



EMBRACING *uncomfortable*



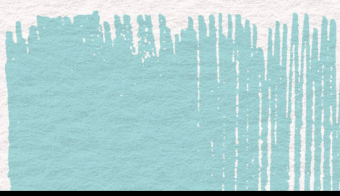
**FACING OUR FEARS
WHILE PURSUING OUR PURPOSE**



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JUSTIFICATION, MINIMIZATION, AND DENIAL

ob-struc-tion | \ əb- 'strək-shən:

the barriers we unconsciously (or consciously) implement that prevent us from embracing uncomfortable and experiencing real transformation in our lives.

*What persistent patterns of behavior
prevent you from engaging in new ways of
thinking, acting, and/or relating to others?*

I live in this amazing loft apartment on the edge of downtown Chicago. It was a killer Craigslist find, and I love every quirky element of the space. However, one thing I've learned living in the city is you'll never exactly find every item on your list of "must-haves" when it comes to residential space. For the gain of open-concept living, a modern kitchen (oh hey there, you wonderful dishwasher you), and the most cozy, beautiful built-in

book nook, I had to dance-battle it out with my roommate (and best friend) for the doorless (but windowed) walk-in closet pretending to be a bedroom, or the master, but windowless, space. I got the room that fits my bed . . . and nothing else. Ah, city living. At least I have a window to see you through.

In order to get creative with clothing storage, I had to purchase several pieces of furniture to substitute for the closet I was *sleeping in* instead of containing my belongings therein. Forever in search of a good deal and a chance to transform something old into something newer, I found an unbelievable armoire at the local Salvation Army. Somehow, I managed to convince said roommate (and best friend) that “we’re modern women, we can do hard things” and traipsed her down to the thrift shop with her midsize SUV. Once inside, she took a good look at the 8x4 foot piece of *solid wood furniture*, side-eyed me, and said with the ultimate exasperation, “There is absolutely NO WAY just the two of us are capable of managing Narnia’s wardrobe on our own, let alone fitting it into my car. Square peg plus round hole equals . . . you do the shapes.”

My response: “It’s not *that* big.” I should mention I have the spiritual gift of cunning and justification, so a few more side-eyes and \$70 later, the Salvation Army guys had rolled the armoire out the doors and left it on the sidewalk (“that’s as far as we go, ma’am”).

Problem number one occurred when said roommate and best friend was right about the armoire not fitting in her car. That thing didn’t have a prayer of squeezing into the trunk of a car that, if I was lucky, could hold a small coffee table, a Costco crate of cherries, and a yoga mat. My solution: get a bigger car! This would require leaving her alone* on the sidewalk in front of the store in the middle of August, in ninety-degree heat, to guard the armoire

* “*Abandoned*” is the term she prefers.

and fend off all the thrift-store vultures who were also in search of the best armoire deal that day. I blessed her with a bag of Cheetos, promised her my firstborn, and drove to the nearest U-Haul, where I rented a truck and a dolly.

The amount of maneuvering and the extra good-Samaritan shopper hands that sucker required to get into the back of the rented pickup truck should have somehow convinced me of the unlikelihood we could get it out of the truck, *and* up the steep flight of stairs leading into our second-floor apartment. It didn't. Also, I failed to mention a crucial detail to the sacrifice of city living—no elevator. We're modern women! Elevator, schmlevator. I was confident that we could do it. The roommate (and best friend) did protest. That armoire must have weighed two hundred pounds, "But we're modern women and we can do hard things!" One hour, more curse words than I care to admit, a fair amount of yelling, one desperate cry of "I'm going to pass out!" and frantic pleas to "not let go or I'll DIE!" later, we got that beautiful, big baby through the door.

I think my roommate (~~and my best friend~~)* gave me the side-eye for the rest of the week. Also, I was banned from thrift stores, buying large pieces of furniture, and using the term modern women in any connection to lifting or moving anything between this day and high-fiving Peter at the pearly gates. She made me sign a notarized paper napkin *with those exact words on it*.

OUR THREE BIGGEST OBSTACLES

The armoire adventure of 2014 is a great example of a trap I can easily find myself in, an unwillingness to change my perspective through the stubborn practices of justification, minimization,

* Okay, she's still my best friend but it was really touch and go for a while there.

and/or denial, the three biggest obstacles that derail us from choosing consistent with our values and acting according to our purpose (also known as the three haters to change). Side-eyed roommate/best friend offered numerous tidbits of wisdom throughout the journey to bring armoire to its new home. “It’s too big, it’s too heavy, we’re modern but our muscles aren’t up-to-date.” To which I responded, “It’s not *that* big” (minimization), “It’s not heavy” (denial), “You said my arms are looking more toned since I started working out last week, so we can definitely do this” (justification). Before we jump into exploring these concepts further, let’s take a quick step back and review the ingredients required for transformation.

As I mentioned in chapter 7, in my work I frequently shift between a posture of validation and being a cheerleader of change as my clients open themselves to the vulnerability of their circumstances and their desires for growth. Our ability to transform into those growth areas requires a willingness to step into both. Coaching clients to implement a practice of self-validation is often healing and brings the release of shame and self-loathing. Often, they’ve spent years beating themselves up for the feelings they’ve experienced, filling their minds with those dreadful “shouldn’ts,” trapped in the past of *their* choices or the consequence of others’. Change is and will always be the trickier path. Validation is a surrender to permission, allowing yourself the green light to experience the emotions of your actions and the grief, anger, pain, or disappointment of how others have failed you.

Change is always harder. Back in chapter 5 we discussed how our brain is like water—without intentionality it will default to the path of least resistance. One of the reasons we are so quick to give up on change is the process it takes to alter habitual patterns of action (think back to our analogy of the wheat fields: forging

new pathways takes determined persistence). Another reason is we're simply ignorant to the factors keeping us in our present holding pattern. We're conditioned to the art of unconscious decision-making, and we need to bring awareness to the forefront of our minds. In short, we need to know when and why to embrace the uncomfortable. We've taken that first step by intentionally defining our core values and our overarching purpose. Now we need to clarify what obstacles we can expect to present themselves in the process of our transformation.

Denial is falling
into the river and
refusing to accept
that you're there.

Justification keeps us stuck in our circumstances because we convince ourselves that the outcomes *will be different this time* despite any stimulating change. Minimization is deceiving ourselves of the impact of our current circumstances. It's saying, "It's not that big of a deal (the stairs aren't *that* steep)." Denial is most often focused on our contributions to the present moment and is also the opposite of radical acceptance. Denial is falling into the river and refusing to accept that you're there.

Before we dive into exploring these concepts, you need to know one thing. This process is going to require humility, whether you've chosen where you are at today or you haven't.* That might necessitate a practice of grieving and lamentation before you're ready to swim in the current of change. What exactly do I mean by that? Let me give you an example. I've worked with a lot of clients who've been hurt by the ruthless damage of trauma. The destructive actions of others have shattered their sense of self,

* When in doubt, say this cheer: "my location isn't my destination." Believe it and onward you go.

their approach to the world around them, and their perspective of what is truth. This is a place where justification is warranted. They are *justified* in their feelings but often find themselves trapped in their circumstances. There is no greater need for validation than in the depths of trauma grief. Minimizing the pain to push forward in the present often means they are just stepping deeper into the water without the knowledge of how to swim.

Grief and lament are powerful experiences that say, “This was not how it was supposed to be and because of that I feel _____.” Note the period at the end of that sentence. You feel _____. There is no should or should not, like or don’t like, want to or don’t want to. Your feeling(s) simply is or are. Please know I don’t see it as fair or reasonable that you may have to engage this process through the scars of trauma. As I do with my clients, I grieve alongside you and together we build the momentum of a stronger current to step into this place of transformation together. So, if you need to pause here, no matter how long, please do so. But do so with the commitment to humbly step back into the process—your process.

Now let’s talk about humility for a minute. In the world of nouns, humility gets a bad rap in my opinion. Too often we fail to see humility as a choice and instead see it as a weakness, or worse, a state of resignation. The best definitions of humility include one essential word: freedom. Humility is being free to view things from different angles, to consider other options without the false belief that it will rob us of our identity. Let me set you up with the honest expectation that humility might trigger your anxiety. It’s an Indiana Jones–level leap of faith and at its core, the practice of humility is very much the choice to embrace uncomfortable. What keeps most people from this place is actually the first barrier to change . . . justification.

**JUSTIFICATION:
LETTING YOURSELF OFF THE HOOK**

There is no better way to ensure you stay in the holding pattern of habit than justification. Years ago, I was working with a client who was battling chronic low-grade depression and a resulting lack of motivation. She envisioned her life looking significantly different than the outcome she was experiencing in the present, but struggled to embrace the uncomfortable choices necessary to ignite a path of change in her life. Approaching fifty, she was hoping to be married with children, or at least thriving in her consulting career with a strong community of deep relationships that brought her fulfillment and joy and steady plans on a Friday night. Instead, she was in the depths of another breakup (the third in two years), failing to find joy or interest in her present place of employment (and honestly her career choices overall), and frequently found herself at home binging on empty calories and emptier reality TV shows, or worse, at the local dive bar trolling for guys.

Every week she would present with the same desire for a different outcome—a meaningful relationship being number one. Now, let me pause here and clarify, as a single woman who in high school anticipated celebrating double-digit anniversaries and having children by now, I could relate and empathize greatly with her current grief and sense of loss over something highly valued and desired that had yet to materialize in her life. Honestly acknowledging and sitting with the pain of unmet expectations and heart-longings was a critical element of our work together. However, it's also a place we can easily get stuck in. For some reason, we mistake steps toward change as a betrayal of our emotions and our circumstances. If I change my pattern of behavior, I'm basically admitting I was wrong or inadequate to begin with (which is SO not true—but we'll get there). It's kind of like mistaking

validation for agreement. The outcome? We dig in our heels and continue defending whatever choices we've made that led to our present circumstances. We justify, often out of self-protection and fear that if we choose to do differently, then the only person we have to blame for our present circumstances is ourselves. For my client, that meant an ongoing pattern of unhealthy relationships because she justified that any type of companionship was better than the option of being alone. Yet, when faced with the truth of her actions as we processed each week, she consistently expressed frustration and anger toward the quality and behavior of the men in her life. Justification was a prison, trapping her in an endless cycle of bitterness and disappointment. When the options her heart longed for didn't present themselves, instead of shifting her perspective to see different opportunities that might bring alternate forms of fulfillment, she returned to the familiar habit of unhealthy decisions with justification, maintaining her position on the hamster wheel of life.

Here's the deal. We ALL justify. Just think about your last argument with your spouse, or the last conversation you had with a coworker who graciously expressed concern or questions about your directional choices on a project or vision, or the last time you decided to skip the gym, or when you had *just another* drink, or said "no" to your kid because you just "didn't want to." My hunch is the follow-up internal conversation swirling around in your head was chock-full of justification. Why do we do this? Because justification is an attempt to let ourselves off the hook and avoid the uncomfortable rest shifting around within us. If you think back to the last time you justified, it is likely because you weren't following your values and were misaligned with your purpose (even if you haven't fully defined those yet). We have no need to justify the choices we feel confident in or pleased with—the

emotional payback is justification enough (joy, assurance, peace). However, when the resulting emotions are less pleasurable, we'll often resort to all kinds of stratagems to convince ourselves that our actions were defensible.

How, then, do we step out of the hamster wheel? The first step is to hit the brakes and take a pause (if you're asking yourself how to do this, clearly you wheeled right past chapter 5). Justification can come so quickly we fail to see or recognize its behavior until the situation has come and gone and we're left dealing with the shame or regret of another impulsive response. Pausing creates space for reflection when we encounter the prickly feel of an uncomfortable reaction. The goal is to get to the place where that reaction is recognized internally before it shifts to an external expression.

This comes with time, patience, and practice. Again, commit to a pattern of pausing now before any hints of justification present themselves. Then, once they do, you've already got a new habit in place. In your space of reflection, look for makers of justification. "I was tired." "She was wrong." "He was harsh." "That wasn't fair." "I'm always the one taken advantage of." The key is to see where you are excusing your behavior, thoughts, or reactions. Avoid labeling them as right or wrong. In the process of reducing the justification in your life, you also want to decrease the time you spend in your internal *People's Court*. Once you've hooked justification, consider where you need to label an emotional experience and validate it. Shifting from justification to validation is a powerful way to acknowledge yourself and your experience without contributing to the baggage of unproductive rationalizations, or, worse, resignation. Shifting looks like this:

Justification: "She *always* reacts that way, so it doesn't really matter. I'm going to do it however I want to."

Validation: “I feel *disappointed* when she sees my actions as intentionally disrespectful.”

Justification: “I *never* have enough time to do the things I want to do.”

Validation: “I feel *frustrated* that the other responsibilities in my life seem to take priority over the things I enjoy.”

Justification: “It’s never going to change so why bother trying.”

Validation: “I feel *tired, angry, and discouraged* that the system continues to treat me and others this way.”

Moving from justification to validation means you aren’t dismissing your experience or the feelings that result from it. They are valid, even if they’re based on a misunderstanding or a misinterpretation of others. Feelings are feelings—stop judging them. Once you’ve let yourself feel, then it’s time to reorient yourself to where you want to be. This can trigger those dreadful justifications all over again. So, if you find yourself stuck in the negative loop cycle, keep reminding yourself of the feeling and continue pressing toward the willingness to embrace the uncomfortable. You’ll navigate out of justification eventually!

“IT’S NOT THAT BIG OF A DEAL”

Now let’s talk minimization. Minimization is just a fancy way of saying “it’s not that big of a deal.” It’s sort of the cousin of justification. If justification says, “I’m doing it this way because of someone or something else;” minimization says, “My choices or responses aren’t impacting me or others that much.” Or, the ever popular “it’s not that much of a problem.” If you’ll bear with me for a hot second, I’ll explain things in the form of a grammar lesson (yes, this book provides psychological advice, medical

wisdom, and now language arts training—you're welcome. Also, thank you, middle-school grammar teacher. You were right; we *would* need this in the future). Justification is all about conjunction words—that is, the words that link two parts of a sentence together. The common culprit of justification is the conjunction *because*. Minimization is all about the adverbs: *really, most, however, usually*. While minimization can look a lot like justification, the big difference is that justification is putting the root of the problem on someone else while minimization at least acknowledges your role in the consequences you're experiencing, but you've convinced yourself that they're not really causing any palpable damage.

Often it's years of minimization that land clients in my office, uncertain of what the real root of their pain is but knowing something's not functioning properly in their lives. The language of minimization is "It *really* doesn't happen that often." "Usually, I respond differently." "*Most* of the time I'm able to control it." "I can see the problem; however, it's not affecting me that much."

I used to call myself the queen of justification, but over the years I've realized minimization is really my drug of choice, *especially* when it comes to the things I say yes to. I used to work with an executive coach who had to gently yet firmly remind me quite often that my personality and leadership style rarely lends itself to rest and intentionally pausing (you can imagine how uncomfortable writing about and practicing the discipline of pausing was for me). I say yes because I see the potential in new opportunities and get overly excited. Then, when my calendar is full and I have little breathing room, I simply tell myself I'm not *really* THAT overcommitted and while I have a lot of responsibilities, most of the time I'm managing just fine and it's not really impacting me or others too much.

Sound familiar to anyone? Minimization is sneaky because we *are* acknowledging the problem—we're just downplaying its impact. It's like a quarterback telling his coach the strain in his shoulder doesn't hurt that much and isn't a big deal, only to go for

Minimization is sneaky because we *are* acknowledging the problem—we're just downplaying its impact.

a sixty-yard throw and, in the process, tear his rotator cuff, putting him out for the season, or worse, ending his career. Since we're willingly acknowledging the problem, minimization can be challenging to change. We *know* what's wrong,

we just don't want to admit or accept it because change might equate to saying no to or removing ourselves from something that does bring a level of gratification and comfort (momentarily).

Overcoming the obstacle of minimization in order to embrace the uncomfortable *requires* that we know our values. So, if you struggled in chapter 4, time to go back and read it again. Here's a great example of why. Every year in my Professional Identity and Ethical Practice course, I take my students through a values exercise designed to help them see what they are prioritizing in their lives and what decisions they're making that might be grossly misaligned with what is really most important to them. The first step in this exercise is to write down any item that comes to mind that they believe they need to function effectively every day. Without fail, the most popular answer is a smartphone. However, as the exercise progresses, students are asked to reflect on and identify other areas of importance to them through various prompts that challenge them to consider influential people in their lives, critical memories, places of significance, and deeply desired goals. Then, because I value authenticity in every area of my life, I

challenge them to get uncomfortable. They have to start eliminating what they've written until the number of things that take prominence in their lives is whittled down to five (much like what I challenged you to do in exploring your own values). Guess what almost always goes first? The smartphone. Yet the average person spends over four hours a day on that little device!¹ We minimize the impact or time spent on it, despite its inconsistency with our values. However, without knowing what our values really are, we have no way to gauge where our choices might be falsely aligned.

Once you do have a clear grasp on your values and purpose, it's much "easier" (put in quotations because, come on, we're talking about getting uncomfortable here—it's NEVER easy) to identify the shifts in our behavior that need to take place. At this point it becomes a matter of defining and avoiding the significant losses that can result from our decisions. Remember our conversation around the principle that all decisions involve loss? If Mr. Quarterback values excellence and sees his purpose as engaging in every effort to the fullest capacity of his giftings and talents, acknowledging the intensity of his pain and losing the opportunity to play in a high-stakes game is a *lesser* loss than the totality of a season or his entire career. In short, he would be choosing to be a better steward of his gifting and talents. Conversely, his decision to minimize and step into the game would represent a divergence from his core values and purpose. Instead of pausing for purpose, he paused for praise. He made a decision that would bring him satisfaction in the moment.

"IT REALLY WON'T TAKE *THAT* MUCH TIME . . ."

Let me use myself as an example. A few days before writing this chapter, I received a phone call from someone asking about my

interest in an influential leadership role at a local organization I am involved with. The guy on the phone might as well have been speaking my love language. The expectations and possible experiences involved everything I love and seemed to speak directly to some of my key strengths. Saying yes would likely mean some amazing opportunities to join forces with other change agents in ways that carried the potential to enact sustainable transformation in my beloved city of Chicago. As we continued to speak about the responsibilities a yes entailed, I found myself in that familiar place of minimization. “It really won’t *take* that much time away from what I’ve already committed to,” runs the rationale. Thankfully, a disciplined practice I’ve committed to held me accountable to choosing consistent with my values instead of caving to minimization. I responded with “This sounds like an awesome opportunity, thank you for even considering me as an option for this role. I’d like to take forty-eight hours to consider things before I get back to you with a definitive answer.”

Old Deb would respond to the emotional moment (Excitement! Intrigue! Mild guilt at the thought of saying no and letting someone down!). Deb who’s writing a book and wants to (and sees the value in) practicing what she preaches chose the discipline of practicing the pause. In those forty-eight hours, intentional reflection on what responsibilities I already hold, the number of people I’m already accountable to, and the time left for rest, fellowship, and errand-running helped me see the truth that I wasn’t being honest about the reality of my free time. Another yes, no matter how good (read: comfortable) it might feel in the moment, would conflict with both my values and my purpose. So I made the briefly uncomfortable choice of saying no.

Here’s the thing: I KNOW I let some people down with that decision and I may have even left them in a difficult bind.

However, that doesn't mean my decision was wrong and if my character is consistent, once the emotional impact of my "no" subsides, they'll know that, if they don't already. We have to allow others to feel the consequences of our decision even if we don't like the feelings they encounter.* We also have to stick to those decisions, if we've really considered and been honest with ourselves about how they align with or skew from our values and purpose, despite the effects they might have on others.

Before we move on to denial, I want to look at minimization from another angle—minimizing emotional pain resulting from trauma. Trauma is very real and very present in our current world. Unfortunately, I've seen many people minimizing the impact of trauma on their lives because they believe it's either too much to process or because they don't think they'll be able to function if they really step into the depths of their hurt. If you've encountered trauma in your life, minimizing the experience(s) and the impression it has left on you is like bandaging a wound that ultimately needs surgery to heal. Can you function with a bandage? Maybe, at least for a little while. Does surgery hurt and require more intensive and enduring healing time? Yes. Does surgery leave a scar? Yes. If you're minimizing the impact of a gaping wound, I first want to acknowledge your bravery and commitment, and the roots of injustice at the heart of the losses you're faced to choose between. Then I want to encourage you to pursue healing.

DENIAL: LIVING IN FANTASYLAND

Well, we've made it to Egypt, people, and now it's time to cross the river of denial. I like to conceptualize denial as equivalent

* Go get a highlighter and highlight this. Better yet, post this on social media so your online community knows what you now know. And yes, you can tell them I said so.

to living in fantasyland. It's radically accepting our present circumstances and then expecting transformation to magically take place. Or choosing to see our current reality as something completely different than it really is. It's like falling into the Chicago River, choosing to swim to shore, and expecting to step out onto the white, warm sands of a Fiji beach. Ain't gonna happen. The one common characteristic that goes hand-in-hand with denial? Stubbornness. **Justification** is difficult to change because we fear invalidating our experiences. **Minimization** is a challenge because it involves actively choosing to lose something of importance in our lives. **Denial** is a pain in the butt because the first and only way to change this pattern of behavior is by changing our attitude to one of humility and receptivity. When my clients present with denial, I know we're in for the long haul.

There's only one key word that denial proclaims: "No." "No, that's not a problem." "No, that's not my responsibility." "No, I don't need to do that." "No, I don't need to change, you're the one who needs to change." See how much denial and stubbornness overlap? Another obstacle with denial is that we seek out ways to support our perspectives, what's referred to in psychology circles as "confirmation bias." Basically, it's our unconscious ability to look for and find information and situations that only support our evaluations, thereby driving our hold on their truth even deeper.

With justification, once you realize that changing your thoughts and actions doesn't mean excusing the mess others have dumped on your life, it becomes much easier to live your life moving in line with your values and purpose. So too with minimization. Here, you've already engaged the first step of seeing how YOU contribute to your current circumstances. Then, transformation occurs when you're willing to embrace the truth that loss

is not only inevitable but will productively move you toward value-based and purpose-consistent decision-making.

Denial, on the other hand, requires a good, hard look in the mirror and the presence of safe, honest truth-tellers in your inner circle of community. We can only begin the process of shifting away from and out of denial when we choose to acknowledge that other possibilities *could* exist, and then open our mind and our heart to consideration of those possibilities. Notice I didn't say *acceptance*. One easy way to stay in denial is to approach change with an attitude that refuses even to entertain the idea, because you've decided it's impossible. It's like if you want to get from the North Rim of the Grand Canyon to the South Rim and you decide leaping over the Grand Canyon is the only way to get from here to there. With that kind of thinking you've quit before you even began, because the only options are true physical impossibilities. But if you really start thinking about it, you do have other choices, even though they might seem difficult at the time. Be open to those options.

FIGHTING FEAR

The most surefire way to do this is by recognizing the role fear plays in your resistance, adding fuel to your denial. I had a friend share with me not too long ago the pain of navigating her mother's end-of-life care at the hands of breast cancer. The hardest part for her, outside of watching her mom's ongoing physical suffering, was finding out that her mom knew about her condition a year before telling anyone, a year before she took active steps to treat it. She was afraid. Afraid of finding out how bad the prognosis might be, how painful and prolonged the treatment could be, and that she would burden and overwhelm her

family with her growing needs and dependence. Unfortunately, fear motivated her to deny the reality of what came to ravage

her body with sickness to the point that treatment was no longer possible.

The longer I practice, the more aware I am of the power we give fear in our lives.

Why do so many of us let fear stop us from taking that next step? As a therapist, one of the first things I do when working with a client is something called “case conceptualization.” It’s taking the client’s history, their description of the presenting problem(s) they face, as well as contextual, situational, and relational factors, and creating a wholistic picture of what’s really impacting their mental health and well-being, as well as what barriers need to be overcome for growth to occur. The longer I practice and the more I conceptualize, the more aware I am of the power we give fear in our lives and the overwhelming impact it has on many aspects of our day-to-day choices. In fact, I would go so far as to say that fear is one of the strongest motivators we encounter on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, the motivation we experience from fear is often the least productive when it comes to embracing who we are and what we can do. So how do we stop fear from being so debilitating? The first step is radically accepting fear will always be a part of your life. That doesn’t mean you will **always** feel fear. It means that you’ll never 100 percent escape fear. It is bound to spring up from time to time. However, embracing that reality means knowing how to react when fear rears its ugly head. Let’s be honest: I’ve never heard someone say they were well prepared for a challenge because they avoided, denied, or minimized the obstacles standing in their way.

Next, picture what moving forward in *spite of your fear* would

look like. Close your eyes, journal it out, do what you can to visualize a detailed picture of overcoming the fear. Finally, tell two of your people. You know, the people you trust to be your biggest cheerleaders and most honest critics. Ask them to listen without judgment—you're not looking for "that's a terrible idea" or even "you couldn't pick something better if you tried!" Ask them to listen with perspective, to consider your vision from a 360° angle and take into account as many variables as possible. Then have them provide two concrete steps that will set you on a course to punching fear in the face (aka, practical ways to achieve forward momentum).

Confronting denial is not going to obliterate the fear of potential outcomes. My friend's mom's fears all represented very feasible realities. The thing is, *they happened anyway*. She felt pain, the prognosis was not good, and her family did take on the burden of her care. Only, the outcome might have been different if she had been willing to consider a different approach to her fear; that embracing it by facing the prognosis, fighting the pain, and surrendering to the care could have resulted in her survival.

What if another option *could* exist—even if we fear the journey to get there? What would it take to consider that your actions *may be* communicating judgment, rejection, or worthlessness to others? How could you shift your perspective on how what you see and define as vital to your daily functioning *could* actually be more representative of conforming to the standards of Western culture and media-driven consumerism? What might open your mind to the option that your beliefs about a particular situation or circumstance might be based on ill-advised opinions instead of factual information? Here's the easiest step in the right direction I can offer you. Try swapping your "no" for a "maybe":

EMBRACING UNCOMFORTABLE

Denial: “No, that’s not my problem.”

Willingness: “Maybe part of this *is* my problem and I could contribute to the solution.”

Denial: “No, that’s not my responsibility.”

Willingness: “Maybe I need to own some responsibility here.”

Denial: “No, I don’t need to do that.”

Willingness: “Maybe I do need to do something different in order to move toward what’s really important to me.”

Denial: “No, I don’t need to change, you’re the one who needs to change.”

Willingness: “Maybe I do need to change my approach for my own sake, even if the other person is unwilling to change.”

Shifting from denial (stubbornness) to willingness is about saying YOU are worthy of experiencing and living aligned to your values and purpose no matter what others throw at you, even when it requires that you embrace uncomfortable decisions that you didn’t choose to face in the first place. In fact, fighting the traps of justification and minimization are rooted in the same truth. It’s hard work, but it is so rewarding in the long run.

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HOW PURSUING COMMUNITY IS LIKE REVERSING THE CHICAGO RIVER

One last thing worth mentioning as it relates to our ability and likelihood to change is the necessity of community in this process. Here’s an interesting thought. As I mentioned above the flow of water typically moves in the direction of least resistance—usually. The direction of a river’s flow actually shifts and changes based on its momentum. Like the adjustment in a river’s current, the

ability to shift and transform in our own lives requires momentum, something we can't always produce on our own. Did you know that the Chicago River actually flows "backward"? This was engineered in the late nineteenth century out of concern that the river's pollutants wouldn't overflow into Lake Michigan (where we get our drinking water. . . yum). This was a massive project, authorized in 1887 and completed in 1900. It took an entire team of civil engineers and construction workers to design and build a system of locks and increase the amount of Lake Michigan water coming into the river, thus forcing it to flow away from the lake.

So it is with the commitment to walk away from justification, minimization, and denial and to embrace the challenge of truly exploring and aligning yourself with your core values. You can't do it alone. Community is as critical to individual change as the increased energy of water is necessary to move an obstacle rather than go around it. If your life is missing the essential element of safe, supportive community, consider how you might make this your first action item on the list of embracing uncomfortable. If, right now, you're reacting with justification, minimization, or denial, go back and read this chapter with the need for community as your filter. I'm not saying this will be easy, quick, or convenient to put in place, but I am saying it will be essential.

My hope is this book will help both those who avoid *pursuing* community because of fears of rejection and those who avoid *providing* community because of fears of stepping beyond their zones of familiarity. We cannot do this alone, and we cannot accomplish these goals in the false safety of uniform spaces. Only among diversity of thought, culture, communication, and perspective can we confront the barriers to change outlined in this chapter and open the door to our truest selves.

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