


We face thousands of choices between what is best and what is easier. When you learn to embrace the uncomfortable as a gateway to better things, everything changes. Discover the freedom that will fill your life when you begin to see discomfort as an important step toward reaching your goals.

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1

THE COMFORT MYTH

com·fort myth | \ 'kəm(p)-fərt 'mith:

failing to live according to our core values and true purpose by defaulting to the familiar, aka comfortable.

What have you sacrificed in your life, whether intentionally or unintentionally, that has prevented you from fully living a life that represents your purpose and your identity?

When I was in graduate school the pinnacle of our learning experience was assessed by a test called the “comprehensive exam.” Exactly as the name implies, this all-day experience was like the Ninja Warrior of psychological knowledge appraisal. You could take the exam at any point in the first four years of your studies, but it had to be passed by the time you started the internship application process at the beginning of year five. Ever the achiever, I started early . . . like *really* early. We’re talking first year, first semester.

I should mention that my psychological knowledge at this point was comprehensively limited to my run-ins with celebrity types

during my brief employment at NBC Studios in the non-prime-time publicity department (another story for another chapter). Did I have experience? Yes. I was working with celebrities! Did I have knowledge? Well, I could tell you that Freud had an ego. And everyone blames their mother.

Needless to say, I failed. Yet, ever determined to succeed and succeed early and often, I persisted and took the test again six months later.

Fail.

Another six months later.

Fail.

Maybe a year will help.

Fail.

To date, I'm confident I've set some unattainable record with my graduate school for "most likely to stubbornly insist on passing this devil-of-a-test."

Seven times. That's how many tries I had before I finally passed that miserable exam. Over five years of failures, during which professors suggested I reevaluate my goals (believe me, as a professor now I would be telling my students to do the same thing!), I went to the one therapy session I could afford at the time in hopes that there would be some magic cure for the growing anxiety I was now experiencing on a regular basis.

Fast forward to three months later, I missed passing by a handful of points. After one failed attempt, my blessed tribe of graduate school friends found me wandering the streets of Pasadena, milkshake in hand, tears and snot running down my face. They

embraced me as I hiccupped my way through a sobbed recitation of professed inadequacies. With their ever-persistent encouragement and support, I gave it another go. Result: failed by a single question.

DO YOU REALLY BELONG HERE?

I'd never been confident of my choice to pursue a graduate degree in clinical psychology (likely a big factor in my repeated failure of that nightmare test). I think we all have that single question that tries to keep us from achieving what we have set out to accomplish, and this was mine: "*Do you really belong here?*" I didn't see myself as an academic thinker (and often still struggle with that one—doesn't God have a sense of humor). I was more inexperienced than all my peers, coming from a creative writing background and practical expertise in the wrangling of famous people. An art form, sure, but it was definitely a stretch to find a crossover in skills application.

I was certainly unclear about the direction I hoped to pursue with my degree and only seemed to gain less clarity as time went on. Every step in the direction of my degree felt more like an obstacle than an open door. I had to take additional classes to meet the program's application requirements. Finally, when I did apply, I was waitlisted* with discouraging feedback that I wouldn't likely receive acceptance. Then, when I finally did get in, there she was, four-hundred-and-something empty bubbles waiting for me, the dreaded comprehensive exam. I can confidently say that for most of the six years I studied for my PhD, nothing ever felt "right."

During those six years, I would have quickly admitted that school was challenging because I didn't believe I fit in. Yes, the DEFINITELY did not help with that; however, in retrospect the

* Waitlisted: One of the most uncomfortable realms to be in. Basically, where many of our hopes enter hospice care to transition slowly to death.

greater issue was so much deeper. If I were to place myself in my shoes back then I would easily say my expectation was to fall into the ideal identity of a standard graduate student; to achieve high marks on my exams and papers, be seen as a deep, intellectual thinker, to have professors expect and anticipate serious achievement levels from me, and to be comparable, better yet *compatible*, with the aspiring abilities of my fellow classmates. If I could be all those things, I would feel *comfortable*—that I fit, because I had unconsciously determined that this fit provided me the assurance that I was worthy of being there. That I *belonged*. Yet in all honesty, the deeper truth was that I felt like a fraud in most of those areas. I felt like a fraud in a room full of Freuds, and that stupid standardized exam wasn't helping.

So why did I keep taking the awful thing? People often ask me why I didn't give up on that test after failures number 2–6. Here's the ultimate irony: the answer is, because of my *fear of failure*.

Every endeavor
I pursued was
designed to move
me in the direction
of what I *thought*
I wanted to be, or
more accurately,
how I wanted to be
seen.

(Come again??) I'd committed
to doing a PhD, told everyone
I knew I was doing a PhD, and
was now filtering all my major
life decisions through the lens
of "once I finish my PhD."
I'm the first official case study
for embracing uncomfortable.
While failing that test over
and over was one of the most
miserable experiences of my

life, the thought of *not* passing it was not a reality I was willing to readily accept, because I had unconsciously placed my identity in overcoming it. Other options were simply . . . not an option.

Again, that word *fraud* was the key. To see oneself as a fraud

suggests that your core identity is one of an impostor, a fake. That could not have been truer of the better part of my graduate school career. Every endeavor I pursued was designed to move me in the direction of what I *thought* I wanted to be, or more accurately, how I wanted to be seen. If I could achieve what I perceived my classmates as pursuing, accomplishing, and excelling in, I would fully embrace the role I had defined for myself and the expectations I believed should come with it. (Take note of that “should”—we’ll come back to it later.) I would grant myself permission to *perceive* that I fit in. What that meant was that unconsciously I also believed something entirely untrue—that once I achieved that status, I would experience a great sense of belonging and, as a result, an overwhelming feeling of comfort. What a terrible myth. I was trying to mold my identity into this misconception that would cocoon me and ultimately give me the wings that were purposefully going to set me free. Unfortunately, what was supposed to set me free was keeping me in bondage. Or more accurately, here I was in this cocoon expecting to come out as a butterfly when I think I was really created to be more of a seagull.

TRYING TO MEET OTHERS’ EXPECTATIONS

One might argue that the expectations I had of the typical graduate student weren’t really that off, and that’s probably true. The catch is, deep down those really weren’t MY expectations. They were based on what I thought others expected of the role and of me in particular. I wasn’t and never will be the academic who waxes philosophical in rhetoric as their main contribution to the development of their field of expertise. I’m a relator on every possible personality measure you can complete. I will nerdily admit

I love research, so I have that going for me. However, I always feel complimented when someone tells me I'm not the stereotypical image of what they expect a doctor/professor to be like. It validates who I truly am and who I am wholeheartedly not. Yet, for the better part of six years I was trying to be seen as that stereotypical misconception. If I were being brutally honest, I still am at times—more times than I'd like to admit. Because that's what we do. We live in a world of expectations that most of the time are based on what we think we *should* do, how we *should* behave, look, think, achieve.

BUT. These expectations are not consistent with what we really do value and desire to embrace—what could be argued as our purpose. We're so busy trying to live up to what we think the world expects, or to some image of ourselves, that we burn out. Then, we're too tired to actually live out what we want to live. Other people's expectations become our standard of living and one day we find ourselves disappointed, frustrated, stressed, discontented, exhausted (the list could go on) and wondering how the heck did that happen? Long story short, we're functioning in nothing close to comfort. How exhausting!

The kicker is, choosing to be that person we feel fully represents our purpose or identity often means going against the grain of what the greater culture defines as “right”—and that's also uncomfortable. Sometimes we become so weary of feeling like we're going against the grain that we just say, “What's the use?” When you're always playing defense, you're too worn out to play

offense, and that's where the scoring actually happens! The choice of stepping into the discomfort of your authenticity despite the resistance you may encounter actually produces greater congruence and, ultimately, enduring comfort. It's the trade of short-term discomfort for long-term contentment instead of the other way around. It's challenging the myth of comfort in pursuit of daily living consistent with who you've been created to be.

THE WOMAN IN THE COFFEE LINE: A CAUTIONARY TALE

Well then, what prevents us from making this daily choice to embrace uncomfortable?

For one, our values are long-term, but our need to “feel good” is in the moment. We are prone to make an unconscious, reactive decision based more on a pattern of behavior instead of an intentional pursuit of the bigger picture of who we truly want to be.

I saw this in action not too long ago when I was waiting in line for coffee around the corner from my office. The customer in front of me was ordering the most preposterous cup of tea (picture Meg Ryan in *When Harry Met Sally*¹—everything was customized and on the side. How one could do that with a cup of tea was nothing short of an art form). I was uncharacteristically not in a hurry that day and more fascinated by the cinematic tea production happening in front of me than any concern of where I needed to be next and when. I say that because how the woman behind me was responding could **easily** have been me on any given day, so I do not absolve myself of any responsibility here and I'm not judging her actions as beneath me. I'm just going to use them to illustrate a point because woman-behind-me was having a *moment*. You know those situations where someone

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makes a snide comment under their breath and then the emotion gets the better of them and their ability to modulate their tone of voice goes completely out the window? Woman-behind-me was in *that* place. She was huffing and puffing and grumbling so much she was basically live-commentating the tea-ordering fiasco of 2019 to the ENTIRE café. The thing is, if she'd stopped and thought about it, I don't think woman-behind-me would ever say she was trying to be the huffy, puffy, snuffy, grumbly individual she was presenting. I would buy stock in the fact that she wouldn't embrace those behaviors as part of her core identity or purpose; yet, here they were front and center. Her behavior was characteristically reactive. In the moment, she needed her experience of inconvenience to be validated more than her need to live congruent with her identity. Short-term comfort achieved at the expense of swallowing some pride, taking a deep breath, and considering what behaviors were more representative of her true character.

WHAT WE WANT, WHAT WE DEFAULT TO

This situation can apply to so many choices we make in life. It's the "what we want tos" verses the "what we default tos." Unfortunately, the defaults tos often fall in into the category of failure to act in accordance to our values. Try these on for fun-size.

- I want to spend more time with my family, but instead I maintain the same pattern of working overtime or over-committing to an abundance of activities.
- I want to be fully present in my marriage, but instead I give myself permission to get distracted by the less important stuff (this is a choose-your-own adventure-

style book, so you get to fill in the blank with what you define your own “less important” to be).

- I want to eat healthier and be a better steward of my body, but instead I commit to busyness or anything that would help me avoid the requirement of getting up.
- I want to date someone who embodies the core values I desire in a mate, but instead I settle for whatever’s front and center.
- I want to balance my finances according to my income, but instead I give in to my latest in a long string of impulse purchases.
- I want to live according to my values and purpose, but instead I default to the unintentional, reactive, habitual patterns that may feel comfortable in the moment but ultimately leave me feeling this sense of angst and lack of fulfillment because I never really arrive at where I want to be . . . or WHO I want to be.

We invite way too many “buts” to the decision roundtable. Here’s where it’s important to pause and clarify what the comfort myth actually is, because it’s layered. The myth of comfort refers to:

1. The false identities, values, and purposes we’re pursuing because we’ve convinced ourselves that’s what we really want, without carefully considering the outcome’s consistency with our core values.
2. The choices (which are genuinely yours) we make in the present that don’t actually align with our authentic identities, values, and purposes because the experience isn’t actually driven by a seeking of comfort but instead a default to familiarity.

Using my own story as a grad student, my comfort myth was that achieving the deeply philosophical and intellectual identity I believed a student *should* have would make me feel a great

We invite way too many “buts” to the decision roundtable.

sense of comfort. Second, I was repeatedly choosing to take that exam over and over even though I clearly wasn’t ready for it. Why? I thought passing that exam early on and

with high marks would align me with Myth #1. So, Myth #2 was just perpetuating Myth #1!

I had two things going against me. I was pursuing a misaligned purpose AND failing anyway. My experiences were incongruent with my expectations (even if they were misaligned with what I really desired), and it left me feeling frequently and incredibly *uncomfortable*. I wish I knew then what I know now (no one’s ever said that before), that the discomfort I was experiencing was not resulting from my failed attempts to live up to the image I’d constructed in my head, but actually a result of seeking false comfort* in choices that weren’t congruent with my true values and purpose.

Social psychologists look at incongruence—when something isn’t compatible with your expectations or feels out of place—as a byproduct of misaligned goals and unspoken motivations.² A broader use of the term, from a counseling perspective, is basically functioning in a state of experienced disagreement or inner conflict.³ Navigating life circumstances, relationships, even basic daily choices, in a state of incongruence can lead to stress, anxiety, depression, diminished well-being, and poor mental health.

* Full disclosure: It’s not in society’s best interest to put “discomfort” on the labels of things. “Yes, your prom shoes are gorgeous, made out of Italian patent leather from only grass-fed alligators . . . and they’ll also leave you pigeon-toed.”

Yet often do we place ourselves, or find ourselves placed, in that category—not what I planned for, not my intention, not what I expected, nothing I can do about it?

For most of my graduate school career, I was smack-dab in the middle of a “not what I planned for” situation. I don’t know that even now I could tell you what I *really* expected out of that time in my life, a time I’m *very* glad is now behind me. I can confidently tell you that even if I could articulate all this to you, it would be nothing close to what I actually experienced. And I think that’s the problem. For five of the six years I was in grad school* I floundered around with a neglected focus on my purpose. Instead, I allowed my experiences to define me and my choices. These choices were habitual and automatic, not contemplated and intentional. So, when obstacles presented themselves like the Warped Wall on *American Ninja Warrior*, my responses were reactive and the perception I held of my identity shifted like a kite in the wind. I wasn’t intentionally focused on my purpose. So, when something happened and I thought, responded, or behaved contrary to my core self, the outcome was often anxiety, frustration, disappointment, or despair. But I didn’t know why.

Here’s another example you might relate to. We live in a culture where the picture of a happily married lifestyle attained by a certain critical age is the Holy Grail of relational and life-status aspirations. For those of us who fall in the singles category, it’s too easy to place the identity of “failure” in our bucket of labels. I’ve seen this comfort myth play on repeat in the lives of friends, clients, and family members. It goes like this: Myth #1: if I find the right person, aka my “soul mate,” get married, and settle down

* Thank you for your purchase of *Embracing Uncomfortable*. 100% of the author proceeds of this book will go to the “Deb Gorton Student Loan Reduction Fund.” Ha ha, just kidding. More like 5%. Your donations are greatly appreciated.

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(what does that even mean!), I will feel fulfilled; I'll achieve a great feeling of comfort because I'll never feel lonely, inadequate, or unlovable ever again. Basically, these are the same qualities for a cozy throw or an R&B playlist. Or even if I do still feel those emotions, they won't be nearly as intense as they are now, *or* I'll have a permanent partner to soothe me out of any such feeling.

This myth also unconsciously suggests that I'm not adequate as a single and will never find true contentment and fulfillment in this stage of life, no matter what. This leads to Myth #2: DATE ANY BREATHING INDIVIDUAL THAT CROSSES MY PATH because being single is way worse than coupling off with some random dude or dudette. Who cares, as long as you're a couple!!

TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE!

The consequence of living the comfort myth is an ongoing, restless desire for something else, because every time we achieve the false comfort we seek, it's never enough. Thankfully, transformation is possible! However, like I tell my clients (and inadvertently myself), saying it, recognizing it, that's the easy part. It's in the doing where things get difficult.

Notice, though, I said *difficult*, not impossible, and if we journey together our chances of success rise exponentially. So, to that end I'm going to be brutally honest about myself throughout this entire book, at the risk of exposing myself as the fraud that I fear I am. Why? Because it's critical we rise to this challenge together. Do you know that only eight percent of the general population actually takes the steps to meet the goals they set for themselves?⁴ How do they succeed? They don't do it alone.

I get that! Over the last several years I've been blessed with

an abundance of true, life-giving, intentional, honest, raw, vulnerable community. This is the type of community where I can be my gruesome, truthful, unfiltered selves (because I'm a "3" on the Enneagram I can default to many "selves" and still be fully loved and embraced). It's been in that intentionally created space where I've started to confront those destructive messages and move more into a fuller embrace of the momentary discomfort of choosing to be my authentic self—which leads to longer-term contentment and peace. It's in this space I've learned that everyone carries these messages, even those people with ten gazillion followers on social media who come across as having everything together. So, I want to do that for you. My prayer is that if I expose the truth instead of running and hiding from it, perhaps you'll feel the pull of bravery and gravitate toward doing the same and then turn and do so for others. So, the moral of the story is, find your people and commit to doing this work with them. It'll be your first practice in the art of stepping into the uncomfortable. (And yes, I'll be saying more about this "find your people" challenge.)

Once you've established the community that's going to journey with you in this process the next step is taking a long hard look in the mirror to determine where you're defaulting to the comfort myth at the expense of what you truly value. Recognition is always the first step toward transformation. We can't change what we don't know is there or we don't acknowledge as missing. So, pause with me for a second. Consider the hunches that are quietly nudging you toward an area of your life that represents a comfort myth (likely something habitual) versus a core value. It's okay if you're unsure

There's a reason the question "What's your gut telling you?" exists.

at the moment or if you haven't established what your core values are; we're going to address that process in another chapter. However, there's a reason the question "What's your gut telling you?" exists. The initial thoughts swirling in your brain as you've read the beginning pages of this book are the ones driven by unconscious emotion and are more likely to be consistent with what's authentically you. Sure, what you've jotted down may change considerably as you continue reading; however, it's also likely that you've established some key decisions here that won't change drastically but instead will go through the sieve of refinement as you navigate what follows.

Next, you need to carve out time, intentional time in your schedule to do this work. Block it off. Make it sacred to you and to others. I'll talk about the critical role of the discipline of pausing later on, but know you'll feel a greater sense of frustration in this process *without* a commitment to this time than the momentary discomfort of consistent, intentional pauses. These pauses serve to create the space necessary to evaluate progress (see how this cycle of discomfort to comfort is a part of nearly every decision we make!) and foundationally place us in a space of minimal noise and distraction.

Why do you think we so easily lose sight of our authentic purpose? Well, let me ask you this, when was the last time you actually thought about your purpose? Or, even better, have you ever sat down and thoughtfully, carefully, *intentionally* defined it? If you answered yes to either of those questions you've already graduated from *Embracing Uncomfortable* and should really be enrolled in *Embracing Uncomfortable 2.0*. Actually, why don't you just start writing it yourself (I'll take a 10 percent motivation and purpose fee from any and all future book sales). We lose sight of purpose because we never knew what it looked like in our own

life to begin with, and we arrive there because we didn't take the TIME to honestly and investigate-ively (clearly, making up words is a pastime of mine) answer this question.

Most of us would probably say we're too busy. We offer the trite "there's not enough time in a day" answer, when ironically the discomfort of being too busy pales in comparison to the discomfort of functioning purposeless. To be clear, the choice to pursue purpose is one that will require frequent and costly sacrifices. However, the type of discomfort that comes from *those* losses, the ones that simply don't align with our fundamental values, is like the aching pain of a good workout—it yields a high return in the *long run*. Pun intended.

That's exactly what finally propelled me into a place of living more consistent with who I believed I was created to be rather than the created illusion of the self I was repeatedly failing to become.

I *DID* pass that exam and finally felt incredibly, overwhelmingly comfortable. FALSE! The day I finally passed was like the disappointing ending to an otherwise epic movie.* It felt kinda . . . blah. While I don't want to downplay the extremely hard work, persistence, and tenacity my graduate work required, I felt the same letdown when I walked across the stage to receive my diploma a year later. In fact, at that point I was finishing up a year of full-time internship where I was seeing about thirty clients a week and crying both to and from my daily commute to work, (yes, sometimes with a milkshake in hand). Things just didn't feel right. I had achieved what I set out to accomplish, but I continued to feel this nagging sense of discomfort in the outcome.

* Think *Titanic*—it was a grand and adventurous love story until that end scene with Jack slowly freezing to death in the water while we all knew there was PLENTY of room for him on that large floating door.

WHAT I LEARNED ON THE BEACH

A year later, I realized why during an unplanned forty days in the desert. Okay, my desert was a beach and forty days was more like ninety. Don't get any glamorous ideas, it was an East Coast beach in the dead of winter, so it was cold, and windy, and there was NO ONE around. However, thanks to my desolate surroundings my distractions were eliminated, and I was able to stop, look, and listen. I could actually engage in that critical practice of disciplined pausing. As I did so it allowed me to challenge the comfort myth by taking time to discern my false from true purpose.

Slowly, these false perceptions of who I wanted to be, how I wanted to behave, and where I wanted to go on my journey were gradually revealed. I began to see where my choices were causing me acute discomfort because they ultimately didn't align with most of who I really was. It wasn't just the false pursuit of an external mold that represented a professional, elbow-patched, tweed-wearing, philosophically thinking academician. There was more, a lot more.

I discovered I had to be the problem-solver in order to be seen as valuable. That I had to have the answers in order to be seen as competent. That I had to be in a relationship in order to be seen as worthy of something to offer based on the culture myth of my surrounding community. I could fill a chapter in this book with the insecurities I unearthed and the resulting behaviors I was engaging in that fought hard against the core of who I really was.

Here's the thing. After all this . . . I AM an academic. I'm currently running a master's in counseling program, serving as an associate faculty member, and was recently promoted to an endowed chair position. I don't say all this to toot my own horn but to toot that without any doubt, I KNOW I wouldn't be where I am today without a willingness to embrace uncomfortable

things in order to fulfill the greater comfort of my calling.

Lest you think I have it all together, I've had to fend off the lure of myths since my days at the beach. They still catch me off guard, trap me in their sweet talk and conniving ways, and trip me up constantly. I'll even let you in on them if you continue reading.

The difference today is that I have a compass north. I know who I want to be, how I want to be, and where I want to be no matter my season or circumstance. This makes all the difference. I allowed myself to be stripped of the unnecessary to see that what I thought was beneath the surface was not really there at all. The shame, the discouragement, the uncertainty, the fear, the insecurity—those were feelings, but they were not and ARE not part of my identity. So, I stopped pursuing ways that suggested they were. Yes, that's uncomfortable, but the relief of being authentically me is so worth the momentary uneasiness of owning my insecurities and acting in opposition to them (more on this later one).

Now I want to help you do the same. The next chapters in this book are designed to steer you on a path (one we can journey together) of challenging the comfort myths in your own life. We'll explore the consequences of comfort and how embracing momentary discomfort can produce radical transformation in our lives. I'll walk you through some exercises that help to define our values and purpose in order to set ourselves back on course when we wander off track, and how to navigate the other bumps and detours we undoubtedly experience from time to time. If you're with me, all you have to do is turn the page.

Comfort.

Myth.

Challenge.

Accepted.

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