

“Who am I to Teach and Charge for it?”

*Candid Reflections to Comfort, Encourage,
Caution, and Support*

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Introduction

This is a book that has been on my mind to write for many years.

It comes up in most workshops that I teach, this question of “Who am I to teach this? I’m no master. Besides, everything has already been said. I’ve got nothing new to add to this.” Or “Who am I to be a healer? I’m not that good yet. I’m not ready. I need more education.” Or “Who am I to hold circles? I don’t want to feign that I know things or that I’m some big deal.” Or “Who am I to offer anyone wisdom about how to live their life when I still have so many struggles?”

My friend Justin Luria expressed this recently on Facebook: “What’s with all these ‘I discovered spirituality 2-6 years ago and now I’m a teacher’ people? I find them mainly from my generation, early 20s to early 40s. Is it a legacy of the entitlement we were raised with, the ‘You can do and be anything you want sweetie’ generation? Is it just a new age variation of the arrogance of youth that thinks that because you’ve been on a gap year or two and taken a couple of workshops, that you’re qualified to take on the mantle of spiritual teacher? (But it’s okay guys, we’re in the post-2012 world, everyone should now be their own guru, yeah?) What’s considered normal (or even bare-bones acceptable) seems so woefully inadequate.”

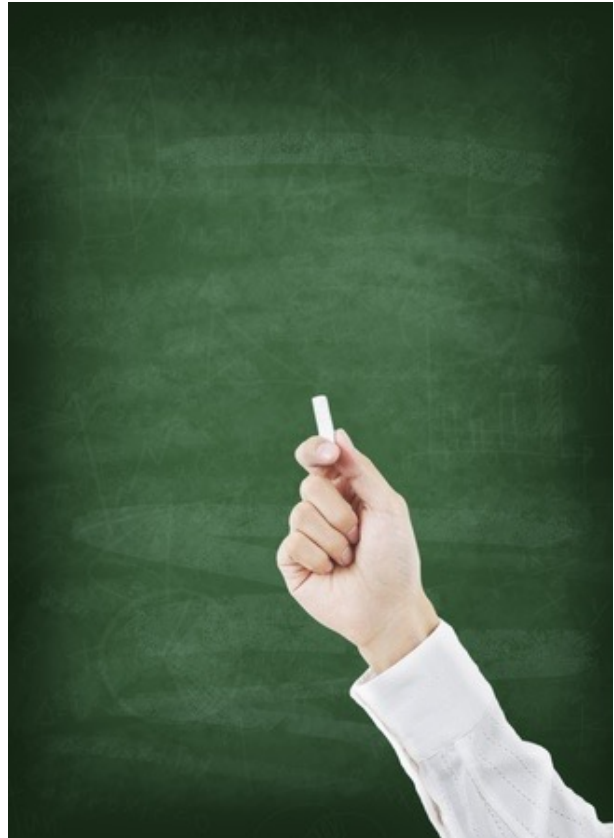
“Who am I to teach?”

It’s a weighty question that deserves more of a response than the pat, “Believe in yourself,” with answers given out as though the heart of the malady was a lack of self-esteem and that the miracle cure could be brought about by popping the pills of “valuing yourself.”

No.

This is a bigger and more important question.

So, I want to try and write a response that might be worthy of everything that is inside that question. And, in all candour, it’s a question I am coming to cagily, carefully, and on my knees, because at the time of writing this, I am “just” 40-years-old, and these are questions best addressed by someone further on in years and deeper in the tooth of wisdom than I. And yet, having not



found a book that delves into this wondering, and finding this question as I do, in so many quarters of my work, here I am, courting this question with all the respect that is due to it and full of the wondering about whether it is even a good idea to do so.

“Who am I to teach?”

The question is one I feel a real personal connection to as, when I was 21, I was leading personal growth weekend-long workshops for a leadership development franchise. There were people attending who had sandals older than I was. I had no business leading those workshops. I remember one man who, upon seeing that an over-excitabile boy was going to be leading the course, politely and graciously asked for a refund. I was offended at the time but I wish I could hug him now. I knew the basics of some fancy neuro-linguistic programming and other “technologies” for personal growth, and I imagined that this gave me some permission to lead groups of adults through some incredibly deep waters. I thought that my having some theory I’d learned by rote (and yet hadn’t sincerely implemented into my life) meant I’d learned something worth sharing. I was full of posturing and dishonest swagger while trying to prove that I was fully empowered.

I was a disaster who didn’t know how to be grounded.

I pretended to be more empowered than I felt because I thought that’s what I needed to do; or maybe it was because I wanted so much to be seen in the same way other big seminar leaders were seen; or maybe because I thought that at my young age, I should already be perfect and I was deeply ashamed that I wasn’t yet, and so I tried to cover it up with big talk about how well these tools had worked for me. But the truth was that I couldn’t even get myself to exercise most days.

I was so young.

In the broad scheme of things, I still am.

So, when some come to me with these questions of “Who am I to do this work?” I take it very seriously.

“Who am I to teach?”

Of course, the most obvious and important question is, “Teach what?” Surely, we are all qualified to teach some things and not others. Surely, most of us have some areas of our life where we have legitimately got our stuff together and other areas where we remain a disaster.

So, to be given a worthy answer, this question eventually needs to be honed.

This is especially true when we lead a workshop on personal growth, teach a workshop on spirituality, on life’s bigger questions, or lead groups through deep internal work. When we lead those kinds of workshops, we are making certain promises. And I see my job here as lifting up

some of the problems that can come with these big teachings, because it's not just what we promise – it's what we're capable of delivering.

“Who am I to teach?”

That question is echoed in my frequent wondering, “Who am I to write this eBook?”

I suppose I am someone who has made most, if not all of the mistakes contained in these pages. I'm also someone who has worked with hundreds of people who wrestle with this question.

But, to bolster my odds of getting things right, I've drawn in the old words of my ancestors in the form of the Scottish and Irish proverbs that you will find throughout this eBook.

This book is divided into three sections.

Section One: Comforts & Encouragements is written to comfort and solace those who are afflicted by this question. It's there to offer encouragement and a balm to soothe the emotional roller coaster that this question can provoke. This section is a tiny fire and lean-to in the cold woods of not knowing. The section is there to let you know you aren't alone in feeling like you are a fraud or an imposter in your work.

Section Two: Afflictions & Caveats is written to challenge those who have become, perhaps, too comfortable in skirting around the edges of this question. This section is there to introduce you to the extended family of this question, its brothers, sisters, fostered urchins, cousins, aunts, and uncles. It's designed to tour you around the house where that question lives and then the neighbourhood so you can come to understand the territory in which this question lives. This section is written to challenge those who are striding with, perhaps, too much ease and more swagger than they've earned down the corridors of the sensitive, inner lives of others.

Section Three: Paths Forward offers some thoughts on ways to proceed that I hope might be reliable guides for you. This is the section I imagine most people are craving but it is likely the section that you need to read the least.

Section Four: The Poverty of Believing in Yourself offers a contrarian perspective on this impoverished notion of believing in yourself that you won't find in most personal growth books on the market on the subject.

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“Who am I to teach?”

We live in a day and age that is in desperate need of wisdom and, perhaps, many of us are responding to that by trying to become teachers to be the thing we never got in the world. But we are doing it without much guidance.

We are doing it without much community to be accountable to, and we are doing it without many elders under whom we could meaningfully apprentice to learn our particular craft.

Of course, sometimes those who ask, “who am I to teach?” are often secretly angling for pity or approval. You won’t find that in this book. If you’re here for blanket encouragement, that’s not exactly what you’ll find here either. If you’re here for advice or “the answer,” you definitely won’t find that here.

What you will find is the encouragement to keep wrestling with this worthy of “who am I to teach?” as honestly as possible.

As my colleague Mark Silver once put it, “I would say that, deep down, it’s an honest and sincere question when asked as a real question, and not as a statement *masquerading* as a question, where ‘Who am I?’ stands in for, ‘I can’t/I’m not supposed to/I’m not the one to do it.’ The integrity, the care, the humility is all needed in this inquiry.”

What I want to offer here isn’t a solution but some ideas and reflections that, like seeds, might take root and grow into an apple tree that can at least provide food to sustain you while you keep up the wrestling.

Anais Nin once said, “You have a right to experiment with your life. You will make mistakes. And they are right too. No, I think there was too rigid a pattern. You came out of an education and are supposed to know your vocation. Your vocation is fixed, and maybe ten years later you find you are not a teacher anymore or you’re not a painter anymore. It may happen. It has happened. I mean Gauguin decided at a certain point he wasn’t a banker anymore; he was a painter. And so he walked away from banking. I think we have a right to change course. But society is the one that keeps demanding that we fit in and not disturb things. They would like you to fit in right away so that things work now.”

And so, yes, we have the right to experiment with our lives.

But what about when it comes to the lives of others?

One reaction to this question is to collapse, shrink down, and back away from opportunities. Another reaction is to posture, puff ourselves up, and pretend to be a lot more together than we are. But, if we’re going to explore this meaningfully, it’s got to be a response from a place of deeper composure.

I hope that these reflections might help you get a bit closer to that.

Who am I to Teach and Charge for it?

And, of course, these ideas and reflections are offered in the spirit of knowing the very real and distinct possibility that none of these ideas will have any merit for you. When I say “people” or “we” in this book I am referring mostly to my own corner of the world, North America, and largely to the privileged - often-white - people who live here. Perhaps this will hold value for others and I’d be gratified to know this was the case, but I don’t write these words in the expectation that this is so.

“Who am I to teach and charge for it?”

Let’s find out.

Comforts & Encouragements

*Thoughts and reflections to help those who are
able but feel unready and unworthy*

Comfort & Encouragement #1: You Deserve to Have Your Needs Met

At the heart of a lot of the struggle with the concept of “who am I to teach?” is this deep feeling of discomfort that we have needs at all. There’s this big feeling of shame in a lot of people for needing the level of support they do. A lot of healers and coaches feel like they should be able to help anyone who wants their help for free and be okay with that.

But you’re a human being. You have needs (e.g. food, water, shelter, etc.), and in this culture, without money, those are hard to get. So, unless you’re consciously choosing to opt out of the cash economy (an attempt I would applaud and celebrate), then it’s something to come to terms with.

Can you be humble enough to admit that you need support to live? Can you be humble enough to receive that support in the form of money from clients whom you are helping?

You have needs. You deserve to have them met.

This doesn’t mean you’re entitled to be a billionaire. It doesn’t mean you’re entitled to anyone’s business in particular. It doesn’t mean your needs matter more than those of others’.

It just means that you deserve these things as much as any other human on earth.

And it means that it’s important to be incredibly real with yourself about what it is that you need and what it will take to make that happen. This shows up particularly clearly with money.

Comfort & Encouragement #2: You May Need to Appoint Yourself

Many people walk around life feeling needy and unsure this world is asking anything of them. Most people are waiting for proof that the way they live their lives matters to others. The invitation is to stop waiting and to proceed as if you are needed. This might mean you develop a bit of swagger and self-appoint yourself. So be it.

“As a rule nobody asks you to do your life’s work. More often, at least in the early going, you have to do your life’s work as a self-appointed task. And in the early going you’re not very good at it. It is a learning thing, expensive, demanding, relentless.”

– Stephen Jenkinson

But, of course, if we’re needed, it’s the most natural thing in the world to doubt our capacity to rise to the occasion. That’s not a disempowering belief to get over, it’s a human response to explore. It’s something to wrestle with. That wrestling is a part of the learning and growing that helps you be ready. If you skip an active engagement with your doubts, you may find that they linger around like ghosts of the departed who, never properly grieved and yet willfully forgotten, stick around to haunt you in a world to which they no longer belong. Your doubts are like seeds and they can only give you the plant inside them if you are willing to plant them in the fertile soil of your curiosity and willingness to admit there’s something you don’t know.

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Additional Resources:

The Miraculous Discovery in The Field Full of Pebbles: on.fb.me/1KOjP7R

Proceeding as if You’re Needed: bit.ly/241VUr4

Comfort & Encouragement #3: Your Doubts are Often Your Integrity in Disguise

When people say to me, “I don’t know if I’m ready,” I immediately trust them a bit more.

Because, in asking the question, I hear a deep integrity trying to assert itself amidst a desperate need to pay the rent. I hear a deep concern for the well-being of others. I hear the humility of knowing how little they know and how much they still struggle. And I hear the tension between not wanting to be a fraud and yet not wanting to pretend they don’t know anything at all. They are simultaneously lit up by the possibility of stepping into a work that they love and also terrified. They want to help people but are also scared they might hurt them. They want to fly but are terrified that they will fall.



They are aware that the bigger a job they take on, the more potential there is to screw things up and really hurt people. They’re aware the more trust that’s invested in them, the more they have to be faithful to. They know that this trust isn’t a resource we actively seek out or try to cultivate; it’s a sort of human-making burden we carry with care because we know the more of it that people pile on our back, the more damage there would be should we ever get lazy and drop it.

Trust is a burden.

When people court power and responsibility too fast and too soon, before they’re ready, they are actually courting disaster.

In my own ancestry, the role of chieftain or head of the Clan (Ceann-cinnidh) wasn’t something you wanted. It was responsibility. Your role was to make sure the elders were cared for and that the young were fed. You were responsible for your people. And you could be deposed in a second.

On one side we have people never starting because they’re not perfect or ready and they don’t want to hurt people. On the other side we have people blindly charging ahead and imagining they’re ready and that people are lucky to get what they’ve got to give. Neither of these orientations is particularly helpful or sustainable.

Another possibility is to consider that teaching what you know and offering it as a service isn’t a sign that you’re “done” or “perfect.” It’s you signing up for your next step in your schooling

without any illusions that it will be easy. And learning should give you pause. You should have second thoughts about learning. Because learning is expensive and you can only pay with the thing you can least afford to give. You can only pay for learning with what you already know.

Stated another way: When you already know everything, there's no room to learn anything new.

Stated another way: Your certainty that you already know what's true might be the thing that's keeping you from seeing the world as it is.

Stated another way still: We often get attached to our particular set of blinders and yet, if we want to see more, they're what we need to give up.

Learning is expensive. Do you believe that you're worthless? Well, if you want to learn then you'll need to pay with that thought. Do you believe you're flawless? Same thing. And it can't be overstated how hard it is to question what we've always believed to be true.

Learning is what helps refine you. Sometimes I think that when we get started, we should be paying our clients for the chance to learn.

When people express their doubts I want to fall on my knees and thank them. The people who scare me are the ones with very little experience but extreme confidence. People like me when I was young. Those are the ones most likely to hurt people.

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Additional Resources:

Paying the Thing You Can't Afford to Lose: on.fb.me/243huwz

Comfort & Encouragement #4: Your Questions About Money are Often About Your Integrity

Intimately tied into the question of “Who am I to teach?” is the often unspoken ending to that sentence “. . . and get paid for it?”

It can feel very strange to many of us, this notion of being paid to do something we love that’s bringing healing to the world. There can be a guilt associated with it and this urge to just give it away for free.

We are in a strange place in this culture. No one bats an eye at people taking jobs in industries that are destroying the world (e.g. mining, industrial forestry, fossil fuels), but when people try to make money doing something good? We suddenly feel strange about accepting money for it. Surely, if anything it should be the opposite. It’s something to wonder about.

And again, when people bring up these issues I want to worship at their feet for a while, because these concerns don’t come out of nowhere. They often have roots founded in a concern about the direction of the larger economy – both where it came from and where it’s going. As people learn more about what’s happening in the world, it’s the most natural thing to have questions about money emerge. What is money? Where did it come from? For what kind of work should I accept it, and for what kind of work should I refuse it?

And if you work in the healing arts, this becomes an even more pressing question, as people will start bringing many things to your door to question you about making money. They’ll point out that traditional medicine people in most indigenous cultures almost never take money for their ceremonies or healings, so how on earth can you? Aren’t you just participating in the commodification of something that should never be commodified?

When I see people wrestling with this, I want to hug them and thank them for being willing to engage and grapple with something for which there are no easy answers. I want to praise the deep integrity of their political and spiritual landscape. I want to urge them to keep following those threads. Nowhere in me is there an urge to “fix” anything. I have no desire at all to do anything other than hold those people’s feet even closer to the fire so they can really feel the burn of consequence and so that anything that might be out of alignment in them can become known and felt. Many of my colleagues would see all of this as a set of disempowering beliefs, but frankly, I think a lot of their beliefs about money are deeply toxic. I think the willingness to wrestle with these issues is, itself, a noble endeavour that deserves to be applauded. It’s a rare thing in this culture to associate anything with money other than desperation and entitlement.

I’ve been broke before (and I didn’t care) because I’d decided to spend my time enjoying my life and doing volunteer work in my community. There’s nothing less spiritual than that. But there’s

also nothing particularly spiritual about being broke and not being able to take care of yourself, and therefore being a burden on others.

Having said all of that, a few thoughts do occur to me that I offer on the off chance they might have some use to someone.

We no longer live in a tribal set-up. Were you to have been a healer in that set-up, your needs would have been met. You would have been taken care of by the village. That is no longer the case today. We no longer have a village, so we need to do something different.

And it's worth noting that you do not need to make an income from healing. You could work a job and also do your healing work. That is an absolutely legitimate and beautiful model. You can be a healer without making a business out of it.

Offering your gifts to the world? Non-negotiable. That's a mandatory part of being a human being. Making it a business and charging for it? Entirely optional.

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Additional Resources:

12 Toxic Myths of Wealth: The Personal Growth Industry's Bankrupt Notions of Prosperity: marketingforhippies.com/toxic-myths-of-wealth

I'm Broke and I Don't Care: marketingforhippies.com/broke

The Meantime: 30 Day Cashflow Challenge: marketingforhippies.com/meantime30day

Comfort & Encouragement #5: Doubt is a Part of the Creative Process

“Is minig a bha claidheamh math an droch thrill.”

(Good sword has often been in poor scabbard.)

– Scottish Gaelic Proverb

Doubt is unavoidable.

It's a part of the creative process. Although, it's rarely self-doubt. It's more often imagining *other* people's doubts about us and then reacting to those imaginings.

We ask ourselves, “What would others say about this?” We often ask them. But, of course, they're not us. They don't see things the way we do.

I've performed improv comedy since 1992, and during this time I had a few years where my improv was terrible. I couldn't do a good scene to save my life. And of course, the worse I did, the more and more my self-doubt grew. The more my self-doubt grew, the worse my improv became. Eventually I got out of the funk.

It wasn't until years later when I was able to look back and see what had happened.

Instead of jumping into scenes with my ideas, I was second guessing everything and turning to my teammates on the bench to say, “Do you think I should do this or not?” But by the time they heard my idea, processed it, and replied, the moment was gone.

I would have learned faster by just acting on my ideas. Many of them would have been terrible, but I would have learned from that.

But that's not how it went for me. And it's not how it goes for most of us. We have ideas and we doubt them. We make things and we doubt they're any good.

And sometimes we're right. It's not that good. Sometimes those doubts are accurate assessments of the poor quality of something we've made. But that doesn't mean we should stop making things. It doesn't mean we should stop trying. If anything, it means we should keep trying. We should get off the bench and jump into as many scenes as possible. We should keep writing every day. We should keep making things and learn from the doing, knowing that doubts will be there all along the way.



Doubt doesn't mean "stop." Doubt means "keep learning."

Ira Glass said it perfectly:

Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, I wish someone told me. All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it's just not that good. It's trying to be good, it has potential, but it's not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you. A lot of people never get past this phase, they quit. Most people I know who do interesting, creative work went through years of this. We know our work doesn't have this special thing that we want it to have. We all go through this. And if you are just starting out or you are still in this phase, you gotta know it's normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Put yourself on a deadline so that every week you will finish one story. It is only by going through a volume of work that you will close that gap, and your work will be as good as your ambitions. And I took longer to figure out how to do this than anyone I've ever met. It's gonna take awhile. It's normal to take awhile. You've just gotta fight your way through.

Doubt is a part of the creative process.

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Additional Resources:

Art Song by Tanya Davis: youtube.com/watch?v=qpunQZ4cUyI

What it Takes to Give Birth (to a Baby or a Dream) by KC Baker: kcbaker.com/blog/2014/01/21/birthing-dreams

Comfort & Encouragement #6: You Might Not be Ready, But . . .

“You are currently not the person who can deliver the calling that is within you.

You will grow into that person as you say yes to your calling.

God does not call the qualified. God qualifies the called.”

– Rev. Michael Beckwith

This is an important one to wrestle with.

You genuinely might not be ready for the work you’ve imagined for yourself.

Try that one on for size.

We’ve all seen it: someone whose shoes are way too big for them. Someone crashing and burning because they weren’t ready.

That could be you.

If you don’t seriously consider your level of readiness, you’re a fool.

You actually might not have the skill, wisdom, internal fortitude, or capacity to do the work you’re so drawn to. History is full of people who thought they were ready, or thought they were invincible; just like Icarus, who was drawn by his desire to get closer to the sun and deaf to his father’s pleas, fell helplessly to his death as his wings melted as a result of his hubris. There are many examples of those people whose arrogance outstripped their ability and whose lack of regard for limits cost others dearly.

So you might not be ready, but it’s important to ask ourselves, “Ready for what?” Ready to be a guru to thousands? Maybe not. Ready to run some free workshops in your living room? Maybe so. Ready to quit your day job? Maybe not. Ready to go to part time? Maybe so.

Often, the question “Am I ready?” boils down to the belief that “I need to be perfect to be ready.” No wonder we never feel ready.

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Additional Resources:

Hot House Deaths, The Secret and the Importance of Limits: bit.ly/20TaUtk

11 Celebrated Artists Who Didn’t Quit Their Day Jobs by Clay Wirestone: bit.ly/1f0wj9W

Who am I to Teach and Charge for it?



Comfort & Encouragement #7: You Have Something to Offer

This is vital.

Can you offer everything you might want to right now? Probably not.

But do you have something to offer that could help people? There is no doubt.

Is what you are able to offer enough to sustain you in a business? How much could you charge for it? Do you even need to charge for it yet? Those are very open and worthy questions.

But do you have something to give this world? That is not a question worth any time at all, because it will distract you from the needed work of giving your gift to the world. So many people shut down because they don't want to be a burden on others. But the real burden put on the world is one you put there yourself by not giving your gifts and thus making everyone else carry your load to make up for it. You are needed.

Healers often think, "I know I still have unhealed issues so who am I to heal anyone else?" and thus they set themselves into an impossible to escape place, and rob anyone they meet of whatever portion of healing they might have brought. You may not have healed everything in your own life, but I imagine you've healed something. If you stick to helping people with issues of a similar intensity and dynamic, you'll be on solid ground.

"Are you ready?"

Who knows. "Ready for what?"

"Ready for the big time?" Maybe not.

"Ready to help *somebody*?" You'd better believe it.

Don't let the fact that you aren't ready for everything stop you from offering something.

You have *something* to offer.

NOBODY TELLS THIS TO PEOPLE WHO ARE BEGINNERS
I WISH SOMEONE TOLD ME.

ALL OF US WHO DO CREATIVE WORK, WE GET INTO IT BECAUSE WE HAVE GOOD TASTE.

BUT THERE IS THIS GAP.

FOR THE FIRST COUPLE YEARS YOU MAKE STUFF, IT'S JUST NOT THAT GOOD. IT'S TRYING TO BE GOOD, IT HAS POTENTIAL, BUT IT'S NOT.

BUT YOUR TASTE, THE THING THAT GOT YOU INTO THE GAME, IS STILL KILLER. AND YOUR TASTE IS WHY YOUR WORK DISAPPOINTS YOU.

A LOT OF PEOPLE NEVER GET PAST THIS PHASE, THEY QUIT.

MOST PEOPLE I KNOW WHO DO INTERESTING, CREATIVE WORK WENT THROUGH YEARS OF THIS. WE KNOW OUR WORK DOESN'T HAVE THIS SPECIAL THING THAT WE WANT IT TO HAVE.

WE ALL GO THROUGH THIS.

AND IF YOU ARE JUST STARTING OUT OR YOU ARE STILL IN THIS PHASE, YOU GOTTA KNOW ITS NORMAL AND THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CAN DO IS

DO A LOT OF WORK

PUT YOURSELF ON A DEADLINE SO THAT EVERY WEEK YOU WILL FINISH ONE STORY.

IT IS ONLY BY GOING THROUGH A VOLUME OF WORK THAT YOU WILL CLOSE THAT GAP

AND YOUR WORK WILL BE AS GOOD AS YOUR AMBITIONS

AND I TOOK LONGER TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO DO THIS THAN ANYONE I'VE EVER MET.

IT'S GONNA TAKE AWHILE. **IT'S NORMAL TO TAKE AWHILE.**

YOU'VE JUST GOTTA FIGHT YOUR WAY THROUGH.

Comfort & Encouragement #8: Don't Underestimate the Important Gift of Empathy

"Is fearr beagán den ghaol ná mórán den charthanas."

(A little kinship is better than a lot of charity.)

– Irish Gaelic Proverb

You might be surprised how much of what people are paying for is actually empathy.

You might be amazed at what a significant factor “feeling understood” is for people when they’re spending their money. Sure, they want the particular result they’re paying you for, but do not discount the impact of them feeling understood by you. Don’t underestimate the real value and gift of it. Sometimes people would rather work with someone who is a little less skilled if their bedside manner is much greater.

The life coach and healing arts industry is lacking that. And there’s more New Age bullying than you may think.

It can be an immense relief to realize that our presence is a gift to others .

Empathy is also at the heart of good marketing.

“Who are you to heal people?” Maybe you’re someone who really knows how to listen. Maybe someone who won’t push or bully people into doing something that’s not right for them.

—



Additional Resources:

New Age Bullies by Julia Ingram: juliaingram.com/nab

Seven Principles & Seven Practices on Empathy in Marketing: marketingforhippies.com/empathy-in-marketing

An Epiphany While Roling by Lissa Rankin: on.fb.me/1of6mMP

Comfort & Encouragement #9: Almost Everyone is Crap When They Start

“Bionn gach tosach lag.”
(Every beginning is weak.)
– Irish Gaelic Proverb

There are a few geniuses who seemed to hit the ground running brilliantly, but for the rest of us, this isn't the story.

The first marketing workshop I did was terrible.

The second one I did was much better.

The first youth leadership workshop I led was an abysmal and mortifying failure. They got better from there. That's how it is. It's not always so bad, but I've started several things well before I was ready. It's not a path I recommend. But it's comforting to know that you're in good company.

A truism I heard once was that “Every master was once a disaster.”

Everyone you see who is now celebrated likely struggled in the very areas they are celebrated. The legendary Casanova was terrible with women.

He dedicated his life to learning the arts of courting and seduction. He was not born with those. In story after story we learn about the masters who, in their beginnings, struggled too.

But they stuck in there. This is known as playing the long game. So, this truism teaches us that no matter how deep a disaster we are now, there is the possibility of greater competence and skill. As we continue to teach what we most need to learn, we in turn learn.

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Additional Resources:

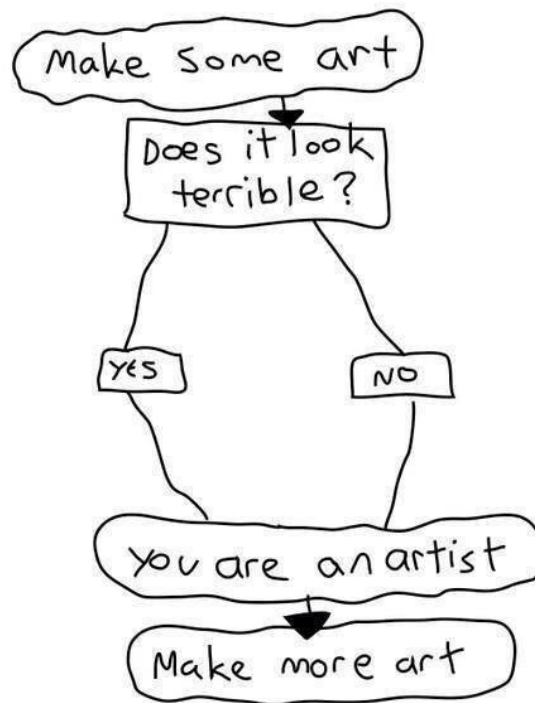
Videos on Persistence and the Long Game: nichingspiral.com/videos/persistence

Leonard Cohen on Creativity, Hard Work, and Why You Should Never Quit Before You Know What It Is You're Quitting - brainpickings.org/2014/07/15/leonard-cohen-paul-zollo-creativity

Bad writing precedes good writing. This is an infallible rule, so don't waste time trying to avoid bad writing. (That just slows down the process.) Anything committed to paper can be changed. The idea is to start, and then go from there.

Janet Hulstrand

How To BE AN ARTIST.



OM
DENKEN

Comfort & Encouragement #10: Beware of Comparing Your Insides to Other People's Outsides

It's really easy to look at others who are more successful than you, doing the kind of work you want to do, and to imagine you're seeing the full picture.

I promise you that you are not.

It's easy to look at people who are doing the work you want to do and imagine you'll never be ready to do what they do, that you'll never reach the level they have.

I've been behind the scenes of many organizations that seem phenomenally together and professional from the outside, the very picture of success, and yet, on the inside are in utter shambles.

I've been behind the scenes at many holistic expos that might seem like a money grab from the New Age scene, but the reality is that despite all of their New Age law of attraction philosophies, they are almost all losing money or barely squeaking by.

I've hung out with some of the biggest names of the personal growth scene and seen the human foibles they have that never seem to make it onto the stage. I've seen a New Age author, famous for his books about his near-death experiences, be drunk every time we met – a profound (although delightfully charming) alcoholic.

I've heard of countless yogi gurus who have taken advantage of their female followers but in a way that never makes the mainstream media.

I've come to know that a very prominent figure in the personal growth world cheated constantly on his wife, despite speaking about how great his relationship was on stage.

It's easy to believe the hype and to see those who are actually only a few steps ahead of you (whatever that means) as "perfect." But the truth is, they're people too.

Don't compare your insides to other people's outsides. Don't compare the movie of your life to the highlights reel you get to watch of others. It will leave you feeling inadequate and miserable. Just keep focused on creating something wonderful, beautiful, and useful to the community. Create something worthy of the problems you see in the world with the gifts you have. That is more than enough.

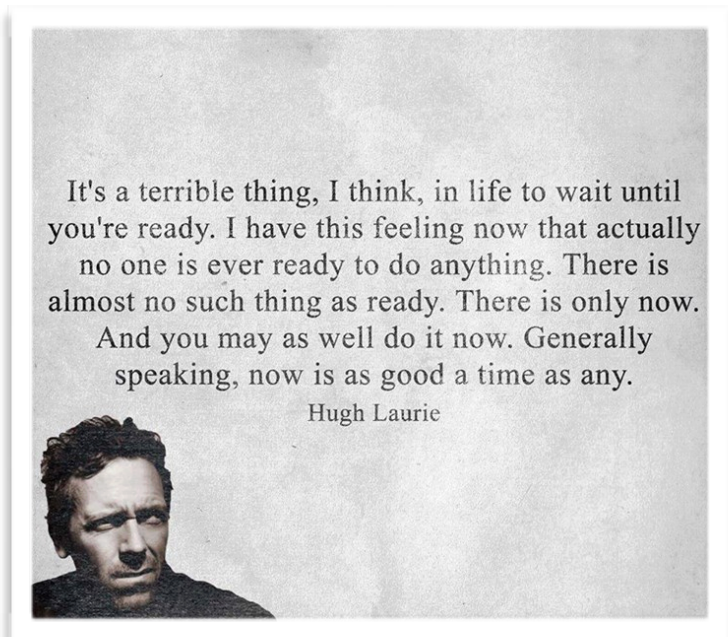
Comfort & Encouragement #11: You Know More Than You Think You Do

It was 2002 when I got a call from the United World College in Las Vegas, New Mexico to lead a facilitation training.

Having recently lived through an utter disaster of a facilitation-training that I had led, I felt zero desire to go there again. I'd spent the past years leading workshops and summer camps, but was feeling particularly humbled. My immediate response, upon getting the invitation, was to say to myself, "What do I know about this? With everything I thought I knew, I still find myself in disasters."

But still, I gave myself permission to do the same thing I hope you might: I sat down, pulled out some paper, and made a list of what I might teach were I to lead such a training. Four densely packed pages later, I found myself stunned with how much I had to say and how lucid it felt. Yes, I'd made a lot of mistakes in the past, but when I gave myself this chance to reflect on them, I found that the seeds of my failures had bloomed into apple trees bursting with fruit that I could offer to others. There was such a wealth of ideas that I felt selfish to keep it to myself. If what I had learned could help stop others from going through the same pain I had, I wanted to share it.

Also, if you get through all of this and realize, "Man, I actually don't have much to offer," then that's fine news too. You can let go of the urgent dream of building a business and get a job for a while so the heartache of the disappointment can ease up some. Then you can regroup and see what if anything you'd like to try offering in the future. Perhaps you have more training to do or life to live before you're ready to teach again.



Comfort & Encouragement #12: They Don't Notice What You Notice

"Gabhaidh fear na sròine moiré a h-uile rud ga ionnsaigh fhèin."

(The man with a big nose thinks everyone talks of it.)

– Scottish Gaelic Proverb

Performers know this one all too well.

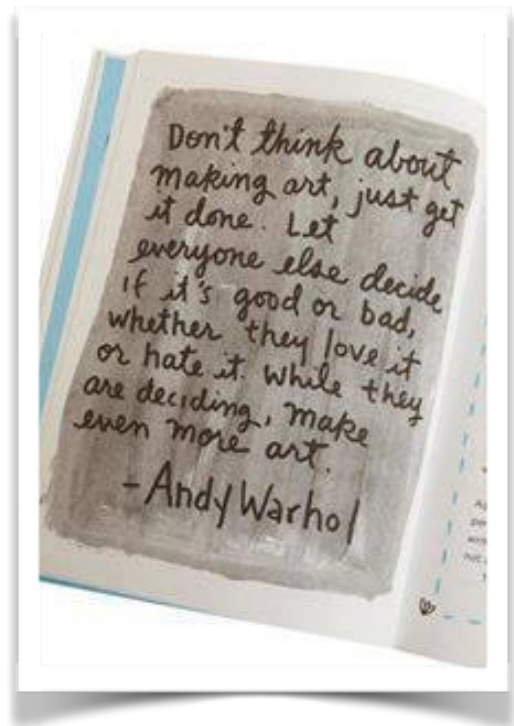
As I've mentioned, I do improv comedy with Rapid Fire Theatre, and there have been many, many shows where I would walk off stage feeling defeated by what a terrible show I'd just done. I would head to the front of the theatre where the audience was leaving, carrying the accumulated weight of every choice I wish I could have made differently, only to be greeted by someone saying, "That was amazing! Thanks man!" and get a high five from a stranger who was leaving with a big smile on his face.

I thought the show was sub-par at best. He thought it was great.

This happens all the time.

We are often our own worst critics.

They – your audience – don't (often) notice what you notice.



Comfort & Encouragement #13: To a Third Grader, a Fourth Grader is God

“Is tric a bheothaich sràd bheag teinne mòr.”

(A small spark has often kindled a great fire.)

*

“Lionar bearn mòr le clachan beaga.”

(Great gaps may be filled with small stones.)

– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs

You don't have to be a PhD to help a third grader. You just need to be a fourth grader.

You don't need to be thousands of steps ahead of someone to help, just a few.

This is so important to let sink in. And as long as you're not over-promising, you'll be fine.

My colleague Jana Beeman put it this way: “I tell my students, ‘Look at your journey, look at what you’ve surpassed in your life. Look at everything you’ve learned and the power of who you are. If you find someone a few steps behind you on your path, how can you not be the one to help them? If you don’t, you both lose.’”

Comfort & Encouragement #14: You'll Improve Faster Than You Think You Will

Think of the design of the nautilus shell. Imagine that the centre of it represents you as a very skilled and confident practitioner of what you do.

That first ring on the outside is the biggest. But they quickly become smaller and smaller. In this image you will see that within five loops you're at the centre. Improving your craft is a lot like that too.

Let's take leading a workshop as an example:

You learn so much the first time. The lessons are big and glaringly obvious. You can't imagine you didn't see them beforehand. The second time you lead the same workshop (assuming you took the time to reflect on the first workshop and implement what you learn) it will be much better. Much. But you'll still learn things. They just won't be as big as the first time. The third time you do it, your learnings will become subtler still.

The first student leadership workshop I did was in a theatre to 250 students. By the end of the day (which consisted entirely of me talking at them with almost no interactive activities) there were 20 people there. Most of them had left. It was that bad.

I was devastated and mortified.

But I had already confirmed a second workshop the next day. Unable to feign my death as school had already let out, I set to work to change everything I could to make the next day not be such a terrible thing that the legal changing of my name would, afterwards, be a requirement.

Fortunately the next day was in a dance studio with chairs that could be moved about. That changed things. I added in as many interactive activities as I could. I gave a powerful heart-to-heart at the end of the day that had students coming up with tears in their eyes, telling me it had been the most powerful day of their lives. My friends and I were stunned at the turnaround from one day to the next.

I ended up leading that workshop about 80 times. By the time I'd done my last one, the refinements I was making were so subtle that no one but myself would ever have noticed, but I knew they were making my events better.



Comfort & Encouragement #15: You're Going to Fuck Up

*"Ni bhíonn saoi gan lochs."
(There is no wise man without fault.)
– Irish Gaelic Proverb*

*"Is e an t-ionnsachadh Òg an t-ionnsachadh bòidheach."
(The learning in youth is the pretty learning.)
– Scottish Gaelic Proverb*

No matter how much you apprentice, learn, and master your craft, you will still make mistakes.

The question of, "Am I ready to teach and charge for it?" could often be more honestly rendered as, "How can I proceed in such a way that no one ever gets hurt?"

That question, of course, is a setup for paralysis. Someone *will* get hurt at some point. That's life. You're going to disappoint people. Sometimes you'll disappoint others because you stretched too far. Other times you'll hurt yourself because you didn't stretch enough.

If your metric for success is that you never fuck up, then give up now. It's going to happen. But when things go wrong, you still have a job. And that job is to learn, to make amends, and then to be faithful to that learning.



Making mistakes doesn't make you a failure. It gives you the opportunity to be human. It gives you the opportunity to learn what you need to learn so you're less likely to make that mistake again, and then to make meaningful amends. This might even be a greater gift to the community than the original gift you'd intended, because not only do they, perhaps, get more value than they'd imagined from your amends, but the community gets someone who's a bit wiser and more humble. Learning from our failures gives us an incredible sense of self-trust and confidence. Learning to trust ourselves is central to the process of creation. When you trust yourself, the question of "Am I ready?" has already answered itself.

*"Many people misunderstand the concept of safety. They think they can gain it by protecting themselves from other people or choosing safe people. Safety actually occurs when we learn to trust our ability to take care of ourselves."
– Mary MacKenzie*

The fact that you have failed in the past might be the most trustworthy thing about you.

I get excited whenever someone asks me for a refund. I'm excited because I know something. I know they are asking for a refund because what they got from me wasn't what they wanted. More accurately, what they got from me didn't match their expectation. They imagined it would be a better fit than it was. And this expectation was created by my marketing. There was something in the way I described it that gave them a false impression. So, to me these moments are golden. I always promptly refund the money and then ask what I could have changed in my marketing to ensure they never would have bought my eBook/product in the first place. And they always give me gems. That means a higher integrity in my marketing, a clearer understanding of what my product is and isn't, and less wasted time for everyone in the future.

But, if you fuck up in a larger way that causes genuine harm, then you'll need to do more than simply ask a question to learn. If you're going to really make amends in this situation, it might take a lot of effort. The effort you put into making things right is your education. It's what ensures that you "get it" at a level you never could have if you'd simply said, "Oops, sorry," and walked away. When you genuinely make things right, often at great cost to yourself, you walk away with a deeper inner strength, sense of integrity, and feeling of readiness to carry yourself well in the future. If you really handle it, you will learn the true cost of laziness and selfishness. You'll learn how cutting corners costs you more than you want to pay. It will make you a better craftsman of what you do.

And the extra benefit is that you get more permission to become cranky and curmudgeonly at all the young whippersnappers who think they know it all.

Blessings everywhere.

Comfort & Encouragement #16: Your Failures are Your Credentials

*“Má tá tú ag lorg cara gan locht,
beidh tú gan cara go deo.”
(If you are looking for a friend without fault,
you will be without a friend forever.)
– Irish Gaelic Proverb*

It’s easy to get lost in, “But I can’t teach this. My life has been such a wreck. I’ve made so many mistakes.”

But those mistakes, once learned from, are actually what make you trustworthy to the people you want to help.

The fact that you’ve overcome some of your own struggles is, perhaps, the deepest source of credibility you have.

Our deepest wounds are often not only the doorways to our truest niche, but also what makes us trustworthy.

It’s the genius of Alcoholics Anonymous: partnering those just coming in with those who are just a bit further down the path.

Looked at another way, I’ve often heard it said that, “We teach what we most need (and needed) to learn to learn.” This reminds us that we never stop learning. Because of the wounds we’ve received in our life and because of the nature of who we are when we’re born, we find ourselves in this world, curious about certain things. Drawn to things. Needing to know about things.

We try things and they don’t work. And we wonder why. We try to be healthy but we find ourselves sick. We want to be happy but we find ourselves depressed. We want to make a good living but we find ourselves broke.

And in our struggle to figure out how it all works, we learn things.

Your failures, learned from, are you credentials.

You know things from your struggles, and there is a very good chance that you take it for granted that everyone else knows them. We look at what we have learned and think to ourselves, “Sure, but everyone knows that.” I encourage you to ask yourself if that’s really true. That’s the assumption that has many of us feeling as though we’ve got nothing much of value to offer.

We all struggle with things (e.g. dating) and so we try to learn about them. And this learning gives us things to share (e.g. becoming a dating coach).

And this truism reminds us that the best way to learn anything is to teach it, to sit back, reflect, and ask ourselves, “How could I express this so that others would understand it?” And in our efforts to articulate and express the things we know from our own experiences, we come to understand our own experiences better. And understanding our experiences helps us hone our own particular point of view and map out the best way to make it from point A to point B. The clearer our map, the more trusted we are. But, if we’d had no first hand experience of struggling on the terrain, we’d never have made such a fine and helpful map in the first place.

Your failures aren’t a reason for you to opt out, they’re the prime reason potential clients want to opt *in*.

Your past failures and current foibles are also, actually, what makes you human and relatable. My colleague Meredith Broome put it brilliantly when she said, “I like to remind people (and myself) that we are humans working with humans, and I wouldn’t want it to be any other way. Nobody actually wants to work with a know-it-all. I know that for me, the second I think I have the answers to someone else’s life is the second I have stopped listening to them. In the coaching profession, I think that’s a kind of violence we risk doing to our clients, to stop listening. The second you have it all figured out is the second you stop learning and growing. And that’s usually when clients stop showing up, or it’s hard to sustain your practice.”

Your failures are your credentials because they were your most important education.

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Additional Resources:

Your Deepest Wound is Your Truest Niche: marketingforhippies.com/woundasniche

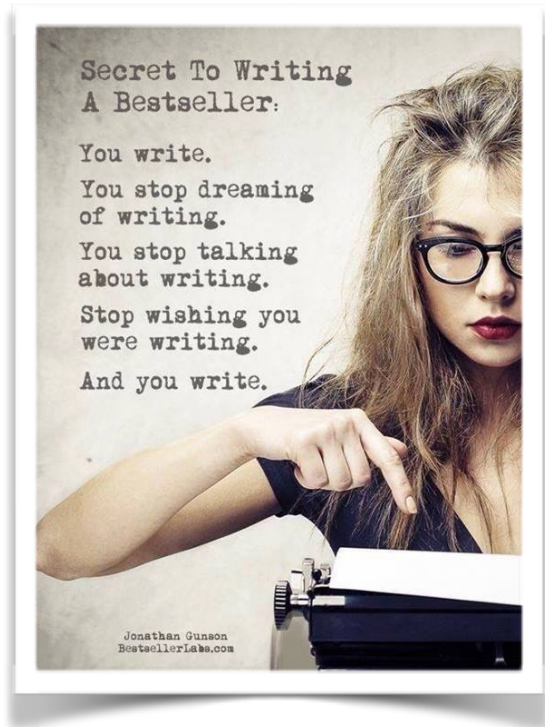
Comfort & Encouragement #17: This is Not About Self-Worth

At least, it's not entirely about self-worth. And again, this idea might just save you years of therapy.

When talking about “not feeling ready,” I think it's useful to remove “self-worth” from the conversation because it can be a terribly seductive red herring.

In fact, the way we make it about ourselves and take it so personally is telling.

There can be a kind of narcissism here where we obsess about how we'll be seen by others. The story of Narcissus, in brief, is thus: there's a fellow. He has a fling with a goddess. He's a cad of a man. She's upset. She curses him to fall asleep and fall impossibly in love with the first thing he sees when he wakes up. When he wakes up he looks into the body of water he's sleeping beside and sees his own reflection. He falls in love with it so much that he has to get closer to it and falls into the water and drowns. Many take the message of this story to mean, “Don't fall too in love with yourself” but the message is actually, “don't fall in love with your *reflection*.” Don't fall in love with how others see you and base your self-worth on that. If you base your self-worth on what others are willing to pay you or whether they think you're ready or not, you're in for one hell of a roller coaster ride, because some people will love you and some people will hate you.



This constant focus on ourselves can be a slippery, spiraling slide into neuroses. What does a reflection need to survive? Your presence. When you withdraw it, the reflection goes away.

So I recommend withdrawing your attention away from yourself and pouring it into creating beautiful things. When you do that, you might just find that the self-doubt goes away because you're no longer paying attention to yourself. Stop obsessing. Start creating. Keep making your art. I've seen so many people spend years trying to perfect their thoughts, get their sales letter exactly right, or perfect their website before starting, when they might have gone further by getting out there and giving talks and learning as they went.

—

Additional Resources:

Why “Charging What You're Worth” Is Bullshit: bit.ly/1PKuYUb

Comfort & Encouragement #18: Your Story and Point of View Have Value

“Ní fíu sceal gan udder.”

(There’s no worth to a story without an author.)

– Irish Gaelic Proverb

“Aon bho a bhristeas an gàrradh, ‘s a dha dheug a leumas.”

(One cow breaks the fence, and a dozen leap it.)

*

“Cha mhisde sgeul mhath aithris da uair.”

(A good tale is not the worse of being twice told.)

– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs

It’s easy to feel, “It’s all been done.”

It’s easy to look at the marketplace and think, “Oh man. There’s nothing I could possibly add here.”

And maybe you don’t have anything to add yet.

But it doesn’t mean you never will. And just because the market seems flooded doesn’t mean that other voices aren’t desperately needed.

Consider this: have you ever gone to a seminar or class on a topic and found yourself totally confused, only to have another teacher explain it in such a way that you totally get it? Something about the examples they used or the way they broke it down had it land inside of you with a solid “thunk.” Imagine if they’d decided, “There are already so many people teaching this. I’m not needed.”

Imagine if a musician listened to Bob Dylan and thought, “I’ll never be better than that,” and decided to quit music and thus robbed the world of what he had to give.

I teach marketing. You might have noticed that there are quite a lot of other people out there doing it. And yet it never occurred to me not to teach it because of that. And here I am with over 10,000 people on my email list, years (and an appalling lack of effort and strategy) later. There are a lot of people who seem to like what I say and how I say it.

Who am I to Teach and Charge for it?

Because of your life story, you bring a unique perspective and point of view to any issue with which you're grappling. Don't discount that. That wouldn't honour the investment that people and this world have poured into you just to get you here.

And this video by Marie Forleo says it so well: youtube.com/watch?v=SDmq82Ma1F8

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Additional Resources:

Your Life Story Has Value by Waymatea Ellis: nichingspiral.com/articles/waymatea

Just watch this video (Base-jumping barnacle goose – Life Story: Episode 1 Preview – BBC One):
youtube.com/watch?v=0_JoetV3ZTQ

Feel Like It's All Been Done Already? Watch This. by Marie Forleo: youtube.com/watch?v=SDmq82Ma1F8

Comfort & Encouragement #19: Give Your Clients Some Credit

This isn't an excuse to be careless or to feign greater expertise than you have, but give people some credit in making their own choices.

If someone gets hoodwinked by a charlatan, yes, there's a lesson around integrity for the charlatan, but there's also a lesson there for the one who got conned.

If people fall for a fake guru, there are lessons for them in how they fell for it.

All you can do is do the best you can.

I've had people sign up for workshops, and because they hadn't read the sales letter, demand a refund.

Not my fault.

Did I learn from that and make systems to make sure it didn't happen again?

Sure.

But the people spending money have a responsibility too.

Afflictions & Caveats

*Thoughts and reflections to help you keep your
centre as you begin the seductive work of
teaching*

Affliction & Caveat #1: Thank You for Being Concerned

When people express hesitancy about teaching, I want to celebrate that because there are many out there teaching things who shouldn't be. There are many out there who are more enamoured with themselves than they ought to be and more convinced of their powers than they have properly earned.

*“Shaoil leis gum bu leis fhèin an cuan fo gheasaibh”
(He thought the ocean his own under his spells.)*

*

*“Bosd gun chur leis.”
(Pride with nothing to back it up.)*

*

*“Far an taine ‘n abhainn, ‘s ann as mo a fuaime.”
(Where the stream is shallowest, greatest is its noise.)
– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs*

Every industry and community has its shadow side – the personal growth scene is no different.

In 2008, two people died in what the media referred to as a “sweat lodge” in Sedona, Arizona.

In fact, to my understanding, it wasn't a sweat lodge at all. As information has unfolded it has become clearer that this was not a traditionally run sweat. More of a hot house.

The hot house was being led by James Ray (featured in the New Age hit movie *The Secret*). It was, according to Dr. Christine B. Whelan, “The culmination of a five-day, nearly \$10,000 ‘Spiritual Warrior Event’ advertised as a retreat to ‘accelerate the releasing of your limitations and push yourself past your self-imposed and conditioned borders.’”

I don't know if there were any traditional elders present to lead it. I suspect there weren't. We know there were 60 people in it – a traditional sweat might hold 12 people. We do know that Ray declined to be interviewed by the sheriff's office on the night of the incident and returned to California the morning after the deaths.

According to abc15.com at the time:

At one point, someone lifted up the back of the tent, allowing light into the otherwise pitch-black tent. Ray demanded to know where the light was coming from and who committed the ‘sacrilegious act,’ Bunn said. A man, yelling ‘I can't take it, I can't breathe, I can't do this’ had crawled out, Bunn said.

As it neared the end, Bunn said some participants found themselves physically and mentally unable to tend to those around them. After the eighth round, Ray instructed them to exit the sweat lodge just as they had entered – going clockwise, a movement meant to symbolize being inside a mother’s womb.

What followed was a triage situation with people laid out on tarps and water being thrown on them to bring down body temperatures. Some people weren’t breathing and had bloodshot eyes. One woman unknowingly walked toward the fire before someone grabbed her, Bunn said.

Shouts of ‘We need water, we need water,’ rang out. ‘They couldn’t fill up the buckets fast enough,’ Bunn said.

Off to the side, a medical doctor participating in the retreat performed CPR on Shore and Brown with the aid of others. When Bunn asked if she could help because she knew CPR, she was told to stay back.

‘Ray was standing about ten feet away, watching,’ Bunn said. ‘He didn’t do anything, he didn’t participate in helping. He did nothing. He just stood there.’”

MSNBC reports that, “In all, 21 of the 64 people crowded inside the hot house Thursday evening received medical care at hospitals and a fire station. Four remained hospitalized Friday evening – one in critical condition and the others in fair condition.

I wish that James Ray had paused before leading that course and asked himself, “Who am I to teach?”

—

Additional Resources:

On the James Ray hot house event: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Arthur_Ray

Affliction & Caveat #2: The Burden of Praise

“Is sleamhainn leac doras an taigh mhòir.”
(The chief's house has a slippery doorstep.)
– Scottish Gaelic Proverb

Many times in my life I've sought praise.

Many times in my life I got drunk on it.

But it wasn't until I deeply abused my power and hurt someone who trusted me, that I saw praise for what it is and isn't.

Praise is not there to make our heads big or to gratify our ego.

Praise is the humanizing burden that tells us, “You have an impact on others. Be careful now.”

Being praised puts responsibility on your shoulders. It's telling you that you're in a different phase of your life now, and that something else beyond your youthful carelessness is asked for.

When someone praises you, sit with their words for a while, and see if you can feel its weight and how it asks you to be stronger.

It's not a badge for you to proudly display – it's a sort of unasked for honour that you carry with you as you go.

Affliction & Caveat #3: Be Prepared?

*“Cuiridh aon bheart as an duine gu lom, is gun bhonn fo chèill,
Is cuiridh beart eil’ e ann, ach a bhabhail am féin.”*

*(One hapless act may undo a man,
And one timely one will re-establish him.)*

*

*“Na las sop nach urrainn duit fèin a chuir as.”
(Do not light a whisp [fire] that you cannot yourself put out.)*

*

*“Am fear nach seall roimhe, Seallaidh e as a dheigh.”
(He who will not look before him, Will look behind him.)*

– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs

If you want to trust yourself, then you need to be worthy of that trust. Don’t focus on courting trust. Focus on being trustworthy.

Do you due diligence. Know the risks. This is why apprenticeship is so important.

If you’re doing something that could put people’s lives at risk, you’d better be putting in the time that’s needed to make sure you’ve done everything you can to make it safe.

If you’re leading an emotional process, don’t go further than you know how to go. People are counting on you. When you act in a way that is worthy of trust, you’ll feel so much stronger. It’s important to distinguish between the non-action of obsessing about what might possibly go wrong, and the real world work of preparing for those things.

There is nothing that will make you feel more confident at a baseline level than having all of the bases covered.

Action:

Make a list of everything that could possibly go wrong when you offer what you offer, and then come up with a plan to either eliminate that risk or to deal with the worst case scenario if it should ever happen.

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Additional Resources:

Interview with Stephen Jenkinson – Am I Ready to Teach?: marketingforhippies.com/teachers

Affliction & Caveat #4: Stepping Up is Vulnerable

*"Give up the notion that you must be sure of what you are doing.
Instead, surrender to what is real within you, for that alone is sure."*

– Baruch Spinoza

There are no two ways about it.

Stepping up is vulnerable.

When you're putting yourself out into the world, you can bet that all of your internal demons of "Who do I think I am?" are going to show up. You can bet that that's going to come from the outside too.

But consider this possibility: the bigger the fear is for you, the more likely it is that you are aimed in the right direction.

If thinking of doing something makes you scared in a good way (vs. legitimately knowing that you have no business doing a thing), it's likely because it matters very much to you. The intensity of the feeling of fear may not be proof that it's a real fear but proof that it's something you care about a great deal and you really want it to go well. It's likely because you care so much about the people involved and you'd never want to hurt them or let them down. This means the direction is on track even if you are miles and miles from arriving there.

When we really care about something or someone, we are vulnerable. When it's real, we are going to be vulnerable.

That's how it is.

If you feel vulnerable, it might not be a sign that you are off track or that something's wrong. It might just be one of the surest signs that you're on the right track.

Martha Nussbaum says this so beautifully:

To be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control, that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame. That says something very important about the human condition of the ethical life: that it is based on a trust in the uncertain and on a



willingness to be exposed; it's based on being more like a plant than like a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from its fragility.

Being a human means accepting promises from other people and trusting that other people will be good to you. When that is too much to bear, it is always possible to retreat into the thought, 'I'll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for my own anger, and I just won't be a member of society anymore.' That really means, 'I won't be a human being anymore.'

You see people doing that today where they feel that society has let them down, and they can't ask anything of it, and they can't put their hopes on anything outside themselves. You see them actually retreating to a life in which they think only of their own satisfaction, and maybe the satisfaction of their revenge against society. But the life that no longer trusts another human being and no longer forms ties to the political community is not a human life any longer.

Tragedy happens only when you are trying to live well, because for a heedless person who doesn't have deep commitments to others, Agamemnon's conflict (in which the king-protagonist has to choose between saving his army and saving his daughter) isn't a tragedy . . .

Now the lesson certainly is not to try to maximize conflict or to romanticize struggle and suffering, but it's rather that you should care about things in a way that makes it a possibility that tragedy will happen to you. If you hold your commitments lightly, in such a way that you can always divest yourself from one or the other of them if they conflict, then it doesn't hurt you when things go badly. But you want people to live their lives with a deep seriousness of commitment: not to adjust their desires to the way the world actually goes, but rather to try to wrest from the world the good life that they desire. And sometimes that does lead them into tragedy.

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Additional Resources:

The Power of Vulnerability by Brene Brown: [youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzlF7o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzlF7o)

Affliction & Caveat #5: Cultural Appropriation – is it Yours to Teach?

Oh this.

This is so big.

These days in North America you can open any holistic magazine and find ads for white people teaching indigenous workshops and traditions from sweat lodges to Ayahuasca Ceremonies to basket weaving – making money from traditions from other cultures.

And it lifts the question up, “Is what you’re teaching really yours to teach?” Before you answer too swiftly with a “yes” or a “no,” I offer the introduction from a blog post I recently wrote on this topic called *Cultural (In)Appropriation* (link below). If you are teaching or considering teaching life wisdom from cultures that differ from your own ancestral lineage, then I urge you to read the articles listed below.

Cultural appropriation is a term you’ve likely heard many times, and it’s one you’re likely to hear many more. There are some people who argue that we should never borrow the styles and fashions of another culture, and there are some who argue we should do it more.

But, living as we do in a culture that is big on easy solutions to complex problems, any piece written on this issue, it seems to me, can only be about enthroning and admiring the complexities that occur in the often troubled interactions between cultures.

If you’re looking for clear-cut answers or consensus on this amongst activists or people of colour or indigenous people, you’re going to keep looking for a very long time. It doesn’t seem to be there. There don’t seem to be any rules you can follow to be “good,” and a set of absolutes to avoid so you won’t be “bad.”

There are no solutions put forward here. No straightforward path, just some wonderings aloud that I hope might help us to see not so much the solution, but just to see “more.” Perhaps the impulse to fix things that we don’t fully understand is at the root of cultural appropriation anyway.

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Additional Resources:

Cultural (In)Appropriation: bit.ly/1oyPFvO

Interview with Stephen Jenkinson – Am I Ready to Teach?: marketingforhippies.com/teachers

Affliction & Caveat #6: Limits Are Not Our Enemies

For years my dear friend and mentor Vicki Robin has been lifting up the question in my mind about limits. Certainly, there are limits based in old fears. There are self-imposed restrictions that don't serve us. And then there are limits that ought to be respected.

But we are a culture obsessed with and confused by freedom. And we have learned to see freedom as the absence of any limits; therefore, limits become the enemy of our freedom.

And as a teacher, this can have devastating, even deadly results if we aren't willing or able to respect the limits of our students.

Leadership poses very hard questions of us.

Are we really as ready for leadership as we think we are? Does stepping into the role of teaching ask us to pretend that we are beyond our own evolution? Where are we feigning greater expertise than we truly have? Where do we find ourselves posturing wisdom when we're really feeling clueless? Where are we settling for grandiosity at the expense of something deeper and truly grand? Where are we presenting half-baked goods as fully baked? Where are we charging the full fee for something that's really only worth half?

Leadership (and perhaps simply the time we live in) calls for deeper and deeper integrity.

It is supported by mentors and elders who can help us find our way. And if we're not elders yet, then that can be our role – to call the elders out of hiding and into the role they've spent a lifetime ripening for.

The world is on fire right now, and we are called to be bold, but humble. To have a strong ego, but not a big one. To take risks, but not carelessly. To test our boundaries, while honouring them. To give up the need for status. To focus on our growth and enjoy our natural rise in stature in our communities as we deepen.

These sorts of limits aren't the enemy, they're friends we can trust and enjoy. They don't confine us, they define us. Acting within our limits is not always laziness; it can be the height of responsible action. Sometimes saying "no" to leadership opportunities we aren't ready for is the best gift we can give.

True freedom is not found in the absence of limits but in our ever deepening, respectful, and loving relationship (and intimacy) with ourselves, others, and the forces of life.

We feel most powerful when we act within our integrity. Acting outside the limit of our integrity feels terrible. We feel ungrounded, off-rhythm, and hesitant. Integrity breeds presence and relaxed awareness.

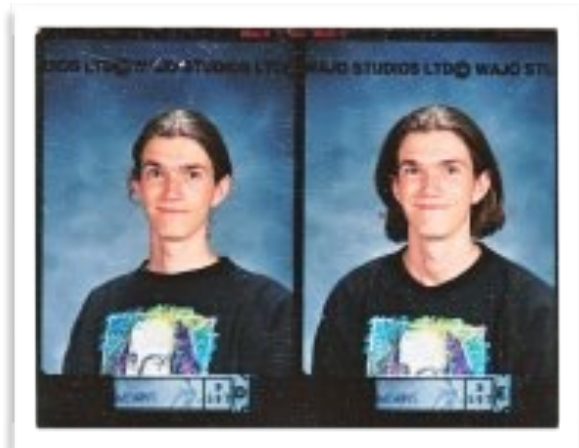
Derrick Jensen wrote a book called *The Culture of Make Believe*. This is what our culture has become. Full of pretending. Full of pretense. Full of posturing.

In a culture of self-promotion, we are encouraged to also engage in self-reflection. We are invited to trust our own growing process, the wisdom and nature of our own boundaries. To trust the rate of our own growth and encourage others to trust that too.

The irony is that when we let go of trying to be more, to be seen as so great, our natural greatness shows up. People aren't drawn to people who are "confident," they're drawn to people who are comfortable in their own skin. At peace with themselves. Centered.

When I was 19 years old I was leading workshops for high school students all around Alberta with a company I started.

At 21, I was leading personal growth workshops for people two and three times my own age. At 25, I was running the youth program of the State of the World Forum (founded by Mikhail Gorberchev). In my early twenties, I was leading camps on activism to activists with far more experience than I.



And, in every case, I really felt entitled to do so. I saw myself as a leader. And I got a lot of amazement and praise from people older than me. They saw me as a big deal. I enjoyed that.

As the saying goes, "Lord, give me the confidence of a mediocre white male."

But here's what I learned most from those experiences: I wasn't as ready as I thought I was. I was young. I was arrogant. I was full of self-importance. I wanted to be seen as powerful and I courted that.

And I got my ass handed to me many, many times. I got yelled at a lot. I had my ignorance of important issues lifted up again and again. Sometimes graciously and other times not. I had my limitations repeatedly shoved in my face. It turns out I could be dominating as a co-facilitator. It turns out I didn't know shit about issues of race and class.

I used to lead board breaking as an empowerment exercise for high school and junior high school students. They'd each get an inch-thick piece of pine. On one side they'd write a fear they had, on the other side they would write what it would mean to literally "break through" that fear. It was profoundly powerful in its impact precisely because it was so scary for them.

And then one day one of my volunteers, going totally against my instructions in his technique, deliberately broke his wrist.

And I stopped. The real risk of what I was doing came home to me. This was no joke. And I'm not just talking about the (very real) potential for my uninsured ass to get sued. People could get hurt. I was no karate master. I was teaching them to break wood in a few hours.

I'm not saying it was a bad thing to do or that I might never do it again, but I woke up to the real risks involved. The impact of what might happen if it went wrong.

There's an old Gaelic Proverb that says something like, "Be aware that everything has a price. Be prepared to pay that price. But be aware that some prices are not worth paying."

It turns out that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. It's enough to make you think you know something, but not enough to do it right, not enough to handle contingencies. Turns out you can sound really good and say the right things and impress people, but words, aphorisms, platitudes, and empowerment don't protect you from the world.

*

My friend and colleague Marilyn Daniels is a brilliant life coach and mentor for those not only wanting to succeed within the system, but who want to transform it. She wrote these words to me:

As a coach, most of my clients come to me because they want to grow and move outside of their current limits. Most of the time this is a good thing – we need to outgrow outmoded cultural and personal patterns, we need to break out of culturally imposed definitions of who we are and what we can achieve. Doing this, in fact, may be critical for our collective survival. We need to grow up as a species... But there's a point at which this can all tip over into addiction to growth, the incapacity to accept oneself, the inability to respect inherent limits – our own and the planet's. Being able to hold each part of this complex equation with awareness is critical.

*

The personal growth scene extols us to push past our limits – that we have no limits. There are books with titles like *Unlimited Power* or *Unlimited Wealth*. As if limits, of any kind, were the enemy.

But we do have limits.

Rampant capitalism seems to think that there is no limit to growth. But the Earth has limits.

If you push too hard and too fast doing yoga, you can hurt yourself. Very badly.

If you irrigate a field too quickly, the water bounces off the surface of the soil (it can only absorb so much so fast).

Yes, sometimes we need to move fast and sometimes we need to slow down. This culture needs to slow many things down.

As Thomas Merton put it:

There is a form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent means most easily succumbs – activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence. The frenzy of activists neutralizes their work for peace. It destroys their own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of their work because it kills the inner wisdom which makes their work fruitful.

*

Growth is not the only goal.

Nothing in nature lives forever. Or grows forever. Death is there too.

We live in the days of skyrocketing growth. Straight up in straight lines. Bigger is better. What do we want? More.

But a small business doesn't only need to grow big and sell. It can also grow deeper into the community. We don't just need to grow more powerful and wealthy, we can also deepen and wisen. Our economy doesn't just need to grow in Gross Domestic Product – it needs to deepen in quality of life. As Gandhi is said to have stated, "There's more to life than increasing its speed."

Is what we need right now more power, or more wisdom for how to use that power?

I feel concerned about our obsession with the power to conquer our limits over the wisdom to enjoy, test, and explore our limits.

I fear that our culture misunderstands growth, and that it is like the acorn trying to grow itself by lacquering on shells on top of its shells to become a bigger acorn, rather than immersing itself in

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the necessary time of darkness to slowly crack, die, and burst itself into the oak; an authentic growth far more profound than an increase of shells.

Stated another way: to explore our limits is to explore our truest nature. Our limits aren't there to be dismissed as a sign of disempowerment, but honoured as the containers we live in.

Affliction & Caveat #7: Your Need to be Seen as a Teacher Might Just be the Surest Sign You're Not Ready to be One

"The wise leader appeals to a very few followers. By being a disinterested facilitator, unconcerned with praise or pay, the leader becomes potent and successful."

– John Heider, *The Tao of Leadership*

"Ge milis am fion, tha e searbh ri dh'ol."

(The wine is sweet, the paying bitter.)

– Scottish Gaelic Proverb



In my youth and exuberant arrogance, other people got hurt (or possibly could have). I led events that totally collapsed. At a summer camp in the foothills of Montana, I let the youth go climb around, only to then see some of them thousands of meters away climbing up very steep mountainsides with no gear. And no nearby help. I dropped to my knees and prayed. No one was hurt. I was fortunate.

These things happen to people in leadership.

But these days everyone wants to be a leader. Stated differently: many people want to be seen as leaders.

Stated another way still: many people feel entitled to be seen and treated as a leader. They feel entitled to self-appoint themselves into that role. After all, what are two of the most common words used in ads today (especially in promotional material for personal growth workshops)?

"You Deserve . . ."

Want to be a bestselling author? You deserve that.

Want to be a revered seminar leader? You deserve that.

Want to be financially rich? You deserve that.

But are we really ready for it? Have we authentically earned it? Have we put in our time? And have we really considered the potential impact? If we want to be a billionaire, how will we do that in a way that doesn't exploit the planet or make slaves of people?

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Being Chief of a community in traditional cultures (e.g. the Gaelic culture of the Scottish Highlands) wasn't primarily about power over others – it was about a deep responsibility for the clan. You were the one to make sure the elders and children were fed first and to make sure the tribe was safe. It wasn't the kind of job one hungered for. It was a vote of deep confidence from your community; it was a sign of trust. It was a privilege and a burden.

In traditional communities, being a shaman didn't mean you just led groovy workshops whenever you wanted. It meant you lived in a community and you got up at 3am when you were needed to tend to the ill and to bring healing.

The desire to be seen as a big-deal-teacher who is smart and wise often leads to a lot of talking on the leader's part. And that talk is often full of elaborate theories and maps.

In *The Tao of Leadership* John Heider says it so well:

The best work often seems idiotically simple to group members who are unaccustomed to this sort of leadership. Yet a great deal happens. Perhaps it looks as if their leader is only sitting there and has no idea of what to do. But it is just this lack of needless intervention that permits the group to grow and be fertile. Perhaps some disappointed group member expected an expert who would expound freely. But what this leader says is so obvious, it often sounds simple-minded. Even this leader's honesty is strangely perplexing. Appearing foolish does not matter.

If you find yourself wanting to be seen as a powerful leader, an elder, a medicine person, or teacher, exploring that need might just be your fastest path to becoming one. Avoiding it might be the thing that dooms you to never being someone others can trust.

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Additional Resources:

Interview with Stephen Jenkinson – Am I Ready to Teach?: marketingforhippies.com/teachers

Affliction & Caveat #8: Are You Still Eating Sugar?

There's the old story about a mother traveling a long way to meet with Gandhi.

"My daughter is eating sugar," she said.

"Bring her back in two weeks," said Gandhi.

Two weeks later she returned, once again making the long trip to see him.

"Bring her back in two weeks," said Gandhi.

Once more she returned home and then came back to see Gandhi. This time he took the young daughter aside and spoke to her about eating sugar and she agreed to stop.

"Why didn't you just speak to her the first time?" asked the mother. "Why did you make us do this journey three times?"

"Because a month ago, I was eating sugar," replied Gandhi.

So ask yourself, what is it you want to teach others? What will what you're teaching ask of them? Are you doing those things yourself?

These are important questions to consider as you explore whether or not you're ready to teach. If you're "still eating sugar," that's okay. You can be honest about this when you teach. But it changes the promise you're making from, "How to stop eating sugar" to "An exploration of why it's so hard to stop eating sugar," or "How to reduce your sugar intake."

You can keep working with the issue. You can keep teaching. As long as you do it honestly.

Affliction & Caveat #9: Do You Even Want to Teach in this Culture?

This is a culture that eats up its teachers. It's also a culture that has no use for them.

This is a culture of workshop junkies who are looking desperately for a way out of their pain. And this is part of the challenge. They imagine the pain to be personally *theirs*, the result of some personal defect or flaw; some way that they are broken. It never crosses their minds that the problem might actually be a part of a much bigger thing than they had bargained for, with deep roots in our culture and history.

And so they are looking for personal solutions to collective problems, small solutions to big issues, and they do not find them. They are starving for something they don't understand, and without knowing it, are all too willing to let their wounds turn teachers into food. And teachers who are craving the approval of students for their hard won wisdom are all too willing to let themselves be eaten in the hopes that they might manage to satiate those who have come to them for help. But there is no bottom to this hunger.

This is the culture in which you are proposing to be a teacher.

Someone once asked Bobby Kennedy Jr. if he thought that his father would have won in modern elections. His response was, "Given the climate in politics today, I think the question is, 'Would he have even run?'"

So it's a culture of starving people grazing on the food grown from the increasingly depleted and poisoned soil of our culture. Some of them have caught the scent of something real, something more, something beautiful, in writings they've come across or teachers they've seen, but like a feral animal released back into the wild that kills for sport, they don't seem to know how to conduct themselves in the presence of an elder. This is a culture that has been raised on a healthy distrust of older people. This is a culture that has lost sight of there being those who have come before us and those who will come after us. This is a culture that has very little respect for earned authority, because there are so many "olders" and so few *elders*. It's a culture where, instead of growing up, people stay adolescents till they die.

One of my dear friends Frank MacEowen wrote three brilliant books on Celtic spirituality, and he led a number of workshops. He was eaten alive by his students, followers, and critics. He began to see how people's egos were hijacking the sacred journey he was on. He came face to face with the entitlement and complacency of white North America whenever he would lift up anything resembling a radical political idea, or whenever he'd speak about how bad things were in the world and dare to challenge their right to be hopeful. He faced radical activists viciously challenging and attacking his work as being not radical enough. It broke him, and one day he hosted a burial for

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Frank MacEowen (an ancestral name he'd brought back) and went back to the name he grew up with.

The trust is so low. The hunger is so big.

Are you sure you want to be a teacher in this culture?

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Additional Resources:

The Sibling Society – Robert Bly: <http://amzn.to/2dm6tBw>

Entering the Ghost River – Deena Metzler: <http://amzn.to/2cHNd0o>

Affliction & Caveat #10: Are You Teaching Because You Need the Money?

Stuart Wilde commented many times that the first impulse many people have, upon waking up from the “tick tock” mundane world of this mainstream culture, is to teach.

The results are often a disaster.

There might be a great deal of learning for everyone involved, but it can be an expensive way to learn for all.

What often drives this is the desire stop working for “the man” at a soul crushing 9-5 job. The idea of making money by doing something meaningful is intoxicating, and it often leads people to teach things before they are ready.

If you’re going into this for the money or out of financial desperation, it’s worth pausing. Could you make money in other ways while your wisdom builds?

It’s worth at least reconsidering.

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Additional Resources:

Plateaus of Higher Consciousness by Stuart Wilde: peopleandpossibilities.com/wilde.html

Higher Consciousness & Your Career by Stuart Wilde: cornerstone.wwwhubs.com/wilde1.htm

Paths Forward

*Thoughts and reflections on practical steps to
proceed with integrity*

Path Forward #1: Figure Out Your Resonant Price

All praise and credit to my dear, dear friend and colleague, Mark Silver, for bringing this notion to the world: resonant pricing.

If you struggle in figuring out what to charge, I can't recommend enough that you check out this simple, human, effective, and liberating process.

It will help you find prices for what you charge that feel not too little and not too big, but "just right."

If you charge an amount that feels like it's *too much*, you'll be scared every time you ask for the money. If you charge an amount that's *too little* you'll feel resentful when they say "yes." Either way, something will feel off-rhythm when you ask and that will push people away.

If you land on an amount that feels right to you, then your energy will be clean and strong when you ask. You'll feel comfortable in your own skin about it, and others will sense that.

—

Additional Resources:

The Wackiness of Resonant Pricing by Mark Silver: bit.ly/1TiUQfL

Path Forward #2: Be Clear About Your Goals

When people say they don't feel ready, I want to ask them, "Ready for what?"

And most of the time the answers I get are fuzzy. How clear are your business goals? Less clear than you think, I can promise you that.

Most people come to me thinking they need marketing tactics, but what they are really needing is an overall strategy. And even before that, what they need is some sort of a vision for what they are trying to create.

They come to me saying, "I'm building a house. How do I use a hammer? I hear that hammers are very important for house building. Teach me." But what they actually need first is a blue print of the house and a work plan for how to build it. But even before that, what they need is a vision of the kind of house they want.

So you don't feel ready to build your house? Of course not. You might not even be sure of what you're trying to build just yet.

Be clear about your goals.

For example, is your goal to be travelling 12 months of the year? Half of the year? Not at all?

Do you want to make \$4000 a month? \$6000? \$10,000?

Do you want to be doing mostly one-on-one coaching? Live workshops? Online programs?

Do you want to write books, do public speaking, and be a media personality?

Do you want your teaching to fund your life, or just to be a supplement?

What is it that you want?

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Additional Resources:

7 Business Goals Mistakes No One Talks About by Sergiu Simmel: bit.ly/1oAPwaR

Path Forward #3: Be Real About Your Timelines

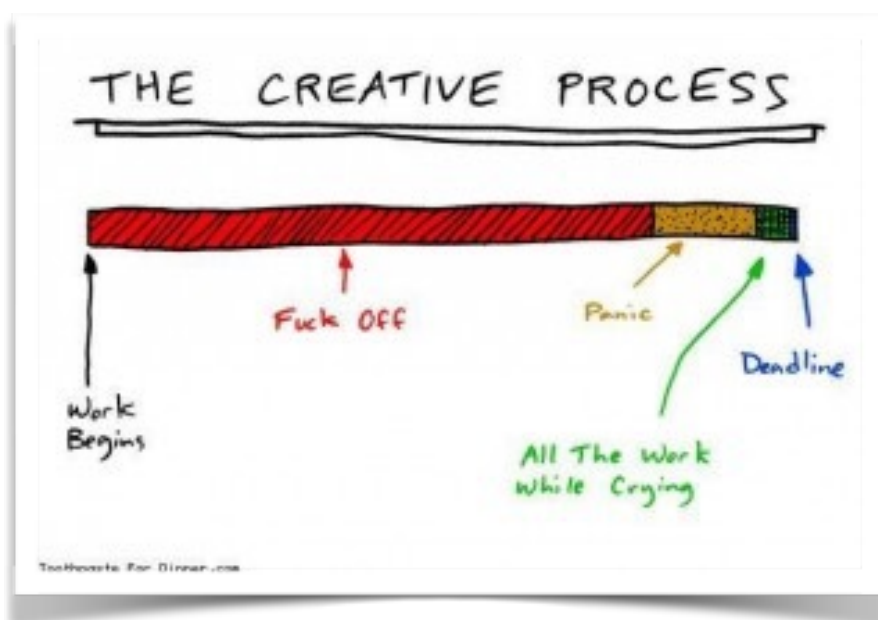
Let me save you a trip to your therapist in which you fruitlessly explore how your lack of valuing yourself is stopping your business from growing.

It takes time to grow a solid business; 18 months to three years if you're really focused.

If you don't settle on a solid niche early on, it'll take you longer.

I see so many people fail because they leave their day job too soon. They leap into their business before it has any chance of supporting them, and then it collapses and some well-meaning New Ager tells them it may be a reflection on their lack of self-worth.

It takes time to build a business.



Additional Resources:

The Four Stages of Business Growth: marketingforhippies.com/four-stages

The Niching Spiral: nichingspiral.com

Path Forward #4: There's a Difference Between Not Being Ready Out of Fear and Out of Intuition

I've met a lot of healers who never really feel ready. They always need one more course or one more certification. And often they're scared to really launch.

So, sometimes what holds us back is our fear.

But not always.

Since I started my business, people have been telling me to write a book. Practically since day one.

I didn't feel ready. It wasn't fear. It was just knowing that I wasn't ready to do that yet. I knew my point of view, but my ideas were still cooking. This year, about 15 years into my career, I finally feel ready. The feeling is clear and uncomplicated.

Don't let people bully you into doing something you're not ready to do yet. It's your life. Do what you want to do.

If you don't think you're ready for something, sit down with some paper and a pen for an hour, and draw a line down the centre of the page. On the top left-hand side, write the word, "Intuition." On the top right-hand side, write the word "Fear." Then just meditate on your feeling of unreadiness, and ask to be shown what parts of that feeling are fears and which are intuitions. Which parts are the voices of parents or friends who are pulling you down and which parts are the voice of your body, heart, mind, and soul saying, "Hey there chief! This is off track."

There's a difference between not being ready out of fear and not being ready out of intuition.

Path Forward #5: Under Promise, Over Deliver

"Gealladh gun a'choimhghealladh, is miosa sin na dhiùltadh"
(Promising but not fulfilling, is worse than refusing.)

*

B'fheàrr gun tòiseachadh na sguir gun chrìochnachadh."
(Better not to begin than stop without finishing.)

*

Am fear as mò a gheallas, 's e as lugha cho-gheallas."
(He that promises the most will perform the least.)

*

Am fear a tha grad gu gealladh, 's tric leis mealladh."
(Quick to promise often deceives.)

*

Chan eil fealladh ann cho mòr ris an gealladh gun choimhlionadh."
(There is no deceit/fraud so great as the promise unfulfilled.)
– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs

If I had to just pick one of these ideas, it would be this one: **under promise and over deliver.**

If all you did was this, your fear of not being ready would likely vanish overnight.

As you go about offering whatever you have, however humble it might seem, make sure that you under promise and over deliver. Promise less than you think you can truly deliver as a result and then deliver more than that. Of course, this means that you need to get very real with yourself about what it is you are capable of delivering.



Don't lie, especially to yourself, about what you are capable of. Self-deception is the most seductive deception of all.

If you claim to be able to heal any condition and then you don't, people will be upset. But if you say, "I'm just beginning and I'd love to offer you a 60-minute reiki session," and you do it, that's wonderful. As long as you're not promising more than you can deliver, there are zero ethical issues at all. People know what they've signed up for.

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Is the result you're currently capable of offering enough to sustain a business? That's an important but different question.

One of the best pieces of advice for this that I've ever read is to offer people just the tip of the iceberg. They will feel how much is still unseen under the water, and trust you even more. And you will feel more solid knowing that what you've offered them is really only 10% of your actual capacity.

If you do this consistently, your clients will be thrilled.

This idea is so simple, but its consequences are so profound.

Path Forward #6: Apprenticing

“B’fheàrr a bhi gun bhreith na bhi gun teagasg.”
(Better be without being than without instruction.)

*

“Am fear nach gabh comhairle, gabhaidh e cam-lorg.”
(He who won’t take counsel will take a roundabout way.)

*

“Buinidh urram do’n aois”
(Honour belongs to old age.)

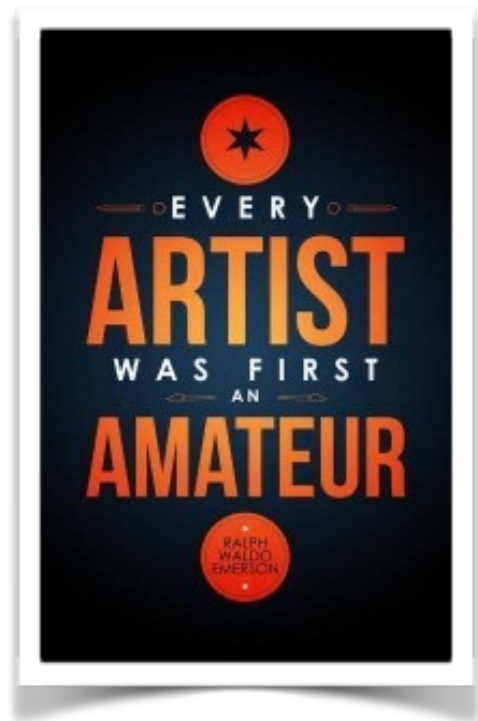
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“Is fheàrr comhairle na thràth, na tiodhlac fadalach.”
(Timely advice is better than a late gift.)

– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs

*

“Ni thagann ciall roimh airs.”
(Sense does not come before age.)
– Irish Gaelic Proverbs



Our culture is not big on humility.

In a day and age where you can become a reiki master in a weekend or a life coach in a year’s certification, the notion of a meaningful, long-term apprenticeship is a fugitive idea hiding out in our better sensibilities until we wake up to the need for it: brought to our knees by some humbling experience where we realize the impossible price we often need to pay to really learn something, and the even more dear price to pay when we don’t learn properly and try to do it anyway.

In traditional highland Scottish culture, to become a storyteller meant a seven-year apprenticeship. To become a Druid? 21 years. You can find these sort of time frames the world over. Sadly, you can also see people going to a weekend workshop and then feeling qualified to lead sweat lodges and ceremonies.

One of my friends in Edmonton, Randall Benson, works in solar power. He only hires journeymen electricians, and most of his jobs are based around fixing the screw ups of less qualified people.

If you want to feel totally solid in what you’re offering, find yourself a mentor. Be willing to work for free for a while. Offer free workshops in people’s living rooms for five people. Do it for free until people start to insist on paying you. Make your money in other ways.

There’s a good chance that if you’re having these fears, you’re in the first of four stages of business. And at that stage, your business is actually incapable of sustaining you financially. Your business is

like a young tree that's unable to bear the weight of your livelihood. So don't crush it. Give it time to grow while you grow as well.

Many times I've heard Stephen Jenkinson say in his school, "I spent a long time sitting where you are sitting. I travelled with a master storyteller for seven years and I never said a thing. I just learned."

These days, too many people rush to be teachers before they've ever really been students.

One approach that can take a lot of the pressure off of growing into your role as a teacher, is to consider offering a portion of what you do on a pay-what-you-can basis. I've done this with most of my daylong and weekend workshops for about 15 years. It let me feel okay about leading weekend workshops even though I was just starting, because I knew people wouldn't pay me more than they wanted to. It felt amazing to never have to worry that I might be over-charging or that people weren't getting the value they paid for.

And, if you're really apprenticing someone, there may come a point where they kick you out of the nest because they know that you're never going to feel "ready" enough to do it on your own. And do you know what? You'll be okay.

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Additional Resources:

The Natural Business Cycle by Julie Wolk: marketingforhippies.com/natural-business-cycle

Blog Posts on Pay What You Can Pricing: marketingforhippies.com/category/pwyc

Interview with Stephen Jenkinson – Am I Ready to Teach?: marketingforhippies.com/teachers

Path Forward #7: Hone Your Craft

“Ma tha thusa ‘nad fhear-ealaidh, cluinneamaid annas do làimhe.”

(If you are a man of skill, let us hear your masterpiece.)

– Scottish Gaelic Proverb

“Is fearr obair ná cant.”

(Work is better than talk.)

– Irish Gaelic Proverb

When you’ve finished apprenticing a teacher or school, you’re still learning. But now you’re learning directly from your craft. You’re now learning from experience. This means giving yourself time to reflect on what you’ve gone through, developing better systems and checklists, and taking time to improve your skills here and there.

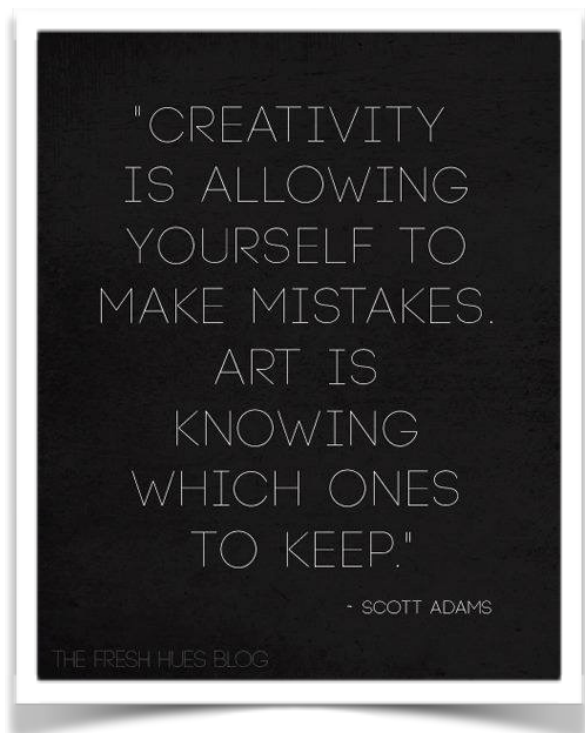
It means taking a deep pride in doing the best job you can do in creating the most beautiful offerings you can. When you do this, questions of self-worth fall away and are replaced with an excitement to give what you’ve made to the community.

Most entrepreneurs don’t do this.

Instead of creating a few programs and honing them over time, they are constantly creating new programs.

On a marketing level, this is a bit of a disaster, because then people never get to know you for anything in particular. On the level of confidence, it’s a disaster. How are you supposed to feel totally confident about something you’ve never done before? Of course you feel nervous and unsettled. And on the level of craft, it’s also a disaster because you can’t do something once and expect it be of much worth.

If you create a workshop and do that same workshop 100 times, then you’ll have something of incredible worth. You’ll be able to speak with some swagger and bravado when asked about it. You won’t have doubt. It will be good and you will know it’s good. You will have found all the holes



and integrated so many learnings – big at first and subtle towards the end. You'll know every inch of it and will barely be able to let it go at the high price you charge.

When you are more in love with your craft and clients rather than your business or reputation, you'll see things bloom in ways you couldn't imagine.

Honing your craft includes seeking out candid feedback from clients and implementing it to make your offerings better.

Honing your craft means making time to reflect on what you thought went well and what didn't in your last offering, and improving it for the next.

Sometimes I'll do a program, and by the end I feel awful because I see everything that I could have done differently. But once I've found some meaningful solution to each of those issues, my feelings shift to excitement to offer it again.

There are those who are confident but incompetent. They are dangerous. They need to be stopped.

There are those who lack confidence but are competent. They need encouragement. They have likely been beaten down by life and are tortured by the voices of their parents, partners, family, or society, telling them they'll never be any good at anything.

There are those who are confident and competent. These people are seeing things clearly. They're good and they know they're good.

There are those who lack confidence and are incompetent. These people need instruction. These people need to focus on mastering their craft.

I've met many people who are incompetent but think they should feel confident about teaching. This is madness. This sets up an internal war inside of you: the part of you that is grounded in reality on one side, and the hopeful part of you, or the part needing to be seen as a teacher, on the other.

Let me save you years of therapy: when you feel more competent, a certain confidence will tend to grow with that. Confidence is, properly, the by-product of competence and not the other way around.

Hone your craft.

Path Forward #8: Focus on Creating an Offer that Feels Wonderful

There are some things that, when you think about offering them, send you into the “panic zone.” You freeze up.

Maybe it’s leading a week-long retreat. Maybe it’s healing people of certain issues. You just don’t feel ready to do that at all. It wouldn’t feel right or good to offer it. It’s too scary.

And then there are other things that would feel totally fine. Maybe that’s just going for tea with someone to talk about what might be possible. It’s so important to start with something that feels good, right, and comfortable to you and to go from there.

If, instead of obsessing about whether or not you’re ready for everything, you were to pour all of your love and attention into making the best offering you could, you would find your concerns dropping away and being replaced by a deep, authentic excitement to share.

Action:

Take a blank piece of paper and draw a line down the centre of it.

On the top left-hand side, write “Feel Ready” and on the top right-hand side, write “Feel Unready.”

Underneath the “Feel Ready” side, write down all the things you could offer right now that would feel honest and easy for you to offer with an uncomplicated heart.

Under the “Feel Unready” side, write down the things you have been thinking about offering that feel questionable to you: all the things you’ve considered but aren’t sure you can handle. Go back and forth for no more than 20 minutes.

And then get moving on the “Feel Ready” side. Hustle that hard. As you do it, your confidence will grow. Or, you’ll learn from failing. And then you’ll feel more confident as a result of your learnings. Slowly you’ll feel more capable of handling the things on the “Feel Unready” side.

Too often we obsess about what we aren’t ready for yet, and that has us feeling unready for everything. Are you prepared to do everything? No. Something? Yes.

Ask your friends what they would most trust you to do in terms of your work. What result would they most trust you could help them achieve? Build an offer around that.

Path Forward #9: Start Small and Pay Attention

“Is fheàrr teine beag a gharas na teine mòr a loisgeas.”

(The little fire that warms is better than the big fire that burns.)

*

“Cha bhi luathas agus grinneas an cuideachd a’ chill.”

(Quick and fine don’t combine.)

*

Cha bhi luathas is grinneas còmhla.”

(Quickness and neatness do not go together.)

– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs



“So if you really have been entrusted with something that you’re absolutely persuaded is the stuff of the ages, let the world let you know that. Sit at the door and see if you can discern the sound of knocking when it happens, instead of flinging it wide open and saying, ‘I’m here. Any dangerous work for me to do?’, or things of that kind.”

– Stephen Jenkinson

If you’re scared, start with something tiny.

Start with leading a small workshop in your living room. Start with writing a simple eBook. Start by making a YouTube video. Offer a free hour-long coaching session to ten people just so you can try. Offer it as a volunteer to a community that needs it most (e.g. immigrant population or those in prison).

You might take like a duck to water and see how many of the fears you had were just in your head. You might get hooked on it and want to do it more and more, watching as your fears fall away from you like a bird’s shadow as it takes off into the air.

But you might also realize that something didn’t feel right. And you can learn from that too.

When you are ready for it, people may begin to ask you for it. When you really are a healer, people may just start calling you on. When you’ve earned people’s trust, they may naturally see you as a leader.

And even if they don’t, you might see the moments to step forward and offer what you have where there is genuine need for it.

We live in a culture that doesn't think too highly of paying its dues (if it thinks of it at all).

For years, I led all the day-long and weekend workshops I did on a pay-what-you-want basis. People attend the whole thing and pay whatever they want at the very end. When I did a crappy job, I got paid less. When I experimented with a new format that didn't work, I got paid less. And I think that's fair.

I led free 3-hour intro workshops for years until I finally settled on the content and clarified in my own mind how I was seeing marketing. As that relationship and point of view clarified, I had people insisting on paying me for the workshop.

"No, no. This is a free workshop," I'd say.

And they'd look at me and say, "No. This was really good. I need to pay you something."

So then I started asking for money, at first a sliding scale of \$1-40, and eventually I settled on \$30 in advance and \$40 at the door.

I didn't start charging until people started paying.

I started free and let it evolve.

Start small. Let things grow.

Experiment. Notice what worked and what you liked.

Path Forward #10: Get Candid Feedback

*“Bu mhath an sgàthan sìil carried.”
(A friend’s eye is a good looking-glass.)*

*

*“Bithidh cron duine cho mòr ri beinn mas leir dha fhèin e.”
(A man’s faults will be as large as a mountain ere he himself sees them.)*

*

*“Is diù nach gabh comhairle, ‘s diù ghabhas gach comhairle.”
(Who won’t take advice is worthless; who takes all advice is the same.)*

*

*“Chan fhiosrach mur feòraich.”
(Nothing asked, nothing learned.)
– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs*

If you’re not sure you’ve got much to offer, why not find out the truth and put your obsessing to rest?

Why not create a Google form or [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) survey and invite your past and current clients to give you candid, honest, forthright, and totally anonymous feedback on how you did with them? What worked and what didn’t? How would they assess your work with them from a 1-10? If it wasn’t a 10 what would it have taken to be a 10? What do they see as your greatest gifts and strengths? What do they see as your weaknesses? What was the biggest result they got from working with you?

If you’re unwilling to do this, I’d like to suggest that this unwillingness is all the evidence you need that you might indeed, not be ready after all.

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Additional Resources:

The Four Most Dangerous Words an Entrepreneur Can Say: marketingforhippies.com/four-words

Path Forward #11: When You're Starting, Give Yourself More Space than You Think You Need

This is huge.

I remember a facilitation truism that I learned years ago: if you spend an hour on an experiential exercise in a workshop, give yourself an hour to debrief it because that's where most of the value will be harvested.

If you are taking people on a ropes course and they have a fun time but you never talk about it, much of the benefit is lost. If you simply have a conversation about fear and trust but don't pair it with an experience, it will likely stay as theory and simply be an interesting conversation. It's the combination of experience and reflection that gives these things their full measure of power.

And so it is with this learning we call being in business. When you first begin, consider giving yourself one hour to reflect on every hour you work with someone. If you lead a weekend-long workshop, consider that you may need a weekend to reflect on what you learned from leading it.

If you really take this on, then you'll realize that it may ask more of you than you'd initially bargained for. If you plan to really be responsible with your work and to master your craft, you'll see what the actual demands are. And it might be a price that's too high to pay. Good to know. Let yourself walk away in good conscience.

It could also lift up that your life may currently be too full for you to really learn well.

You might not have enough space in your life to absorb all that's possible to learn.

It may not always be a 1:1 ratio, but when you're starting off, you could do worse than to take this into consideration and put it into practice.

Path Forward #12: Remember Why You're Drawn to Do it in the First Place

It can be easy, in the midst of our fears to think that we're not enough, and to lose track of why we are drawn to do this work in the first place.

Action:

Journal about why you felt drawn to your work in the beginning.

Question #1:

Why do you feel called to do it? What got you started doing this? What did you see that was missing?

This question puts the focus on what inspires you about your idea, rather than any sense of insufficiency you may have.

Question #2:

What difference could this work potentially make? How could doing this work change the world for the better?

Imagine if this work took off and everyone in the world who needed it got access to it. What might that do for the world?

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Additional Resources:

Twelve Ways to Figure Out Your “Why”: marketingforhippies.com/how-to-figure-out-your-why

Path Forward #13: Make Your Case as to Why You Can't do it, and Then Debunk it

Too often when people come forward with doubts about whether or not they're ready to teach, they're met with a barrage of encouragement, a bunch of, "You can do it!" and, "Believe in yourself." It's well-meaning but it also silences the voice of doubt. And, sometimes, it's important to allow that voice of doubt to speak and be heard. Once that voice of doubt has made its case and been really well heard, it often pipes down a bit. But take the time to listen to it, it often has important information to share.

Action:

Step #1: Articulate why you think you can't do it.

You can't teach and charge for it. Maybe that's true. But let's find out. First, prove it. Make your best case. Lay out all the reasons you have been scared to really articulate for yourself why you can't or shouldn't do it. Most of the time, these thoughts rest under the surface and seem so much bigger than they are. They're the vague and shadowy gremlins that whisper to us, "Don't do it" and "You're not ready." So, let's give them a chance to speak. Let's hear them out. You might as well. Suppressing them just makes it worse anyway.

Step #2: Sift for worthwhile information. Again, the voice of doubt often has valid concerns worth listening to. It might ask you to check through what you packed one more time and have you realize that you forgot your passport. Your doubts can be your friend. They can protect you with their quiet insistence that something isn't quite right.

Step #3: Refute that case, point by point.

I'm not saying your case is wrong or untrue, but I'm wondering if there might be another side to it. I'm turning it around, exploring another perspective. You might find out that you can't refute the case. That's good to know. But you might find out that all of the reasons you gave for not being able to pursue your dream of teaching and charging for it are bullshit. That's good to know too. This step isn't about silencing the voice of doubt but about bringing an insistence that another angle be considered and that your doubts and fears, while they may contain some truth, do not hold a monopoly on the truth.

Step #3: Articulate why you actually can do it.

Now try to make the case and prove that you can and should do it. Again, importantly, I'm not saying that this is true. At all. I'm just wondering what else might be true.

This seems like such a simple exercise but it can be immensely powerful.

Path Forward #14: Get Therapy

The Naraya Preservation Council states:

“Stepping into your power is not the hardest thing. The hardest thing is to step in and remain grounded, humble, and generous. Much of mundane training would have us believe we are inferior. If you begin a dedicated dance with Spirit you will start to see and feel your own power. It comes in brief slices in the beginning. Like shafts of light beaming down into the shady forest. We get a glimpse of who we are and what it feels like to be powerful. If we continue our dance with dedication, a glimpse becomes a knowing. Along the path come opportunities to heal. In a perfect world, our awareness would grow equally as our healing grows. But that is not always the case. It is possible to be powerful and broken. And that is a challenging combination. Don’t rush to power. Rush to healing. Rush to love. Rush to generosity. And a humble power capable of transforming the world will follow.”

If you are planning to teach people something about life, then working out your own issues matters greatly.

Perhaps it’s traditional therapy that will help you in your growth and deepening. Perhaps it’s not. Maybe it’s a registered psychotherapist. Maybe it’s a men’s group you’re a part of. Maybe it’s a group therapy program.

What matters is that you are getting regular support from those who are further down the road than you. What matters is that you are being mentored, guided, and helped by those with skill in helping you see your own destructive and deceptive patterns. Find something that can help you see yourself more clearly.

I’ve known so many people who make their living by delving into people’s psyches who themselves seem to lack even a basic level of self-awareness. I’ve seen therapists with low integrity. I’ve seen healers with huge egos. I’ve seen gurus hitting on their young female followers. I’ve seen life coaches refusing to be questioned and turn concerns of their clients around with shame and blame saying things like, “Maybe it’s *your* control issues . . .”

If you’re going to help others and yet you refuse to be helped, then perhaps you can’t be trusted.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. **As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”**

Path Forward #15: Have a Practice

“Ma tha thus ‘an fhear-ealaidh, chuinneamaid annas do làimhe.”
(If you are a man of skill, let us hear your masterpiece.)

*

Bheirear comhairle seachad ach cha toirear giùlan.”
(Council can be given, but not conduct.)
– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs

“Ní bhíonn an rath, act mara mbíonn an sacht.”
(There is no prosperity unless there is discipline.)

*

“Cleachtadh a dhéanann maistreacht.”
(Practice makes mastery.)
– Irish Gaelic Proverbs

Perhaps this should have been the first reflection.

If you are going to be teaching people about life, then you need to be a practitioner; and you can't, it seems to me, be a practitioner without a practice of some kind: a practice you'll engage with for many years (and likely, if everyone is very lucky, many years before you begin teaching anyone).



Perhaps it's tai chi, meditation, walks in nature, having a sit spot, ceremony, woodworking, reading poetry, writing, yoga practice, pranayama or holotropic breath work, or gardening. It could be many things. But something that pulls you out of the rapid, constantly accelerating, sharp angled, addicted to growth, neon-lit culture in which we live. Something that regularly connects you back to nature, the land, and yourself. Something that connects you with something more real than this culture's obsession with appearances, sensationalism, and conflict.

It strikes me that a practice needs to be a balance of something we do daily with deeper investments of time and energy throughout the seasons with annual deeper dives.

I love what John Heider says about this in *The Tao of Leadership*:

Do you want to be a positive influence in the world? First, get your own life in order. Ground yourself in the single principle so that your behaviour is wholesome and effective. If you do that, you will earn respect and be a powerful influence . . . The great force of our spiritual roots lies in tradition. Like it or not . . . Rather than read every new book that comes along, reread the classics. Eat food grown locally. Wear simple, durable clothing. Keep a small home, uncluttered and easy to clean. Keep an open calendar with periods of uncommitted time. Have a spiritual practice and let family customs grow. Of course, the world is full of novelty and adventures. New opportunities come along every day. So what?

—

Additional Resources:

Tales of Forgotten Crafts by Duncan Parker: vimeo.com/148149813

Path Forward #16: Admit Your Humanness

“It is a mistake to believe that a great leader is above others. Paradoxically, greatness comes from knowing how to be lowly and empty and receptive and of service. Imagine that the life force is like water in the river and in the sea. The sea, greater than the river, lies below, open and receptive. The busy, rushing river enters the sea, is absorbed and transformed.”

– John Heider, The Tao of Leadership

I was struck years ago by how the words human, humus, humility, and humiliation all had the same linguistic root.

It seems to tell a story about how being “down to Earth” is connected to our humanity.

I remember the day I realized that humility is when you realize you are human, and humiliation is when someone else realizes that for you.

So much of what passes for spiritual wisdom today seems to find its ground in the idea that being human is something to transcend: that the end game is that we no longer make mistakes, have any fear, and are walking embodiments of unconditional love who never forget how to be good humans. So much of what passes for teaching on the art of deep living seems very stuck in the shallow end of simplistic and maybe even dangerous notion of spiritual evolution with the gaudy, woven in understanding that the goal is to be *more* than human.



We're a culture in love with superheroes because we have so few real heroes.

And we're a culture still in love with the few heroes we have because we lack real community and kinship.

But it's good to remember that core to the story of the hero is the truth: there can only be one hero per community, and in that story, everyone wants to be the hero. No one wants to be an ordinary community member. There's a strong aversion to being a regular human being and an even stronger aversion to speaking to and admitting this unavoidable fact.

When you weave an unwillingness to be an ordinary person into business, the whole thing becomes a set-up for disaster. We tell ourselves that people won't sign up for our courses unless they feel confident we are the embodiment of what we are promising them, and so we lie in our

marketing – sometimes overtly, sometimes by omission, and sometimes by a willingness to stretch and exaggerate the truth. “If I don’t seem perfect,” we tell ourselves, “then no one will buy.”

And so we are careful to only speak about our struggles in the past tense. Indeed, this seems to be the formula offered by many marketers in this scene: the speaker goes to the front of the room and says, “I know how you feel. I’ve felt the same way. I struggled with these issues too. But then I learned this tool I’m about to share with you, and now everything is wonderful.”

That’s called a set-up for a fall.

*

When I was in my early twenties, I was invited to lead youth activist workshops for the Whole Life Expo in the States. They were engaged in the noble effort to make this New Age consumer expo something more political.

Of course, no one showed up to my workshops, and so I spent all weekend hanging out with some of the biggest names in the personal growth scene – people whose books I’d read and whom I had admired for years – Marianne Williamson, Gregg Braden, and Debbie Ford amongst them.

And I remember one day sitting in on Debbie Ford’s workshop about Carl Jung’s notion of the shadow. She was in the middle of a divorce and speaking about how the nature of the shadow is that we often can’t see it in ourselves even if everyone around us can. She admitted to the group: “Do you think I can see my own shadow here? Nope. If you see it please let me know. I’m blind to it.”

I’d never seen a teacher do that before: speak of their struggles in the present tense. She wasn’t leaning on the group. She wasn’t making it a burden. She was just reporting a fact.

Later, I was in a van with her and Justin Hilton (who was running the festival). Justin had run into the bank to make a deposit and Debbie turned around from her seat in the front and asked me, “What is it? What’s my shadow here? Do you see anything?” Again, there was no neediness in her voice. There was just a curiosity. And maybe she wanted to see what I was made of. I sat there dumb. I had nothing to offer at such a young age beyond being struck by her willingness to be flawed and unaware.

I recall Stephen Jenkinson, author of *Die Wise*, speaking about death in his Orphan Wisdom School. He candidly admitted that he wasn’t particularly looking forward to dying and that he didn’t really know what the architecture of the other side might look like. He was willing to be human, to be wrecked by the whole thing. He was willing to speak about himself and his wonderings in the present tense. He was willing to not know everything.

*

“Come and learn the possibilities (and the limitations) of holistic nutrition.”

This remains one of my favourite sentences ever penned in marketing.

I remember reading it on a poster for a workshop on holistic nutrition at an organic grocery store in town, and being struck at how much more credible and trustworthy the workshop it was describing seemed to me. Such a simple notion: admitting that there are limitations to what you have to offer.

We all know it's true. Nothing works 100% of the time. And when people claim or imply that it does, we trust them less, not more. When people tell us that their modality can help everyone, we take a step back.

Unless we're desperate. Then we tend to grasp onto anything, even the heavy stone that false hope becomes in stormy waters. Anything. This is part of the responsibility of marketing: don't fuck with people. Don't give them false hope. Be real with them. Be real about everything that's possible and that could happen. Be real with them about the limitations of what you can do.

This is why niching matters. When you choose a niche, you're saying to people, “I can't do everything. But I have some skill in this area.” That is credible. That is believable.

If you're real like this, then there are plenty of sales you won't make. But there are enough that you will. And if you avoid over-promising, you also won't have to deal with people wanting refunds, complaining about you, calling you a fraud, or suing you. So, there's that.

I'll always remember Billy Blanks in his Tae Bo infomercials telling people how much hard work his programs were, making sure people knew that it wouldn't be easy, and not to buy it if they were looking for a quick fix.

If your natural nutritional approach can help people with their cancer treatment but not replace it, tell them that.

If your work can help them find meaning in the heartbreak but not remove the pain, tell them that.

If your work can help them save money but won't make them rich, tell them that.

If your work can help them feel at home in this world but won't deliver on the spiritual pyrotechnics they might hope for, tell them that.

It's a worthy exercise to do.

Action:

Take two pieces of paper. On the top of one, write the word “Can” and at the top of the other, write the word “Can’t.” And then take 15 minutes going back and forth between writing out what you feel confident your approach can do and what you know it can’t do.

Ask yourself, “What are people hoping my work with them might accomplish that just isn’t realistic?” and write about that.

Your first answers will be obvious, but as you keep digging and sifting, you’ll find subtler things. You might do this for your business as a whole. You might try it for a particular workshop, product, or service. You will come across as much more trustworthy and comfortable in your own skin.

And then put this on your website wherever it best fits. You might add it to your “Are You Sure?” page. You might put it in your sales letters or even on your homepage.

Try telling the truth about your limits. Try telling the truth about your weaknesses.

Try considering the possibilities and the limitations of your own work and then sharing what you find.

Path Forward #17: Stop Calling Yourself a Teacher

“The wise leader stays in the background and facilitates other people’s process’.”

– John Heider, The Tao of Leadership

No one I’ve ever met, whom I consider to be a real shaman or medicine person, ever calls themselves that.

Most people whom I’ve met who I would consider to be dangerous to others do call themselves that, often within the first 30 seconds of meeting them.

No one I’ve ever met, whom I consider to be a real spiritual teacher, ever calls themselves that.

Most people I’ve met, whom I would consider to be dangerous, call themselves “Spiritual Master Teachers.”

Take that for what it’s worth.

Path Forward #18: Be Careful Not Fearful

A simple but important distinction to make: be careful not fearful.

Be full of care, not full of fear.

It's so easy when approaching these issues to get lost in the worst-case scenarios. It's so easy to become lost in our own fears and never notice that this directs all of our attention onto ourselves.

Being fearful is a place of self-concern. It's not a place that allows for concern of others. It's not a place that even, really, allows for an awareness of the needs of others.

When we are fearful we become hyper-vigilant about how we might not get what we want and how we might lose what we already have.

When we can shift our attention towards being full of care for others, we're more likely to make decisions that genuinely help people.

We can ask the question, "Who am I to teach?" fearfully. When we do, it becomes a way to avoid wrestling honestly with these issues. We can ask the same question carefully. When we do, it becomes a doorway to an even deeper sense of integrity and alignment with our political and spiritual values as we live in the modern world.

Be careful not fearful.

Path Forward #19 Playing the Long Game

“Chan ann leis a’chiad bhuille thuiteas a’chraobh.”

(It is not with the first stroke that the tree falls.)

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“Chan eil gach iuchair san tir an crochadh ri aon chrìos.”

(All the keys in the land do not hang from one girdle.)

*

“Cha’n fhaighear math gun dragh.”

(Good is not obtained without trouble.)

*

“Chan e gogadh nan ceann a nì an t-iomradh.”

(It is not the nodding of heads that does the rowing.)

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“Is fheàrr fheuchainn na bhith san duil.”

(It’s better to try than to hope.)

– Scottish Gaelic Proverbs

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“Ní dhéanfaidh smaoineamh an treabhadh duit.”

(You’ll never plough a field turning it over in your mind.)

– Irish Gaelic Proverb

There is much to be said for playing the long game.

It takes time and effort to get good at something. It takes time and effort to become known for something. Marketing doesn’t just take place in space (as in “Let’s own all of the geographic markets! Let’s get our product into Japan”). It also occurs through time. And it takes time. “Overnight successes” almost never happen overnight. They are, usually, the result of many years of practice.

I think of the Chinese bamboo tree that, when you plant it, shows no evidence of growth for five full years, and yet, in the fifth year, grows 90 feet in 90 days. How does it accomplish this? For the first five years, it is growing its root system 90 feet deep and wide. This is the long-game. I think of the stonecutter. They hammer on a boulder hundreds of times with seemingly no effect at all. And then they hit it one more time and it splits in half. But it wasn’t the last hit that did it. Persistence, patience, and practice are deeply underrated in these times.

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Additional Resources:

Niching Spiral: Persistence: nichingspiral.com/videos/persistence

Path Forward #20: Build Your Business Around Your Natural Gifts

I recall Stephen Jenkinson talking about a very earnest young man who wanted to learn from him and came to stay on his farm to help out.

The trouble was, he wasn't much help at all. Finally one day the young man said, "I don't know if I've been much help with the farming," and Stephen said, "Farming? You haven't even done any! Look you're not a farmer. You're an academic. That's where your gifts and passions lie. Go and pursue that!" And the young man did, was excellent at it, and no more farming equipment was broken that year.

I remember leading an event with a fellow who was an incredible leader in his community and a powerful public speaker. But he wasn't a very good group facilitator. I've known others who are incredible facilitators but are awful public speakers. I've known people who could lead groups through emotional processes and engage people from the stage but couldn't lead an organization to save their lives.

One of the fastest ways to grow your business is to make sure to build it on your natural gifts. I've seen many people take on projects that work against them. They're incredible introverts and yet they work in a job where they're constantly engaging with large groups of people; they're extroverts stuck at a desk job; they're mathematically minded and working in a creative field, or they're an artist stuck working with numbers.

It's painful to watch. It's like asking a bird to swim underwater or a fish to fly.

And of course, they feel like failures because they were never built to do that job. They feel like failures because they are constantly failing and are thus full of self-doubt, and then they wonder, "Who am I to be paid for this?"

If you are not sure what your natural gifts are, I recommend checking out the resources below.

Build your business around your natural gifts.

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Additional Resources:

The Natural Gifts Society: naturalgiftssociety.org

The Strengths Finder 2.0 by Tom Rath: strengthsfinder.com

Path Forward #21: Host Conversations

This is such a simple idea but it can have powerful implications.

Instead of hosting workshops and retreats where you are set up as the expert who is promising results and offering solutions, you can simply host conversations.

When you're starting out, there's a very good chance that you are still figuring out how you see things, and there are a few better ways to hone your point of view than wrestling it out with other people in real time.

A good conversation can help you see your blind spots. A good conversation can help you see what resonates and what doesn't. A good conversation can help you see where others are struggling and how they talk about it.

This can take the form of a meet-up group that gathers regularly.

You can promote it just like you would promote workshops, but instead of promising certain outcomes, you're promising a good conversation.

You can charge a nominal fee for this. You can do it for free in your living room with friends.

There's a whole movement based on this called Conversation Cafés - conversationcafe.org

You can even host a whole conference on this based on the conversational model proposed in the book *Open Space Technology* by Owen Harrison. Imagine that! Hosting a conference and charging for it, but without promising anything other than a good conversation with good people.

If you want to really hit home runs, you hand select the participants. You say, "I want to have a conversation about _____ and I'm inviting _____." If they dig the topic and they dig the invite list, you should see a solid response.

The Poverty of Believing in Yourself

If you've ever struggled with confidence in building your business, this section is for you. This Poverty of Believing in Yourself section isn't written to give advice so much as it is to comfort, console, and lift our gaze up from our personal struggles to the bigger context in which they lie.

It is a long post that might need more than one sitting to get through, but the topic is worthy of the time invested. One doesn't approach such a topic, so central to our experience of being human in the dominant cultures of the world, lightly or casually.

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In mid-March of 2016, I had a two-and-a-half hour Skype conversation with Yahya Bakkar in New Jersey (pictured here), who had been following my work for years. Many parts of the conversation struck me, but one has stayed with me in particular.

He has been a motivational speaker and is working to coach and mentor young men to find self-confidence and to believe in themselves. I was inspired by his work and what it might mean for these men with whom he'll be working.

And he knows something about the need to believe in yourself, as he was raised in a strict, religious family, and was disowned by his adoptive father in his twenties because he wasn't religious enough for him.

He also found his birth mother in his mid-twenties. She was living in Thailand and working at the airport. He flew her to the United States to visit for ten days. On the fifth day, she had a meltdown, and while he watched, she tore up his only photo of himself as an infant. He'd left it, framed, by her bedside during the visit.

And then she left. He hasn't spoken to her since.

So as a young man he had to learn to believe in himself because no one else would.

He had to love himself because none of the people who should have did.

And so he was going to teach these young men to believe in themselves too.

I was struck by both the beauty and the poverty of the whole situation. This approach of "believing in ourselves," complete with its affirmations and incantations, its notes on the mirror and its positive self-talk, is a solution to a problem.

So, what's the problem?

Well, we imagine it to be that we don't believe in ourselves.

But why don't we believe in ourselves?

Because we weren't believed in.

This is important. Our lack of self-belief isn't a personal failing. It's not that we're internally deficient or lack some confidence gene that everyone else has.

This might seem like I'm indicting his parents for not believing in him, but it's a bigger story than that. Likely his parents never were believed in either. Who knows how long this lack of belief goes back. And frankly, this job of being believed in is a village-sized job that has been foisted onto parents. It's too big. It's too much to ask of the parents and it might not actually be a job that is suited for parents in particular. Surely, the aunts and uncles and grandparents have some important role in fostering young people's beliefs in themselves. Surely the rest of the community plays some role.

But it's deeper than that.

When I talk about being believed in, I mean something deeper than looking at a child and saying, "You can do anything."

In fact, I certainly don't mean that.

I mean something more along the lines of a community expecting the arrival of the child and considering that this child might be coming to them from somewhere and that it might be bringing with it, in its tiny closed fists as it emerges from the womb, some sort of gift for the community. I'm talking about the community believing that its well-being hinges on those gifts being properly identified and fostered into their fullest fruition. I'm talking about the community, its elders in particular, clearly seeing the seeds that have been handed down to the village from those who came before in the form of this little one, and doing their best to ascertain the proper role for them.

I've done a lot of thinking about niching. Most of my colleagues use the word niche to mean "target market." But I tend to define it as something like, "your role in the community," as it comes from the old French verb "nicher," which means, "to make a nest." And it's worth noting that the bird makes the nest for their young. The chicks in the eggs don't build the nest into which they will be born. And so, the role of our culture needs to be about helping the young person to find their role.

My father died when I was nine years old from multiple sclerosis, and I never had a strong male role model growing up. Eventually I found some but they were men I had never, for the most part, met except in passing. They were men who wrote the personal growth books I devoured with a hunger I couldn't understand: Leo Buscaglia, Stephen Covey, Tony Robbins, Gregg Braden, and more. I was trying to elder myself with personal growth books because there were no elders around.

That wasn't my mom's job.

It wasn't even just my family's job.

It's not a job that they alone were capable of. It's too big.

The personal growth scene is big on confidence as a thing to cultivate.

After all, if you don't have it, what might happen? It's like a ticking time-bomb we know might go off. If we don't become confident by a certain point, then it could be too late and the timer might run out, and the bomb could explode leaving us with a life of quiet desperation.

And yet, the desperation is present now in the way we approach this getting of confidence. It's present in the way we talk about confidence as something we can "get."

The desperation is present because the bomb we're terrified might detonate already went off so many generations ago, and we are standing in its crater. We are standing in the poverty of the dismantled village. We are left fending for our own belief in ourselves. We are left with a fractured, individualized understanding of who we are. Instead of understanding ourselves as a part of a community, we are left to understand ourselves as some static, atomized individual who is responsible for making themselves feel worthy.

We are told that we need to parent ourselves. And I'm not arguing with this or suggesting this kind of therapy isn't vitally important work to do. I'm grateful that the ones who do it are out there. But I am suggesting that the existence of this work and the clear need for it is a sign of the deep poverty of this culture and collapse of village mindedness.

It is madness.

Of course, we feel desperate about it all.

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"If you haven't been fed, become bread."

— Robert Bly

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I think we also forget how much of authentic confidence comes from real competence.

If you are good at something you will tend to feel confident about it.

When we are doing something we aren't good at and we fail, it's a terrible feeling. People have been let down. People have been hurt. We didn't do a good job. If we're an alive, empathetic human being, we're going to feel bad about that, because in our heart of hearts we'd never want to hurt someone.

When someone isn't skilled in an area and is being asked to take on a big job in that arena, the appropriate response is not, "You can do it! Just believe in yourself."

In a traditional culture, you'd never become a medicine person after taking a year-long course. You'd be mentored. You'd apprentice someone. You'd be set up for success and not failure. You'd have support. And you would have likely been recognized as someone to groom for this role from a young age.

If a young person was born with a fascination in stories, maybe they might become a storyteller. If they were more athletic, maybe a hunter. If they were drawn to crafting, maybe that.

But, in this culture, we are raised to conform, fit in, be a cog in the wheel of industry and progress. In this culture, we are told how to be based on our gender. In this culture, we are put into boxes of reward and punishment. In this culture, we are led so far astray from the reason we might be here on this earth – the gifts we brought in and the trust that our community would recognize them – that even finding our way back there is a miracle. And finding our way back to that without help? It's a miracle.

I found myself amazed at the work Yahya was doing. "What you have done is Herculean," I told him. "It's huge. You've taken on the work of a whole village in trying to find those gifts and then crafting a way to give them. It's too big. Robert Bly has the line, 'If you haven't been fed, become bread.' You've done that. You've become bread for these young men. And my hope is that your work with them helps ease their burden; that it's another step towards some sort of a village, so that those to come aren't left with the too heavy burden of trying to figure out their gifts on their own or believing in themselves."

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The industry of believing in ourselves is often a Band-Aid solution to a deep laceration. It's covering up something so immense. It's an industry that whispers to the sapling, "Water yourself. Be your own Sun. Be your own soil."

Stephen Jenkinson says it very well:

If you're on the receiving end of that stuff long enough, what happens is, there's this little bud that grows up from you being bombarded with somebody being certain that you're loveable, no matter what you think. And that little bud is a bud of worthiness. That you didn't do anything to conjure, or manufacture. It's not a meritocracy getting loved, getting grieved, getting understood and seen. It isn't. It's a consequence that you've got sane people around you. That's what it is. But if you have this bud of worthiness that somehow, involuntarily starts to take up room and your take on yourself? The inevitable consequence is your ability to love somebody is born there."

I remember watching a video in which, poet Maya Angelou recounts to comedian Dave Chappelle her experience of meeting young rapper Tupac Shakur. The way she related to him was the way an elder relates to young people: a feeling of their deep importance in the scheme of things. This kind of interaction is one that every young person deserves on a regular basis. What she does to Tupac is not to feed his ego, but to feed his soul and to tether him back into the history of his people. She places him back into belonging. She nails him back to time and place. She tells him, "This is who you are. This is where you are. This is when you are."

And how many young people will ever be on the receiving end of such a moment? How many will be fed in this way? How many will ever even meet someone capable of this kind of beauty?

I recall one story I heard from an elder who was sitting with a young man, an activist wrestling with the state of the world.

"I am depressed," said the young man.

"Yes, you are," said the elder. "But, depressed as you may be, while we are here together, you won't be depressed alone."

He was affirming his feelings. He wasn't trying to change him. He was letting him know he mattered enough to have company in the matter.

While speaking to a group of kids at Vashon High School in St. Louis, ET the Hip Hop Preacher, a black motivational speaker, was confronted with deeply disrespectful behaviour from his audience of mostly black students. His response was not to attack or shut them down, but to confront them with a fierce love and honesty. You can watch it here: [youtube.com/watch?v=MsTCsmqkezQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsTCsmqkezQ)

There are so many ways this kind of love and believing in people can look.

But most of us didn't get a lot of it.

This culture is full of elders on drugs but has a deep poverty of elders dispensing medicine. This culture is full of young people with gifts to give and no one to recognize those gifts.

Years ago, I interviewed the good David Waugh of the Natural Gifts Society about this issue:

Tad: So, how did you get involved with this work of helping people find their gifts?

David: Yeah, it started, oh, very early on. I would say one of the first mentors that I found when I was lost in my mid-life crisis, in that crisis all of my old identities didn't work anymore. I had been running a business, I left that. My marriage broke down, so I was no longer a husband, and a father, a worker. All of those identities that I really thought – when people would ask me who I am, I would describe myself in those terms.

When I left all of that, it was like the deep question: “Who am I?” It started to haunt me, and I had some time and I had some means so then I started to explore. One of the first mentors that I came across was a fellow named James Hillman, who just passed away last year. He has a wonderful book called *The Soul's Code*, and that was my first hint that there's some sort of code, there's some sort of pattern, and it's really unique to each person.

The metaphor that he used was, the acorn that has the blueprint of the mighty oak tree, it's that specific. Each person has something of a unique pattern, and that's very different from a lot of how the culture represents us as more of a blank slate. I think the term is “tabula rasa.”

It's actually echoed in many indigenous traditions around, and like you say, the Catholic mystics also discovered that people have these innate or inherent gifts of spirit, that's the way they articulated it. James Hillman called it “the soul's code.”

Then I started in my research, I met an African shaman who really still – he's quite modern in the sense that he has a couple of PhD's – but he went through a traditional initiation. His name is Malidoma Somé, and he says in their culture when the mother is pregnant with a new child, the medicine person or their shaman actually interviews the child when it's in the womb through a kind of hypnosis, I suppose. They find out that the child has a unique purpose, a unique destiny.

A lot from our education system focuses on standardized testing and there's a lot of mixed messages like, “You can be anything you want to be.” Well, that's kind of life telling the acorn that it could be a rose or a sunflower, where it's actually more precise in, you know, we're fortunate enough if we can be who we're meant to be. That's going to take some help, I think, some guidance.

If you struggle with believing in yourself it's because, properly, I don't think that it should be your job. It's a job that's too big for you. It's a village-sized job being taken on by an individual. It should have been the job of everyone around you as you grew up to help you

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find the perfect role for you in your community and to become good at it so that your community could receive your gifts.

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If you struggle with believing in yourself, the truth is that you may always be plagued with this.

You may never get the confirmation from the world that you need.

It may be too late for you.

But, again, “If you haven’t been fed, become bread.”

If you didn’t get it from your family, you can be that for others.

Being wounded doesn’t mean you can’t heal others. It just means you know how important the medicine is.

If you don’t believe in yourself, then see if you can’t walk your way towards believing in others and why they’re here. And see if that can’t be something more than a reflex, a blanket reaction of positive affirmations. See if you can make it particular to those you meet as you narrow your eyes a little to make out the types of seeds they carry with them in their fists that they never dared to open because they were terrified to lose what they’d been entrusted with, knowing full well that their family and community had no capacity to see or help them plant those seeds. If you’re very lucky, maybe some of those people will relax their fists open, and you can sit next to them and help them in learning to weave themselves into that bigger blanket of a village that might be one day.

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It’s good to distinguish, in all of this healing work, the difference between healing and a cure.

A cure means the problem is gone.

Healing means that some measure of wholeness has been restored. And, often, we don’t find a cure, but we do find healing.

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“A good half of every treatment that probes at all deeply consists in the doctor’s examining himself . . . it is his own hurt that gives a measure of his power to heal. The doctor is effective only when he himself is affected. Only the wounded physician heals. But when the doctor wears his personality like a coat of armour, he has no effect.”

– Carl Jung

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The archetype of “The Wounded Healer” as we know it now, seems to have originated with Carl Jung (1875-1961) in the Greek myth of Chiron (a centaur, known as a wise teacher, healer, and prophet), who in the process of overcoming the pain of his own wounds, came to be known to us in modern times as the compassionate master teacher of the arts of healing and medicine, privy to the secrets of life and death.

During a skirmish with a rowdy bunch of centaurs, Hercules carelessly and accidentally wounded his friend and mentor Chiron in the knee with one of his arrows.

The arrows Hercules had chosen to use on this particular day were arrows coated with the blood of the monster Hydra. Arrows coated with the blood of Hydra were known to cause painful wounds that would never heal.

Being an immortal, Chiron would never be able to heal from the wound caused by Hercules, and being immortal he could never die.

He then retreated to his cave to heal himself, and in so doing, created the healing arts. Ironically and despite this great achievement, his wound never healed. He had spent his entire life becoming very accomplished in the use of healing with herbs and other methods, but he could not alleviate his own pain. But, in his search for personal healing, his ability to heal and teach others grew.

On the [Moontides](#) blog, I found these good words:

Chiron reminds to us that it is only by being willing to face, consciously experience, and go through our wound do we receive its blessing. We are all wounded healers in one way or another, and many of us have been directed and made wise through our own painful childhood experiences. Hence, it is through these very experiences of hurt and pain that we can best help others . . . and it is not just helping those who are suffering similar experiences. In fact, the healing process applies to ourselves as well because each time we relive our pain in order to help others, we are also again dealing with and healing ourselves just a little bit more.

We each have the ability and perseverance to go beyond our issues, our problems and troubles, and not have suffering label us as who we are. There are many men and women – probably in our daily lives – who are an inspiration and testimony to that. Chiron symbolizes those who find the strength through suffering to help others avoid the pain they themselves have had to undergo. We are often directed and made wise by our own painful childhood experiences. Chiron's house and sign show where we have been deeply wounded and may hold the key to our own healing. Chiron takes us on a journey through our darkness, personally and collectively. He teaches us that our wounds contain a gift, and that the process of healing oneself is a journey back to greater wholeness and integrity . . . the gift of who we truly are. His story reminds us of the magic, relief, and healing that can occur when we fully accept and honour who we are.

A Chironian wound is an injury that will never, ever totally heal.

We learn, suffer, and grow from dealing with this sensitive area, but the wounding will never totally heal and go away. This Chironian wounding can then, later in life and after much personal struggle, become a special area where we can help others by sharing our healing and teaching powers with them.

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“The most important question is not how to get rid of our own wounds, but how to make our wounds a source of healing . . . it's like the Grand Canyon is a wound in the Earth, but if you go into that wound, there's a healing force coming out.”

– Henri Nouwen

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This culture is obsessed with the self.

We imagine ourselves to be self-made and value self-esteem. We try to teach young people about self-respect and self-worth. When we are dumped or heartbroken, we are told to practice self-love.

What if instead of manufacturing belief in ourselves, we could muster up some of the honest grief for having never been believed in in the first place? Maybe that might be a more honest path to follow. Maybe that grief could remind us that we showed up here with something to give. Maybe the grief could point us back in the direction of the village we left so long ago.

What if, instead of trying to avoid our lack of belief in ourselves, we could examine that lack of belief and come to understand what it does to us? What if we could testify to what it does to someone when others look through them? What if we could give voice to the grief of never having been seen, so that others might follow so our well-wept tears will water the seeds in our unopened

fists? Isn't this what many of the greatest artists in the world have done? They have turned their own suffering into art and beauty.

What's missing is the grieving from those in this world full of people who don't believe in themselves. What's missing is the grieving of what's been lost and what we never knew. What's missing is a village full of grandmothers and grandfathers who help us find our way. When we don't grieve its absence we have no chance at cultivating its presence. Our grieving it is our remembering that it matters. It is affirming and praising its importance.

When we grieve, we aren't cured, but we do receive some portion of healing.

So, if you're looking for a cure to your lack of belief in yourself, consider that inwards may not be the only direction to face, because the feelings of belonging, peace, and happiness we're after don't come this alone.

Stephen Jenkinson has powerful words about this:

The devotion to personal contentment is the depression machine, it generates the depression. It makes the depression inevitable which of course obliges you to work harder to be happy and there we are. But how does it do that? Because it whispers to you that happiness should be the discernible consequence of you winning, of you trying hard, of your best intent being in the forefront of all your design. And a lot of people in the world, ancestrally, knew long ago that being content or that sense of well-being, that's a consequence of your willingness to help the world live. That your happiness is actually a corollary - let me change happiness - that your health is a corollary of the health of everything around you.

If you are trying to "get confidence" (as if it were something you could buy off the shelf at the local mall), you may be trying to find a remedy for something that has no cure. You may be a tree planted in the crater where a bomb went off, struggling to survive and feeling that it's your fault that you don't grow stronger, not even knowing what it would be like to be a part of an old growth forest. And if you learn of that heartbreaking impossibility, then you are left with the realization that the old growth forest isn't for you. You will never live to see it and you deserve it as much as any human being ever born. You were not born in the old growth. It will be a thousand years before it arrives.

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*"The candle is not lit to give light, but to testify to the night."
- The Night Abraham Called to the Stars by Robert Bly*

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You were born in the crater.

And so, what does this time and this place ask of you? Perhaps, what it asks of you is to plant the saplings and tend to them, to be the source of that old growth for the ones yet to come. Perhaps the crater is asking you to redeem it and turn it into a place worth coming from.

My friend Corin Raymond struggled with self-doubt for years and wrote songs about it. He was guided by the understanding that, if you need it, someone else will too. Jonathan Byrd calls these songs “Songs of Service.” Corin put it this way: “This is a song I worked on for many years, and I talk about it in the *Record Lonesome Night* book, how the song – even during the years it was unfinished – was a companion and a friend I could turn to. I had the idea when I was probably twenty, and I started writing it for a girl, but as the years went by, the ‘you’ in the song became ‘me.’ It became a letter to myself, a reaching out, an offer of friendship from the part of me that had faith that we were going to make it. It’s definitely one of the songs that saved me.”

What if we were less concerned about getting confidence and more concerned with creating beauty? And what if this included beautifully expressed grief? What if we were less concerned with acquiring belief in ourselves and more focused on believing in others? What if we stopped running from our low self-confidence and started getting to know it?

David Richo put it beautifully in his book, *How To Be An Adult*:

Our problem is not that, as children, our needs were unmet, but that, as adults, they are still unmourned . . . neediness itself tells us nothing about how much we need from others; it tells us how much we need to grieve the irrevocably barren past and evoke our own inner sources of nurturance . . . What was missed can never be made up for, only mourned and let go of . . . We are grieving the irretrievable aspects of what we lost and the irreplaceable aspect of what we missed. Only these two realizations lead to the resolution of grief because only these acknowledge, without denial, how truly bereft we were or are. From the pit of this deep admission that something is irrevocably over and done, we finally stand clear of the insatiable need to find it again from our parents or partner. To have sought it was to have denied how utter was its absence. Grief work done with consciousness builds self-esteem since it shows us our courageous faithfulness to the reality of loss. It authenticates us as adults who can say Yes to sadness, anger, and hurt. Such an heroic embrace of our own truth transforms emptiness into capacity. As Jung notes, “your inner emptiness conceals just as great a fullness if you only allow it.”

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If you don’t believe in yourself, I don’t blame you.

It’s hard.

And it was never your job to begin with.

When someone says, “believe in yourself!” it’s so worthless. It’s just words. And words aren’t food. So much of the meaning of your life is in the hands of others and the meaning they grant it by their actions and non-actions. When someone believes in you, there is no price that can be put on it.

One of my friends in a conversation about this shared with me, “This seems true and I find it so disheartening. I’ve never really valued myself and I’ve always struggled to try and believe that I had something to offer others. Now, if this is true then I’m left feeling both validated and powerless. Validated because I feel like the struggle to build my self-worth has never been successful and powerless because maybe I don’t have as much control over it as I had hoped.”

And, of course, we don’t.

But that doesn’t mean there’s nothing to do.

I’m not against pump-up and motivation. I’m not against therapy, visualizations, meditations, and retreats to build up self-confidence. Those all seem to be a needed part of the story these days, and god bless the people who do that work, but the fact that it’s needed is an indictment of the deep poverty of our culture. It’s what we’ve been left with. It’s not a sign of our culture’s wisdom. It’s the evidence of how much wisdom has been lost.

I’m not against the work people are doing to help others believe in themselves, and surely there must be a diversity of perspectives and approaches on this in the world, but before you can believe in yourself, you need to see yourself, and the one thing we can never really see is ourselves. The set up of the whole arrangement of our bodies is that we have eyes on the front of our heads that see most of our bodies but not all of it. There’s a lot of yourself you usually don’t see. Without a mirror, you can’t see the back of your head or neck or upper back. And so, it’s up to the community to see the rest of you. If you don’t have a community, you’re left to twist yourself into contortions to get some perspective on yourself or to walk around believing only in the parts of you that you can see.

I’m not against the work of helping people believe in themselves, but in this culture at this time, much of that work seems to further the deification of our individualism. It’s the attempt to reify our capacity to be self-made. It’s the affirmation of our atomized understanding of this universe. It’s our saying, “I can exist without you. I don’t need you to believe in me... and you don’t need me either.”

And what is the end game of this? Nobody needs anybody. Everybody is self-sufficient.

Who am I to Teach and Charge for it?

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“Cha duine, duine ‘na aonar.”
(A person by himself is not a person.)
– Scottish Gaelic Proverb

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I’m saying that worshipping at the altar of the self is a lonely place to be.

I’m not saying the pain isn’t real. It’s too real.

I’m not against reading books on positive thinking, as long as it doesn’t get in the way of the heartbreak that these times seem to ask of us; as long as it doesn’t stop us from using that grief or from being used by it to make something beautiful to feed life. Grief is a reliable compass, pointing us in the direction of what matters. Grief is what connects us with the beauty and preciousness of life and reminds us that life is worth believing in. Our deep grief can be a form of high praise for the thing we never got. Grief is what motivates us to make sure that that which has slipped from view still has a place in this world.

I’m saying that, as Vernon Howard put it, “The resistance to the disturbance is the disturbance.” Our resistance to grieving what we never had is the issue, not just that we never had it.

I’m saying that confidence is the natural by-product of a sense of deep belonging to a people and place. It comes from our lived relationships to all of the people we know, all of the natural world, and whatever that mysterious unseen world is. Belonging comes from relationship. Belonging is the seed from which a comfort in our own skin might sprout and bloom into a flower that some might name “confidence.” Confidence is the natural by-product of being supported in developing an articulated skillfulness in the expression of your natural gifts that others helped you identify.

I’m saying that the bromides of “You can do anything,” “Believe in yourself,” and “You can do it,” are sometimes tonic and sometimes toxic. Sometimes they encourage people to keep going and sometimes they encourage people to do foolish things. Sometimes people should not believe that they have the capacity to do things (e.g. “Sure! You could do brain surgery! You just have to be confident in yourself,” or “Sure you can lead this group through this healing ceremony!”) Sometimes confidence is misplaced.

Believing in ourselves, in the way this culture asks us to, seems to be an impossible task, like Sisyphus pushing a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down again before it reaches the top. Our modern approach to confidence mistakes the sources of our strength and ignores the gravity of the culture that we live in.

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"The soldiers settled down to filling and lighting their clay pipes. They continued to ignore him as if he were a ghost and they could not see him. Perhaps he was in a dream. Or perhaps he was a ghost; perhaps he was dead already. How would you know if you were dead?"

- *The Law of Dreams* by Peter Behrens

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The story we are fed is that we're supposed to be able to live in a culture that fundamentally looks through us, sees us as a resource to be used, or sees us as inadequate in some fundamental way, and to be utterly unaffected by this. That's the story we are told is true. You're supposed to stand in the face of that and remain intact. According to whom?

This is madness.

During the Potato Famine in Ireland, many Irish fled their country to North America. But the route took many of them through Liverpool, a town that, according to John Kelly in his book *The Graves Are Walking*, ". . . had grown steadily wealthier on the high-end vices of the white man: African slaves, sugar and tobacco. In 1807, when Britain abolished slavery, Liverpool – nimbler than other English seaports – identified immigration as the next growth area of human trafficking. By the 1820's, the city offered regular passenger service to North America." But even those Irish, who somehow survived the famine that killed twice as many as the American Civil War, were often emotionally and spiritually crushed by their time in Liverpool. For most of them, ". . . Liverpool represented a first encounter with modernity . . . Under the sheltering umbrella of peasant culture, even the most humble could be esteemed. Of course, the peasant knew he was poor, but that was the result of being outmatched by life, and where was the shame in that? Many a man – many a fine man – had been outmatched by life. Besides, the peasant's language, Irish, was such a glory, the saints in heaven spoke it. In Liverpool, modernity pitilessly deconstructed all the comforting myths of peasant culture; the emigrant suddenly found himself an object of horror and contempt . . . In Liverpool, the emigrant was forced to see himself – judge himself – by the standards and values of the modern world. The historian Robert Scally has called this change in perspective the 'Liverpool Mirror' and it was as cruel as any pestilential Vauxhall cellar. Standing in front of his reflection, the peasant saw the poet, honored for his perfect image of the moon, and the 'scholar' revered for his 'priest's knowledge of Latin' dissolve into Punch's 'aboriginal Irishman: illiterate, savage,' a speaker of a language 'through which no light had flashed for a thousand years.' . . . some were broken utterly and completely by it."

Swagger doesn't come from affirmations. It comes from belonging. It comes from having a people who have your back. Swagger comes from having a role in your community. Swagger comes from the end of self-concern, which is the bloom on the flower of knowing your place in something so much bigger than you, something which your life is dedicated to feeding.

I'm saying that we can be the source of a world that would never place the burden of "believing in yourself" on the shoulders of the young, a world where children would know that our love for them was a place they could rest and lean into, not a prize to be won, so that when they are adults, they'll know that they are here not to earn love but to spend it.

And in reality, when my friend does his good work with young men about their self-confidence, his teaching the concept of "believing in yourself" won't be the power of his work. It will be his believing in the particular youth with whom he works, the look in his eyes, and the fact that he makes time for them that tells them, "You matter." The notion of self-confidence is the menu. His willingness to sit with them, listen, and try to see what they're seeing . . . that's the food.

People seeing us and believing in us is food. We can't live without it and we can't self-generate it. We can question the thoughts that stop us from seeing all the ways we have been and are still being affirmed every day by simply being alive. We can question the thoughts saying, "We're worthless," but it's likely we need help doing that.

Years ago, I heard an audio of Jack Canfield, and he ended by telling the listener that, even if no one else in the world believed in them, he did. "I believe in you," he said. And that message was a mixture of things. It was a beautiful and sincere message, the kind of message I am imagining he could have used when he was younger. And it was also a generic message, however genuine, to the masses. It was a ghost of the real thing that had very little power to touch anyone in a lasting way. It was an indictment of the culture that he felt, accurately, needed the message.

Many of us grew up not believing in ourselves. We grew up not knowing our gifts or strengths. We grew up not getting much of the emotional and spiritual food that we needed to become healthy human beings. The most terrible part of this all is how normal it has become. We look at the situation, if we see it as a situation at all, and we imagine that it has always been this way, that it is this way everywhere and that it will always be this way. "Of course," we tell ourselves. "Humans are plagued with self-doubt and don't believe in themselves! That's how it is!"

It has become normal, but it is not natural.

The work Yahya is trying to do with young men is beautiful and it's needed, but what does it say about our culture that it's needed?

What does it say about our culture that people of colour are told to believe in themselves by white people who benefit from a system that oppresses people of colour and who refuse to do anything to change that?

What does it say about our culture when those who are physically disabled are told to believe in themselves by the same culture that only refers to them with pity or as inspiration freaks, a society that (almost) always shows abled-bodied people in its TV shows and movies?

What does it say about our culture that women are told to believe in themselves and be confident in who they are by the same culture that sends them daily messages that they aren't enough?

There's so much focus on getting people to believe in themselves and so little attention put on why they don't feel comfortable in their own skin in the first place. There's so much focus on the symptoms of self-doubt and so little on the deeper institutional causes of this self doubt.

There are other cultures that do not know these neuroses. We all descend from cultures like this. Remembering this is costly and asks a lot of us to see that. But, in seeing it and being willing to grieve the absence of it, our tears water the ground of our days to make it fertile for the possibility of the presence of it again in the days of those to come.

The central poverty isn't that we don't believe in ourselves, but that we have to.

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Additional Resources:

Interview with Stephen Jenkinson – Am I Ready to Teach?: marketingforhippies.com/teachers

The Tao of Leadership by Stephen Heider: <http://amzn.to/2dopczc>

The Power Principle by Blaine Lee: <http://amzn.to/1PXZ0E2>

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey: <http://amzn.to/2d8YjAm>

Kumaré is a feature documentary film about the time filmmaker Vikram Gandhi impersonated a fake guru and built a following of real people – kumaremovie.com

Your Turn by Seth Godin: www.yourturn.link

22 Myths About Building Your Practice: bit.ly/2122RXF

To help you uncover your niche go to NichingSpiral.com

Dedications & Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to everyone upon whose back I have climbed to learn about what it means to be a good human. And to everyone upon whose backs I will continue to lean on and climb. It's written in gratitude for everyone who has put up with my learning curve thus far, and for those who will do so in the years to come.

It's dedicated to the possibility that the burden of my learning through them might mean something beautiful through what I do with the reality of my learning and thinking.

It's written in deep thanks to all those elders and teachers who continue to show how its done, and who continue to walk through this world in a beautiful way so that the possibility of doing so is not lost to us.

It's dedicated to everyone who keeps trying, myself included, despite our own profound hypocrisies.

And it's in deep thanks to Emma Kerson and Susan Kendal Urbach for their outsider eyes and keen editing to make sure that I was saying what I was meaning to say.



About the Author: Tad Hargrave

Tad is a hippy who developed a knack for marketing (and then learned how to be a hippy again). For almost a decade, he has been touring his marketing workshops around Canada, bringing refreshing and unorthodox ideas to conscious entrepreneurs and green businesses, helping them grow their organizations (without selling their souls).

Tad does improv comedy semi-professionally, co-runs Edmonton's progressive community building network TheLocalGood.ca, founded streetcarshows.com, indigodrinks.ca, socialyogiyeg.com, and the Jams program of yesworld.org. He speaks Scottish Gaelic and helps to run www.novascotiagaelsjam.com, and is also a huge Doctor Who nerd.

Tad currently lives in Edmonton, Alberta (traditionally known, in the local indigenous language of the Cree, as Amiskwaciy [Beaver Hill] and later Amiskwaciwaskihegan [Beaver Hill House]), and his ancestors come primarily from Scotland with some from the Ukraine as well. He is drawn to conversations around politics, history, ancestry, healing, and how those all intersect.

You can learn more about Tad and his work at marketingforhippies.com and nichingspiral.com.