others, you could start looking into people's eyes and greeting them with a smile. If you value openness, then you can decide to engage in these valued actions regardless of how you feel. You become what you do repeatedly, and it's the little things that count. We can "become" the person we have always wanted to be by engaging in the kind of actions, big or small, that they would as soon as today.

4. Re-write down the challenges you face, but this time from the perspective of the person you wish to become. This person also experiences the same pain and challenges you currently do, but they react differently. They think thoughts in alignment with their values and direct their attention towards actions that align with these values. How does the person you wish to become react to these

challenges?

5. Now, answer honestly, could you act in this way towards the challenges you currently face? Could you direct your attention towards engaging in the valued action the person you want to become engages in along with your pain? If so, then great. I believe you already know what to do. If not, and the task seems too daunting, then what is a valued action that at least goes in the direction of the way you wish to become? Break the daunting task down into little steps ordered by your level of willingness to act. For example, let's imagine that you value health and openness and wish to quit smoking, but the task of quitting cold turkey and experiencing the chaos of withdrawal symptoms is too daunting. You start to experience pulls to smoke. Even if there are thoughts and feelings struggling with these pulls to smoke, what could you do to at least go in the direction of engaging in an action that values "openness?" What about setting a 5-minute timer before you allow yourself to smoke? It may seem silly, or as if you are "not accomplishing much," but with this simple small action you have decided to become the quitter. You have

decided to become a person who values health and openness. Set a 6-minute timer next time, and see where it eventually leads you. Someday you may set a 24-hour timer.

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No matter what we tell ourselves, we can control our actions. We might not be able to control habitual reactions, but we can control how we react to those reactions. Usually, we are unwilling to do something we want to do because of a fearful thought, feeling or possible outcome. This is your pain. This is the painful part of yourself that you have to be with. If there is a major unwillingness to engage in your valued action, then I want you to understand that it is okay. This is part of who you are. Still, I want you to honestly ask yourself “Why?” What’s stopping you from engaging in these valued actions that lead to being who you have always wanted to be? Could it perhaps be the feeling of unwillingness itself? Or anxiety? If so, then go back to writing down how the person you want to become would treat these emotions. That is the step you take right now towards transformation, and it’s not “peachy.”

If at any point during this process you find your attention difficult to direct, or feel as if you are “stuck” in your thoughts

or feelings, I recommend that you practice mindfulness and cognitive defusion techniques daily in order to cultivate greater psychological flexibility. Remember, these techniques are not designed to “get rid of” feelings of unwillingness to act or anxiousness. Instead, they help us see that we, as conscious beings aware of what we are experiencing, can act in certain ways regardless of what we are feeling, thinking or perceiving. Some exercises you can practice daily include:

1. The 10-minute meditation I recommend in chapter two’s section on psychological flexibility.
2. Labeling your distressing thoughts and feelings as if you were viewing them from a distance. Try to catch yourself engaging in self-destructive patterns and reframe your perspective. For example, instead of saying “I am sad,” recognize that you are aware of the feeling of sadness by saying, “There is a feeling of sadness.”
3. Singing your distressing thoughts or saying them outloud in a funny voice. This is a simple action anyone can do, but some may be unwilling to try due to the distressing ruminations themselves or the belief that it won’t help. Believe it or not, this is a serious clinically researched cognitive defusion technique. It helps us see that no matter

how we feel about something, we can still direct the focus of our attention and action towards being a certain way.

Biology & Belief

Belief and attention are incredibly powerful tools, but many of us have forgotten this. As someone who has embraced the material in this book, you are not one of those people. The power of belief is even being recognized today in the field of biology of all places. Epigenetic researchers, who study the effect the environment has on gene expression, have discovered that genes can turn themselves on or off in the process of natural selection. However, here's the catch:

They cannot turn themselves on/off by themselves. It needs to be done by some outside force.

This suggests that genes are not the ultimate “deciders of our fate” as thought previously, and there is something else at work.

“Our environment” is not limited to our surroundings and the people in those surroundings who nurture us, but also includes the environment we build for ourselves inside of us and the nurturing we give to ourselves. Bruce Lipton is a cell biologist who believes in the concept of “nurturing one’s self.”

He received his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia and conducted postdoctoral research at Stanford University. Lipton's research focuses on how environmental factors—such as thoughts, beliefs and emotions—influence gene expression and, consequently, our health and behavior. His research challenges the conventional belief that genes control our biology, arguing instead that our perceptions and environment are the primary determinants of our health and behavior. Lipton's work emphasizes the power of positive thinking, consciousness and lifestyle choices in shaping our well-being. He is also known for popularizing these ideas through books like *The Biology of Belief* (Lipton, 2005) and lectures on the intersection of science and spirituality.

Moral Beliefs

You take back responsibility for what is appearing within you by re-recognizing the truth that you have to be with what has decided to appear within you, what awareness has already allowed in, remembering that these appearances are your own activity, and then by deciding what kind of activity you will engage in using the power of your attention.

Even morality becomes simple when you see that you are responsible for deciding what is morally correct in your life. Remember the story of the religious gay man? This is where he gets to decide what God looks like for himself. This is where he decides what the rules look like for himself. After all, is this not how things have always been in our world? Just as every country and culture has done before him, he gets to decide what morality looks like. He chooses the rules. He is responsible for his own life. How freeing is that?

Now, I am not saying that there are no rules in life or consequences. However, human beings are free to make choices. As they say, “God gave us free will.” There are consequences to not listening to yourself, not being honest towards others, or loving towards your neighbor. We live in a world of laws, a world of cause and effect, but one of those laws is that we have the free will to decide what we believe in. We also have the free will to go against or with the current. To allow God to work through me, or go against their will. To do what works best, or to not do what works best. To be myself or not to be myself. We are free.

I am going to reference a recent event in my life to illustrate this point. Recently, I have begun to invest all of my free time in actualizing my work's purpose as a leader in this coming age of love. I have been working on my writing but wanted more time to devote to starting my business. As I have been working two jobs, 60 hours a week, I wanted balance in my life to create enough space for the kind of serious investment I wanted to put into becoming a successful new-age thought leader. Simply put, I had to get out of my part-time job at Starbucks. Working at Starbucks gave me a clear example of where we are at in our modern instant gratification society of expectations. From the ten in-house orders still needing to be made, the five drive-through orders still coming through, being expected to think three orders ahead of time, forgetting to not put ice in someone's drink, having to remember the custom modifications a customer found on TikTok, to the manager "just doing their job," demanding what should never be demanded of human beings ... reducing the drive-through times by one more second.

I wanted out. So I decided to quit unprofessionally, not giving my notice, effective immediately. I did this because I love myself. I can also choose to do what's best for me sometimes

too. However, challenges kept popping up ... “Am I a bad person for doing this?” “I actually like who I work with.” “Am I doing the wrong thing?”

Even so, I decided to go easy on myself and continued with my plan to not give notice. But something was real about that fear of not giving notice ... and these are the things you start to realize when you no longer turn away from yourself. Yes, I did like the people I worked with ... and I do value honesty, love and communication. In the end, I realized I was losing myself in the fear of my co-worker’s reactions to my decision to quit, and consequently was not speaking my truth with the people I care about at my Starbucks job. If I went through with not giving notice, then I was doing myself a disservice by deciding not to be the confident person I had decided to be. My thoughts, feelings and attention were not in alignment with a confident person’s. So, I ended up approaching my store manager and pouring out my feelings about overworking. I was working 60 hours a week, closing at my grocery store job and opening at the coffee shop in the morning. I explained my sleep problems and my concerns about balance and health in my life. I asked her to change my schedule so I could come in a little later in the morning if I was to give my two-week notice. We

made a compromise. When it comes to moral reasoning, being honest with yourself, and recognizing what you really want is everything. We all want love. Would the world really be so bad if the only law was to love?

The Science of Psychedelics

I referenced earlier the medical blog *Verywell Health* and their mention of frontier research published by *The New England Journal of Medicine* suggesting that if psychedelics are used in an assisted therapeutic setting, then they are at least as effective as the traditional use of SSRIs in the treatment of depression. Most people in the study reported additional feelings of “interconnectedness” with life, empathy and a general sense of well-being. The results also showed that what some individuals got out of just one dose of psychedelics would take months of regular doses of an SSRI.

According to the results of a double-blind clinical trial led by researchers at NYU Langone Medical Center, combined with psychological counseling, a single dose of psilocybin significantly lessened mental anguish in distressed cancer patients that lasted for more than 6 months in 80 percent of the 29 study subjects monitored.

In a study published in the May issue of the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, scientists surveyed 2,500 users of DMT, a powerful psychedelic structurally similar to psilocybin, who had encountered an "autonomous entity" after inhaling it. *The John Hopkins Magazine* article titled A Spiritual Experience, reports that more than half of those who had previously self-identified as atheists—28% of the sample—described some type of belief in a higher power or God after taking DMT, according to Griffiths, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research.

The article explains the function of DMT, "DMT, known to many as 'the spirit molecule,' is the primary active molecule in ayahuasca, a plant-based psychedelic. It occurs naturally in many plants and animals and is also endogenous to the human brain, where it activates receptors for serotonin, the 'happiness hormone' that regulates our mood, cognition, memory, and more. But we are only scratching the surface of what DMT can tell us, researchers say. 'DMT's natural function in the brain has been related to dreaming and near-death experiences,' Davis says. 'Some people even go so far as to say that it might get released in the brain as we die. Others say it's a very old system that is not used in the same way it was used in early

times of human development. We're pretty much still in the dark.”

*

This body of research made me examine the matter seriously, and even though I have never taken any kind of psychedelic drugs, I have wondered whether users of psychedelics went through similar experiences as spiritual seekers. After researching the function of psychedelics, the intersections between what the spiritual seeker goes through and the drug user were obvious. Furthermore, psychedelics, quite literally, prime the mind for manifesting new behavioral connections.

When psychedelics are ingested, they can lead to significant changes in the activity of the default mode network, or DMN, in the brain. The DMN is a network of brain regions that are active when an individual is at rest and not focused on the outside world. Clinical psychologist and psychedelic researcher Gabby Agin-Liebes explains to the medical blog *Verywell Health* that the DMN is associated with self-referential thoughts, the ego or personality, and is most active in individuals with many ruminating thoughts, such as people with depression (Simon, 2021). Research suggests that

psychedelics such as psilocybin, LSD and ayahuasca can disrupt the normal functioning of the DMN. Specifically, these substances reduce the activity and connectivity within the DMN, which can lead to ego-dissolution (Carhart-Harris, R. L., et al. 2016) (Nour, M. M., et al. 2016).

Quite literally, psychedelics slow down the “little me in my head” we have been referencing throughout this book, and make room for who we really are, awareness itself, to “be seen.” Psychedelics force us to cognitively defuse from who we thought ourselves to be and make room for being a new way in the state of dissociation they can bring about. Agin-Liebes explained to the medical blog *Verywell Health* that psilocybin-assisted therapy can help individuals let go of rigid, negative thought patterns.

She says, “In other words, it gives them a break from the relentless barrage of self-criticism and judgment, and provides them increased access to their emotions. If these experiences go on to affect patients long-term, they can learn “to be present and break free of their habitual tendencies to become entangled with stressful patterns and negativity.”

Psychedelics create the perfect environment for new behaviors to be learned because psychedelics also seem to

increase brain plasticity, which allows for the forming of new neural connections to be made (i.e. habitual behaviors) (Grieco, S. F., et al. (2022) (Ly, C., et al. 2018).

On Being an Optimist

I used to be cautious of positive psychology as I thought it was another form of denial and escape designed to turn us further away from the hurtful part of ourselves. I did not yet understand the concept of “believing through the doubt.” I thought human beings were just incapable of that. Now I know what it means to truly have faith. After realizing I was free of my beliefs, or after realizing it was all just me engaging in negative thoughts, I wondered what if I did think another way? I “manifested” all of this hurt thinking hurtful thoughts ... would it be different if I just thought more positively? I started considering the concept of “manifestation” as a real thing and it has led me to where I am today, something I am eternally grateful for.

If you’re skeptical, try it sometime. We only live once—let’s decide to be positive. Or don’t ... it is your decision after all.

Conclusion

The days of not feeling like yourself are over. After all—when are you not being yourself? We have a tragic idea of ourselves as being “abnormal” but there is no such thing—at least for me. I used to believe I was abnormal, but now I have decided with the power of my belief that there is no such thing, and it has saved me further suffering. I have decided that we are perfect the way we are—all aspects of ourselves—and you can too. We have mistakenly believed in separation but it is being replaced by the reality that we are all intrinsically connected. The feeling of being alienated from others and the world around us is being replaced by the desire to love and to be loved. We have been told who we should be like and are now replying with an age of remembrance of who we really are.

I was once a dictator towards myself. I struggled for so long, turning away from certain aspects of myself in the desire to be someone else, and it hurt. It hurt deeply. But I somehow always knew that at any time I could just ... stop. Rest in myself. I have decided to be here with myself. I have decided to

be okay with all aspects of myself. I have decided to love myself.

In other words, I have decided to be myself.

Have you?

Acknowledgements

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Now, I wish to express my eternal gratitude to the ones who have been there for me and who have aided me in my desire to become the person I have always wanted to be—which I now know was always simply myself. Father, I couldn't have asked for a better dad. Thank you for instilling in me a passion for life and blessing me with your courage to make things happen. You are the reason I dream big, and you are the reason I have succeeded in becoming the leader I am today. Mother, thank you for introducing me to “woo-woo witchy crap.” I am sorry I made fun of you for so many years—you were right. I am proud to be the son of a witch (a light witch). Thank you for letting me read Neile Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God* on the couch while Dad was in the

hospital even though I was so young and didn't understand a single paragraph. Although, it probably communicated to me in a way I do not understand. Thank you for introducing me to Eckhart Tolle, and I am sorry I threw the first book you gave me into the trash can. I love you to the moon and back x1000.

Tim, thank you for introducing me to the idea of becoming a psychologist and helping others. I finally wrote my book, and you haven't died yet. Maarten, thank you for introducing me to Rupert Spira and ACT—I became obsessed. Thank you for introducing me to a practical spirituality I could wrap my overly logical head around ... for a time. I hope Bob the plant has been well. Steven Hayes, you and your team of researchers have made popular something that is changing Western psychology forever. Good job publishing that paper as a freshman in college, and thank you for your efforts to make spiritual concepts accessible to Western scientists. I believe that it is changing our world forever. Miho, I finally wrote my book. I had the completely wrong idea of what I was learning about myself during the time I was with you and consequently started to become distant. I am sorry that brought about so much confusion for you. Those years were the hardest years of my life.

Finally, I thank all my dear friends. You guys listen to me yap about this stuff all day long and still decide to love me enough to listen. Little brother Melvin, thank you for always unconditionally supporting me no matter where my creative energy was leading me. Thank you for being a major part of my life for so long. Wiz, If I recall, I think I shared with you a portion of this book in its early development. I hope something spoke to you within these pages. Jovan, I believe we are more similar than you or I originally thought. Matthew, thanks for being there with me during my darkest times while living in Japan due to your abnormal sleep schedule. You have a beautiful heart and care for your friends deeply. John, you were the first friend I felt comfortable talking about spiritual topics openly with, and for that, we have formed a bond that I cherish. I've been "do-being" man. The sticky note club dream is alive and well! I promise to come see you after putting some money in my bank from my business. Really, I promise to come see all of you. Nick, you were right. I stopped talking about my book and started writing. I hope you are well. Rebecca, you couldn't have popped into my life through the Starbucks drive-through at a better time. You came in during a time I was starting to realize there's more to the spiritual search

than “allowing things to be.” You redirected my focus towards becoming conscious of the activity my being was engaged in, and the power of my attention. With my decision to start being another way, I began to realize the patterns of unnecessary thought I no longer needed to be engaged in. My life started to align with my no longer suppressed intentions rapidly. You helped me put together major pieces of my realization and in that way have contributed heavily to this book becoming what it was always meant to be. Thank you.

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you showed for it. Zi, you taught me to deeply respect the opinions of others. With your otherworldly bluntness, you helped me actualize the skill I was developing—the acceptance that I can be wrong, and that it is possible for others not to understand my worldview. That one thing we agreed on—everyone’s reality is different—I believe we learned together. With our back-and-forth trading of “that’s true” and “I guess you’re right.” You would have been a cool IRL friend growing up.

Eleanor, shortly before meeting you I quit my job working as a caregiver for in-patients, along with what I thought was my dream to become a transpersonal psychologist. My reason for doing so was because I was conflicted. Before I learned that most of psychology is a theory, I was obsessed with “proving” scientifically what I had learned about myself while on my spiritual search for truth. I started to doubt if I could do it, or if it was even for me—this kid who grew up with 12 hours a day of gaming and twitch.tv. I allowed my passion for my spiritual views (which I have learned involves a never-ending learning process) to influence me to ignore the fact that some people need conventional help. More specifically, anti-depressants have their place in this world, at the very least to provide people who

truly need relief ... some relief. This was one of the major things I struggled with at the workplace—drugging patients up to the point of numbness. The last event that led to me walking out involved me giving a patient indirect advice to stop taking drugs and really feel instead what he had been running away from this whole time. Although I referred him to his therapist to talk about the matter, he ended up deciding to stop taking the drugs on his own and consequently went a little crazy. I did not yet truly see that both the new and the conventional can be honored. They both have their place. What I learned from you—that I was wrong—I learned in more ways than one. Thank you.

Lastly, I wish to pay respect to that which the word “God” refers to. God ... this whole path I have been on has really been about coming back to you, hasn’t it? I have always loved you from the bottom of my heart. I cherish my younger years when I was a student at Zion Lutheran learning about you. Admittedly, I did not pay much attention during bible study, but it probably was for the best. I got to find you on my own. Do you remember when I used to pretend play that my life was a movie with you directing it? I would jump up at every end of the year ceremony at school and imagine a credits scene, as well

as a trailer for the next year of Luke's life. Somewhere along the line, I imagined that the magic was gone—but it wasn't. I always felt you were closer than close whether it was when I was still a young Christian, a forsaken mental-disorder struggler, a confused spiritual truth-seeker or an ecstatic finder.

Thank you for everything. All of it. The hurt, the confusion and the loneliness. I see now that you were always simply giving me exactly what I wanted: to know the kind of love you have for us—the kind of love I needed to have for myself if I was to actually help the world in the way I said I wanted to. If I was to help the world in the way you would have me do. I guess you really listened to my prayer that time. You have continued to remind me to stay grounded in my new way of being through whatever seemed necessary in the moment. You have given me the strength and have blessed me on my journey “so that I may bless others.”

You have revealed to me my life's purpose, and I must say, it just makes so much sense. I am not to go at it alone, as it is you wish for your people, but to accelerate the coming of the new heaven and earth by collaborating with transformational leaders who are already bridging the gap in our world. Leaders who understand the truth within these pages and need help

getting it out there. After all, none of this has been about me. It's been about taking responsibility and serving our world in its current state. I am here to serve—as we all are—and bring people together who can create truly transformational experiences for people done rightly. God ... Thank you for the company I am creating. Thank you for our retreat where we will offer anyone willing to let go of their idolized conceptual self—a new life in You. Thank you for guiding me to meet the people I need to meet, allowing me the confidence to have the conversations, and gifting me the will to make this happen. As for those who are in for the ride—you know who you are.

To our friendship—and our mission.

Amen.

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